

Keystone Exam requirement delayed 2 years

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, February 3, 2016 5:45 pm

High school juniors very likely breathed a sigh of relief when they learned they won't have to pass the Keystone Exams to graduate next year.

Gov. Tom Wolf signed a bill Wednesday to delay the tests' graduation requirement until the 2018-19 academic year.

"Taking a two-year hiatus to study the situation and come up with some well thought-out proposals is a great next move," said Centennial Superintendent David Baugh.



Wolf called the testing system "at best incomplete" and said it puts undue burdens on faculty, requiring the state to fix implementation issues and determine if there are better ways to measure student achievement.

The Keystone Exams test for proficiency in algebra 1, biology and literature.

The governor said his support for the legislation, which passed the Republican-led House and Senate unanimously, "doesn't mean that there's no role for tests." He also said he remains committed to accountability.

"What we're trying to do is offer the best instruction we can for kids," said New Hope-Solebury superintendent Steve Yanni. "Delaying these exams will give us more time to align our curriculum and our courses to give our kids the best shot to be successful."

Souderton Superintendent Frank Gallagher called the measure "a step in the right direction." The Keystone's are worthy tests, he said, but their high-stakes nature is unnecessary.

"They give us good information about our program, and from there we can use it to make improvements," he said.

Reasons for the delay include significant failure rates and the costs and time involved in helping students pass the alternative "project-based assessment." By one account, about 126,000 Pennsylvania students failed at least one Keystone last March.

Students who fail twice in a given test area must instead complete a project under the guidance of an instructor, and show they understand it.

Kate Kieres, assistant superintendent at Palisades, said several district students have either completed or started their project-based assessments, "so I'm sure there is a certain amount of frustration on their

part."

Kieres said the online work is designed to take six to eight hours to complete, but was taking much longer. Yanni described the system as "cumbersome."

"We navigated some of that," he said. "It's not the best way to measure student achievement."

Curtis Griffin, superintendent at Hatboro-Horsham, said superintendents found the Keystone Exams "required a lot of energy on the part of the district to staff this."

Additionally, once completed by students, he said, "The students never heard back from the state."

The legislation requires the Pennsylvania Department of Education to investigate alternate methods for students to demonstrate proficiency for graduation and present its findings within six months to the House and Senate Education committees.

"We just don't want to kick the can down the road two years and still be in limbo," Kieres said. "There are still uncertainties."

She said unless something changes, freshmen are now on the hook for the Keystone requirements.

As Griffin said, "We understand that for right now we're still in limbo."

The state Board of Education approved the Keystone Exams in 2013 after about six years in development.

Many lawmakers want a permanent end to the tests, which have been criticized as unfair to students from poorer schools. About a dozen states currently have similar graduation tests.

Several organizations, including the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the Pennsylvania State Education Association, have been critics of the mandate.

Jerry Oleksiak, president of the PSEA, said he'd love the Keystone requirement to "completely go away."

"High-stakes, pressure-filled tests aren't an accurate reflection of what a student is capable of," he said.

"This is a good time to look at our overall testing policies."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.