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Sent: Friday, June 13, 2008 2:49 PM

To: j buckheit@state.pa.us; IRRRC

Cc: Donna S. Weldon; david simpson; 'David Simpson'; david mason; Johanna Billings

Subject: graduation exit exam comments

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Please see the attached comments on the GCA's regulations from PAGE, Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education.

Thank you
Donna Benson
Past President
Legislation committee

6/13/2008

Graduation from high school must be meaningful, but many important skills are needed in life that tests cannot measure. Exit exams are not the answer. Multiple-choice and short-answer tests that are currently used to measure standards do not adequately measure the complex thinking, communication, creativity and problem solving skills that students need to succeed in college, work, and life. More high stakes tests may not measure everything that is important in a young person's education and the present tests have caused our best students to waste time.

High Stakes testing may look good to outside observers, but often has unintended consequences as we have already seen from the NCLB round of testing. Already gifted and high ability students are made to wait until other students catch up before they are allowed to learn more in-depth curricular concepts. Their time is being wasted while teachers prepare students for the PSSA tests which drive the entire curriculum. To add more tests as graduation requirements seems to only compound these problems. These problems include neglect of higher-order thinking and performance skills – writing, product development, problem solving, and extensive research skills. Narrowing of the curriculum to have students prepared for the test materials has been occurring since the PSSA tests began.

Teachers are focusing their instruction on state standardized test items. According to Dave Ellison, educator and correspondent, "to prepare for high stakes testing, teachers cut projects, discussions, cooperative activities, simulations, field trips, music, and art and increase drill and practice of basic skills." As a result more challenging courses are being dropped and opportunities to study cross curricular courses in many areas such as humanities are being lost. High ability students who take the PSSA exams have complained to me that these tests are a waste of their time.

Activities which are more hands-on, creative, problem solving, or cross curricular are being eliminated in favor of test preparation alternatives. Having rigorous, interesting courses with well prepared teachers are more likely to bring about high achieving graduates than exit exams.

Accountability is not a bad thing as such, but it has become synonymous with the word test. Would the Enron executives have passed an ethics test? Will the public be the ones to develop the standards for the testing companies? Who will make the tests? Who will determine if too many students have passed or failed? Will scores be adjusted if too many students pass on the first try?

Another problem has been accuracy of scoring. Scoring errors have led to serious mistakes that have had a significant impact on students. I have had a student who has shown award winning creative writing ability, who needed remedial writing help according to the PSSA test, due to not following the "acceptable rules" which did not reward creativity. Creativity in real life is valued. How can we develop inventors and creative producers if we stifle creativity in our educational system?

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To fund testing requirements money has been and will continue to be diverted from valuable programs, especially programs for higher level and gifted students. Costs will increase for the local school districts to prepare students for the test and remediation and to prepare teachers to administer tests. The expense for these additional assessments will escalate while districts ignore the education needs of higher ability students. Students may no longer get what they individually need to reach their potential. This will hurt our best and brightest students most of all. Once they reach the standards someone has set for the majority of students, no resources will be allocated to take the high ability students further.

High ability students are important only if they can help the school's published ranking. Will younger students be allowed to take graduate exit exams at their instructional level? If a student passes all of the tests prior to high school will the student be graduated? What will be the school's responsibility once the student has passed the exit exams? Is the school then "off the hook" for all further public education? This could leave gifted students out the door at age 12 or under. Will districts be required to extend their curriculum to have students complete courses that are not assessed? Will the student be provided with a rigorous curriculum that will allow access to Pennsylvania's post secondary institutions? Or will these young students and their parents be left to fend for themselves in furthering their child's education?

If the state proceeds with exit exams, there needs to be provision for students to test out of or be exempted from courses and get credit or waiver course requirements. Right now some districts require students to repeat courses taken prior to high school when they have accelerated through a District's curriculum.

The best assessments provide feedback to help challenge and inform teachers of a student's ongoing learning needs. High stakes tests will do little to help teachers fine-tune instruction for individual students. Tests will arrive under heavy security and be scored externally with schools and teachers only getting aggregated scores months after the students have taken the tests. This will have little impact for determining of students' needs as required in existing Chapters 14 and 16.

Do not fall into the erroneous thinking that we can solve any and all problems with more of the same. If the tests we already have are causing unintended consequences, do you think that perhaps more tests will be the solution?

Please think about this.....Do you go to the office to find a list of multiple choice questions on your desk or are you given prompts for the letters of correspondence to complete your daily work? For what are we preparing our students? Are we preparing them for the world as it exists, or as it will be in the future? I think not. Instead of adding more tests, let's decrease those we are giving. They are not working to ensure quality education, in fact, the opposite is happening. If students are not assessed at their instructional level, AYP can not be measured. The unintended consequences are causing more problems.

PAGE's concerns related to the GCA's include the following:

- Unintended consequences will be compounded
- Instructional time may be focused on drill and practice even after mastery is achieved.
- Low level tests lack challenge and therefore waste time
- High stakes testing narrows educational opportunities
- Gifted students may be assessed inappropriately with age group peers, not at their instructional level.
- Rigorous course work will be replaced by teaching to the tests
- Creativity will be stifled.
- Gifted students will be left with few options for challenge in high school.
- District responsibility for meeting the needs of the gifted learner may be eliminated.
- Graduation will be determined by standardized exams, not by teachers who have knowledge of the students and use ongoing assessments throughout a challenging course.
- Alternatives for early graduation may not be addressed appropriately for high ability learners.

The Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education, PAGE, does not support adding Graduation Competency Exams that narrow the curriculum, limit time for rigorous courses of study, and focus resources away from high ability students by restricting access to enrichment and acceleration in high quality educational programs.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Donna J. Benson
PAGE Board, Past President,
Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education
Representing 74,000 gifted students in PA