

**PENNSYLVANIA PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHILDREN  
JOAN BENSO TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
ON KEYSTONE EXAMS  
AUGUST 26, 2013**

Good morning Chairman Folmer, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC), a statewide, non-partisan, independent child advocacy organization committed to improving the education, health and well-being of children in the commonwealth. PPC's vision is to make Pennsylvania one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the final proposed Chapter 4 regulations and specifically, the Keystone Exams. PPC has been working on revising the commonwealth's high school graduation requirements since 2005 when we began to advocate for a sensible assessment system to ensure students have achieved the state's academic standards when they graduate.

Eight years later, PPC remains concerned about how well Pennsylvania is preparing students to move on to postsecondary education, (whether that is a 2- or 4-year degree program, an industry credential or technical certification), the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce or the military. For too long, Pennsylvania has been graduating tens of thousands of students each year who received their diplomas despite failing to demonstrate proficiency in reading and math. More than 34 percent of students who graduated in 2012, or about 44,000 kids, did not score proficient or advanced on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSAs or the 12<sup>th</sup> grade retake. These students come from all types of schools throughout the state – not just our most distressed schools. In fact, in 2012, there were 428 school districts and 74 charter schools and career and technical centers that graduated at least 20 percent more students than scored proficient or advanced on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSAs.

How can this be happening, given the state requires students to demonstrate proficiency of the academic standards to graduate? It happens because most students graduate based on locally aligned assessments, which can have 500 different meanings among our 500 school districts. The PA Department of Education commissioned a study by the Penn State University's College of Education to examine this question. The results were released in 2009 and, of the 418 reporting districts, only 18 had locally aligned assessments that were an accurate measurement of both math and reading proficiency.

In other words, we are sending our young people into the world lacking the educational foundation to succeed in postsecondary education, the military and the workforce without the need for costly and time consuming remediation. During that same time frame, Pennsylvania's state-owned universities and community colleges reported to PDE that 1 in 3 recent high school graduates, or 20,000 students a year, could not pass a first-year college math or English course and were required to take one or more remedial classes. These remedial courses cost students, their parents and taxpayers more than \$26 million every year – making the affordability of college that much further out of reach for students. Policymakers and education officials must explain to families who are personally bearing the high costs of remediation in postsecondary institutions why they need to pay college tuition for coursework their children should have learned in high school.

To address this situation and ensure that Pennsylvania's high school graduates are postsecondary and workforce ready, the commonwealth adopted regulations in 2009, which PPC supported.

These regulations require students in the classes of 2015 and 2016 to demonstrate proficiency in algebra I, biology, literature and English composition by taking a final Keystone Exam at the end of each course, which counts for one-third of the students' final course grade. For the classes of 2017 and beyond, requirements are expanded to include an additional math Keystone Exam (algebra II or geometry) and one social studies Keystone Exam (civics and government, U.S. history or world history). These regulations are currently in place and the proposed changes to Chapter 4 are designed to address some of the concerns raised about them.

The proposed changes address the concern over the high cost of implementing 10 Keystone Exams in the proposed timeline – especially as the state continues to push its way out the economic recession. That, coupled with a realization among educators and PDE that there were real challenges in operationalizing the one-third of the grade provision (different grading systems in districts, impacts on class rankings to name a few), has resulted in the State Board of Education proposing revisions to these graduation requirements to address these issues.

These proposed revisions to Chapter 4 would:

- Reduce the number of Keystone Exams from 10 to five (literature, algebra I, biology, English composition and civics/government). The regulations stipulate that English composition and civics/government will be developed when funds are available.
- Extend the timeline for the Keystone Exams being a graduation requirement to 2017 for literature, algebra I and biology; adding English composition in 2019; and civics/government in 2020.
- Simplify the process by eliminating the one-third of the grade provision and requiring students to demonstrate proficiency of the state academic standards by scoring proficient or advanced on the Keystone Exams. The revised regulations continue to require schools to provide supplemental instruction to students who do not pass, but the revisions now also hold the students accountable by requiring that they participate in the supplemental instruction before re-taking the Keystone Exam or moving to the project-based assessment.
- The revisions to Chapter 4 also maintain important safeguards for students with disabilities and English-language learners. Special education students who satisfactorily complete their special education program as outlined in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can graduate and appropriate accommodations are provided to English-language learners.

There are many strong advantages to the Keystone Exams, which students take immediately following the course, over a comprehensive assessment (such as the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA) as a tool to gauge student readiness:

- Keystone Exams assess more focused and in-depth content than the PSSAs did.
- Because Keystone Exams are given at or near the end of a course, the content is fresher and more relevant to the students, enabling educators to get a better sense of what a student really knows. While we appreciate this was not the case during this past year as we replaced PSSAs, it will be in the years ahead.
- Keystone Exams are administered closer to the point of instruction so teachers can quickly identify content areas where students are struggling and adjust teaching strategies to provide more focused help to students.

- Students who fail to score proficient on the Keystone Exams have an opportunity to receive supplemental instruction and re-take the Keystone or a part of the Keystone Exam (often referred to as modules). If they are still unsuccessful, students may then move to a project-based assessment to demonstrate proficiency.
- Because the exams are required for graduation, students are more likely to take the Keystone Exams seriously and try to do their best. Educators have long raised concerns that some students don't give their best effort on the PSSAs because the students often felt they had no stake in the outcomes of the exam.

Keystone Exams are also a critical component of Pennsylvania's new teacher evaluation system. The Keystone Exams, along with the PSSAs in grades 3 through 8, are used in evaluating multiple measures of student performance in the new system to evaluation teachers. Keystone Exams will be one of a number of data components used to create the PDE School Performance Profiles which represents the "Building Level Data" component of teacher evaluations (counting for 15 percent of a teacher's overall evaluation). Keystone Exams also will be used to calculate student growth data in PVAAS, which, once a three-year rolling average has been established, will be used to calculate the "Teacher Specific Data" component of the evaluations (also counting for 15 percent). Without Keystone Exams, the new teacher evaluation system, which is being implemented this school year, is in serious jeopardy.

Keystone Exams also are aligned to the PA Core Standards in English and mathematics, which are part of the proposed Chapter 4 regulations. The PA Core Standards were created by Pennsylvania teachers and are based on the national Common Core State Standards, which the State Board of Education adopted in 2010. School districts across the commonwealth have been working since 2010 to realign their curriculum and materials to meet these new, more rigorous standards and the aligned Keystone Exams. Without these standards and the Keystone Exams, all this work and expense will be lost and we are likely to find ourselves back in the same situation we were in when Penn State conducted its survey. Districts are very well intentioned and do their best, but at times, the state needs to take responsibility to advance requirements that ensure every Pennsylvania child who graduates from high school is well-prepared for whatever pathway they choose to explore after graduation. Keystone Exams fulfills that state responsibility.

Opponents of Keystone Exams have characterized them as additional tests for already over-tested students and have expressed concerns that educators will merely "teach to the test," making daily classroom instruction nothing more than test prep. Nothing could be further from the truth. The literature, algebra I and biology Keystone Exams already have replaced the comprehensive 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSAs and may be used as the course final exam, so it is not more tests, but better tests. As far as teachers "teaching to the test," we know that a quality education requires the adoption of rigorous statewide academic standards (such as the PA Core Standards) that define what students should know to graduate college and career ready; locally determined or created curriculum; aligned instruction; and assessments that determine whether each student has achieved those standards. If all of those components are aligned, as they are in Pennsylvania, "teaching to the test" isn't a concern.

It has been suggested that the Chapter 4 regulations should be delayed until adequate and equitable financial resources are provided to all schools and that holding students in school districts lacking adequate resources to the same high standards as students in well-resourced districts is creating a sense of false hope for students. I would respectfully contend that what would be truly unfair to any student, regardless of what

school district he or she attends, is to not expect that student to meet rigorous standards, to not be provided supplemental instruction and to not assess the student's progress in a meaningful way. PPC strongly supports additional funding for public education and the adoption of a funding formula that distributes basic education funding in an adequate and equitable manner, but if we wait until every school district is adequately funded to make important educational reforms to increase student achievement, we will be failing our young people by graduating thousands and thousands of students who are not prepared for productive adulthood.

PPC strongly supports the proposed revisions to Chapter 4. These changes save state dollars by reducing the number of Keystone Exams from 10 to five, and they simplify the process by eliminating the issues associated with implementing the "one-third of the grade" provision. In addition, they extend the timeline to implement keystones as a graduation requirement, giving educators and students more time to prepare. The regulations also provide students a number of pathways to demonstrate achievement of the state standards and graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary education or 21<sup>st</sup> century occupations:

- Students can demonstrate proficiency by scoring proficient or advanced on the Keystone Exams.
- School districts may use Advance Placement exams, International Baccalaureate exams, or independently-validated local assessment in lieu of the Keystone Exams.
- If students do not score proficient on a Keystone Exam, they can participate in supplemental instruction and re-take the Keystone or a module of the Keystone Exam. Students may re-take the Keystone Exams as many times as necessary.
- If, after taking supplemental instruction and re-taking the Keystone Exam, a student has still not demonstrated proficiency, the student may participate in a project-based assessment. Project-based assessments are administered by the school district and scored by a statewide review panel.
- If a student experiences extenuating circumstances (such as a serious illness, death in immediate family, family emergency, transferred from an out-of-state school in 12<sup>th</sup> grade) the Secretary of Education may grant a waiver. For a waiver to be considered, the student must have met all graduation requirements except for demonstrating proficiency of the standard. The chief school administrator must request the waiver by submitting a written request to the secretary outlining the justification for the waiver.

Because there are so many pathways and supports available to students to ensure they graduate from high school college- and career-ready, it's critically important that the waiver must be used very judiciously and only in special, extenuating circumstances. To ensure the waiver does not become a "back door" to graduate students who are not prepared, as was evidenced by the Penn State study, the authority to grant waivers must remain solely with the Secretary of Education. It is important that we deliver on the commitment we made to students, parents, employers and taxpayers to ensure all of our students, regardless of what district they attend, graduate from high school postsecondary and workforce ready with the educational foundation to be productive and successful adults and citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to take any questions you may have.