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Mr. Joseph Toresella
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ANTHONY J. DELALINO
COMMUNICATIONS SECTION

Dear Mr. Toresella,

It is with great disappointment that I heard on NPR news last week that Governor Rendell has signed a \$200 million contract with a company to begin developing state graduation tests. The negative effects of these tests are astounding and will affect all citizens of the Commonwealth in negative ways---from wasting our tax dollars on another unnecessary test to increasing the drop-out rate among Pennsylvania's youth.

I thought that any such expenditure would at least require the approval of the legislature or the education subcommittees of each State House, or perhaps as a last stronghold, the State Education Board members. It appears that everyone's head is in the sand as this idea of state graduation tests becomes another disaster for Pennsylvania's youth and teachers. As if the NCLB testing policies haven't had enough of a negative effect on our children and public school educators, Governor Rendell now subjects them both to another disgraceful education policy which as you'll see from my review of research (attached) was a negative process 30 years ago; and, will be again if approved by you and others with your influence.

Please at least represent our children and our adolescents as you do all you can to stop this expenditure and policy of developing a state high school graduation test. Now is the time to say, "No" to Governor Rendell who, with this contract signing, will waste our money and ruin the educational lives of many students and teachers. Show the power you can have by standing up to stop this policy: "Be the change you wish to see in the world . . ." (Gandhi).

Please contact me at the addresses below if you wish to hear more about the research.

Sincerely,



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Report on High Stakes Graduation Tests and Their Impact on Graduation Rates

Introduction

Several states have added a high stakes test as a requirement for graduating from high school. Massachusetts, California, and New York are notable states that have implemented such tests within the past five years as a condition of graduation. A total of 23 states currently use high stakes exit tests as a precondition to graduating from high school, and at least three other states plan to phase in graduation examinations over the next few years (Rosenthal, 2008).

Minimal Competency:

Using tests as a criterion for graduation is not a recent phenomenon. Several states implemented graduation examinations, labeled as minimal competency tests (MCTs), during the late 1970s and early 80s (Brown, 1990). The reason that they were titled “minimum competency tests” (MCTs) is due to the fact that the tests generally assessed a minimal level of academic skills that students should learn during their schooling careers. Much like the current rash of graduation examinations, these tests were designed to cover content that high school students generally learn in ninth and tenth grades, rather than content covered during the last two years of high school. In those states with MCTs, many teachers reported that they were forced to spend more time on a limited curricular content at the expense of what they believed were other more important areas (Brown, 1990; Dorr-Bremme et al., 1983; Rottenberg & Smith, 1990). Current graduation examinations are also first given during the ninth and tenth grades with opportunities for retaking the examinations several times before students eventually either drop out of school or graduate.

Initial Financial Impact to States and Local School Districts:

Academically challenged high school students must receive frequent and specific instruction and remediation to reach success on these tests that are often offered to students first during their freshman year. If students fail, then they receive remediation for the remainder of their years in high school until they hopefully receive a passing score. These initial failures mean that high schools must be staffed with additional teachers to provide additional courses to remediate those students who fail the test. Students forced into these remedial courses receive limited curricular offerings since they must take remedial courses to improve the basic skills assessed by the tests. Many states (including Pennsylvania for the PSSAs) offer test preparation materials to

students and teachers, at a cost to school districts. The more tests required/mandated by state legislators the more money the schools and the state tax payers must spend for the following:

- 1) designing the tests
- 2) printing and distributing the tests
- 3) retrieving tests from school sites
- 4) scoring the tests
- 5) providing specially designed print-outs of the test results for schools
- 6) distributing the results of tests to educators and parents in all the communities.

Indiana's Department of Education reported that it cost the state \$557 per student to maintain the state's current level of performance on the graduation test, and Texas noted that it spent \$2 million for personalized study guides for students who did not initially pass parts of their state exit examination. Teachers may need additional training to help students successfully pass these tests, and in Massachusetts, it costs tax payers an additional \$101 per student to train the teachers (Rosenthal, 2008).

Narrowing the Curriculum While Ignoring Thinking Processes:

Other obvious costs include the time that teachers devote to test preparation rather than teaching those concepts/principles needed for adult success either as a future college student or in entering the work force at age 18. It is not unusual for teachers to spend approximately four weeks of the school year preparing students to succeed on state mandated tests (Rottenberg & Smith, 1990). When students and teachers are held accountable on one high stakes test, the result is an obvious narrowing of the curriculum, so that students receive fewer opportunities to study more needed and meaningful content. High stakes tests generally have been found to encourage poorer quality teaching that discourages student motivation due to an emphasis on basic skills rather than thinking processes (e.g., creative and critical thinking, problem solving, research skills, decision making) (Brown, 1990). Marzano and Costa (1988) found in analyzing questions from two standardized achievement tests that the tests only required students to use 9 of a possible 22 cognitive operations; only the skills of comparing and contrasting and retrieving information were necessary to answer every question. FairTest (2007) reported that narrowing the curriculum most frequently occurs with low-income students in which students receive test coaching that fails to prepare them for further learning during their high school years. Often the library budgets are spent on test preparation materials instead of books or other needed educational materials.

Consider that employers desire the following traits from students as they enter the world of work:

- Adaptive problem solving
- Assessing and responding to risk
- Managing distraction and giving mindful, rotating attention to tasks
- Working alone, with self-management
- Playing changeable roles in real or virtual teams and groups (Baker, 2007, p. 313).

How can high schools best help their students develop these competencies? Preparing for a series of standardized high stakes tests is unlikely to encourage this type of cognitive growth.

Effects on Graduation Rates:

According to the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy in 1986, those states with MCTs were more likely to have the highest dropout rates. The Board noted that year that nine of ten states with the highest dropout rates used an MCT as a requirement for graduation. In 1996, researchers Griffin and Heidorn and the Florida Department of Education noted that students who failed the Florida MCT were more likely to drop out even though they were receiving passing grades in their classes at the time of the test administration. In a study conducted by assessment researchers from Boston College, the authors noted that “in schools with proportionality more students of low socioeconomic status that used high stakes MCTs, early dropout rates – between the 8th and 10th grades – were four to six percentage points higher than similar schools without high stakes tests” (Clarke, Haney, & Madaus, 2000, p 2). Jacob (2001), from Harvard University, discovered that dropout rates are approximately 6.5 % greater among students in the bottom scoring achievement test quintile in those states that use high stakes graduation examinations than in those states without graduation tests. Two researchers at The Pennsylvania State University used the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) data to reveal that the use of an eighth grade promotion test is strongly associated with increased probability of students dropping out before tenth grade (Reardon & Galindo, 2002).

More recently, graduation examinations in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts have had the impact of slightly increasing the dropout rates of high school students, particularly in urban districts (Wheelock, 2004). New York State dropout rates also increased slightly following the implementation of required Regent’s examinations for all students in Language Arts/English, Mathematics,

Global History, and American History (Warren, 2005). It is notable that dropout rates have increased, especially in urban areas of New York State: particularly Rochester and Buffalo. In another study, following the implementation of minimally required scores on the Regent's separate content area examinations New York City's dropout rate was found to reach 20% in 2002; up from 15% for the class of 1998 (Rankin, 2003). Warren discovered that across several states studied that the effect of exit examinations was the *decrease* in *graduation* rates by .77 percent.

Graduation rates and dropout data are often reported more accurately by researchers who are not employed by state departments of education. Many of these state department personnel report more positive data regarding their graduation rates as a way to justify using graduation examinations and a strategy to imply that these states are meeting NCLB guidelines for successful student performance. For instance, Rankin (2003) cited a Cornell University survey in which 45% of *superintendents* from low-performing New York school districts reported an increase in dropouts two years following the implementation of more challenging Regents tests. Warren (2005) reported that state departments of education are using figures from Common Core Data (CCD) which ". . . are biased by migration, changes in cohort size, and/or grade retention" (p. 1).

Other researchers have noted the challenge of identifying the reasons and isolating the variables responsible for students' decisions to dropout. Rabinowitz, Zimmerman, and Sherman (2001) stated,

It is almost impossible to demonstrate a causal connection between any single factor and a decision to drop out of school. Several factors correlate with dropping out, including being held back and being too old for a grade and having a history of poor academic achievement as reflected in grades and test scores. While a test may be the immediate trigger of a student's behavior, the test results may simply aggravate or reflect a history of low performance. (p. 3)

"Push Outs" or Dropouts?

The Houston, Texas schools are infamous for noting that during one exceptional academic year (2002) they had "no dropouts." A few months later, investigative reporters revealed that the Houston District falsely reported that almost 3,000 high school students had "moved away" or "transferred" instead

of dropped out (Hancock, 2005). In another Houston circumstance, many Black and Latino students were retained in ninth grade for several years to prevent them from having to take the tenth grade graduation examination. Many of those students who repeated ninth grade eventually dropped out in large numbers.

When students can be encouraged to leave school voluntarily they are often not reported as “dropouts,” thus revealing greater success by school districts. These strategies are occurring today in several places, particularly chosen by those schools who see no hope in making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies. By choosing another way to encourage students to leave school, districts do not have to admit that students are actually “dropping out” as per legislative definition.

High Stakes Testing’s Effects on Students of Color and Low Socioeconomic Status:

In a report issued by the California Group ERASE, Applied Research Center, the authors reported, “In virtually every state that has implemented high school exit exams, a disproportionate number of those who have passed all other requirements but fail to graduate, or must go into the world with a ‘certificate of completion’ instead of a diploma, are students of color” (Gordon & Della Piana, 1999, p. 3). A report by Holmes (1999) revealed that state education personnel in Massachusetts decided to lower the passing grade on the Massachusetts graduation examination based on the finding that “. . . (M)ore than three quarters of Latinos and Blacks would be denied a diploma under a higher standard” (p. 2). Another researcher discovered that ACLU statistics confirmed that 65% of low income students were failing the tests while only 12% of affluent students failed (Weaver Dunne, 2001).

High Stakes Testing Effects on English Language Learners (ELLs):

“In 2004, 9.9 million school age children spoke a language other than English at home, representing 19 percent of all children in this age group” (Lapkoff & Li, 2007, p. 11). Hernandez (2006) reported that in 2005, one in five children eight years old or younger in the United States was Hispanic. From 1993 to 2003, the enrollment of English language learners in America’s public schools grew by 84%, much more than the 11% growth of the entire student population (The Associated Press, 2007). This varied language and ethnic

diversity among United States' student population creates numerous challenges for American's public school teachers.

All of these immigrant students don't enter school conveniently at the age of 5 and receive a full 13 years of American schooling. They enter our public schools daily at all grade levels bringing with them varied background experiences with formal schooling---some receiving several early years of schooling in their native lands, and others having never attended school at all before entering America at the age of 10 or 12 or 16. Each separate ethnic group brings with them numerous cultural perspectives on their responsibilities in receiving an education and their need to graduate or dropout and earn money from the age of 16, or to marry by the age of 17, or return to their homeland before they graduate.

It is clear from the research that speaking English fluently enough so that one can succeed academically takes on average at least 6 to 7 years (Cary, 2000). The adoption and implementation of high stakes exit examinations by state legislative bodies have the effect of encouraging these immigrant students to leave school early rather than spend additional years in school to improve their job related skills and chances for further academic study.

Impact on The Commonwealth's Future Economy

Despite good intentions, the implementation of high school examinations as a criterion for graduation is likely to have a detrimental economic impact on the Commonwealth. Less students graduating creates the problem of fewer economic opportunities for those who drop out. Adolescents who do not receive diplomas are more likely to

- enter the work force without the skills needed for employment success;
- work without health care for them or future family members;
- need additional training to succeed at their jobs at a cost to their employers;
- need possibly future support from the Commonwealth for unemployment benefits later in their lives;
- possibly enter a future GED program thus costing the Commonwealth more money to educate the student.

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Receiving a high school diploma has innumerable benefits for Pennsylvania's youth. Legislating high stakes tests will not improve the circumstances for our youth or our educational system. Any educational legislative policy/law should have the impact of providing the following in educational settings:

1. improve the opportunities for educators to become better teachers

and

2. improve students' opportunities to learn better and more.

High school graduation examinations will NOT provide teachers or students with improved learning or better instructional advantages.

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