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Buckheit, James

From: emiller53@comcast.net

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Sent: Monday, June 09, 2008 11:17 AM

To: j buckheit@state.pa.us

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Subject: comment on changing high school graduation requirements

Dear Mr. Buckheit,

After hearing about the proposed changes to high school graduation requirements that are now being considered, I decided to look at the information on your web site before forming an opinion. After reviewing the proposal, I have to come out STRONGLY OPPOSED to this plan.

We already have PSSA testing. The preparation and administration of these tests takes a substantial amount of time away from actual instruction, and not only in the core areas. Add yet another battery of tests, and more instructional time will be lost. I have been a teacher in the public education system in Pennsylvania for 31 years, and one thing I have learned through experience is that actual time spent on instruction is infinitely more valuable than the time spent taking standardized tests that have been forced on the system by politicians. How do you propose to make up for the lost instructional time? It seems to me that we are working to create a generation of young people who are proficient in taking standardized tests rather than being able to demonstrate learning through actual relevant performance assessments.

I have one other concern. As a teacher of art, it is obvious to me that little or no consideration is being given to the impact of these new proposed requirements on the arts (and other special subject areas) in Pennsylvania's public schools. The focus on PSSA testing has resulted in the reduction of instructional time devoted to special subjects and electives in the art (especially in grades 1-8) in many school districts, including the one for which I work. If these new graduation exams are implemented, they will, of course, only address the four core-area subjects. As I read it, if a student performs poorly on a certain exam, he may be required to repeat the course before retaking the exam. Therefore, if a student who has a low proficiency in algebra, for example, has to retake an algebra course in order to retake the accompanying test, he loses the opportunity to take an elective course. The result is that a student who is highly proficient, interested, and successful in art, for example, will lose the opportunity to work to a higher level in that subject. If this student's goal in life is a career in the arts, you will be doing him a great disservice. For many students, a special area subject is the reason they remain in school. It is their passion. Don't rob them of opportunities because a group of misguided politicians want to impose narrowly focused testing on public schools.

I believe that this plan, much like the PSSA system, is poorly thought-out, and that little, if any, consideration was given to all of the possible ramifications in the years ahead. This testing will not make our public schools stronger. Actually, the opposite may occur. It looks like another attempt by the "experts" in Harrisburg to create the illusion of accountability. If you want to improve schools, provide the funding that is needed. Work with universities to improve teacher training and preparation. Set class size standards. Stop sucking time and resources into the testing vacuum.

I also have to ask, how did I, and all others who completed high school before the advent of PSSAs and high school competency exams ever survive after graduation? How did so many of us ever achieve success? How in the world did the colleges and trade schools we applied to know if we were fit? Who really believes that more testing will improve the chances of high school graduates across the state? Not me, and I find that the vast majority of my colleagues agrees with me. I suggest that the employees of the PDE do some more homework, and use the resources you have available to develop a more useful proposal to meet the goal of improved public schools.

Sincerely,
Eric Miller
Art Department Chairperson
New Oxford High School
Conewago Valley School District

6/9/2008