

Senate Education Committee Hearing
June 2, 2017
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Berks County: Reading, Pennsylvania

My name is Monica Reyes. I am here today to provide testimony of my experience taking standardized tests. I was born and raised in Reading Pennsylvania. I attended schools in the Reading School District, Berks County, from Kindergarten through 12th grade. I graduated high school in 2007 from Reading High School. I want to paint a picture for you about the Reading School District for your reference during my testimony. The district's demographics consist of: 81% Hispanic, 11% African-American, 5% Caucasian, and 2% are Other. Nineteen percent of students in the school district are English as a Second Language (ESL) students and 20% are special education students. In the district, 99% of the students are economically disadvantaged. In the high school alone, which includes 10th, 11th, and 12th grades, there are 3,200 students.

When I was in high school, I took the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exam which has since been replaced with the Keystone Exams. I have minimal recollection of the material on the PSSA exams in the high school because they were not important to me during that time. I do remember, however, dreading going to school and completing a lengthy exam that would not affect my grades. The majority of my fellow classmates shared the same feelings on the exam. We did not know the actual purpose of the exam, but knew the importance teachers placed on the results. Teachers highly encouraged us to do our best. Some teachers even brought in desserts for us to make the testing process more enjoyable. However, that tactic did not influence or motivate students who placed no value on the results. No accountability for students on test scores resulted in a lack of effort to do well on these standardized tests. Looking back in my high school career, I recall feeling more pressure in doing well when taking the SAT exams used for college admissions. In contrast to the PSSA exam, I knew that the SAT score would be used to determine acceptance at a university. Therefore, I needed to do my best.

I want to share with you recent insight based on my younger sibling who is a junior at Reading Senior High School. He did not have to take any part of the exam this year as he passed the Biology and Literature Keystone Exams in his sophomore year. Since it is "Keystone Exam Season," I asked him to talk to other students and observe anything related to the exam while in school for the past few weeks. HE reported that the value placed by students on the exam varies among individuals. Some students prepare before the exam and fail, while other students do not prepare and pass. The Keystone Exams are extensive and provide no direct benefit to the student body. These factors influence the majority of students to disregard the seriousness of testing. Some students believed that the test was a requirement this year. However, they still did not care about their test performance. For example, many students who do not care about the exam often select random answers in order to sleep during the remaining testing period.

Burdens exist for students and teachers that result from the failure of the exam. Students that do not pass the exam one year are required to take a preparation course in the Keystone exam subject that they failed, instead of being able to choose an elective the following year that is of interest to them, like a foreign language, accounting, income taxes, or music. This negatively affects the academic opportunities students can get while attending school. Some students end up taking the test preparation courses that essentially teach to the test. Teachers are also affected by this. Teachers that

are scheduled to teach Literature now have to tailor their teaching to the information that is on the Keystone Exam.

I provided the Reading School District's demographic information to give you an understanding of the district's distinctiveness when compared to other Pennsylvania schools. The Reading School District has a diverse mixture of racial and ethnic backgrounds, special needs, and socio-economic disadvantages plaguing 99% of the student population. Additionally, there are large numbers of transient students, truancy, and trauma experienced by the student population. It is important to consider all the issues related to urban and impoverished neighborhoods before evaluating a student's success. Such factors include but are not limited to destitution, domestic and child abuse, one-parent household, drug addiction, mental health, poverty, and crime. The Reading School Administration recognizes these issues and thus eliminated two teacher positions and replaced vacancies with school social workers.

Even within just one high school in Pennsylvania, each student is significantly different from his or her peers. If students cannot be compared to each other in the same school, it is impossible to compare Reading students to students in the suburban areas. Therefore, in my view, it is impossible and unfair to administer the same test to all the students to gauge their academic success. Additionally, there are vast funding disparities between Reading and its surrounding suburban schools. While Reading is spending \$9,000 per student, other surrounding schools are spending \$14,000. Higher funding equates to more school resources and teachers that are crucial for academic success. If school district funding is not standardized throughout the state, tests to evaluate school performance should not be standardized either.

Some things to consider when proposing the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement:

1. Each high school has their own graduation requirements. In Reading, a student needs 4 credits in math to graduate. If a student cannot pass the Algebra exam, they must take preparation courses in Algebra for the Keystone. This will prevent students from taking other math courses that are required to meet the school's graduation requirement.
2. There are approximately 900 students who graduate each year from Reading High School. By making the Keystone Exams a graduation requirement, there will be many students who will not graduate. Will the state provide additional funding to schools like Reading, who already have scarce resources? Reading will need additional staff and space to accommodate these students. Also, how long do you keep students if they don't pass and never meet the measurement requirements?