

Articles from The Unionville Times

Op/Ed.: Keystones should not be a graduation requirement

2014-07-08 08:07:58 Mike McGann

The one-size-fits-all approach to education is wrong

By Stephen Barrar, *State Representative, 160th District*



State Rep. Stephen Barrar

This September will mark the first year the Keystone Exams will be used as the deciding factor for whether or not students will graduate from Pennsylvania's public high schools.

This September will also mark the five-year anniversary of House Resolution 456, the bi-partisan legislation that urged Gov. Ed Rendell to cease all funding and implementation of high school graduation requirements. I was a co-sponsor of this legislation, along with 80% of my colleagues in the House of Representatives.

Pennsylvania is home to 500 school districts and approximately 1,800,000 students. Each child that is enrolled in one of these school districts is different than the next child; they learn differently, they face different challenges, they excel in different areas, and they test differently. They are the 1.8 million reasons as to why the one-size-fits-all approach to education is

wrong.

I believe we should have standards for our schools and all stakeholders should be held accountable to these standards. However, I believe the best judges of a student's progress should be those who know the student best; parents, teachers, school administration and school boards. No Child Left Behind was wrong; it took the focus off the individual student and placed it on testing. The Keystone Exam takes this one step further, rather than targeting the school for low test scores; it targets and penalizes the child.

The Keystone Exams were first introduced as the Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA) on January 2, 2008. The Senate and House delivered an overwhelming, bi-partisan response of opposition by placing a moratorium on the Rendell Administration with the passage of Act 61 of July 9, 2008, Section 117 which specifically prohibited the promulgation, approval, or proposal of "a regulation to change or establish high school graduation requirements."

However, the Department of Education ignored this moratorium and issued a solicitation request to begin the development of GCAs.

Republican leadership in the House and Senate continued to urge the Governor to cease implementation, but it fell on deaf ears as the GCA morphed into the Keystone Exams and a contract for over \$200 million was signed with Data Recognition Corp.

On September 30, 2009 the State Board of Education took a vote to approve high school graduation requirements. The majority and minority chairmen of the House and Senate Education Committees sit on the State Board of Education. Rep. Paul Clymer, Republican Chairman for the House Education Committee, was the only legislator to vote no.

As the Federal and State government assume more control of education the local control diminishes. The personal face behind these tests fades away as these children become numbers. We are presented with data to debate over why some districts are reporting more progress than others. We do not know the personal story of each child behind the data; this is the exact reason we have school boards. Out of Pennsylvania's 500 school boards, less than 20 expressed support for the Keystone Exams.

Five years ago, the General Assembly was denied the opportunity to vote on the Keystone Exams and now we are at a critical turning point for education in Pennsylvania. This September our children will be equipped with a No. 2 pencil and a bubble sheet as their future weighs in the balance instead of with the local school district, where it belongs.

Stephen Barrar is a nine-term state representative. A Republican, he represents the 160th District, which includes various Chester and Delaware County communities. Because of redistricting, following the 2014 elections, it will now include Pocopson, Pennsbury, Kennett Township and Kennett Square in Chester County, along with Chadds Ford among its Delaware County communities.

