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Editorial: High school exit exam poses challenges, but is worth the effort

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A proposal to require high school students in Pennsylvania to pass competency exams to graduate is stirring up controversy here and elsewhere across the state.

At Mars High School last week a forum on the exit exam proposal passed by the state Board of Education early this year was held with opponents of the exit exam plan dominating the event.

Developing and administering a graduation exit exam program is sure to be difficult- and controversial- but it is worth doing if a high school diploma is to have meaning.

Rather than fight to prevent Harrisburg lawmakers from implementing a high school graduation exam similar to what 25 other states have already done, school officials and education experts in the state should put more of their energy into developing a competency exam program that is effective and fair.

In New York State, students have for nearly 30 years been required to pass the Regents Competency Tests to graduate from high school. Since New York's program was implemented, 24 other states have made some form of competency exam a requirement for high school graduation.

Few people will disagree with the notion that a high school diploma should mean that a graduate possesses basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. But anecdotal evidence suggests that often is not the case.

Employers often complain about the low caliber of job applicants they see boasting a high school diploma. Many community colleges, and even some four year colleges, have had to develop remedial courses for freshmen to boost the basic academic skills that high school graduates should possess.

Clearly, many high schools are failing some of their graduates. An exit exam program would help define the scope of the problem and also would give the diplomas earned by Pennsylvania's high school graduates more value.

At the Mars forum on the proposed exit exam for Pennsylvania, Judith Mosse, of the State Association for Gifted Education, said "Having rigorous, interesting courses with well prepared teachers are more likely to bring about high achieving graduates than exams."

That probably is true. But without competency exams, the school district and its taxpayers don't know if the school does, in fact, have rigorous, interesting courses taught by well- prepared teachers.

Without exit exams, there is no way to know what the students are, or are not, learning. Students can leave high school with a diploma, but a transcript full of C's and B's is really subjective unless and until the students are measured against a standardized exam designed to reflect competency in subjects.

The members of the group meeting at Mars said they want to parents to be aware of the graduation test plan and what they view as its dangers. While there are many challenges to creating an effective exit exam program, the greater dangers is in doing nothing- and just assuming that a diploma means something.

Among the objections to exit exams is the argument that exams raise already high dropout rates as students leave school early partly to avoid having to take the tests. But while some support this logical theory, many prominent studies reject the argument, finding no link between exit exams and increased drop out rates.

Other objections include the fact that students already take many standardized tests. Again, there are solutions, including Pennsylvania's proposal that students pass either six of the 10 graduation competency exams, or score "proficient" or above on the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment), or pass advanced- placement or a locally developed assessment that is compatible with state standards.

Critics also knock the program as a "high stakes" test. But Pennsylvania's proposal, like those in other states, would offer students multiple chances to pass the tests, and offer remedial help between tests to help improve students' scores. That is hardly a high stakes proposition.

Another issue highlighted by critics includes the cost to the district. That is a legitimate issue and the state should be expected to provide funding for the exit exam program. But if high schools have to spend more money to ensure that their graduates have basic competences then maybe that is more appropriate than employers and colleges having to pay for remedial programs to teach young people what they should have learned in high school.

A high school diploma should be based on more than class attendance and a record of non-failing grades assigned in a subjective environment. A state-administered test for competency would add value to the meaning of a high school diploma.

Mars along with 136 other of the states 501 school districts has adopted a resolution opposing a graduation competency exam.

Critics of the plan at Mars and elsewhere bring up numerous points worthy of discussion. But it would be better if educators across the state directed their energies toward making sure that Pennsylvania's exit exam program is as good as it can be by learning from other states' experiences, rather than trying to prevent competency exams from becoming law here.

