

Mr. Jake Miller
Cumberland Valley School District
House Bills 168 and 177
Statewide Graduation Requirements and PA Core Standards
House Education Committee
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Good morning, Chairman Saylor, Chairman Roebuck, and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Jake Miller, and I currently serve as a 7th grade U.S. history teacher in Cumberland Valley School District. I appreciate the opportunity to provide firsthand, field-based testimony on House Bill 168 and 177. Thank you for your attention to the issues surrounding Keystone Exams and PA Core Standards, and thank you for inviting me here today.

Beginning with my high school graduating Class of 2001, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has instituted several shifts in policy regarding graduation requirements. My class was the first to be incorporated with a graduation project, which has since come and gone. The following graduating class was the first to have to complete the PSSA. Since then, we've continued to increase the measures for students to receive their diploma, up to and including today's Keystone Exams.

As Mr. Oleksiak stated before me, we are not opposed to assessment. We're teachers. We're the ones who created the first tests. Heck, my students are currently taking a quiz in their 3rd period class as we speak. What we have issues with is basing a student's entire academic career on three – and possibly five – different standardized tests.

At Cumberland Valley High School, many of my colleagues led the way by piloting the Keystone Exams a few years ago. Since they are so experienced with administering them, they have some pretty strong feelings on the subject, so I decided to survey them:

- Only 12 percent of the teachers support the Keystone Exams.
- A full 83 percent oppose them. Half of the respondents “strongly oppose.”
- Some 67 percent stated that the Keystone Exams are “just more bureaucratic red tape.”
- 92 percent believe that there are more pressing educational issues for the legislature than adding more Keystone Exams.

- While 83 percent of teachers oppose the current Keystone Exams, an astounding 94 percent oppose adding additional ones.

Some issues my colleagues raised regarding the Keystone Exams are:

- They do not accommodate students with learning disabilities.
- They severely limit students who plan to enter the work force (rather than attend college).
- Standardized tests offer a quick and easy (although by no means accurate) way to chart student progress.
- What legitimacy is there to the Keystone Exam? Could you or I pass the Keystone Exam in Biology? I'm not so sure.
- One thing that makes America great and so cutting-edge, innovative, and entrepreneurial is our inclination to curiosity and inquiry. Standardized testing thwarts that.

To the general public, challenging standards and data behind them should seem like good things. It is also fair – and fundamental – to expect students to be proficient in biology, algebra, and literature. Many students across the commonwealth – my 7th grade students included – will do fine on the Keystone Exams.

But to the student who fails these exams, the fallout can be absolutely awful. At our school, as is true of schools across the commonwealth, those who fail the Keystone are placed in remedial courses to ensure that they will pass the exam. This course has them complete the same rote learning over and over again to master the areas they failed in last year's exam. Oftentimes, this remedial course comes at the expense of elective courses – like art, technology education, agriculture, engineering, and more – just so the student can “retake” their science, mathematics, and/or literature course. It goes without saying that, to the average teenager, this is nothing short of punishment.

From what I've gathered at my district, the amount of students who continue in the remedial courses are dwindling each year. The principals have said that these high-risk students failing the high-states exams are beginning to dropout.

The impacts can also be felt by students who pass the Keystone Exams. How, you might ask? At Cumberland Valley High School, the increased need for remedial courses may soon come at the expense of non-Keystone Exam courses that can define careers. Some of those courses being considered for the chopping block are Bio-Chemistry and Anatomy & Physiology. These two courses may drive students to careers, but these courses – and others – may also no longer be offered by school districts.

This burden isn't solely on the students; it is also mounting within schools implementing the Keystone Exams. Teachers' schedules have been reworked and class loads increased. Based upon estimates solely at Cumberland Valley High School, our district will be required to hire at least 2 new teachers to help ease the burden the added remedial classes have placed upon the teaching schedule. This adds more costs to school districts.

Likewise, the costs are also mounting for the commonwealth. From what I've learned, the Keystone State will spend more than \$160 million on the Keystone Exams. As a teacher who has personally seen classrooms overflowing with students, lacking proper resources, teachers who are suffering emotional turmoil from the stresses of the classroom, and students who could use more direction, challenge, and encouragement, I know we can agree that \$160 million could be more appropriately spent elsewhere.

I raise this concern because I struggle to measure our return on this hefty investment. More bureaucratic red tape? Less time for teachers to teach worthwhile, inspired curriculum? Administrators spending more time on statistics than students? More frustrated, disheartened students? That hardly seems like a worthwhile expense.

I know many of the legislators in this room are worried about both the financial future and educational future for all Pennsylvanians. It is my humble opinion that the Keystone Exams offer no realistic boost to either. If anything, they are detrimental to our state coffers and our students' and schools' success.

Indeed, from my perspective in the field, high-stakes testing has been head over heels more high-risk than high-reward.

For these reasons, like Mr. Oleksiak previously stated, I appreciate the efforts of Rep. Tobash and others on this committee who have voiced concerns about the use of graduation exit exams. HB 168 would eliminate the use of Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement. To borrow Mr. Oleksiak's words, "We both whole-heartedly endorse this idea and urge the House Education Committee to approve the bill as soon as possible." Students are taking Keystone Exams this year and those scores are being banked for their projected graduation in 2017. There is no need to put these students through the stress of high-stakes exams, and there is no need for school districts to waste precious financial resources on remediation for students who may simply have trouble taking tests, had a bad day, or were distracted by something going on in their lives. We need to have high expectations for our young people, but we also have to use common sense and make decisions about their future using measures that are fair.

When I told my students, who are very appropriately studying the foundations of American government this week, that I was going to speak on two pieces of legislation before the House Education Committee, they were curious to know what they referenced. When I shared that HB 168 discussed the Keystone Exams, they began to boo. One student stayed behind to say that – as a 7th grade student, mind you – he was worried that he might not graduate because he won't be able to pass the literature Keystone Exam because he suffers from dyslexia.

The other bill that I told my students we are discussing is HB 177, regarding PA Core Standards. Like most of my students, most teachers' opinions waver regarding the PA Core and the related Common Core standards. It is not the lightning rod that it is for the general public and for some legislators.

You might ask, "How can that be?" I say that frankly because, when given the time to be creative and cutting-edge, teachers have met the demands of the PA Core before anyone ever named it such. In my own classroom, I've developed a mock trial, written and performed my own plays, created a Shark Tank game show, created our own board games, began the National History Day

competition at our school, and this March we plan on writing a bill for the General Assembly to consider.

At Good Hope Middle School, where I teach, my colleagues have had students build robots, experiment on pre-packaged foods, used mathematical equations to analyze the shadows of buildings and speeds of passing traffic, created artwork for their own t-shirts and then printed them, worked a kiln and made some pretty incredible monster vases, created their own award-winning pieces of fiction and non-fiction, created applications for their devices, constructed incredible cutting boards for Christmas gifts, and enjoyed the curiosity behind learning. That's what good teaching is all about.

Today, unfortunately, some teachers are so frustrated that they're leaving the profession because of the added rules, regulations, and lack of time to do that kind of creative work. We can say the same of administrators as well. The stresses on our profession are mounting. We need your help. Removing Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement is one step we can make to improve the ever-important role of educating our youth.

In summary, when you as lawmakers give teachers the time to do great things, they will do just that. We've seen it across our state, and it's happening right now, as we sit here today. However, the standards and expectations have been changed so many times in the last few years that we have to be continually retrained in them. Coupled with the additional requirements, such as the new Student Learning Objectives and the Danielson Model of Teacher Evaluation, it often feels like educational guidelines are akin to building the plane while it's in mid-flight.

My fear is an education system that is filled with droning instead of determination. One that is filled with students and teachers who operate in fear instead of best practices. Your staff probably doesn't operate best in fear. Students and teachers don't either. I also fear that we are changing education to be more about what we can statistically measure rather than building fundamental skills in students such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, skills that will be vital to their future and to ours.

I implore you to empower Pennsylvania's teachers. If you want better educational results, there really is no other way. I cannot remember much about my graduation project, but I can tell you about the teachers who changed my life with full conversations and lessons that made me the concerned citizen speaking in front of you today. I speak for all teachers across the commonwealth when I say we just want to continue to empower the students for Pennsylvania's posterity.

Thank you for the opportunity to present comments on HBs 168 and 177. I will be happy to answer any questions at this time.