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December 9, 2013

### Unintended Consequences of Keystone Exams

Good morning and thank you for providing me with this opportunity to speak to you today. I have been in public education for the last 20 years; 15 of those years as a professional school counselor in a middle school. When you think of a school counselor, what duties come to mind? Most likely, you think of a person who meets with students individually and in large and small groups tackling academic, social, and emotional issues to prepare students for career and life success. Perhaps you envision a counselor meeting with each student individually every year discussing students' goals and creating plans for helping them meet their goals.

Fifteen years ago, I met with every student individually each school year, taught large group guidance lessons to sixth graders daily, ran small groups as needed, supervised a SAT prep program, and handled student crises immediately. Fast forward to 2013; I no longer teach or run groups nor am able to meet with every student individually. Sadly, many occasions arise when counselors are unavailable for students. During PSSA and Keystone testing, I pray students do not have a crisis as it is almost impossible to devote time to anyone on a testing day.

Why did my job change so drastically in the last 15 years? One word answers the question: testing. Districts struggle to "fund" the unfunded state mandates and administrators must delegate new duties to counselors not assigned to classrooms. Years ago when Pennsylvania required districts to use PSSA to assess students, the state also required districts to designate a test coordinator in each school building to complete the "testing task." In my district, counselors became the testing experts.

PSSA, Keystone, and benchmark testing responsibilities cause counseling duties to take a back seat. Although it is unclear how many school counselors across the Commonwealth

coordinate testing, someone in every school building absorbs the testing role. As a result, that person is unable to fulfill his/her intended job requirements. I estimate I spend 50% of my time in testing responsibilities throughout the school year. A high school counselor in my district estimated 40% of her time is allotted to testing. Unfortunately, these statistics translate into a loss of student services.

Excessive time and resources are devoted to test preparation, coordination, and administration. Test preparation starts at the beginning of the school year with data entry into the PIMMS system. All student records must be updated and accurate to generate precise testing stickers. Due to the loss of approximately 30 positions over the last three years, counselors in my district were introduced to the PIMMS system this year as another added duty.

Prior to receiving any exams, I read the lengthy test manual and spend days creating a testing schedule and informational packet for teachers. Every administrator and teacher in the building must pass an online exam and provide their certificate, which is compiled in one of four notebooks and necessary in the event we are monitored. In addition to the certificate notebook, another notebook stores the accommodations for IEP students, one holds attendance and make-up testing records, and one contains copies of packets we provide the teachers regarding the schedule, test security, cell phone policy, and security checklists.

Once tests are delivered to our building, the conference room used to store tests is no longer available. This year, the conference room, used daily for meetings, will be unavailable from February through May due to the state requirement that tests be stored in a secure location. After sorting tests and adhering a student bar code label on each answer book; test books, answer books, two sharpened pencils per student, scrap paper, and highlighters are collected and placed in testing boxes which are stored on a cart in the conference room.

A test administrator meeting is held to review testing procedures, the testing schedule, and security measures. All teachers must attend the meeting. Prior to testing, teachers must cover or take down bulletin boards, posters, word walls, and maps creating a sterile educational environment and bare walls in every classroom. On the morning of testing, I carefully choose my shoe attire to quietly walk the halls of the school building (although roller skates seem to be more appropriate for the busy day). As I arrive at school on a testing day, I review teacher absences and quickly find test administrator replacements. I then retrieve the three-tiered cart containing the test boxes. The cart is heavy and I carefully maneuver it around the hallways and in between students to deliver testing materials.

At the end of the proposed testing session, counselors walk around to every testing room to gather the students who need extended test time. I monitor the extended time room while the other counselor collects the testing boxes from each room. She counts each box to ensure the correct number of tests. After all students complete testing, we determine which students were absent and plan for future make-up sessions. After days of scheduled testing, the make-up sessions begin. At the conclusion of testing, we complete pages in the answer book for students who received accommodations and for students who did not have a barcode label. Finally, we account for all books and return them in the boxes we saved from the original shipment. The nuances of the testing procedures and security measures are burdensome and cumbersome.

“I am so stressed out,” reported an eighth grade student after testing. Not only do the students feel that way, the test administrators and coordinators feel that way too. When test results arrive at the school, counselors must deliver information regarding schedule changes to students and parents in order to remediate students who did not score proficient. The mandatory remediation is a huge drain on time and resources. When students retest, they miss class time

while the rest of the school building follows a normal schedule. Last week, as the students who were retesting were walking to the testing area, a school counselor overheard a student declare, “Here comes the moron parade.” Concerns clearly exist when districts must single out the non-proficient students.

One of the most common test administrator complaints involves the lengthy and confusing test instructions. The testing instructions refer multiple times to the test book and/or answer book and students must flip back and forth between two books. Test administrators have reported that students miss questions in the answer book because they worked to the stop sign in their test book. When students mistakenly eliminate a section, how accurate are the results? Another Keystone Exam criticism applies to the considerable loss of instructional time while testing. Adding more Keystone Exams into the current schedule seems impossible. If over half of the school is testing, the entire school is shut down until testing is over. The students are already over-tested and many of our students are frustrated with the sheer number of high-stakes tests. Balancing spring Keystone exams, finals, AP exams, graduation, and master scheduling challenge every counselor in the month of May.

I recently reviewed a draft of the proposed PA school counselor’s evaluation. Of course, all of the tasks revolve around counseling roles and duties appropriate for school counselors. There is no area on the form for evaluating test coordinator functions. That’s a shame because after all these years, I’m pretty good at it. In fact, at the present time, no educator evaluation includes testing responsibilities. However, someone in each building across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania must handle the responsibility of testing coordinator. Who will take on the increased responsibilities with additional Keystone Exams? How will students handle the stress of more high-stakes testing? Are Keystone Exams the true measure of a good student? A

student who is non-proficient on a Keystone Exam may be an excellent student and productive future employee. We have yet to prove a connection between proficiency on Keystone Exams and productive, well-educated citizens. Educators prepare students for college and the workforce and no correlation exists between the exams and the readiness for higher education and/or the workplace. What real purpose do these tests hold? Rather than investing money on more testing which has no proven result, provide more funding to schools which has the ability and knowledge to prepare students for their futures.