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From: Ron Sofo [rsofo@freedom.k12.pa.us]
Sent: Thursday, October 15, 2009 12:36 PM
To: IRRC
Cc: Ron Sofo; Sandy DiSante
Subject: FW: To Test or Not To Test-feedback for the Commission in its consideration of adopting the proposed final regulations
Attachments: TO TEST OR NOT TO TEST.docx

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Hello,

I am Dr. Ron Sofo, Superintendent of the Freedom Area School District (Beaver County, PA) writing you today to ask for caution in the adoption of the Keystone examination proposal. A virus free statement, "To test or Not to Test", is attached for the Commission's review.

These regulations address an important but not sufficient part of the reinvention of public schools to successfully address the challenges and opportunities our youth will face in the 21st century. However, with their adoption the State Board of Education with the Pennsylvania Department of Education need to insure that the implementation process is as transparent, fair, deliberate and logistically doable as possible to earn the full cooperation and support of educators, parents, and students.

The State Board of Education and all involved in the creation and implementation of K-12 public education policy must publicly and at every opportunity reinforce the need to move all K-12 instruction towards mastery models of teaching and learning. All students will not be afforded a high probability of Keystone success unless this mastery focus, based upon high quality formative assessments, keyed to re-teaching of unmastered K-12 content and skills, is embedded in education practice, policy and an adequate, equitable and predictable funding system of public education.

Freedom stands ready to assist in this most important endeavor.

Ron Sofo Ph.D.
Superintendent
Freedom Area School District
724-775-5464

From: Sandy DiSante
Sent: Thursday, October 15, 2009 9:51 AM
To: Ron Sofo
Subject: To Test or Not To Test

Ron,

Per your request – total of 838 words.

Sandy DiSante
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To Test or Not to Test: This is not the right question!

Recently, there has been much debate and a flurry of activity at the state and local levels over the Pennsylvania State Board of Education's passage of the Keystone (end-of-course) Final Examination proposal. The notion of whether there needs to be a final examination of appropriate rigor and relevance for key, core academic high school courses is **not the right question** to debate when we still have a system of public education that ill suited to teach all students to appropriate proficient levels of core academic knowledge and skills. To expect all of our current or future high school students to pass this type of test, or any other fair and appropriate test, will require a major retooling and redesign of how we teach, formatively assess, and re-teach students to proficiency starting in kindergarten thru twelfth grades.

Would we expect a school bus to take all of its student passengers to the moon? While a bus is an adequate transportation system to move students from home to school, it was never designed to take its passengers to the moon. To think that a new set of tests will "solve" public schools' performance deficits reported in the media is parallel to believing that better fuel or a larger engine in a bus is sufficient to reach the moon! A more productive question to address and work to place its solutions into action is: **How do our public schools become success oriented organizations for all students and their teachers?**

The public schools we and our parents attended were designed to weed and sort students for an economy and way of life that wanted a large portion of students to "graduate" with low-to-medium levels of skills and knowledge. Our economy needed people to fill low-to-medium skilled jobs. We expected that about 25% of our students would pursue a college education, with most of them being predominately white males. We accepted thinking that most smart people in Math or Science had some type of "gene" that made them that way. Schools functioned to identify and promote those "gifted" and "talented" individuals at the expense of other students. A grade of "A" was not worth much in most any course if most students were able to earn one. Students failing and dropping out of school were necessary signs of academic rigor for those who did succeed. Failure was a necessary outcome of the public school experience for many students.

We now have politicians, business groups, and other educational policy experts advocating that our public schools should prepare all students for some type of post high school education or training. We understand that most of today's low/medium skilled jobs are either being performed by automation or people in China, India, Mexico, and the countries of the Pacific Rim or South America. Schools now must insure that all students can apply what they learn in school to real world predictable and unpredictable situations that qualify them for higher skill paying jobs and careers. When a portion of our students do not achieve proficiency on one high stakes test, politicians and the business community proclaim our public schools to be "broken" and cry for more external accountability.

The current system of public education that most students experience today is not broken. Rather, it is not an appropriate system for the new mission of all students to higher levels of academic achievement. We must spend the majority of our time, talent and resources in designing schools where students' best efforts to learn, combined with caring teachers, using best teaching practices to deliver a rigorous and relevant curriculum are the norm. **We need to empower our educators to exercise their daily professional responsibility for results.** *We are foolish to believe that we can test our students to academic excellence.* Nineteenth century thinking in this case will not solve a 21st century challenge.

It is imperative to craft a new 21st Century Promise with our students, their parents, our teachers and administrators, policy makers and funders. This Promise must support the creation of a system of public education that maximizes the probability that all students and their teachers will experience success in the learning and teaching of rigorous and relevant academic knowledge and skills. We need to be asking: *How do we encourage students to give their best efforts to learn every day?; How do we support our teachers on a daily basis to successfully address the learning needs of all students?; How do we assist parents in being their child's first and most important teacher and provide physically and emotionally safe environments for them at home?; How do we create adequate, predictable, efficient, and equitable funding systems for public education that meet the educational needs and external mandates to educate all students, including those who are learning disabled, living in poverty, English as a second language learners and gifted.*

How do we insure that Success will be the only option for our students? That is the Question!