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**Comments of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)
regarding the Proposed Revisions to Chapter 4 Regulations**

**Presented to the
State Board of Education
November 5, 2012**



The Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) has always supported efforts to ensure that Pennsylvania high school graduates are college or career ready. Our members spend every day working very hard to help their students reach those goals. We support efforts to provide assistance to students who struggle to meet proficiency standards, as well as efforts to offer students multiple ways to demonstrate their proficiency. One size does not fit all. We believe that every student should be challenged with high expectations and a well-planned, dynamic, diverse, and appropriate curriculum throughout elementary, middle, and high school. When students leave our schools and make their choice - enter college, begin other post-secondary training, or join the workforce - they should have the knowledge and skills needed to succeed.

In light of these goals for our members and their students, we have serious concerns with the proposed changes to Chapter 4 of the State Board of Education Regulations. In particular, we believe that the elimination of the strategic plan is misguided and will hurt efforts to provide students with a coherent and comprehensive curriculum. Additionally, the changes in the graduation requirements, which will create up to five high-stakes exit exams over the next several years, are not in the best interest of students. Both of these changes can and will have negative impacts on students and student achievement, and for that reason we believe that the changes should not proceed as outlined in the Pennsylvania Bulletin.

Elimination of Strategic Plans

Strategic plans and the strategic planning process provide school districts, charter schools, and CTE's with an opportunity to develop a coherent plan of curriculum, instruction, and assessment focused on state standards and student achievement goals. The planning process allows all stakeholders – teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members – the occasion to discuss their vision for the education of their children and the best methods for achieving that vision. The plans themselves provide a guide for all members of the community aimed at providing a coherent, comprehensive, and logical progression of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. When plans are distributed to all stakeholders they can determine

how their work fits into the plan and how they can support schools and students in their efforts to achieve their goals.

While we recognize that the development and review of such plans can be onerous at times their importance for setting goals and guiding instruction far outweighs any perceived burden on the schools and districts. First and foremost, implementation of the plans establishes a form of accountability, such that schools and districts must provide the public with information about planned instruction, assessment, professional personnel, classroom and other resources, and instructional supports and measurable goals to improve student achievement. All stakeholders have the opportunity to participate in the development and review of the plans, and the general public can review the plans and offer comments before the plans or revisions to the plans are adopted by school boards. This process allows for the maximum amount of local control and accountability and provides all stakeholders with a sense of participation and ownership. The more that parents, students, teachers, and others participate in the development of a coherent and comprehensive strategic plan, the more likely they are to support that plan and ensure its proper implementation.

Additionally, strategic plans allow for schools and districts to set short-term and multi-year organizational and educational goals that guide the curriculum. These plans allow for the development of a coherent, comprehensive, and logical plan of progression for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, which helps educators and students understand how different content areas and topics fit together and build upon one another. Particularly important is the fact that strategic plans delineate how all academic areas contribute to student achievement, not just those areas that are tested. Strategic plans also allow time for programs and curricula to impact student achievement, and periodic reviews offer schools and districts the opportunity to reflect on students' achievement. Stakeholders can make adjustments to the plans based on data and what is in the best interest of students.

By removing the requirement for schools and districts to develop and maintain these strategic plans, we risk losing the voices of parents, students, and teachers. Rather than being partners in education and student achievement, these groups become nothing more than consumers subject to the decisions of school boards. Sometimes those decisions may have negative educational consequences that may not immediately be obvious to members of the school boards. We can help to avoid these negative consequences by maintaining the strategic planning process. It is vital to maintain the input of those with the knowledge, skills, and expertise in education, namely the teachers and educational support professionals who work with our students on a daily basis, as well as those who know students the best, their parents and themselves.

For these reasons, PSEA believes that the proposed elimination of strategic plans and the strategic planning process should be rejected. Instead, we believe that the requirements for the plans can be streamlined to avoid redundancies and improve the process, while at the same time preserving the core pieces of the plan. In particular, in our view the core pieces of the plan are: (1) participation in the planning process by representatives of all stakeholders; (2) measurable goals for student achievement; (3) descriptions of planned instruction, assessment practices, and instructional supports; (4) explanations of the personnel and resources needed to achieve the goals; and (5) plans for early childhood education, early intervention programs, and transition programs. We owe it to our students to provide the best education possible with the resources available, and we believe that is only feasible when we have a comprehensive plan for curriculum, assessment, and student achievement.

Changes Related to the Keystone Exams

In addition to the proposed elimination of the requirement for a strategic plan, PSEA is concerned about the proposed regulatory changes to the graduation requirements and Keystone Exams included in the Chapter 4 revisions. The revisions require students in the Class of 2017 to score proficient or advanced on Algebra I, Literature, and Biology Keystone Exams in order to graduate. Students in the Class of 2019 will also have to score at least proficient on a

Composition Keystone Exam in order to graduate, while proficiency on a Civics and Government Keystone Exam will be required for the Class of 2020. Under the proposed amendments, the Algebra I and Literature Keystone Exams would replace the PSSA exams as the measure of proficiency for high schools.

One serious concern is that the Keystone Exams have not yet been approved by the United States Department of Education (USDOE) to replace the PSSA exams as the measure of proficiency. Yet, the proposed revisions would do just that. The USDOE has explained that prior to implementing revisions to accountability plans which include assessments, a State must submit such revisions to the Department for review and approval, and, once approved, incorporate the revisions into the state's approved Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook.¹ Moreover, the Department has explained that a State that desires to amend its accountability plan must submit to the Department a written request for amendments that apply to the current year's assessment results in order to give the Department sufficient time to review and approve the amendment(s), and notify the State of such approval so that the State can apply the amendment(s) without delaying adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations and school improvement identifications. Additionally, the Accountability Workbook that Pennsylvania submitted to the USDOE indicates that changes in assessments "will only be undertaken on the basis that the achievement performance levels are equated to previous years and that are approved by USDOE." To our knowledge, the performance levels have not yet been equated to previous years, and no approval has been received.

Once again, it is our understanding that Pennsylvania has not yet received approval from the USDOE to amend its accountability plans which currently mandate administration of the PSSA. Therefore, we do not believe that the Pennsylvania Department of Education has the authority to make these changes at this time and risks denial of the plan as well as penalties².

Further, these changes would alter the nature of the Keystone Exams from one piece of evidence of student achievement to high-stakes exit exams. To our knowledge, the State Board of Education and the Department of Education have not conducted studies related to the validity

or reliability of the Keystone Exams for use as high stakes assessments or for determining college or career readiness. PSEA did not support the initial Keystone Exams proposal because we believe it is inappropriate to base the assessment of college and career readiness solely on high-stakes exit exams. PSEA advocated for a multiple measure approach; test results would be considered along with other indicators of student proficiency that are typically incorporated into the student's evaluation and the course grade. During discussions about the initial proposal, PSEA joined other key stakeholders to develop a plan, which the State Board adopted and which is part of the current regulations, that included the Keystone Exams as only part of a student's final grade. We then supported efforts to determine the cut scores for the exams, and our members participated in this process. However, they did so under the assumption that the exams would be one-third of a student's final grade and not the only factor used in determining whether a student did or did not graduate. With higher stakes involved, those individuals and others who participated in the process may have made different decisions. Those same cut scores cannot and should not be used for determining proficiency on exit exams. Yet, there is no indication from the State Board or the Department of Education that new cut scores would be established if the proposed changes are approved.

Stand-alone exit exams, which the Keystone Exams would become under this proposal, could have numerous unintended consequences. Extensive academic research, which we have provided to PDE and the Board, has demonstrated those negative consequences: increased dropout rates; narrowed curricula; diversion of resources away from education of students and toward more standardized testing of students; and disproportionate harm to some of our most vulnerable students – those living in poverty, minority students, English language learners, and special needs students.

PSEA has not been alone in our opposition to the use of a single exam to measure student achievement or the potential for achievement. Several advocacy groups have recently filed a civil rights complaint challenging the use of high stakes exams in New York City, and other groups joined in our call for an approach to assessment that included multiple measures of student

achievement. Empirical research, which we have also shared with PDE and the Board, continues to suggest that multiple measures of student achievement and knowledge are more accurate and reliable, while high-stakes exit exams discount any success and achievement that a student may have experienced over the course of a school year.

The proposed changes to Chapter 4 with regard to the Keystone Exams will create the high-stakes exit exams that so many Pennsylvanians opposed when the exams were adopted just a few years ago. While the proposed changes will reduce the number of Keystone Exams students must complete, they will now require students to score at least Proficient on three exams, and later five exams, in order to graduate. Beginning with the Class of 2017, students must score Proficient or Advanced on Algebra I, Biology, and Literature. Then, in 2019, graduates will need to also score Proficient or Advanced on an English Composition Keystone Exam, while the Class of 2020 will need to demonstrate proficiency on an additional Keystone Exam in Civics and Government in order to graduate.

The Keystone exam score will no longer count as one-third of a student's final course grade. Instead, students will be judged and success will be measured solely by a single test score at the end of the year rather than on a student's entire body of work in the course. Proficiency becomes tied to a single assessment, a single measure of a student's knowledge on a single day, instead of being a full measure of the student's knowledge and skills demonstrated throughout the course. The negative consequences of creating such a system of high-stakes exit exams far outweigh any benefits that may come from this change.

Even in a system that includes model end-of-course assessments, standards of practice in the field of student assessment mandate that these tests be used as only one of many sources of evidence that a district should use to make graduation and promotion decisions. A statewide model assessment system should reflect high standards of professional practice by including several different types of formative and summative, group and individual, assessment strategies. Evaluation systems that include multiple sources of evidence are more appropriate than high stakes testing for several reasons:

- Multiple sources of evidence are more valid and reliable than one-size-fits-all systems because they give students additional and different opportunities to demonstrate proficiency over time. In general, systems with multiple sources of evidence can be designed to more closely reflect how and what students have learned. Systems with multiple sources of evidence can be designed to measure a wide range of standards-based educational performances, and thus do not generally narrow the curriculum to drill and test preparation.
- Systems with multiple sources of evidence can be designed to measure a wide range of standards-based educational performances, and thus do not generally narrow the curriculum to drill and test preparation.
- Multiple sources of evidence can suggest more specifically the areas in which individual students require extra support.

Currently in Chapter 4, the assessment system allows for multiple assessment strategies since a student's final grade is a culmination of all of the different types of assessments they have participated in throughout the year. While it may be appropriate to reduce the number of required tests as the state abandons the current policy upon which Chapter 4 is based, even the reduction in testing cannot mitigate the potentially devastating consequences of a single high-stakes test.

With only three to five high-stakes assessments, district administrators and teachers will feel even more pressure to focus on these content areas, pouring time, money, and resources into the teaching of those content areas. The result: a curriculum lacking in variety, creativity, and flexibility. Non-tested courses like art, music, physical education, and even Chemistry and history will be reduced or eliminated to provide additional staff time for English Language Arts, Algebra, and Biology, with Composition and Civics and Government added in the future. This will be particularly true if the unfortunate trend we are seeing of continued education funding cuts to public schools is not soon reversed. More on that later.

A reduction in the number and focus of the assessments will also eliminate a positive aspect of the current Keystone Exams: the flexibility of receiving a proficient score on Biology OR

Chemistry; US History, World History OR Civics and Government; and two of the three math subjects. No two students are exactly alike, and not all students will do well in every subject. The reduction to just three exams forces all students to be good at the same things and ignores their inherent strengths. Some students perform well in Chemistry and choose to take more courses in Chemistry, but they may not perform as well or have not taken as many courses in Biology. Why penalize them? Will the student who is struggling with Algebra I be relegated to remediation in Algebra before moving to geometry in which he or she might be very successful? These questions have not yet been addressed by the State Board or the Department of Education. If we want well-rounded students who can think critically and participate productively in society, they will need more from us than preparation for an English Language Arts, Algebra, and Biology exam. They will need a well-rounded curriculum that allows them to demonstrate their strengths and their mastery of the standards in the ways that are best for them. We not only ignore their strengths, we ignore everything we know about child development, about human nature, and about the needs of our students as they move into an ever-evolving technological and information-based world.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that there be ten high-stakes exit exams. There is a difference between high-stakes exit exams and end-of-course exams used in conjunction with other measures of student achievement. If standardized assessments are going to be part of the graduation requirements, then they should truly reflect the curriculum and be used as just one piece in a larger system of assessment. Our interest is in providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate that they are college or career ready.

In this regard, we are pleased that the pathways to proficiency, and therefore graduation, currently in Chapter 4 will remain in place if this proposal is enacted. By continuing to allow for these multiple pathways to proficiency, we increase the probability that all students will be able to graduate. PSEA fully supports providing remediation to students who need it, as well as allowing students to retake the assessments and/or complete a project-based assessment. However, PSEA is concerned with the proposal to make the project-based assessment only

available to twelfth grade students or to other students only after two years of remediation. Students will perform best on these assessments when they are administered as close to the time that instruction takes place as possible. Students should not have to spend multiple years in remediation and retesting before they have access to the project-based assessment. In many cases, the very students who are best served by this type of assessment are also the ones more likely to give up if they become frustrated with multiple attempts at remediation and retesting. These are also the students who likely will benefit the most from re-assessment as close to the original instruction as possible. This is particularly an issue for Algebra I which may be offered in seventh or eighth grade. Students who are not successful the first or second time may remain in math limbo until they have access to the project in twelfth grade. This means they will never have the opportunity to take geometry even though this may be an area of strength and interest for them and a prerequisite for the post-secondary educational or career plans.

We also support the issuance of waivers by the Secretary of Education in extenuating circumstances. PSEA supports the idea of providing waivers where the district recommends issuing diplomas to students who meet the district's course requirements but may not pass all three Keystone Exams. We would add that the proposal should be modified to provide that the Secretary's decision to overrule a local determination, and deny a district's request for a waiver for any student, is an adjudication under the Administrative Agency Act. We agree that the appropriate remedy, if the Secretary determines that a district is requesting too many waivers, is not to deny graduating seniors a diploma, but rather, as provided in this amendment, to provide the authority for the Secretary to require the district to present a plan to improve its curriculum and instruction to better align with the state assessments and improve student performance on the exams and projects.

We are disappointed to see that a policy already approved by the State Board of Education that provides students in Career and Technical Institutes with an alternate pathway to proficiency is not included in the proposed revisions. Previously, the Board had adopted a policy that would allow these students to demonstrate their career readiness and earn a diploma by

meeting the district's graduation requirements, by taking and successfully completing the courses associated with the Keystone Exams, and by achieving a score of competent or advanced on a PA State Skill Assessment. We strongly support this alternative and we strongly urge the State Board to include it in any approved changes to Chapter 4.

Impact of Funding Cuts

For the second year in a row, the governor has proposed cutting the funding to our schools, making it even more difficult for districts and schools to provide the type of full, well-rounded, meaningful education that will help all students succeed. The state has a responsibility to adequately and equitably appropriate resources so that students achieve and are prepared to pursue their post-secondary goals. The current proposal does nothing to advance us toward meeting that responsibility. Indeed, it may impede any progress by eliminating the voices of the very individuals who will be impacted by the changes, namely the students and teachers, while forcing the Commonwealth and its districts to spend already limited resources on redesigning curriculum, remediation, and project-based assessments to focus on tested curricular areas. The worst consequence of the funding reduction is that the districts and schools that feel the brunt of the budget cuts are also the districts which will likely have the most students in remedial classes and completing project-based assessments.

Conclusion

The proposed changes to Chapter 4 are a response to a problem that does not exist. The great majority of Pennsylvania's public schools are working. The great majority of our students leave their schools ready for the world of college, trade, military, or work. It is unfortunately true that not all of our students reach that goal. When and where that happens, we can and should target our precious and dwindling resources to help those students in those struggling schools that need it the most. Less accountability and high-stakes tests do not provide that help, nor does a drastic reduction in funding, and they are not the answer.

PSEA believes, and we have the research and classroom experience to support this, that there are numerous options available that would increase student achievement and produce the

graduates we want for our Commonwealth, but high-stakes exit exams, endless remediation, and delayed project-based assessments are not among them. PSEA has shared with the legislature and with the State Board of Education our “Solutions that Work”, outlining what those options might be for districts in need, and we continue to advocate for those research proven, classroom tested, successful approaches for our students. Thank you.