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## Opinion

### Test our grads

#### Pennsylvania must ensure that its students are ready for the world

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By Alan Lesgold and Steven Ender

A proposal for statewide graduation requirements has sparked a vigorous and healthy debate. On the one hand, we in Pennsylvania owe our children an education that will prepare them for life in our modern global world, and a high school diploma ought to signal that we have provided a high school education that meets that obligation. On the other hand, many people worry about "overtesting" and about their children being treated fairly.

Right now, we administer the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment to help assure that every student makes progress toward adequate preparation for life and that every school is meeting federal and state standards. The new proposal would give school districts a number of options of to assure that students have achieved the level of education envisioned by state standards. One option would be to replace existing final exams in courses with graduate competency assessments. There would be no additional testing. Districts simply would be responsible for ensuring that whatever end-of-course exams they administer meet state standards.

Pennsylvania's new graduation requirements represent a tremendous opportunity to create tests that directly capture the application of high school curriculum to success in real life. Students and parents should see these exams as an opportunity to demonstrate that students have acquired valuable knowledge and skills that they can use in everyday life, whether that means on the job, in a college classroom or in their communities.

There certainly is room for debate about the specific requirements for these new final exams and about alternative approaches to assuring that a high school diploma actually means that a student is prepared for college or other post-high school training. But finding our way to the right standards and tests cannot happen if we simply kill off the idea of school-leaving exams altogether.

While some special interests have vocally opposed these graduation requirements, the vast majority of Pennsylvania taxpayers apparently understand their value. A recent poll commissioned by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children showed that 58 percent of respondents support the State Board of Education's proposed graduation requirements, while only 24 percent oppose them (the remainder were undecided). We agree with this majority.

Now more than ever, we must move forward with progressive tools that help our students compete on a global scale. Pennsylvanians who enter our colleges and universities don't just

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sit alongside peers from the commonwealth or neighboring states, they often are sitting alongside -- and competing with -- students from around the world. Many of those students enter college with a level of academic proficiency in core subjects that surpasses that of Pennsylvania's students.

Too many of our high school graduates are entering college believing that their diploma means they are prepared to succeed, only to end up struggling because they didn't get an adequate high school education. They face the prospect of taking costly and time-consuming remedial courses to bring them to the levels of academic mastery they should have achieved in high school.

This puts our students at a disadvantage. In the worst cases, it can demoralize them and make their road to a college degree or prosperous career more difficult. The net effect is lost opportunities that can lead to lower-paying jobs, limited room for growth or advancement, or even a lifetime of dependence on social service programs that cost all taxpayers.

Such troubling scenarios could be mitigated through the stronger graduation requirements the State Board of Education is considering. These rigorous requirements would be accompanied by resources from the state, including teaching supports and model curriculum that school districts could choose to incorporate. This collaborative effort could help ensure every one of Pennsylvania's high school graduates earns a diploma that represents academic readiness, a diploma that would allow every graduate to enter a college classroom ready to learn and succeed.

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