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Buckheit, James

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From: monica miller [mountainviewmath@yahoo.com] 2008 JUN 16 PM 4: 22
 Sent: Tuesday, June 10, 2008 10:05 PM
 To: j buckheit@state.pa.us
 Subject: Re: Changing High School Requirements

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

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June 10, 2008

Jim Buckheit
 Pennsylvania State Board of Education
 333 Market Street, 1st Floor
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Dear Mr. Buckheit,

The new high school graduation requirements are an excellent start to improving the opportunities for our children. Setting state minimum standards on core subjects lets businesses know that there is a capable work force available in Pennsylvania. However, convincing parents, educators, and school administration that the current system does not always work is a challenge.

I originally heard of the new standards at a school board meeting in February. Our school board was one of the 167 that were misguided by information sent out by the PSBA. Like many parents, I believed the rhetoric. Fortunately, I attended a PaPirc meeting in March where Dominique Raymond presented information on the new standards. I was impressed and asked Dominique to speak in Susquehanna County, where I live, to give educators the opportunity to hear the facts. The town hall style meeting was planned to be held at my local high school. Due to a possible conflict with our school board, the meeting was eventually held at a local fire hall. It was very informative and for my school district, Mountain View in Kingsley, had a positive impact. Unfortunately, not many people were able to attend.

Before the meeting, I spoke with as many people as possible to get their questions and their views. I spoke with teachers, guidance counselors, school board members, parents and two superintendents. Although there were many negative comments, most of the concerns were based on the information sent by the PSBA. A few people did have some positive opinions of the standards. Based on these conversations, I have a few suggestions.

First, the new standards need to be actively promoted to parents, teachers and community members. For many, the only information they have on the new standards is from the PSBA and from local school board members. There are superintendents that look at the impact based on funding and local control instead of the effect on the opportunities that would become available for future graduates. The new expectations, including the new funding, need to be brought to the general public not just the select few school administrators that were invited to attend the meetings with Dr. Zahorchak or meetings at the local IU. Average parents do not have access to these meetings and do not know that they should. If the new standards are presented by schools as more high stakes testing and impossible standards, parents will not encourage their children to have a positive attitude about learning.

The next suggestion is to keep teachers involved. Again, an effort needs to be made to include all high school teachers rather than the ones that are picked by the IU to voice their opinions. When the PSSAs were first required by all school districts, I had the opportunity to volunteer at both the elementary school and high school. Much of the opposition to that testing was based on resistance to change and loss of control. Although the PSSAs are high stakes test, the GCAs are not. Teachers need support to get past the fear that they are not teaching to standards. They need to understand that, if the curriculum is based on the state standards, they are already "teaching to the test" and will not have to make many changes. Also, they should be kept informed of the developments of the suggested curriculum. Unfortunately, it seems that, like most organizations, only a few teachers actively attend meetings, outside trainings, workshops, etc. To reach all teachers, PDE has to do something different. A possible suggestion is sending out monthly newsletters. Also, PDE should present this information to pre-service teachers at colleges and universities.

Another concern is the responsibilities of colleges. State funded post-secondary institutions should also be held accountable to the new standards. By accepting students that do not have the basic skills to succeed, colleges are sending a message that high school standards are irrelevant. With the current system, students can be accepted to a school and then given remedial classes to become prepared for actual college level course work. Remedial classes at the college level should

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be a rare occurrence, not a safety net for post-secondary institutions that lower admission standards.

My last suggestion is to send representatives to county fairs to present the new programs directly to the public. As odd as this suggestion is, it is probably the most cost effective way to talk directly to the public. By setting up a booth, or possible sharing space with the local government booths, PDE would be able to explain the new programs in a family friendly setting, directly to the people that need to hear it.

Thank you for taking the time to read these suggestions. The new standards and the changes that PDE is trying to implement will have a positive influence on the opportunities for future Pennsylvania graduates. Due to the negative hype sent out by PSBA, the new requirements need to be aggressively presented to parents, teachers, and community members.

Thank you,
Monica Miller