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LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF PENNSYLVANIA, INC.
4751 Lindle Road, Suite 114 • Harrisburg, PA 17111
717.939.3731 or 8

May 19, 2009

Mr. Joseph Toresella, Chairperson
Pennsylvania State Board of Education
P.O. Box 230
Flourtown, PA 19031-0230

Subject: Proposed Keystone Exams – GCA

Dear Mr. Toresella:

I am writing on behalf of the Learning Disabilities Association of Pennsylvania in opposition to the proposed mandatory graduation exit exam or GCA currently referred to as the Keystone Exam and in support of the CERT Keystone 2.0 proposal.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Pennsylvania (LDAPA) has been advocating for children and adults with LD since its inception in 1964. Our non-profit organization is dedicated to helping individuals with learning disabilities succeed and protecting the rights of all people whose lives are negatively impacted by this “hidden handicap.”

We do not believe that our children will be “exempt” from these gatekeeper exams and are deeply concerned about the negative impact they will have on our children’s future educational achievement and ultimate success in their adult lives. Our organization is unique in that its membership includes both parents and professionals united in our efforts to secure an appropriate and effective education for students with learning disabilities and those who may not as yet be identified but are at risk. Students in the SLD category account for more than 50% of those children classified as exceptional.

Our children do not test well, as a general rule, and the time taken to prepare students with learning disabilities to take such tests is detrimental to their overall learning. We do not ask for a “free pass” but seek a through and efficient education that will enable our children to lead productive and successful lives as adults and contribute to their communities in the future. It is beyond our comprehension that the State Board would believe that a test is going to accomplish this at the expense of learning.

It is a testimony to the commitment of both parents and professionals that a multitude of diverse groups have formed a coalition in the CERT alliance to restore reason and credibility to the testing proposal. The Keystone 2.0 is a compromise that combines testing with coursework to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum. In this way changes can be made to improve education without holding students responsible for a weak curriculum over which they have no control.

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If the purpose of this proposal is to improve education, let us all work together and do just that by employing those programs and practices that have proven successful. Early intervention has shown the greatest success rate but we must not forget those students who are in middle or high school and need intensive instruction to correct weaknesses that may have been over-looked. Testing, as proposed in Keystone 2.0, can be a useful tool to improve education and lead to a more effective curriculum.

High-stakes testing is not the answer but will lead to greater drop out rates and that is a clear indication of Pennsylvania's failure to educate all students to the best of our ability after 12 years of public school. Our children deserve a thorough and effective education and must be competent to lead us in the future. This can only be achieved if they have the necessary skills to read, comprehend, articulate and write competently and possess the necessary critical thinking skills that effective teachers have been nurturing over the course of many years. No one test is an adequate measure of a student's knowledge or competency nor should it be. This is a cumulative process that should be measured through a variety of methods to demonstrate proficiency.

As taxpayers, people around the state have voiced concern if not outrage that our tax dollars are being directed to support something we find unnecessary and potentially harmful. During such difficult economic times, this entire proposal strikes a chord of irresponsibility if not indifference to our concerns and opposition to high-stakes testing.

We ask that you think of our children, all the children in our state, regardless of their strengths and weakness, color or social status. All students from various areas, who live in cities, suburbs or small and rural districts deserve a quality education. Regardless of whether graduates are college bound, vocational students, military or looking to enter the workforce, they represent Pennsylvania's future. We owe them the highest quality education we can provide to prepare them to take the lead from us as we have from the previous generation. If we do not do this, we have failed in our leadership and our mission and perpetuate unemployment, welfare and increased criminal activity.

It is our hope that the State Board of Education will take a step back and consider all the ramification of proceeding with high-stakes testing. We hope we can provide some information and guidance regarding the testing of students with learning disabilities.

Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,



Sharyn Denham, Public Affairs

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