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April 6, 2022

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

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650 words

### **An abject failure: the Keystone Exams**

The concept of achieving proficiency on Keystone Exams as a high school graduation requirement has been a very costly failure in Pennsylvania, concludes a new analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“Implementation has been continuously postponed while more and more complicated and expensive-to-administer alternatives have been enacted into law,” says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 13*).

It was in 2010 that the Pennsylvania Legislature adopted the Keystone Exams to, first, establish statewide high school graduation requirements and, second, as a way for state and federal governments to hold high schools accountable for educating students.

The tests bowed in 2012 and the plan was to have the Keystones becoming a graduation requirement in 2017.

At the outset, students had to receive a score of “proficient” in areas covering math, English and science. But the first results – posted for the 2014-15 school year – were troubling: On the Algebra test, 35.5 percent were below proficient, 27 percent were below proficient in English and 41 percent were below proficient in Biology.

That prompted the Legislature to pass Act 1 of 2016, delaying the “proficiency” mandate for graduating until 2019. But over the following six years, test results for math and English not only failed to improve but slightly worsened through 2019 (math 36.7 percent below proficient and English 28.5 percent below proficient).

And they fell again in 2021 following a COVID cancellation in 2020, especially in English (with 50 percent below proficient, though the number of students taking the Literature test statewide fell by 91 percent from the 2019 count of 11,888).

And what about Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS)?

In 2021, 968 11<sup>th</sup>-grade students took the Keystone Algebra exam. Of the test-takers, 52 percent (502) failed to achieve a proficient score -- a three percentage point rise from 2019. Only two

PPS schools -- CAPA at 24.2 percent and the Science and Technology Academy at 14.5 percent - had better results than the state average.

“Indeed, both these schools had better results than in 2019,” Haulk notes. “The other schools ranged from 44.4 percent to 100 percent failing to reach the proficient level. Three schools had over 90 percent scoring under the proficiency requirement.”

Do note that in 2021, only three high schools in the state had zero students scoring below proficient on the Algebra exam -- Julia Masterman in the City of Philadelphia, Downingtown STEM Academy and the Wilkes-Barre STEM Academy, which had only 19 test takers.

The two highest academically ranked high schools in the Pittsburgh region -- Peters in Washington County and Pine-Richland in Allegheny County -- had 6.1 percent and 6.5 percent, respectively, below proficient on the Algebra exam in 2021.

Long story short, legislative delays now have pushed using Keystone Exam results for graduation until the 2023 graduating class. But a legislative measure adopted in 2018 allows for 20 alternative accomplishments that can be used to meet graduation requirements for students who cannot reach Keystone proficiency levels.

That, however, could be an intractably expensive option for schools to administer. Surely there is a more reasonable and more cost-efficient alternative to what Haulk says has become a “convoluted process” that has made the Keystone Exam requirement “a mockery.”

“Indeed, its very existence points to the failure that high school education has become for nearly 40 percent of Pennsylvania high school students,” Haulk says. “Something drastic needs to be done and soon.

“Continuation of the fiction that high school students are qualified for a diploma even when they perform very poorly on math, science or English tests undermines credibility and tells failing students they are educated when they are not and likely consigns them to menial jobs.”

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