

Buckheit, James

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From: Nadia Prisuta [nprisuta@hotmail.com]
Sent: Sunday, June 01, 2008 11:51 PM
To: j buckheit@state.pa.us
Subject: Graduation Competency Assessments

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Dear Mr. Buckheit:

I am an English teacher at Sharpsville Area High School in Mercer County. For the past ten years, I have taught various grades and mostly eleventh grade. As a result, I see how my career has changed due to the PSSA. I am gravely concerned about the route our school system will take if our state continues with the idea of GCAs. I am opposed to GCAs for many reasons.

Schools need to be held accountable. I believe with a little creativity and cooperation among all involved in the process of educating children that our state can raise the bar; however, GCAs are not the answer. Currently, my students take 4 state tests: the writing, reading, math and science tests. Overall, these tests consume part or all of 9 school days. In addition, students miss more crucial class time for test preparation which is often difficult to blend with the curriculum of their current classes since these tests are more comprehensive in nature. Students also miss class time for 4-Sight testing. Because we have roughly 45 minute classes, I have had to cut key components (in part) of my English curriculum like grammar and vocabulary.

So, what can we do? I think most schools, like mine, are already doing remarkable things that show student growth as much or more than a standardized test can. Our electronic portfolio graduation project combines technology, writing, public speaking and a review of chosen student work. Students build a portfolio, scan curricular and non-curricular artifacts, write reflections on each, proofread, personalize their portfolios on the computer, write speeches, and present highlights of their high school accomplishments and the real-world value of each artifact to staff. Competent writing, technology and public speaking skills alone are valuable tools in the world of business. Our staff has designed rubrics to score these portfolios, and this year we were amazed at the effort students put into this day of presentations. Furthermore, through the PA Business Week program sponsored by a group called Americans for the Competitive Enterprise System, our district sponsors a business week where juniors develop a business plan, advertise, market, compete with other businesses, build products, and work in teams. The energy during this week and the student work produced is remarkable. Community members and teachers advise these teams. For two years now, our community has been in awe of what our students are capable of, and we see this program as hands on and valuable at a grade level like this as students are beginning to think of their futures.

Unfortunately, my fear is that with more state tests that our school will need to cut some of these programs that are highly valuable to implement more testing. Testing is not the best method of assessments for all students. In 2003, a former student of mine graduated. I had taught her in both speech and grade 11 English. As a senior, she came back to me very upset. She had passed her reading and writing PSSAs easily but had scored a basic on her math. She planned to major in elementary education in college and feared this test may haunt her in the future. In 2007, she graduated from college and was a long-term substitute in our district for part of this year. She is creative, well-spoken, likeable, energetic and intelligent enough to earn a college diploma in four years. However, for whatever reason, she was not a strong test taker in math. Maybe it was the lack of funding dedicated to tutoring which prohibited her from passing, or maybe she was never going to be a strong standardized test taker, much like me. I graduated from both high school and college with honors, yet I was virtually sick the three times I took the SATs because I could not achieve the type of score to reflect what kind of student and worker I am.

I wish my students could read more novels and write more essays incorporating research and documentation. I have noticed in the last few academic years that I lose more time with them and have to scramble to get things in. I also notice that my students deeply enjoy our class discussions, especially when we are not interrupted in the middle of *Ethan Frome* to take a state test. If I could turn our novel guides into the state to show how my students have analyzed the themes of this novel, I bet they would be impressed. And, the novel guides that would not impress them also do not impress me. As a result, students receive a low score and in the long run their class grades and GPAs are lower. I guarantee that our high school diplomas at Sharpsville mean

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something, and I am saddened to hear our Governor and others insist they do not.

What will happen if Pennsylvania turns to the GCAs? Will we increase our high school drop out rate? Will our vocational education programs lose students because they must be at their home schools? For many of my eleventh graders, they would despise school if it wasn't for the Mercer County Career Center. They are getting fantastic training and have already begun programs that will lead them to a successful career. All students are not college bound. Educators need to encourage more education to our students, but are training programs worthless? Doesn't our society need all kinds of workers?

I have only touched on a few of my concerns with the GCAs. I firmly believe that Pennsylvania can lead the way as a state if we work together and discover the many forms of assessment that can hold our students accountable. With cooperation and proper funding, I also believe more students, whether at large or small or rural or urban schools, will want to come to school and learn. I have been told several times in my career that education is about student discovery. How do more standardized tests show this discovery which leads to learning? Thank you for your time. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share my views with the State Board of Education.

Sincerely,

Nadia Prisuta
Hermitage, PA

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