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From: Helen Sitler [hcs@iup.edu]
Sent: Wednesday, March 11, 2009 1:57 PM
To: 00statbd@psupen.psu.edu
Subject: regarding the Graduation Competency Assessment

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I write to you as someone who serves in dual roles:

- I teach Basic Writing and College Writing at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, thus I regularly teach students who have just graduated from Pennsylvania high schools.
- I supervise student teachers who teach English in secondary schools in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Given what I observe in these two roles, I am vehemently opposed to adding a Graduation Competency Assessment (GCA) in the state's public schools.

In *The Pennsylvania Bulletin* (www.pabulletin.com/secure/data/vol38/38-20/925.html) the State Board, in explaining its interest in GCA, notes that 9 years after accountability measures were introduced, i.e., through statewide standards and PSSA testing, "these reforms have not yielded consistent results at the high school level." I wonder then why anyone thinks that adding one more accountability measure will produce different results. The logic of this escapes me.

In my role as a first-year composition instructor, I see students whose performance depends on how much writing experience they have from high school. In general, I find that they have had insufficient opportunities to flex their writing muscles. When they do write, too many are coached only to do what earns high scores on the PSSA. Many students have not learned to plan thoughtfully; they have learned instead to write to a formula that tends to be rewarded in test scores. In short, the current testing restricts the writing many students do; this, in turn, restricts students' thinking. The GCA might compound this.

In my role as supervisor for English Education student teachers, I have seen some classrooms where students are challenged in enriching, creative ways. These classrooms are always in schools where PSSA scores are at or well above AYP. In schools struggling to meet AYP the learning environment is often much different. One student teacher was required to use the PSSA Coach Book as a text for teaching reading. As I observed that lesson, I nearly wept for those students. This was a travesty of teaching reading. I cannot imagine students from that class ever becoming lifelong readers. They may do well on the PSSA testing, but they are not likely ever to pick up a book for pleasure. Reading as a pleasurable activity has certainly been left behind. Again, this pseudo-reading could escalate with a GCA.

In general, the effect of escalating demands for AYP have sucked the life out of the teaching of language arts. Teachers who feel under fire—true of many, many good teachers I know—**must** teach to the test. Their administrators, also under fire, demand it. This means that many students, at least in my area of the state, are not experiencing any joy through reading and writing. It means that students' experiences with literature are constrained by the artificiality of testing. It means that they are not likely to emerge from this incubator of test-taking skills as citizens who **will** read, who **will** find that writing has purpose and meaning.

We are in an era when creativity and innovation are highly prized and necessary commodities on the global scene. Rather than looking to the future, the proposal for a GCA mires students ever more deeply in past practice that admittedly has failed. Testing used as formative assessment is a good thing. Testing used in its current incarnation—as a bludgeon—does nothing to promote learning and achievement. The GCA is one more bludgeon.

I ask the members of the State Board to release teachers to teach in innovative, creative ways that engage students. I

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ask the Board to support quality professional development for teachers rather than focusing energy and attention on the GCA. I end with the words of Dr. Kylee Beers, a specialist in adolescent literacy and the president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English: "Testing does not improve learning. Teachers do."

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