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**Sent:** Thursday, September 10, 2009 10:01 AM  
**To:** andy@pasenate.com; eerickson@pasen.gov; pdrucker@pahouse.net; dmilne@pahousegop.com; IRRC  
**Cc:** board@tesd.k12.pa.us  
**Subject:** Keystone exam opinions

Dear Sirs,

As a parent with two children currently in the Treddyfrin-Easttown School District, I attach my opinion regarding the new Keystone Exams below.

Matthew Clark

**Keystone Exams – A numbers game to improve college scores, or a means to improve high school education?**

The new Keystone Examinations add more tests to the high school curriculum in an attempt to “improve” education. Improving the quality of education by increasing testing, and requiring the new tests to be one third of course scores is exactly equivalent to the concept of “quality through inspection”, which has been largely discarded in the actual field of manufacturing. Why? In a factory, quality inspection at the end of the process leads to discarding a higher fraction of the product. This inefficient method of increasing quality is largely responsible for the downfall of the American automotive industries, as well as many manufacturing industries.

Why do we now want to bring this failed methodology to our schools? The new Keystone Tests in Pennsylvania do exactly that, by requiring a series of state-developed tests be passed before students can graduate. The only sure outcome of this change is that some fraction of students will fail to pass the tests, lowering the overall graduation rate. This may well lead to increased quality of those who do graduate, and improve the value of a Pennsylvania diploma: but at high cost. Do we really feel that we are giving out undeserved diplomas? If so, insuring that these students will not get diplomas is not the best course of action; improving their education should be a higher priority.

The logic that leads to the conclusion that the graduation rate will fall is simple. The current graduation rate, without these tests, is 84%.1

Adding more testing requirements has little chance to increase this rate - the good students will pass them. But no one claims adding tests will improve the education of good students; on the contrary they add more hurdles to trip borderline students and prevent them from graduating.

What then, is the motivation for adding expensive processes for generating, validating, and administering state tests? Pennsylvania already has among the highest graduation rates in the nation. However Education Secretary Gerald L. Zahorchak suggests that we are beyond worrying about graduation rates; we need to now concern ourselves with the number of students who achieve *college degrees*.2

*“Despite having one of the strongest high school graduation rates in the nation, Pennsylvania trails behind 25 other states in the percentage of adults who hold a post-secondary degree. We also lag behind 20 states in the percentage of adults with incomes at or above the national average. This disturbing disparity indicates we are graduating students from our high schools who are struggling to achieve the success of their peers in many other states.*

*“This is further evidence that too many of our high school students are not adequately prepared, even though they have been given diplomas that are supposed to indicate academic readiness. In too many cases, the high school graduation requirements set by local school boards are not serving students or taxpayers. It is time to replace this patchwork system of local graduation requirements with a statewide system that will ensure every Pennsylvania high school student who receives a diploma is ready to succeed.”*

It is unclear how adding a new set of graduation requirements is going to help achieve this goal when it is not even clear that scholastic performance is the major issue in college graduation rates. In the current economy the ability of parents to finance a college education is more likely to be a major factor and increased high school testing is unlikely to have an effect in that realm.

The new Keystone tests are required to count for 1/3 of the course grade. This makes them not only a state-mandated final exam, but prescribes a fixed weighting for the test, taking the decision out of the hands of local teachers.

(a) Successful completion of secondary level coursework in english composition, literature, algebra i and biology in which a keystone exam serves as the course final exam. A student’s keystone exam score shall count as one-third of the final course grade.

Should you fail the test, you can't graduate, and not only that you will find this out only 10 days before your planned graduation date.

they shall be offered at least 3 times each year: once each in the fall, spring and summer. Keystone Exams shall be ADMINISTERED, reviewed and scored so that the scores for candidates for graduation are provided to schools no later than 10 calendar days prior to graduation.

Should you fail the test, we now enter a new and exciting world of “project modules” that must be created (at our expense) which could add to the Keystone test scores. It is unclear what the resources are for creating and administering these modules, or even what the nature or duration of them will be.

(N) If a student is unable to meet the requirements in § 4.24(b)(1)(iv)(a) (RELATING TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS), a student may supplement his Keystone Exam score through satisfactory performance on one or more project modules related to the Keystone Exam module or modules in which the student scored below proficient. points earned through satisfactory completion of one or more projects will be added to a student’s highest keystone exam score. the total shall count as one-third of a student’s final course grade, as provided in SUBSECTION (F)(8).

In summary, while many of us with actual high school students find that getting through high school is difficult enough, our Pennsylvania board of education has moved past us and is on to improving college scores. We should leave that exercise to the colleges and not add yet another round of required tests for our students.

Matthew Clark

Wayne, PA

September 10, 2009

1Data for the 2005-2006 year. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences 2009.

2January 7, 2009 Press release from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.