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**State proficiency tests a smart idea**

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A higher bar for students

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY  
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Students don't like it. Teachers don't like it. Nonetheless, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education's plan to institute high school competency exams in four subject areas is a welcome change, as demonstrated proof of the learning required for a diploma.

Who likes the idea? Employers. College teachers and admissions officers. Gov. Ed Rendell. People who gauge the changes in the world economy and the skills needed to land jobs. And probably plenty of teachers, students and parents, once they get past the misperception that this would be another bureaucratic layer of testing piled atop all the No Child Left Behind requirements.

The plan approved Thursday by the state school board faces reviews and approval by the Legislature. It would create 10 standardized competency tests -- two in English, three in math, two in science, three in social studies. Students would have to pass six to graduate; students who fail would get remedial help and retake them. Schools could also use other tests, such as the PSSAs in reading and math, Advanced Placement tests or local exams that districts use, if they are approved by the state as rigorous enough.

If that sounds like a lot of tests, it is. But the standardized competency exams could replace final exams now used by districts, and that's the general idea. More important, though, is that the state tests would set a bar of achievement to get a diploma and to prepare grads to get a job or go to college. Many students in Pennsylvania aren't meeting basic goals now and graduating anyway. That's not in dispute. Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak calls those promotions "empty diplomas," noting that about 45 percent of the 126,000 high school students who graduated last year did so without demonstrating proficiency in PSSA math and reading exams.

Pennsylvania isn't going out on a ledge. In New Jersey, statewide proficiency tests have been administered since the early 1990s. Those who don't pass the tests in 11th grade are placed in remedial classes and take an alternative test later on. Pennsylvania would have similar programs for those who fail, along with accommodations for special education kids and those struggling with English.

One valid objection is that some students learn and perform well in school, but do poorly in tests. That's the major failing of all such tests. But it is outweighed by the vast number of graduates who move on -- to entry level jobs or college -- without basic skills, and without the ability to quickly pick up basic employment or study skills needed for the next step.