



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding  
Keystone Exams**

**Presented to the  
Senate Education Committee  
August 26, 2013**

**By  
W. Gerard Oleksiak  
PSEA Vice President**

Good morning. I am Jerry Oleksiak, a special education teacher with more than 30 years of classroom experience, primarily in the Upper Merion Area School District. I am currently on leave from my teaching position and serving as the Vice President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to speak on behalf of PSEA's 183,000 members and voice our concerns regarding the State Board of Education's proposal to change the graduation and Keystone Exams requirements.

It's "Back to School" time for our kids, and here we are back again to talk about Keystone Exams. Several years ago, we worked with the Chairmen of this Committee, the Department of Education, and many other organizations to hammer out a workable system for the Keystone Exams. The basic system, which was finalized into regulation, called for the exams to be used as end-of-course exams. Accordingly, the teacher would use the Algebra I Keystone as the final exam in the Algebra I class, the Biology teacher would use the Biology Keystone as the final exam in the Biology class, and so on. As you can imagine, not all of our teachers liked this agreement. Some of our teachers have developed final exams they feel test at a higher level than color-in-the-circle standardized exams can test.

Moreover, many of our members originally were disappointed to realize that the Keystone Exams would be worth one-third of the course grade. Most feel that is too much weight to give to one exam. There are other assessment measures, such as research papers, quizzes, oral presentations, individual and group projects, that are better indicators of student learning and should not automatically be outweighed by a single test. Up to this point, many final exams were typically worth 20 percent of the grade, and this is the percentage we originally fought for during the initial promulgation of the regulations. One of the problems with the PSSA is that not all students take them seriously, since they know that the PSSA isn't going to affect their grades. A 20 percent weight for a Keystone Exam helps to solve that problem. Believe me, any classroom educator or parent can tell you that students do take seriously exams worth 20% of their grade.

I provide you with this context to remind you and inform you of the significant compromises we accepted, with no small difficulty on our part, to come to a final agreement on the Keystone

Exams as originally adopted. We were not alone in this. Many other organizations worked with the Senate when you asked them in order to reach a compromise: the PTA, the Education Law Center, ARC, the School Boards Association and more.

Then, in March of this year, the State Board of Education approved regulations that would override the agreement we all reached. These regulations would turn first three Keystone Exams, then two additional ones for a total of five, into high stakes exit exams. If these regulations go into effect, students will have to score Proficient or Advanced on potentially five different Keystone Exams in order to graduate from high school. Yes, there are provisions requiring remediation and providing for students to do projects in each course in which they score Basic or Below Basic. The Department is paying a company to develop projects. But, there is no funding available to help schools pay for all of the costs involved in remediation or implementing such a project system. This is a real issue, particularly as districts are still contending with the loss of nearly \$1 billion in resources in just the last few budget cycles. Most are struggling just to maintain the programs they are already offering, programs as basic and necessary as kindergarten, art, music, and sports. What further programs and services will be cut in order to get money to pay for remediation and projects? Where will districts find time in their already crowded days to do all of this?

While there is a provision for remediation and a project route in the existing regulations that were adopted in 2010, the number of students who need to pursue those options when the keystones are worth one-third of each grade is potentially more manageable than the number who would have to pursue those options when every Keystone Exam is a potential block to a high school diploma.

Put simply, creating high stakes exit exams for students is not sound education policy. It never has been, it never will be. Ample research has found that the negative consequences of high stakes testing include increased dropout rates, harmfully narrowed curriculum, diversion of resources away from education of students and toward more standardized testing of students, and disproportionate harm to some of our most vulnerable students, those living in poverty, minority students, English language learners, and special needs students – those who I spent my career teaching.

A part of this discussion often overlooked in all of this is that there is no proof that these exams actually do predict whether a student is going to succeed in college or career. One of the provisions we worked to get into the existing regulations requires the Department to validate the Keystone Exams to make sure they actually are valid measures and predictors of whether a student will succeed. One way this can be done is to track the students to see if those who score Basic on Keystone Exams do any differently in college than those who score Proficient. We have some evidence that many students who score Basic on the PSSAs do fine<sup>1</sup>. Based on this knowledge, it is not a leap of logic to assume that many students who score Basic on the KEs will do fine in higher education and the workforce as well. Surely it is putting the proverbial cart before the horse, if not patently poor educational management, to place such high stakes for students on these exams before we know whether or not those exams are a valid reason to hold those students back.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of going into more of the problems with this new set of regulations, I will turn to what we think you could do to fix the situation. Essentially, the regulations governing Keystone Exams that went into effect in 2010 should remain in effect, with some tweaks to address implementation problems that have been identified. Specifically:

1. The Keystone Exams should remain end-of-course exams, to be weighted at one-third of the course grade. A lesser percentage would be better, but we stand ready to honor the agreement previously obtained.

---

<sup>1</sup> Relationships Among Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Scores, University Proficiency Exam Scores, and College Course Grades in English and Math. Andrea L. Sinclair and Arthur A. Thacker, (HumRRO FR-05-55). (A study commissioned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania State Board of Education). The HumRRO Report included data showing that among all three universities that participated in the study, 58.7% of students who scored basic or below on the PSSA tests took at least the standard level Math or English college course. (The unweighted average across universities and courses was 63%.) **That is, most students who “failed” the PSSA enrolled in nonremedial college courses in the same subject area.** Furthermore, although the identities of the universities providing data to HumRRO in the study were not published, **they were likely to be among the most selective and rigorous public postsecondary institutions in the Commonwealth.**

<sup>2</sup> A recent study of the NAEP proficiency cut scores for the National Assessment Governing Board showed that over half of the students scoring in the "basic" category of the NAEP tests were found to be "college ready." This underscores the point that we would be doing a great disservice to thousands of students by hanging up their educational advancement (and perhaps alienating them from formal education) by giving such extreme weight to whether a particular test score lands a student in a Basic or Proficient category. The elaborate and impressive methods behind setting cut scores should not obscure the fact that their actual meaning in educational terms is imprecise, and their positioning little more than a well-educated guess. That is why it is so important to students that policymakers insist that these tests and their cut scores be validated by reference to other educationally significant consequences.

2. The Keystone Exams should continue to be graded on a 100-point scale. One change that would benefit students is to count the score a student earns, no matter which category that score falls into, instead of saying that a student whose score falls into the Below Basic category gets zero points.
3. In keeping with Pennsylvania statutory provisions that grant authority over graduation requirements to local school districts, maintain the regulations' provisions allowing the use of local assessments in place of Keystone Exams, if the local exams are validated through a process identified by the Department. This validation process must be reasonable and must be available at a reasonable cost to the school districts.
4. Retain and enforce the requirements for validation, which ensures the test is an accurate measure of students' abilities, of the Keystone Exams. Standardized assessments that are going to be administered to nearly every Pennsylvania student, and affect the academic and career paths of those students, must be validated to determine if they are, indeed, an accurate predictor of student success.
5. Retain the use of industry certification exams as an alternative pathway to graduation for students enrolled in career and technical programs. These are the assessments by which career and technical students demonstrate proficiency and employability in the careers they are pursuing. In simple words, such a qualified and employable student should not be denied a high school diploma because he or she scores in the Basic category on a standardized test.
6. Address an implementation problem that has been identified in the existing regulations, by not requiring that a course grade be re-opened and changed after students take remediation and re-take a Keystone Exam. Instead, treat the re-take of the Keystone Exams as districts have traditionally accounted for students who take summer school classes and then pass courses. The student gets a passing grade in the summer school course, allowing them to graduate, but the district is not required to re-open and change course grades – an administrative mess.
7. Require the Secretary to approve a waiver upon application by the Chief School Administrator for those students who meet the criteria for a waiver. The current

regulations *allow* the Secretary to approve a waiver request. The regulations could continue to require that if a district seeks waivers for more than 10 percent of the students in a graduation class, the Chief School Administrator must submit for the Secretary's approval an action plan to identify improvements that will be implemented in the courses associated with Keystone Exam content for which the waivers are requested.

We all want what is right for the students of Pennsylvania. This Committee would be doing a great service to those students if you could work with the Department of Education and State Board of Education to stop the current attempt to turn the Keystone Exams into exit exams. Instead, make just those changes to the 2010 regulations that would enable their implementation to be less complex and burdensome for our school districts and the dedicated staff who teach these courses and administer these tests.

I thank you for your time and attention today, and for all of the work this Committee has committed to the Keystone Exam issue.