
Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to give you my perspective on the cost of assessments.

Let me begin by telling you a little bit about myself.

I am employed as a technical consultant at AT&T. I worked at Bell Labs in the Software Technology Center for about five years before taking a position in a new business unit that was creating infrastructure for something called the World Wide Web. You may have heard of it. That was 1995.

In my various positions I have had a front row seat in the development of the world we know today, first with the internet, more recently with cellular voice and data and now with "the cloud." In my career I have learned a lot about technology, how it is used well, and how it is used badly.

I have been a school director at Palisades since December, 2004. For most of that time, I have served as the PSBA and Legislative Liaison. In this role I have been privileged to participate regularly in various forums to exchange information, knowledge and experience with other school directors, administrators and education professionals from around the state and beyond.

At Palisades, we seek to make our students into lifelong learners, and I have sought to make this my own goal. As a board member, I read at least one current book on education each year, and I spend time reading academic papers and articles in the popular press. I have even dived into data and exercised my own feeble analytical skills to mine data at both PDE and the US Department of Education.

In my testimony today, I am going to review a few slides from a deck created by our Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Kate Kieres, in response to an inquiry by the Board about the time students spend in testing. I will

conclude with some observations I have developed while reflecting on some of the topics in Elizabeth Green's book, "Building a Better Teacher."

I think it is important to have some context when we talk about assessments, and particularly Keystone exams. PSBA members who were around 5 or 6 years ago might recall that unlike most of them, I was an advocate. I was in favor of the Keystones.

The concept of statewide testing across 10 or more core subjects struck me as a positive one, ensuring that instruction across PA would be uniform and graduates from one school would cover the same material as another, and that colleges and businesses could be confident that students from one part of the state would have covered the same material as those from another.

It seemed particularly advantageous to me that we would replace the many hours of PSSA preparation and testing with an end of course exam, something students would be taking anyway.

It did not seem unreasonable to expect students to be able to achieve a passing grade on 6 out of ten of these core exams.

I was comfortable that locally developed alternative assessments would accommodate those students with special needs who were not otherwise able to pass the Keystone exams.

Sadly, at the PSBA legislative conference last spring, I found myself having to apologize to my colleagues for supporting the Keystones. They were right and I was wrong.

The Keystone exams I described above are not the ones we have. Quite the contrary. What we have are assessments, not end of course exams.

Worse, because of the graduation requirement, we have turned these assessments into high stakes exams.

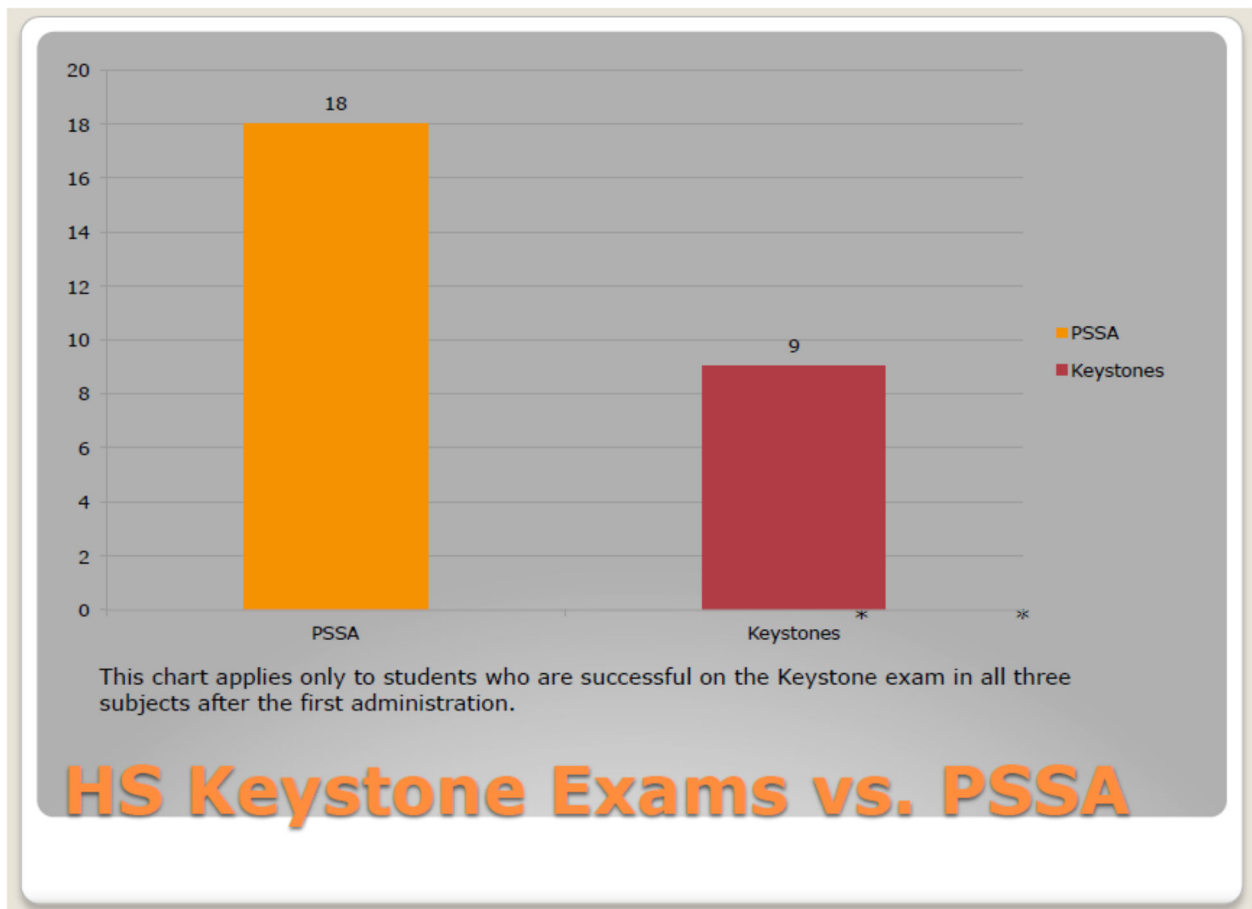
I never argued with fellow members about the value of high stakes exit exams. The research is quite clear that these are of extremely negative value and have a very large and unfavorable impact on graduation rates.

Finally, the locally developed project-based assessment has become a state-developed, web-based project that consumes an enormous amount of student and staff time.

This the purpose of this hearing, I am told, is to examine the cost of assessments. The charts below represent the analysis prepared for the Palisades School Board that I mentioned before.

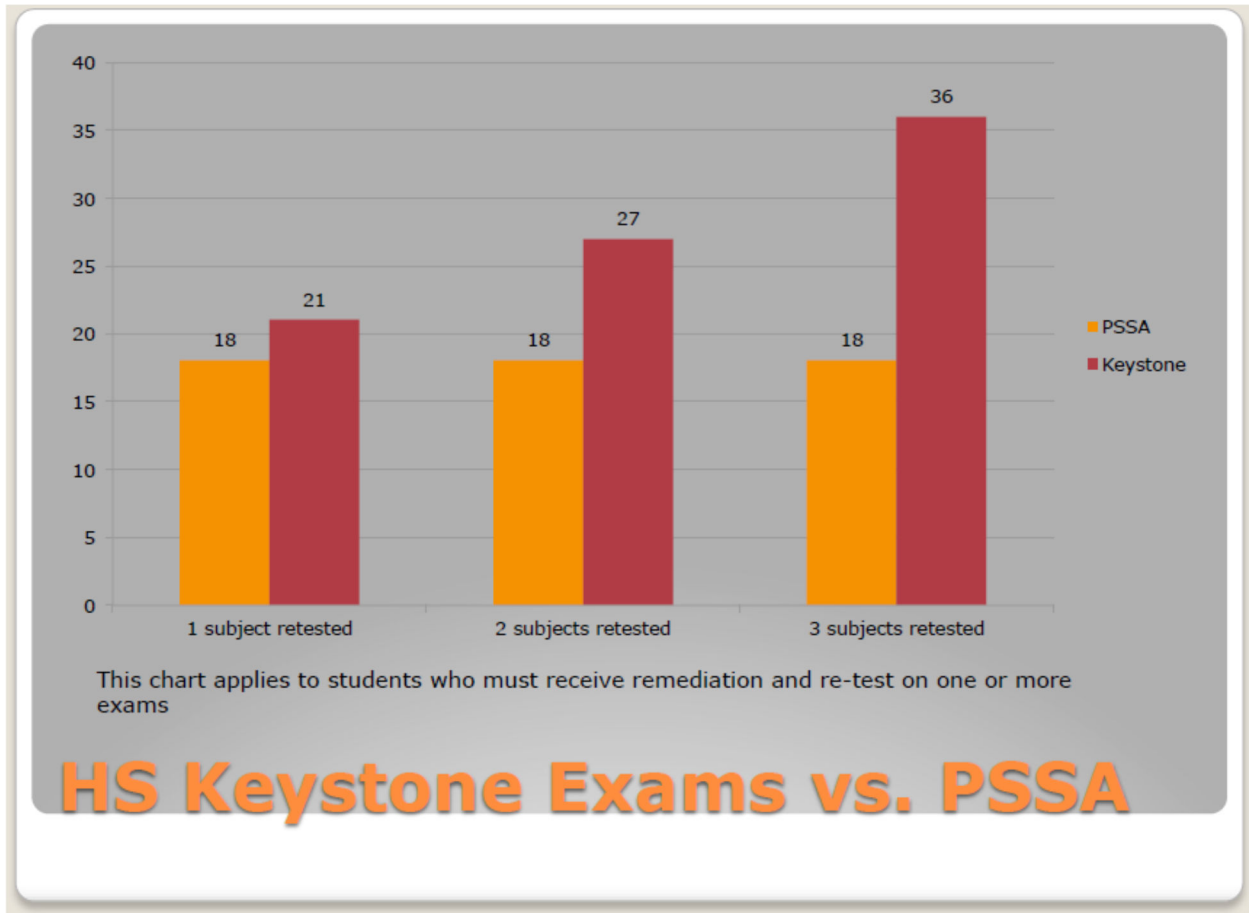
I have selected only a few related to Keystones in particular, but you can find the entire deck at the school's web site. There is a link at the end of this document.

In the first slide, you can see that the Keystone concept does not disappoint when it comes to relieving our students of the burden of the 11th grade PSSA, effectively cutting the time spent testing in half.



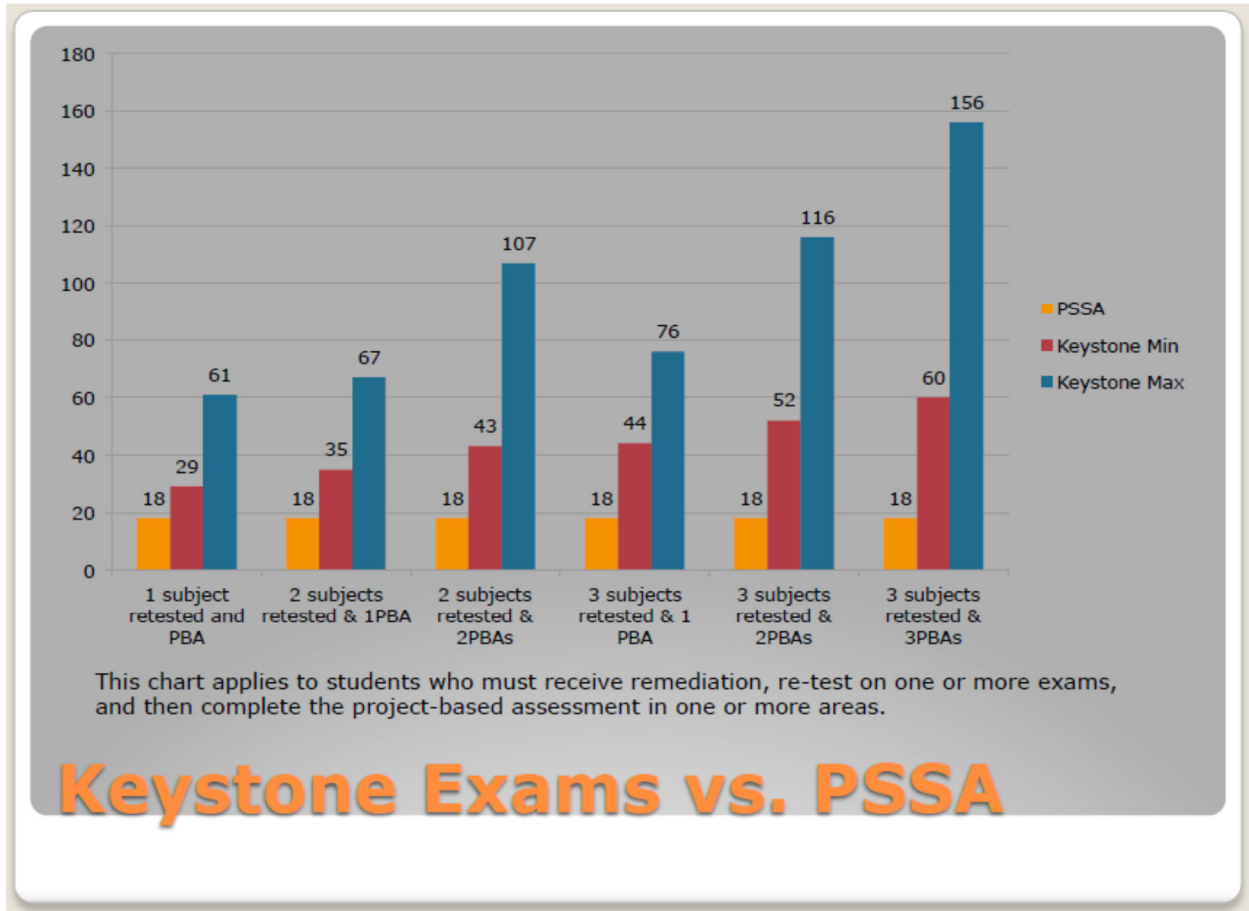
It is important to note that this only applies to those students who are successful in each subject on the first test.

In the second, we can see that the time advantage disappears the moment a student fails any one of these tests, and assessment time doubles if the student must retake all three.



At Palisades, this has had a direct impact on staffing, as the science program has been adjusted to integrate remediation into curriculum at a direct cost of 0.6 FTE. Such explicit costs have not emerged in math or language arts, but that does not mean the cost isn't there. It simply has not been covered by a specific change in our programs.

But the real pain is felt with the project-based assessment, as this last chart illustrates.



Please keep in mind that this chart only accounts for the time spent by the student, not for the opportunity cost to the student or to the learning support staff who must work with each one to ensure they complete the PBA.

You can be assured the because of the onerous nature of the PBA, students sacrifice valuable, relevant parts of their IEP to complete it. When I consider this impact, the word "unconscionable" comes to mind. If I were the parent of a special needs student, I would find it hard to tolerate this.

In closing, I want to reflect back on an earlier slide in the deck Dr. Kieres prepared. It discusses the nature of assessments.

- **Formative**
 - Administered during instruction (daily, periodic)
 - Provides information to the teacher about areas of strength/weakness for individual students and the group as a whole
 - Used to “drive” instruction
 - “Monitoring” or “check-up”

- **Summative**
 - Administered at completion of instruction
 - Used to measure understanding, usually to issue a grade or evaluation
 - “Audit” or “post-mortem”

Formative vs. Summative

In focusing on this slide, I want to draw your attention to the purpose of these assessments. In the one case, it is “Used to drive instruction.” In the other, it is used as an “audit” or “post mortem.”

Next I ask you to consider which one is of greater value to the student. I think the answer is clear.

The focus on the post-mortem assessments assumes that the issues that we have with the quality of teaching derive from the poor performance of the teachers, as if we can get rid of the bad apples and then everything will be fine.

If you are interested in producing good apples, though, shouldn't you focus your investments on how to grow them in the first place?

More than half a century of research has shown that the problem with under-performing schools is not in the schools or the classrooms. It is outside of the buildings, in the neighborhoods where poor parents have no time or resources to spend with their kids when they are young. It is in buildings that are poorly maintained and under equipped. It is in an environment where the relevance of book-learning cannot stand up against the skills required to survive on the street.

This is where the investment needs to be made.

And to expect to get a crop of good apples by honing your skills at finding the bad ones is exactly backwards. You get better apples by figuring out how to grow better apples!

We need to focus our efforts on teacher training, using "Lab Schools," teacher residencies or the Finnish model and provide aspiring teachers with 2-3 years of closely supervised, hands on training before putting them in a classroom on their own.

We need to escape from the notion that a great teacher is born and not made. We need to encourage continuing, interactive communities of educators in our schools, teachers who meet daily to review what they do in the classroom, what is working and what is not.

We need to divert all this spending on tests into spending on education. Not doing this is the true cost of these assessments.

References:

Standardized testing in Palisades, presentation by Dr. Kate Kieres, March 11 2015
<http://www.palisadessd.org/cms/lib03/PA01000106/Centricity/Domain/538/Testing%20Presentation%203.11.15.pdf>.

Suggested reading (with a caveat)

Caveat: some of these books are uneven, driven by an apparent need to promote charter schools, or at least an ambivalence about them. I urge you to focus on the methods, whether used in the classroom or used in the training of teachers, and not the system for delivering these methods, whether charter or traditional public school.

Building a Better Teacher. How Teaching Works (And How To Teach It To Everyone), by Elizabeth Green

<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/building-a-better-teacher/>

Teach Like a Champion, by Doug Lemov

<http://teachlikeachampion.com/books/teach-like-champion-2-0/>

The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education, by Diane Ravitch.

<http://dianeravitch.com/dianes-books/>

Drive, the Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us, by Daniel Pink

<http://www.danpink.com/drive/>

The Race between Education and Technology, by Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz.

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674035300&content=reviews>.

Finally, I urge you to study the Finnish model, and how that country was able to raise its schools literally from the bottom of heap of developed countries to the very top, in a focused and long-term strategy of investment in teacher training, and heed the words of Diane Ravitch in her review of Elizabeth Green's book, and endeavor to see to it that we "end up with recommendations for higher standards for entry into teaching, for practice-based internships, for mentors for new teachers, and other ideas that would send new teachers into the classroom with both knowledge and experience, as well as support for them in their early years as teachers."