

Thomas Obermeyer

From: Friedman_Jeff [Friedman_Jeff@asdk12.org]
Sent: Sunday, March 15, 2009 4:08 PM
To: Sen. Bettye Davis; Sen. Charlie Huggins; Sen. Donny Olson; Sen. Gary Stevens
Cc: Comeau_Carol; Siegfried_Robin; Gardner_Rhonda; Don Burrell; Thomas Obermeyer
Subject: SB 109

Dear Vice Chair Davis and Education Committee Members:

I am writing about SB 109 which will be heard by the Senate Education Committee on Monday.

SB 109 repeals the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam. The Anchorage School Board has noted a number of problems with this exam over the years. I will write about my own perspective on this exam, but I believe these thoughts are shared by the other members of the Board.

First, the exam is not a a good measure of whether someone is ready for a high school diploma. The test is closer to an exam to determine whether someone is ready to take high school level classes. It is a basic skills test and it identifies students who need remedial work before they are capable of taking standard high school class work. While that is useful information to know, there are better, less expensive, and less time consuming ways to obtain that same information.

Unfortunately, a number of students each year pass the HSGQE and then drop out of school under the mistaken belief that this test shows they know everything they need to know to obtain a diploma. Having passed what they see as a High School exit exam, they see no reason to remain for a diploma. These dropouts are not adequately prepared for the work force. Even if they don't drop out officially, students sometimes drop out mentally and though they are attending classes, they are not fully engaged because they believe they have already passed the important requirement for a diploma.

This test is also extremely time consuming. Twice a year, high schools lose a week of instruction time because of the three days of testing. While the testing doesn't take all week, the interruption is enough to disrupt instruction for most of the week.

There are also issues of fairness concerning such a high stakes test. There are some students who just do not perform well in a testing situation. They are able to demonstrate mastery of the subject in class and in other test situations, but they fall apart in a high stakes, all or nothing test. Other students from whom English is their second language may also have mastered the subject matter but fall short on the test because English doesn't come easily to them. Then there is the whole area of Special Education. What accommodations are appropriate for each student under their IEP? Are students given a fair chance to pass this test despite their disabilities? Are they being given an advantage over other students because of a disability?

The cost of the test is also an issue. I am sure you will have a fiscal note indicating how much the State will save by not having this test. Fiscal notes don't usually discuss costs to the local districts, however. Time, money, and energy go into ensuring that the test is properly administered by certified teachers. There are strict limits as to who can administer the test to which students. This is particularly hard in some of our smaller schools in Anchorage, and I imagine it is even harder in rural Alaska.

I know there has been some discussion about replacing the HSGQE with the WorkKeys skills test. That is something that is worthy of consideration, especially if WorkKeys was used as a skills assessment system throughout a student's high school education rather than as a high stakes test. WorkKeys provides real time, relevant information about a student's progress to parents, teachers, and students. It is something students can use to help them take control of their own education. This is unlike the HSGQE which many students and parents view as an irrelevant hurdle to be jumped before receiving a diploma.

Students who obtain all of the credits needed to graduate should already have all of the basic skills that are tested by the HSGQE. If there are concerns that some districts might be graduating students who don't have those skills, then the solution to that is

through oversight by DEED. In Anchorage, 95% of the students who have the credits to graduate have also passed the HSGQE. I am confident that the remaining 5% are not being passed in their coursework without having those basic skills. Instead, I believe they are the students who have issues with the test taking procedure rather than mastery of the content.

The Anchorage School Board looks forward to working with the Legislature and with this Committee to find a better method of ensuring that all students who receive a diploma have adequately mastered the content needed for that diploma. I just do not believe the HSGQE is the tool to do that with.

Jeff Friedman
Anchorage School Board
1534 D Street
Anchorage, AK 99501
907-742-4699 (Home)