

1. ***What are the Keystone Exams?***

The Keystone Exams are end-of-course exams designed to measure whether or not a high school student has reached proficiency in 10 subject areas. Currently, there are three Keystone Exams being administered to all Pennsylvania public school secondary students. They are Algebra I, Biology and Language Arts.

Starting with the Class of 2017, students who score below proficient on any one of these three keystones will not be able to graduate from high school.

There are seven additional Keystone exams that are waiting to be developed pending funding.

2. ***How do the Pennsylvania State graduation requirements for students in 2014-15 and 2015-16 differ from those of the class of 2017?***

Pennsylvania high school students graduating in 2014-15 and 2015-16 as well as in previous years have had to or will have had to either score proficient on the PSSA's or on an alternative assessment selected or developed by the school district in order to graduate. For example, schools may use assessment activities from multiple sources such as performance-based tasks in which students demonstrate their understanding of subject matter through written, visual, oral and/or demonstration tasks developed by the district.

3. ***How is this different than the graduation requirements for the class of 2017 and thereafter?***

The new graduation requirements will no longer allow schools to select or develop alternative assessments to determine a student's mastery of a subject. It will be determined only at the state level based on students' scores on the Biology, Algebra I and Literature Keystone Exams or the project-based assessment in these subjects.

4. ***What can we do about the situation?***

Call or write your state legislators and ask them to support House Bill 168 (HB168). Inform your family, friends, neighbors and coworkers about the Keystone Exam graduation requirements and the impact it is having on our students academically and emotionally, and our schools financially. Ask them to call and write their legislators. If you have a personal experience of how the Keystone Exams has affected your child or your school, share your story. We can make a difference but we have to speak out. Our local legislators are willing to help but they need to hear from you in order to make your voices heard in Harrisburg.

5. ***What is House Bill 168?***

House Bill 168 is legislation that would halt the creation of additional Keystone Exams and prohibit the state from using the Keystone Exams or any other state assessment as a graduation requirement. The bill is currently in the House Education Committee. We urge all parents to contact their legislators and ask them to support HB 168 and/or other similar legislation.

**6. *Why support HB 168? What is the impact of the Keystone Exams?***

The Keystone Exams, originally designed, as end-of-course exams only, were re-purposed in 2012-13 to be an accountability measure to replace the 11th grade PSSAs. This change in direction increased the hours of testing time for many students. For example, high school students were required to take Keystone Exams in biology, literature, and algebra. This type of testing (and retesting for students who score below proficient) created unanticipated hours of planning for test preparation, administration, remediation and review.

High school students are not the only students affected by the testing. Eighth graders are also negatively impacted. Since many students take algebra in the eighth grade, students must take the PSSA and the Algebra I Keystone Exam at the same time. High stakes testing in eighth grade, which affects the students' ability to earn a diploma, adds undue stress to students who have not yet entered high school.

**7. *Why oppose the Keystone Exams? Don't we need to hold schools accountable?***

We aren't saying don't hold schools accountable. We aren't even asking to do away with standardized testing or the Keystones. We are advocating for removing the Keystones as a graduation requirement. Continue to have students take the Keystones as they do now and the PSSA's as they have for years. However, use that information as one data point on how a school is performing or to determine a student's level of proficiency in a subject. Do not make the state assessment the deciding factor on whether or not a student will graduate from high school or whether or not the student has mastered the subject content.

Schools must always strive to improve and to enhance their curriculum to ensure they are continually meeting the changing needs of a global, technologically advanced society. However, forcing all schools and all students to be judged by a single assessment disregards the strong history of academic performance by multiple measures that are known to be the best measure of a student's proficiency in a subject.

We oppose the Keystones as graduation requirements for many reasons, but our main concerns are as follows:

- a. The Keystones are an unfair assessment of a student's academic performance. A single test should not be the only factor in determining a student's knowledge of a subject or whether he or she has earned a high school diploma;
- b. Keystones eliminate the discretion of the district to use alternative assessments to determine a student's mastery of a subject;
- c. Keystones remove the right of the school district to award diplomas to students that it believes are proficient and eligible to graduate;
- d. Keystones will require us to narrow our curriculum to the content covered in the Keystones. Right now, West Chester has a rich curriculum in which students can take many electives including career and technical education courses that will better students for post-secondary education and the workforce.
- e. Studies have shown that some school districts now spend nearly 60 percent of a student's 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 be spending learning other subjects and taking electives that will prepare them for college and for their future career.

- f. It is estimated Keystones will cost the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania \$300,000,000 a year and our district \$600,000 a year, every year, once fully implemented. We believe this money could be better spent to fund initiatives such as full-day kindergarten, career and technical education programs, remediation programs for struggling students, art, music, world language, sports and other programs.
  - g. The costs for schools to provide help/remediation to pass these exams are extreme – and are an unfunded mandate. Districts have to spend money to hire additional teachers to help with remediation and to handle the alternative project-based assessments. We estimate the costs for the West Chester Area School District will be \$600,000 a year.
  - h. Students who attend career and technical schools will be significantly impacted. Students won't have time to attend the technical school portion of their day because they'll be in remediation. For example, a student who would like to study culinary arts or automotive technology or graphic design will have to take a biology remediation course instead, even if that student passed his or her biology class as determined by his or her teacher.
8. ***If the new requirements allow students to retest or to take a project-based assessment does that not give school districts sufficient options using a state assessment to determine a student's mastery of a subject?***

No, because all the assessments are pen and paper tests, which we know are not the best way to assess *every* student's mastery of a subject. By allowing schools to implement alternative forms of assessment, educators can have students demonstrate learning through multiple methods.

Currently, schools may use assessment activities from several sources such as performance-based tasks in which students demonstrate their understanding of subject matter through written, visual, oral, and/or demonstration tasks.

For example, elementary students may participate in a personal achievement and learning exhibit where they demonstrate their understanding of a particular question or interest that they have and what they have learned about it. High school students may be required to develop a portfolio or complete a graduation project. In addition, students may be given real-world problems and asked to solve them based on what they have learned about the subject, which is more closely matched to how they will be assessed in real-life and in the work world.

How often does an employer assess job performance using a pen and paper test? Not too often (if ever), because pen and paper tests are not always the best indicator of proficiency. Pen and paper tests certainly have their place and are valuable measures of learning, but they should not be the sole means to determine if someone should or should

not be allowed to graduate from high school – that ultimate decision should be left to the people who know the students the best, the ones who work with them and have worked with them every school day for the past 13 years, not the state, based on a single test.

**9. *Didn't we always have high-stake testing? Why is it a problem now?***

No. We have had standardized testing for decades but the difference between then and now is the value and importance placed on these tests. The extreme focus on testing intensified in 2001 under the George W. Bush presidency and with the No Child Left Behind legislation. This high-stake testing frenzy was reinforced under the Obama presidency with the Race to the Top grants. It is time to stand up to the politics at both the state and national levels and re-examine the long-lasting consequences of high-stake testing on our students, our teachers, our schools and our society. We did not have to pass a state test to graduate high school, nor did our grandparents, nor do students in private schools, nor do homeschooled students — and our public school students today should not have to either.

**10. *Don't we need to fix are failing public schools?***

Public schools are producing better test results and higher graduation rates than at any other time in history. Contrary to popular rhetoric, the majority of Pennsylvania's public schools are meeting the needs of their students and exceeding those of most charter schools. Public school test scores and graduation rates are the highest they've ever been, and dropout rates are at their lowest point. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. high school graduation rate hit an all-time high in 2009 when 85% of U.S. adults over the age of 25 reported having attained a high school diploma as compared to only 34% of the population in the 1950 U.S. census. In addition, according to the College Board, average composite SAT scores for American students have risen almost constantly since 1990. In 2004, the average composite SAT score was 1026 as compared to 1003 in 1994 and 999 in 1984. In 2010, students' mathematics scores were up two points higher than in 2000 and 15 points higher than in 1990.

Also according to the College Board, among the class of 2012, the number of high school graduates taking AP Exams increased to 954,070, (32.4%), up from 904,794 (30.2%) among the class of 2011 and 471,404 (18.0%) in 2002 among the class of 2002. More importantly, the number of high school graduates scoring a 3 or higher also increased by 8% from the class of 2002.