

# 2696

October 5, 2009

Independent Regulatory Review Commission  
333 Market Street, 14<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Harrisburg, PA 17101

SUBJECT: Issue #2696 Keystone Exams

Dear Members of the IRRC:

**Should Pennsylvania's students be required to pass a competency exam to graduate from high school?**

Common belief is that the High School Competency Exam will add meaning to a Pennsylvania high school diploma and ensure that our graduates will have the college and career ready skills required to succeed. For the estimated 57,000 students (40% of those who now graduate) who are expected to fail the exam; school districts will be required to provide additional instructional support to prepare them to pass or retake the test. They also point out that currently 22 states already have exit exams.

Recent data demonstrates mixed results, and that for these 22 states, 7 have shown declines in high school reading achievement since 2002 while 7 have shown gains. The results for math achievement fared better with 12 states showing increases while only 3 states showing a decline (Center on Education Policy, June 2007, Answering the Question That Matters Most-Has Student Achievement Increased Since No Child Left Behind?, p. 49-50).

Objections to the establishment of this test include the fact that school funding per student in Pennsylvania's school districts is not distributed equally. Fears are that many more students from districts with low achieving schools could drop out of school to avoid the prospect of being labeled a failure. The result being that even larger numbers of students may be pushed into a world of diminished opportunities, reducing their chances for securing a meaningful job.

I question if our financially stressed school districts will be prepared to provide the serious remedial courses, professional development, and student courses in a fair manner and consistent with what will be available in wealthier districts for the students who do not pass the test? If not, are our social systems prepared to support the expected increases in the number of individuals who do not earn a high school degree?

I suggest that our state and our schools must set high expectations for students to achieve a high school degree. Higher expectations for learning in the long run will only benefit every student in

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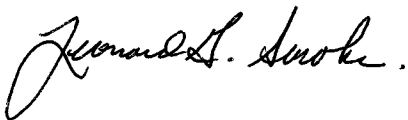
every school and every graduate who is seeking additional schooling or work. At issue is that fact that the proposed High School Graduation Competency Exam, to be applied during a student's last year in high school is too little, too late. Can serious senior year remediation be expected and sought when students learn late that they cannot graduate because they have not mastered the academic skills needed. Will students seek to enter a program of remedial coursework during their senior year that will need to be added on top of their regular course work? I believe not, and that this test has the potential to result in a stressful high stakes teach-to-the-test remedial program that for many students will have a low chance for real meaningful learning and at worst will label a student for years as a failure.

I suggest that students must have their academic deficiencies identified much earlier as during the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Special remedial programs should be required for each student needing these additional skills. Remedial work can be designed differently for each student to meet their own goals and completed during or after school hours or even during summer enrichment sessions.

Students identified as needing help should be assessed yearly from 7<sup>th</sup> grade onward to 12<sup>th</sup> grade to ascertain whether they are on track or off track. Each student must be provided yearly with an honest individually designed roadmap indicating to each what is needed to reach their goal and minimally this includes passing the Graduate Competency Exam. Of course, this will cost each school district additional time and money for the added assessments, classes and faculty professional development. And it should not be applied only by districts with surplus resources.

Simply designing a test to label students as failures, I believe is not in our interest. My mother used to say, "A stitch in time saves nine" and this can also apply to our most precious resource, our children and our future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leonard G. Soroka".

Dr. Leonard G. Soroka,  
Dean of the School of Education  
Holy Family University  
9801 Frankford Avenue, Philadelphia Pa 19114  
[lsoroka@holyfamily.edu](mailto:lsoroka@holyfamily.edu)  
267-341-3565