

Education Advocate – Special Update

In the March/April 2008 edition of the Education Advocate, the issue of the proposed Pennsylvania Graduation Competency Assessment (GCA) was addressed. In April, the Commonwealth Education Organization sponsored a public forum on the State Board of Education's proposal to institute the high stakes high school graduation exams (GCA). With many educational groups coming forward to express a deep concern that GCA is too much too late in the lives of our students, the elected officials in Harrisburg came forward to stop the Department of Education and Governor from proceeding with this proposal. On July 9, 2008, Act 61 was signed into law by the Governor which provided a one-year moratorium on the GCA. The General Assembly pushed to have the enactment of any graduation exam requirement come through them first. However, the GCA proposal is now being moved through a back door process. The following article clarifies what is currently happening with this proposal.

Many thanks to Kim Geyer - of Mars Research & Retrieval Service (www.marsrrservices.com) - for her research, writing and contribution of this article.

“A Real Regulatory Balancing Act”

Policy Brief on the Regulatory Review Process vs. the Graduation Competency Assessment Process

The mission statement of the Independent Regulatory Review Commission (IRRC) is to assist Pennsylvania's Governor and General Assembly in creating a beneficial regulatory balance. What is occurring in the Commonwealth's regulatory review process is not balanced, due to the Governor and the Secretary of Education's insistence to proceed forward with their Graduation Competency Assessment (GCA) Plan. **The premise of the plan would mandate all high school students pass a series of ten competency tests in order to graduate from high school with a diploma.**

Rewinding back to last spring, this process was blocked by both the House and Senate via legislation introduced as a response and urging of statewide constituency who were in opposition to this proposal. On July 9, 2008, ACT 61 (the Omnibus School Code Bill - <http://www.pasbo.org/08HB1067Summary.pdf>.) went into effect. It prohibited further action on the proposed GCA regulations during the 2008-09 fiscal year. From May 17th-June 16th, the IRRC took public comment as required by law and on July 16th issued a public report raising numerous concerns urging the State Board of Education to step back from the GCA proposal. Not to be deterred by the regulatory review process, our Governor and Secretary of Education ordered the Pennsylvania Department of Education to move forward as planned with the GCA process that same month.

On August 28, 2008, they issued requests for proposals (RFPs) for the development of the ten GCA tests, diagnostic tools for grades 6-12, and a model state curriculum. All three aligned components would be phased-in with implementation set to begin in the 2009-2010 school year, accompanied by a multi-year funding plan for the GCAs. RFP bids were opened by Pennsylvania Department of Education officials on October 15, 2008 in a closed meeting. The next day, GOP Senators sent a letter to Governor Rendell and Secretary of Education Zahorchek requesting them, “to immediately cease any further activity related to the development or implementation of a GCA”. These Senators were disturbed that the one-year moratorium was ignored, especially in light of the current economic situation and the state's budget deficit.

Governor Rendell responded that the \$9 million dollars to be spent to fulfill this process is far less than the amount mentioned by his statewide critics, even though there is no longer any line item in the budget specifically for that plan. The original line item of \$15 million was absorbed back into the budget last June. However, the Governor felt he had found a loophole in the \$54.4 million dollar line item for assessments. This line item showed a \$22.7 million dollar increase over the 2007-2008 budget. He simply moved money from this line item to offset the cost of the development of the graduation assessment tests, state curriculum, and the cost of this whole plan. The argument related to the GCA goes beyond the cost factors.

In this case, the **fact** is our Commonwealth has a very specific regulatory review process for a uniform purpose and oversight of the rulemaking process in Pennsylvania. This process is in place to operate as a consensus builder among the legislative standing committees, the agencies, and interested parties. Those interested parties include the voters, taxpayers, and citizens of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The General Assembly, our elected officials, must ask themselves why it should be permitted that any government official can circumvent our state's regulatory review process. Not abiding by, nor being accountable to, the regulatory review process compromises the integrity of representative democracy and a system of governance for and by the people. Our elected officials must step forward to hold accountable **anyone** from circumventing any process in Harrisburg that allows the taxpayers, voters, and general public an opportunity to give input on any legislation or mandate being considered by the state.

This is a partial list of organizations that attended CEOs forum on Graduation Competency Assessments in April 2008 and voiced important concerns about their implementation:

American Federation of Teachers, Pennsylvania Association of Elementary and Secondary Principals, Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education, Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, Pennsylvania School Boards Association, Pennsylvania State Education Association, Pennsylvania Parent-Teacher Association, South Hills Area School Districts Association, a former member of the State Board of Education, The State NAACP were unable to attend but sent their position paper.

The raffle winners are delighted with their prizes! CEO congratulates them and applauds all who contributed to this, our annual fund raiser. Remember though, donations are readily accepted at any time! Please consider us for your 'tax year-end' charity if you missed our raffle. Thank you.

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