

**Testimony of Joseph J. O'Brien,  
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**Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee Hearing  
Keystone Examinations  
August 26, 2013**

Senator Folmer, Senator Dinniman and other distinguished members of the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to address you today on behalf of the Superintendents and Curriculum Directors of Chester County and our respective school districts.

The comments I'm offering today are drawn from analysis and review of the proposed Keystone Examinations by many dedicated educational leaders from our region – a region which boasts some of the finest public school districts in the world – as demonstrated annually by any assessment tool you may choose to use. I would like to offer you a Common Sense critique of the proposed Keystone examinations:

I would offer the following points for you to consider:

1. The Keystone Examinations **require too many resources and take too much time** to implement – in an environment when public school districts' are having their budgets severely cut, and students are seeing more and more standardized tests gnawing away at their educational programs.

2. The Results of the Keystone Examinations are largely pre-determined and amply demonstrated by the other assessments already in place. I will confidently predict now that the more affluent school districts of Chester County will do substantially better than our poorer school districts. I know this; you should know this; and the Pennsylvania Department of Education knows this fact. Thus, **we will spend a large amount of money we do not have to prove something we already know. This is simply not a wise use of our limited resources.**

- ***The monies required for three Keystone exams could be better used to help school districts who have already demonstrated their sore educational needs in our previous standardized testing programs.***
- ***The instructional learning time lost each year for testing – which one of my colleagues will graphically show you today – will more than double – taking up far too much teaching and learning time...***

3. Our ***Pennsylvania Department of Education does not have the capacity to do this work.*** After years of budgetary cuts and positions being eliminated, the good people at Pennsylvania Department of Education cannot properly manage this system. I know we have good people there – and, as an Intermediate Unit leader, I do everything I can to assist the PDE staff, but the implementation pushes a limited team beyond any reasonable limits. Then my fellow Superintendents get angry and upset at the mis-direction and confusion that results – when this outcome is also very logical.

4. ***Keystone Examinations are yet another unfunded mandate*** being passed onto local school districts and local taxpayers. The costs of the tests will become a permanent expense for local school districts – with a resulting decrease in spending on education.

- If the ***Keystone Exams become linked to graduation requirements, then the costs will multiply greatly*** – as students and parents will demand – and Pennsylvania Department of Education will require remediation, re-testing, supplemental instruction, and even alternative assessments to assist students.
- This ***graduation requirement linkage will return us to the days of PSSA Seals on diplomas*** – when strong local reaction forced a change back to local control. Why must we do that again? Let's learn from our past mistakes – and not replicate them with keystones....

5. As we **constantly test, retest and practice taking tests** (because of the importance of the tests), there will be significantly less time for other important subjects and electives. This time for **testing will effectively narrow our curriculum, and focus time on the tested subjects** of Algebra, English Literature, and Biology – and prevent many students from experiencing the rich and varied curricula that many of our Chester County school districts already have in place. For many of our school districts, these tests will hurt our students educationally.

6. On this topic, **do we really believe that strong performance on only three tests (English Literature; Algebra; and Biology) will demonstrate quality education to any college or employer?** What about higher level math and science courses? This idea began with ten Keystone examinations – and it is now watered down to three tests, for economic and other valid reasons. However, these tests will not show any great level of student performance to anyone. To begin this process will **lead us to either add more Keystone exams or to seek a simpler system with more advanced assessments. In all honesty, the PSSA tests measured a broader curricular area, and Keystone Exams are a step backwards...**

7. **Some good assessments already exist. Other states have them. If we really wanted content area exams we would not have to look any further than the AP Exams that exist in every subject area.** These AP exams, in **combination with the PSAT and SAT (or ACT)** already exist, and they are normed and proven. They would serve as an appropriate performance protocol and provide assessment data. Using these assessments would cost less than the large amount of money now being given to the testing companies.

8. Our legislators, parents, taxpayers, and our Pennsylvania Department of Education ***all want schools and educators to be accountable for the performance of Pennsylvania's children.*** As an educational leader, I welcome accountability – but we need a coherent and logical system that is well articulated, well thought out, and well implemented. Unfortunately, Keystone exams will not give us anything like that. We will spend a lot of time and money to prove what we already know – ***One size assessments do not fit all students or all school districts. When quality school districts (like many I represent) consistently demonstrate high student achievement on recognized criteria, please allow them to have a waiver from this testing frenzy – for it only hurts our students,*** and holds them back from further studies and a richer curriculum.

9. Such a ***differentiated system would allow quality school districts the autonomy*** they need and deserve; it would provide meaningful ***educational targets for school districts struggling to improve their performance*** to move into the top tier school districts, and it would ***allow the state and Pennsylvania Department of Education to better focus their limited resources*** on schools in need of improvement.

10. Being realistic, I do understand the ***need to have a test in place for reporting purposes*** – the remnants of NCLB and AYP – and ***we may even have to use these Keystone Exams – because we do not have anything else.*** However, these steps should be seen as a temporary, stop gap measure to grant us time to develop a simpler and deeper assessment system that does not hurt our public schools or students any more.

***In Summary, Keystone Exams are an unfunded mandate that will take money we do not have, use time we cannot spare, and show us what we already know. They will assess nothing meaningful – and will be replaced in a few years – hopefully with something much better.***

Final Points: So here are my Common Sense Recommendations for the Committee to consider:

- A. Adopt the Standards we have been working on for the past several years.
- B. If we have to, keep Keystone Exams for reporting purposes only – or to meet our waiver requirements.
- C. Do not add any more Keystone Exams.
- D. Do not link the Keystone Exam results to student graduation or to high school diplomas in any manner.
- E. Give Pennsylvania educational leaders and our students some strong, consistent leadership at our Pennsylvania Department of Education.
- F. Properly fund and staff our Pennsylvania Department of Education – only then can you realistically charge PDE to develop a better testing/assessment program.
- G. Do not advance any assessment/testing program without appropriate state funding. If the state is not interested in funding it – then let it be a local control issue for our local school districts to resolve. ***Mandate relief begins with you...***

I thank you for allowing me to testify, and I wish all of us good luck as we proceed.

***Respectfully submitted,***

***Joseph J. O'Brien Ed.D.  
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