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CENTRAL BUCKS SCHOOL DISTRICT

LEADING THE WAY

The Central Bucks Schools will provide all students with the academic and problem-solving skills essential for personal development, responsible citizenship, and life-long learning.

June 4, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Buckheit:

I am writing to comment on the Academic Standards and Assessment proposal. Our school board is on record officially opposing. Any proposal to enact Graduation Competency Assessments and any other regulation or legislation that would reduce the authority of local school districts to determine whether their students have earned a high school diploma is opposed.

The Academic Standards and Assessment proposal is one of the most concerning actions coming out of the State Board of Education that I can remember in my over thirty years in public education. I can only conclude that there is a strong move to replace local control with state control. The state has developed standards and tests (PSSA) to measure student performance. In turn, districts have aligned their curriculum, often narrowing it so as to be in direct alignment with what PSSA measures. Now, we have a new set of tests that are to serve as end of course final exams. Districts will again align their courses, narrowing the course content even more to be in align with what the GCAs measure. There is an old adage that says, "You get what you measure". My concern is Pennsylvania will indeed get what it measures – a very narrow slice of what students know and can do. This is particularly troublesome to a district that has high performing students and one in which the PSSA is viewed as minimal competency, not the end goal.

The State Board of Education and our legislators should recognize that over-testing our students and substituting state approved exams for locally developed end of course final exams will reduce the quality of learning that is going on in a number of schools across the Commonwealth. I simply cannot fathom how there could be one assessment for high school Biology that will fit students all across the state. In the Central Bucks School District alone we offer four levels of Biology and four different final exams.

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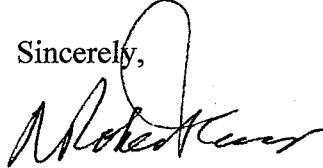
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There are many aspects of the academic standards and assessment proposal that are faulty and I suspect that you will hear many criticisms. I simply want to focus on my fear that there will be a regression to the mean and, in an effort to improve learning, the students in high performing districts will actually begin to perform less well over time. The standards set by the GCAs will become the end or the goal which, in my mind, has the bar set too low.

I would encourage the State Board of Education to move out of a one-size fits all model for its 501 school districts. Further, it is time to begin to develop authentic assessments in disciplines and perhaps use a sampling technique to assess how well students are performing across the state. Further, if there is concern about student performance in low performing districts, then, as a Commonwealth, we should muster our resources and direct our support to those districts.

Sincerely,



N. Robert Laws
Superintendent

NRL/slr

Cc: Board of School Directors
Dr. Barry J. Galasso, Bucks County Intermediate Unit
Nancy B. Silvius
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Senator C. McIlhinney
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