

Buckheit, James

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From: Jerry Bourdeaux [jrbourdeaux@yahoo.com]
Sent: Monday, June 16, 2008 5:36 PM
To: James Buckheit
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Subject: Support for GCAs

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

June 16, 2008

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Dear Mr. Buckheit,

I am a former urban high school principal who lives in Lancaster City. Because I have a practitioner's knowledge of graduation requirements and local assessments, I was invited to serve on the Governor's Commission for on College and Career Success. From the beginning, it was clear that changes needed to be made in Pennsylvania's graduation policies if we were to produce graduates ready to meet the demands of the world beyond high school.

Let me say up front that I strongly support the proposed graduation requirements and changes in local control over testing. Proposals for Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) and rigorous guidelines for assessments developed locally will offer a dramatic improvement to the current system of accountability.

At present, all juniors are required to take state tests (PSSA tests) in reading, mathematics, science and writing. PSSA tests in reading and mathematics are required under No Child Left Behind laws and, therefore, carry greater weight for students and schools. All PSSA tests, regardless of the subject area, set the bar for student achievement and clearly outline for teachers and administrators what is expected.

There are major problems with PSSA tests, however. These tests can be called "composite" tests, because they are a compilation of content and skills covered in three or more years of schooling. For example, the PSSA Mathematics Test requires that eleventh graders recall material covered in Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, and some basic probability and statistics. On the PSSA Science Test, juniors are expected to remember content covered in biology, chemistry, earth science, physics and environmental science. It is unreasonable to assume students can remember so much information, much less demonstrate this knowledge on PSSA tests.

For some students, passing PSSA tests requires only a short review of the material. However, for the vast majority of students—even those who work hard and want to do well--and their teachers, PSSA tests present an overwhelming challenge and are certainly out of line with good instructional practice. Imagine trying to review three years of mathematics with special education and ESL students or with students who have not yet finished a geometry course, much less an Algebra II course.

Graduation Competency Assessments offer a reasonable and realistic alternative to PSSA tests. In mathematics, this would mean taking a GCA in Algebra I after students have mastered the requisite material. In science, this would mean taking a GCA after a biology or chemistry class. GCAs can be given in small doses and would cover material directly associated with a recently studied body of knowledge. Without question, GCAs make sense as an assessment tool.

Why is local control so problematic in determining graduation requirements? Local control over assessments has given us the kind of graduates we now have---many young adults who are not proficient in mathematics, reading and writing, and who cannot discuss issues in science and ecology that will affect their lives in the years ahead. Local control has led to a lack of consistency and rigor in graduation requirements across the state.

Although students are required to take PSSA tests in reading and mathematics, they are not required to pass these tests in order to graduate. School districts make up their own rules for graduation. In many cases, local control has allowed districts take the path of least resistance.

For example, in one district teacher-made final exams can count as the “equivalent” of PSSA tests. In other districts, especially those in Corrective Action, students can pass 4Sight tests to meet graduation requirements. 4Sight tests serve to monitor student performance and provide practice before taking the PSSA tests. 4Sight tests are a shorter version of the PSSA tests and are not nearly as rigorous. Is it fair for some students to be held accountable for passing PSSA tests while others can simply pass 4Sight tests?

Given how important it is for students to graduate with the skills necessary for success in college and the work place, it makes sense for the State Board to rein in idiosyncratic approaches to graduation and assessments and standardize policies for graduation across the state. This is the only way to make it perfectly clear what students are expected to know and be able to demonstrate.

The State Board of Education and state legislators should implement the proposed changes as soon as possible.

Please call if you have any questions about how PSSA tests and current graduation requirements are affecting our students and why it is essential to change Pennsylvania’s graduation requirements.

Sincerely,
Jerry Bourdeaux, Ph.D.
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