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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY  
REVIEW COMMISSION**Raising the Bar**

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If you're not familiar with the term "empty diploma," it refers to the shameful and destructive practice of graduating kids who lack basic skills. This is a big problem in Pennsylvania.

According to the state Department of Education, more than 56,000 high school seniors graduated from Pennsylvania high schools last year even though they failed state math and reading tests. This happened because the state PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) tests aren't the final word on who gets diplomas and who doesn't.

School districts have final say via so-called local graduation assessments. And so the PSSAs, which are Pennsylvania's No Child Left Behind tests, can be and routinely are summarily dismissed as a graduation requirement.

How it helps graduates to enter the work force or go on to college while lacking basic math and language skills is a mystery to us — and a disservice to the ill-equipped graduates. It's why the Education Department, at Gov. Rendell's urgings, has developed a battery of graduation tests in 10 core subjects. Sensibly, the tests would be administered at the completion of each course as opposed to combining the subject areas into a single comprehensive test in students' senior year.

That would be less troubling for students. And with remediation provided along the way, it would be a more effective way to help students learn the basic skills they need to succeed in today's world. Besides, we have to do something.

State Education officials can't allow watered-down graduation standards to remain in place. It's impractical if not ruinous from a national perspective; it also violates the state's legal and moral obligation to provide students with an education.

Unfortunately, the proposal is getting panned by school districts and teacher unions. They warn against burdening already test-weary students and fret that more students will drop out if standards are raised. Additionally, they claim that districts are the best judges of whether students are qualified to graduate.

Seems to us local standards are much too weak if students who can't pass basic skills tests are getting diplomas anyway.

What's worrisome is that lawmakers are joining the opposition. And so we encourage citizens to chime in.

Public comment on the proposal to standardize graduation requirements will be accepted through June 16.

Stand up for real graduation standards and against handing out diplomas just for showing up.

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