



FAQs Proposed High School Graduation Requirements Rulemaking

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Introduction

The State Board of Education is proposing regulations that would revise high school graduation requirements to establish a consistent statewide measurement of the minimum knowledge and skills that a public high school diploma signifies as well as a system of academic supports to help students achieve.

All young people in Pennsylvania should have the opportunity and education to build productive and successful lives for themselves and their families. Pennsylvania should hold all its high school students -- regardless of where they live, their race, income level, or future education or work-related aspirations -- to the same standards and assess them through comparable, validated tools.

What are the current high school graduation requirements?

Since 1999, students in Pennsylvania have been required to 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 to graduate from high school. Other graduation requirements, such as course requirements, grades, and graduation projects are decided by local school districts.

What has the State Board of Education Proposed?

The State Board of Education's draft rulemaking requires that every Pennsylvania high school student demonstrate proficiency in the state academic standards in reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies to graduate from high school beginning in the 2013-2014 school year. Proficiency could be assessed through one or a combination of the following:

- Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) -- statewide end-of-course high school exit exams that are aligned to state standards in reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies and that could replace current final exams
- The PSSA administered in 11th grade or the 12th grade retest
- Locally administered, validated criterion referenced assessments comparable to the GCAs. These local assessments must be independently and objectively validated by a vendor selected by the school entity from a list of approved vendors published every five years by the Secretary of Education after approval by the State Board of Education

- Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams that include academic content comparable to the appropriate GCA at a score established by the Secretary to be comparable to the proficient level on the appropriate GCA

Is the GCA one high-stakes graduation test?

No. The State Board proposes that a total of ten GCAs be developed: three in mathematics, two in English/ language arts, three in the social studies and two in science. The math GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry. The reading and writing GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in high school literature and composition courses. The social studies GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in American History, World History and Civics and Government. The science GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in Biology and Chemistry.

To be deemed proficient for purposes of graduation through the series of GCAs (in lieu of the PSSA, local assessments or AP/IB), students need to demonstrate proficiency on the two English/ language arts GCAs, any two mathematics GCAs, one of the science GCA and one of the social studies GCAs.

Well-designed GCAs offer the following benefits:

- Place assessment closer to the point of instruction and create a sense of relevance and progression for students
- Assess smaller bodies of knowledge at one time
- Allow students to begin taking GCAs earlier and have multiple opportunities to take and pass them
- Provide results earlier so teachers and parents can identify and address weaknesses earlier
- Diagnose specific areas of student weakness allowing targeted remediation
- Offer a valuable credit-recovery tool for dropouts who are returning to get their high school diplomas

Why does Pennsylvania need to change the graduation requirement?

The State Board is not proposing to change the requirement that students need to demonstrate achievement of the state standards. The basic concept remains unchanged from the 1999 requirement. The Board is proposing to change how achievement is measured. The Commonwealth is currently not doing enough to ensure that every high school graduate is adequately prepared for postsecondary education or training, 21st century occupations and productive citizenship.

In 2007, 128,603 high school seniors graduated from school districts in Pennsylvania. Almost 57,000 of these students, or 44 percent, 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 these local assessments – and this is cause for concern.

This disconnect is widespread – 473 school districts graduated at least 20 percent or more students in 2006 than scored proficient or above on the PSSA.

Does the proposed rulemaking eliminate local control?

No. The proposed rulemaking leaves in place the core requirement that in order to graduate, 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 to graduate from high school. It provides school districts additional options for students to demonstrate achievement through the GCAs, and Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate tests and the rulemaking establishes how a local assessment can be validated as being aligned with the state academic standards. Other graduation requirements, such as course requirements, grades, and graduation projects would continue to be controlled by local district policy.

Doesn't the rulemaking just burden students with more tests?

Absolutely not. All but one of the options prescribed in the rulemaking for demonstrating achievement of the academic standards already exists. Students already take the PSSA, local assessments, and (for certain students) Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate tests. GCAs are the only “new” test under the rulemaking. However, their utilization will not result in students taking more tests. GCAs are intended to replace final exams. Therefore, the proposed rulemaking should not add to the current regimen of testing.

Given the low PSSA proficiency status of current high school graduates, aren't we just setting students up to fail by requiring them to pass exams in order to graduate?

No. The proposed rulemaking provides important academic supports to students and schools that are designed to enable students to achieve the standards. The proposed regulations require the establishment of a voluntary model curriculum aligned with state academic standards in each of the content areas assessed by GCAs. They also require mandated remediation for students who fail to score proficient and professional development for teachers to improve instruction, remediation methods and utilize the model curriculum and new assessment tools.

The rulemaking represents a fairly comprehensive regulatory scheme for support and accountability. The purpose of the rulemaking is not to withhold diplomas; it is to help students across the Commonwealth achieve the state standards so they can move on to productive lives following graduation.

Should exemptions and/or accommodations be made for students with disabilities and for English Language Learners?

Sensible accommodations and modifications need to be made for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. In the State Board's draft regulation, the Board directs the Department of Education to provide guidance to school entities as to the appropriate accommodations for these students. In addition, students with disabilities will continue to receive regular high school diplomas by meeting the goals in their individualized education programs (IEPs).

Do we still need the PSSA?

As long as the PSSAs are the required assessment for the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, students are required to take them. The reauthorization of the NCLB Act may lead to states being able to use an accountability system, like the GCAs, to determine Adequate Yearly Progress for NCLB. Virginia currently utilizes end of course exams in English, reading algebra I, geometry, and algebra II and plans to use their science end-of-course exams in the near future to meet testing requirements of NCLB. This suggests that Pennsylvania might be able to make the same step if we implement GCAs.

Does the rulemaking create an unfunded mandate for school districts?

No. There is no intention on behalf of the State Board of Education or the Department of Education to create an unfunded mandate for school districts. Like the PSSA, the Department of Education would be charged with developing and administering GCAs.

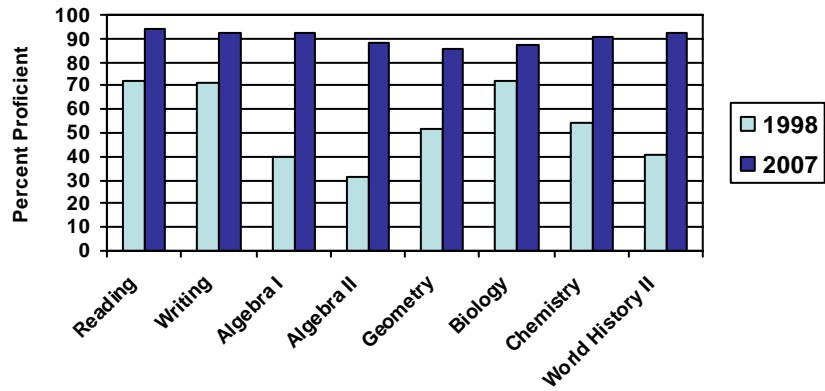
Isn't it unfair to subject career/technical school students to the new accountability requirements?

It is entirely fair. The state academic standards represent the core concepts and competencies that students must master by the end of high school regardless of their next steps in life. Career/technical students do not deserve a second rate education, nor do they deserve a second rate diploma. Graduates can and do change jobs and career paths at a dizzying rate in today's economy. Common, basic expectations will help ensure that all students are prepared for every career and educational opportunity in their lives.

Other states' experience with end of course exams has not been positive, so why should Pennsylvania move ahead?

Virginia has a system of academic supports and end of course exams that is substantively comparable to what the State Board of Education is proposing. The exams were implemented in 1998. Student achievement has improved. Please see the following chart for a representation of the improvement in student achievement that has occurred across the board in Virginia. States that have not seen much success from end of course exams have failed to design appropriate supports for students and schools. Pennsylvania is

proposing to couple the accountability of end of course exams with a strong system of supports.



Virginia Assessment Results

https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/datareports/assess_test_result.do