

Buckheit, James

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From: Elliott Seif [elliottseif@verizon.net]
Sent: Friday, July 24, 2009 11:41 AM
To: Buckheit, James
Subject: New high school graduation proposal

July 24, 2009

Jim Buckheit
Executive Director
Pennsylvania State Board of Education

Dear Jim Buckheit:

The following commentary is related to the proposed changes to the graduation requirements, especially the proposal for new state tests. Please read and let me know if there is a way to follow up on this. I

would appreciate it if you could also pass the contents of this e-mail on

to Joe Torcella, Chairperson, State Board and any other members of the State Board that might be interested in reading this.

To the State Board:

I am a retired high school teacher and Professor of Education at Temple University, and for twenty years served as the Director, Curriculum/Instruction Services for the Bucks County Intermediate Unit. I am currently an educational consultant, author and trainer. I am also currently involved in working with some colleagues on how to reform middle and high schools in urban areas so as to improve achievement and graduation rates.

I want to share some of my thoughts about the proposed changes to the high school graduation requirements and the shift to course based tests. I wrote a long critique of the original proposed changes, and have read the state board announcements about the current proposal. So, in a short e-mail, let me just say that I think that the shift to standardized tests/assessments, even with the options suggested, is the wrong way to go for the future of education in Pennsylvania.

There are many reasons for my opposition -- the probability that the state tests will not meet high standards (given the fact that the state standards are generally poor documents and that the tests will probably be mostly multiple choice and relatively simple answers); the fact that many school districts already have high quality final exams and the cumbersome nature of certifying that these exams meet state standards; the difficulty of administering the tests (a nightmare district requirement of administering ten tests three times a year, providing extra instruction for students who do not pass, creating projects for those who do not pass on several tries, etc.);

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the probability that more students will drop out as a result of the tests; the problems that some students will have with the tests due to their special talents and abilities (talented art students who will have trouble passing the math tests, etc.).

But my biggest concern has to do with the inflexibility and lack of innovation this will cause in Pennsylvania school districts as they try to meet a "standardized" approach to education determined by the tests. The reality is that this approach is a 19th century way of fixing education for a 21st century world. This solution will stifle creativity, limit changes that are needed to meet the needs of students in a 21st century world, and lead to less, not more, excellence.

What do I mean? In order to illustrate the problem and concern, think about this question: How do you develop a single test across the state for an English literature course? Should all 501 school districts be teaching the exact same literature in this course? With all of the wonderful literature available, with all of the diversity and differences across the state, is there any room for "customization" and "individualization" of an English literature course? My belief is that there are many ways to approach an English literature course, and "good" courses might consist of very different readings, depending on the interests of the students and teachers, themes that are adopted by teachers, and so on. Yet the likelihood is that a "Keystone" English literature course test, if it is to be effective, will have to require that ALL students in the state read the same things. In a 21st century world, this seems a little rigid and unnecessary!! The same goes for history -- will an American history test require that all students across the state focus on the same ideas and themes? Develop survey courses instead of courses that promote in-depth learning? Hold the same discussions? Will this require that all districts organize their history courses in the same way? (one year survey courses? Two years of American history? Three years worth of courses?) Content based math courses will also stifle innovative approaches -- there are some exciting curricula used by some districts that create interdisciplinary high school mathematics programs that use real life problems to teach math over three years. They get very positive results. These will be impossible to use and assess once "algebra" tests are used as end of course requirements.

What we need to do is to have high standards, but also to encourage diversity, innovation and creativity in our educational system based on 21st century student needs. Rather than standardized course tests across the state, this can better be accomplished (and much more cheaply) with "model assessment banks" of questions, shared on line, that teachers can use to develop assessments. The assessment banks can be created as teachers share their questions and model questions are developed statewide. This allows the tests to focus on many types of assessments --- multiple choice questions, essays, performance tasks, and so on -- that lead to deeper understanding of subject

matter and skills such as research, deep reading, higher order thinking, and so on. The questions can also be used to focus on different themes and topics within each course. It also allows teachers to "customize" assessments to meet diverse student needs. The assessment banks can also be used to collect and create "formative" assessments that can also be used to give students feedback and improve instruction. Also, assessment banks can be shared and created for innovative models and approaches to teaching and learning (such as assessments that focus on research skills, interdisciplinary course projects and tasks, etc.).

Ideally, each district should be required to use these model assessments to develop a set of "cornerstone" assessments -- a relatively few assessments that will be used to determine whether students have developed the required content and a set of "21st century" skills that allow for graduation. Imagine the creativity that this will unleash and the different ways districts will come up with their assessments. Imagine the discussions that this will create within a school district. Imagine how the sharing of these will strengthen the state's education system in the long run (and the short run).

If you want to think about the difference in these two approaches, consider the auto industry. Imagine one system that "standardizes" automobiles so that every auto manufacturer has to develop the same type of car. Or imagine a variety of general standards to judge the quality and reliability of autos, but that allows for tremendous diversity, creativity and innovation in size, types, colors, uses, etc. This latter approach is what we should strive for in our educational system.

If you want some standardization of assessments, consider a mix of state tests and local assessments. Although I am not crazy about the idea, the PSSA tests currently provide an opportunity for a required set of state tests to measure some general skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Why not use what is currently there if you want a graduation requirement? This would add little cost to the system, and allow for flexible course and curriculum requirements. The general approach here is to have some standardized requirements for graduation (already in place) but also to work with districts from the ground up to help them develop better assessments, some of their own cornerstone assessments for graduation, AND to promote innovation and creativity in a 21st century world. The left over money (due to the fact that the course tests will not be developed) can be used to strengthen the educational system -- support for extra curricular programs, support for formative assessments, support for professional and curriculum development that will engage students in learning, etc. Grants can be offered to districts to help them upgrade their programs, introduce new courses, create interdisciplinary approaches, support innovative professional development and extra-curricular programs, and the like. The money can also be used to develop an on

line system of sharing new ideas and approaches to teaching and learning.

Another helpful addition to the mix is the current graduation project requirement. Right now this is loosely defined and regulated. But what if that requirement were tightened, clear expectations created, that assess whether students could do research, write a coherent report that included analysis and interpretation, and do a well organized presentation before a panel organized by a district. This would be a tremendous addition to graduation, allow students to do in-depth work in an area of interest, and demonstrate that students have skills not determined by traditional testing.

Frankly, I don't have much hope that, at this stage, what I have to say will make a difference, but I hope you will think about what is in this e-mail and consider it as you move towards the new graduation requirements. In my best of all possible worlds, you will hold off on passing the new requirements and consider this very different approach for a state vision of the future of education. You might also want to look at the Partnership for 21st Century Skills website (<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org>) to understand what educational changes are needed in a 21st century world (surprisingly, Pennsylvania does not appear to be a partner in this organization).

If you wish, I will be glad to discuss this further either by e-mail (elliottseif@verizon.net) or by phone. I can be reached by phone at 215 247 0508 (if you get an answering machine, try my cell -- 215 205 4350). I would also be willing to testify at the State Board if it would be helpful.

Thanks in advance for your consideration.

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