

RTSD Testimony – PA Senate Education Committee
August 26, 2013

Good morning Chairman Folmer, Chairman Dinniman, esteemed members of the Senate Education Committee and members of the State Board of Education. Good morning also to fellow school board members and school administrators who join me here this morning to submit testimony related to revisions of the Chapter 4 regulations for academic standards and assessment. My testimony today reflects the unanimous view of the Radnor School Board.

My name is Charles E. Madden, III. For the past 18 years, I have served as a Director on the Radnor Township School Board. In addition, I am a special education teacher with the Delaware County Intermediate Unit, at the Marple Education Center. I am also a life-long resident of Radnor Township and graduate of Radnor High School.

Joining me this morning is Kevin Kane, Administrative Liaison to Government Relations Committee/Director of Student Services and Special Education at Radnor, who will aid in answering any questions the Committee may have.

Radnor Township School District has always been, and continues to be, a high-achieving district serving a community that expects excellence and adherence to the highest standards of education for our students. Families move to our community so that their children can attend Radnor schools. Earning a “Radnor” diploma means something, to those who earn it, to the colleges and employers who seek Radnor students, and to all community members who, whether they have kids in the schools or not, contribute to that education.

The Radnor community expects graduates to be college and career ready and our graduation standards far exceed those mandated by the state. In addition to four years of English, most Radnor graduates also have four years of math, science, and social studies. Many Radnor graduates take three or four years of a foreign language as well. The culture of high expectations in our community combined with the skill and dedication of our staff prepares virtually all of our students for college and careers. In fact, 95% of our graduates attend advanced schooling. To us, "local control" means retaining the ability to choose curriculum, instruction, and assessment tools that benefit our students and meet our community's high standards.

In May 2009, the Radnor Township School Board first recognized the negative impact Keystone tests would have on our district and students and passed a unanimous resolution discouraging the State Board of Education from implementing the Keystone Exam assessment system. In the past four years, the composition of our board has changed, but the premise of that May 2009 resolution continues to be supported by the current board and serves as the foundation for the testimony I share with you today. A copy of that May 2009 resolution is included along with our testimony.

We recognize that the federal No Child Left Behind legislation created the need for statewide standardized assessments and that the Algebra, Biology and Literature Keystone exams

are a response to continued federal accountability demands; however, for schools like Radnor's, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), including the Keystone Exams, does more to interfere with our mission than to help. The accountability systems that coordinate with these assessments - TIMS, PIMS, School Performance Profile, Teacher and Administrator Evaluations, and the promise of additional Keystone exams - provide little return on investment and consume state and district resources. In addition to the expense associated with creating and maintaining these accountability systems, Radnor is especially concerned about lost instructional time and professional development days. The drive for accountability has created a maze of unfunded mandates.

In order to address student achievement, we use other measures that give us more timely and actionable results. For example, Radnor High School administers the annual PSAT, a nationally recognized standardized test with a 54 year history, to all students in grades 9-11. Requiring only two hours of testing time, the PSAT promptly provides detailed score reports, allowing six months for our staff to adjust their instruction based on specific student data. Timely, explicit results enable district data teams to analyze trends in student achievement and to make mid-course adjustments to curricular and instructional emphasis. As school directors, we want to provide assessments that our staff can use to help our students achieve.

By way of contrast, this year's PSSA and Keystone administration consumed weeks of instructional time across multiple grades, and the Keystone Exams subjected students to standardized testing stresses they have never before encountered. Students were tested on subjects they last studied three to four years ago, necessitating cursory refresher lessons that supplanted three to four weeks of intended instruction in their current courses. Additionally, the Department of Education's last minute decision to tie the Keystone results of 11th graders to AYP forced schools to design and implement costly remediation courses and interventions. The upheaval this caused for students and teachers during the 2012- 2013 school year will continue in 2013-2014.

The results of the Keystones, which only just arrived a few short weeks ago confirmed what we already knew; the overwhelming majority of our student body exceeds Pennsylvania's standards. Except now, we are faced with the predicament of how to address the needs of students who have passed our courses in Algebra, Biology, or Literature yet failed to pass the Keystone Exam. Students will be unable to advance academically, despite having demonstrated their proficiency based on multiple measures, and will instead be faced with remedial work targeted solely for success on one assessment.

The financial impact of the Keystone exams is significant. Besides time lost to test preparation and administration, we incur the expense of creating remedial opportunities for students, which includes added staff time and associated materials. We especially regret the incalculable loss to our students who have been and will be prevented from pursuing areas of greatest interest through electives.

Just as the state has used test results to label schools as successful or failing, the Keystone graduation requirement insists that districts take the same approach with our students. The reality of the testing regime for special needs students is particularly troubling. In Radnor, we

intend to help all students achieve in all areas, and we reject labeling any student as a failure based on one Keystone exam score. The graduation requirement of passing three Keystone exams overreaches by forcing us to use our diplomas and transcripts to label as failures students who may have already passed a course in one or more of these subjects because they are not able to pass a Keystone Exam.

There is no benefit to students or teachers when instructional days are lost reviewing for these tests. There is no benefit to students when they are subjected to the additional burden of another high-stakes test where the results could mean the difference between earning a diploma. There is no benefit to the taxpayers when the costs of administering these tests far exceed any value to our district.

It is the belief of the Radnor Township School Board that the negative aspects of the Keystone Exam assessment system far outweigh any positives. These exams usurp the authority of local school districts to grant diplomas and determine whether our students are college and work ready; to determine whether they have met the rigorous standards set by our Board and our community; and to determine whether we have successfully accomplished our mission.

We know these tests are unnecessary because our students are already successful as indicated by every meaningful, objective measure.

- 99% of our 2012 students graduated – 95% went on to pursue higher education.
- The average SAT score was 1730 out of 2400; our average ACT score was 25, putting our average student in the top 20% nationally.
- Of the 514 AP exams taken by Radnor students in 2012, the average score was 4.1 out of 5.0.

None of these achievements can be attributed to the implementation of the Keystone Exams. The Class of 2012 did not have to submit to the Keystones to prove they were worthy of our diploma. These students had the opportunity to spend valuable classroom time exploring their passions and our teachers had the time to nurture those passions. Keystones, like the PSSAs, are of little value to our students as they do nothing to improve the instruction in our schools, nor do they better prepare our students for college.

Pennsylvania's standardized tests are relevant in Pennsylvania only. By contrast, colleges across the country universally accept the SATs and ACTs as proof of college-readiness. Our schools use the PSATs to help determine which students are ready for the challenges of advanced placement courses. These are the tests that are meaningful to our students. These are the tests, along with curriculum-based assessments, that best meet the needs of Radnor's students. The rigorous nature of these tests should more than satisfy the assessment requirements of both the federal and state mandates without adding undue stress to our students or unnecessary costs to the taxpayers.

In closing, we would like to ask that state resources would be best allocated supporting districts as they seek to implement the rigorous standards of the PA Common Core Standards as opposed to spending funds on the creation of new standardized tests. The state has already identified best practices related to local proficiency assessments, and these are more than

adequate measures to meet the federal requirement. The addition of the Keystone assessments has a measurable cost with no real benefit to students.

We respectfully ask that you consider our request to revise Chapter 4 to remove the Keystone Exam requirement in full and allow schools to choose their own method of assessment. In addition, we would ask that you work with the U.S. Department of Education to identify a list of nationally-normed assessments such as the PSAT, SAT, ACT, and SAT 2, etc. that districts could choose to utilize in lieu of state assessments. In addition, we want this committee to know that through our Government Relations Committee, we will continue to advocate for change at the federal level as well because the current system of assessments does not serve our students, our staff, or our community.

On behalf of the Radnor Township School of Board Directors, I would like to thank Tredyffrin Easttown School District for hosting this hearing as well as the Senate Education Committee for allowing us to provide testimony today. We appreciate your consideration. The time for listening is over it is now time for action.