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Editorial: Graduation Requirements: Waste Paper

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Any Pennsylvania lawmaker who fails to support tougher high school graduation requirements ought to be flunked out of the legislature. Too many schools are handing out "empty diplomas" to thousands of seniors who graduate without the reading and math skills needed for college or a good job.

This travesty needs to stop now.

Legislators shouldn't listen to those local school districts crying that they should decide when their students are ready to graduate.

They're doing that now, and their track record stinks:

In 2006, more than 56,000 Pennsylvania high school seniors graduated, despite failing state math and reading tests. Many received diplomas for just showing up! How could that happen? State graduation standards have been around since 2003. It happened because districts have been allowed to use local graduation assessments that are often dumbed down.

Statewide, 45 percent of 127,000 seniors flunked at least one of the state tests in 2006, and graduated even though they lacked basic skills. Those disturbing numbers should have lawmakers rushing to enact new graduation requirements that consider the best interest of students. Instead, they're kowtowing to school boards and teachers' unions.

State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak has offered a solid plan that would create graduation tests in 10 core subjects. Starting in 2010, students would take reading, writing, math, science and social studies tests. But instead of taking one comprehensive test their senior year on everything they were supposed to learn in high school, students would take a test on each subject at the time they finished that course. That would be less intimidating to students.

Each district would also have to prove that its local assessments met state standards. Only then will a high school diploma have the same value regardless of which district awarded it.

Critics say the subject tests will discourage students, who will then drop out. Are they saying it's better to have students stay in school under the mistaken belief they are getting a real education?

To graduate, students would have to pass six tests or demonstrate proficiency by other means, such as passing the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. Those who fail a subject would get remedial help sooner and could take several retests. The state would develop a model curriculum for the subjects and increase teacher training.

A pending House bill would block the state from developing the new graduation tests. Some legislators say they don't want to see another set of tests added to those students already take.

They can't see the forest for the trees. The point is to graduate students who can succeed. Taking their pulse periodically to see how they're doing and making adjustments makes perfect sense.

The districts and the state can work out the kinks in this program during a yearlong review phase. The legislature shouldn't be an obstacle. Children's futures are at stake.