



NORTH ALLEGHENY SCHOOLS

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Patricia P. Green, Ph.D.
Superintendent
200 Hillvue Lane
Pittsburgh, PA 15237-5391

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

412-366-2100

October 16, 2009

Mr. Arthur Coccodrilli, Chairman
Independent Regulatory Review Commission
333 Market Street, 14th Floor
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17101

Dear Mr. Coccodrilli:

It is my understanding that the Keystone Exit Exam issue is going to be addressed by you next Thursday, October 22, 2009. Members of my Board of School Directors and I have expressed strong public opposition to this new level of testing for our students in the North Allegheny School District. Many of my Superintendent colleagues around the State of Pennsylvania have taken similar positions, publicly, on this issue as well. While I am a very firm believer in accountability, the implementation of this new testing layer is unnecessary and counterproductive to the goals of North Allegheny.

North Allegheny School District, with over 8000 students, is one of the highest achieving districts in the State of Pennsylvania and is ranked as the 7th top achieving district out of 500 school districts in the State by the *Pittsburgh Business Times*. We are very proud of our emphasis on academic achievement and the fact that we have been ranked in the top 3% of the nation's largest school districts by *Expansion Management* magazine.

Over the years, we have taken specific steps to increase the academic rigor and achievements of the students in North Allegheny to reach the outstanding levels where we are today. Our approach does not rely on high school exit exams and could be put in place by any district in Pennsylvania or anywhere in the country where there is the will to EXCEL. We have developed and implemented early intervention programs at the elementary level as well as remedial programs at the secondary level to assist struggling students so that they could be successful on the PSSA tests. We instituted Individual Learning Plans for every student who was less than proficient and, as a result, North Allegheny is one of the highest performing school districts in Pennsylvania. We aligned our entire curriculum with the Pennsylvania State Standards and then added a layer on top of that for added rigor and called them the North Allegheny Standards. The results are staggering and when our students receive a North Allegheny diploma, it truly has significant meaning. That is part of my concern because I believe these new Keystone Exams are actually going to water down the curriculum, not add rigor. Currently, when students are tested on the 11th grade math PSSA test, it contains Algebra I, Algebra II and Trigonometry. The new tests will only focus on Algebra I, which is actually a step backwards in terms of rigor. The model curriculum being developed will be a diminished version of what is currently in place in Pennsylvania. We also have students taking Algebra I as early as 6th grade, who, at age 11 will have to take a high school exit exam, which will count for 1/3 of their total grade. That makes no sense to us.

"Great Expectations ... The Best Is Yet To Come!"

Districts have aligned their curriculums with the existing State Standards and we have spent significant funds to utilize resources that are all aligned with the PSSA exams. Now, the State and local school districts will have to spend huge amounts of taxpayer dollars to support this new exit exam, which is totally unnecessary. Pennsylvania has made great gains on the PSSA in support of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and there are already existing vehicles in place through the Pennsylvania Department of Education for any district that has not made significant gains. Many districts have strong curriculum in place to address all subject areas and are networking with business and industry regarding what is needed as our students graduate to enter the workforce with 21st Century skills. Again, implementing these new exit exams is a step backwards, not a step forward into the future possibilities for our students. All the research regarding exit exams in other states indicate that they create a significant increase in high school dropouts while other research points to the importance of a challenging curriculum and a strong teacher in front of the classroom as key factors in student success. We have invested large amounts of taxpayer funding to better prepare our teachers through staff development aligned with the State Standards and our curricula, all of which will have been wasted if the State shifts to this new exit exam. Spending funds on this new layer of testing is not a best practice for accountability purposes. Millions of taxpayer dollars will be expended in creating this new curriculum and the tests, as well as implementing them. The ripple effect to schools puts an unnecessary burden on the local taxpayer. These are unfunded mandates that should be carefully analyzed during difficult economic times instead of being rushed through as a political band-aid.

The U.S. Department of Education is seriously considering national standards and Pennsylvania has indicated a willingness to go in that direction as well, which could necessitate another shift in curriculum. Why would the State invest in a State curriculum now that may need to be again changed very shortly if the national standards go into effect? That would require an additional shift for local school districts and more taxpayer funding spent.

Local school districts in very large numbers have passed resolutions against these new tests and numerous Superintendents are speaking in opposition to this reactionary measure. Please do not put another layer of testing on the local districts unnecessarily and recognize the voices of those closest to the students who are asking the IRRC to say no to these tests.

As you are considering the Keystone Exams next week, I hope you will vote against them and take the points I have raised into consideration.

Sincerely,



Patricia P. Green, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools

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