

Richard Gusick

Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Staff Development, and Planning

August 26, 2013

My name is Richard Gusick, and I am the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Staff Development, and Planning for the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District. Thank you, Dr. Waters, and thank you as well to the members of the Committee for holding this hearing today. The Tredyffrin/Easttown School District has held a long-standing opposition to tying Keystone Exams to graduation requirements. This is because the District believes that such a requirement will have a negative impact on the students of T/E and on the students across Pennsylvania. Additionally, the requirement will have a direct negative economic impact on the District and the state, which will indirectly harm students.

When the idea for graduation tests first emerged, T/E conducted an informal study focusing on students who at the time were not proficient on the 11th grade PSSA. We learned that many of these students were

accepted to and graduated from quality universities such as Rutgers, USC, Temple, West Chester, and Penn State. Most of these students did not require remediation in college. If passing the PSSA had been a graduation requirement, these students would have been in jeopardy of graduating from high school or from being admitted to these selective universities. At the time, advocates of graduation competency assessments presented a study that revealed that 50% of students who were not proficient on the PSSA needed remediation in college. If this is true, the study also reveals that 50% of these students did not require remediation. This is because some students, particularly those with test anxiety or learning differences demonstrate understanding through less traditional means other than high-stakes testing. No one in this room knows how many students are indeed proficient from a knowledge standpoint but do not demonstrate this proficiency on high-stakes tests, even after multiple attempts. Across the state, the number may be in the tens of thousands or even higher. Early results of Keystone Exams suggest that the new tests are even harder than the former 11th grade PSSA. This may further jeopardize diplomas for even more students.

While it is important to ensure that high school students can demonstrate proficiency in core content areas, efforts to achieve this outcome cannot be designed in a way that hinders or harms students who are in fact proficient.

Non-proficient students must receive remedial instruction and cannot qualify for a project-based assessment until after two failed attempts at the Keystone Exams. For these students, opportunities to take electives in the arts, world languages, or even higher level math and science classes become more limited. In the end, some students will have experienced these limits unnecessarily due to the format of the high-stakes tests.

Advocates of Keystone Exams often cite economic benefits of graduation tests. We argue that high-stakes tests will have a negative impact on local districts and the state as a whole. As some students fail to pass the Keystone Exams, the dropout rate is almost certain to increase. How can a higher dropout rate improve Pennsylvania economically? The costs of a high dropout rate are well-known and

contribute to less employability, higher crime rates, and a greater need for public assistance. The impact is felt at a local level as well. Every time the dropout rate increases in a district, the values of all the local properties fall.

Industry leaders have suggested that Keystone Exams will lead to a better prepared workforce. We have talked to employers, and the skills they cite as important include a strong work ethic, the ability to work in teams and to lead them, critical and creative thinking, and technical skills. Many national studies confirm these employer needs. While Keystone Exams do measure understanding of certain skills in the content areas, they do not measure any of these important skills employers have identified as essential. In fact, as long as Keystone Exams remain a graduation requirement, schools will be less likely to teach these workplace-ready skills as they adjust instruction to teach to the tests, and the students will lose as a result.

The costs of administration of Keystone Exams, project-based assessments, and supplemental instruction run into millions and millions

of dollars. Never before has the state been as challenged to provide local districts with the funds they need to maintain programs. These millions of dollars could be repurposed to assist schools that need the funds the most while enabling schools with a proven record of accomplishment to continue doing what they do well. Local districts continue to bear the costs of purchasing textbooks and other resources, realigning curricula, and providing staffing for supplemental instruction. Limited in the ability to raise revenues in an Act 1 environment, Districts will have no choice but to cut other successful programs, many of which do provide students with marketable skills, to pay for these measures that will enable students to graduate. Many Senators have championed the cause of mandate relief. Imposing Keystone Exams as graduation requirements may amount to the single largest unfunded education mandate on local districts and taxpayers in recent history.

We ask that you support two modifications to Chapter 4. First, eliminate the connection between Keystone Exams and graduation requirements.

We understand that Keystone Exams will still be administered to satisfy

federal testing requirements. Under federal law the tests will still be reported publicly and used for accountability purposes. But there is no federal requirement that ties Keystone Exams results to a high school diploma. This was a direction that Pennsylvania chose and may still choose to reverse. Second, Chapter 4 also calls for the addition of two more Keystone Exams as graduation requirements in the years to come – one in English Composition and one in Civics and Government. The addition of these two tests will exacerbate the aforementioned concerns. The state and most districts have not yet begun to incur the high economic costs of administering these additional tests, which include aligning curricula, purchasing textbooks and providing supplemental instruction for students who do not pass. Please reverse this path to enable the funds to be spent on programs that will actually benefit students.

The stakes of your decision are high for Pennsylvania students. If we do not change course, the dropout rate will increase, opportunities for students will be limited, and the economy of the state and local districts

will be threatened. Please remove the graduation requirement. Please cancel the additional Keystone Exams. Thank you for your consideration.