



# Education Advocate

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*A Publication of the Commonwealth Education Organization*

Plan to attend the CEO public forum on proposed high school exit exams on April 24th

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

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## **Education Advocate**

is produced bimonthly by the Commonwealth Education Organization, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization.

Editor: E. Perlman

The Commonwealth Education Organization  
invites you to attend  
a public forum on  
the State Board of Education proposal  
*to institute high-stakes high school graduation exams*

**Thursday, April 24, 2008**

**7 p.m.**

**Mars Area High School**

545 Route 228 - Mars, PA 16046

Education authorities from across the state have been invited to provide facts, information, and opinions on this groundbreaking proposal.

The following groups have been invited to join the panel:

*(listed alphabetically)*

- American Federation of Teachers
- Autism Society of America
- Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education
- Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
- Pennsylvania Department of Education
- Pennsylvania PTA
- Pennsylvania School Board Association
- Pennsylvania State Board of Education
- Pennsylvania State Education Association



*Come to learn more about  
the future of education in Pennsylvania  
and to ask your questions!*

## Beware: High Stakes Exit Exams planned for PA students

*This timely article is reprinted from the last issue of the Education Advocate.*

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 plan<sup>1</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup> grade or re-taken in 12<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> – 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.<sup>3</sup>
2. Exit exams narrow the curriculum as teachers focus mainly on tested subjects.<sup>3</sup>
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.”<sup>4</sup>
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.”<sup>5</sup>
5. A California study concluded: “High stakes tests failed to meet legislative objectives to increase achievement and close the achievement gap.”<sup>6</sup>

### 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*.<sup>7</sup> 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,*”<sup>8</sup> 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](http://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](http://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.

## Comments on high-stakes exit exams

“A closer look at exit exams indicates the following: they reinforce conventional academic curriculum, [but] they do little to enhance standards and may even undermine them; they distort curriculum and instruction; they lead to higher and more inequitable dropouts rates; and they impose substantial costs—especially on districts and schools that can least afford it—without considering alternatives. As a way of reforming the high school...exit exams seem an approach that has so far failed on its own terms.” *Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice*

“This proposal to modify [graduation requirements] is less about what is good for the children of Pennsylvania than it is about who makes the final decision about whether a child graduates. It is about eliminating local control of education, assessment, and graduation of our students and replacing that local control with a high-stakes assessment system controlled from Harrisburg.” *PSEA*

The proposal “puts too much emphasis on one set of exams, undermines teacher judgment and local school district autonomy. It will force teachers to spend more time on test preparation but will not improve graduation rates or success in college and other post-secondary programs.” *AFT*

“Pennsylvania PTA believes that valid assessment does not consist of only a single test score, and that at no time should a single test be considered the sole determinant of a student’s academic or work future.” *PTA*

“States that have implemented high-stakes graduation exams, without alternative performance measures or options, have universally experienced a decrease in graduation rates, particularly among African American and Latino students.” *The School Redesign Network of Stanford University*

“Teachers, administrators, and students report that high-stakes graduation exams lead to less depth in the curriculum, a decrease in teaching higher-level skills, and a decrease in flexibility in the core curriculum (often through the loss of electives). *Center on Education Policy*

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*A Pennsylvania Department of Education press release contends that too many students receive "empty" diplomas from local school districts.*

*(January 17, 2008)*

*Therefore, the Pennsylvania Board of Education wants to establish a system of high-stakes exit exams for high school graduation.*

Is this a good plan for Pennsylvania students?

Do educators support this plan?

What are the unintended consequences of exit exams?

Is there a better plan?

*To find out more, plan to attend CEO's public forum on April 24th.*