



*Proud Leadership for Pennsylvania Schools*

**Testimony on House Bill 177**

**Presented by  
Lee Ann Wentzel and Scott Deisley  
On behalf of the  
Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators  
Before the House Education Committee  
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Good morning, and thank you for holding this hearing today and for providing PASA the opportunity to share our thoughts about House Bill 177, which will establish an Academic Standards Commission to study and offer recommendations to the General Assembly, Department of Education and State Board of Education concerning the Pennsylvania Core Standards.

My name is Lee Ann Wentzel, I serve on the PASA Legislative Committee and as superintendent of the Ridley School District, which is located in Delaware County. Joining me is Dr. Scott Deisley, superintendent of the Red Lion Area School District, which is located in York County.

PASA supports clear, rigorous and developmentally appropriate state academic standards together with an aligned system of assessments and accountability that uses multiple measures of student achievement to fairly and appropriately inform students, parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, state policymakers and taxpayers as to the academic achievement of our public schools. This system demands that standards be rigorous and provide the set of essential knowledge and skills students will need to be successful in the highly competitive 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which we live.

However, while we support House Bill 177 and the establishment of a new commission to review and report its findings on the PA Core Standards, we urge a strong caution that students, parents, teachers and schools are suffering from a bad case of state policy whiplash, resulting from what has now become a regular practice of frequently changing state standards. What has been the effect of those frequent changes?

Each time there is a change there can also be a drop in student achievement as it takes several years for districts to align curriculum, develop or purchase new instructional materials and align local assessments with the new standards. It also takes several years for the Department

of Education to fully align and validate the PSSA and Keystone Exams with changes made to the academic standards.

Students who were enrolled in First Grade in 2005 are now in Eleventh Grade. They are now taught and held accountable under their THIRD set of state academic standards in English language arts and mathematics. As a result, there has been no continuity in expectations, focus and accountability for our students during their K – 12 educational careers. In addition, with state expectations changing three times, many school districts had to revise all or part of their curriculum two or three times, purchase new books and instructional materials, retrain teachers and instructional staff and redesign classroom, school and district administered tests. Each revision to the standards also forces the Department of Education to revise the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), Keystone Exams and related support systems. The overall impact of these continuing changes in the academic standards results in additional costs to local school districts and state taxpayers of tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of taxpayer funds.

The Ridley School District thoughtfully engages in adjusting the local curriculum to align with the state standards. Like many districts, we prefer to implement our curricular review and changes on a regular cycle. Unfortunately, the combination of shifting standards, altered assessments, and diminished resources require a less predictable method. The priority for review now must align with the areas of primary accountability and available funding sources. Since 2011, we have delayed review for social studies, music, and physical education. Our efforts and resources have been focused on language arts and mathematics over the previous four years instead.

Our preferred cyclical process for curriculum review and revision includes looking at the scope and sequence within a specific content area for a child's entire academic career. We analyze the impact across all grade levels when standards are created, changed, or eliminated. Instructional practices and assessment results are also considered as part of the decision making process. This approach allows us to determine where, and how, to best prepare children to achieve at high academic levels.

The attention on language arts and mathematics for accountability purposes has demanded additional effort in curriculum decisions. We have invested nearly \$400,000 for elementary language arts and mathematics materials and professional development during the preceding four years. The upcoming changes for our middle level language arts, mathematics, and science are underway—as are the same areas at the high school. All of these updates for the purpose of remaining aligned to standards will continue to require a sizeable investment.

The curriculum renewal cycle has long been our commitment to the children of our community in Delaware County to remain competitive with their academic peers in the Commonwealth. However, we have not been able to fully and accurately assess our efforts due to the frequent changes we are experiencing. Dr. Deisley will share his experiences in York County.

The Red Lion Area School District utilizes a five-year curriculum cycle. The first year of the cycle we make adjustments to the curriculum to ensure that we are aligned to the academic standards. The remaining years of the cycle we work on common assessments and monitor our student achievement in relationship to their performance on the PSSA, Keystone Exams, and district assessments. We budget approximately \$200,000 per year for curriculum revisions and the purchase of instructional materials. Please note that, since we use a five-year cycle, we only have funds available for 20% of our curricular areas per year. When changes to academic standards are made that do not align with our curriculum cycle, we are forced to allocate funds from other budget line items in order to address those changes in standards or worse yet, we are forced to adjust our cycle. These changes result in some curricular areas not being reviewed for many years.

The idea behind a five-year curriculum cycle is to make minor changes and adjustments along the way and not a major overhaul every five years. However, the frequent changes in academic standards has caused us to have to make major changes almost every year in curricular areas that are not in our cycle. For example, we find ourselves making changes to our English language arts curriculum almost yearly. Given that writing will no longer be a stand-alone category in the calculation of the School Performance Profile score, we will need to make adjustments to our curriculum, again. ELA is scheduled for a curriculum revision in 2016-2017 according to our current cycle. Therefore, we either adjust our cycle and push off another curricular area or we wait and use a curriculum that is not aligned to the standards or we move funds from another line item to make the necessary changes.

The PSSA and Keystone Exams only assesses a narrow representations of the standards, and because of the high stakes nature of these assessments, teachers feel pressure to focus primarily on these tested standards rather than providing for students the rich experience provided when all standards are naturally integrated. For instance in the area of ELA, because the essential areas of research and speaking and listening are not tested, these areas become glossed over at the expense of test preparation.

When assessments are constantly changing, the validity of the PSSA scores is also questionable. How can progress be measured when there are changing measures of achievement? We need consistency so that we can work toward improving student achievement. The constantly changing academic targets create an environment that does not allow for measuring student achievement.

States began to develop and adopt academic standards in the 1990's in response to the landmark 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report issued by a blue ribbon panel established by President Reagan and the subsequent Presidential Education Summit convened by President George H.W. Bush made an urgent call to action to states to "adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct..." The report also called for states to develop "Standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work. The purposes of these tests would be to: (a) certify the student's credentials; (b) identify the need for remedial intervention; and (c) identify the opportunity for advanced or accelerated work. The tests should be administered as part of a

nationwide (but not Federal) system of State and local standardized tests. This system should include other diagnostic procedures that assist teachers and students to evaluate student progress.”

Governor Casey (No. 1994-4), Governor Ridge (No. 1996-6) and Governor Rendell (No. 2005-06) each, by Executive Order, established citizen commissions to review educational expectations and make recommendations for improvement.

Since 1999 when the first set of state academic standards were published through 2010 students, parents, and schools largely operated under a consistent set of expectations in English language arts and mathematics. That changed in 2010 when the Common Core Standards were adopted and again in 2014 when the PA Core Standards were adopted.

It is also important to note that while all the attention is focused on the standards for English language arts and mathematics, there are also ten other sets of state academic standards, the most recent of which were approved in 2006.

<b>State Academic Standard</b>	<b>Year Approved</b>
Science and Technology	2002
Environment and Ecology	2002
Arts and Humanities	2003
Health, Safety and Physical Fitness	2003
Family and Consumer Science	2003
History	2003
Civics and Government	2003
Geography	2003
Economics	2003
Career Education and Work	2006

The controversy over the Pennsylvania Core Standards goes to the very core of the purpose, goals, and function established for Pennsylvania’s public schools. Although the title and content of the standards is different now, the controversy has been ongoing since the early 90’s when Pennsylvania first adopted Outcomes-Based Education and its 53 state learning outcomes and other goals for its public schools.

It is also important to note that the PA Core and state academic standards provide the foundation upon which the entire student, school, school district, teacher and principal accountability system is based. State and local tests, Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS), teacher effectiveness system, School Performance Profiles, school improvement and recognition, student eligibility for EITC scholarships and eligibility of schools for certain federal grants. A great deal rides on the quality, clarity, depth and breadth of the state standards—and, of equal importance, the consistency in those standards over time.

What also must be clearly understood is that the state standards are not the curriculum. School districts have and continue to develop and approve their own curriculum and local assessments.

We believe an ongoing process to review the expectations established for Pennsylvania's students and schools is appropriate and necessary and therefore urge approval of House Bill 177. However, we also urge members of this Committee to consider carefully, that should the Commission call for major changes to the standards, this Committee must seriously contemplate the emotional, financial and educational costs such changes will have on students, parents, teachers, and schools resulting from moving the academic bulls eye the fourth time in six years.

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