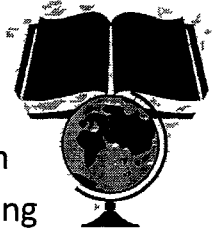


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South Hills Area School Districts Association
Comments on Keystone Exams (Torsella Compromise Plan)
August 11, 2009

As President of SHASDA and a six-year school director from West Jefferson Hills, I represent a consortium of 22 districts in Pittsburgh's South Hills. I serve on the Board of Directors of the Allegheny IU and the Pennsylvania School Boards Association.

Last year, along with 200 districts statewide, SHASDA members voted unanimously to oppose a mandated statewide curriculum and standardized state-developed end of course exams. In Allegheny County alone, 33 districts passed resolutions against GCAs and a majority of them have passed additional resolutions against Keystone Exams with more being considered. The cost of validating local assessments, even at 1/2, renders them mandatory. Though re-named, Keystones are mandatory exit exams that after thirteen years of class work, participation, compositions, projects, presentations, and class tests, may deny a diploma to a student who may not be able to demonstrate proficiency on a standardized test.



The current proposal does not have buy-in from the educational community, for reasons such as increased costs, inequity, loss of local control, logistical concerns, and its lack of grounding in research. Although PSEA has agreed not to oppose the proposal, not one association of educational professionals supports the current proposal of July 9, 2009.

I want to clarify that the March 4 "Joint Agreement" between PSBA, PDE, and the State Board of Education, which was an agreement **not to oppose** the Keystones, did **not** carry the weight of PSBA's membership, nor PSBA's Board of Directors. As a PSBA Director, I learned of that Agreement at the same time as the general public. Our membership of 4,500's platform opposes mandatory statewide curriculum, standardized state-developed exit exams, and reduced authority of local school districts to establish graduation requirements. The resolution passed at our July 12 Board of Directors meeting, three days AFTER the Proposal currently before you was announced, is the prevailing resolution as passed unanimously by PSBA's full Board of Directors.

A student's course grade should reflect his achievement over time. It's punitive to give a student who does not reach a cut score on a standardized test a zero for 1/3 of his grade, rather than the score he has earned. Under this plan, a single test will have a major



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influence on a student's grade in a course, and, more importantly, his QPA, as he competes for college admission. Exit exams are unproven and untested. They harm the very students they are intended to help, and they don't benefit the students who pass them.

Most of our SHASDA districts will not have a problem with students passing the Keystone Exams. Our students will be hurt by the decreased rigor, as these minimum competency exams will replace the comprehensive mid-terms and finals that are tailored to reflect the rigor of our course offerings.

In a nearby school district to mine, students will be affected much differently, as many live in poverty. Across this state, students enter classrooms that don't have equal resources. This disparity is not only financial, but it also exists in administrative leadership and teacher effectiveness. Parents in my district probably can afford a tutor. Our board may be able to sell a tax increase to pay for the increased staffing and professional development required to remediate students who fail the exams. In that nearby district, when you can purchase a home for less than the cost of a car, a tax increase will not cover the even greater proportion of their budget needed to handle their remediation costs, as their students are to a much greater degree "at-risk." Their parents can't afford tutors. When a parent is a day from homelessness because she cannot pay the rent; when a household is facing utility shut off because they can't pay their utility bill; when a student can hear gun shots while doing his homework – is it reasonable to expect those students will be as likely to persist through test prep, test-taking, remediation, test re-take, remediation, and finally Bridge project?

Every child who drops out of school is one too many, as that diploma may keep a teenager from employment, even if that job requires no math or reading skills. If the purpose is to bring accountability to our schools, please don't do it on the backs of our children.

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