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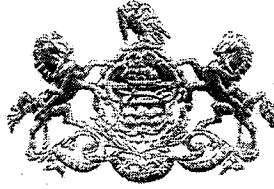
STATE SENATOR
JANE CLARE ORIE
40TH SENATORIAL DISTRICT

SENATE BOX 203040
ROOM 362, THE STATE CAPITOL
HARRISBURG, PA 17120-3040
717-787-6538 • FAX: 717-787-8625
E-MAIL: jorie@pasen.gov
WEBSITE: www.senatororie.com

LA CASA BLANCA BUILDING
9400 McKNIGHT ROAD, SUITE 105
PITTSBURGH, PA 15237
412-630-9466 • FAX: 412-635-2199

2525 ROCHESTER ROAD, SUITE 207
CRANBERRY TOWNSHIP, PA 16066
724-776-3500 • FAX: 724-776-3582

Office of the Majority Whip



Senate of Pennsylvania

August 11, 2009

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PA State Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Dear Members of the State Board of Education:

As you are probably aware, as the prime sponsor of Senate Bill 281 -- legislation that would require legislative approval of any new graduation requirement -- I continue to have serious concerns about the Keystone Exams proposal put forth by the State Board of Education and believe that if implemented will take us in the wrong direction for the following reasons:

- 1. Cost.** With a \$3.2 billion deficit, we cannot afford ANY new program. In February, the Governor requested \$18 million in FY 2009-10 to develop the 10 Keystone Exams. In May, the Department of Education signed a contract with a vendor to develop the tests for \$201 million over 7 years. At a time when many proven education programs, like the EITC and Science in Motion, are being cut and/or eliminated, if there is any new funding, it should go toward proven programs or instruction, not a new test.
- 2. "Taxpayers will save Money."** The contract the Department signed was for \$201 over 7 years. While State Board of Education Chairman Joe Torsella claims that the latest proposal will eliminate the 11th grade PSSA and save \$40 million from the original \$201 million cost, there is still \$161 million of new spending. Furthermore, what is not being said is that there are new state costs associated with the proposal -- including validation of the Keystone Exams as well as the half of the costs for validation of local school assessments. The state would be required to set up a new bureaucracy for validating assessments -- comprised of school board and teacher representing but without principals or superintendents (two groups that have been critical). We need to know the full fiscal impact of these mandates prior to enacting this testing scheme.
- 3. New/Unfunded Mandates on Schools.** The Rendell Administration is also quiet on the new costs to be borne by local taxpayers.

Validation of Local Assessments. The latest proposal calls for schools to validate their local assessments every six years to ensure that they are in line with the

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state's academic standards. The prior versions only called for a local assessment validity study. Torsella has estimated that it will cost \$5,000 to \$15,000 to validate each local exam. At 501 school districts times 10 exams times \$5,000, this comes to \$25 million. This cost would be split 50/50 by the state and schools.

Alternative Pathways. While Torsella is to be lauded for looking at alternatives to the Keystone Exams, the latest proposal will require school districts to pick up the costs of establishing and paying for a new regional bureaucracy that will be charged with scoring Alternative Pathway projects. This will be a new cost for schools and circumvents the role of the local teacher grading a project. In other states, the cost of regional scoring at the local level is around \$500,000.

Books. With the latest proposal containing model curriculum and testing, schools will ultimately be forced to pick up the costs for new books that are in line with the academic standards, model curriculum and Keystone Exams.

This all represents new costs for the Commonwealth and schools and we need to know the full fiscal impact at the local level.

4. **"Voluntary."** While the Administration touts the Keystone Exams as voluntary, they are voluntary in name only. First, if the 11th grade PSSA is eliminated -- as called for under the latest proposal, ALL school districts will still be required to administer 4 Keystone Exams (Algebra 1, Literature, Science, and Writing). Secondly, while the proposal states that school boards can continue using their own local assessments; these local assessments will have to be "validated" every 6 years to ensure that they are aligned with Pennsylvania's academic standards. The costs associated with validating local assessments will force many school districts to "opt into" the Keystone Exams.

5. **Loss of Local Control.** The Keystone Exams are intended to replace the local school assessments. Once a school district administers the Keystone Exams, the state would forbid students to graduate unless they pass 6 of the 10 exams or go through the Alternative Pathways project route. The scoring of students' Alternative Pathway projects would be done at the regional level and the Secretary of Education would exempt students on a case-by-case basis (thus circumventing the role of the school board). The Department's \$201 million contract also calls for the development of model curriculum, thus negating the role of the school board setting curriculum.

6. **High-Stakes Testing.** Students scoring below proficient on any Keystone Exam will get a "0%." This arbitrary decision -- with no science behind it -- will adversely affect the lives of many students. Students should be given credit for their actual level of achievement no matter how high or low. The Keystone Exams will also count as 1/3rd or 33% of a student's final grade in that course. The 1/3rd percentage is also an arbitrary figure that has no basis in science. Overall, if a straight "A" student scores below basic on a Keystone Exam, his/her final average will be 67% at the most. Students would have to pass at least 4 Keystone Exams to graduate (new graduation requirement). While the latest proposal indicates that students will have to pass 6 of 10 exams, technically,

students will be required to pass all ten as 30% of a student's GPA is going to be based on the exams. It is also important to point out that in reality, we could have at least 2-3 years of students taking both the PSSA and Keystone Exams simultaneously until there is a transition made. As research indicates, there is a very real concern that students will simply drop out of school, rather than going through the new hoops to graduate. This is, in fact, a high-stakes testing scheme. The infatuation with testing at the both the state and national levels, in essence, treats our children as lab rats.

7. PSSAs are Working. On July 27th, the Rendell Administration released the latest PSSA results -- ahead of schedule -- so that it could tout that for the first time ever three-quarters of Pennsylvania students scored on grade level in reading and math. At a time when we are finally seeing progress and have limited resources why change course?

8. Federal Level

The Federal Government is moving toward national standards and testing. Much like the Senate Republican argument on the Governor's health care proposal, why should the state enact a new testing scheme that will be circumvented by the federal government?

If Pennsylvania proceeds with the end-of-year testing scheme, it will have to rely upon the federal government to approve eliminating the 11th grade PSSAs in a timely manner. Despite the elimination of the 11th grade PSSAs, the Commonwealth will need to administer BOTH the 11th grade PSSA and the Keystone Exams for at least 2 to 3 years in order to show the longitudinal data for the Keystone Exams.

9. Opposition

The original Graduation Competency Assessment (GCA) proposal was opposed by 22 education organizations: American Federation of Teachers PA, The ARC of PA, Autism Society of America/PA Government Relations Work Group, Disability Rights Network of PA, Education Law Center, Learning Disabilities Association of PA, Mental Health Association in PA, NAACP - PA State Conference of NAACP Branches, National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), PA Association of Agricultural Educators, PA Association of Career and Technical Administrators, PA Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals, PA Association of Pupil Services Administrators, PA Association of Rural and Small Schools, PA Association of School Administrators, PA Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, PA Middle School Association, Parent Teacher Association - PA, PA School Boards Association, PA State Education Association, PA for the Education of Gifted Students, and Philadelphia Student Union. Over 200 school boards adopted resolutions opposing the GCAs.

After the initial Keystone Exam proposal was announced, the 18-member Coalition for Effective and Responsible Teaching (CERT) issued its own proposal ("Keystone 2.0"). The CERT Coalition consisted of: American Federation of Teachers PA, Autism Society of America/PA Government Relations Work Group, Learning Disabilities Association of PA, NAACP - PA State Conference of NAACP Branches, National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), Parent Teacher Association, PA Association for Gifted Education, PA Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, PA

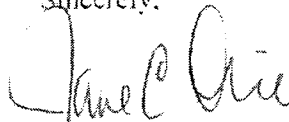
Association of Agricultural Educators, PA Association of Career and Technical Administrators, PA Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals, PA Association of Pupil Services Administrators, A Association of Rural and Small Schools, PA Association of School Administrators, Pennsylvania Middle School Association, PA Psychological Association, PA State Education Association, and PA for the Education of Gifted Students. Only the PSEA has dropped its opposition to the Keystone Exams. Over 50 school boards adopted resolutions opposing the Keystone Exams.

After the revised Keystone Exam proposal was announced, the members of the CERT coalition (minus PSEA) maintain their concerns and/or opposition. PSBA is now on record as opposing the Keystone Exams.

The fact remains that there is no data demonstrating that passing exit exams or end of course exams provides any subsequent benefit in college or career success. There is no distinctive research or empirical evidence to suggest that other states that have these exams in place have outstanding and/or distinctive results to prove this reform has legitimate merit. If there was one, we'd all be doing it and emulating them.

I respectfully request that you reject the Keystone Exams proposal.

Sincerely,



Jane C. Ori
Majority Whip
40th Senatorial District

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