

## TESTING

### Aiming for student proficiency in education gets high marks

Monday, January 14, 2008

When local high school graduates seek to further their education at Harrisburg Area Community College, more than half are not ready to perform at the college level.

Testifying before the State Board of Education last week, HACC President Edna V. Baehre said 55.4 percent of entering freshman require remedial instruction in reading. More than half of the new HACC students also need remedial help in math and a third require assistance with their writing skills.

Despite an Education Week report last week that ranked Pennsylvania 10th in quality of education, this dismal picture is repeated around the state. Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, noted at the hearing that 20 percent more children graduated in 2006 in 461 of the state's 501 school districts than scored "proficient" in statewide tests.

What more evidence is required to make the case that educational fraud is being perpetrated on a huge number of students, parents and taxpayers in the commonwealth?

And this is not a new phenomenon. Overcrowded prisons and companies increasingly seeking better educated employees from abroad are the stark real-world consequences of educational failure. That Pennsylvania is perceived to be in the top 10 states in education only suggests an even more abysmal state of affairs in 40 other states.

The federal No Child Left Behind program, which has been both widely praised and criticized, represented a recognition of the problem, and sought to bring accountability to the classroom. But a more effective program would make students accountable for their educational effort and accomplishments, or lack thereof.

Toward that end, the state board is expected to adopt recommendations from the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success that would require high school students, in order to receive a diploma, to achieve proficiency on at least six of nine end-of-course examinations. These Graduation Competency Assessments would be given in English, math, science and social studies.

Schools would have the option of administering the GCAs, require passage of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test in 11th grade or the 12th grade re-test, or administer a locally determined test comparable to the GCAs, subject to state approval.

This approach offers a critical difference from proposals for a single, all-encompassing graduation test that we have criticized. Under GCAs, students would have to prove proficiency in material they've just been taught. Remedial instruction for students who failed would be mandated. And there would be ample opportunities to retake the test. Students who passed each GCA would be awarded Certificates of Proficiency in that subject, recognition that is important in conveying to students the significance of learning the material and doing well.

There is a danger of too much testing. But the GCAs can be used to replace teacher-composed final exams, and one hopes that they would eventually supplant the PSSA tests required by No Child Left Behind. The experience in other states suggests that GCAs, which are similar to New York's long-standing Regents exams, could prove to be a turning point in education in Pennsylvania. Yet at least one vital piece of the education puzzle remains to be addressed.

Pennsylvania needs to swallow hard and put up the dollars necessary to ensure that every school district has the resources necessary to achieve educational success. Ultimately, that translates into greater economic success for Pennsylvania and its citizens.

And far fewer people crowding our prisons.