



**Testimony to the House Education & House Veteran Affairs and
Emergency Preparedness Committees - Graduation Requirement**

Presented by

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Good morning. My name John Callahan and I serve the Pennsylvania School Boards Association as its Assistant Executive Director. The PSBA is a nonprofit statewide association representing the 4,500 elected officials who govern the commonwealth's public school districts. PSBA is a membership-driven organization that is pledged to the highest ideals of local lay leadership for public schools. We work to support reforms for the betterment of public education and to promote the achievements of public schools, students and local school boards.

I want to thank the Chairman of both committees, prime sponsor Representative Bill Kortz and the members of the two committees for their kind invitation to present today on House Bill 1858 that would implement a mandated naturalization graduation requirement in Pennsylvania. Under the bill, all high school students would have to take and receive a passing grade on the United States Citizenship Test on Civics, produced by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. The test would effectively become a high school exit exam in addition to the existing Keystone Exams.

While the goal of increasing students' understanding of government is worthy, PSBA believes House Bill 1858 creates a redundant and unnecessary mandate. State regulations under Title 22, Chapter 4, require public schools to provide instruction in civics and government at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Further, Pennsylvania has academic standards for civics and government that specifically describe what students should know and be able to do, with a sequence for students in grades 3, 6, 9 and 12. Schools administer assessments to their students in this instructional content area.

House Bill 1858 establishes a new graduation requirement at the very time the General Assembly, under Act 1 of 2016, has suspended the mandate for students to pass the series of high-stakes Keystone Exams in order to graduate. The Department of Education recently recommended to the General Assembly its recommendations for replacing this testing mandate. The department notes that according to research and the experience of other states, passing high school exit exams is not the sole valid measure of mastery of standards-based core subject matter, nor is it the sole reliable indicator of readiness for postsecondary success.

PSBA has consistently and will continue to be opposed to high stakes testing. It is inappropriate to base high school graduation decisions on the results of a state test rather than a comprehensive long-term academic record. We supported the passage of Act 1 of 2016 which postponed the current graduation requirement in order to perform a thorough review for the following reasons that apply to this mandated naturalization graduation requirement:

High stake tests do not work

There is no evidence that high stake tests accomplish the majority of the policy goals they were developed to support. The National Research Council's 2011 Incentives and Tests-Based Accountability in Education Study concludes that there is no scientific basis for the current heavy reliance on high stake tests for measuring student achievement or school performance. The NRC states that the benefit of high stake tests have been "small or nonexistent." Many researchers have evaluated testing and have indicate the following:

- **Test-based decisions do not prepare students for college success.** Some students who successfully demonstrate learning through classroom performance do not score well on

standardized tests. These often include students with test anxiety and learning disabilities as well as students whose first language is not English. A review of research has found that there is no definitive evidence that college enrolment rates increase with high stake tests.

- **High stake tests reinforce inequity.** Typical students do not appear to benefit greatly by taking exit exams, but those that are already vulnerable, such as low-income and minority students often are worse off. The National Research Council Blue Ribbon Commission found that high school exit exams decreased graduation rates for vulnerable populations by two percentage points on average.¹
- **High stake tests increase dropout rates.** A 2013 study by Steve Hemelt and Dave Marcotte looked closely at the relationship between exit exams and high school completion and found that the dropout rate was increased by 11 percent when examining those students in twelfth grade (the year exit exams truly have their ultimate impact).
- **High stake testing is not associated with workforce success.** In the study of research on exit exams performed by the National Research Council it was found that high stake tests based on standards are likely not associated with higher employment or earning for students overall.
- **High stake testing produces teaching to the test.** The higher the stakes, the more schools focus instruction on the tests. As a result, whole subjects are being dropped, including opportunities for music and art. Important skills that cannot be tested with standardized tests, such as writing research papers, public speaking or conducting laboratory experiments, are not taught. This narrowing of curriculum is most severe for low-income students. A study of California, Georgia and Pennsylvania school districts found that teachers narrowed their curriculum and instruction to focus on tested topics and also increased their use of test like problems and formats.²

Financial impact of testing

The development and implementation of the three Keystone Exams now being used has cost taxpayers approximately \$70 million over a six-year period. Many more millions are being spent by the state to develop, provide, distribute, collect, analyze and report results of tests that support instruction and accountability for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessments (PSSA), Keystone Exams, Classroom Diagnostic Tools and other assessments.

An additional cost to districts is the extensive recordkeeping systems to match students with the Keystone Exams that have been successfully completed and those for which remediation will be necessary. Remediation would conservable come in to play in the case of these tests – current remediation is conservatively estimated to cost over \$300 million. This means between the state and school districts, Pennsylvania’s testing programs since 2008 have cost the taxpayers conservatively over \$1.1 billion

¹ Jennifer Jellison Holme, Meredith P. Richards, Jo Beth Jimerson and Rebecca W. Cohen "assessing the effect of high school exit examinations," review of educational research December 2010

² Hamilton, L.S. , Stecher, B.M. , March, j.A., McCombs, J.S. , Robyn Russel, J.L. et al. (2007) Standards -based accountability under No Child Left Behind: Experiences of teachers and administrators in three states. Santa Monica, CA: RAND

As mentioned earlier, the state does requires instruction in social studies content areas, specifically including civics and government. PSBA believes that consistent implementation of the standards is critical and that the State Board of Education's current regulations address the policy objectives of House Bill 1858. Chapter 4, § 4.12 of the PA Academic standard includes:

(3) Social studies.

(i) History. Study of the record of human experience including important events; interactions of culture, race and ideas; the nature of prejudice; change and continuity in political systems; effects of technology; importance of global-international perspectives; and the integration of geography, economics and civics studies on major developments in the history of the Commonwealth, the United States and the world.

(ii) Geography. Study of relationships among people, places and environments, of geographic tools and methods, characteristics of place, concept of region and physical processes.

(iii) Civics and government. Study of United States constitutional democracy, its values and principles, study of the Constitution of the Commonwealth and government including the study of principles, operations and documents of government, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, how governments work and international relations.

In addition, the State Board of Education has adopted academic standards for civics and government that I have attached to this testimony for your reference and can be found on the State Board of Education website at: <http://www.stateboard.education.pa.gov>.

In closing, PSBA would like to emphasize our belief that public schools provide meaningful academic instruction and assessment that engage students to be critical and creative thinkers. The association supports efforts to appropriately measure student attainment of state and local academic standards using measures of accountability and performance that employ multiple, ongoing methods of assessment for knowledge, skills and abilities. We believe that high stakes test do not achieve results and that the current state standards being implemented address the goals of House Bill 1858.

I thank you again for this opportunity to speak with you today and I am pleased to answer your questions.