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From: Korchnak, Lawrence [lkorchnak@bwschools.net]
Sent: Wednesday, October 14, 2009 4:44 PM
To: IRRRC
Subject: IRRRC Reg #2696

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Dear IRRRC Commissioners:

I am writing to express my support for the recently submitted regulations to establish stronger, consistent statewide standards for high school graduation:

A kid can hit any target that he sees that doesn't move on him.

In Pennsylvania public schools, student achievement is scattered across a wide range of proficiency levels. This phenomenon is less a product of what the child brings *to* the classroom than what takes place *in* the classroom. While Pennsylvania has the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) to determine a student's proficiency, students may still graduate without achieving proficiency due to the nature of alternative assessments administered at the local level.

For the past 40 years, I have served children in multiple capacities as a teacher, counselor, and administrator. While most of that time was spent in successful school districts, I also have had the honor to serve as a Distinguished Educator for the Pennsylvania Department of Education in some of the most dismally failing schools in the Commonwealth. Drawing from the breadth of my experience, it is abundantly clear that student achievement is predicated on high expectations, rigorous curriculum and quality instruction. That should not be a surprise to anyone involved in education. Unfortunately, this means different things to different people.

As Pennsylvania's schools try to compete on a global scale, it is remarkable that there is no external standard other than the PSSA upon which student achievement is measured...and then, only with respect to minimum competencies in the core subject areas. Even so, when students fail to achieve proficiency on the PSSA, school districts employ locally developed assessments to validate student proficiency. Unfortunately these alternate assessments have mixed results. The recently released Local Assessment Validity Study Report confirms that there is no guarantee that those who fail to reach proficiency on the PSSA leave our schools with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful at the next stage of their lives. The report "documents considerable variance in the type and form...as well as the manner in which these are used as graduation requirements." Consequently, under the present system of student assessment, there is no consistency and no real standard of proficiency. Hence, there is no real accountability.

Keystone Exams would provide a standard upon which to base accountability. They would provide a clear, consistent expectation of proficient academic performance throughout the Commonwealth.

Furthermore, Keystone Exams would provide progress monitoring where it counts...in the classroom where teachers could assess instructional effectiveness and student achievement in real time, as students complete their course work and prepare to move to the next level. The opportunity for retaking the assessment would diminish the "high stakes" nature of cumulative assessments and give the student a chance to truly learn the material instead of being assessed before graduation.

Keystone Exams would establish a minimum standard for proficiency in specific subject areas...and, under the Department of Education's proposal a school district could still create its own local assessment, provided that the assessment meets that standard. Furthermore, the Keystone Assessments could be administered in place of a

final exam in the core content areas eliminating the subjectivity that often accompanies teacher made exams and generates mixed results.

Opponents of state wide assessments describe Keystone Exams as high stakes or infringing on local control. The truth is that these phrases are more ideological than research-based. High stakes accountability is common by any measure of success in today's world. Local control is rarely an issue when "big government" dispenses funds or services. As to the cost, there is no direct cost to school districts unless they elect to create their own assessments, and then with financial support from the Department of Education. The real issue can be simply stated: under the present system, most public school children graduate with deficiencies in core subject areas, notably mathematics and reading.

Curiously, schools are expected to compete on a global scale yet face opposition to the very structures and methods that have produced global success. States that employ universal standards and assessment are among the highest performing in the nation. Take Massachusetts as an example. In the most recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Massachusetts outscored the nation and most of their international peers in math and science. According to the most recent 2007 TIMSS results, Massachusetts 4th graders ranked 2nd worldwide in Science and tied for 3rd in Mathematics. The state's 8th graders tied for 1st in Science and 6th in Mathematics. It is difficult to ignore a system that produces achievement levels like this. In fact, 46 state governors have initiated efforts to create national standards...accountability on a national scale.

Keystone Exams should be supported for what they are - a significant first step to accountability by setting high expectations while providing a target that students can see that won't move on them.

Begin with the end in mind...and deliver quality instruction for all students to succeed.

Sincerely,

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