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The Daily & Sunday Review

Towanda, Pennsylvania - a division of nepanews.com

2008 JUN 23 AM 11:45

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Twin Tiers Perspective: Education secretary admits diplomas lack value

May 30, 2008

On February 12, 2008, Secretary of Education, Gerald Zahorchak, wrote a letter to PA school boards urging them to accept the Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA) or at least not oppose the GCA as recommended by the Pennsylvania School Board Association and the Pennsylvania State Education Association. Stalemate!

Education will hardly reform itself when these groups lobby against reform. It would appear that few in education want to be held accountable, but Zahorchak cites 10 newspapers that have supported the need for a standard diploma.

Currently, students must score proficient or advanced on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) or pass a Local School Assessment (LSA). The GCA would be a standard alternative that would help to validate school diplomas. Zahorchak stated that 45 percent of public high school seniors which amounted to nearly 57,000 students who graduated in 2006 did not score proficient or advanced on the eleventh grade reading and math PSSA. Though this percentage is staggering, this is not news to those who read The Daily Review's July grade report. The unsettling fact is that these students still received diplomas based on the current LSA which can vary in content, difficulty, authorship and grading even within the same building. There have been concerns about the security of the PSSA. Wouldn't this be even more of an issue for the LSA?

What has finally caught up with schools are the incredible numbers of unprepared students who possess a diploma. Industry and secondary education have been screaming for years about the lack of preparation that entry level workers and freshmen possess. The National Association of Educational Progress reported that 28 percent of all college freshmen in the fall of 2000 required remediation in at least math, reading or writing. The lack of preparation is actually compounded when one realizes the percentage of graduates who never attend college. Zahorchak states that 35 percent of companies provide remedial math instruction to their workers.

When students pass the LSA, but not the PSSA, there are four possible reasons to include test validity, test reliability, curriculum and accountability. Much time,

input and money was spent in developing the PSSA. Base lines were established and data have been collected at least since 1996 so test validity and reliability should be easily eliminated. Superintendents are quick to claim that they have a rigorous curriculum. This leaves accountability, but if accountability is in question then curriculum to include the hidden curriculum are back on the table. The implication in the Secretary's letter is that the LSA must be weaker than the PSSA. Businesses, industries and colleges would not have called for the GCA unless there was a problem with the graduate they received. This implication is further supported when Zahorchak states that independent evaluators will need to certify the LSA as equivalent to the GCA.

As school budgets continue to exceed the inflation rate, focus on performance seems to increase. Based on the district spending per pupil, a diploma for a child in Kindergarten in today's dollars will cost about \$156,000. For this cost the student's diploma should be a credential with clout and not just a timecard.

Administrators are quick to use educational jargon, but too often are remiss at showing progress in terms of measurable goals towards their school's mission statement. The taxpaying public wants to see real world success of all graduates that is attributed to the school. Taxpayers, parents and students should examine their district's mission statement and demand tangible progress. This lack of accountability was addressed in a Letter to the Editor on September 23, 2007, but lacked a response.

Board members need to see this requirement for what it is and that is a validation of the diplomas it confers to its graduates. No, this GCA will not fix the problem by itself and it would be ludicrous and ignorant to suggest that it would. What the GCA could do is give a more accurate reading of the "health" of the curriculum and atmosphere. A measurement is only as good as the instrument and the competency of the individual reading the instrument. Based on the facts presented we should fully anticipate more dropouts until districts truly focus on the mission of their schools and their methods to achieve their mission. A decreased graduation rate should not be a surprise; nor should it be a reason to resist using a standard test. Medical professionals do not blame the thermometer for a reading showing that you have a temperature when you actually have a temperature. They treat the problem. They do not hide it by renumbering the thermometer and denying your symptoms.

This is a perfect example of rose-colored glasses. Often the students who shine and would do so in any school are spotlighted as a representation of the student body. Meanwhile, those who do not thrive in traditional schools remain in the shadows. Boards need to remove the tinted glasses and examine the entire spectrum and evaluate whether the school has achieved its mission. Students who do well should be commended for their efforts, but does anyone look at the numbers of students who do not thrive after 13 years of schooling? How do we

know that our students are getting what they need unless we have some instrument to measure their competencies?

If we believe businesses, industries and colleges then we accept that there is a problem. Does anyone have the courage to take a deeper look at reform or shall we continue to spend \$156,000 for a diploma that stands a 1-in-4 chance of requiring remedial classes prior to freshman level college courses or a 1-in-3 chance of needing math remediation through their employer? If districts do not at least create a certified LSA then we can just leave those rose-colored glasses on.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Scott Hall, of Towanda, is acting chief administrative officer for the proposed Family Choice Charter School. Its establishment has been rejected by local public school officials who, Mr. Hall points out, would have to surrender each year about \$7,700 per pupil that attended FCCS, if it were to be approved. He received his principal's certificate through Marywood University, a Master's of Education through Mansfield University, teaching certification at Shippensburg University and a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Scranton. He has taught 12 years in public schools.