

# 2696

## Comments re Graduation Competency Assessments

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Parkland High School  
Public Hearing  
State Board of Education

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My name is Betsy Adams and I am in my 24<sup>th</sup> year as a high school principal. Presently I am in my 16<sup>th</sup> year as principal of Conrad Weiser High School in Berks County, a school of slightly over 1000 students. Previously I served as principal of Tamaqua High School in Schuylkill County for 8 years, 2 years as assistant principal at Plymouth-Whitemarsh in Montgomery County and 2 years as Assistant principal at Palisades High School in Bucks County. My first 8 years in education were spent as a math teacher at Palisades High School.

In 2001, I was honored as the Pennsylvania High School Principal of the Year.

Over my 24 years as a principal and 36 years in education, I have been aware of many programs to improve education. I am a believer in high standards and having students strive to be the best they can be. I have worked hard to raise the academic and behavioral expectations of students and staff at Conrad Weiser and the other schools where I worked.

I am completely opposed to the concept of graduation competency assessments.

Many other people will testify so I will restrict my thoughts to just a few areas, even though I could argue for hundreds of reasons. I won't address the issues of special needs students, English Language learners, etc. I am hoping others will speak about those students.

My major question is why? What purpose are these supposed to serve? The statement in the announcement talks about the minimum skills, knowledge and abilities that students should have in order to earn a high school diploma.

But what is more important, a onetime test or the work a student produces over several years. As an employer, would you prefer the person who can take a test and do well, but other wise is lazy, does not follow directions, does not work well with others, does not know how to find or analyze information. Or would you prefer the employee who may struggle to pass a test, but is reliable, hard-working, follows directions, gets along well with others and can find information and present it. Those are all skills that do not show on a single test. but do show in the four years it takes a student to earn a diploma.

I believe that many of you are under the assumption that if a student cannot pass the PSSA test with an advanced or proficient they are destined for failure because of their

lack of knowledge. And you assume that because many students graduate even though they were not proficient on the PSSA test that there is a problem in the system.

So do you know what the square root of 5 to the -4 power equals??  $(\sqrt{5})^{-4}$   
As a former math teacher, I do. But do you? Do you need to know that to be successful in your profession? Is that important for the future success of most people?

Last year, that was the first question on the grade 11 math PSSA test. The first question! If you cannot answer the first question, what are the chances you could score high enough to be proficient?

If the equation of a line is  $Y=2/3X - 3$ , do you know what the equation of a line would be that is parallel to that line? What about the equation of a line that is perpendicular to that line? If you don't know that, that's two more questions wrong and you look more like you would not be proficient.

If a student is in a career tech program successfully preparing for a career in Masonry or Culinary Arts, would spending more time learning about the equations of parallel and perpendicular lines help them?

I believe the PSSA test is overall a good test. Too long, but challenging. However, you cannot make assumptions that scoring less than proficient means failure. Pennsylvania has chosen to have a challenging test rather than an easy test that all can pass. That sets high standards for all of us to try to reach. That's great. But expecting that all students would reach those high standards or that they need to reach those high standards is not realistic thinking, but sets students and schools up for failure.

I believe that anyone who makes judgments about a student's ability or a school's achievement based on their scores on a PSSA test should be required to take the test and see what it is like. Personally, I believe every legislator should have to take the test so they understand the expectations set for the students.

Let me tell you about some of my students who were not special needs students, but who only scored "Below Basic" on the PSSA test in either math or reading, not basic, but below basic. With a lot of extra work, they may have been able to come to basic, but scoring proficient would have been difficult. I have a few examples, but I could name many students who are similar to my examples.

There is Matt, poor in math, below basic on the PSSA test, and a poor test taker, but otherwise a good student. Presently he is a senior in college on target to graduate with a degree in criminal justice. Last semester he was on the Dean's List. Then there is Liz, similar -great kid, but below basic on math and a poor test taker. She is a senior in college and ready to graduate with a degree in Elementary Education.

So doing poorly on the PSSA test does not mean you will be a failure or are not prepared for the future. But adding that extra stress would have created huge problems for Matt and Liz. What would they have gained, by needing to pass the test to graduate?

Even colleges consider SAT's as only one criterion and usually give more weight to the student's GPA and class rank, something that considers four years of student work.

My previous examples are students who would struggle, but would have stayed in school and worked hard to pass a competency exam. But then there is George. He struggled in all subjects in high school, but persevered. He scored below basic and would have had difficulty passing most tests. But he worked hard, got along well with others, and today is serving successfully in the armed services.

If he had to pass a GCA to graduate, he would have dropped out. Then what?

And Nate – he was below basic on both math and reading but worked hard and successfully completed a career tech program in plumbing. To have him pass the PSSA tests would probably require that he be pulled from career tech and spend more time on reading and math. Would he have done this or dropped out? My guess is that he would have dropped out? Would that have been the best for his future?

Then there is Casey. He always did as little as possible to get by. His teachers held him daily to high standards. His graduation was in jeopardy until the last minute. But he was very bright. He could have passed a test easily. What would that have said to him? If he had passed the GCA, would he have thought that he needed to keep working?

As professionals, we work hard every day to keep students to high standards. If you question what students are learning, set up a panel to look at expectations in each school district. Concentrate your concerns where there is a problem. Help those schools improve their standards.

Don't penalize the large majority of students and schools whose students are achieving. Don't waste our time and our money on another set of exams. Let four years of achievement be the criteria. Don't ruin student's lives because they cannot pass an exam.



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