

The Philadelphia Right to Education Local Task Force

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Friday, March 13, 2009

Topic: Graduation Competency Assessments

Good Morning,

My name is Cecelia Thompson and I am the Chairperson of the Philadelphia Right to Education Local Task Force of Intermediate Unit 26. The Task Force provides systemic advocacy for children with disabilities attending public and charter schools in Philadelphia.

I am providing testimony today concerning Pennsylvania's proposed legislation for the administration and mandatory Graduation Competency Assessments for students as a requirement to graduate from high school in Pennsylvania. Our concerns and objections are as follows:

1. As it currently states, children with IEP's (Individual Education Placements), with the agreement of the IEP team, can be excluded from being proficient on these exams. Our concern is twofold.
 - a) If the IEP team determines a student to be exempted from being proficient on the exam, will the school still provide the highest quality of instruction to the student. In a current society where the students' academic career is based on standardized tests, will children with disabilities be given the maximum quality of education as required by IDEA, which is a Free and Appropriate Public Education? As a Task Force, we feel in Philadelphia, where there is a lack and inequity of resources and overcrowded classrooms, schools will may make the decision to focus less on students exempt from proficiency and focus more of their resources on the students who have to make proficiency on these exams. If this happens, we see this as educational suicide for children with disabilities.
 - b) In influx of students diagnosed with disabilities. If words gets out to parents of students without disabilities, but are struggling learners, that the IEP team can exempt a child from being proficient on these exams, there is fear of an increase in the requests for evaluations to be declared disabled, as stated in Chapter 14. This may lead to an increase of children diagnosed with Learning Disabilities or Emotional Support or other diagnosis. If this happens, the IEP team can determine the child does not need to be proficient on the exam. The danger is a group of students who need services from school districts and not getting the appropriate assistance needed to improve their academics. Furthermore, in Philadelphia, where we are currently with students who are currently not where they should be academically, will teachers apply less time and resources to already struggling students because they do not have to make proficiency? Again, in Philadelphia, this is educational suicide.
 - c) Furthermore, if a student feels they cannot pass the exam to graduate, or, does not pass the needed number of exams to graduate high school, they will drop out. Again, in Philadelphia, where the drop out rate is around 48%, we feel this number will increase to a number unacceptable for our communities, city, and our children. Again, educational suicide.

It is for the above reasons we feel the need for legislators to consider factors other than this Graduation Competency Assessment in being the sole determinant for a student to graduate high school to pursue college or more vocational training. Please do not let this be a stumbling block for children with disabilities and a cause of children dropping out of school and not being the productive citizens we believe they can be.

Thank you!