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Make diplomas more valuable

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College admissions officers and many employers learned long ago that a Pennsylvania high school diploma is a credential that guarantees very little in terms of a graduate's preparedness for higher education or work. Its value varies widely from district to district, and it doesn't say much about what a student knows.

Making that diploma a reliable credential of basic academic competence is the goal of the state Education Department in establishing a new system of graduation competency assessments. Students will take nine major tests in four subject areas — English, math, science and social studies — over the four-year course of a high school career, and will have to pass six of them in order to graduate.

Pennsylvania will join 22 states that have such standards verified by tests, and four others that are in the process of implementing them. Students now in sixth grade would be the first in Pennsylvania to take the tests, other than in Pittsburgh, where a pilot project will be implemented sooner.

The standards and testing are a matter of accountability for school districts and students. Students who fail a particular test will be able to retake it, and districts will be required to focus on bringing those students up to competency in the subject area.

According to Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak, 57,000 of Pennsylvania's 127,000 public school graduates last year lacked proficiency in reading or math, or both — 44 percent.

The key is the establishment of standards. All districts must comply, although they will have the option of whether to administer the tests as final exams or additional exams, subject by subject.

Going into the process, administrators, teachers and students will know the standards and what the students will have to know in order to pass. Meeting the standard is simple accountability, what the schools should be doing in the first place. As Pittsburgh Superintendent Mark Roosevelt, an ardent advocate of the standards, put it: the standards are a "systemic change in how schools treat the awarding of diplomas to make sure they're worth something before students are held accountable by the economy."