

Erie Times News

State should require tests for graduation

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State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak wants Pennsylvania high school students to pass tests to graduate. Our reaction is, why not?

It's hard to understand why those opposed to the idea don't want to make sure high school students are proficient in reading, writing and math before they receive a diploma.

Zahorchak has proposed a good alternative to local assessments. The state would offer 10 exams on math, language arts and social studies during a student's high school career. These tests would be given at the end of each semester. Students would need to pass five tests to graduate, and they could repeat the tests if necessary.

In the current process, the state demands a three-part requirement for graduating students: course completion, a senior project, and a display of proficiency in reading, writing and math on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment or by local school district assessment.

Zahorchak doesn't believe relying on local districts to assess proficiency is good enough. We don't, either. And neither does Erie schools Superintendent Jim Barker.

"What we're trying to do is give students one more option to demonstrate their proficiency," Barker said. "This will allow us to have many paths (to graduation) ... for students who need it."

Barker also made another important point. The proposed tests would clarify the value of a high school diploma in Pennsylvania. Each of the state's 501 public school districts have different graduation requirements and ways to assess proficiency in reading, writing and math. The state's new testing would bring uniformity.

Testing opponents, including Millcreek schools Superintendent Dean Maynard, complain that a new state assessment would mean one more testing burden for districts and students already overwhelmed by tests and testing. Other critics say the testing would be time-consuming, expensive, and unfair to districts and students.

They're right about the expense. If approved by the State Board of Education when it addresses it Thursday, the state should make sure it also pays for the tests.

Provided districts don't make the mistake of teaching the tests, the key question remains: Why not do this?