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CONEWAGO VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Daniel R. Trimmer
SuperintendentLori Duncan
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June 1, 2008

Mr. Jim Buckheit, Executive Director
State Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Dear Mr. Buckheit,

We, the superintendents of the school districts of Adams County, are writing regarding the proposed establishment of Graduation Competency Assessments in Pennsylvania. We are opposed to this proposal on a number of different levels. First, there is no direct evidence to show that these exams will have any positive impact on the achievement of our students. As has been well documented, there currently are a number of states that use exit exams and some that have done so for a number of years. There is no direct evidence that students from these states perform at higher levels or are better prepared for further education or the workforce than Pennsylvania students. Rather, evidence that does exist indicates quite the contrary: exit exams result in higher numbers of students dropping out of school. Assuming that exit exams could indeed guarantee improved results, a very important question is, can a single test measure one's true ability or predict future success? Every major commercial testing company will answer no to this question. One of the most well established and respected standardized test is the SAT, yet the publishers of the SAT have repeatedly said that their test should never be used as the sole criteria for entrance into college and studies have shown that it is a very poor predictor of future success beyond the first year of college. Still, our state is proposing to develop tests that are used as the sole criteria for exiting high school. Decisions of such importance should be based on a variety of data and not a single test score.

This brings us to a second concern. It is our understanding that every student will be required to pass the same tests regardless of his or her vocational or educational plans. It is also our understanding that these tests are in courses that are traditionally thought of as college preparatory courses. There are literally thousands of students across the state who are extremely talented in music, art, woodworking, or some other trade, and who will struggle to be successful in passing some of these tests and could therefore be denied a diploma. We challenge any person to come to our schools and view the work done by our students in the "nonacademic" courses and honestly conclude that these students are failures. Unfortunately, this is exactly how some of these students will be labeled if they fail to achieve an arbitrary score on a high stakes test. This does not even take into account those students who struggle with the English language or have a learning disability.

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We are sure you will counter our argument by stating that students will be given multiple opportunities to pass the tests and will be given additional instruction to help them do so. There are two major weaknesses in this line of thinking. First, if students are continuing to prepare for these tests by retaking courses, the time they are spending in remediation is denying them the opportunity to enroll in the very classes where their strengths, talents, and indeed their futures lie. Secondly, if students require remediation beyond the school day or year in order to pass the required tests, there is a cost factor involved. Who will pay the salaries of teachers for summer remedial classes or Saturday review sessions? Local taxpayers are already carrying more than their fair share of the burden without being asked to finance a program that they did not ask for.

Finally, we are concerned with the process by which this proposal has been presented and approved by the State Board of Education. Supposedly, this proposal is in response, at least in part, to concerns of business and industry. Yet, repeated surveys on those traits most desirable to business include not academic skills, but rather, soft skills such as teamwork, creativity, dependability, and work ethic. Focusing on preparation for a series of high stakes tests seems to be counterproductive in developing the very skills business claims to value. We are also concerned about why the voice of every major educational association in the state seems to have been ignored. The State Board of Education has received testimony and comment from organizations representing teachers, parents, administrators, and school boards and these groups are unified in their opposition of this proposal. Yet it continues to move ahead based solely on the wishes of a few.

Money and time can be spent in our schools more productively than in the development and institution of still another high stakes test, especially one that has the potential to do irreparable harm so many of our students.

Sincerely,

Daniel R. Trimmer
Conewago Valley School District

Paul Healy
Bermudian Springs School District

William Hall
Gettysburg Area School District

William Chain
Fairfield Area School District

Robert McConaghy
Littlestown Area School District

Eric Eshbach
Upper Adams School District