

RECEIVED 577

Buckheit, James**From:** BARBARA RITZHEIMER [ritz5000@comcast.net]

2008 JUN 12 AM 9:38

Sent: Friday, June 06, 2008 12:48 PM**To:** jrbuckheit@state.pa.usINDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION**Subject:** Graduation Competency Assessments

I am writing to voice my opposition to the Graduate Competency Assessments. I have been teaching in Pennsylvania for 34 years so I have seen government initiatives come and go. I will not be teaching for too many more years, and I am glad. What the government, at the national and state levels, is asking students to do is ridiculous.

We are forced to spend so much time getting students ready for high stakes tests such as the PSSA, there is not much time to teach them what they need to know to succeed in life. We lose almost two weeks of teaching time just to administer the PSSA. That does not include the time spent in giving students time to practice for the PSSA. Now the state wants to add a high stakes graduation test on top of the PSSA.

I believe that most of the people who are responsible for requiring that students take these tests are college graduates or grew up at a time when it was desirable to have a college education to get ahead. They think everyone should have the knowledge necessary to get into college. In today's economy, it is no longer necessary to have a college diploma. Do you need more education beyond high school? Yes, but not necessarily at a college. I have had numerous students do quite well and earn more money at the entry level without a college degree than I earned with 20 years of teaching and a master's degree.

I adopted my son from Brazil. Had he been required to pass a graduation competency test, he would never have received a high school diploma. His education had been interrupted repeatedly in Brazil so he lacked many of the basics. His basic reading and math skills were poor. He worked hard; and with a lot of intensive help, he graduated from high school. He enrolled at Harrisburg Area Community College where he needed to take remedial classes for the first semester. He continued to work hard and was accepted at Northland College, a premier environmental education college in Wisconsin. He graduated with more than a 3.0 GPA. He is now working as an environmental educator at a 4-H camp in Georgia. His supervisors have nothing but good things to say about him. He is an excellent teacher. That would never have happened if he would have had to pass a graduation exam.

I have students who want to be hair dressers, electricians, auto mechanics, plumbers, etc. They don't want to learn, and probably don't need to learn, higher level math. What they should be learning is personal finance and inventory and accounting procedures. I remember one girl who wanted to be a hair dresser. She was already working at one of the local shops helping out with answering the phone, washing hair, etc. She was going to v-tech and announced very proudly that her instructor had enough faith in her to allow her to do someone's hair without supervision. I could tell she was really excited. But then she became sad when she told me she was having real trouble passing Algebra II. She did graduate, but I seriously doubt she would have gotten a diploma if she would have had to take an exam.

What about the special education and ESL students? Will they have to pass the exam?

I attend workshops in many other parts of the country and have spoken to teachers from states that require graduation tests. They have shared stories with me of students who can't pass or are afraid they cannot pass and therefore quit school. I really feel that this issue has to be studied more carefully.

I also think that policy makers have to talk to teachers and students. Education is not what it used to be. Students don't automatically believe that education has worth. You have to show many of them how something will be of value to them in the future before they make any effort. The school district in which I live and teach does not have a high percentage of people with college degrees. Many of our students expect to work in a factory, shop or mine. It is hard enough to convince them that a high school diploma is necessary without also requiring them to pass a graduation assessment.

If the state does go forward with the graduation competency assessment, at least get rid of the PSSA. The high

6/9/2008

stakes testing is out of control. Soon I will be doing nothing but preparing students for tests. I don't understand how a college can figure out whether or not to accept a student based on a 3 ½ hour SAT but the state of Pennsylvania needs 12 or more hours of testing to see if a student is competent. Then to make matters worse, we now give the 4 Sight test four times a year to help get kids ready for the PSSA. The juniors have to take the fourth 4 Sight test **AFTER** they have taken the last PSSA. No wonder these students are ready to quit.

Please think long and hard about what you are asking of these students. They are not all going to go to college. Some of them blossom a little later than others. Just because they aren't very good at higher level math or can't interpret poetry, doesn't mean they cannot be successful contributors to our economy and society.

Barbara Ritzheimer
5 Locust Street
Pine Grove, PA 17963
570-345-3420
ritzh5000@comcast.net