

Miss Heather Karschner  
108 Fox Hunt Drive  
Souderton, PA 18964  
June 11, 2008

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY  
REVIEW COMMISSION

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PA. STATE BOARD  
OF EDUCATION

Mr. Jim Buckheit  
Pennsylvania State Board of Education  
333 Market Street, First Floor  
Harrisburg, PA 17126

Dear Mr. Buckheit,

I am writing in regard to the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments in Pennsylvania. I graduated from Souderton Area High School in 2006 with a record of academic success. I ranked third in a class of about 500 students and was a National Merit Finalist. Now an undergraduate college student, I value education highly and appreciate this opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to education in Pennsylvania.

Although I generally support greater standardization of public education curriculum in our state, I cannot support the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments. I have read about the proposal in newspapers and online. This large increase in testing takes our schools in the wrong direction. I learned the most during high school from the personalized knowledge and experience of my teachers, not from state test preparation. Admittedly, I was lucky to attend school in a district with many qualified teachers, a privilege not all students have. We can both agree that identifying failing teachers and schools is important, but I feel this testing is not an effective means to that end.

The assessments are being promoted as optional, but I am suspicious of that. How will this testing create equality and standardization if it is only adopted by some schools in the state? I suspect the tests will be essentially mandatory, and if anything, schools need less mandatory testing – not more. PSSA testing days were some of the least fruitful in my high school career. The tests ate up valuable class time, and I sometimes found their results to be inconsistent with my achievement in school. Administrators were obviously extremely concerned about testing results; the pressure on students made me wonder how much pressure was also being put on teachers to teach to the test.

Many of my fellow students did not try their hardest on the PSSAs because they were tired of state testing and felt it had little impact on their futures. I can only imagine this getting worse if students are required to take six additional tests. I would also hate to see teachers have less and less time for their own lesson plans, a problem I found especially prevalent in my advanced classes.

I urge the Board of Education to reject the current proposal on graduation requirements and continue revising the plan with input from all interested groups. It would be a shame to pass the proposal simply to end the process and to have something to show for everyone's efforts so far. It is better to take more time and energy to do something right, a lesson I learned in Pennsylvania's schools.

I wish I had more in the way of an alternate graduation proposal, but I trust the state's many education experts will have some good ideas. Perhaps course final exams could be required to cover certain basic questions, and teachers could report on those results. In such a large and diverse state, flexibility must be allowed.

I thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Heather Karschner". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Heather Karschner