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Standardized Testing and Its Costs Continue to Grow in Pa.

I know that when one challenges the policy of an administration, especially of one's own party, you risk entering the danger zone. But for 12 years in the Senate, I have fought tooth and nail against standardized testing regardless of whether the administration has been Republican or Democratic. And I'm not about to stop now. It's just too important of an issue.

Harrisburg always revolves around spin and the recent announcement of Pennsylvania's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan was spin at its finest.

The Governor and the Secretary of Education only focused on one part of the ESSA plan and patted themselves on the back for ending the "test culture." Here are a few questions about the whole ESSA plan that reveal the lack of candor in their claims:

- Does subjecting students as young as 8 and 9 years old to six and a half days of testing, instead of eight, really end test culture?
- Does making eighth-grade students take both the PSSA and the Keystone Exam end test culture?
- Does continuing the Keystones as a high school graduation requirement and forcing students to take the equivalent of 10 days of testing end test culture?
- Does maintaining a policy of teacher evaluation and school performance that still depends on test scores end the emphasis on teaching to the test?

The answer to these questions is obviously no, despite any attempts at political spin. And, as is often the case, what wasn't said is much more telling than what was.

What the Governor and the Secretary of Education didn't want to talk about is the problematic continuation of the Keystone Exams and their graduation requirement in Pennsylvania's ESSA plan. Earlier this year, the Department of Education presented a baffling proposal – all students must continue to take the Keystones, but they can still graduate even if they fail the test, as long as they pass their high school courses. In other words, the Keystones are a graduation exam that you don't have to pass to graduate, but students still have to take them (and teachers still have to spend weeks preparing for

them). How can a test that doesn't count maintain standards and accountability in education?

Maybe the Governor and the Secretary only wanted to focus on a modest reduction in PSSA testing time instead of discussing the Keystones because they cost so very much. Over the past eight years, Pennsylvania and local school districts have either already spent or awarded contracts totaling more than \$1.3 billion for standardized testing. In fact, one company alone has been awarded more than \$741 million in testing contracts. No wonder we had a \$15 million budget shortfall. No wonder property taxes are so high. Keep in mind, while the administration also highlights a \$100 million investment in the basic education subsidy in this year's proposed budget, they don't tell you that in the year and a half ending in January 2017, the state signed standardized testing contracts totaling \$115 million.

The Commonwealth is currently in dire financial straits, being forced to borrow to fill vast funding gaps in last year's budget and without a finalized state budget and revenue plan for this year. At the federal level, increased levels of funding for education are highly unlikely. And yet, we continue to exhaust the money we do have on redundant standardized testing, instead of putting those funds where they matter most – in the classroom.

Meanwhile, the Senate Education Committee unanimously passed an alternative to the Keystone Exams, which is simply to utilize the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in their place. Not only do 70 percent of high school students already take the SAT, but it is also aligned with our curriculum. Furthermore, the federal government will accept the SAT, in terms of accountability and measuring growth, as it recently has in our neighboring state of Delaware's ESSA plan. In addition, using the SAT in place of the Keystones will open up college scholarship and post-secondary opportunities to thousands of low-income students who do not have the funds to pay for the test and the opportunities it offers.

The Governor publicly asked for ideas for cost savings. Using the SAT instead of the Keystones is one of them. And yet, the Department of Education never considered this alternative in meetings with ESSA stakeholders and never responded to the proposal in the Senate.

This is just one instance of the department's failure to foster a genuine discussion with the legislature. The most glaring example was its refusal to obey Act 1 of 2016, legislation that put a hold on the Keystone Exams. The department willfully ignored the law and continues to instruct school districts to give the exams. It even concocted its own legal interpretation of the bill's "legislative intent" to justify still giving them. As one who helped write the bill, I find it incredible that the Secretary of Education knows better than what my fellow lawmakers and I meant when we wrote and passed it. The intent, Mr. Secretary, was to completely stop the exams for a period of time, during which a new approach to accountability would be developed. Mr. Secretary, respect the clear legislative intent and stop finding legal loopholes to continue these tests – tests that your

own department and stakeholder groups have determined are not good predictors of college or career readiness anyway.

Finally, it would have been refreshing if just once during the ESSA press conference, the Secretary of Education spoke of education as what it is and what it should be – not a test score – but rather an essential element in nurturing the human spirit and maintaining the strength of our democracy.

In the long run, nobody remembers tests or their test scores, but nearly everyone had a teacher who influenced their lives through a commitment to humanity and learning.

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NOTE: This piece originally appeared in the Daily Local News under the title “State’s standardized testing scam.”