

Testimony Regarding Keystone Exams

to the

Senate Education Committee

Senator Mike Folmer, Chairman

August 26, 2013

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Senator Folmer and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you today regarding the Keystone Exam Program. My name is Mark DiRocco, and I am the Superintendent of the Lewisburg Area School District in Central Pennsylvania. I have been and continue to be in support of the Keystone Exam Program since the idea was first presented several years ago. I believe the former eleventh grade PSSA Test was an inadequate assessment system at best and did not reflect the true academic performance of most high school students, especially in mathematics. Most of our eleventh grade students study Trigonometry, Pre-Calculus, Calculus, or AP Statistics as their math class. These students were two to three years removed from their Algebra and Geometry Courses, which was the primary content of the Eleventh Grade PSSA Math Exam. Consequently, our high school math teachers had to interrupt instruction of more advanced math courses to review information that was two or three years old to help prepare our students for the PSSA. Quite frankly, that system was irrational and was never properly aligned to what we were teaching to most of our eleventh grade students.

High school students had little motivation to perform well on the PSSA exams, as they had no impact on their post-secondary schooling or career opportunities. While I don't believe that the Keystone Exams should have excessive influence on high school graduation, it is important for our students to understand that there is a benchmark for learning that must be met to qualify for a high school diploma. Many, if not most students will have to face some type of testing for licensing or credentialing at some point in their future careers. I believe it is appropriate for students to understand that standards must be met in order to accomplish a level of competency. The Keystone Exams can accomplish this without being a "high stakes" exam.

The Keystone Exams are a much more rational and student-centered approach in the design of an accountability system. The premise that academic standards for a more defined content area is now being assessed at the conclusion of a specific course makes inherent sense. Students have multiple opportunities to take the exam and school personnel will have timely data to help accelerate the learning of students that do not score proficient. Ultimately, if some students are unable to score at the proficient level on a Keystone Exam, the local district can develop a project to allow students to show they are proficient in the standards. This fail-safe system will allow the vast majority of students to graduate on time as they would in a normal matriculation process. This is a much better approach to assessment and accountability at the high school level. The Keystone Exams also place a motivator on the students as the exam will count toward their final grade and must be mastered as a graduation requirement. The PSSA had no impact on a student's academic record and motivation to complete the exam was modest at best.

Although I continue to be a proponent of the Keystone Exams and believe that we should move forward to fully implement the system, I would like to present the committee with a few concerns and some suggestions for consideration. The 33% weighting of Keystone Exams toward a student's final course grade is causing much consternation across the Commonwealth and is seen by many as an infringement upon local control of school districts. I would suggest a weighting factor of 20% as this would still make the exam personally meaningful to the student, but not overshadow the classroom assessments earned throughout the year. This has been a weighting factor our high school has used for years in regard to final exams and it seems more reasonable.

The implementation of the Keystone Exams was unfortunate to say the least. Due to budget constraints, the Department of Education did not have the resources necessary to continue administering the Eleventh Grade PSSA for federal AYP purposes while they implemented the Keystone Exams this past spring. Consequently, the Algebra I, Biology, and English Exams were administered to all eleventh grade students during the winter and spring of 2013. The keystones were not designed for this purpose and the Department's decision caused tremendous frustration among school district personnel, students, and parents. I found this development to be particularly disappointing, as I had publicly supported the Keystone Exam Program on several occasions. Now that the Department has received the waiver from the USDOE, I am hoping that the keystones will only be administered as they were intended, as end-of-course exams.

I must admit that the Keystone Exams have been a heavier lift than we anticipated and although Lewisburg is one of the highest performing districts in the state, our students did not perform as well as we had expected. We realize that we must add more rigor to our courses to properly prepare our students for the Keystone Exams and the new standards. However, we are somewhat concerned with the Algebra I and Biology Keystone Exams. It appears as though the Algebra I Exam is based on what typically has been considered the second half of Algebra I and the first half of

Algebra II. Every student in our district that completed Algebra II in our middle school last year scored proficient or advanced on the Algebra I Keystone, while nearly every student that only completed Algebra I at the middle school did not score proficient. Also, the Biology Keystone Exam seemed to go well beyond the content of a normal tenth grade biology course and included items that we would typically see in Honors Biology or AP Biology. I recommend that the Department of Education review the Algebra I and Biology Exams to ensure they are properly aligned to the standards. I am not suggesting that we “dumb down” the exams. However, the tests should reflect what they are intended to measure. The Keystones need to be properly aligned to the standards if they are to be a true reflection of academic achievement. Currently, the question of alignment is causing distrust of the state’s accountability system in many schools across the Commonwealth.

We have a tremendous window of opportunity to build an accountability system that holds schools accountable for student learning, is fair and reasonable for students, and is meaningful to parents, students, school professionals, and the public. I strongly encourage the Legislature and the Department of Education to push forward with the development and implementation of the Keystone Exam Program. Let’s make adjustments and refinements as necessary to ensure the exams are properly aligned, valid, and reliable so we can all move forward with the confidence that our students and schools are being properly assessed.

Sincerely,



Mark D. DiRocco, Ph.D.