

LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF PENNSYLVANIA, INC.

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TO: Senator Jeffrey Piccola, Chair and Senate Education Committee

FROM: Sharyn Denham, Learning Disabilities Association of Pennsylvania

SUBJECT: **Graduation Requirements/Keystone Exam**

Date: July 13, 2009

On behalf of the Learning Disabilities Association of Pennsylvania, I want to thank Sen. Piccola and the Senate Education Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony for the record regarding the proposed new graduation requirements or Keystone exams.

As a result of our mutual concern for all Pennsylvania's students, LDAPA joined with a broad-based coalition in opposition to this proposal. With our shared concerns, respect and cooperation, the Pennsylvania Coalition for Effective and Responsible Testing (CERT), formed as a broad-based alliance that includes parents, educators, administrators, advocates for students with disabilities, and civil rights groups. CERT presented a counter proposal for consideration, Keystone 2.0, which would not deny a high school diploma but count 20% toward the final grade.

The announcement by Joseph Torsella, Chairman of the State Board of Education, that consensus had been reached was premature at best and excludes the legitimate concerns of the vast majority of organizations who have been working together within the CERT group. The 33% weight of the exams and zero credit given to those students who score below basic is unacceptable and places the burden on students who may not have had an equal opportunity to benefit from their instruction due to a learning disability or insufficient educational opportunity.

High-stakes testing has not improved education but has added to the overall decline in high school graduation and the associated social and economic hardship that accompanies an ineffective education. Students at risk, such as those with learning disabilities, will be most vulnerable and dropout rates will increase as they have in states that have adopted graduation exit exams. These students will be victims twice, first when they received an inadequate or inappropriate education, and then are held accountable for that education when denied a diploma after successfully completing their district's requirements.

Although the Keystone testing is voluntary and school districts may use their own testing measures to determine graduation, validation is mandatory and costly with PDE picking up half the costs involved. Those districts with more wealth and larger tax bases will be in a better position to support validation of their testing as opposed to smaller and financially challenged districts. This basically will tie the hands of districts already struggling to provide quality education and their students. Children already dealing with inadequate educational opportunities will have another burden placed upon them. This is judging all students by the same standards where they are not receiving an equal education and is discriminatory.

We ask that the Senate Education Committee consider leveling that playing field for all children regardless of where they live, social or economic status, their abilities or disabilities. We cannot afford to fail our children and ask you to stand up for their future as well as our own.

LDAPA was proud to participate in CERT's cooperative efforts and we hope to be a part of continued dialogue and discussion regarding quality education for all children in Pennsylvania. We thank you for this opportunity to share our concerns.