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The Philadelphia Inquirer**Editorial: State High Schools Graduating Failure**

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The numbers are staggering.

More than 56,000 Pennsylvania high school seniors graduated with "empty diplomas" in 2006 because they failed state math and reading tests. They were given diplomas, in some cases, for just showing up. They left high school without mastering the basic skills to get a job or enter college.

That has prompted state Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak to push for tougher new regulations requiring students to pass at least six tests in English, math, science and social studies. This is a smart step.

Instead of a comprehensive test on everything learned over several years, students would be tested at the end of a course, similar to a final exam. For example, a student could take the Algebra I test as a freshman.

The plan would give teachers an annual snapshot of a student's progress. Those who fail could get tutoring and a second chance.

That approach makes sense and would put Pennsylvania in the vanguard with a number of states that have seen improvement after making the switch. However, the new regulations wouldn't take effect until 2014, after this year's sixth graders finish high school.

If this is worth doing, why take so long? Lucky these education leaders weren't in charge of landing the first man on the moon.

Once in place, the plan would close the loophole that allows students who fail the state tests to graduate by passing a local test not sanctioned by the state.

Statewide, 45 percent of 127,000 seniors flunked at least one of the state tests in 2006. That's an alarming figure.

The failures are not just in urban districts, though the rates are the highest there. In Philadelphia, 76 percent of the seniors flunked at least one of the tests. But even in Lower Merion and Unionville-Chadds Ford - two top school districts - about 20 percent of the seniors failed.

This points to a bigger problem that testing alone won't fix. But the testing plan may improve how students are assessed, and ease the pressure of teaching toward one final "make or break" test.

However, the state should reconsider some provisions during the expected yearlong review phase. For example, the current proposal allows districts to select four different testing options for students to demonstrate proficiency. That's too many alternatives and too many tests.

What's wrong with a single option and uniform standards so that students in Great Valley are taught the same basics as students in Garnet Valley? Isn't that the point of the plan?

Critics say the new regulations would hurt students in underfunded districts and could actually increase the dropout rate. That's a legitimate concern. But that's a funding and support issue, not a testing issue.

Despite some shortcomings, Secretary Zahorchak is on the right track in trying to bolster graduation requirements. Too many students are failing, and a diploma should be worth more than the paper it's printed on.