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Testing is important

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A recent editorial ("Test happy," May 18) presented an erroneous argument that state-level graduation requirements amount to little more than additional testing of students. In fact, these graduation standards are not only critical, but long overdue.

Many Pennsylvanians might be surprised, and unsettled, to know that the commonwealth's 501 school districts have no uniform standard for deciding when to award a high school diploma.

Instead, each district is allowed to set its own diploma requirements, resulting in a patchwork system of graduation requirements that vary in scope and rigor.

This has allowed some students to obtain diplomas without demonstrating academic proficiency. Many of these graduates enter the workforce or go on to higher education inadequately prepared for the challenges they will face.

Our proposed graduation requirements would remedy this problem by expanding the menu of options for schools to show their graduates are prepared. The options would include a series of tests known as graduation competency assessments. These tests would essentially be end-of-course exams that a student could take at any time and that school districts could use in place of final exams.

The editorial wisely noted "it does little good to memorize the 'Gettysburg Address' if (students) don't understand the significance of what Abraham Lincoln was saying." I agree we need to go beyond recitation of facts and instill concepts and competencies in our students, and I have worked tirelessly to promote that philosophy.

Still, testing can be an important part of ensuring students understand concepts and think abstractly. The issue is not whether we test, but ensuring the tests are rigorous and truly measure preparedness.

To give diplomas to those who are unprepared is akin to giving them false hope that they are ready to succeed in a high-skills global economy where knowledge equals success.

Gerald L. Zahorchak, D.Ed.
Secretary of Education