

June 2, 2017

Testimony by Dr. Jim Scanlon, Superintendent, West Chester Area School District.

Chairperson Eichelberger and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for taking time to hear from practitioners about the impact of the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement in the state of Pennsylvania.

My name is Jim Scanlon and I am in my eighth year as superintendent of the West Chester Area School District, a district of about 11,600 students. I have been a superintendent for 18 years, I attended public schools in Pennsylvania and most of my educational career has been spent working in public schools in Pennsylvania.

I have seen new initiatives take place each time a new governor is elected.

I have watched mandate after mandate come down from the PA Department of Education, PA Board of Education, or our state and federal legislators.

Schools have had to adjust to these new rules on annual basis.

There are so many aspects to educating children today – aside from the basics of teaching and what happens in the classroom. Schools must grapple with funding and politics. They have to deal with the social development of our children in an age where social media has changed everything. We must continually analyze our use of technology – for educational purposes and for communicating. We have to do our very best to educate the increasing number of special needs children in our districts. We have to provide adequate professional development for our staff. We have to fulfill our contractual obligations with unions. We also have to deal with our aging facilities. And, we have to answer to our taxpayers who fund it all.

And then, there's assessment. We are asking our students to do something that's entirely unfair: To spend weeks and weeks taking standardized tests and having their entire educational ambition directed toward passing them. This is not what public education was intended to do, nor should do.

I understand that the intent is accountability, but this is just not a good way to measure student progress. Educators around the nation are starting to speak out – and more and more states are re-examining the way they do this.

I believe in accountability. I believe in very high standards for our students. I do believe that tests can be a good thing. But not the way we are being forced, by the state and federal government, to give them.

We officially began the PSSA testing window on April 10 and we ended on May 26 when we finished with the high school Keystone Exams, a new graduation requirement. That's a month and a half out of our 9 and a half month school year! There is very little learning that takes place in this time, but there is a tremendous amount of anguish. And this year was the worse than last, which was worse than the year before, and that was worse than 2013 when I provided my first testimony about the impact of testing on

our students. Other than a two-year delay on implementing the Keystone graduation requirements, nothing has changed. It is killing our public education system.

Now, beginning with the class of 2019, even a straight 'A' student who doesn't do well on Keystones won't receive a diploma, under state law.

This past school year approximately 93% of our students passed the Algebra and English Literature exams and about 82% passed biology. This is much higher than the state average. But many of our students are taking the Keystone exams for a second and third time, and we are scheduling those who did not pass into remedial courses in the fall to help them pass, which means they will have to pull out of an elective in which they have already registered. Many of these students will be applying to college, and I know that some will be accepted by January of their senior year but if they don't pass all three Keystone Exams, or an online Project Based Assessment, they will have their acceptance letters rescinded. It will happen.

Every superintendent in the Commonwealth can provide you with an example of a student who was accepted to major university but didn't pass one of the Keystone Exams with each of the past two graduating classes. We had one student pass the AP Biology exam with the highest score of 5, and be accepted to Johns Hopkins University. But he did not pass the Biology Keystone exam. If that had happened with Keystones as a graduation requirement, he would not have been able to attend the university to which he'd already been accepted. We had another student fail the Algebra and Biology Keystone Exam but received a scholarship to a culinary arts school because of the program he attended at the Technical School. If that student was a junior today, he would be removed from his electives, the technical school, and be placed in remedial courses in order to pass the Keystone Exams or a Project Based Assessment. Because he would miss out on the technical school courses, he most likely wouldn't get involved as successfully with culinary arts and wouldn't be eligible for a college scholarship. Decisions about assessments have a huge impact on the future of many students!

Keystones exams as a graduation requirement are a bad idea for the following reasons and must be removed as a graduation requirement:

1. They are an unfair assessment of a student's academic progress. A single test should not determine whether a student graduates. Students spend 13 years of their lives in school, and one test given on one or two days isn't representative of their learning.
2. There are concerns about how well the test aligns with curriculum. For example, from 2013 to 2016 fewer than 60 percent of students statewide are passing the biology test. In West Chester, a high performing district, the pass rate for our current senior class is only about 82 percent.
3. It is estimated that approximately 60 of the 960 students in the WCASD graduating class of 2019 will not graduate because they did not pass all three of these Keystone Exams, but will have passed our courses (including many honors, dual college credit, and Advanced Placement courses.)
4. Current 10th graders (class of 2019) who have not passed all three Keystone Exams will be placed in test prep classes to help them pass these exams. They will be removed from elective courses such as arts

and music in order to find the time needed.

5. School districts now spend nearly 60 percent of their time preparing for and taking state tests and that number will increase with the Keystones as a graduation requirement. The time students will have to spend in remediation is a detriment to their education and takes away from time they could use to take valuable courses.

6. The costs for schools to provide help/remediation is extreme – and is an unfunded mandate. Districts are having to spend money to hire additional teachers to help with remediation and to handle the project-based assessment which is a Keystone alternative WCASD has spent more than \$1.5 million the past three years to provide additional instruction for students to pass these exams.

7. Technical schools will be significantly impacted because some students won't have time to attend the tech school portion of their day because they'll be in remediation.

8. The timing of the tests is poor since many classes haven't covered the information that students are being tested on by the time the test is administered.

9. There are no real accommodations in the tests for special education students or for students who speak a different language. Under current law, even students who are not reading or writing on grade level for whatever reason would still be required to take the test at least once. Recently a brilliant math student failed the math section because he couldn't read the instructions for the problems.

Teachers and parents have literally sent me hundreds of examples of how students are worried, anxious, and depressed. The rules for taking these exams are crazy, as well. Every bulletin board has to be covered so kids can't make a reference to anything for help. We stop instruction so all teachers and staff can monitor bathrooms, hallways, testing rooms, all in the name of test protocol and security.

Springtime in a school should be full of excitement and learning. It shouldn't look like a place that's closed up for the summer. The rules allow students to take as much time as they need but once they close the booklet, the session is over and they can't return to it. There is no research to support that any of these test environments are helpful, supportive, or represent good pedagogy.

That negativity is already beginning to drive down our test scores. Learning should be challenging, but also enjoyable and exciting. Teaching should be dynamic and creative. We're missing so much of that because of these tests.

The pressure of passing these tests is actually lowering the bar. We are seeing fewer students take Algebra in middle school because parents don't want their children exposed to the pressure of taking a Keystone graduation test in 7th grade.

Time and again I hear stories of kids who are so stressed out and fed up with the extreme amount of testing and the pressure associated with it that they are enrolling in private schools, instead. Just this past weekend I spoke with a parent who told me her son's anxiety about school began in third grade when he first had to take the PSSA's. We had one high school student who was actually pulling her hair out because she was so stressed about having to pass her Keystone. And we're starting to see some of our

best teachers retire early or leave to teach in private systems – citing the ridiculous focus on standardized testing – as the reason.

We can do better. We have to do better.

Let's get back to teaching and learning, and do what's right for our kids and our state.