



Proud Leadership for Pennsylvania Schools

Testimony on House Bill 168

**Presented by
Erich Eshbach and Michael Snell On behalf of the
Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
before the House Education Committee
February 12, 2015**

Good morning, and thank you for holding this hearing today and for providing PASA the opportunity to share our thoughts about House Bill 168, which seeks to reduce the number of Keystone Exams from ten to three and would prohibit the Department of Education and State Board of Education from establishing a minimum level of student performance on a Keystone or other state assessment as a graduation requirement.

My name is Eric Eshbach. I serve as the chair of PASA Legislative Committee and superintendent of the Northern York County School District. Joining me to address House Bill 168 is a fellow superintendent from York County, Michael Snell, superintendent of the Central York School District. Our colleagues, Lee Ann Wentzel and Scott Deisley, will address House Bill 177 immediately following our testimony.

House Bill 168, sponsored by Representative Tobash, will reduce the number of Keystone Exams the Department of Education is required to develop and administer from ten to three. The bill also would prohibit the Department of Education and State Board of Education from establishing a minimum level of student performance on a Keystone Exam or other statewide assessment as a graduation requirement. The three tests are those that are already being administered to students across the state: Algebra I, literature and biology. PASA applauds the introduction of House Bill 168 and urges that it promptly be enacted into law.

The debate over Keystone Exams and state mandated high school graduation testing requirements has been non-stop over the past eight years. It began upon release in December 2006 of the report and recommendations drafted by yet another state commission, the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success.

As you know, the ongoing debate has been vigorous and highly emotional. Recently, the debate has been further complicated by coming under the cloud that envelops the Common Core Standards, Common Core Assessments and student data and reporting systems. The General Assembly has itself been deeply engaged in these debates. As the regulations were being developed and debated, it held numerous public hearings, legislative leadership participated directly in discussions with Department of Education and State Board of Education leadership, and lawmakers passed legislation, resolutions and several state budgets that included funding to develop and administer the Keystone Exams (Act 61 of 2008, S.R. 156 of 2009, S.B. 281 in 2009 and Act 82 of 2012).

Following promulgation of the final regulations in 2010 that mandated the development and administration of the Keystone Exams, strong opposition from schools, parents and others continued to grow across the state as the Department of Education worked to implement the new requirements. Strong opposition, combined with numerous problems encountered during the development and implementation of the regulations, drove the Department and State Board to amend the regulations last year (2014). The changes included delaying the implementation of the graduation requirement by one year, delaying the development and administration of additional tests, and providing school administrators additional flexibility to permit students who were not able to pass the exams or the alternative project-based assessment to graduate. In our view, the most significant change was to turn the tests into high stakes graduation tests that students must pass or not be permitted to graduate from high school.

Even with these changes, the Keystone Exams, project-based assessment and associated requirements impose significant burdens on students and schools.

From Dr. Eric Eshbach

In York County school districts, as is the case around our state, a significant effort has been placed on the process of analyzing scores on the Keystone Exams and adjusting curriculum and instruction in light of what that analysis reveals. This is being done with the intent of ensuring that our students can pass the state-enacted expectation of all students achieving at a set level in order to graduate. Yet we realize that expecting all students to achieve proficiency on a rigorous test, administered during a single snapshot of time, is an unattainable feat. We have been expected to differentiate our instruction to the needs of each child, adopt curriculum that ensures a comprehensive program of education, and administer Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for special needs students and gifted learners. Yet we expect all students, despite their educational ability, proficiency in the English language, or personal and career interests, to achieve a high level of proficiency on a single test.

Staff from the sixteen high schools in York County have been reviewing the best way to offer the courses leading up to the Keystone Exam, the proper course sequence, the curriculum and textbooks necessary to ensure success, and the instructional practices that will best prepare our students for “the tests.” In reality, however, with a significant number of students who have not achieved proficiency on the exams, we are spending more time trying to figure out how we will remediate the students prior to the next administration of the exam, and how we can fit these remediation classes into a student’s already packed schedule. We are spending time preparing for how we will handle students who cannot pass the exam after the second administration and will need to enter into a project-based assessment. Yet we have been given no guidance or parameters from PDE as to what those projects will look like, how long they will take, and the staff necessary to ensure student completion of those projects. As superintendents, we have been struggling with the procedures and criteria we will use in issuing an exemption for students who have not been able to demonstrate proficiency, even after the project based assessment, or who simply don’t have the time to demonstrate that proficiency in three areas. We have been spending valuable time working to prepare students for a test, instead of showing them how the standards and core content associated with these courses will apply to their lives after graduation.

In this time of great change brought on by technology and access to information, it is wrong to mandate a test based upon disparate knowledge, Algebra 1, biology and literature. The feedback we hear is our graduates need to know how to think for themselves, communicate and collaborate across oceans and continents, and learn to be creative and critical thinkers. The Keystone Exam does not provide any feedback or guidance in these critical 21st century skills.

From Dr. Michael Snell

Central York is focusing on providing real world work for real world audiences that have little in common with a standardized test. For example, Central just opened the Panther Perk, in conjunction with local business operator Dirk Krebs of K&K Coffee. Our learners had the responsibility to determine if this venture was legal on a number of fronts, find start-up capital, create and build a space, and work with our food service director, our business manager and others to bring this vision of a student-run business to fruition. Nowhere are the skills of innovation, entrepreneurship, drive and determination measured on a standardized test. As a matter of fact, there is nothing standardized about Central’s Panther Perk, or our student-run catering or public relations businesses at Central.

The time to administer and account for the standardized tests all takes away from what I believe you, our parents and the community want for our graduates. The anxiety our learners endure for the sake of a quick assessment, one in which their graduation depends, is terribly disconnected from what I believe we really want our graduates to know and be able to do when we present them with their diploma.

One group of students for whom I have particular concern are those who choose to attend our Career Technical Center. Northern's students attend Cumberland Perry Vocational Technical School. Cumberland Perry is an outstanding school that offers a partial day program in 22 career areas. Students in a CTC are required to show proficiency in an exam based on the field of study in which they are enrolled. These exams, designed by the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI), are a true measure of how a CTC student will perform in his or her chosen career field. It is, for lack of a better term, an authentic measure of the knowledge a student has gained. The NOCTI exams provide industry-based credentials and certifications for career and technical education programs. They provide results that help to measure accountability of programs as well as the teachers who deliver instruction. The NOCTI's are both theoretical as well as practical in their measure of a student's proficiency. In short, when a student walks away with a proficient rating on a NOCTI exam in, for example, welding, the business that hires that student can be assured that he/she has mastered various welding techniques, understands the physical and mechanical properties of metals, and is adept in safety protocols. In my mind, exactly what someone who is hiring a welder would want of a candidate.

At Cumberland Perry, nearly 93% of students have shown proficiency in the twenty-two NOCTI exams that were given last year. Yet, we have significant concern that a majority of those students have not shown proficiency on the Keystone Exams. One might argue that, when proficiency on the Keystone Exams is required for a student to graduate (the Class of 2017), those students will then take the Keystones more seriously, show more concern, and subsequently score higher.

Perhaps that would occur, but at what cost? In order to ensure these students are proficient in Algebra I, biology, and literature, we will have to offer additional courses to remediate the students at the expense of courses at the Vo-Tech. Questions have started to circulate as to whether a student who cannot pass the Keystones would have to stay back at our high school and not be permitted to attend the Vo-Tech until proficiency is attained. Others suggest that additional Keystone prep or remediation courses be offered at the Vo-Tech at the expense of their practical training in the "shop" environment. I will fight long and hard against either of those occurring.

The community I serve has a long-storied history of business and industry that relies heavily on career and technical trades. I will not sacrifice the ability of a student to learn a highly skilled trade simply so he can pass the Keystone Exam. I'm confident that my health and well-being, as well as yours, depend heavily on carpenters, welders, electricians, and mechanics. To rob these students from their desired careers and overlook their talents would be detrimental to our community, our Commonwealth, and our nation. We need to stop standardizing learning

and assessment for our students and begin customizing it to their talents, needs, and abilities. Keystone Exams, used as a graduation requirement, ensure standardization and deny a student the right to choose his or her path in life. Passing House Bill 168 will be a bold statement to our students that every one of them matters.

PASA's Position

PASA strongly opposes the use of high stakes graduation tests and has done so since they were first proposed by the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success in 2006.

While we do agree with the use of Keystone Exams as high stakes graduation tests, PASA members overwhelmingly prefer the end-of-course Keystone Exams over the four Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests that they replaced. PSSA tests were administered in tenth and eleventh grades in Reading, Writing, Mathematics and Science.

PASA believes the Keystone Exams should be used at the state level for the sole purpose of meeting the current accountability requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the approved state waiver. These require states to assess all students once at the high school level in English language arts, mathematics and science.

PASA believes that any student consequences associated with the tests should be at the discretion of each locally elected school board, which under Section 1611 of the Public School Code are provided authority to establish requirements for the award of academic degrees. Some districts may choose to require students to pass the tests in order to graduate. Others may count the test scores as a portion of the final course grade. Others may choose neither, preferring to use their own local assessments instead.

On behalf of PASA, we thank you for your consideration.