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RECEIVED**Comments on Pennsylvania Graduation Competency Assessments  
(GCAs)**

by Ronald G. Ebbert, Recently retired Educator and Current Upper Adams School Board Member

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY  
REVIEW COMMISSION

I am responding to a letter addressed to School Board Members dated February 12, 2008. In that letter Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak outlined the rationale for the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs). He cites in 2006 that 45% of public high school seniors who graduated did not score proficient on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade Reading and Math PSSAs. It was PDE who in 2002 normed the PSSA into quartiles and set the state cut score so that only half of the students were considered proficient or advanced. This effectively told the other half (basic and below basic) they were not worthy of graduation and charged the local school district with "fixing" the problem. To now pronounce and imply that local districts are not doing the job is ridiculous - - we should be celebrating that we have moved ten percent (10%) of that basic and below basic group into the proficient range. To suggest that we need yet another set of tests to make them "worthy" of graduation is ludicrous.

Dr. Zahorchak also cites that there are 501 school districts and therefore 501 different graduation requirements. As a recently retired teacher and administrator with 35 years of service to public education, I have had a front row seat and been actively involved in my district's educational process. Since my retirement, I have served on the Upper Adams School Board for the past year. School Boards have always been charged with developing graduation requirements and more recently were charged by PDE with justifying those students that did not score high enough on the PSSA were worthy of graduation. Our district selected Study Island as a means of assuring that all students had the basic skills. I believe this computer-based program serves that requirement. It not only assesses the students but advances them instructionally based upon their responses and progress.

Let us examine the underpinnings of the PSSA. It is a norm-referenced test with HALF of the students deemed unsatisfactory by PDE. It would have been much better had the test been based on common criteria that are meaningful to ALL high school students and based on common educational skills agreed upon by ALL employers. Since its inception in 1995 the PSSA has changed dramatically over the years and has been renormed several times. I once commented to a PDE representative at a PARSS (Pa Assoc of Rural and Small Schools) meeting in Bedford County that if we continue to renorm the PSSA we will always have 50% of our students in the "bottom half". Now PDE asks us to trust them to develop yet another layer of testing that will likely confirm that indeed half are "below average".

Another argument advanced by Dr. Zahorchak is that the diploma should be meaningful to employers. PDE undermined that concept years ago. I have three children who have diplomas from Upper Adams. My youngest daughter is severely mentally retarded and attended LIU programs located outside the district until she "graduated" at age 21. Even though she never attended one day in Upper Adams she received a diploma identical to

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that of her brother and sister. It was advised that since she completed the IEP set forth under state and federal IDEA regulations she had successfully fulfilled her requirements for graduation. I once quipped that we should issue a diploma when students enter school and spend our efforts on truly educating the child. Which leads me to question and explore what REALLY is the role of public education? Is it to prepare students for college? For the workplace? For success in society?

Dr. Zahorchak cites statistics from colleges and employers that imply that districts give diplomas to students that are not prepared. Forty years ago I entered college after a fine high school education only to find a college English professor who had an entirely different set of expectations. I quickly found out that after a few weeks under his able tutelage (i.e. doing it his way) I was again an A student. This was fine until I encountered the NEXT college English professor who wanted it done HER way. In short, GCAs are no guarantee that colleges and employers will be satisfied until we develop a test on which all can agree. I seriously doubt if that will ever occur. This would also require that a GCA would need to be published for all to see. Currently the PSSAs are extremely secretive. Had I not been a Principal I would have never seen ANY of the seven variations of the test that our students were expected to pass. The public and parents accept at face value that the tests are fair and legitimate. I once challenged a local state legislator to take the PSSA test. To his credit he agreed but was not allowed by PDE to participate. Perhaps we should select a cadre of average citizens who are considered successful and use them to norm the test. I cannot wait until you declare that half of them are not worthy of their diploma!!!

And to think we do this in the name of EDUCATION.

Thank you for reading my comments.

Sincerely,

Ronald G. Ebbert  
Recently Retired Principal,  
Current School Board Member

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**Buckheit, James**

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**From:** Ron Ebbert [ron\_ebbert@hotmail.com]  
**Sent:** Monday, June 09, 2008 3:42 PM  
**To:** jrbuckheit@state.pa.us; irrc@irrc.state.pa.us  
**Subject:** GCAs



GCAs.doc (24 KB)

Dear Mr. Buckheit, Scott Schalles, and Michael Totino,