

COMMENTS
ON
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATIONS
GCA/PSSA PROPOSAL

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2008 JUN -2 AM 11: 42

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

I am writing in opposition to the State Board of Education's proposal to require a proficient or advanced score on the PSSAs or passage of 6 GCAs as a requirement for a student to receive a high school diploma. I am writing from the perspective of a retired natural resources professional, the father of 4 children who have graduated from public schools, two as valedictorian and one as salutatorian, all are college graduates and three also have Master's degrees. I have 12 grandchildren, 11 of whom are currently attending Pennsylvania public schools. In addition, I have served more than 18 years on my local School Board, 14 years as President and more than 10 years on the Joint Operating Committee of our local vocational-technical school.

The premise that Algebra II, 12th Grade English Literature or Biology/Chemistry is required for success in a career or life is ridiculous. Everyone is not suited for nor has a need for a college education. Many of the people who perform the functions that hold our communities together, our automobile mechanics, our HVAC technicians, our health care technicians, our firemen, our police, our farmers, our factory workers, our truck drivers, can live happy, productive lives without the level of knowledge required to reach the breadth and depth of education specified in the Board of Education's proposal. Better to spend time teaching them how to manage their money properly, including emphasis on budgeting and the impact of credit card debt on their long term financial outlook or undertaking to instill in them a sense of the obligations associated with being a citizen of this country including volunteer public service.

I find it ludicrous that an individual who reads at the second grade level, cannot perform many of the ordinary functions of life such as tying shoes or brushing teeth without assistance and will never be able to live and function independently, be granted a diploma because the requirements of an IEP were fulfilled, but a person who can design and install a heating and air conditioning system in a home or commercial building is denied a diploma because the cutoff scores on PSSAs and GCAs were not met. Which one will be a contributing member of society, paying taxes, coaching Little League baseball or serving as Scout Leader? Should every student have an IEP? What would be the financial and time requirements of such a policy?

I have a good example in my own family. One of my sons-in-law is a graduate of the vocational program at a local high school. There is a very strong probability he would not have been granted a diploma under the conditions being proposed yet he has a responsible position on the staff of a local university, is a contributing member of the institution's President's Forum and the Property and Budget Committee. He and my daughter have 4 children, own their own home and serve the community in a number of volunteer capacities. Why should we advance regulations that deny such a person a high school diploma?

One of the goals of education should be to instill in students a love of learning and hopefully encourage them to continue to acquire knowledge throughout their lives. We cannot expect that goal to be reached if we force the “hands on learners” into a purely academic program.

Obviously how many students pass or fail the PSSAs or GCAs depends on the nature of the questions asked and the cutoff scores. But if, as has been reported, it is true that the people who developed the PSSA test instruments feel that a “good ” question is one that 50% of the test takers answer incorrectly, are we not developing a program designed with failure in mind rather than success?

It seems to me that the push for this program is coming from people whose professional and social circles do not include “blue collar” workers. They do not see on a day to day basis the talents of these people or the contributions they make to communities in which they live. In my professional career I “rubbed elbows” with these people on a weekly basis. I saw individuals with limited knowledge of English literature, Chemistry or Algebra run a successful business, tear apart and rebuild large engines, provide employment for others in their community and play a large part in providing the raw materials that sustained an international corporation. Part of the justification for the proposal is that we need to prepare children to compete in a “global” economy. Maybe we should be more concerned about preparing children to strengthen and sustain the “local” economy and local communities which will lead to stronger state and national economies.

The State Board, in giving their rationale for the program, refers to the fact that only 37% of the students who graduate each year without having passed the PSSA make it to their sophomore year in college and only one-third graduate on time. Is this failure of the student or is it a failure of the system? Could it **possibly** be that we are sending too many children to college? Horrors! Might we be better off having our society and school Guidance Departments touting rather than denigrating the “blue collar”, “hands-on” occupations? Maybe we should be steering the appropriate students toward these careers earlier in their academic lives.

The State Board also states “no individual or entity is expected to be adversely affected by this regulation.” How ridiculous a statement is that? The members of the student body who don’t receive high school diplomas after having successfully passed all the local assessments will have a much more difficult time finding employment, if they seek it at all. The truly gifted will have fewer opportunities to take challenging courses of study because so much time and so many resources will be committed to the students struggling to master the State mandated material. Isn’t it interesting that colleges and universities do not require students to demonstrate mastery of all subjects before granting them a degree? The marketplace determines the value of that degree not some bureaucrat.

This proposal is just as flawed as Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and regulations. More and more information is being published indicating the data from Texas, the foundation for the NCLB legislation, was at least incorrectly reported if not deliberately falsified. Just as all children are not the same height and weight, cannot all run a 12 second 100 meter dash or dunk a basketball, all children are not endowed with the same intellect or artistic talents. We will never have 100% of the students score proficient or advanced on the standardized tests the educational system is forced to spend so much

time preparing for, administering and scoring. Better spend that time identifying the student's real strengths and interests and fostering their development. In the next several years as more and more schools fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and are placed on the "Needs Improvement" or "Failed" list despite herculean efforts by educators, the real folly and cost of NCLB will become obvious.

Why spend 50 million or more dollars on implementation a program that of would, in my opinion, result in

- more not fewer dropouts (primarily males) with all the attendant social costs
- fewer not more opportunities to accelerate the learning of the more artistically and academically talented students
- more not less paperwork for administrators resulting in less time being spent supporting teachers in the classroom
- more not fewer financial resources supporting the bureaucratic process thus not being available for supplies and support in the classroom;
- more not less frustration on the part of students as they are forced into an academic track that has limited interest to them
- more not fewer discipline problems as a result of this frustration
- more not fewer talented teachers leaving the classroom as they are prevented from really helping students develop to limit of their abilities
- fewer not more individuals leaving school with a love of learning
- fewer not more individuals having the satisfaction of completing high school and receiving a diploma

The big winners in this process are the companies and their supporters who develop, administer and score the standardized tests. The big losers are the "hands-on" and middle of the intellectual spectrum students who will be forced into an educational path that is not relevant to their personal or career interests and a society that will have to deal with social and financial costs of a larger and larger number of uneducated or undereducated citizenry.

I have no objection to and would, in fact, support regulations that require mastery of basic English and mathematics skills or offer the option of taking State developed tests, the passage of which would result in Certificates of Achievement or an Honors diploma. But the plan as presented will result in the expenditure of large sums of taxpayer dollars without solving the problem it proposes to address and will hurt far more students than it helps.

I would be happy to talk with you personally should you need clarification on any of the points in this document.

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