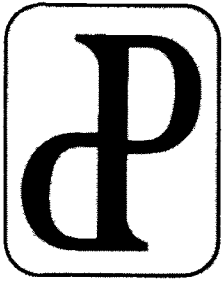


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PARKLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

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State Board of Education

Public Hearing

February 5, 2009

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Good Morning Board Members,

Let me begin by welcoming you to Parkland School District and Parkland High School. We are pleased to be hosting this public hearing on high school reform in Pennsylvania. We consider the preparation and education of our students to be our most important mission and dedicate ourselves to providing a quality education to all students in our school district. We applaud the process of high school reform; we have made a number of changes to our high school program over the past few years.

We have been very careful to follow the regulations that have been promulgated over the years as Chapter 4 has been implemented and a standards-based approach has been adopted. We have a regular curriculum review cycle through which we update our planned courses on a regular basis. We incorporate any new state regulations that come about and make revisions for new content and assessments as the subject matter and needs of students and society change. We have spent much time and effort writing common, consistent mid-term and final examinations that are administered to our high school students in all subject areas. We have a complex remediation program that serves students who do not achieve proficiency on the PSSA and we have incorporated a local assessment process that clearly aligns with the standards. Seniors who do not reach proficiency on the PSSA go through a rigorous program until they master the necessary skills and demonstrate this through our assessment program.

We were pleased that the Department of Education collected and is reviewing the local assessments being used by school districts. We believe that the current regulations must be followed and commend the Department for enforcing the rules that govern this process.

We are opposed to the implementation of mandatory Graduation Competency Assessments for numerous reasons, several of which I will mention this morning.

- 1) We believe the current system of assessment should continue to be improved and modified rather than working to create a whole new system. Currently, after a long wait, state assessments are being written to address the special needs of students with learning disabilities. This work is currently taking place. Why not build upon what exists rather than creating a whole new layer and system of statewide assessments? The GCA's do not address student learning styles and special needs.

- 2) The GCA program would represent an approach based on specific course content and a departure from the standards-based approach that has been in place. Proficiency would have to be clearly defined as it is not delineated in the current proposal. It is not clear how this approach would fit with the NCLB program as schools work to reach AYP each year.
- 3) In these most challenging fiscal times with extremely tight budgets, we are MOST concerned about the expense of the program both at the state and local level, especially since considerable local and state dollars have been expended on the current system. Enforcing the rules that already exist and offering assistance to schools and districts who are not meeting these regulations will be much more cost effective as it targets needs and does not paint all with the same broad brush.
- 4) The current regulations stipulate that local assessments are to be developed that are aligned with the standards. We have been careful in Parkland and many if not most school districts to implement local assessments that are directly aligned with the standards. A concern in this regard is that the proposed regulations will cause the local district to pay for the validation of their local assessment if they choose to continue to use them. We recommend that the current system be regulated and reviewed by the Department of Education. This cost should not be borne by local taxpayers. (I have a couple of packets if the Board would like a copy of what we sent.)
- 5) The focus should be on helping schools help students, especially the lowest achieving students to master the skills needed to demonstrate proficiency that will allow them to go on to further education or a career and ultimately achieve success. Another menu of standardized tests will not assist with this process.
- 6) The logistics involved in administering multiple GCA's and their sub-tests will have a detrimental impact on school staff. The costs in personnel time will be substantial. With the new emphasis on course content rather than standards, school districts would have no choice but to revise their curricula to prepare students for these new assessments. Districts might be forced to narrow the course content to be sure to cover the required information to prepare students for the GCA's.
- 7) All schools in Pennsylvania should provide instruction to all students so that they can demonstrate proficiency on the state standards. We believe the ability to demonstrate this proficiency as it currently exists is appropriate. The addition of a PSSA test to assess students with learning disabilities will be a welcome addition to the menu of testing available.
- 8) The taxpayers of Pennsylvania cannot afford the cost of a new set of state-wide tests. These state-wide costs include \$15 million to develop these tests over the next three years and then \$40 million per year to score the tests. In these very difficult economic times, let's renovate the system we have rather than building a whole new system. This makes economic and educational sense!

In conclusion, no single test, the PSSA or the GCA, should be the determining factor as to whether or not a student receives a high school diploma in Pennsylvania.

Thanks for listening.

Louise E. Donohue, Ed. D.
Superintendent of Schools
Parkland School District