

Good afternoon Senator Eichelberger, Senator Dinniman and all of the members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present information regarding the impact of the Keystone Exams on our public schools.

First and foremost, Pennsylvania public schools are committed to making education in Pennsylvania second to none and the Chester County Intermediate Unit is dedicated to working with our local school districts to ensure that all students receive a quality education and are provided with the opportunity to reach their full potential. Despite the many challenges of meeting the needs of all learners, Pennsylvania's public school educators firmly believe that all students should be required to think critically and apply their learning and skills in realistic and meaningful ways and that all educators should be held accountable for the learning that takes place in their classrooms and their schools.

However, there are major challenges and concerns with the current implementation strategy of the Keystone Exams and Pennsylvania's school accountability system. While a moratorium has been placed on the Keystone exams until 2019, please keep in mind that the class of 2019 is currently in 10th grade and come September 2017 will be in 11th grade. As a result, all of these students are in limbo. Imagine if you were about to enter your junior of year high school and not know whether or not you would be able to graduate based on a single exam that you have taken.

Every member of the class of 2019 is required to take the Keystone exams and since they do not know whether or not the Keystones will be used as a graduation requirement, for the moment they must assume, and those responsible for their education must also assume that the Keystone Exams will be a graduation requirement and proceed accordingly. It is an urgent matter and this issue needs to be resolved as quickly as possible so that we may provide our students with the necessary guidance to complete the requirements to receive their high school diploma. I strongly urge you to rethink tying the Keystone Exams to a student's ability to graduate for the following reasons:

1. The use of the Keystone Exams narrows the curriculum in such a way that it negatively impacts the academic experience of students. Because the original implementation of the Keystone Exams was scaled back from 9 tests to 3 tests, the three existing Keystones have an inordinate (and unintended) amount of impact on student scheduling, remediation practices, and academic decisions. One glaring example is the priority based on biology above all other sciences, simply because a biology Keystone Exam is linked to a graduation requirement and the state accountability system.
2. Testing systems should be beneficial to students. The current length of the Keystone Exams is disruptive to the academic environment for not only the students involved, but also for the rest of the students in the school. The results of the Keystone Exams should be timely and able to be used to guide future educational decisions for that student. Because the Keystone Exams are end-of-course assessments, they appear too late in the student's course to guide future instruction in that course and they only give

informative guidance regarding the student's understanding of the content in that course - not the broader skills that students will need for college and career.

3. Using the Keystone Exams as an accountability measure is a flawed practice. The Keystone Exams serve as an end-of-course assessment, not a measure of a school's success in preparing students for college and career. The narrow scope of the three tests does not give an accurate picture of the knowledge that a student gains during a K-12 academic experience. Even when combined with other measures, using the Keystone Exams requires that iterative decisions are made to determine how they can be used (How are student scores banked? What year should reflect which student's scores? If a student re-takes the exam, which score should be used?) All of these issues stem from using the Keystone Exams for a purpose for which they weren't designed.

Also, as you are aware, intermediate units provide services to students who struggle in the traditional educational environment. As such, IUs are charged with developing, implementing and assessing innovative educational programs that allow every child to reach his or her full potential. It is with this mandate, given to intermediate units, that I am compelled to urge you to then not require those same students to all be evaluated and their educational achievements based on a single high-stakes test.

As an intermediate unit, CCIU provides special education services to thousands of preschool and school-aged students in Chester County every year. For our students with special needs who work diligently and tirelessly to meet the demands of the classroom and society, I ask you to consider the following:

First, the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act, known as IDEA, requires a strong emphasis on transition planning for adulthood for students with disabilities. Students are expected to meet these goals fully prior to graduation. The emphasis on “getting a passing grade on Keystones” is misaligned with best practices surrounding transition planning which include the mastery of skills needed to live and work independently and fully in the community.

Second, students with special needs who do not pass a Keystone exam are then forced into remedial classes and catch up classes rather than enjoying the full curriculum of the high school offerings with their peers.

Third, the two percent acceptable non-pass rate for special education students is helpful on some levels - from a global district passing rate. However, it does not address the self-esteem, high anxiety level or other negative impacts associated with taking the tests for the students with disabilities.

Fourth, having conflicting federal and state legislation regarding students with special needs makes educational programming very challenging. The Individuals with Disabilities Act requires schools to create individualized education plans for students with disabilities, yet the Keystones Exams are a requirement for the majority of students with disabilities – even when a student’s IEP team determines it is not in the best interest of the student.

The Legislature, through Act 1 of 2016, charged the Pennsylvania Department of Education to study the role of the Keystone Exams and to present to the General Assembly with recommendations for the continuation or discontinuation of the Keystone exams. As you are aware, among those recommendations, were to adopt and implement options for students to demonstrate postsecondary readiness other than the Keystones including: achieving equivalent score(s) in standards-based subject matter content area(s) on alternate assessments approved by PDE, this could include the SATs, the ACTs, National Occupancy Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI)/National Institute for Metalworking Skills (NIMS) Skills assessments, or other industry certifications; or by demonstrating competency in standards-based subject matter content through course grades or assessments plus evidence related to postsecondary plans that demonstrate readiness to meaningfully engage in those plans.

In its report, PDE concluded: "...the current graduation requirements too narrowly define postsecondary readiness. In order to more accurately recognize the varied pathways to postsecondary success, PDE recommends that a statewide graduation requirement reflect those pathways by offering options for students to demonstrate readiness."

As a result of PDE's conclusion and the testimony that you have heard today, I urge the Pennsylvania General Assembly not to require Keystone Exams as graduation requirements. We at the CCIU welcome the opportunity to provide additional measures of the impact of increased testing and changing accountability systems on our schools.

In addition, we know it is especially important that we work closely with our school districts, our legislators, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education during this critical time for Pennsylvania public education. We need to work together to have a strong accountability system with public commitment in place.

In conclusion, the CCIU and Chester County school districts welcome rigor, high expectations, and accountability and have willingly and regularly invested time and resources to equip students with the skills they need to be college and career ready. However, the financial, emotional and academic costs associated with the implementation of the Keystone Exams and delayed decision regarding the Keystones as a graduation requirement have negatively impacted districts, students, and their families. School districts and IUs are concerned that the financial and student impact will become even more pronounced the longer the decision is delayed to permanently remove the Keystones as a graduation requirement.

We appreciate your support for the children of Pennsylvania, and support legislation that eliminates the Keystones as a graduation requirement and allows school districts to adopt and implement options for students to demonstrate postsecondary readiness other than the Keystone exams.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.