

I was asked to speak today concerning the impact of the Keystone exams on my current position as principal of Pottsville Area High School.

Most people would agree that the role of high school principal has evolved over the years. It is vital that we stay current with new educational trends, laws, and initiatives. The new teacher evaluation system itself has demanded many hours of my time in its first year. Concurrently, we are rushing to implement with fidelity the new Pennsylvania Core Standards. However, no other initiative has impacted my job more than the Keystone exams.

In the summer of 2012, we were informed that the Keystones would be replacing the PSSA's for the upcoming school year. With scheduling already complete, that left little time for us to prepare for a complete switch. I often use the analogy of a freight train when referring to Pottsville Area High School. We, as a moderately-sized high school, are much like the iron horse, traveling swiftly along the track. It is very difficult for us to switch gears quickly. It takes a significant amount of time and planning to effect lasting changes. Districtwide, we have invested a great deal of money in resources dedicated to the PSSA's. With current budget constraints, it was difficult for us to abandon coach books, curriculum, etc., in order to prepare our students for the Keystones. The last minute notice only compounded matters.

The sheer enormity of the current testing has been overwhelming. With the PSSA's, it was pretty simple. All 11<sup>th</sup> graders took the same tests during that same school year. Quite the opposite is true with the Keystones. They are not grade-specific so different students are taking various combinations of testing. Student A is retaking all three (Literature, Biology, and Algebra) during the winter wave, hoping to achieve proficiency this time. Student B is a 2<sup>nd</sup> semester vo-tech student with double-period core courses so she will test for the first time in the winter wave instead of in the spring with the rest of her class. Student C is a cyber student who will enter the building for the first time ever to test. Student D is currently enrolled in Keystone-related courses and will take his tests in the spring. The possibilities are endless.

Tracking proficiency and compiling testing rosters is a daunting task at best. Simply creating the rosters took me an entire school day. Another half day was spent uploading the students on the eDirect website. Then, the boxes arrive and a monumental task commences. Our curriculum coordinator and I spent one full day completing inventories and prepping the test booklets and answer sheets for testing. Yet another full day is spent creating the testing assignments and defining the testing locations and proctors. Many questions arise. Which bell schedule should I use? Which teachers are the best proctors? Are they available for *all* testing days? Which special education students need a small testing room? What am I going to do with the hundreds of students that are not testing? I need to keep them quietly engaged in an activity, yet I want them to experience something worthwhile. The better speakers are often costly and not in the budget. Also, what reasonably healthy snack can I offer our students? After all, we are a Title I school with a sizeable free and reduced lunch population. I want to ensure that they at least have something to eat to fuel their brains. Yet another area of concern is our recent transfer students. Do we have recent scores or must we track down missing scores from their previous district? The list of details seems infinite.

I then create a letter detailing the specifics of the testing and disseminate that letter to parents, including in it their right to inspect the tests in my presence prior to test administration. If parents opt to do so, I will be setting aside time for them to review the tests in my office.

The DAC and I meet with the entire faculty a few weeks prior to testing for a half hour. They are informed of the hour-long online training module that is required of them and manuals are then distributed. Next, we meet with them again as a group in the form of a forty-five minute follow-up during which time we distribute an enormous amount of paperwork which is the culmination of all of the details I referenced earlier.

I also meet with the students one week prior to testing to explain the procedures, including the important cell phone policy. Often times, I feel like I am more of a cheerleader, encouraging students to do their best. Motivating students to give their full effort on the Keystones can be challenging at times. Current sophomores and juniors do not need to achieve proficiency to graduate. To illustrate an example of our efforts, last year, I had an aide assist me in preparing 3,000 construction paper feet to coordinate with my theme (Put your best foot forward.) Students who worked diligently were rewarded with a foot. Random "feet" were chosen to win various raffle prizes. This incentive works for many of our students, but not all. Some of the students testing are special needs students. They struggle academically on a daily basis, even more when required to take an exam that is not modified to match their abilities.

When all of the testing "care packages" have been assembled to include scratch paper, formula sheets, sharpened pencils, rosters, etc., testing is set to begin. Currently, we have ten days to complete six modules. During this cycle, we only have nine days allotted due to the Thanksgiving holiday. Also, we try to avoid utilizing Mondays which have higher rates of absenteeism. The day prior to testing is spent confirming details of the testing. After all, I feel as though I have eaten, slept and breathed testing for the last couple of months, but not everyone has. A small group of students will be prepped to circulate the testing rooms with loaner calculators to be sure our students are equipped with the last of our "must haves."

On our first day of testing, immediately following the break, I spoke with one particular special education student who was having trouble completing the free response portion of the Literature test. He was very frustrated and I was called to the testing room. I did my best pep talk. After all, if I telemarketed credit cards in college, I can surely convince my students to work hard on standardized tests. Right?

The conversation went something like this...

Me: "You can do this."

His answer: "It's the first day back from Thanksgiving break. I hate these Keystones."

Me: "It could be worse. The PSSA's involved more testing days." (I proceeded to count them aloud.)

His reply: "I'd rather do the PSSA's. These are harder."

Me: "You're only doing three subjects. Future classes will need to pass five to graduate."

His answer: "Then I'd definitely drop out."

Sadly, he wasn't kidding. He meant what he was saying.

At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> testing session, we accommodate our students that need extended time, both regular education and special education students. All proctors converge upon my office to return their supplies and the assembly line resumes. The boxes are disassembled, supplies are replenished, pencils are refreshed, and a make-up list of absent students is compiled. At the conclusion of extended time, booklets are refiled in their appropriate boxes and we prepare for day two. Only five more days of testing!

Typically, most schools are not audited during testing. The odds just don't favor it. Last year, we were audited twice during the keystones, once in December and once in May. Each audit consumed about four hours of my time, answering questions, producing documentation, summoning teachers to respond to inquiries, etc. Thankfully, the auditors were complimentary both times. During the second audit, the auditor suggested that we wall off part of my office space to include a locked area inside of my locked office. When I questioned the feasibility, she suggested an alternative: my office locks should be changed and only I and the DAC could have the keys, not even our head custodian or assistant principal. We did comply with that request.

Throughout the rest of the keystone window, the testing cycle continues much like the movie "Groundhog Day." At the end of module two of each test, booklets are packed up in accordance with strict instructions. The DRC label is placed on flap A, the UPS label on flap B.....three strips of packing tape...answer sheets in a plastic bag in the box, secured with a zip tie.

In order to meet our participation rate, we continue to hound our absent students, sometimes doing home visits. Students that are enrolled in our cyber program are particularly difficult to coax to report for testing.

At the end of the makeup window, we breathe a collective sigh of relief.....and prepare for the next testing window to do all of this again later in the school year. We wait with baited breath, hoping that all of our hard work pays off in the form of favorable results. In the meantime, we will tweak curriculum, craft new ways to remediate students and do all of the other non-testing tasks required of us.

Many busy administrators would delegate this to someone else. Perhaps to guidance? Or to the curriculum director? The problem is that I realize how much time this consumes of my schedule. If I delegate this mammoth undertaking to them, they won't be effective in their position either. They won't be able to tend to the student who just experienced the loss of a parent. They won't be available to attend a vital training for the new math series we are implementing in our elementary school. Since I am hands-on, I know who withdrew last week, whose schedule was changed, which special education

students need to be tested in a small group setting, etc. This is so important that I can't imagine delegating it to someone else. However, realistically, we may reach the point where we will need to hire someone as an assessment coordinator as we add more tests to the line-up.

I am very energetic and complete all of this behind the scenes with very few people observing what is involved. I would resign myself to call this part of "the job" except that all of this preparation detracts from what I believe is one of my most important priorities: being accessible to my students and staff. Part of what makes our larger school feel like a community is the personal connections we forge with our students. They feel comfortable approaching me with a concern. I even consider this a proactive layer of security for our school. Studies show that students are less likely to drop out of school or engage in risky behavior if there is someone with whom they connect and trust.

This leads to a lingering question. What are the unintended consequences of increased testing?

How many students will fail to reach proficiency? NCLB proved that 100% proficiency is unachievable.

Will we lose our rich elective course offerings as we are forced to offer Keystone remediation courses to many of our students? Will Keystone Algebra replace AP Statistics when we exhaust our available staff?

Who will oversee the PBA component that will be required of non-proficient students? In our current economic climate, I can't imagine having the staffing to do this.

Will our graduation rate suffer? Will the student I referenced earlier decide to opt for a GED instead of a diploma? The economic impact of high school dropouts is well-documented. They earn less money, are more likely to rely on government assistance, and sadly, even have a lower life expectancy.

Are the Keystone tests a true measure of our students' understanding of vital concepts? Are they a reliable indicator of a student's future success in college, the military, or ultimately at his intended career?

If we cannot confidently answer these questions, I would ask that we take the time to study, monitor and adjust testing when warranted. A little reflection may take time, but is integral to maximizing the benefits we hope to reap as a result of the keystones. There is too much at stake for us to continue experimenting....or to continue without proper planning, training or sufficient communication. I would be happy to expand upon anything I mentioned or to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. It is truly an honor.