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David Sumner

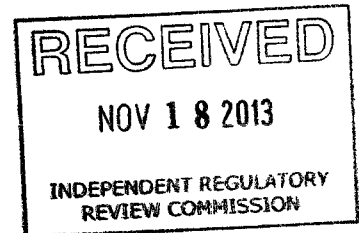
From: AndyDinniman AndyDinniman <AndyDinniman@pasenate.com>
Sent: Monday, November 18, 2013 1:38 PM
To: David Sumner
Subject: State Sen. Andy Dinniman's submission to public record for Nov. 21 vote
Attachments: IRRCDinnimanColumn.pdf, IRRCDinnimanReasons.docx

Mr. Sumner,

Please accept into the public record my attached column and my attached point-by-point opposition to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Chapter 4 Final-Form Regulations to be considered by the IRRC on Thursday, Nov. 21.

Respectfully,
Andy Dinniman
State Senator -- 19th District

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Keystone exams fail Pa. students

By Andy Dinniman

Though controversial, I believe the new Pennsylvania Core Standards (Common Core) are a positive step for education. However, in the false name of raising academic standards and accountability, the Corbett administration is attempting to assess these new standards through the Keystone Graduation Exams, which will result in higher property taxes, less classroom instruction, more "teaching to the test," and the potential for a generation of students to be branded as failures.

The state Department of Education and the state Board of Education have proposed the exams to the Independent Regulatory Review Commission, which is set to vote on them on Thursday.

I encourage you to join me in opposing the exams. Here's why:

It is fundamentally wrong for three standardized tests to determine a student's high school graduation. If the Keystone exams are approved, high school students starting with the Class of 2017 will face the possibility of passing all their classes with straight A's yet failing one of the keystones and not getting a diploma.

It is also irresponsible to implement a program of graduation exams that will result in the largest unfunded mandate in the past 50 years. The Keystone exams require school districts to provide remediation and supplementary instruction for students who do not pass. However, the state Department of Education provides no funding for remediation costs. In fact, the department claims that the exams will have no cost to school districts, even as statewide test results indicate that remediation and supplementary instruction will be required by more than one-third of students in algebra I, more than half in biology, and a fourth in literature. The exams and their required remediation could result in an unfunded

mandate of more than \$300 million a year. In fact, the West Chester Area School District estimates that remediation for the biology exam alone will cost local taxpayers about \$250,000.

These costs will be passed on to taxpayers in the form of massive school property tax increases. Meanwhile, financially distressed districts are teetering on the verge of bankruptcy. In Philadelphia, schools face class sizes of nearly 50 students, have been forced to close their libraries, and even struggle to afford textbooks and basic instructional materials. How can we spend more than \$65 million to develop and implement a testing program when our poorest school districts are going bankrupt?

It doesn't make sense to expand standardized testing at a time when increasing evidence challenges the notion that it is the best way to gauge student achievement and learning. Already, anywhere from 10 to 20 days (out of a 130-day school year) of instruction time are lost to testing and test preparation. If the Keystone exams are approved, an eighth-grader taking algebra I would face taking a class test for a grade, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment math test, and the Keystone exam.

Even after students go through two or more tests with the required remediation and an individual project-based assessment with a teacher, the new regulations allow a superintendent to exempt any student from the graduation-test requirement. So why invest instruction and testing time and taxpayer money in the exams when tens of thousands of students will be allowed to graduate anyway? This is not a program for accountability and higher standards.

It is unfair to stamp "failure" on the backs of teachers, schools, and communities that lack the fiscal resources to prepare students to pass these exams. Why should students who are set up for failure stick with the program? These exams will

simply increase high school dropout rates. And how can we revitalize economically distressed communities when their schools and students are labeled substandard?

There has been no shortage of problems with the proposed Keystone exams. The fact that 58 of 61 superintendents and intermediate unit directors in the Philadelphia suburbs have signed a position paper opposing them is a clear indication that something is wrong.

Still, the Corbett administration continues to seek to quickly and quietly push them through. In fact, the Department of Education has repeatedly withheld data necessary for weighing the costs to local districts. I have filed seven right-to-know requests to obtain exam results and breakdowns by school district, as well as information regarding the potential remediation costs. (Such costs will weigh more heavily on lower-performing and financially distressed districts, as their students are more likely to require remediation.) How absurd is it that the minority chair of the Senate Education Committee has repeatedly been refused relevant information or even a fiscal analysis of the exams?

The majority of unfunded mandates imposed on our schools come from Department of Education and State Board of Education regulations, not legislation. It is time for the legislature to stand up to the department and its endless regulations that result in more unfunded mandates and higher property taxes.

The Keystone Graduation Exams don't cut it. They fail students, they fail teachers, they fail schools, and they fail local taxpayers. Let's stop them before they fail Pennsylvania.

State Sen. Andy Dinniman, a Democrat from West Whiteland, is minority chair of the Senate Education Committee
(www.senatordinniman.com).



Senate of Pennsylvania

8 Reasons Why We Oppose the Keystone Graduation Exams

By State Senator Andrew E. Dinniman, D.Ed.
Minority Chair, Senate Education Committee

1. It is fundamentally **wrong** for three standardized tests to determine a student's high school graduation. The implementation of high-stakes graduation exams runs contrary to all of our efforts to reform public education, recognize different learning styles and embrace an individualized approach. **If the Keystone Graduation Exams are approved, high school students starting with current freshmen (Class of 2017) will face the possibility of passing all their classes but failing a Keystone Exam and not getting a diploma.**
2. It is **foolhardy** to spend more than \$65 million a year on testing while more and more of our school districts teeter on the verge of bankruptcy, despite school property taxes being at an all-time high. In Philadelphia, for example, schools face class sizes of nearly 50 students, have been forced to close their libraries and even struggle to afford textbooks and basic instructional materials.
3. It is **unfair** to stamp "failure" on the backs of teachers, schools and communities that lack the fiscal resources to adequately prepare students to pass these exams. Why should we expect students who are set up for failure to stick with the program? And how can we expect to revitalize economically distressed communities when their schools and students are labeled as substandard and second-rate?
4. It is **irresponsible** to implement a program of graduation exams that will result in the largest unfunded mandate in the past 50 years. If a student fails any of the three required Keystone Exams, the school district must provide supplementary instruction and student can take the test two more times. If a student continues to fail the exam, the student is entitled to a project-based assessment with a teacher. The Pennsylvania Department of Education provides no funding whatsoever for remediation costs. **It is conservatively estimated that it will result in an unfunded mandate of \$300 million a year. The buck will no doubt be passed onto taxpayers in the form of massive school property tax increases.**

The enormity of the costs (associated with remediation) to local school districts is illustrated by the results of the recent statewide Keystone Exams, which were taken by all high school juniors on a pilot basis. Results were first issued this summer and oddly enough, a different and improved set of results was released in September. The September results are being questioned by a number of school districts:

<u>Exam</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Algebra I – Failure Rate	60%	35.6%
Biology – Failure Rate	60%	54.4%
Literature – Failure Rate	45%	24.6%

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has not provided a fiscal note or in-depth analysis of the extensive remediation obligations of the Keystone Exams for local school districts. Unbelievably, the department claims that there is no cost to school districts, which is simply not possible.

5. It is **unscrupulous** for the Pennsylvania Department of Education to continue to withhold data that is necessary for weighing the costs to local school districts. In response, I have been forced to file seven Right to Know requests in an effort to obtain exam results and breakdowns by individual school district, as well as information regarding the potential costs or estimates of such remediation. Keep in mind, such costs will weigh heavier on lower-performing and financially distressed school districts as they face a higher potential for students requiring remediation.
6. It is **preposterous** that a test developed by the state with no input whatsoever from a course teacher or local district should be the main deciding factor on whether a student passes and graduates. The school code leaves the decision as to who graduates to the local school district. **The imposition of state-required, make-or-break graduation exams represents a serious threat to local control.**
7. It is **illogical** for the Pennsylvania Department of Education to continue to expand standardized testing at a time when increasing evidence challenges the notion that it is the best way to gauge student achievement and learning. Already, anywhere from 10 to 20 days (out of a 180-day school year) of instruction time is lost to testing and test preparation. If the Keystone Exams are approved, an eighth-grade student taking Algebra I would face taking a class test for a class grade, the PSSA Math Test and the Keystone Exam, which would be banked for graduation purposes. **The Keystones will only further promote “teaching to the test,” while sacrificing more valuable instruction time in the name of standardization.**

8. **It is clear that the Pennsylvania Department of Education is not ready for prime time and neither are the Keystone Exams.** The department is now under its third secretary in less than a year and in my view, lacks the ability to provide the leadership necessary to initiate and supervise the implementation of state-wide required graduation exams. The department has lost the confidence and trust of numerous school district superintendents. The fact that almost all (58 of 62) superintendents and Intermediate Unit Directors in the Philadelphia suburbs have signed onto a position paper in opposition to the Keystone Exams (due to the resulting loss of local control and its massive unfunded mandate) is a strong and clear expression of the loss of confidence in the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the State Board of Education.