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Another View

Exit tests would ensure students meet standards

By Joan L. Benso

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A new education debate percolating in Harrisburg could affect high school students across Pennsylvania, including youth in the Lehigh Valley. At the center of the issue is a proposal by the State Board of Education to revise high school graduation requirements through the implementation of a series of new high school "exit exams" called Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs). They are intended to evaluate whether high school students are mastering the state's academic standards.

The proposal -- to be voted on by the State Board on Thursday -- calls for the creation of 10 GCAs; three in mathematics, two in English and language arts, three in social studies and two in science. A

student would need to pass six to graduate from high school. The GCAs would not necessarily mean more tests for students; in fact, they could replace traditional final exams that high school students already take. The State Board's proposal has ensured local flexibility by allowing school districts to use any combination of assessment instruments to determine whether their students are proficient in each discipline. In addition to the PSSA and GCAs, districts could use Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams, or keep using their own local assessment but have them validated through an independent review. It should be noted that districts can comply with the accountability regulations without additional local costs.

The proposal features a comprehensive system of supports for districts and students including: model core curricula; mandatory remediation for struggling students; professional development for teachers in content areas; technical assistance for districts to design remediation, tutoring and extended instruction;



accommodations and modifications for English language learners and students with disabilities; and, quick turnaround of student scores to enable targeted remediation. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) would not be supportive of these regulations if the State Board had not directed the Department of Education to take such action.

Under current regulations, one of the requirements to graduate from public high school is that students must demonstrate achievement of the state standards by scoring proficient or above on the 11th grade PSSAs or a local assessment that is aligned to the state standards. Unfortunately, many students in Pennsylvania are not doing well on their PSSAs, which could spell difficulty in life after high school.

In 2006, 45 percent of graduating seniors did not score proficient on the reading and math 11th grade PSSAs, the 12th grade retake, or did not take the PSSAs but graduated based on local assessments. The percentage of 2006 Lehigh Valley graduates not proficient in math and reading as measured by their 11th grade PSSAs ranges from 28 percent to as high as 77 percent. These results are mirrored across Pennsylvania, in rural, suburban and urban school districts alike.

To be successful in a 21st century economy, young people must graduate from high school prepared to transition to post-secondary education and/or the workforce. A high school diploma is not enough anymore and the knowledge base that the diploma represents is more important than ever. In 1950, 60 percent of jobs were classified as unskilled, attainable by workers with high school diplomas, or even high school dropouts. In 2005, only 14 percent of jobs were unskilled, while 86 percent were skilled or professional jobs requiring higher levels of education and training.

Today, all students need to achieve the Pennsylvania academic standards so they have the skills to be successful in postsecondary education, in careers, and as citizens in an increasingly complex world.

We are failing a large number of our students by awarding high school diplomas that don't guarantee they have met the standards and can achieve in the next chapter of their lives. Consider the evidence: Nearly one-third of all students entering two- or four-year colleges in the United States need to take, and pay for, remedial courses in one or more subjects because they lack the skills they should have mastered in high school.

Clearly, Pennsylvania needs a consistent common-sense accountability-and-supports system aligned with the standards that assures every child in every school district is meeting the standards. The draft regulations by the State Board establish a regulatory landscape that provides just that assurance.

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