



Education Advocate

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Beware: High Stakes Exit Exams planned for PA students

Beware: High school exit exams are on the way in Pennsylvania!

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The promise of PVAAS

Protecting Parents' Rights

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The Pennsylvania State Board of Education (SBE) recently voted unanimously to develop statewide graduation requirements that will be implemented with the class of 2014. The regulatory review process by the state Attorney General, both the House and Senate Education Committees, and the Independent Regulatory Review Commission (IRRC) has now begun. Therefore, now is the time to look at the details and ramifications of these requirements, and to let your opinion be part of the debate before final approval and implementation.

What are the new graduation requirements?

Locally elected school boards currently determine graduation requirements. This proposed SBE plan¹ will usurp this local authority by mandating that high school graduates must prove "proficiency" in reading, writing and mathematics along with science/ technology, environment/ ecology, and civics/government or history. Proficiency will be measured by the state assessing the students' knowledge of the state standards for each discipline using a combination of the following:

- the PSSA administered in 11th grade or re-taken in 12th grade
- ten new Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs)
- Advance Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams with academic content comparable to the appropriate GCA
- assessments developed by school districts that must be validated by a state-approved vendor – with local districts paying all validation costs

The state is really creating a system of high stakes exit exams (the GCAs) that will determine who graduates and who does not, regardless of a student's school record.

Since the PSSA only assesses math, science and reading, and since most students are not enrolled in AP or IB programs, and because many districts will not be able to or want to incur costs for validating local assessments, **it is likely that most Pennsylvania students will take the GCAs in order to graduate.**

What are GCAs?

The state will develop ten exit exams in the following subjects:

- Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry
- English Composition and Literature
- Biology and Chemistry
- History, Civics, and Government

If school districts include GCAs as part of their graduation requirements, "*students will need to demonstrate proficiency on both the English composition and literature GCAs, any two math GCAs, either science GCA and one social studies GCA.*"² – six of the ten tests. GCAs will be given in the fall, spring, and summer in lieu of final exams. The state is promising to have *all* test scores back to *all* districts ten days prior to graduation. Students who do not pass the required combination of GCAs and/or other assessments will not graduate with their class. They will be remediated by the school district and retested until they meet proficiency.

Why should students and parents be concerned?

Across the country, experts are writing and testifying about critical consequences of high stakes exit exams, including:

1. Exit exams increase dropout rates. National independent research confirms a link between graduation (exit) tests and higher drop out rates. After using graduation tests for 15 years, Texas set a record with 40,200 students from the class of 2007 who did not receive a diploma.³
2. Exit exams narrow the curriculum as teachers focus mainly on tested subjects.³
3. "The test is hardest on students who do not

- have access to good schools or good teachers...That applies mostly to poor and minority students.”⁴
4. Gifted students may learn even less. “Already gifted and high ability students are made to wait until other students catch up before they are allowed to learn more. Their time is being wasted while teachers prepare students for the high stake tests which drive the curriculum.”⁵
 5. A California study concluded: “High stakes tests failed to meet legislative objectives to increase achievement and close the achievement gap.”⁶

A Red Flag!

The proposed regulations also contain a prophetic statement about the *“establishment of a voluntary model curriculum aligned with State academic standards in each of the content areas assessed by the GCAs.”* The word “voluntary” is familiar. PDE mandates are often introduced as voluntary pilots to gain acceptance, only to become mandatory later.

Iowa is ahead of Pennsylvania in creating a model curriculum that reduces education to “essential” knowledge and skills, including 21st Century work skills. Expected to be *voluntary*, it is now *mandatory*.⁷ A similar PA plan could sacrifice local academic autonomy for state mandated mediocrity.

Important Questions

1. Clearly, the current PSSA system that was supposed to strengthen graduation knowledge has been deemed insufficient by the PDE. Where is the proof that this new, expanded system of exit exams will fare any better?
2. What are the long-term social consequences of increased dropout and push-out rates?
3. Initial cost estimates for this proposal total \$87 million. What are the long-term costs for test upgrades and administration as well as remediation of students who fail? How will the remediation process be planned and implemented?
4. If all students who take GCAs must pass, will rigor be sacrificed to the lowest acceptable standards?
5. How will exit exams affect special education students and other subgroups?

In reality, high stakes exit exams hold students accountable for lack of “proficiency” too late in the education process. High school students who lack proficiency in basic subjects probably lacked foundational knowledge from elementary school. Denial of a diploma is the final punishment for students who are victims of an education system that allows third grade students who score below the proficient level on the PSSA to progress through six to nine more grades, never gaining proficiency. Remediation can be much more successful with younger children than with high school students.

If PA Secretary of Education Gerald Zahorchak truly wants a system that *“will ensure that a diploma has meaningful, substantive value,”*⁸ the state Board of Education must go back to the drawing board to create a different plan that will ensure effective remediation of children *in elementary school* so they have the academic foundation that will enable them to succeed in school, college, and the workplace. Then punitive high stakes exit exams will be unnecessary. ?

- 1 [Annex A, Title 22.Education, Part 1. State Board of Education. Chapter 4. Academic Standards and Assessment.](#) Found at www.pde.state.pa.us.
- 2 “Discussion Paper on Proposed State High School Graduation Requirements.” PA State Board of Education. Jan 2008.
- 3 Neill EdD, Monty. “A Graduation Test: The Wrong Cure for Pennsylvania’s Education Problems.” Testimony before the PA Board of Education. Jan 2008
- 4 Williams, Juliet. “California Exit Exam Boosts Dropout Numbers.” Associated Press. 8 Nov 2007.
- 5 “Testimony for Chapter 4.” Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (PAGE). 9 Jan 2008.
- 6 “Exit Exam Effects.” [The Principals’ Partnership](#). Union Pacific Foundation. 19 Mar 2006. www.principalspartnership.com.
- 7 Jacobs, Jennifer. “State curriculum focus of new plan.” [The Des Moines Register](#). 6 Feb 2008.
- 8 “Education Secretary Applauds State Board Action to Make High School Diplomas More Meaningful.” PA Department of Education News Bureau. 17 Jan 2008.

“Power of 2”

Most Pennsylvanians are familiar with the **PSSA** – the sometimes-controversial annual state assessment tests in math, reading, writing, and science that measure achievement, or how well students are learning the state standards. Now the state has a companion assessment instrument - **PVAAS** – the Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System that uses PSSA results to measure academic progress, or how much an individual student grows over time. The state Department of Education refers to this combination as the “Power of 2.”

PVAAS is a “value-added” or “growth model” that uses a complex statistical formula to analyze students’ PSSA scores, plot prior academic growth of individual students and groups, and project how individual students should perform in the future. Students whose teachers and schools effectively teach to the state standards should gain a full year of education “value” or “growth” every year. PVAAS shows whether this occurs.

PVAAS adds another dimension for interpreting PSSA scores to evaluate the teaching in a particular school or district. The PSSA measures a snapshot of a student’s level of proficiency in learning state standards. A student may score below proficiency in reading and be two years behind at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the year, he may be only six months behind but still score below the proficient level. The PSSA score will show failure. The PVAAS numbers, however, will show that the student actually learned more than a full year of reading, so the student, teacher, and school have had a successful year. Likewise, PVAAS may show that a high-achieving student who repeatedly scores at the advanced level is merely coasting and not receiving a full year of growth, an equally serious problem.

Proponents assert that value added analysis:

- identifies which individual students and groups gain *more than* or *less than* a full year of growth based on state standards
- eliminates the influence of race, socio-economic status, and other factors because each student is compared only to himself or herself, not other students

- provides educators with an important diagnostic tool to identify and meet the needs of students and improve instruction
- identifies needed professional development

However, the PVAAS system does have a major inconsistency. The PDE website states: ***“PVAAS is not a tool for teacher accountability.”*** Other value-added systems, like TVAAS in Tennessee, use the data as one measure of teacher performance because *“value-added assessment makes it possible to isolate the impact of the individual teacher and to respond with appropriate rewards or corrective training.”*¹ This is of particular importance because *“students assigned to highly effective teachers for several years running experience much more academic growth than students assigned to a string of particularly ineffective teacher.”*² In fact TVAAS data has shown *“that students unlucky enough to have a succession of poor teachers are virtually doomed to the education cellar.”*¹

Why then would PVAAS not be used for teacher evaluation? Are Pennsylvania teachers against this concept? The National Education Association (NEA) asserts: *“Data should be used to help educators do their work better, not to punish them for low scores.”*³ The NEA is a powerful force in Harrisburg, so teacher accountability is not yet tied to PVAAS. Tennessee and other states are successfully using value-added results to evaluate teachers and provide merit raises or needed remediation. Hopefully, a current pilot in Philadelphia may be able to break this accountability roadblock in Pennsylvania.

Another roadblock for effective accountability involves getting PVAAS results into the hands of parents. Although each school superintendent has access to PVAAS data on individual students and groups to share with teachers, few have released information to parents and the community. As knowledge of the availability of PVAAS results spreads, parent requests may spur administrators to compile reports by grade or subject or school to release to taxpayers, and results on individual students to share with parents.

Although PVAAS has the potential to improve student learning, the following must be recognized:

1. The PSSA is based on state standards that have been questioned by leading national authorities.
2. The PSSA has been a controversial assessment from which parents excuse their children for religious reasons.
3. Test results and learning projections do not always indicate what a student will actually achieve, especially for “late bloomers” or poor test-takers.

However, PVAAS should be recognized as a promising tool for student, teacher, school, and district evaluation.?

Protecting parental rights

A public school board member told her superintendent, “No one in this district is going to care about my child the way that I do.” The superintendent, a loving father and intelligent educator, was taken aback by this statement as if it was something he had never considered before. Sadly, many in our society have lost sight of the special bond that exists between parents and their children. Simply put, parents love their children, and children need their parents. Government in the form of schools or any other entity should never usurp the parents’ authority except in cases of neglect or abuse.

By approving the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹ in 1995, the Clinton administration put this parent-child bond in jeopardy. Under the rules of the U.S. Constitution, all the provisions of this international treaty would be binding on our nation and its people. Although ratification of UNCRC has been blocked since 1995 by a core group of Senators, there is no assurance that newly elected federal officials will successfully continue to oppose this threat to parental rights.

At first glance, many of the UNCRC precepts seem good for children. All children deserve a loving family, healthy development, and protection. However, a closer look reveals statements that should concern parents who value their parental autonomy in regard to their children.

Beginning with Article 3, the UNCRC requires all decisions regarding children – even those by parents – to be based on “the best interests of the child.” While giving lip service to the rights of parents and families, successive Articles make statements that could override YOUR choices in raising YOUR children, such as deciding what they read, who they associate with, what religion they practice, where they attend school, and what kind of discipline to use. Parental rights could become secondary to the “state” – the government of each country- that the UN believes gives, protects, and enforces the rights of children as well as determines just what is and is not in their “best interests.” Parents could be forced to surrender their rights to the government.

According to Geraldine van Bueren, a principal drafter of the UNCRC, *“best interests provides decision and policy makers with the authority to substitute their own decisions for either the child’s or the parent’s.”*²

The United States is under pressure to sign the UNCRC because every other country has ratified the document. For war-torn, third world countries where many children are abandoned and mistreated, the UNCRC may offer revolutionary ideas. However, this document insults Americans whose inalienable rights are already protected by the U.S. Constitution. America does not need and should not ratify the UNCRC. ?

1 Holland, Robert. “Indispensable Tests: How Value-Added Approach to School Testing Could Identify and Bolster Exceptional Teaching.” Lexington Institute. Dec 2001.
2 Olson, Lynn. “‘Value Added’ Models Gain in Popularity.” Edweek. 16 Nov 2004.
3 “Don’t be left behind.” NEAToday. May 2007.

1 For text of the UNCRC, go to www.unicef.org.
2 “The Threat from International Law.” <https://www.parentalrights.org/learn/the-attack-on-parental-rights/international-law>

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