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From: Elliott Seif [elliottseif@verizon.net]
Sent: Monday, October 05, 2009 8:31 PM
To: IRRC
Subject: Comments regarding final regulation changes to Chapter 4
Attachments: Chapter 4 comments to IRRC.doc

To whom it may concern:

Attached are comments in opposition to the proposed Chapter 4 Department of Education changes currently before the IRRC.

I would appreciate it if you could confirm receipt of these comments.

I am hoping also to testify before the IRRC on October 22nd. I will let you know in a separate e-mail whether I will be able to attend the meeting and to testify.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours truly,

Elliott Seif

#2696

October 5, 2009

**COMMENTS TO THE IIRC REGARDING CHANGES
TO THE CHAPTER 4 REGULATIONS –
6-312 – ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT**

As a lifelong educator and advocate for public education, I have supported many of the initiatives from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. In the past, the Chapter 4 regulations, in the main, have been helpful in strengthening educational programs in the State with minimal bureaucracy and maximum flexibility.

Unfortunately, I believe that the current changes to the regulations, with the addition of the Keystone exams and several other revisions, have the potential to adversely affect the quality of education in many Pennsylvania schools and districts, add additional costs and burdens (unnecessary unfunded mandates) to our schools and districts, and add little to the educational process.

I have opposed this plan from its initial proposal to the present. I think it is a major mistake, and have testified before the State Board asking them to withdraw the plan. Unfortunately, they have chosen to ignore the serious arguments against Keystone Exams.

Listed below are my major arguments in opposition to these new regulations, as well as some suggested alternative proposals that I believe would be more effective and much less expensive to implement.

Elliott Seif, Ph.D.
Philadelphia, PA
elliottseif@verizon.net
Currently an Educational Consultant, Author, and Trainer

Former Director, Curriculum/Instruction Services,
Bucks County Intermediate Unit

Former Professor of Education
Temple University

1. Is there a need for the new Keystone Exams?

- **There is no evidence that substituting Keystone exams for the PSSA exams and local final exams will be a better system for determining whether students adequately meet the State standards and will do better in college and in careers.** The State cites the lack of proficiency on the part of about ¼ of the State's student population as evidence for the need for a new form of testing. But the lack of proficiency is limited to a relatively small part of the student population. And -- it is unclear whether students who do not demonstrate proficiency on the PSSA tests are the same students who do not get into or finish college and who need remediation. Students may not demonstrate proficiency on the PSSA for a variety of reasons, not all of which are the result of poor knowledge and skills.

The State argues that there is a need for a system of statewide final exams to insure that students meet State standards. But the reality is that local assessments in the form of final exams already exist across the State, and these exams are usually one part of a District's assessment system designed to meet State standards. Think back on your own high school education – did you ever take a major course that didn't have a rigorous final exam? Now it is true that the local high school final exams are quite varied, and that some District exams may be weak. But many are extremely strong -- so why throw out the baby with the bathwater? Why not build on the current system instead of wholly replacing it? (See alternatives to a new exam system below).

In addition, it is hard to determine whether many of the State standards are being assessed at the District level, since the State standards are often very general and/or are poorly written, vague and ambiguous at best¹. So it is very unclear as to whether current course final exams in many different subject areas actually measure the State standards or can be easily revised, changed and adapted to meet poorly designed State standards.

Another problem with the Keystone exam proposal is that it will take much of the assessment process out of the hands of knowledgeable teachers and place it in the hands of an outside agency with limited abilities to evaluate student responses. This outside testing agency will be responsible for developing and scoring these assessments. Multiple-choice questions are most likely to be scored by machines, while open-ended items will be scored by minimally trained paid workers with limited understanding of educational issues and rigid rubrics. Is that a good thing? This seems like a waste of millions of taxpayer dollars when we already have a system in place that works for most students and can be upgraded for others -- at a time when we can least afford it!!!

2. If Keystone exams are implemented, can we be assured that they will do what they are supposed to do?

- **There is no guarantee that the State will produce high quality final exams that measure the outcomes of the State standards and also meet the needs of diverse districts and students across the State.** The odds are that the new exams will have many problems, in part because the tests will not easily be able to measure successful implementation of poorly developed State standards and also meet the needs of diverse students across the State. The tests might even lower standards in many districts!!!! I guarantee that, if these tests are developed, many already existing final exams in many districts will be of much higher quality than the State exams.

Creating “standardized” final exams that meet the diverse needs of students in 501 districts will also be a challenge. One strength of the current system is that it allows for flexibility among teachers and districts in developing courses of study and assessments that meet the needs of students with diverse skills and interests. Yet the State is proposing a “one test fits all” model for districts across the State. But--how will one test be used to assess English literature across the State, when students read many different novels and have different emphases in their courses? Will the State tests require that every student in the State read the same books, no matter what their skill levels and interests? Will a single test meet the needs of gifted students? Special needs students who are not labeled as special education students? How will the State develop one American history course when different districts emphasize different themes and organize their American history curricula differently? When the State history standards are so poorly written as to be incomprehensible?

- **There is no guarantee that new Keystone final exams will solve the problem of students who do not have appropriate “21st Century” skills in order to do well in college and the work place.** Most educators believe that technological changes (such as Google and the Internet), career changes (less unskilled and more skilled workers who use projects, creativity and higher forms of thinking) and a generally more complex society (the need for citizens who can think and argue) require new and different forms of educational practices and assessments. Yet the proposed regulations require “more of the same” – in the form of traditional final exams.

Instead of solidifying traditional approaches to assessment, teaching and learning, new Chapter 4 regulations should be designed to encourage districts to help students develop new and different experiences that promote the learning of 21st century attitudes and skills. The regulations should encourage the development of non-traditional courses and course structures, research projects, real life, authentic problem solving, and extensive writing tasks. After meeting certain requirements, students should also have greater, not fewer, options to pursue their own intellectual and aesthetic interests.

- **The new regulations weaken a critical part of the State assessment system – the culminating project – thus undermining the credibility of the State’s desire to strengthen the assessment system.** While the State Board argues that it is important to strengthen assessments to insure success of students, their actions demonstrate otherwise. The proposed Chapter 4 regulations seriously weaken a significant aspect of the State’s assessment system – the graduation project. The current culminating high school project requirement in Chapter 4 is an important supplement to the traditional assessment model. The requirement helps to assess goals not measured by traditional tests, such as research, critical and creative thinking and problem solving, lengthy writing, and presentation skills. Yet, inexplicably, the newly proposed Chapter 4 regulations significantly weaken, rather than strengthen, the culminating project requirement by stating that a student can fulfill the project through “the completion of a college application process”. Instead of adding this new method of fulfilling the project requirement (that has nothing to do with a rigorous project), the project regulations should be strengthened to require research, critical thinking, problem solving and strong presentations, and be required of every student individually in order to graduate. In light of the weakening of this important feature of Chapter 4, how can we rely on the State Board and Department of Education to create new assessments that are rigorous and relevant?

- **The proposed testing requirements in Chapter 4 may lead to just the opposite of what is intended.** The new requirements state that students need to pass the COURSES, not the exams. This means that it is possible that students who do well in the course and fail the exam may pass the course (since it only counts for 1/3 of the grade). Or students might do poorly in the course and pass the exam with high marks, leading them to pass the course. Inexplicably, the new regulations state that students will be able to do a project if they fail the exam twice!!! This is a thoroughly confusing option since the point of the test is to create high standards!!!!

The tests are also meant to increase rigor and raise the standards for graduates, but it is likely that, as a result of these changes, MORE students will drop out of school and fewer students will meet these (proposed) test requirements. For example, a talented art student who is weak in math skills may not be able to graduate with the rigid requirements of having to pass several math final exams and courses.

- **The proposed testing requirements will reduce the ability of districts across the State to develop creative assessment solutions, and will “standardize” assessments and the curriculum so that schools and districts will be less likely to be able to meet the needs of diverse student populations.** The goal of the State regulations should be to encourage districts to develop a wide variety of diverse high quality educational programs that foster educational excellence and build the knowledge, skills and habits of mind appropriate for a 21st century world. But the development of “one size fits all” assessments will only lead to greater rigidity on the part of districts and are not likely to help provide incentives for districts to find creative solutions to the current educational malaise.

- **The new testing requirements will probably need to be revised and modified due to the “Common Core Standards” currently being developed and the National level.** Through the National Governor’s Association, 47 States (including Pennsylvania) are involved in developing “Common Core Standards” around “21st century outcomes”. The idea behind this partnership among States is that American students need a different type of education, one that emphasizes a broader set of attitudes and skills than is demonstrated through traditional testing – critical and creative thinking and problem solving, research and collaborative skills, strong communication skills such as making presentations, argumentation skills, and the like. Measuring these skills will require different forms of assessments other than traditional tests, such as research and writing projects, authentic performances, portfolios that contain multiple types of student work. The Partnership will be working on developing these new forms of assessments once the Standards are completed.

Pennsylvania’s involvement with these Standards will probably mean that the State will have to create a whole new assessment system based on the Common Core Standards rather than the Pennsylvania standards. So the State will spend considerable sums of money on tests that use the current State standards, only to have to revise and change them (perhaps even abandon them) once the Common Core standards are developed. Is this a wise use of State funds?

3. What is the “real” fiscal impact of the implementation of Keystone Exams on both the State and individual districts?

- **The costs for the State are unduly high and unwarranted.** The new tests replace a system that already exists. They will require several hundreds of millions of dollars to implement – and may actually be more expensive. The new assessments may not any better measure whether students meet State standards. The new assessments may have to be replaced once the Common Core standards are developed. Even if they are maintained, the costs will be continual, since the ten tests will probably need to be revised and the scoring system updated continuously.

- **The new testing and validation requirements will be expensive and cumbersome for districts to implement and to administer.** The implementation of the Keystone exams will place an undue burden on every district through major new unfunded costs, new bureaucracies, and additional personnel. Districts will have to administer **30 tests** (10 tests 3X a year). They will have to create **support systems for all students** who do not pass. The test will be broken into modules, so that the **remediation requirements** get even more complicated. Think about it – the costs and bureaucracies that will be needed by each district for **administering, packaging, receiving, recording, inputting data, creating tutorials for all or part of each test, administering parts of the test to students....** And -- the scores for the tests may not come back in some instances

until ten days before graduation – how will districts be able to determine if their students are graduating with enough time to work through the details????

In addition, many districts will also have to go to the expense of *revising their courses, buying new texts, replacing existing courses with new ones (such as in American history)*, with no guarantee that their courses will be any better – and might even be worse than before!!!

Districts that wish to maintain their system of final exams and believe that their exams are as good as or better than the State exams will have to go through a *“validation” process that will be costly* (even with the State paying ½ of the costs) and probably take considerable time to complete (in spite of what the State says). There is no guarantee that the validation process will be fair and objective, since the State will decide on who will be allowed to do the validations.

4. What are some alternatives to the proposed regulations that would also strengthen local assessment systems and insure that students have the knowledge and skills for both college and the work world?

- **Instead of creating top down State-imposed one size fits all assessments, the Department should work closely with school districts in Pennsylvania to find the best examples of end of course exams (and other course assessments).** PUT THESE ON LINE – share them across the State. Provide time and incentives for teachers to review these assessments and improve the ones that they currently give. Encourage them to give many different types of assessments. Work with low achieving districts to improve their assessments as they work with students. Listen to the problems districts have as they develop and implement new assessments. Allow for flexibility where appropriate. This would be cheaper, more engaging and involving, and lead to better results in the short and long run.

- **Use the current regulations that require assessment plans to encourage Pennsylvania's districts to develop a comprehensive set of local assessments that are strong and varied.** Work with districts to help them develop comprehensive assessment plans that provide for a variety of “cornerstone” assessments for students, K-12. These should not only include traditional assessments but also “performance” tasks and projects.

- **Instead of creating a mandatory, one size fits all, system for ALL districts – With an expensive and time consuming validation system for districts to opt out – begin with a voluntary system of State exams for Districts interested in piloting the program.** This will enable the State to “try out” a system of model curricula and final exams, determine if the system works, revise and adapt the system to meet the needs of

diverse districts, and give other Districts the option to buy in if they feel it is a strong system. While this will still be expensive, it will at least provide an opportunity to work through its problems and to determine how to strengthen this system for all districts and students.

- **Strengthen (don't weaken) the culminating project assessment that is currently in the regulations by mandating that culminating projects include research, a coherent paper, a presentation, and thinking and creativity.** The new regulations seriously weaken the culminating project requirement. On this basis alone, the new regulations should be rejected! Instead of weakening the culminating project, it should be strengthened as a graduation requirement.

- **Develop a different set of regulations that encourage districts to develop creative ways to design courses, assess students and build the knowledge, skills and "habits of mind" necessary for 21st century living and college success.** The development of new regulations and incentives to create new ways to approach educational excellence can coincide with the "race to the top" monies being offered by the Federal Government.

- **Work closely with other States to develop an alternative set of assessments, based on new Common Core Standards.** The Governor's Association is creating a new set of "Common Core Standards" that are designed to produce students who are both college and career ready when they graduate. Pennsylvania has signed on to this project. There will also be a push to develop new assessments to go along with these Standards. Wait until these Standards and Assessments are developed (states might also be asked to develop assessments associated with these Standards) before committing to a new set of state assessments that will be very costly and might have to be redesigned anyway.

ⁱ The State standards in many subjects are often vague and ambiguous, and some State standards have been rated poorly by outside organizations. In particular, several outside organizations have rated Pennsylvania's History Standards with a D or F. They have been judged to be unclear, fragmented, and incomprehensible. Written in 1999, they have yet to be revised!!!