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Effective Graduation Proficiency Assessment: Parents' Perception of High-Stakes vs. Multiple Assessment as a Predictor of Future Success

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EFFECTIVE GRADUATION PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT:
PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF HIGH-STAKES VS. MULTIPLE ASSESSMENT AS A
PREDICTOR OF FUTURE SUCCESS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Title: Effective Graduation Proficiency Assessment: Parents' Perception of High-Stakes vs. Multiple Assessment as a Predictor of Future Success

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This qualitative cross-focus group study investigates how two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success in one small Pennsylvania School District.

Attitudes and experiences of parents of students who demonstrated proficiency on the State tests are compared and analyzed with those of parents of students who demonstrated proficiency on a local, holistic proficiency assessment model.

The collected data shows that students represented in the different groups had little difference in the achievement of stated goals in their post-high school careers. Both groups of parents further demonstrated negative attitudes toward the State assessment test and its impact on future success, although for different reasons. The parents of students who had demonstrated proficiency on the test expressed a belief that the proficiency assessment limited their students' instruction, while the opposite group of parents focused more on the negative feelings and loss of self-esteem generated from lack of test success.

Those findings supported the major conclusion of the study that both group of parents favored having the school involved in the teaching and assessing of emotional intelligence skills and habits and the assessment of proficiency through multiple sources to help students bridge to post-high school success.

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CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM

Introduction

A high school principal out for a summer stroll happened to cross paths with the mother of a recent graduate of his school. The mother eagerly launched into a long litany of Dean's Lists, scholarships and other academic and service awards the daughter had accumulated in her several years of college. She then put the exclamation point behind the post-high school successes of her daughter by referencing the sub-par performance on the State test of high school proficiency exam her offspring scored while in high school. "I guess that damn PSSA didn't know what it was talking about," she asserted.

So. What exactly should high school students be required to demonstrate they have learned in high school to show they are ready for the post-high school world? More concisely, what is effective graduation proficiency? Is it important to assess student proficiency in affective and emotional intelligence areas in addition to academics in order to ensure a successful transition between high school and the workplace or high school and ongoing career preparation? Labels such as self-discipline, ethics and emotional intelligence abound in the literature of success stories — success stories of entire organizations and success stories of individuals. The current pressures from high-stakes pen and paper testing causes concern as to whether these elements that are identified as foundational to success in the work world are part of the preparation of high school students. Or, to paraphrase educational consultant Dr. Willard Daggett, should current state testing programs be a starting line rather than a finish line? (2007)

According to the concept of accountability currently popular in the world of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, American education is -- or was -- failing. Studies such as one completed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provided evidence that, despite the spending of billions of federal dollars in the educational effort, “only 31% of fourth graders can read at proficient (passing) or advanced level” (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 6). Other studies claimed that the NAEP had determined that only about one-third (of American students) are proficient in reading, and fewer still in math (Walker, 2000). Politicians, businesspeople and journalists all have sounded the alarm that American students’ scores fall in the lower ranks when compared with their counterparts from around the world, falling so low as to constitute what many saw as a threat to our security and way of life for the future (Wright, 2002). With the need to ‘raise the bar’ of student and school achievement thus established, proponents of high-stakes testing claimed that “NCLB creates a culture of accountability, requiring schools to assess what they are doing to raise proficiency levels of all students and support teaching and learning” (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 26). The best and easiest way to demonstrate success in this arena, their argument ran, was that “each state sets minimum levels of improvement, measurable in terms of student performance (on a test)” (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 26).

As a result, every state now requires that students participate in statewide testing programs (Abrams and Madaus, 2003). Depending on the state, these programs vary in difficulty, content, item format and especially sanctions linked to test performance. According to Wolk, 24 states (such as New York, Massachusetts, Texas and Virginia)

now require that students demonstrate proficiency in selected areas in order to qualify for a high school diploma (2004). Other states (for instance, Missouri and Vermont) shift the focus to use the results to hold schools, rather than students, accountable. Still others, such as Pennsylvania, fall somewhere in the middle. At least one major western school district will now use the test results to determine teacher pay raises (Meyers, 2004).

However, critics of this reliance on test scores as the be-all and end-all measure of student, teacher and school effectiveness are sounding the alarm that this trend should raise some warning flags around the defining and naming of “proficient students.” Daniel Pink has coined the phrase “SAT-ocracy” to describe the U.S. educational system, going on to call the SAT (and other tests) “the desert (students) must cross to reach the promised land of a good job and happy life” (2005, p. 57). Arguments from this camp are numerous, ranging from statistical unreliability of scores (Lenton, 2004; Sadker and Littleman, 2004) to higher dropout rates (Sirotnak, 2004; Wrigley, 2003). They also point to national surveys that demonstrate a lack of support and understanding for the tests from parents and communities (Gleason and Guilfoyle, 2004). Other studies bemoan the lack of correlation from these tests to other indicators of proficiency such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test and Advanced Placement exams (Olsen, 2004, Wright, 2003). According to the Association of Supervision and Curriculum, this “narrow focus on a specific score and content area has had the unintended consequence of taking the focus away from the whole child, and some children altogether” (2007, p. 8). In the minds of those critics, these concerns serve as the classic example of the system thinking error Peter Senge described as “today’s problems com(ing) from yesterday’s solution” (1994, p. 57).

Yet another huge concern of some critics involves “narrowing the curriculum” to only those areas measured on the test while ignoring many other important lessons that may be instrumental in future success. Studies by Wrigley (2003) and Olson (2002) report findings that support the notion that state test scores have been known to drive curriculum to the point of ignoring the individual values a school culture holds dear. Abrams and Madeus sum up the argument when they note “curriculum narrows to what is covered by the test” (2003, p. 33). In that sense critics claim that high-stakes tests are, therefore, putting a blinder on the American education system and the public it serves. They argue that our vision of what education can – and should – be is being narrowed to what can be easily measured on a single pencil and paper test. ‘What gets measured gets done,’ says the business world mantra (Peters, 1982). Concern is being raised that the lessons getting left untaught include important life lessons such as emotional intelligence skills (Rice, 2007) and career exploration (Bass, 2006) that are equally important for future success in the workplace and in higher education.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study will be to investigate how two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success in one small Pennsylvania School District. With the results, the District in question may be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their current approaches in the area of assessment and curriculum as to whether they are helping students develop readiness for post-high school experiences.

No Child Left Behind legislation has called for more frequent testing and accountability on the results to help more clearly define what students know before graduating. In response, some schools have initiated local assessment programs designed

to go beyond the academic standards of the State test to address the “whole child” before adding a stamp of approval to a college or workforce-bound graduate. The school in this research has attempted to use the strategic design plan of Charles Schwan and William Spady to build a curriculum – and assessment program – that begins with identifying “what students should know,” “what they can do,” and “what kind of people they are” (1998, p. 126). Their work grows also from valid national concerns such as those outlined by groups such as the Association and Curriculum Development who in 2007 issued a position paper offering the opinion that academic achievement and proficiency was but one element of student learning and development. Among other areas of suggested improvement in the existing assessment structure, the paper goes so far as to call for incorporation of social and emotional learning into state standards to stand alongside existing academic goals (2007). As part of his whole child approach to contemporary strategic planning, Schwan uses the metaphor of “weight-bearing walls” as a way to describe the supports that stand in the way of today’s educational leadership moving the American education system from an Industrial Age to an Informational Age system. This becomes relevant to the goals of this research in his assertion that to remove a weight-bearing wall (such as the “paper and pencil orientation” of both curriculum and assessment) “you must apply another support before that wall can be removed” (March 22, 2007). Indirectly, a goal of this research may be to evaluate the effectiveness of the local assessment of proficiency as such a potential supplement to the State test.

Purpose of Study

No critic of high-stakes testing would argue that schools cannot be improved. Many parents would agree that there is more that should be done in schools to help prepare their student for the fast-changing world their student will face. Most would also agree with the metaphor that a blood pressure reading will never be a substitute for a full physical examination. Just as we continue to try to represent complex situations with one or two numbers, high-stake standardized test results will still be questioned as they are currently used as a sole judge of student readiness for life after high school. An increasing number of school officials and parents are concerned that the pressure of test performance is forcing schools to eliminate important lessons such as career exploration (Bass, 2006) and emotional intelligence lessons (Rice, 2007) as they juggle state demands to find the most effective means of preparing and assessing “whole students” for success in the next steps in their lives.

With NCLB the law of the land and the need to find a quick and easy measure of accountability, there is concern not all students and not all schools are being judged fairly and that important lessons for their future success are being overlooked by school curriculum ‘teaching to the test.’ Few can argue with the need to produce an increase in student achievement and proficiency, and even fewer would deny the need to improve school effectiveness. Likewise, there would be little disagreement for the need to motivate both students and schools alike to continue to invest the effort to produce continual improvement. But in our eagerness to meet all of those worthy goals and still find an easy way for parents, businesspeople, educators and students to understand who is winning at the game of education, have we allowed the elimination of other important

factors through which success can be obtained from school curriculum? Have we allowed a system to evolve that increases hopelessness and dropout rates especially among the very groups that we had intended to target for additional help? And, can we continue to hold individuals and schools accountable while not confusing and alienating the parents and community members whose support is critical?

No one argues that standardized tests by themselves are the sole problem. Few advocate eliminating their use as the easy solution to this accountability challenge. Used correctly, the data they provide can be a valuable part of the effort in helping to determine student proficiency and school effectiveness. Used correctly, the data they provide can be useful in helping to evaluate curriculum and instructional strategies. But used incorrectly, is there potential for harm? Critics note that the old saying that ‘when the only tool you have to use is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail’ could apply very easily to this case. When the only tool used to judge individual proficiency and potential and school effectiveness is a test score, do we hit everything and everyone over the head with those results? Opponents argue that the results can end up being very destructive both to individuals and to the entire educational system. Instead, should we look at teaching and learning as a complex procedure that cannot be evaluated and judged by one simple number?

Methodology, Study Site, and Population

This qualitative phenomenological study will gather data from parents of students who were rated as proficient on State assessments and from parents of students who were non-proficient and whose graduation was based on the District’s holistic alternative

assessment tool. The involved School District, like most in the State, can portray the progress of students with a K-12 framework. Connecting this information with student success after high school allows for a more complete look at the bridge each assessment instrument has on post-graduation realities for students.

Strategies for data collection will include focus groups with each set of parents and follow-up interviews. The selection process and data gathering techniques are detailed in chapter three.

There are limitations to this study that include description and examination of only one of many examples in one small Pennsylvania high school. But this study will provide an inquiry into the connection between proficiency measures prior to graduation and the transition to the workplace or to continued education. This data will be in the form of perceptions of parents who have the advantage of a perspective much broader than the District's snapshot of students. This study provides a data set which to this point is missing in most examinations of proficiency. By examining the perceptions and experiences of parents regarding standardized tests vs. the local assessment as a predictor of student preparation, the researcher hopes to add to the literature examining the current debate on the effectiveness of using one single test as a determinant of high school proficiency and readiness for post-high school plans at one high school.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in contrasting beliefs regarding cognitive, affective and emotional intelligence development of individuals. Cases defending various approaches are being built in many different corners of society pulling schools in often opposite directions. Is it the business of school to be accountable solely

to reading, writing and arithmetic standards for all children (United States Department of Education, 2004, O’Connell, 2006)? Should schools follow the pied piping of those who argue for education’s role in developing skills, attitudes and habits as well as knowledge (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998; Goleman, 1995; Friedman, 2005)? Additionally, how can schools answer the many individual agenda demands of those like Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Conner who argue for the necessity of spending more time on civics education saying “Creating engaged and active citizens is too important a priority to shortchange in curriculum planning” (2007, p. H1)? Time, money and effort are all valuable commodities in short supply, causing schools to move cautiously before deciding where their limited resources should be used. This debate is further detailed in the Chapter Two review of literature.

This study may be used by this District, or others, to contribute to the literature surrounding Schwan and Spady’s (1998) more holistic model of proficiency in terms of identifying what students should know, what they can do and what kind of people they will need to be as a starting point for answering questions of resource, time and curriculum allocation. While the major outcome of this research is to help the involved School District evaluate the alternative model, the data also will be analyzed and evaluated in hopes of contributing to the expanding body of literature attempting to compare the strengths and weaknesses of one approach to proficiency assessment and curriculum development to the other on the larger scale as well. Parents have been selected as the source of data for this research due to their unique insights to each type of assessment, especially in evaluating the resultant “success” of their student in post-high

school years. Another possible benefit of examining parental perception is to fill in the gaps in data caused by the existing absence to date of this data set.

Definition of Terms

Cross-group analysis - research methodology analyzing, comparing, and searching for general trends uncovered in a set of four separate focus groups addressing the same set of questions with parents whose experiences meet different criteria in regard to the same set of conditions.

Emotional intelligence - for this study, the need exists for a general term to sum up the multitude of knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits usually acknowledged to be a prerequisite for success in the post-high school world. Liao, et al., suggested that the overreaching purpose of teaching emotional intelligence skills is to “help children acquire the skills, the attitudes, and the dispositions that will help them live well, and that will enable the common good to flourish” (2003). Getting more specific, Goleman describes individuals who score high on these tests as having “self-control, empathy, zeal and persistence and ability to motivate oneself” (1995, p. vii). Reiff takes his definition from one of the top tests of emotional intelligence saying that those who have emotional intelligence “are generally optimistic, flexible, realistic and successful at solving problems and coping with stress without losing control” (2001). The combination of all of those provides an acceptable working checklist of traits of emotional intelligence as right attitudes and work habits of “self-control, empathy, zeal, persistence, flexibility, coping with stress and the abilities to motivate oneself and problem solve.” But probably the best evidence for use of that term for this study comes from Grenier (2004,

p. 42) who says simply “ ‘EI’ offers packaging for the myriad of soft skills we have always known were essential but were not sure how and why.”

High-stake testing - For purposes of this study, that terminology will be understood to represent the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) fueled accountability measure of state-wide standardized tests that are used currently in all states to determine and report individual graduation eligibility, teacher performance, school effectiveness and combinations of all three. Typically, negative consequences are attached to sub-par performances. For example, individuals may not earn diplomas, schools may be placed in “improvement” plans and teachers may even be denied pay increases — all based on the results of a state-wide, pen and paper standardized test that usually is limited to assessing standards in the areas of reading, arithmetic and soon, science.

Local Assessment Rubric - multiple source proficiency assessment used to demonstrate readiness for graduation in the local School District in this research. This particular assessment attempts to use past performance to demonstrate what students know, what they can do, and what kind of people they are.

Multiple assessment - will generally refer to the use of standardized tests as well as portfolios, projects, rubrics and any other locally determined assessments collectively used for demonstrating proficiency in areas such as Schwan and Spady advocate in their contemporary “whole” student approach to leadership. The State of Pennsylvania currently allows individual school districts latitude in establishing their own “local assessments” to determine proficiency for students who have not reached expected levels on the State test.

Proficiency - minimum level of achievement demonstrated in state standards for graduation eligibility.

PSSA - Pennsylvania's standards-based, criterion-referenced assessment used to measure the student's attainment of academic standards while also determining the degree to which school programs enable students to attain proficiency of the standards.

Strategic Planning – for this study, Schwan and Spady's preferred practice of defining what students should know, what they should be able to do, and demonstrating what kind of people they are. Advocating that the “be likes” are the most important of the three, those authors go on to acknowledge concerns over which values different religions, cultures and socioeconomic status parents may support. But they also maintain the existence of a group of ten universally endorsed values including honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability.

Limitations of the Study

This study is confined to one small group of parents in one small central Pennsylvania School District. The perceptions of these parents toward the standardized test and the multiple local assessment will be addressed, but this group can hardly be said to speak for all parents. Other limitations of this study on the perceptions of parents could include:

1. A study analyzing parents' perceptions of success assumes that a universal definition of “proficiency” exists. Differing levels of parental expectations expressed in roughly equivalent terms could impact the findings.

2. Because most of the information used for analysis in this study relies on self-reported data, it is subject to the limitations of participants' reports on their own child's achievement. Limitations included that the reports made are accurate and truthful representations of the parents' actual perspectives.
3. This study is limited to one researcher's analysis; the findings could be subject to other interpretations.
4. Findings are limited to selected volunteers who chose to participate in this study.

Research Questions

In the end, the knowledge that is sought from this research on value-added education as compared with high-stakes assessment, leads to the identification of the following umbrella question for this study:

- How do two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success?

Sub-questions that fall under that widespread question:

- How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of proficient students (as defined by the State test) link with their post-graduation reality?
- How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of students proficient only on the local District proficiency assessment link with their post-graduation reality?
- How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient on the State test in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?

- How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient only on the local assessment of proficiency in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?

Significance of Study

High schools are increasingly being held accountable to the performance of their students. At the same time, more schools are finding themselves caught in a bind of monetary and time demands. In a day and age of consumer choice, schools must be able to find ways to focus their limited resources on high leverage practices that satisfy parents, students and taxpayers and best prepare students for future success. The information gathered from this study may help one School District better identify parent expectations for their students and from their schools and help the School District evaluate their current efforts using both types of assessments.

Chapter Summary

The intent of Chapter One was to give the readers an understanding of the background and need for this study. While contrasting demands pull high schools in many directions, schools must use research to make informed decisions regarding the limited time and money they have available. By examining parent perceptions of existing methods of assessing student proficiency and matching these to post-high school follow-up data of student performance, the District in this study can identify which assessments, and which curriculum, allow them to best focus their resources.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study will be to investigate perceptions of parents of students at one Pennsylvania high school toward the State standardized test used as one measure of graduation proficiency. Collected data will be compared to that of the same groups of parents toward a local multiple assessment demonstration of proficiency that attempts to incorporate demonstrations of areas in addition to that currently measured by the single score of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test. These parent perceptions, based on the assessment scores and subsequent successes or failures of their children toward both the PSSA score and student performance on the local multiple assessment as a predictor of student success post-high school will be coded, organized into data collection charts and then examined, analyzed and compared to determine any possible trends in attitudes and shared experiences. By collecting this data from parents it is hoped to be able to contribute evidence to the “pen and paper” versus “whole student” accountability data currently raging. Is the current system adequate? Are some students being treated unfairly? Is “whole student” testing a more or less effective alternative? Are schools teaching and holding students accountable to all that they will need to be successful? According to some, the high accountability associated with individual and school proficiency on these tests has resulted in increased pressure to “teach to the test,” often narrowing curriculum efforts to the limited focus of the tests at the expense of other important lessons (Darling-Hammond, et al., 1995; Mier and Wood, 2004; Bass, 2006). Such an expectation of accountability produces, some claim, a climate of reduced

educational opportunities for all students (Grossman, 2005). Examining parent perceptions of high-stakes State tests versus a local multiple assessment of graduation proficiency which attempts to incorporate measures of these oft-overlooked areas such as emotional intelligence, and built on the strategic design plan of Schwan and Spady at one Pennsylvania high school will be gathered and analyzed to determine relationship to post-graduation student experiences.

While all states have initiated some form of increased standardized testing as a result of the call for increased accountability formalized by the No Child Left Behind legislation, hardly any state system of accountability matches that of any other (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005). The system that has evolved in Pennsylvania began with what a recent Governor's Commission called "rigorous" academic standards adopted in 1999 in reading, writing, speaking, listening and mathematics (PDE, 2007). Currently every Pennsylvania student in grades 3 through 8 and 11 is assessed in reading and math each year, while those in grades 5, 8, and 11 also participate in writing proficiency examinations. Beginning with the 2006/2007 school year a science test has been added to the list of assessments also. According to the State Department of Education website, "the test is a standards-based, criterion-referenced assessment used to measure the student's attainment of academic standards while also determining the degree to which school programs enable students to attain proficiency of the standards" (2007). While the State is quick to point out that diplomas are not withheld as a condition of passing the test (Darling-Hammond, 2005), the Pennsylvania Code Title 22 Chapter 4 regulations do mandate that in order to graduate students must demonstrate proficiency in the standards. High numbers of learning disabled students and English as

Second Language students, as well as any other students who are unable to demonstrate proficiency on the 11th grade test, are afforded the opportunity to take a retest in the fall of their senior year. Current policy allows for students who need an additional opportunity to then attempt to demonstrate they have met the requirement of mastering the standards on a local assessment linked to the standards. An informal survey sent to all 501 Pennsylvania schools in 2007 illustrated that this local assessment can take many forms. Some of the responding 37 districts reported using assessments as diverse as course final tests to district-developed tests to computer-based courses. Reported remediation efforts being used to prepare students for the re-test and local assessment ranged from no program to utilizing time after school, study halls and weekends. Due to exactly this all-over-the-board nature of local assessment and concerns over laxness of administration at the local level, in 2006 a Governor's Commission on College and Career Success recommended the elimination of this local assessment option in favor of a five-subject-area test to be phased in as an alternative to proficiency on the PSSA by 2014. Concerned that "raising the graduation standards is important to ensuring a bright economic future," the Commission recommended replacing the local assessments with a series of five-subject-area Graduation Competency Assessments (2007). This Graduation Competency Assessment (GCA) plan was approved by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education on January 17th, 2008 (PSBA, 2008). In its final form districts were given a "menu" of ways to allow students to demonstrate their readiness for the world beyond high school. These included, first, passing six of a series of 10 end-of-course GCA's (Algebra I and II and Geometry, English Composition and Literature, Biology and Chemistry or American or World History, or Civics and Government). (PA State Board

of Education, 2008). Achieving proficiency on the PSSA still remained as option two for students seeking to earn graduation. Also added as a possibility for demonstrating proficiency was the passing of an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test or passing a local assessment certified by independent evaluators as equivalent criterion-referenced assessment to the GCA's (PSBA, 2008).

Sent on to the Pennsylvania General Assembly for final approval, the plan created a storm of controversy and has rallied many groups to opposition. These groups include Pennsylvania School Boards Association and others representing “parents, teachers, students, school support professionals, children with disabilities, gifted children, members of minority groups, school principals, school superintendents and school board members: (PSBA, May 23, 2008). In May of 2008 Senate Education Committee hearings became the floor for a chorus of concern from these groups and others including nearly 160 school districts who had passed resolutions opposing the tests (Altoona Mirror, May 15, 2008). One month later the House of Representatives Education Committee “strongly” recommended that the State Board of Education step back and re-evaluate the proposed regulatory changes. In both houses concerns included those already discussed in this research. In addition, questions were raised regarding the proposed \$160 million price tag for the tests, as well as a concern over a possible violation of Section 1611 of the Public School Code that allows local school districts to make final graduation decisions. (PA State Board of Education, 2008).

By early July, 2008 these concerns and the infighting between Houses of the General Assembly rose to the point GCA's were prohibited from being “further promulgated, approved or proposed” for the 2008/09 school year (PSBA, 2008, July 11).

The public school code bill that continued that temporarily resolution was passed along with a budget that increased annual spending on State assessment tests by 70 percent to \$54 million dollars. Some of that increase in funding was to be used to help local districts develop voluntary graduation tests (2008, July 8, Altoona Mirror). “As a community we need to have more conversation about what a high school diploma means” State Secretary of Education Gerald Zahorchak told a group of school administrators (2008, Zahorchak). Later that month Karl Girton, chairman of the State Board of Education was asked by Governor Ed Rendell to step down from his leadership post in a move that both men reported was “unrelated to controversy over the testing proposal” (Altoona Mirror, July 24, 2008).

To keep the battle going in the effort of replacing the local assessments, the State took the step of asking the 501 school districts to submit samples of their local assessments. With assistance from the Pennsylvania State University School of Education, the State Education Department announced plans to catalogue and analyze these local exams for rigor. Hoping to overcome what was shaping up as a political battle between local and state control advocates, Zahorchak promised that the evaluation and any subsequent addressing of local assessments would be purely scientific –and keep the students in mind. “We may find that there are lots of good practices and ways to do this locally,” he said (Raffaele, August 17, 2008).

Contrasting Perspectives

Overview

These driving questions come from several theoretical perspectives and issues which are facing educators, parents and students. The demands of increasing

accountability cannot be avoided. But, many schools and even more individuals in the profession believe schools have a larger obligation than just reading, writing and arithmetic. Business seems to agree. The 2007 Governor's Commission on College and Career Success reports that 82% of all Commonwealth businesses say that they are having trouble recruiting skilled workers and would like to see potential worker quality improved (2007). Yet the question remains. Are current accountability methods causing new problems of their own? Community, parental and economic voices are all calling on the schools to springboard students into what all hope becomes a prosperous new economy. But serious limitations of time and money also impact educational practice. So, the debate rages. What are schools preparing students for? What should be taught -- and tested -- to help ensure and predict future success in college and the workplace? How can this curriculum be measured? Can ways be found to integrate the best of all worlds?

“High-Stakes” Testing or Multiple Assessment?

It has been the political football kicked around even years before No Child Left Behind Legislation. How best to hold schools accountable to teaching the lessons our students, our communities and even our economic way of life need? For years critics raised concern that despite the huge amounts of money poured into the schools, the results were less than acceptable (United States Department of Education, 2004, Walker 2004). Study after study comparing our students to those of foreign countries listed U.S. achievement in dangerously low position (Wright, 2002). The result was the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2003, establishing a culture of accountability for all schools for their students' proficiency levels. To find the best and simplest ways to demonstrate the

necessary level of proficiency, more and more states turned to the practice of establishing “minimum levels of improvement, measurable in terms of student performance (on a test)” (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 26).

This need to prepare students to survive in a rapidly changing world beyond high school by holding them accountable to mastery of fundamental skills of English and math also met very little resistance from any parents or education professionals. Many added to the list of reasons for increasing accountability by pointing to the huge graduation requirement variance from school to school (O’Connell, 2006).

Since the beginning of the new culture of accountability every state now requires that students participate in statewide testing programs (Abrams and Madaus, 2003; Cuban 2005). Just as the culture, traditions and expectations of the states vary, so also do these enacted programs vary in difficulty, content, item format and especially sanctions linked to test performance. Almost half of the states now require that students demonstrate proficiency in selected areas in order to qualify for a high school diploma (Wolk, 2004). Darling-Hammond, et al., (2005) estimates that by the year 2008 seven of 10 public school students will have graduation determined by such a test. Other states shift the focus of their accountability efforts to use the results for the schools rather than students. As an extreme example, some districts have attempted using test data to determine teacher pay (Meyers, 2004).

After six years of the increased accountability, at least one national survey lists continued public support for the effort. According to a survey conducted on October 11-12, 2004 by the Winston Group on behalf of Americans for Better Education, 62% of

parents of public school children have a favorable view of No Child Left Behind. African-Americans viewed the effort favorable by a 62% to 25% margin, while Hispanic parents listed their approval by a 54% to 24% count. Fully 61% of those parents surveyed believed accountability more important to improving schools than increased funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Supporters of the movement further list results as demonstrating effectiveness. In the State of Pennsylvania, a research study commissioned in 2004 by the Department of Education found a high correlation between performance on the junior year PSSA and student achievement on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. A corollary finding of that same study documented that PSSA success was indeed a prediction of student performance during the first year of college, claiming that PSSA-proficient students had a 90% chance of placement directly into college-level courses without the need for remediation (2004). In 2007, the State Secretary of Education extended the convergent and predictive validity of that study referring to that research to conclude that the State test was therefore appropriate to use as an indicator of student success in later life. (*Altoona Mirror*, February 2007). Other positives attributed to the increase in testing are research studies that credit standardized testing with improving expectations and accommodations for special education students (Ysseldyke & Nelson, 2004). More globally, a 2007 report by the Center on Education Policy found that “most” states with three or more years of comparable test data student levels of proficiency in math and reading have gone up since 2002, the year NCLB was enacted. In Pennsylvania, the number of students scoring at the proficient level or higher increased in reading and math between 2001 and 2006. In reading, State students jumped from 58% to 65% proficient in grade 11, while students

matching that level on the math test climbed from 48% to 52% in the same time span (Center on Education Policy, 2007). That same organization one year later once again evaluated student achievement data from the states. Their conclusions included that while reading and math scores have gone up in “most” states (at least as determined by the number of “proficient” students), the gains tended to be larger in elementary and middle school as opposed to high school. This finding was corroborated by evidence that progress against the National Assessment of Educational Progress was also more pronounced in the lower grades than in the high schools. The review of current data also concluded that historical wide achievement gaps between black and white sub-groups had grown smaller. Still another finding of the study was that it was impossible to determine the extent to which these trends were the result of No Child Left Behind legislation. State and School District initiatives already underway at the inception of NCLB, as well as the lack of a group of non-NCLB students to compare with eliminated the possibility of bestowing all the credit for the improvements on the federal accountability legislation. (Center on Education Policy, 2008). But critics of this reliance on test scores as the be-all and end-all measure of student, teacher and school effectiveness are questioning these claims, not just in Pennsylvania, but also across the nation. Cuban is one of many who question whether high-stakes tests do indeed measure current, and predict, future success (2004). Other concerns with high-stakes testing are worthy of note as well, ranging from statistical unreliability of scores (Lenton, 2004; Sadker and Zittleman, 2004; Rothstein, 2004) to higher drop-out rates and lower Scholastic Aptitude Test scores (Sirotnak, 2004; Wrigley, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Peterson, 2005), lack of reliability and validity associated with making decisions on the basis of one test (Abrams and Madeus, 2003)

and lack of transfer from the test to other indicators of achievement (Olsen, 2002; Wright, 2003; Cuban, 2005). They also point to national surveys that demonstrate a lack of support for and understanding of the tests from parents and communities (Gleason and Guilfoyle, 2004). These same surveys document a lack of parent and community agreement with the idea of a pen and paper test alone should determine eligibility for graduation. For example, a research study completed in 2005 in the State of Washington found in that State, 75% of parents of eighth graders surveyed believed for a variety of reasons that their students should not have to pass the State exam to qualify for high school graduation. Almost that same amount (70%) felt that the high school diploma should be awarded on effort and progress rather than merely passing a pencil and paper test (Christenson, 2004).

One additional concern of the critics with the test can be summed up as “narrowing the curriculum” to only those areas measured on the test, eliminating the opportunity to address the important affective, psychomotor and emotional intelligence domains. This trend has become known in some circles as the “soulless standardization of curriculum” (Hargreaves, (2003, p. 1).

Wrigley (2003, p. 95) described this phenomenon as happening when “test scores become ends... (and) explicit discussion of values and the type of society to which schools articulate/adhere are ignored.” Olson marks the concern in even simpler terms by noting that “instruction decreases in areas not covered by state tests” (2002). Flores and Clark (2003) and Darling-Hammond and Aness (1995) sum up the argument when they note “curriculum narrows to what is covered by the test.” The Center on Education Policy reports that while schools and districts have been able to better align instruction

and state standards, “71% of districts have cut instructional time from at least one subject area” (2005).

Educators who lament the loss of art, music, character education, and other “soft” initiatives can also find allies from among the medical profession. Brain-based medical researcher Dr. Keith Verner notes, “there is virtually no correlation between measures of intelligence and measures of executive function” (2003). The importance of his testimony becomes even more vital in his definition of “executive function” as being:

...intimately involved in our ability to think critically, solve problems, plan for the future and follow and modify our plans as new situations arise, while keeping our goals in mind. These skills, one could argue, are at the very heart of what we hope all educated citizens could do (2003).

Consequently, at the opposite end of the testing spectrum are the individuals, schools and states that are experimenting with strategies to incorporate academically focused test scores with additional ways of holding students, teachers and themselves accountable. Bandalos argues that the effectiveness of a state assessment system must be judged by the extent it promotes student learning. This means, “what is needed are systems of assessments, consisting of both classroom and large-scale components that provide a variety of evidence,” (2004, p. 6). Darling-Hammond also picks up this general theme in noting that “most currently used American tests do not tap many of the skills and abilities that students need to develop in order to be successful in later life and schooling (1995, p. 4). Moving to more specific recommendations, Wolk suggests a model of “multiple measures” that would give points for standardized test results, grade point averages, personal work, absences, extracurricular activities and community service. In his plan “students could not earn enough points to graduate just by passing the

mandated exit test. They must show enough proficiency in other important areas to earn (the necessary points)” (2004). Other plans that have surfaced providing the “dashboard set of indicators” called for by Darling-Hammond (2005) include Jones’ (2004) “balanced model,” Lederman and Burstein’s (2006) daily use of wireless key pads that build cumulative electronic portfolios and Stader, Lowe and Neely’s (2001) “body of evidence” portfolios.

The multiple assessment model which parents in this research were familiar with was developed for use as a local proficiency gauge for students unable to demonstrate proficiency on any of the reading, writing or mathematics aspects of the PSSA. It was fashioned on the influence of Schwan and Spady, who advocate that the decision making of teaching -- and assessing -- of any strategic design should begin with what the school has determined students should know, be able to do, and demonstrate what kind of people they are (1998).

The Whole Student Assessment in this Study

The assessment format is a six-part rubric that addresses Bandalos’ call for a “system of assessments, consisting of both classroom and large-scale components that provide a variety of evidence” (2004, p. 6). To demonstrate “what they know” students may earn from one to four points based on their PSSA scores. The purpose is to reward students who may have been proficient in two areas but were struggling with just one area. Also, since Pennsylvania requires that all local assessments be tied to the standards, this also helps qualify the assessment for approval. The second category in this area allows students one to four points for their senior grade point average, encouraging continued high academic effort. Since planned courses are built around the standards and

academic anchors, course proficiency can also be said to relate to the requirement that the local assessment be built on the standards.

To demonstrate “what they can do,” students can fall back on one of several options. Since all must make some kind of demonstration of a completed project on the State required graduation project, most use that requirement, but others have also received points toward the minimum of 14 rubric points for their NOCTI or Microsoft Office Users (MOUS) certification, as well as Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test scores.

Students have several chances to demonstrate “what kind of people they are” to earn points on the rubric. Since the faculty and parents of the school’s Learning Team had decided “success comes to those who keep trying,” the rubric allows points for students who complete a voluntary remediation session in those areas where proficiency has not been met. Points may also be earned for taking the voluntary re-test and for improved performance. Attendance is also factored in for points, while community service is being considered for inclusion.

An Alternative to Current “Weight-Bearing Walls”

Not only are individual researchers and schools calling for a multiple assessment approach to demonstrating graduation proficiency, professional organizations are weighing in on the side of multiple measures as well. Laitcsh, Lewallen and McClosky (2005) collaborated for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) call for the need to use a variety of assessment strategies in high stakes decisions such as demonstrating proficiency for graduation. Two years later, the same highly regarded professional organization through its Commission on the Whole Child issued

another policy paper for members noting that “this achievement (on proficiency tests) is only but one element of student learning and only a part of any complete system of educational accountability.” The Commission report also noted their intent to remain influential in the growing debate, reporting that they had been tasked with:

“recasting the definition of a successful learner from one whose achievement is measured solely by an academic test to one who was knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, civically inspired, engages in the arts, prepared for work and economic self-sufficiency and ready for the world beyond schooling” (p. 4).

The National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP) also weighed in on the subject in 2005 with a policy statement advocating utilizing the trio of student “knowledge, skills, and disposition” as a multiple measure of proficiency. Research in fields other than education, such as Kostman’s 2004 study on techniques for predicting future performance by corporate Human Relations professionals, also agreed that “multiple criteria should be considered in making decision predictions” (p. 4). Also weighing in on the topic is the 2003 public-private coalition report Learning for the 21st Century and their call for moving beyond standardized testing as the sole means of student achievement (p. 7).

Whole states have also joined the movement to not limit student proficiency testing to a pen and paper test. For example, Nebraska’s School-based Teacher led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) allows selection and development of assessments to determine whether or not students are meeting the State standards in reading, math, science and social studies to take place where such decisions can have a large impact. “Not in the legislature. Not in the governors office. Not by the Department of Education. Instead decisions should be made in the classroom,” Roschewski asserts (2005, p. 9). As a State, Nebraska has chosen to put the

responsibility on the local district rather than the State. This is being done by allowing each district to design and implement its' own assessments, with the State reviewing each district for psychometric quality and also providing up to four examples of best practice for adoption or adaptation. Part of the accountability is a public rating of each district for assessment quality and student performance. Each district's test must meet six technical criteria; namely, alignment to standards, opportunity for students to learn the needed material, elimination of biased and sensitive language, written at the appropriate level, consistent scores and appropriate levels of mastery (Buckendahl, et al. 2004). Claimed benefits of this local control of the state testing include emphasis on formative evaluation and promotion of improved assessment quality at the local level (Buckendahl, et al. 2004). On the negative side, not just in Nebraska, but anywhere multiple assessments are implemented, development and implementation of valid and reliable assessment strategies would, as Hargreaves and Fullan (2001) and Wiggins (1998) point out, take time, effort and money. Nor would the tests be as easy to administer and score. There would, as Hargreaves points out, follow a "morass of technical issues" (2001, p. 52).

Other Pathways to Success

Do these academically focused tests really measure whether students have accumulated the knowledge and strategies that will help them ensure success? Or are there other knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits (or the "KASH" box needed for success as described by Sorin and Weisboard, 2007) which schools should be teaching and assessing? Are there indeed areas that may be just as, or more, important to future success than academics? Beginning in the mid 1950's Dr. Benjamin Bloom outlined what eventually grew to three taxonomies of educational objectives to cover the whole

spectrum of learning. Believing that most teaching focused on fact-transfer and information recall rather than true meaningful development, Bloom attempted to promote higher order thinking skills beginning with the cognitive area. In the mid 1960's his Handbook II addressing the affective domain was added. Bloom structured his work on the belief that if the teaching purpose was to change attitudes and behavior rather than to simply transmit information, then the instruction and assessment should be structured differently. Even later, the psychomotor domain, or actual skills learned and demonstrated by students, was examined and documented in the same type of taxonomy format. A goal of Bloom's Taxonomy was to motivate educators to focus on all three domains, creating a more holistic form of education. More recently Hargreaves and Fullan spoke of such areas that "add value to cognitive achievement and subsequent success" (1998, p. 31). Knight (2004) labeled these "employability" issues, while Friedman spoke of the need for teaching "collaboration" (2005, disc 3, track 11) and "empathy and people skills" (2005, disc 4, track 8). Both Goleman (1995) and Likona and Davison (2005) labeled this element "character." To provide an umbrella to cover the many aspects sought in this discussion, we will turn to Grenier (2004, p. 42) who argues that the term "...Emotional Intelligence offers packaging for the myriad of soft skills we have always known was essential, but were not sure of why and how."

In 1995 Daniel Goleman opened a lot of eyes -- and mouths -- by asserting that "at best IQ contributes about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success" (p. 34). More specifically, it was this same "emotional intelligence" he championed that was "as powerful, at times even twice as powerful" (p. 95) as conventional intelligence in determining future success. Some scholars did dispute his results, claiming that they were

“ill-defined, unsupported and implausible,” (Cobb and Meyer, 2000, p. 15). But others have rallied to support and reinforce his claims. For example, the supporters’ recent studies have shown that emotional intelligence skills in addition to other positives, help in preventing substance abuse (Riley and Schutte, 2003), increase chances of academic success (Reiff, 2001) and lower juvenile delinquency (Liau, Liau, Teoh and Liau, 2003). Other studies have shown that emotional intelligence can be shown to be a part of senior manager success (Alloway, 2000) as well as that of professional engineers (Scott and Yates, 2000).

In his 2005 blockbuster, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman outlined his beliefs in what the school curriculum must include to prepare students for the future. “...Plays well with others -- people skills” was listed as his third of four must-teach items in a challenge to schools.

Andrew Hargreaves also emphasized the economic necessity of training students for future success by paying attention to affective and emotional intelligence areas. “Teaching beyond the knowledge economy entails developing values and emotions” (2003, p. 4). He then goes even further, adding a call for teachers and administrators to develop their own and others’ emotional intelligence (2003, p. 26).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is not the only agenda being pushed by supporters for inclusion in school curriculum to help ensure future success. Prior to No Child Left Behind legislation, a popular lens to view school curriculum development was the 1992 Secretaries Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report. Formed to encourage a high-performance economy characterized by high-skill, high-wage employment, the Commission’s recommendations continue to be a siren call for some for

improved integration of attitudes, skills and knowledge into the school curriculum. Firmly embedded in its list of necessary high school subject matter demanded by the report is competence in affective and emotional intelligence areas such as “interpersonal skills,” which supports the EI camp. The report was also a call for strengthened foundational competencies that included the same basic skills currently being measured on the academic proficiency tests but also added personal qualities and thinking skills. “If teachers and students know what performance is required for success...schools can organize instruction to teach the skills that support such performance – and -- test developers ... can develop reliable assessments of performance,” the report noted (1992, p. 1). Cuban sums up the argument for both teaching and assessing emotional intelligence and workplace readiness skills when he notes “employers want in entry level employees a strong work ethic, reliability, and positive habits. In survey after survey, punctuality, dependable work habits, grooming and being personable trump academic achievement” (2004, p. 130).

Bransford (2005) also spoke of the importance of schools teaching and assessing proficiency in non-academic areas, concluding with the concern that “all these things are invisible given existing assessment.” Worse yet, he claimed their disappearance was due to our increasing focus on “teaching to the test.” Even “good” schools that traditionally have found ways to address and utilize the individual needs and abilities of their students seem to critics to be changing focus to meet requirements of the existing test structure. When schools face severe consequences based solely on the test scores of their students, those scores often become more important than even the students themselves. Wrigley (2003, p. 95) laments that “intensification” has come to substitute for “improvement,”

while Wolk takes it another step evaluating that high-stakes tests have caused schools to lose their focus in their attempt to be labeled “effective” saying:

Their most egregious flaw is that they don’t address the qualities and values that most parents want their children to have—the skills and attitudes needed to continue learning on their own and to be good citizens, productive workers and fulfilled human beings. (2004)

The growing concern for many parents and educational professionals is that reliance on the results of a high-stakes test does not provide a complete picture of whether schools are providing the opportunities that allow their students to become prepared in all the areas they will need to be successful. Cuban (2004, p. 111) laments that “now there’s only one kind of good district, only one kind of good school, and only one kind of good teaching recognized.” Daniel Goleman, the author who took the concept of “emotional intelligence” to the best sellers’ lists, also is not shy regarding how he sees the role of effective schools. “As family life no longer offers growing numbers of children a sure footing in life, schools are left as the one place communities can turn to for correctives to children’s deficiencies in emotional and social competence,” he maintains (1995, p. 279). He again picks up this theme in a later book, asking rhetorically, “What would our schools – and children – be like if education also included ... emotional intelligence abilities?” (2002, p. xiii). Grenier, in her study of the contrasting claims and criticisms of emotional intelligence, suggests that EI was founded partly on “the need to address what should be taught (2004).

Still another voice weighing in on the debate as to what skills, habits and attitudes students need to be able to demonstrate before earning graduation is the Pennsylvania Department of Education through their Classrooms for the Future grant. The program is a three-year, \$20 million dollar initiative designed, in part, to “prepare students to enter

and successfully compete in the ever-expanding high-tech global marketplace (CFF homepage, 2007). At the heart of the effort is the desire to teach “21st century skills” such as critical thinking and problem solving, communication skills, creativity and innovation skills, collaboration skills, contextual learning skills and information and media literacy skills (PDE, 2007). Interestingly, the grant evaluation team acknowledges the importance of these skills to students by noting on their web site:

Large-scale assessments of the set of 21st century skills have been conducted (International Program of Student Assessment, PISA). Yet this paper and pencil exam does not measure the demonstration of 21st Century Skills in 21st Century settings, i.e. the normal ‘work’ world of students in today’s schools. As a high school reform initiative, CFF focuses on training teachers to engage 21st Century Skills. For this reason, our assessment of formal reasoning, creativity, teamwork and problem solving and presentations skills is especially important. (CFF evaluation team website, 2007)

Yet for all their ardor, even the harshest critique of high-stakes testing has not called for a total elimination of their usage. Many of these educational professionals and parents are advocating an expansion of the use of different types of testing to make such important decisions. Research exists to suggest that also including a measured focus on teaching and assessing the affective and emotional intelligence areas may improve the teaching of academic standards at the same time. Existing quantitative studies like that of Benninga, Berkowitz, Loehn and Smith (2006) report that character education programs are positively associated with academic proficiency. That conclusion is also supported by researchers such as Grossman (2005) who finds that academic performance is higher in schools with multiple and authentic school assessment as compared with those based on a state test.

Deciding What To Teach and Assess

There are schools and parents that maintain that determining what should be tested and, therefore, what students should be accountable for, should actually be the very first leadership step in the local District determining what is being taught in their schools. In fact, Bond points out that curriculum validity is dependent on curriculum and instruction matching the assessment (1995) whether it be a local measure of accountability or one imposed from the state level. It is not the intent of this research to argue the merits of local control versus state or federal direction of curriculum, although this question could be the focus of additional research in this area. Bloom also weighs in on this topic, arguing that it is critical that we determine the levels of student expertise we are expecting since this decision should determine the most appropriate assessment techniques. By way of example, he offers that multiple-choice tests rarely provide information about skill-and attitude-based objectives. Such misuse of assessment to goals does not provide educators with useful feedback for determining whether students are attaining course and school goals.

Some critics who would downplay the possibility of consensus concerning what should be taught as curriculum point out that States like Nebraska (and the District in this study) have the advantage of “being quite homogenous, not only in ethnicity, but in values and attitudes” (Bandalos, p. 37). To counter that claim, Grossman’s research outlines the benefits -- and therefore the possibility -- of multiple assessment being used effectively in 12 different New York State school districts which worked together to bring that opportunity to their very diverse student populations and communities (2004). Schwan and Spady argue that ten universal values cross diversity boundaries, saying:

We have yet to find a school staff and community that have not been able to create a solid consensus around 10 universally endorsed values and their definitions; honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, pursuit of excellence and accountability. While the value labels and definitions differ among communities, the essence of those 10 universal values seems to be the desire of parents no matter what their culture, religion or socio-economic status (p. 126).

It is this same Schwan and Spady who outline a strategic design in their book *Total Leaders* (1998) that became the contemporary holistic model for the local assessment used to gauge parent perception for this research. To make sure a school meets the emerging and future needs of students, Schwan and Spady advocate beginning with mobilizing staff and stakeholders of a school to discuss and come to a consensus regarding the questions of “What are our strongest beliefs and values about learning and teaching? What is the fundamental reason our school exists? In what spheres of living do you want our children/students to be successful after they finish high school? What are the key conditions and challenges students in these spheres will need to successfully meet? and “What will graduates need to be able to know, do, and be like to meet these conditions and challenges?” Incidentally, these authors couldn’t resist pointing out their belief that the “be like” requirement they advocate assessing was twice as important as the other two (p. 124). Once these decisions have been made, the next step is to form student outcomes based on the community beliefs. A relevant and appropriate assessment is only a small step of the strategic alignment that has to be part of the new culture of accountability (2002). These may indeed be the kind of ‘intelligent conversations’ Perkins (2003) was advocating that make up ‘smart’ organizations.

Best practices from within the assessment field also suggest the importance of such multiple measures of proficiency and “beginning with the end in mind” (Covey).

Long the standard bearers in the field of curriculum and assessment, Wiggins and McTighe (1998, p. 7) call for exactly this “backward design” curriculum and assessment cycle. They support an identification of the goals of the school as a first step, then building teaching and testing with those goals in mind. They advocate beginning with the question, “What would we accept as evidence that students have attained the desired understandings and proficiencies – before proceeding to plan teaching and learning experiences?” (1998, p. 8). It was also Wiggins who noted that this assessment, this “evidence,” should seek to measure “all that we value instead of what is merely easy to test” (1998, p. 71). Obviously, the structure and style of assessment would be determined by what the goal of the schooling -- and thus the school -- should be.

If a local school district decides that mere academic knowledge in math, reading and arithmetic is what they want their tax money to provide for their students, then should that desire become subservient to the curriculum and assessment demands of the state or even federal government? Many parents and communities value the affective and psychomotor domains as well as academic lessons and reinforcement for their students, and their future employees. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002, p. 35) note, “Communities are defined by their center of shared values, beliefs and commitments. In communities, what is considered right and good is as important as what works and what is effective.” In other words, different communities may indeed desire different results from their schools. Should it be surprising that a high school that traditionally sends just over half of its graduates to post-secondary schools desire the exact same curriculum and assessment program as one that regularly prepares upwards of 75 or 80%? Since research has shown that many want more than simple academics, should accountability and

assessment methods reflect community desires in a more flexible manner? Writing prior to NCLB legislation, Lightfoot (1983) argued that “good schools” should be determined in the “integration of various perspectives rather than in the choice of one as dominant and objective” (p. 13).

Chapter Summary

In Chapter II both sides of the issue of assessing proficiency and readiness for post high school work has been examined. The rationale for high-stakes testing and increased individual and school accountability has been explored, as has the rationale for a multiple assessment proficiency. The numerous cries for a curriculum and assessment beyond mere academics in preparing students for success has been examined, as has the need for schools to focus their efforts by deciding exactly what their students need to know to be successful before attempting to plan any curriculum and assessment.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology and rationale for conducting this study investigating how different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success in one Pennsylvania School District. The conceptual framework related to the research questions is presented along with its relationship to the rationale for the study, as are strategies for identification and the selection of participants. Information relative to the validity and reliability of the research and interview questions as well as collected data is presented. Relevant data analysis strategies and research methodology are also examined.

Research Questions

A narrative approach has been selected due to the experiential and individual perspective nature of the data necessary to answer the research questions. For school districts to be able to effectively compare leadership and strategic plan options related to assessment strategies, data connecting pre-graduation assessments of proficiency and post-graduation experiences are needed. The purpose of this study is to understand how two different measures of proficiency contributed to, or possibly limited, post-graduation success of students. The platform used to guide this study holds that effective proficiency assessment may be related to leadership and strategic planning that begins with valuing emotional intelligence learning as well as the cognitive learning currently measured by most state tests. The primary research question to guide this study is: How do two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success?

Additional research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of proficient students (as defined by the State test) link with their post-graduation reality?
2. How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of students proficient only on the local District proficiency assessment link with their post-graduation reality?
3. How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient on the State test in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?
4. How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient only on the local assessment of proficiency in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?

A goal of the No Child Left Behind legislation has been to increase student achievement and school graduation rigor and accountability. As a result, reading, writing and mathematics tests have been administered to all Pennsylvania juniors since 1997. In addition, the State of Pennsylvania currently allows local districts to develop their own local assessments for students who have not demonstrated proficiency on the PSSA in order to meet State graduation requirements. The particular local assessment that helped shape the parent perceptions for this research attempted to incorporate a demonstration of high academic proficiency. Additionally, this local assessment examines past

demonstration as a predictor of future performance in additional habits, attitudes, and skills generally labeled as “emotional intelligence.” This assessment was built on the strategic design plan of Schwan and Spady (1995, p. 126) which calls on schools to identify “what students should know,” “what students should be able to do,” and “what kind of people they should be” before making curriculum and assessment decisions. This more contemporary and holistic description is anchored in Bloom’s psychological integration of cognitive and affective domains. This qualitative study will generate descriptive information that will contribute to allowing one School District to evaluate the very different types of proficiency assessment and their potential impact on student post-graduation success.

Data gathering used in this study is designed to focus on the information provided by parents of students who met the graduation requirement of demonstrating proficiency and parents of students who did not but graduated based on the District’s more holistic local assessment. When analyzed, this data will help the District evaluate past courses of action in curriculum and assessment and plan more effectively for the future.

Comparing Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Arriving at valid and reliable answers to research questions involves first selecting the correct method for obtaining the appropriate data. Creswell (1998) suggests the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach to study by noting, “First, select a qualitative study because of the nature of the research question. In a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a “how” or “what” so that initial forays into the topic describe what is going on...Second, choose a qualitative study because the topic needs to be explored” (p. 17). The primary research question in this study seeks to

determine “how” different student proficiency assessments link to post-graduation success. Additionally, with proficiency assessment a driving force in education curriculum and assessment discussions, this is indeed a topic that needs to be explored if not for all schools, then just for the school in the study. Given this direction, qualitative methods move to the front as seemingly the most appropriate for this study. This choice is further strengthened by Gay and Airasian’s explanation that qualitative research “argues that meaning is situated to a particular perspective or context” (2000, p. 9). In this case, the perspective – and meaning – is informed by parents’ reflection on pre- and post-graduation experiences of their children. For this study, a conceptual framework involving leadership and strategic planning and a comparison of proficiency assessment types provide a platform that seek to examine “what” and “how” post-graduation success varies by proficiency assessment types. Gay and Airasian further strengthen the case for this method by adding that qualitative research is also “exceptionally suited for exploration, for beginning to understand a group or phenomenon” (2000, p. 202). Elements of what Creswell titles a sub branch of qualitative research labeled “phenomenology” (1998, p. 33) thus become relevant to this study. Described a “the study of a single phenomenon” (1998 p. 33) (in this case the role of proficiency assessment on post-graduation success). Creswell explains this approach as “describing the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals about phenomenon” (1998, p. 54).

Rationale for Cross Case Focus Groups

While Creswell advances “long interviews with up to 10 people” (1998, p. 65) as the data collection method of choice for a phenomenology, he also cites (1998, p. 54)

Polkinghorne (1989, p. 44) that “researchers are expected to develop plans of study especially suited to understanding the particular experiential phenomenon that is the object of their study.” Since Morgan (1997) describes the goal in qualitative self-contained focus groups as “going beyond attitudes and opinions to study participants’ experiences and perspectives” (p. 20), that methodology becomes quite appropriate for the study of assessing two types of graduation proficiency. Several other researchers also contribute support to the choice of focus groups as the best vehicle for such a phenomenology. Gall, Gall and Borg (2003) offer the insight that such interactions among the participants stimulate them to state feelings, perceptions and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually. Morgan adds that the impractical nature of full-scale observation on past attitude formation tips the scale to focus groups, agreeing that this strategy produces a livelier group dynamic by tapping into personal experiences. Stake may have been describing more of the case study element of this research, but he sums up an important goal of the research and chosen methodology by adding that such an approach can develop “vicarious experiences for the reader” (1995, p. 65).

Setting

The District selected for this study is a small, rural Pennsylvania school located roughly in the agricultural center of the State. According to Standard’s and Poor’s SchoolMatters, the population of the small Pennsylvania School District in this study is made up of a population that includes 12.9% with a Bachelor’s Degree (2005). Despite that low number, the District High School has consistently sent a self-reported 55 to 70% of its graduating seniors on to institutions of higher learning. Approximately 660 students attend the four-year high school, with 31% listed as economically

disadvantaged. (Schooldigger.com, 2008). That same source reports that on the most recent State proficiency 56.6% of the juniors reached proficiency on the math test (as compared to 55.9 % in the State). On the reading test, 67% demonstrated proficiency (in the State that number was 64.7%), while 93% reached that mark in writing (compared with 85.8% for the State) (Schooldigger.com, 2008).

For the past four years, this District has required seniors who had not demonstrated proficiency on the PSSA tests to reach that graduation requirement through a local assessment rubric based on the strategic plan work of Schwan and Spady. Over these four years, 650 sets of students and parents have been exposed to the more extensive proficiency assessment of the District's local assessment. Based an on average PSSA math proficiency of just over fifty percent, half of that number graduated on the local assessment rather than by meeting the State requirement. With the research platform upon which this study is based indicating the need for affective and emotional intelligence as well as cognitive curriculum and assessment, this study presents the opportunity to allow the District to evaluate its current approach to graduation proficiency assessment.

Identification and Selection of Participants

One group in this study will be parents of students who have shared the experience that a child “passed” or demonstrated proficiency of State standards measured by the PSSA in the last four years. A second group will consist of parents whose students earned their high school graduation by demonstrating proficiency on the local assessment rubric. Members of both groups will be invited to participate in a cycle of focus groups and follow-up interviews. Each group contains between six and ten

members. These group members were selected by issuing a random formal invitation to participate to approximately 20 parents for each group. Their involvement was voluntary. Morgan (1997) labels this process of carefully matching chosen categories with participants as “segmentation” (p. 35). Gay and Airasian (2000), however, identify this method whereby participants are selected for inclusion due to the pertinent information about the specific topic and setting being investigated that they can provide as “purposive selection” (p. 139). Creswell (1998) stays slightly more general, labeling this approach “theoretical sampling.” That author also identified another sampling technique that seems appropriate to this plan. According to him “criteria sampling” is the name given to selecting a sample from cases that “meet some criteria” and “specific to this case” (page 118). For purposes of this study the criteria will be that of demonstrating proficiency on either the PSSA or local assessment.

There may be slight differences in the terms and labels described by the different researchers in outlining specific sampling populations listed. But, at their heart, they all describe the intent of the efforts to locate parents of students with appropriate experiences to develop perceptions that enable them to contribute answers to the phenomenon studied by the listed research questions. There may even be advantages in the slight variances, since Gay and Airasian (2000) also cite the strength of combination or mixed sampling as helping to provide triangulation to the effort.

Parent input is sought for several reasons. Not only does NCLB suggest parents be more included in the educational decisions related to their students, but parents also possess a more holistic, or over time, look at their student, while high-stakes tests such as the PSSA measure just a moment in time. Additionally, parents’ input is a missing data

set from studies of proficiency. After District approval of the study, parents were recruited through the mailing of an invitation to participate complete with a study overview and word of mouth. Volunteers were asked to complete an informed consent form (Appendix) and were given an overview of the study's findings when complete.

Rationale for Structured Interview Format

To facilitate the cross-group collection and analysis of data, Morgan (1997) provides that the study utilize structured groups. In short, interview standardization across the groups is necessary. According to Creswell, these questions must explore the meaning of that experience being studied for individuals and ask that they describe their lived experiences (1998). To help meet that requirement, interview questions suggested by similar findings and discussion items in studies completed in the State of Washington by Christensen (2005) and in Louisiana by Bass (2006) as well as by Darling-Hammond (1995) were used as a foundation for the interview protocol. Topic specifics selected for individual questions were adjusted to reflect Pennsylvania's academic environment, while other identified areas for discussion were chosen to reflect the more specific search of this study. Individual interviews will be used as a follow-up to the focus group discussion to further explore experiences and perceptions. These questions used are included in Appendix B.

Focus group interviews of each group of parents, as well as follow-up individual interviews, will be audio recorded and then transcribed and compared for accuracy with the transcription of a stenographer present at each discussion. Each interviewee will be given the opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of the sessions in which they participate. The interview questions used as part of the data collection will reflect the

individual experiences, perceptions and opinions of parents and may or may not correspond with the key points identified in the literature review. Additional viewpoints and perspectives may be discovered as respondents tell their stories and experiences. The interview questions are designed to fall within the framework of leadership and strategic planning in the area of appropriate curriculum design and assessment to collect data necessary to answer the listed research questions. The eight focus group interview questions are detailed below (and in Appendix A) as they relate to the major research questions.

How do two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success?

1. What meaning does your child's score on the State test and/or local assessment have in relation to his or her future career or life success?
2. Do you believe that a high percentage of students with proficient scores is a good indicator of the quality of the school? Why do you believe this?
3. What other skills and habits, in addition to the Pennsylvania State academic standards, should students demonstrate proficiency in before earning graduation?

How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of proficient students (as defined by the State test) link with their post-graduation reality?

How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of students proficient only on the local District proficiency assessment link with their post-graduation reality?

4. Are schools doing a better job of preparing students for future success because of the PSSA? Why or why not?

5. Can a school be a good school even if its PSSA scores are lower than the State average? Please explain your answer.

How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient on the State test in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?

How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient only on the local assessment of proficiency in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?

6. In what ways does your child's score on graduation proficiency exams accurately reflect his or her abilities to achieve success in his or her chosen post-high school path?
7. What other skills and attitudes do they possess that have contributed to their current place in life?
8. Where and how did they develop these other important skills and attitudes?

Reliability and Validity of the Interview Instrument

According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2003), while qualitative researchers do not agree in their assumptions related to the nature of reliability and validity in research, those with a positivist assumption demonstrate a similar concern as quantitative researchers in this area. In the hope of demonstrating such a concern, several steps will be taken to ensure that the data collector, as well as the data itself, can be trusted as an

accurate representation of the study problem. According to Gall, et al., (2003) validity can be strengthened by developing a “chain of evidence” or “clear, meaningful links between research questions, raw data and the findings” (p. 460). Providing an audit trail can help provide this chain of evidence. Such a trail should consist of (but not necessarily be limited to) documentation of source and method of recording raw data, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, and materials relating to instrument development information (p.460). As already discussed, documentation of source and method of recording raw data will occur through taping and transcribing focus group and subsequent interviews. Written documents such as yearbooks and State graduation reports assembled for triangulation of data will be copied and stored with transcript records. A data reconstruction and analysis worksheet of archival data will be completed and used as part of the data collection. Completed forms will be kept with transcribed records, as will all researcher notes related to protocol development. This aspect of protocol development also includes what is hoped to be some small part of construct validity in that the questions indirectly came from suggestions made by existing studies. This supports, in part, the concept that the “measure was used has already been shown to correctly operationalize the concepts being studied.” (Gall et al., p. 460) Additionally, content validity will be further established by a process Huck (2004) describes as “...an instrument’s standing with respect to content validity is determined simply by having experts carefully compare the content of the test against a syllabus or outline that specifies the instrument’s claimed domain” (p. 89). By soliciting the input and agreement of experts regarding validity, the reliability, or extent to which the same results could be replicated in another study, will also be reinforced.

The panel of experts utilized to address the protocol question validity was asked to evaluate the relationship of the interview question to the research question as well as their understandability. Their opinions and advice were collected orally and in writing before question improvements were attempted. A total of seven fellow administrators contributed to the content validity study, including five superintendents and principals from school districts other than the one utilized in the study. All five were enrolled in higher degree programs, giving them a familiarity with research and interview protocol validity issues. An additional two building administrators employed by the District in the study participated, their qualifications being an understanding of the local assessment, as well as their views of parents of graduation proficient students as determined by other districts. An additional five parents not included in either focus group were also solicited for input to ensure an absence of “educationese” that might distract from the main ideas. The questions selected for the follow-up individual interviews were eliminated from the focus group protocol due to their more narrow and “leading” focus. A separate group of parents were utilized to establish content validity of these questions, which are included in Appendix A.

Verification of the Study

In addition to ensuring the validity of research questions, the correctness of data obtained would be a matter of concern. Triangulation of data validity will also be sought through what Stake (1995) called methodological triangulation. Student records involving grade point average and assessment scores, future plans listed in yearbooks and State graduation reports, past presentations to the Board of Directors and faculty, and minutes of faculty committee discussions and any other possible written sources of data

will be researched for additional insights and verification of collected focus group data. Such interpretive information gathered from historical documents can provide an additional and important piece of data imperative in analyzing parent perspectives of each alternative. Transcribing the data and then following Creswell (1998) and Maxwell's (1996) advice to rule out misinterpretation through member checking as well as any necessary follow-up interviews to clarify statements would mean a three-month to a six-month commitment before the data collection step would be complete and analysis of data could begin. According to Creswell (1998), prolonged engagement and persistent observation for long periods of time adds to a study's credibility. Parents were selected as the data source for this study due to their ability to contribute a long-term perspective. Since that same researcher advocates that the use of at least two of such methods be conducted (p. 203), the use of four tactics in follow-up interviews, triangulation, prolonged engagement and member checking will provide adequate measures to ensure trustworthy data.

Plan of Analysis

Just as numbers collected as data are useless unless some meaning is attached to them, the words and ideas collected in a qualitative case study must be organized in some manner so as to facilitate interpretation. Wolcott (1994) argues that getting the data, indeed, is the easy part. Stake (1995) agrees that this interpretation is the most distinctive characteristic of the qualitative research approach. He outlines his belief that it is this search for patterns and consistency within certain conditions that actually provides meaning to the phenomena being studied. Feldman (1995) takes this idea a step further arguing that this sense making of the data is what becomes the basis of future actions and

interpretations for the subjects. So that, in a nutshell, becomes the plan for analysis of the collected data. The first step was the analysis of focus group transcripts and field notes based on an inductive approach gear to identifying patterns in the data by means of thematic codes. Creswell (2003) advocates reading the descriptions, extracting the significant statements from each description, then formulating these into meanings and clustering these meanings into themes.

This search for patterns and themes, for consistency within certain conditions, which Stake (1996) called “correspondence” (p. 78) would be aided by the coding of themes into frequency counts. The coding framework selected for this project is adopted from the work of Christensen (2004) and originally based on the research of a theoretical outline developed by Mitchell, Marshall and Wert (1986) for classifying policy decisions in education.

1. Equity

- A. The fairness of the testing content.
- B. The fairness of who gets tested.
- C. The fairness of teacher quality.
- D. The fairness of instructional resources.
- E. The fairness of being tested on what you have been taught, not what someone says you should have been taught.
- F. The fairness of people being labeled at age 16.
- G. The fairness of being part of an economic social experiment to turn around our country’s economy.
- H. The fairness of effects of economic and racial disparities.

- I. The right and wrong to test scores determining status at age 16.
2. Choice
 - A. The principle of self-determination vs. external determination.
 - B. The position of accepting tests or challenging tests.
 - C. The position of refusing to participate in required testing.
3. Efficiency
 - A. Is it right to require the same thing of all students?
 - B. How many, if any, chances does a student get to pass the test?
 - C. Who should pay for testing retakes?
 - D. The need to standardize vs. needs of individuals.
 - E. The cost of losing creative thinkers due to system standardization.
4. Quality
 - A. Is what is tested important?
 - B. Does a test indicate personal value and worth?
 - C. Does a test indicate system value and worth?
 - D. What does a youth learn from this experience?

This tool would facilitate the search for patterns between the groups studied to identify any possible shared ideas. Information gained from interviews would be used to substantiate and corroborate the data from the focus group discussions.

Perhaps it is Creswell that best sums up an appropriate data analysis strategy for answering research questions such as those in this study:

“The original protocols are divided into statements or horizontalization. Then, the units are transformed into clusters of meanings expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts. Finally, these transformations are tied together to make a general description of the experience, the textural description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced. Some phenomenologists vary this approach by incorporating personal meaning of the experience.” (2003, p.55)

This study will further be enriched by the addition of the analysis of cross group findings. Included in this analysis will be the construction of a statistics chart for each student represented by parents in the study outlining “before” graduation and “after” graduation data. This data should be of value in identifying any differences in trends expressed by the separate groups of parents.

The written report of findings is anticipated to align with the common points of the “description--themes--assertion” format described by Creswell (1998) with support from Wolcott’s “description--analysis--interpretation” (1994). I see no reason to disagree with Creswell’s citation of Merriam that a 60% to 40%, or 70% to 30% ratio balance in the favor of description should be established as a reporting target, particularly since the goal of a phenomenology, according to Creswell (2003) is to “describe the essence of the experiences (p. 55). Wolcott’s (1994) suggestion to find a balance between the three depending on purpose is appealing in its general nature. It is anticipated that larger percentages will be needed in the description category for this particular research.

Wolcott (1994) outlines two handfuls of tips to guide the writing of the descriptive narrative analysis. Of these, his suggestion to “follow an analytical framework” would best describe the anticipated approach of this study. The participants would be identified, including a reporting of major findings to focus group discussion. Any other observation that might prove relevant to later data analysis was also identified.

The major task of the analysis section has been described by Creswell (1994) as “address(ing) the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them.” Wolcott (1998) breaks the task down even further, advising researchers to “highlight your findings” and “flesh out whatever analytic framework guided the data collection.” This part of the narrative will include a discussion of any common or general trends uncovered that exist among sites. How these findings are linked to the theoretical framework and research questions would be a focus. This is where the sample of frequency counts based on coded information is anticipated to be an asset.

The final portion of the analysis will then be interpretations and assertions. “Assertion” is Creswell’s word used to describe the “making sense of the data” or a “making sense of the lessons learned” (1994). Among his tips for this stage, Wolcott (1994) includes “extend the analysis,” “mark and then make the leap,” and “turn to theory.” This then becomes the section where those common trends identified in the previous section can be discussed in terms of what benefits the work of the studied schools can offer to others. In my mind, that is the “leap” Wolcott was suggesting, or the “making sense of the lessons learned” mentioned by Creswell.

Another concern of this analysis has to include addressing what Creswell (1998) and Stake (1995) stress as the need to ensure that a researcher devotes much time and attention to being able to answer the concern, “Do I have it right?” It was Maxwell who probably best described the main threat to valid description, the first section of this narrative, as “inaccuracy or incompleteness of data in describing what you saw and

heard.” This concern will be addressed by following his advice that “the audio or video recording of observations, interviews and verbatim transcription of these recordings largely solves this problem” (p. 89).

The other concern that needs addressed is summed up by his comment that “the main threat to valid interpretation is imposing one’s own framework or meaning, rather than understanding the perspective of the people studied and the meaning they attach to their words.” Identifying possible bias at the onset of the study will help eliminate that threat from the beginning of the study. Maxwell’s suggestion to include member checks will also help avoid any researcher bias creeping into the data, or “bracketing” in Creswell’s terms (1998, p. 52).

Chapter Summary

What direction are schools leaders to lead? With national and state legislation seeking to move schools to a stricter accountability model, schools across the country and the state are making changes that eliminate valued curriculum to better allow students to meet levels on high-stakes tests. This study focuses on data collected from parents of students who have demonstrated exit proficiency through a State test or a more holistic approach to review how both assessments have impacted post-high school achievement. In addition to being mostly a missing data set from the testing debate, parents should also possess a much wider approach to student achievement than just a snapshot of one test. Parent perceptions and experiences will be collected and examined for stories that may provide information to one Pennsylvania School District on the connection between pre-

graduation measures of proficiency and post-graduation experiences and accomplishments.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the data collected in this research project. The study investigates how two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success in one small Pennsylvania School District. Data to be analyzed were collected through a pair of focus group discussions, one limited to parents of students who had demonstrated proficiency on the State test. The other group was comprised of parents whose students reached proficiency on the local District's holistic assessment. Each participant in the focus groups also volunteered to participate in an individual follow-up interview that assisted in adding validity and depth to the original data. The collected data of personal experiences, beliefs and opinions were then analyzed using a framework that grouped shared experiences and beliefs into themes related to the concerns of the basic research questions.

Focus group discussions and follow-up interviews were selected to explore parents' experiences and opinions in specific areas in this research. The focus group discussion questions with follow-up interviews, as well as the cross-group analysis of collected data, provided insight and awareness into the experiences and deeply held beliefs of parents regarding the quality of education their students obtained under the current assessment and accountability system.

Data analysis in this chapter is divided into three sections. Section One provides description and analysis of the demographics of parents and students involved with the study by focus group. First, the parents of the group of students who had demonstrated

proficiency on the State test are detailed. That is followed by a similar description and outline of the group of parents (and their students) participating in the group and individual discussion centered around their child's experience in demonstrating proficiency through the local assessment rubric. Section Two examines the narrative responses of parents whose students demonstrated proficiency on the State test in each subcategory of the thematic code used in the analysis. The dimension in percentages of responses that fell in each subcategory of the thematic framework are additionally tabulated and reported for this group in Section Two. This coding framework was adapted from the work of Christensen (2004) and originally based on the research of a theoretical outline developed by Mitchell, Marshall and Wert (1986) for classifying policy decisions in education. Beliefs and concepts identified were coded and organized under one or more of four identified social values. Originally designed to provide societal and educational foundations for areas of policy development, the framework also lends itself to such a thematic coding of parent concerns and opinions in the area of the use of standardized testing for demonstration of graduation proficiency. This framework is organized into the following areas:

1. Equity

- A. The fairness of the testing content.
- B. The fairness of who gets tested.
- C. The fairness of teacher quality.
- D. The fairness of instructional resources.
- E. The fairness of being tested on what you have been taught, not what someone says you should have been taught.

- F. The fairness of people being labeled at age 16.
- G. The fairness of being part of an economic social experiment to turn around our country's economy.
- H. The fairness of effects of economic and racial disparities.
- I. The right and wrong to test scores determining status at age 16.

2. Choice

- A. The principle of self-determination vs. external determination.
- B. The position of accepting tests or challenging tests.
- C. The position of refusing to participate in required testing.

3. Efficiency

- A. Is it right to require the same thing of all students?
- B. How many, if any, chances does a student get to pass the test?
- C. Who should pay for testing retakes?
- D. The need to standardize vs. needs of individuals.
- E. The cost of losing creative thinkers due to system standardization.

4. Quality

- A. Is what is tested important?
- B. Does a test indicate personal value and worth?
- C. Does a test indicate system value and worth?
- D. What does a youth learn from this experience?

Eight focus group questions and eight follow-up questions that were designed to address the basic research questions are also used as a part of the analyses format.

Transcripts of the conversations were analyzed and parent experiences and opinions

grouped into the listed coding framework categories to aid in obtaining research question answers. Dominant themes and sampling of parent responses and experiences are reported in this section.

Section Three shares the narrative and numerical report for data collected from the parents of students who demonstrated proficiency on the local assessment. Both sections give attention to the coding in the themes of fairness, choice, efficiency and quality. The data collected from the different groups was kept separate in order to allow cross-group analysis in Chapter Five.

Parent and Student Focus Group Demographics

Nine parents representing eight students comprised the first focus group to meet to discuss the study questions and their children's experiences. Seven of the students had achieved proficiency on the three State exams in reading, writing and arithmetic. The eighth student was included in this group since he is the twin of one who had met the established criteria. This meeting best fit the schedule of the parent. While this parent's experiences thus gave her a view from both sides of the study questions, her group discussion focused more on the experiences of the child who did fit the common criteria of the group she participated with. Collectively, each of those other seven students had scored in the "Advanced" range of at least one proficiency test, with a pair of students reaching that level on two assessments. An additional pair of students earned that highest possible designation on all three exams. Statistically, the group averaged a final high school grade point average topping 96%. The range of those grades fell between 88% and 106% (the school awards bonus grade point points for the completion of "Honors" classes). State testing subgroups for statistical analysis listed four males (five

counting the non-proficient twin) and three females represented in the discussion group. One student was classified “economically disadvantaged.” All but one of the students earned status in the top 20% of class rank within their respective graduating class. Two of the students represented were classified as “gifted” and received additional services to address those individual needs during their public school careers. During high school, one of the students worked a part-time job “twenty-plus” hours per week, while the other six résumés boast a large mixture of sports, clubs and volunteer opportunities as well as membership in organizations such as National Honor Society.

In the years since high school, the group has continued to accumulate achievements and honors. Three of the students have completed college, including two earning cum laude status. The other four are still in college, including one student who is working fulltime and completing his studies through an online program. Two of the students started in one institution, and switched to another. Of the total of 32 semesters of college attended to date by the group, they have earned “Dean’s List” status 17 times. While extracurricular involvement in athletics has dropped from high school years, the group still stays active in volunteer opportunities and clubs such as Habitat for Humanity and internships.

A check of the self-reported post-graduation aspirations listed by the students through yearbooks and State graduation reports shows that the majority of the students are heading in directions they anticipated. One student had been “undecided” about his future while in school, but is now working and completing online college credits. All the others represented in this group were on the path they saw themselves headed while still in high school.

Table 1

A Profile of Students Classified as Proficient by the State Assessment

Student	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Graduation Year	2006	2004	2006	2006	2007	2004	2004	2004
Gender	M	M	M	M	F	F	F	M
PSSA Math	AD	P	P	AD	AD	P	AD	B/P
PSSA Reading	AD	AD	AD	AD	AD	AD	AD	P
PSSA Writing	P	P	P	P	AD	P	AD	P
Ec.Dis./IEP	ED	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
GPA	95.9	93.2	88	101.2	99.1	99.7	106.4	85.6
Extracurricular	Work	Sports St.Gov't	Sports Tutor Clubs	Sports NHS St.Gov't Clubs	Sports NHS St.Gov't Clubs	Dance Church	St.Gov't NHS Sports Mock Trial	Sports
Plans	College	College	Undec.	College	College	College	College	College
Actual	College	College	Work/ College	College	College	College	College	Work
Status	Soph. (Transfer)	Grad.	Soph.	Soph.	Frosh	Grad. (transfer)	Grad.	
GPA	3.5	2.9		3.5	3.76	3.6	3.7	
Extracurricular	Com.Serv. Club	Sports	Work	Com.Serv. Club	Internship Work	Internship Work	Clubs Com.Serv. Club	

Note. A second PSSA score is the re-test score.

The parents of these students also brought a list of impressive credentials to the discussion. Three of the nine have earned advanced degrees, with another two having completed four-year degrees. Two of the parents had completed a two-year course of

study or “some” college, while the remaining two had not attended school beyond high school. They are employed in a wide range of fields such as health care, manufacturing, education, the secretarial field and as a stay-at-home mother.

Table 2

A Profile of Parents of Students Classified as Proficient by the State Assessment

Parent	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P7	P8
Gender	F	M	F	F	F	M	F	M	F
Age Range	40’s	50’s	50’s	40’s	40’s	40’s	50’s	50’s	50’s
Educational Level	12	16+	12	14	16	14	16+	16	16+
Occupation	Secretary	Trainer/ Admin.	House- wife	Manuf.	Health Care	Manuf.	Librarian	Teacher	Elem. Principal
Requested Follow-Up Participation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The focus group discussion involving parents of students who had met the State proficiency requirement through the local District’s proficiency assessment rubric was comprised of eight parents representing six students. While in high school, four had scored at the “basic” level on one of the three State proficiency tests, of course, necessitating use of the local assessment. One student had not reached the designated State level of proficiency on two tests, while the other had scored in the “basic” and

‘below basic’ range on all three exams. After the local assessment encouraged remediation and retest, four students improved their scores in the deficient area or areas, including one to the “proficient” level. Males and females were evenly represented at three apiece. Two of the students were classified as “economically disadvantaged” while in high school. Additionally, the group averaged a high school grade point average of 89.8%, ranging from 82.4% to 93%. Likewise, the class range of students represented in this group was widely dispersed, including several in the second fifth of the class ranging to a pair of represented students who finished in the bottom fifth of their class. Two of the students were identified as having learning disabilities in school. While athletics and extracurricular clubs still appear on résumés, they do in smaller numbers than in the other group. Answers such as “work,” “nothing really” and blank spaces were more common responses for this group of students.

In the years since high school, these students have also found ways to earn success in their worlds. Of the students represented, one has completed college, graduating cum laude. Three are still in college, including one who was in the labor force for three years before deciding to further his education. Another student is a member of the United States military. The final student went directly from high school to the work force. Of the 15 total semesters of college attended by this group, “Dean’s List” honors have been earned a total of seven times. In the areas of extracurricular and other activities, most of the students listed summer employment, with two listing continued work in community, civic and college clubs and service projects.

Self-reports from their senior year of high school were as consistent as with the other group of students. One student who had listed “college” as his future pathway

attended for one semester before enlisting in the United States Navy (where he continues his studies on a part-time basis). The other five remain true to the general objective stated several years before in their senior yearbook and end-of-year State report.

Table 3

A Profile of Students Classified as Proficient by the Local Assessment

Student	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Graduation Year	2004	2004	2007	2007	2005	2006
Gender	M	F	F	M	M	F
PSSA Math	B/P	B/B	BB/B	BB/B	P	B/B
PSSA Reading	P	P	AD	P	B/B	BB/B
PSSA Writing	P	P	AD	P	P	B/B
Ec.D./IEP	No	No	No	No	ED/IEP	ED/IEP
GPA	92.4	92.4	93	91.83	86.7	82.3
Extracurricular	Sports	Sports Mock Trial	Sports FCA Tutor	Sports	None	None
Plans	College	College	College	College	None	Cosmo. School
Actual	Military/ College	College	College	College	Work/ College	Work
Status		Grad.	Frosh	Frosh (transfer)	Frosh	
GPA		3.7	3.1	3.56	3.2	
Extracurricular		Honor Society	Com. Serv. Club	Work		

Note. A second PSSA score is the re-test score.

The parents of these students represented a narrower range of educational background than the first group, but just as diverse as occupational experiences. Only one of the eight parents had achieved a two-year degree or trade certification, while the others had entered the job force upon high school graduation. They represented a wide range of occupations, including agriculture, construction, health care, secretarial and retail. This group was originally more well rounded in terms of their own educational level and occupational experiences. But the last-minute choice not to participate in this research by four parents who had previously agreed to join the discussion, necessitated the inclusion of willing parents who met the fundamental criteria, but who may or may not have reflected a wider demographic sample.

Table 4

A Profile of Parents of Students Classified as Proficient by the Local Assessment

Parent	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Gender	F	F	F	M	F	M	M	F
Age Range	40's	50's	40's	50's	50's	50's	60's	40's
Educational Level	12	12	12	12	12	12	14	12
Occupation	Secretary	Secretary	Aide	Construction	Secretary	Agriculture	Medical	Retail
Requested Follow-Up Participation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Focus Group Involving State-Test Proficient Students

Parent responses to each research question are shared in this section, grouped by thematic coding. Samples of answers are also shared in hopes of allowing the reader a general understanding of the experiences and opinions shared by the parents relative to their experiences in their students achieving proficiency on the State test.

Narrative Analysis

Focus Group Question 1: What meaning does your child's score on the State test and/or local assessment have in relation to his or her future career or life success?

The emotional and personal nature of their children's experiences with State testing brought about a near unanimous response from this group that they saw no individual meaning attached to the scores as far as the future success of their student was concerned. Several parents did, however, add intellectual caveats grudgingly accepting possible general benefits for a much wider application of students:

If we were honest, we would all have to admit that we fully expected our children to do well on the PSSA because they do relatively well in school, are organized and are goal oriented. In that respect the scores and/or local assessments to me are a good conclusion to the success the student may achieve in college and grad school.

High achievers will do well anywhere. They will probably be successful anyway.

None. Her grades proved she was a good student. That grade didn't get her into college.

Both the test scores and local assessment, to me, are a good correlation to the success the student may achieve in college or grad school. However, they do not reflect creativity.

But those same parents who were able to speak positively regarding the accountability measures were also quick to join the group in adding concerns related to

individual situations. These concerns fell into all four coding categories of equity, choice, efficiency and quality, with a statistical count showing that 70% of their comments fall into the first and last categories.

In the area of equity issues, parents noted concerns related to the fairness of testing content, those who get tested, differences in instructional levels, and effects of economic and racial disparities. Sample opinions included:

I think there has been some discussion of life skills...life skills that will get you through and help you create success at whatever vocation you choose.

You have different curriculums, college prep, vocational, business. I don't think it's fair to come up with one test for the whole group to have to pass. Kids who take vocational and Career and Technology auto shop skim by on the least amount of math, but can be the greatest mechanic to ever come out of here. I don't see how you can come up with one test that can fairly evaluate every kid no matter what they did through high school.

The geography of the district, I think makes a difference. In Philadelphia they have more resources than we do here.

My daughter said that what they were taught for the PSSA is completely different from regular schoolwork.

It's more geared for kids going on to college. Many aren't going on. Maybe we should have a couple of tests.

Sentiment in the coding area of quality ran just as high against standardized testing. Statements offered from personal experience addressed issues coded into subcategories that reflect concerns with the importance of tested areas as well as the personal and system worth represented. Opinions included:

Do colleges even look at PSSA scores for admittance?

My experience was that my children weren't really concerned. It was just one more test.

There are standards for success that they are not tested on, like keeping checkbooks, making change, résumés, and interview skills.

Success is dependent on many things other than a test.

It's the standards that the test evaluates. Standards are good. I want my doctors to have standards of practice. School X can't be different than School Y. Standards are the bull's eye on the dartboard, but I agree (that important skills and attitudes are left out of testing.)

The certificate they give is a joke.

Don't get me started on this bandwagon. I just feel there is too much emphasis on testing. There can't be just one test. Teachers are teaching to the test and because of that they don't do the fun and creative stuff they used to.

Schools should focus on what students need to know outside of school, not just what they need to know for school.

Though not the major focus of their comments in discussion (only accounting for 30% of parent comments), the coding areas of choice and efficiency were also addressed by this group of parents who represented students who were proficient on the State test. Several parents shared their concern under challenging tests that the PSSA did not have the influence on college entrance as the Scholastic Aptitude Test. In the area of efficiency, parent concerns focused around the subcategories of expecting the same things of all students and the need to standardize vs. the needs of individuals. Sample comments included:

Some just take General Math. Some take Calculus. My daughter is on the verge of OCD when it comes to studying and was really disappointed that that's all the test was. Didn't seem like much of a test to her. Her expectation was that she was going to see where she was.

If he had a tutor to help with all his school work, shouldn't he have a tutor to help with the test?

The test does not measure the creativity of students.

In the end, some parents were indeed able to articulate general intellectual support for the basic arguments of increased accountability through a single standardized test. But they were near unanimous in expressing personal concerns regarding equity, choice, efficiency and quality of the test based on the experiences of their own children. Even being the “winners” in the State testing arena translated into little or no meaning attributed to their eventual success.

Focus Group Question 2: Do you believe that a high percentage of students with proficient scores is a good indicator of the quality of the school? Why do you believe this?

Taken as a whole, the group of parents did not believe that high-standardized test scores were enough to solely mark a school as a “good” school. Almost to the exact percentage of comments as with the first discussion, their concerns seemed to especially revolve around issues of equity and quality, along with lesser concerns in the areas of choice and efficiency.

Concerns in the area of equity started with the fairness of what content is included on the test, the availability of instructional resources and teaching to the test as well as concerns over effects of cultural, economic and racial disparities. Sample comments included:

It does not necessarily mean a good school. Some schools can teach to the test, so to speak. They do more remediation, maybe because they have more personnel. It involves more money.

Yes, if they don't teach to the test. Schools which offer a varied and challenging curriculum would achieve high or proficient scores without teaching to the test.

More and more of the home life of students is reflected in their ability to fit into school. I find this reflected in the attitudes of kids who visit my home. Over the years our home has been a gathering place for all kinds of personalities. It's easy to spot the kids who spend a lot of time in front of computers and video games and kids who have responsibilities and hobbies that require human interaction.

This is an agricultural area where you have lots of kids not planning to go to college. That doesn't mean they won't do well. That's just the area we live in.

The parents also had a number of concerns in committing to calling a school a good school based on standardized test scores for a host of quality reasons. These included the selection of content and the resulting system value and worth. Sample statements included:

I think they shouldn't have to worry about one test. In many cases they should pass if the instruction focuses on the standards. Our focus needs to be on the standards.

I get the impression from our girls that there is such emphasize on the test for the school's sake and the teachers' reputations. The structure of the test is completely different from anything else they ever do.

My big thing is...what do kids really need to know before they leave?

There are different strategies being used. Some schools put a lot of emphasis on the (test). In my school we try to emphasize good instructional strategies that they will need in high school and college.

I don't think test scores reflect if it's a good school. You just can't point to the one school. I think it's a progressive kind of thing. If you have a low score at the high school, it doesn't mean it's just a high school problem.

I'm going to say it could reflect if it's a good school. If kids aren't passing the test, something is wrong. But there may be other measures you can use. I think that is good.

During follow-up questioning, parents were given the opportunity to elaborate further on their idea of a “good” school. All answers supported this notion that they expected more than just academic focus from a quality school.

There’s a whole lot more to teach a child than just to read and write. I know parents have a role, but a lot of kids don’t have parents who will teach them.

A good school is one that prepares students for a changing world. To live a productive life. That covers it.

My opinion is that a high school should get students ready for the real world, whether they are heading to college, work force or even marriage.

A good school is one that students feel successful when they leave.

Focus group discussion also revealed a few concerns that fell in the coding areas of choice and efficiency in the area of the predictive value between standardized test scores and “good” schools. Sample comments included:

Kids know what is expected of them. My son could have done so much better than he did on the test. He didn’t see the reward in it for him. He did what he had to do, and there are kids out there who know what they need to do to just get by.

It seems like students are judged in a herd-like way.

Many students do not test well.

I don’t think the test scores reflect the school’s success rate fairly. The test does not reflect a student’s creativity.

In summary, parents were fairly united in their conviction that a school could be “good” even if standardized test scores were not high. An emerging trend from this discussion was the belief that although parents have to play a role in the teaching of certain habits and attitudes that we have labeled emotional intelligence, schools must also

be involved. There was a general consensus that many students were not getting that instruction at home, and even if they were, reinforcement from the schools was expected.

Focus Group Question 3: What other skills and habits, in addition to the Pennsylvania State academic standards, should students demonstrate proficiency in before earning graduation?

If the theme of the school's expected role of teaching and reinforcing emotional intelligence and the Schwan and Spady ten universally addressed values started to appear in discussion of the last question, then those winds really started to swirl during this part of the conversation. All of the comments and concerns are coded in the quality area where parents shared their opinions on what areas in addition to academics schools should teach and assesses readiness to help their students achieve success. The conversation started addressing the subject in general terms of defining proficiency and what level of knowledge that was needed to reach that level, then quickly turned to specifics. Examples include:

It would be interesting to see if proficiency is really being measured on the amount of information you need to know in each of those areas in order to get by in life.

One of the questions I wondered is this...to hit this proficient score... What if someone went through and did everything that an average typical person surviving in life would do. Would they get a proficient score?

I only have the one child. He did well in school, so I didn't have to struggle with a lot of this stuff. But, I see a lot of college interns where I work and a lot of high school students who come in as part of their co-op program. And the big thing that I see is that kids just naturally don't know how to get something done...how to take a project and break it into steps and understand what order, in what dependencies.

I look at that PSSA math, and it makes me say, “Where is the basic I-need-to-know-to-get-along-in-life math in here? Simple things that people really need to know. What is it we’re trying to accomplish?”

Many of the parents participating in the discussion continued to use the floor as an opportunity to list the specific attitudes and habits they would like to see reinforcement before allowing students into the post high school world. These sought-after requirements included study skills, time management, teamwork, work ethic, socialization, personal communication, social etiquette, civic, political and environmental responsibility, dealing with change, and even more specific situational skills such as interview skills and how to fill out paperwork for college and adult life situations. Interestingly, it does not take much of a stretch of the imagination to fit each of their listed habits and skills into the umbrella definition of emotional intelligence or even Schwan and Spady’s ten universally endorsed values of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability.

Table 5

A Visual Comparison of Universal Values, Stated Parent Desires for Non-Academic Habits, Skills and Attitudes to be Taught and Reinforced by Schools and Emotional Intelligence

Schwan & Spady's "Universal Values"	Stated Parent Desires for Their Children from Schools	"Emotional Intelligence"
Honesty Integrity Trustworthiness Loyalty Caring Fairness Citizenship Pursuit of Excellence Accountability Respect	Deal with Change Work Ethic Teamwork Study Skills Time Management Self Worth Civic Responsibility Environmental Responsibility Communication Skills Organizational Skills Responsibility Ability to Work Independently Proper Dress People Skills Interview Skills Computer Skills Respect Self-Motivation Financial Responsibility	"myriad of soft skills we always knew were essential but were never sure how or why"

Focus Group Question 4: Are schools doing a better job of preparing students for future success because of the PSSA? Why or why not?

The purpose of this question was to continue to explore the concerns and opinions of parents regarding the quality of education schools are providing students pre- and post-State testing. It was felt that positive answers to the question would indicate a preference for a strictly academic education, while negative answers could be interpreted to reinforce discussions that had already taken place regarding just what was expected in

addition to instruction in academics. Such a discussion could again be used to enlarge and reinforce previous comments. In response to this particular prompt, comments quickly emerged that focused in the coding areas of equity, efficiency and quality.

In the area of fairness, parent comments fell into the subcategories of the fairness of teacher quality and economic and racial disparities. At least one parent felt that the test had encouraged some teachers to occasionally do less than a good job, noting

Let's face it. There are teachers with different methods and types of teaching that some kids really respond to and there are methods that are used that I can tell you are just like a light switch for kids. My daughter would endure those and do what she needed. We're down to minimums again. I'll do the minimum I need to get by. I think there is a tradeoff there somewhere in talking about (the quality) of instruction in the same way.

Racial and economic differences were cited again as a concern, not necessarily on the individual level, but at the school district and school level especially where limited resources force schools to select which kids to pour their resources into, leaving a more needy population still struggling.

Ok. How many schools do you know that after they see the results and they want to make AYP, they look for kids that are just under being proficient and those are the ones they work with because they don't have the personnel to work with all the kids. Poor Johnny or whoever is clear at the bottom, but they are not going to work much with him because there is no way they can put the time and effort into him to bring him up to proficient. So they work with the kids who are just underneath, just to get up over the bar so they can get AYP.

In the coding area of efficiency, parents circled around the issue of expecting the same information from different students and the need to standardize vs. the needs of individuals.

No they aren't better. They have to focus on the standards (for the test) and a lot of the personalization has been taken away.

Public schools don't have the personnel to make sure every student individual program is followed. We don't have the personnel. Public education is to give everyone a basic knowledge base.

Finally, the majority of comments and concerns (67%) again centered on the quality of the test and tested subject matter by itself and the testing system as a whole were common. Examples include:

I cannot imagine a parent who would say "All I expect you to do is fill my child's head with knowledge. I can't imagine a parent who would say that. I'll take care of the rest, you just teach him the books.

I'll say yes (schools are doing better) because they do have standards to look at. But that's just a minimum standard. I think it's up to the school to go above the standard and provide personalization.

I'm going to play Devil's advocate here and say no because in just taking the 4Sight (summative evaluations that provide practice and information on weaknesses) and the PSSA test, each different section in our school we lost ten school days. And that doesn't count all the remediation and pulling kids out of study halls.

It all goes back to good instruction. Standards have forced schools to focus on what needs to be taught, which is a good thing. But on the other hand, we're still missing the boat. We're still back to just one test.

I'm not an advocate for just one test. I'm an advocate for assessments with an "s" that will assess the standards.

Based on everything that's been said, it almost does seem that you can look at teaching to this test in a negative way. Or you can look at it in a positive way. If the children are coming up through school and getting a hit-or-miss curriculum, this entire process forced the schools to do a curriculum that will teach a variety of things that all of our kids need to know. Then maybe it's good. But you're never going to get 100% of these children to grasp everything, every concept you're trying to teach. It isn't going to happen. When you hear that 'I've got 15 students and I need to decide which one.. oh if I work with him, he'll make it. I'm going to let her go.' Then that seems like a problem.

Several follow-up interview questions are also asked to provide depth and insight into this question of whether schools are turning out better equipped students now as opposed to pre-State testing. In particular, one question that asked parents to define a "good school" had parents thinking back to their own experiences to compare with those of their children:

A good school is one which teaches and cares about students.
Not just about test scores.

I think it's one where ALL the kids get to feel important.

It looks after kids. There are a lot of other things that qualify as important as academics.

One where kids feel successful when they leave.

On the whole, it became evident that the parents in this focus group felt that schools that focused solely on academic performance did not qualify as doing a better job preparing students than in the pre-State testing days. Several comments were made in the course of the conversation advocating for these additional lessons coming from parents, but each ended with an admission that not all students have that opportunity presented to them in their homes.

Focus Group Question 5: Can a school be a good school even if its PSSA scores are lower than the State average? Please explain your answer.

Once again the subject of “good” schools was broached with parents. This time it came from a slightly different direction than before in the hopes of generating additional discussion as to exactly what constitutes an ideal school. Are academics enough? How deep is the desire to see emotional intelligence habits and attitudes become a formal part of curriculum and hence assessment? Are there other areas currently completely ignored that parents think could contribute to preparing students for future success? This segment of the discussion supported previous trends in the coding areas of equity, efficiency and quality, and contributed additional thoughts and experiences to the overall conversation.

These included:

They should have a standardized test for each grade. If you don't pass that grade test, you stop there. If you don't pass the third grade test, you don't go to fourth grade. You shouldn't have to wait until it's time to graduate.

Yes. All students take the test even though some don't take it seriously.

Teaching to the test is a real Catch-22 for schools.

A school isn't dependent just on test scores. It can depend on the type of students that you have, your faculty, what the students want out of the school.

I think it goes back to some of those teachers where 'I'll put in a video and you just watch it and I'll give you a passing grade.' Those teachers aren't doing the students or the school any favors.

Parents also used their experiences to defend schools based on efficiency issues such as the rightness of requiring the same thing of all students and the need to standardize vs. the need to individualize.

You can have kids graduate that have great values and morals and basic training in technical trades that can't pass that test. You can have schools where (test scores) are low because half of the kids are missing because they are in jail. There are a lot of things that can be a difference of these types of kids who pass and these types who didn't pass. I still think the school can be a good school.

In a lot of schools, mainstreamed kids make for a slow pace in classrooms.

Quality issues were again at the forefront of many parent concerns and opinions, making up 50% of their shared comments. They were particularly focused in the area of system value and worth.

As a parent, if I were being honest and I was moving into an area and looking at schools, I would probably look at that and do some more investigating as to why the scores were low. Like it's been said, there could be other factors involved. But again, if you go back, if there's good instruction going on...

My question is how are these students getting to 11th and 12th grade with passing grades if they can't pass the basics on the PSSA?

One of my pet peeves has always been the attention and money spent on gifted and special students vs. average students. These so-called average students carry the burden of lifting test scores and in reality reflect the success of a school, but get no rewards (or attention).

In the follow-up interviews several parents again picked up this discussion describing and advocating for what they expect from a school.

Schools should meet the needs of all students. Just don't focus on factions like academics. I like standards. It gives a measure where it was wide open before we had them. We just need to have some way or ways to measure whether all students are meeting them.

A good school looks after kids. There are lots of other things that qualify with academics.

Combine good academic goals for students with a culture that stresses citizenship, well-rounded persons...qualities that are important in the world like giving back, a more global approach.

Offer good education. Reading, writing, basics and extracurriculars.

Once again, the parent comments demonstrated that whether discussing their experiences with standardized testing or in outlining a "good" school, they believed that academics alone were not enough to satisfy what they believed students would need for future success.

Focus Group Protocol Question 6: In what ways does your child's score on graduation proficiency exams accurately reflect his or her abilities to achieve success in his or her chosen post-high school path?

It did not take parents long to recognize that this interview protocol question was a restatement of the opening question that generated a long discussion regarding the role State testing played in helping students achieve success. But that didn't stop them from restating and enlarging their position that in their experiences, there was little predictive value between the test and future success. Samples of parent comments that again focused in the coding areas of equity and quality included:

This goes back to Question One. It doesn't.

There's no direct correlation between the exams and success. There may be an indirect correlation but only in relating back to the standards.

I think no matter what the PSSA shows, whether it's proficient or not, I really believe that more than a test score is that child's desire to do what it takes to be successful. I think part of this PSSA thing is saying for you to be successful you have to be a math whiz...you have to know everything about science and geometry and be able to write well. There are lots of successful people who are not math whizzes and do not do all of those things well. It all comes back to is this really for the student or the District? What is the real purpose for this test and this measure?

What it comes down to is there is a big variety. Kids who are talented in this area, and kids who are talented in that area. I think what this is trying to do is raise everyone's level and make them the same. The worst thing that can happen with all this is it makes kids say, "I'll do just what it takes to get by as long as I can pass." Where is the motivation? Where is the drive? Where are the future leaders? The people we really do need to want to go out and kick butt in the world. If we're saying that "proficiency" is the minimum you need to function, I'm all for it. But that's not success.

High School is to teach you the basics so that you can be successful, so you have the confidence to go on and do what you want to do. It's more than just academics.

Is the test geared more for just kids going to college or for everyone? What makes you think that could even work?

Each teacher feels their own subject is most important. How can you come up with one test for all kids to take? It's like any teacher agreeing that one subject is more important than the others.

Our focus needs to be more like a track team than a baseball team. On a track team you focus on individual improvement. It doesn't matter that I came in last in the hurdle race. Did I improve my time over the last time?

Given still yet another chance to address this topic during the follow-up interviews, several parents went even further in airing how their child's personal

experiences had formed their opinions regarding State standardized testing. In this one-on-one discussion, several parents spoke about good points to the State accountability program. The majority of responses, however, continue to reflect negative experiences.

The test did not impact her. That grade did not get her into college. Listening to her, the teachers teach one way for things like the PSSA for writing and another for the SAT. The PSSA did not impact or help her at all.

It does help point toward a career. It does expect them to do well. It allowed us to see where they stood.

Honestly, there was no impact on him. I told him to get a good night's sleep and eat a good breakfast but no impact other than that.

It had very little impact on him. He took it seriously, although many don't. I say it's impact is on curriculum because we tend to teach to the test.

None other than the math phobia he has now.

School was easy. He didn't feel the need to excel on just this one test.

The test put a bad taste in her mouth. She has nothing good to say. Teachers and schools are more concerned with her passing so that it makes them look good. They teach how to take the test, but not everything they'll need. It's a big project that doesn't count for anything. It's for the school and not the kids.

The dominant themes of this discussion seemed to echo the feelings and experiences related to equity and quality described earlier. The general consensus was a negative feeling toward the State test as far as its impact in preparing students for future success.

Focus Group Question 7: What other skills and attitudes do they possess that have contributed to their current place in life?

The discussion resulting from this question was almost a repeat of the conversations that an earlier question prompted regarding what additional skills and attitudes should be taught and assessed by schools. Many of the participants referred back to their earlier comments supporting what we have labeled emotional intelligence and Schwan and Spady's universal values. These included but were not limited to work ethic, self worth, confidence, responsibility, time management, ability to work independently, socialization, civic and environmental responsibility and organizational skills. Several additional thoughts also surfaced that had not been mentioned before:

Students need guidance to use these tools properly and successfully.

Teaching kids consequences and the steps to get there.
People forget what they did to get there.

These should be part of graduation assessment.

Focus Group Question 8: Where and how did they develop these other important skills and attitudes?

This continuation of the previous discussion questions was intended to draw out (and based on previous discussion questions to verify) parent opinions regarding the potential role of schools in teaching, reinforcing and validating emotional intelligence and the universal characteristics. Several parents mentioned their opinion that the home was the proper place for the teaching of these habits and attitudes, but soon the majority agreed that the school did have some role to play.

Whether we like it or not, public schools have had to take on a lot of these roles. We're sitting here with a group of parents who have had students who have been successful. So, I guess we should consider our kids lucky. They've had support. But we're getting more and more students even in the elementary schools with less and less of that outside support they need. So, whether we like it or not, we've got to take on more of these.

School is the safest place for some kids.

Let's not take away how extracurricular activities that students get involved in and all the life lessons taught. There are a lot of life lessons taught in sports and what else they participate in that really have value in creating solid, upstanding individuals...someone who can be dependable and someone who wants to do the right things. You learn a lot from those extracurricular activities.

At home and personal experiences. Volunteering somewhere. Church. And also back to teachers. There are some teachers who take that step beyond and teach ways of life more than just the subjects.

I think good teachers teach compassion through raising money for whatever it is. I think they teach self-confidence and moral values in school.

If these kids don't have home lives to teach them about being courteous and being able to accept change and how to present themselves, the school is the next most solid place they have in their lives.

I think for some of the kids who aren't getting these skills and attitudes at home, they're getting them from the kids who are. As someone said, the more society breaks down, the less that is going to happen. When we were in school, 80% of the kids had the same mother, the same father and went to church. I don't know what the percentages are now, but I know it's a lot smaller. When you had stable friends, the school didn't have to be in this situation. But if it's not there, it's going to be more difficult. And the children who are going to suffer the most are the ones who are from the most disadvantaged families.

In summary, this group of parents seemed to agree – as evidenced by their comments and nonverbal support of other’s comments – that parents should be the primary instructors of these other habits and skills; but since many students did not have this opportunity available, schools must fill the gap for all students.

Numerical Analysis

Through the focus group discussion and follow-up interviews, a total of 103 parent comments were collected and coded into thematic categories using the framework described earlier in this chapter. Analyzed by general description, 4.8% of the comments reflected a positive comment or implication of the current State assessment system. Negative comments and/or implications were noted in 42.7% of the comments, with the remaining 52.5% neutral in this area. Despite little or no direct experience with the local assessment, 4.8% of the parent opinions reflected a direct or implied positive approach to the local system of proficiency assessment. Closely related to that concept, 21.3% addressed a desire for some form of multiple assessment of proficiency to earn high school graduation. An additional 28% of the comments expressed an expectation for the teaching, reinforcing or assessing of emotional intelligence or universal value skills, habits and attitudes as a graduation proficiency.

A more detailed breakdown utilizing the thematic coding framework to reflect the percentage of comments in each coding area by each question provides the following results:

Table 6

Percentage of Parent Comments in Coding Areas by Question: Focus Group of Test-Proficient Students

<u>Question Number</u>	<u>Equity</u>	<u>Choice</u>	<u>Efficiency</u>	<u>Quality</u>	<u>Total Comments</u>
1	35%	5%	25%	35%	20
2	36%	6%	24%	36%	17
3	8%			92%	13
4	14%		22%	64%	14
5	49%	7%		42%	14
6		13%	47%	40%	15
7				100%	3
8				100%	7
Total	23%	4%	18%	54%	103

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

The next series of charts reports the total response and percentage of parent responses by coding subcategory by each of the four major categories. Data was analyzed using this simple statistical reporting to illustrate the narrative claiming areas of majority responses.

Table 7

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Test-Proficient Students - Category Equity

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Total
Responses	6	1	2	7	3			4	1	24
Percentage of Responses	6%	1%	2%	7%	3%			4%	1%	23%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

- A = The fairness of the testing content.
- B = The fairness of who gets tested.
- C = The fairness of teacher quality.
- D = The fairness of instructional resources.
- E = The fairness of being tested on what you have been taught, not what someone says you should have been taught.
- F = The fairness of people being labeled at age 16.
- G = The fairness of being part of an economic social experiment to turn around our country's economy.
- H = The fairness of effects of economic and racial disparities.
- I = The right and wrong to test scores determining status at age 16.

Table 8

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Test-Proficient Students - Category Choice

	A	B	C	Total
Responses	2	2		4
Percentage of Responses	2%	2%		4%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

A = The principle of self-determination vs. external determination.

B = The position of accepting tests or challenging tests.

C = The position of refusing to participate in required testing.

Table 9

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Test-Proficient Students - Category Efficiency

	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Responses	8	1		9	1	19
Percentage of Responses	8%	1%		9%	1%	18%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

- A = Is it right to require the same thing of all students?
- B = How many, if any, chances does a student get to pass the test?
- C = Who should pay for testing retakes?
- D = The need to standardize vs. needs of individuals.
- E = The cost of losing creative thinkers due to system standardization.

Table 10

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Test-Proficient Students - Category Quality

	A	B	C	D	Total
Responses	9	5	20	2	56
Percentage of Responses	8%	5%	20%	1%	54%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

- A = Is what is tested important?
- B = Does a test indicate personal value and worth?
- C = Does a test indicate system value and worth?
- D = What does a youth learn from this experience?

Once again, the data was organized, analyzed and presented in this simple statistical manner to add support to contentions made in the narrative analysis regarding the majority of parent responses.

Focus Group Consisting of the Parents of Local Assessment-Proficient Students

Focus Group Two consisted of eight parents representing six students who had not achieved proficiency on the State test. All six met the school graduation requirement through the local assessment rubric. This second focus group to meet to discuss the topic

was, in some ways, much like the first group of parents. Volunteering to share their opinions, most of them were like the first group of parents in that they had demonstrated an interest in the topic through concerned and proactive questioning and conversations with school officials while their students were still in school. As seen by the demographic data displayed earlier in the chapter, there are several differences with the first group in education earned. The major difference, however, remains that their experiences and opinions may come from the personal experiences of a child reaching the graduation requirement of proficiency on the local assessment rubric due to sub par performance on at least one State test.

Narrative Analysis

Focus Group Question 1: What meaning does your child's score on the State test and/or local assessment have in relation to his or her future career or life success?

Little positive was said during this discussion regarding the positives of a State test for either school or individual accountability. Instead, the personal and emotions attached to this assessment led to comments and opinions expressed that were generally very negative in nature. Like the first group, concerns covered all four coding areas of equity, choice, efficiency and quality issues with the majority of the comments and opinions expressed falling into the areas of equity and quality concerns (68%). Subcategories within the equity area include the fairness of the testing content, the fairness of who gets tested, and the fairness of people being labeled at the age of 16. Examples of comments, opinions and experiences related to what meaning the test has for their child included:

Our daughter was told that the College-in-High-School math course she took would count. But when the college saw her PSSA score, they decided it would only count for an elective credit, not a math credit. Her professor told her the test means nothing because it's just a standardized test. She knows her weaknesses. She's not going into anything math related. She had four other professors who agreed that when you get to college, you know your strengths and weaknesses and you go toward your strengths. The PSSA means nothing, but she has to take another math class in college.

Kids set themselves up for "I can't graduate." They're so stressed they can't do this PSSA.

On any given day scores can change on a standardized test.

When (my child) was in high school, I'd put six hours a night in with homework just trying to help him get through it all with his reading disability. He also got help from his teacher, but when it came time to take this test, that wasn't considered. He's in college now and doing well, but not exceptional. There ought to be something in those tests to give accommodations. Because how can they succeed at them. I truly don't think there are any positives about the test. Comparing kids with Career and Technology Center classes and with learning disabilities with college prep classes is wrong. It also breaks down in economic differences between kids and schools. The availability of funds to provide more opportunities makes a big difference. There has to be some buy-in by the local school to give students what they need.

The PSSA is non-positive because they already know strengths and weaknesses. The rubric lets them use their strengths.

For my kids there was no meaning that I could see. It's all negative.

There's too much emphasis on what people think on tests. It takes away from a well-rounded curriculum. It's too much pressure on teachers as well as kids. It's not fair. They can do the best they can, and some kids will never pass. Some kids are Advanced Placement. Some are Learning Disabled.

Concerns that addressed quality issues were just as common in this group as those related to fairness. The importance of the topics tested as well as concerns related to whether the test indicates personal and/or system worth and value were common.

Examples of comments included:

My thoughts on the matter are that there can't be just one way to gauge (proficiency). There's nothing wrong with the PSSA, but there's also nothing wrong with the teachers making decisions like this because they deal with these children everyday. As a parent, I would rather put my trust in people who are dealing with my child every day, along with talking to me about whether my child is felt to be able to deal with college or the next step. For me having a State test determine their future is no good for me. It doesn't work.

I hate to say there's no positive in the test. But that's how I feel.

I don't think there's much meaning. Kids get a certificate. But let me tell you where that sits. (They) can't take it on any job interview. I don't know why they do this.

We're not all (test) people. Look at my older son. He went to trade school, but he's very successful.

My husband and I look at our three kids. Each one is doing something. One can't do what either of the others are doing. There's too much put on that test.

The rubric helps. It gives kids options and tells them "just try."

I don't like the idea of withholding graduation because people don't do well on a test. I like the idea of the rubric. I don't have a problem with testing, but with how the results are used.

While fairness and quality of the test emerged as the primary concerns, parents also suggested comments that fell into the coding areas of efficiency and choice.

Subcategories addressed included the correctness of expecting the same from all students, self-determination vs. external determination and the loss of areas such as creativity.

Some of those areas included:

All students, no matter what level, have to take the same test. There are people out there who think this test is so great who can't even pass the test.

My question would be, "How does a standardized test judge creativity?" Our son is going for graphic design. He struggled with the math part. He's not gifted in math and he's not going to need it. How can someone be kept from graduating based upon something that really isn't relevant to what they're going to be doing?

We should be teaching creative writing instead of the formula for the test.

The test certainly adds more stress to the senior year.

It's demeaning. You get the results back and you're told you're below basic. It's a slap. All that hard work is gone. It doesn't mean you haven't tried and worked hard. It doesn't mean you're not a person with value.

It made him feel like a failure. Made him feel stupid. He knew he had to work harder in that area.

It made her feel like she wasn't good enough. Made her feel like she couldn't achieve the things that she is. It made her feel negative about her abilities.

I do know of students who dropped out rather than work at improving and doing the remediation. It gave them a defeatist attitude.

The teachers and the rubric knew that he was trying. They gave him the one on one to try to dwell on what he individually needed. It was not the same for each kid. I've always been appreciative of that.

The test is weighted against CTC and vocational students. The school did a good job saying college isn't for everyone.

To sum up, the group discussion addressing the meaning the test brought to a child's success generated some very strong anti-proficiency and standardized test sentiment. Through the experiences of their children, this group of parents has witnessed roadblocks and disappointment thrown up in the senior year, not surprisingly causing a less than positive attitude to form. Parent concerns address all four coding areas of equity, efficiency, choice and quality, with the group most focused on fairness and quality issues.

Focus Group Question 2: Do you believe that high percentages of students with proficient scores are a good indicator of the quality of the school? Why do you believe this?

Based on the group discussion and follow-up interviews, there exists a very strong belief among the parents of this group that test scores are not a good indicator of potential success for individuals. Further, they are not a good indicator of the quality of schools. Once again, there were no "yea, but" or "at least it does this good" from this group. Comments from beginning to end reflected the frustration these parents experienced with the existing test through their children.

It was again in the coding areas of equity and quality that the majority of concerns centered. The fairness of the content, the fairness of instructional resources and economic and racial disparities were the subcategories that garnered the most comments.

For example:

No because it's a standardized test to begin with. One day is not going to tell you what's involved in an entire year. There's more to it than that. Sometimes attendance or just getting passing grades from students is success. I

don't want to see a standardized test telling me that a school is great just because they did well on the PSSA.

What happens in intercity schools where teaching is hard to begin with and just getting kids to school is hard? Are they doing good on these tests?

The State sets schools up for failure the same way (my son) was set up for failure. He didn't get any special accommodations on the test. Philadelphia School District is set up for failure because they don't take their culture into account.

I have a relative who is a principal in Johnstown. There is a huge difference between Johnstown and Richland. I mean, just the differences in the culture. I'm sure it reflects in the tests.

Comments coded in the quality area fell into subcategories of whether what is tested is important and whether the test indicates personal and system worth. Examples included:

What I object to is that I know there have to be standards, but it seems like my kids are studying for this test rather than studying for school. They're studying to pass this test rather than studying the book to pass the curriculum. I think that's wrong.

Teachers are teaching to pass the test. That's what is happening.

Good schools provide more than just academics.

Once the subject of a "good" school was broached, parents spilled out with an outpouring of ideas concerning what they expected in addition to the academics tested by the State standardized test. Particularly in the follow-up interviews, these parents felt it was important to express what they hoped for from public schools.

Assess student needs and capabilities and meet them. I'm different than most I guess. I think school should meet the entire needs of the whole student. Colleges can say that they want you to take courses to be well rounded, but high school

should really be part of that.

Teachers should care about the kids and their individual needs. If kids need help, they can get it. They should feel safe, and enjoy coming to the school.

Should provide possibilities to explore areas other than academics.

School ratio of teachers to students should be small - small class size. That gives each teacher more time with each student. Also, more levels of core subjects. They should have advanced to lower capabilities. I'm old-fashioned. We need to put students on the right levels to help them.

Schools should educate children so they can be successful in whatever field they pursue. Doesn't mean college. Not every kid is college material.

In summary, the focus group discussion and follow-up interviews demonstrated that this group of parents did believe that schools should help shape students in areas beyond just academics. Therefore, it was possible for a school with low standardized test scores to still be a good school.

Focus Group Question 3: What other skills and habits, in addition to the Pennsylvania State academic standards, should students demonstrate proficiency in before earning graduation?

Just as in the first focus group, the parents jumped at the chance to suggest habits, attitudes and skills they felt that students should have to demonstrate proficiency in before graduating. Generally speaking, the majority of these comments fell into the coding areas of efficiency, or the fairness of requiring the same thing of all students, and quality concerns. Examples of comments addressing the need to standardize vs. the needs of individuals included:

I hire people for (name removed for privacy purposes). Really it's gotten better. Ten, twelve or fifteen years ago you'd be surprised how many came out of high school and couldn't make change. Plus, it's a sign of the times, but computer skills are better. I think schools should try to teach kids to be more outgoing. We've interviewed kids who couldn't make it going back and forth with people on a daily basis. Maybe bring those kids out a little bit more so they can deal with the public better. Find those kids and help them.

Teach them respect and to dress properly.

You learn real quick in the workforce that you earn respect. That you don't demand it. I don't know how you can get that point across in school, but it's a good thing to learn.

We look for people who we feel are good workers (when we hire). The biggest thing is that I need to feel that they are sincere about wanting to work for me. They portray that they are going to try to do a good job. You always feel better about someone who comes to an interview and is respectful. Says, "yes sir" and the little things that set them apart from someone else.

People skills.

Comments made during the discussion of this question that were coded in the quality area pertaining to the worth of the testing system included:

Does a student have to go to college to be a success? No.

Kids have different gifts and whatever they want to do with them to reach their potential is OK.

Work ethic. Interview skills. How to do a resume. These are skills that students should leave high school with. Job shadowing. Filling out an application. A lot of kids aren't going to college.

In general, parents were quick to point out areas that are labeled emotional intelligence as mandates for a school to teach. They also called on schools to reinforce and ensure these habits are engrained before students head out into the world.

Focus Group Question 4: Are schools doing a better job of preparing students for future success because of the PSSA? Why or why not?

This question was originally inserted into the focus group protocol to draw out parent feelings related to their opinions on the effectiveness of schools before and after implementation of the State accountability testing. But not only did it elicit conversations in that area, it also served as an invitation to parents to once again list those areas they felt the schools were lacking under a State test focus. While their concerns centered in the area of quality, they also shared some experiences and negative feelings in the areas of efficiency and equity. In the area of fairness, collected data suggests a concern with the fairness of the content on the test, as well as potential impacts of racial and economic disparities. Examples included:

Did they ever list who is on the Board that sets up these tests and what their qualifications are? Are they all educators? Are they all college graduates?

How can a school stop offering a course like consumer math and say it's to make students more ready for life after high school? Some kids really need a course on how to manage a checkbook and figure interest on a loan.

Here's the thing. If I live in a \$250,000 home in the suburbs of Philadelphia, compared to I live with six kids in the same house as a single parent and I'm just barely getting by...It's just totally different cultures. People and the expectations can't measure up.

Closely related to those ideas were several comments coded in the area of efficiency, or the rightness of expecting the same from all students and the need to standardize vs. the needs of individuals. One such example was:

I asked my son what he thought about the PSSA test. He said he thought it was interesting that at his college they had a speaker come and talk on state tests. He felt that a big negative was that they focused on what a person was weak at. Like (he) is weak in math. We don't take kids and look at that everyone is gifted in certain areas and that is where we let them excel. Instead we're going to focus on this one little negative. All of us have negative areas we're weak in and that's what we're trying to pull out as a focus. He said the guy's visual was a sugar cookie and he said, 'Most people are like this, but everyone knows that the chocolate chip cookie is the favorite cookie.' So, he took the chocolate chips and tried to stick them on the sugar cookie. When he picked it up they all fell off. So then he took a hammer and he ended up actually breaking the table. He said 'That's what were trying to do to these kids.' We're turning them into crumbs. It must have been enough that he remembered it.

Once again, the coding area of quality was the most commonly used designation (68%) of the parent comments. Most of their concerns in this area of discussion seemed to fall into the quality issue of importance of what is being tested as compared to what is being left out, and the value of the overall system being built. Examples include:

Even kindergarteners know when the PSSA is being given. It's been drilled into these kids' heads. I'm sorry. To have a successful 12 years you have to start out enjoying it. Because you get to the point where you just want to get out. If you're so stressed in elementary school because of stupid standardized tests, when elementary used to be a lot of fun with learning, it's getting away from all of that. It all started with No Child Left Behind and the PSSA.

Looking back when (an older child) was in school...actually it was more relaxed then. There wasn't as much stress about you have to get to this point. She still got a very good education in high school even though we didn't have the PSSA.

I think that teachers had a broader way of teaching before the PSSA. They do focus more on getting that part. Because all teachers want their students to do well on it because it is a reflection on them. If their students are doing poor, they are told they're not doing a good job. Which isn't true. I think that when you're not so concerned about the test and having your students do well on the test, you teach broader. You teach different areas.

Whether we like it or not, the districts really look at the scores. They are really geared to those scores. They might do more things for students, might teach them in different areas that students could learn. I don't know. I just think we're too geared to the test.

There's a lot that should be taught. Not everyone is going to college. You need business courses; you need your consumer math courses; you need these courses. It seems the PSSA is gearing everyone to be at this level and not everyone is at that level. The majority are at this lower level. It might be more important to the lower level, but we're teaching to the high level.

Most of the things in our business that are mandated by the State or Federal government start out as a good idea but fall apart because of the lack of common sense to make it workable. I look at the PSSA as being the same type of thing. There's nothing wrong with it but it should not be the only indicator of proficiency.

The tests are very time consuming. Our school was shut down for almost three days. It actually takes physically a lot of teaching time.

Several follow-up interview questions were also asked to give depth and additional insight into this question related to the quality of pre- and post- State testing schools. In particular, one question asked participants to define a "good school." To answer that question, most parents turned to lists of emotional intelligence and universal values that they would like to see students have to go out into the post-high school world.

Comments that were coded in the area of quality under concerns for what information is included on the test included:

Schools should move students to ready for what lies ahead and not let good kids fall through the cracks.

Create a total person.

Educate children so they can be successful in whatever field they pursue. That doesn't always mean college. Not every kid is college material.

Get students ready for the next step. Whatever it may be – college, tech school, vocation.

The job of a high school should be to prepare students for a vocation.

In my opinion, schools should prepare students to go out into the world and make a contribution. Should be able to use areas they are gifted in to better society. And they should be able to find employment in that area.

Too many parents think it's to teach discipline. That's where we run into problems.

Overall, this group of parents did not feel that schools were doing a better job today by focusing on the academics that would get students ready to pass a standardized test. Although not intended to help draw out the specifics of other attitudes and habits and skills, parents responded to this question by beginning to build the list of other activities they would like help from schools in instilling in their children.

Focus Group Question 5: Can a school be a good school even if its PSSA scores are lower than the State average? Please explain your answer.

Once again the subject of “good” schools was brought up for parent discussion and comments. This was intended to provide one more opportunity to describe their opinions as to what schools should be providing students to help them prepare for their

futures. Maybe because this was a repeat of previous discussion, the question generated little additional interaction. New comments coded in the areas of equity and quality included:

The success rate should be the graduation rate. With learning disabled kids, if you are graduating a high percentage of your seniors, and they have a future, it doesn't mean they are going to college. They could be going to work at McDonald's. Hey. That's a job. I say, you're doing your job. You've raised these children to be productive.

It's just an opinion based on test scores. Some kids don't test well.

I think if a school district meets a community's needs... Let's say it's a big agricultural area and the school is turning out kids to go into agriculture, then they are meeting their community's needs. If their kids aren't getting into trouble and their kids aren't in a bad drug situation, then they're addressing those needs. Then, they're still doing their job. They're still doing what needs done.

Good schools provide possibilities to explore other areas than just academics.

Although few, parent comments in answer to this question were consistently with comments and opinions expressed earlier in the discussion. They were in-line with the established tone that they believed that a "good" school provided more than just a good score on a standardized test to students.

Focus Group Question 6: In what ways does your child's score on graduation proficiency exams accurately reflect his or her abilities to achieve success in his or her chosen post-high school path?

As this focus group began to see discussion wind down, this question stirred up the session by opening debate revolving around the role the State and/or local assessments play in helping students achieve success. It fanned the flames of the intensity of the discussion, although there was little new added to the data lists to be

coded. The majority of the new comments once again fit into the equity and quality categories. Raised fairness concerns centered on the testing content and the right and wrong of using tests to determine status of teenagers. Sample comments included:

None.

Absolutely none.

A standardized test, like the PSSA, for a lot of students is setting them up for failure. Why set students up for failure? Our daughter is the same way. That's in her head that's she wasn't quite good enough. It doesn't matter that she excelled in all the other ones. The math she was not good at all. She doesn't talk about the ones she was advanced in. She talks about that math grade and how stupid she is. She doesn't need a test to tell she doesn't do well in math.

I think other needs should be valued. Maybe look at rural vs. urban and economic issues.

In the coded area of quality, subcategories addressed included questions related to test content and the personal and system value associated with the existing assessment.

Comments included:

Actually, I think the test was a deterrent for (my daughter). She went to college and did an excellent job. Dean's List and everything. I'm very proud of her. She is going on to graduate school. She looked for a grad school where she did not have to take the GRE because she said 'Mom, look what I did on the PSSA. I did terrible.' She always says, 'Thank goodness for the rubric.' Four years later and she has proven herself. She can do it. When I hear people say, this kid did poorly on the PSSA, they shouldn't go to college, I just want to yell. I think a lot of people have that attitude. If a student doesn't do well on their PSSA, they are not going to do well in college and that's not true. I think it had a negative effect on her. She looked for grad schools that she didn't have to take a standardized test. She said it would be on her transcript just like the PSSA and people would see it.

My son had to take the re-test because of math. He knew some other student who was re-taking it, and he said he knew that kid was really smart. So that made him feel a little better knowing that student had to take it over again also. He knows math is his weakness. He does get stressed out and gets physically ill if he knows he has a test. We just looked at it like it was not that big of a deal. This is not going to keep you from doing what you want to do in life. Take the remediation.

SAT's --- if you don't do well, nobody knows your score. PSSA is like announcing to the whole world. It's embarrassing. A lot of schools offer remediation as their math course and no one wants to be in it.

I really don't have a problem with testing. But I think it could end up showing areas of giftedness.

Whatever happened to positive reinforcement?

The pressure it puts on kids....

With limited exception, the majority of the comments continued to reinforce earlier discussions. As a group, these parents had very little positive to say about the role the assessment test plays in helping students bridge to successful lives.

Focus Group Question 7: What other skills and attitudes do they possess that have contributed to their current place in life?

The discussion resulting from this question was almost a repeat of conversations that had been generated by an earlier question regarding what skills and attitudes should be taught and assessed by schools. But that doesn't mean there was no new data added. Many of the participants referred back to their earlier comments supporting emotional intelligence and universal values. New comments in the coded area choice and accepting or rejecting tests included:

Maturity. I think that has a lot to do with kids with learning disabilities. When my child left high school, he didn't want anything to do with college, and frankly, we didn't think he could do it anyway. For a little while he worked three jobs. He found out that even at \$10.00 an hour life's not real easy. He said 'I'm going back to school. I'm going to have to try.' It's a real struggle for him every day. But he's making it. He just made his mind up. He could never have done it right out of high school.

You're not going to like everyone that you are around. It doesn't matter what job you have. Not everyone is going to be your favorite person. But you have to learn to get along.

Additional comments added to the coded area of efficiency addressed the question of requiring the same thing of all students and the loss of creativity. New opinions included:

I think for (our child) Art Major was a real important factor. The teacher does a fabulous job. She has them do an art show where they had to take their own pictures and cut the mat. They have to frame them. In college that's a strong point for him. He's had his professors single him out and say, 'You're above everyone else.' For some people, that's not important. It's just art. But if you want it to be your profession, it is. Once again, you can't measure that on the PSSA.

A majority of the new data collected was again coded in the quality area. More specifically, concerns were linked to importance of content tested.

I think that cheerleading and sports helped (our child) because she is studying communications and public relations. It doesn't have anything to do with math. So, she was a cheerleader, not shy about getting up in front of people. She has to do a lot of speeches. She announced at boys' basketball games. She's in the forensics team. All of this stuff was a help for her. There are a lot of

different things that help you grow as yourself that you don't need a test to tell you whether you are good or not. She did community service. I think you need the extracurricular.

I totally agree with that. The extracurricular activities really helped (my child). She really got into it. She would tell you that too. It gave her confidence. She wasn't the best at everything, but that was OK. It was a team.

That's a big part to the learning process. You try to stress that not everyone gets along. You may not be best friends, but you can get along for the amount of time you are together.

Focus Group Question 8: Where and how did they develop these other important skills and attitudes?

This question continued the discussion from the previous focus group protocol discussion question. Just as in that case, much of the discussion was a repeat of ideas and opinions expressed earlier. However, there were several new ideas brought forward in the areas of efficiency and quality. They included:

I think local school districts have to have more of an input into those programs. Does any of that weigh into the PSSA at all?

I think it's the parents' responsibility too. It's my responsibility to teach my child work ethic and respect and how to get along. There were times I supplied my other son, who was bored, with extra things to do. It felt that was my responsibility. It doesn't always have to be on the school. My (child) didn't do well in math. He's in the Navy program as a Master of Arms. He's doing very well there. He has been promoted several times. How does that relate to the PSSA? It doesn't do diddly squat. He searched it all out. It was not a choice I wanted him to make. He thought of that on his own and pursued it out. He's worked very, very hard to get where he is. The PSSA didn't have anything to do with it. His classes in high school didn't have anything to do with it. That's something he wanted.

Parents should take responsibility. But it's a sad fact. It doesn't always happen.

I love our rubric.

You mentioned community service. That would be a good thing to add to our rubric.

One of the most valuable things for anybody is their own self-worth. Where does the PSSA help with self-worth? I don't think it does for anyone, especially in the areas where people are weak. It just points them out. I think that's an area that's really wrong.

Overall, comments continued to rehash attitudes, skills and habits previously mentioned. The listed additional comments added value, validity and depth to previous ones to justify its inclusion in the protocol.

Numerical Analysis

Through the focus group discussion and follow-up interviews, a total of 90 parent comments were collected and coded into thematic categories using the framework described earlier in this chapter. Analyzed by general description, 3% of the comments reflected a positive comment or implication of the current State assessment system. Negative comments and/or implications were noted in 48% of the comments, with the remaining 49% neutral in this area. Additionally, 7.8% of the parent opinions reflected a direct or implied positive approach to the local system of proficiency assessment. Closely related to that concept, 9% addressed a desire for some form of multiple assessment of proficiency, while 30% of the comments expressed an expectation for the teaching, reinforcing or assessing of emotional intelligence as a graduation proficiency.

Table 11

Percentage of Parent Comments in Coding Areas by Question: Focus Group of Local Assessment-Proficient Students

<u>Question Number</u>	<u>Equity</u>	<u>Choice</u>	<u>Efficiency</u>	<u>Quality</u>	<u>Total Comments</u>
1	32%	8%	24%	36%	25
2	33%			67%	12
3			63%	37%	8
4	17%		6%	76%	18
5	25%			75%	4
6	40%			60%	10
7		33%		67%	6
8			16%	84%	6
Total	23%	4%	16%	57%	90

Note: All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Table 12

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Local Assessment-Proficient Students – Category Equity

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Total
Responses	9	1		1				5	5	21
Percentage of Responses	10%	1%		1%				6%	6%	23%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

- A = The fairness of the testing content.
- B = The fairness of who gets tested.
- C = The fairness of teacher quality.
- D = The fairness of instructional resources.
- E = The fairness of being tested on what you have been taught, not what someone says you should have been taught.
- F = The fairness of people being labeled at age 16.
- G = The fairness of being part of an economic social experiment to turn around our country's economy.
- H = The fairness of effects of economic and racial disparities.
- I = The right and wrong to test scores determining status at age 16.

Table 13

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Local Assessment-Proficient Students - Category Choice

	A	B	C	Total
Responses	1	3		4
Percentage of Responses	1%	3%		4%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

A = The principle of self-determination vs. external determination.

B = The position of accepting tests or challenging tests.

C = The position of refusing to participate in required testing.

Table 14

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Local Assessment-Proficient Students - Category Efficiency

	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Responses	2	2	2	5	3	14
Percentage of Responses	2%	2%	2%	6%	4%	16%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

A = Is it right to require the same thing of all students?

B = How many, if any, chances does a student get to pass the test?

C = Who should pay for testing retakes?

D = The need to standardize vs. needs of individuals.

E = The cost of losing creative thinkers due to system standardization.

Table 15

Parent Response by Coding Subcategory: Focus Group of Local Assessment-Proficient Students - Category Quality

	A	B	C	D	Total
Responses	21	10	20		51
Percentage of Responses	23%	11%	22%		57%

Note. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

Subcategory Key

- A = Is what is tested important?
- B = Does a test indicate personal value and worth?
- C = Does a test indicate system value and worth?
- D = What does a youth learn from this experience?

Summary

Chapter Four presented and analyzed narrative data obtained from two focus groups and individual follow-up interviews. The analysis presented both student and parent demographic information of those participating in each focus group. Also presented were comments and opinions shared by participants in each group as part of group discussion. This data was analyzed and coded using a framework that divided data in thematic units. A numerical breakdown of comments within the categories of equity, choice, efficiency and quality supports the narrative analysis presented. Chapter V now

uses the various data analysis to address the study's major research questions. Each group is addressed individually, as well as across focus groups to provide research findings. These findings will be summarized. Recommendations and suggestions for further study will be made also.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Since the advent of No Child Left Behind legislation and the subsequent initiation of the Pennsylvania System of State Assessments tests, seniors in that State must “demonstrate proficiency” (Pennsylvania Code Title 22, Chapter 4) in math, reading, writing- and soon, science -in order to qualify for a high school diploma. Most students meet that requirement by scoring at or above an established level on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams. Those who are unable to obtain this standard currently must meet some locally determined assessment of proficiency. Some districts have developed their own pen-and-paper assessments for this purpose. Others use final test scores from courses or purchased online remedial curriculum. Still others use some combination of several assessment strategies. In the School District in this study, that local assessment is built on the Pennsylvania academic standards. But it is also a holistic, multiple assessment model built on the research of Schwan and Spady (1998). Their research advocates a strategic design to education that focuses on determining goals, then teaching and assessing “what students know,” “what they can do” and “what kind of people they are.” Because of the wide range of options – and rigor – among the State schools’ many plans, current debate at the top levels of education policy making in the State centers around the elimination of all such local assessments in favor of a series of pen-and-paper Graduation Competency Assessments. Critics of such high-stakes testing emphases stand by NCLB’s increased accountability demands. But, they also advocate a wider vision of proficiency that includes what this study has labeled

“emotional intelligence skills.” They also envision this new definition of proficiency most likely being assessed through the use of multiple assessments as part of the determination of graduation readiness.

Findings of the Study

This study determines how parents of students in a small rural District view possible impacts of the different approaches in existing options of graduation assessment. Recent national studies show that the achievement levels on high-stakes tests of state graduates as a whole are climbing (Center on Education Policy, 2007 and 2008). But do parents believe that schools are turning out better-prepared students? Despite conflicting claims related to the predictive nature of high-stakes tests, is their primary purpose to simply measure achievement to date or to signify readiness for life after high school? This study investigates what, if any, the two divergent assessments have played in the future success of several individual students through the eyes and experiences of their parents.

This Chapter V uses the data presented and analyzed in Chapter IV to present findings relevant to each of the study’s research questions. Particular focus is paid to the umbrella research question of “How do two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success?” The data collected in answer to each supporting question, adds depth, support and validity to the major findings.

The following sections will focus on the experiences and opinions of parents in each focus group outlining how they believe each test has impacted their son or daughter. Existing research is also linked with parent perceptions and conclusions to support and

help clarify each finding. Lastly, the researcher makes recommendations and suggestions for further study.

Research Question One

How do two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success?

State proficiency exam group. A major finding of this study concludes that the participating parents do not believe that the increased accountability of a state pen-and-paper proficiency test has helped their student to be better prepared for life after high school. In fact, the experiences of parents in the study have caused them to form negative attitudes toward the whole assessment system. In the focus group comprised of parents of students who had achieved the necessary level of proficiency on all three tests (and including one parent with twin children that actually could have participated in both group discussions) less than 5% of their comments reflected positively on the State assessment. To the contrary, 43% of the comments from that group indicated a negative response. The remaining comments were test-neutral. The most numerous coded themes of complaints included the areas of equity, quality and efficiency, with roughly a third of their concerns occurring in the first two categories each. On the following page, Table 16 illustrates this overwhelmingly negative response to the current state proficiency assessment system in both focus groups by illustrating the percentage of positive and negative responses to each question in each of the top two coding areas of equity and quality.

Table 16

Percentage of Positive and Negative Comments to Each Question in the Coding Subcategories of Equity and Quality by Both Focus Groups

Question	Group 1				Group 2			
	Equity		Quality		Equity		Quality	
	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
1	14	86	0	100	0	88	0	75
2	17	83	17	83	0	100	0	83
3	0	100	8	25	0	0	0	67
4	0	100	11	44	0	67	0	35
5	0	57	0	83	0	50	0	100
6	0	0	0	100	0	100	20	80
7	0	0	0	67	0	0	25	75
8	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	60

Note: percentages do not add up to 100% in each category since some comments were considered neutral.

More specifically, parent concerns fell into equity subcategories questioning the fairness of content, the instructional resources available to a small rural School District as compared with larger districts and the possible economic and racial disparities inherent in

a statewide testing system. Efficiency subcategories that showed areas of concern included the lack of assessing creativity on the test and the concern of treating students as individuals balanced against the reality of a testing system. “Treating kids in a herd-like way” was the way one parent registered her concern.

This group of parents did not attribute that eventual student success to the accountability of these tests or the efforts of the school to teach the corresponding academic standards. Instead, they tended to speak of home life being reflected in schoolwork and even more of the individual child’s desire to be successful. One parent summed up what seemed to be the general consensus by saying, “High achievers will do well anywhere.” Another reflected on her child’s experiences that “the test did not impact her at all. That grade did not get her into college.” Still another registered her belief flatly that, “There is no connection between the exams and success.”

The overall negative tone of the parents can best be described as support of the work of individuals like Grossman, who warned of such assessments “limiting educational opportunities for all students” (2005). Implied in his words are economic and race issues that were mentioned in discussion by parents in this study but not necessarily experienced to the depth as some students and parents in other districts. In addition to those concerns, his writing also reflected other experiences indeed shared by these participants. These would include a first hand knowledge of events that they believed showed assessment preparation causing schools to slow down or limit instruction for their high-achieving students. Comments such as “schools are just teaching to the test” and “our daughter was disappointed. It was a minimum” were not uncommon. Other parents noted that their students “knew what was expected and did enough just to get by. It was

easy.” Still others shook their heads at stories of schools focusing the lion share of attention on the “bubble kids” or only those close to proficiency at the expense of low-scoring students. These opinions, coupled with a concern that certain subjects were being taught differently for the test and for college, were examples of how parents felt the test was actually impeding their student’s academic instruction. Interestingly, parents in this group reflected the opinion that the test was more for the sake of the District than it was designed to benefit students. Those of the other focus group were just as adamant that the assessment was of benefit only to those headed to college and that learning disabled and non-college bound were slighted. But still another parent lamented the lack of attention mid-level students received in test preparation and academic attention at the expense of programs for the upper and lower groups of students, completing the full circle of dislike for the State assessment. Every level of students through their parents was able to find their own reason for distrust of the proficiency exam.

Increasing numbers of students earning proficiency on the State test (Center on Education Policy, 2007 and 2008) were not enough to convince this collection of parents that schools in general are currently doing a better job of preparing students for post-high school lives. Much time in both group discussions was spent addressing issues swirling around what Hargreaves labeled the “soulless standardization of curriculum,” (2003, p. 1) or what Abrams and Madeus described as “curriculum narrowing to what is covered on the test” (2003, p. 33). “Too much emphasis on the tests is taking away from a well-rounded curriculum,” one parent expressed a frustration. “Good schools provide more than just academics,” another widened the discussion. Still another noted, “There’s a lot that should be taught. Not everyone is going to college.” Additionally, verbal and

nonverbal reactions also demonstrated a favoring of a multiple assessment approach to determining proficiency. Comments such as “I’m not an advocate of assessment. I’m an advocate of assessments with an ‘s,’” drew both spoken words and gestures indicating support from the other parents in the discussion.

When it came to the impact of the local multiple assessments on students and their subsequent success, evidence of favorable attitude was more evident than it was toward the State assessment. Even in the group of parents with little or no experience with that local rubric, almost 5% of the total comments in discussion reflected a specific positive attitude toward the local District’s holistic, multiple demonstration of proficiency.

Local assessment group. The group of parents of students who had not passed at least one of the tests was even slightly more critical than their previously described counterparts. Only 3 % of their comments toward the PSSA could be construed as positive, with 49% reflecting a negative basis toward the test and its impact on students. Again, this negative trend can be seen in Table 16 (page 120) illustrating the percentage of negative and positive responses to each question within the two most common coding categories of equity and quality.

As noted, the major trend evident in the data was for both parents of students who had met the proficiency levels on the test and parents of students who met the graduation requirement on the local assessment to agree on an overall dissatisfaction with high-stakes testing. The stated reasons for their beliefs, however, differed as sharply as their children’s experiences with the State exam.

In the end, they did not share this negative view based on a perception that the test was limiting instructional opportunities. To the contrary, even though their objections

are also coded heavily in the same equity, efficiency, and quality themes, they tended to see the assessment and accountability through the eyes of the frustration and embarrassment inflicted on their children. Several parents commented on how the lack of success on the test had made their student feel “stupid.” “It doesn’t mean you haven’t tried and worked hard,” one parent noted. “It’s demeaning. It doesn’t mean you’re not a person with value.”

The parents in the group were also quick to point out that despite the lack of complete success on the State exam, their children have been able to go on to find their niches in life, several even in institutions of higher learning. Four of the six students represented in the group have indeed gone on to full-time college studies, thus far all achieving a grade point average above 3.0. One, in fact, has graduated with honors and enrolled in a graduate school. Though admittedly a small sample, these parents had no hesitation in using their experiences to refute a claim by personnel in the State Department of Education proclaiming junior year performance on the State test as an indicator of student success later in life (*Altoona Mirror*, February 13, 2007). Interestingly, all of the students represented in this group met State exam proficiency in reading, falling short on the math exam. These same parents also were quick to widen their label of “success” to include the non-college students who have found a niche, promotion and fulfillment in the military and workforce.

In the group of parents whose children had taken advantage of the local assessment option, 8% of the opinions and comments shared reflected favorably on the holistic approach to graduation proficiency assessment. This would seem to support the 70% of parents in a study from the State of Washington, previously detailed in Chapter

II, who felt that effort and progress should matter for graduation more than a test score (Christensen, 2004). “It gives kids options,” said one parent of the local assessment in the middle of several comments related to the differences in student strengths and career plans. “(It) tells them, ‘just try.’” Another parent picked up that same theme by saying “I like the idea of the rubric. I don’t have a problem with testing but with how the results are used. It should not be the only indicator of proficiency.” Still another added:

My daughter always says, ‘Thank goodness for the rubric.’ Four years later and she has proven herself. When I hear people say, ‘This kid did poorly on the PSSA. They shouldn’t go to college,’ I just want to yell.

Just as dramatic was the parents’ stands against one assessment carrying so much weight in such an important determination as graduation. “There can’t be just one test,” one parent seemed to speak for many. “Teachers are teaching to the test and because of that they don’t do the fun and creative stuff they used to.” Unanimously through their comments and nonverbal reactions to the spoken words of others, the parents weighed in on the side of multiple assessments for determining proficiency. Suggestions such as “maybe we should have a couple of tests” went unchallenged by the others in the group.

Another parent added his thoughts by noting:

My thoughts on the matter are that there can’t be just one way to gauge (proficiency). There’s nothing wrong with the PSSA, but there’s also nothing wrong with the teachers making decisions like this because they deal with these children every day. As a parent, I would rather put my trust in people who are dealing with my child every day, along with talking to me about whether my child is felt to be able to deal with college or the next step. For me, having a State test determine their future is no good for me. It doesn’t work.

This parental belief can find plenty of support from the ivory tower experts as well. The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development Commission on Whole Child recently weighed in with the belief that “this achievement (on proficiency tests) is only one element of student learning and only part of any complete system of educational accountability (2007). The National Association of Secondary School Principals joined in the chorus with a 2005 call to address “knowledge, skills and disposition” in educating students. Related areas that deal with assessing human potential, such as human resources, are finding benefit in the use of multiple criteria in making decisions regarding individuals. (Kostman, 2004). Even the State of Pennsylvania in trumpeting its Classroom for the Future grant to help schools place technology and the latest in professional development for teachers notes that in judging and evaluating successful grant application effectiveness that “pen and paper exams do not measure the demonstration of 21st century skills in 21st century settings” that the grant seeks to encourage (CFF evaluation team website, 2007). So, whether through a “dashboard set of indicators” (Darling-Hammond, 2005), a “body of evidence” portfolio (Lowe and Neely, 2001), a rubric such as the one in this District or that Wolk advocated (2004) or additional tests as mentioned by the parents in this study, the call for multiple assessments of proficiency is significant.

Research Question Two

How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of proficient students (as defined by the State test) link with their post-graduation reality?

The main conclusion previously discussed is supported by parent beliefs shared during group discussion to supporting research questions as well. The data collected in

this study demonstrates that positive or negative performance on the State assessments seems to have little impact on post-graduation plans as compared with stated goals while still in high school. In other words, students who demonstrated proficiency on the local assessment are achieving their stated goals in much the same numbers as those who were able to meet that graduation requirement on the State test. In the group of parents representing students who achieved proficiency on the State test, six of the students were pursuing the exact goal they had listed for themselves prior to graduation. One other student who had been “undecided” while still in school was now working full time and attending college online. Only one of the students represented in the focus group listed college as a goal and fell short of meeting his stated objective.

Parents of these students were not surprised to find that goals were being met. “If we were honest, we would all have to admit that we fully expected our children to do well on the PSSA (and after high school) because they do relatively well in school, are organized and goal oriented,” one noted.

It might be tempting for some to speculate that the educational and professional background of the parents of these students might have skewed the data in favor of college completion. Or, some may even question the sample selection for this project based on these high numbers. After all, the National Center for Higher Education Management System reports that only 56% of college students graduate in six years, a figure much lower than represented by the parents in this focus group (2007). But both of those arguments would miss the main point of this research. Cross group analysis of these parents, and those of students who were forced to demonstrate proficiency on the local assessment (which is discussed in the next section), demonstrates like numbers of

college perseverance despite major differences in economic and educational background as well as method of proficiency demonstration. The samples of parents and students were selected in the same manner. The results are essentially the same across the different groups within the selected sample. This research thus attempts to identify, within the boundaries established by the stated research question, what role the different proficiency assessments may have played in those results.

Research Question Three

How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of students proficient only on the local District proficiency assessment link with their post-graduation reality?

In the group of parents representing children who had needed the local assessment to demonstrate proficiency, three were pursuing what they had noted as their goal while still in high school. One student had left college for the military. One who had listed no goals in high school is now attending college after three years in the work force. The final student had declared cosmetology school as a career path but ended up going directly into the work force. In short, which assessment the student used to demonstrate proficiency did not seem to have much impact on whether they had found a way to achieve their goals. Using Pink's description as these types of tests as "the desert students must pass through to reach the promised land of a good job and happy life," (2005, p. 57) may have become even more appropriate in listening to parents share the creative solutions to the roadblocks standardized testing had thrown up in the paths of students who had struggled with State assessments. One college honor graduate considered only graduate schools that did not require the Graduate Record Exam, afraid

that another poor standardized test score on her transcript would deter potential employers. Another took a Dual Enrollment math course in high school to avoid having to fulfill a general elective requirement in college. Unfortunately for her, the college is still requesting a college math credit due only to her State proficiency test score. That : 126 being planned in the summer to allow her to devote full time to her weak area. “She didn’t need a test to tell her she was weak in math,” noted her mother. Several parents in the group representing other students who had struggled with the State assessment also contributed comments and examples related to their students knowing strengths and weaknesses and compensating in creative manners. “The PSSA is non-positive because they already know strengths and weaknesses,” one parent noted. “The local rubric lets them use their strengths.”

Research Question Four

How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient on the State test in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady’s universal values contribute to their individual development?

It wasn’t the efforts of the school to teach the State standards. It wasn’t the accountability associated with a high-stakes test. Parents of this group tended to credit the success of their children on the test and in post-high school paths to universal values such as accountability, an innate pursuit of excellence and caring. These traits were present from birth, or instilled in the home, church or volunteer efforts in the community according to the parents. If there was any positive impact on these traits, it was not due to the accountability exam, it came as a result of the other aspects of a school experience. “You learn a lot from extracurriculars,” one parent said. “Extracurricular activities helped teach self-confidence and moral values,” another asserted. Still another saw “life

lessons (taught) in sports that have value in creating solid, upstanding individuals.” This group also worried that such opportunities were decreasing as more attention was being focused on the academic curriculum testing for proficiency.

If it is true that curriculum is narrowing to what is measured by the State assessment as Grossman (2005), Darling-Hammond (2005) and the majority of parents of this study believe, then students may be missing out on some of these important lessons. Discussion was evident that parents did not believe schools were doing a better job now since accountability increases attention on academic focus. “I cannot imagine a parent who would say that all I expect you to do is fill my child’s head with knowledge. I can’t imagine a parent who would say that. I’ll take care of the rest, you just teach him the books,” one parent set the tone for that discussion. Evidence from other works over the years supports their belief. Reaching back into pre –NCLB days, Bloom’s taxonomy advocated for a different structure to instruction and assessment to address affective and psychomotor domains as well as the cognitive. The Association of Supervisors and Curriculum Development recently circulated a position paper advocating that “academic achievement and proficiency are but one element of student learning and development” (2007).

Parents in the group did not hesitate to throw out their opinions as to what additional skills, habits and attitudes from their home efforts they would like to see reinforced through modeling, teaching, and even proficiency assessment in schools. These suggestions are listed in Table 16 and repeated here in part as Table 17 for this group, placing Schwan and Spady’s advocated universal values side by side with the listed desires of parents of the schools from this group. While some would argue the lists

are not identical, the conclusion here is that there are striking similarities and much overlap between the different lists.

Table 17

A Visual Comparison of Universal Values, Stated Parent Desires for Non-Academic Habits, Skills and Attitudes to be Taught and Reinforced by Schools by Parents of Students Who Demonstrated Proficiency on the State Assessment

Schwan & Spady's "Universal Values"	Stated Parent Desires for Their Children from Schools
Honesty	Deal with Change
Integrity	Work Ethic
Trustworthiness	Teamwork
Loyalty	Study Skills
Caring	Time Management
Fairness	Self Worth
Citizenship	Civic Responsibility
Pursuit of Excellence	Environmental Responsibility
Accountability	Communication Skills
Respect	Organizational Skills
	Responsibility
	Financial Responsibility
	Résumés and Interviews

In some cases, individuals in both groups of parents were hesitant to defer to the schools for these responsibilities. However, they did eventually concede that in light of society's ills, schools have had to step up and assume responsibilities in this area. One noted:

Whether we like it or not, public schools have to take on a lot of these roles. We're sitting here with a group of parents who have had students who have been successful. So, I guess we should consider our kids lucky. They've had support. But

we're getting more and more students, even in elementary school, with less and less of the outside support they need.

Another parent was even more to the point. "Parents should take responsibility," he said.

"But it's a sad fact it doesn't always happen."

Research Question Five

How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient only on the local assessment of proficiency in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values contribute to their individual development?

Many of the same concepts mentioned by parents of students who had demonstrated proficiency on the local assessment also are highlighted by those whose students had passed the State test. Caring, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability were all described as examples of values that had been formed prior to graduation that helped overcome poor test scores. "He searched it (his career path) out. The PSSA had nothing to do with it. It was something he wanted," one parent explained her son's drive for success. Other parents also spoke highly of values such as teamwork, citizenship and commitment developed in sports and extracurricular activities that had played a part in their students' successes and worried about the elimination of non-academic programs. "Schools should focus on what students need to know outside of school, not just what they need to know for school," one parent said. Agreement in the literature comes from Hargreaves who advocates that schools find "some way to combine cognitive and interpersonal capacities to foster the values of community humanitarian and cosmopolitan identity" (2003, page 59). The following Table 17 lists the universal values side by side with the specific habits and attitudes this group of parents felt schools

should also be addressing. As with the previous group, the lists contain much overlap, using different labels to define the same principles.

Table 18

A Visual Comparison of Universal Values, Stated Parent Desires for Non-Academic Habits, Skills and Attitudes to be Taught and Reinforced by Schools by Parents of Students Who Demonstrated Proficiency on the Local Assessment

Schwan & Spady's "Universal Values"	Stated Parent Desires for Their Children <u>from Schools</u>
Honesty	People Skills
Integrity	Proper Dress
Trustworthiness	Computer Skills
Loyalty	Respect
Caring	Self-Motivation
Fairness	Community and World Citizenship
Citizenship	Pursuit of Excellence
Pursuit of Excellence	Work Ethic
Accountability	Ability to Work Independently
Respect	

Indeed, the argument can be made that it was these universal traits, in sum or in part, that led individuals to overcome poor State assessment scores still to be able to succeed in college, in the work place and in the military.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on the findings of this study.

Promote the teaching and assessing of emotional intelligence, attitudes, skills, and habits as a larger vision of proficiency. If the experiences of these parents and their

students are to be accepted, emotional intelligence skills do indeed have a part to be played in preparing students for their futures. This study lends support to those who claim that there exists a KASH box of “knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits” (Sorin and Wesbord, 2007) that can be more important for some students’ future success than mere academic prowess. While the structure and scope of this study cannot begin to hope to quantify Goleman’s 1995 claim that EI skills are “more than twice as important” as IQ, the collected data does provide qualitative evidence support for Freidman’s call for the necessity of schools to teach people skills as part of proficiency for the “flat” world of the future. ‘I’m not sure how to teach these,’ he noted, “but someone better figure it out” (2005). Perhaps even more important to the students immediately affected by the decisions of the school in question is the testimony of local employers who tell the school “give us kids with the right attitudes, and we’ll teach them what they need to know.” Joining Bloom’s affective domain with Goleman’s and Grenier’s call to teach emotional intelligence skills as “skills we have always known were essential but were not sure why and how” (2004) has the support of parents as one important and effective way to help better prepare their students for their futures.

Schools in general, and the one in this study absolutely could address these issues on their own outside of mandatory proficiency assessment. But, if they are indeed important, and if indeed “what gets measured gets done” as Peters first noted in 1986 and Collins clarified for the social sector in 2005, then some way must be found to teach, reinforce and assess them in any demonstration of proficiency that qualifies a student for graduation. For the school in this study, the results of this study can demonstrate that consideration should be given not only to continuing their existing assessment practice,

but also enlarging the areas that allow students to “demonstrate what kind of people they are.” Specifically, parents through the data collection for this study have suggested the inclusion of community service and participation in extracurricular activities as additional possibilities.

Continue to advocate multiple assessment as a demonstration of proficiency. A single State proficiency test is not considered an acceptable indicator of future potential or of having obtained necessary skills and knowledge by the parents in this study or many educational experts. By giving students reason to continue trying, by teaching them “where there’s a will, there’s a way,” students in this District have used their strengths and their desire to succeed to overcome hurdles in creative ways to achieve success after high school.

Suggestions for Further Study

Parents in focus group discussions for this study also addressed many of the other commonly mentioned issues of high-stakes testing. Test anxiety, teaching to the test, a focus on the bubble kids that narrowly missed proficiency, and dropout prevention were all mentioned as concerns. Any one of these topics and the role multiple assessment could play in addressing them could be a topic for further study.

Additionally, the application of the main lessons from this study to a more diverse, more urban area could add to the depth of the literature in this area.

A study addressing the benefits and needs of reading proficiency vs. math proficiency, in light of the success of students who did reach proficiency in reading, but not in math would also be a valuable addition to the literature of this debate.

Further study might also be a useful addition to the body of literature on this topic to explore what appears to be significant and unique differences in responses between groups to several questions. For example, the group of parents of students who had demonstrated proficiency on the State test showed high coded percentages of responses in the “quality” subcategory for interview questions seven and eight (100% of all comments in each question) compared with almost none for the parents of children who had demonstrated proficiency on the local assessment. Likewise, the second group recorded a high response rate in the “efficiency” and “equity” areas for interview questions three and six, while group one parent comments focused almost entirely in the “quality” area. This unique difference may be due to concerns from group two regarding creativity and the loss of individualization as well as their concern that economic differences between schools might limit individual help for students. Further study would be necessary to explain the divergences.

Conclusion

One comment from all the existing literature and current debate regarding local assessment in the State of Pennsylvania seems to best serve as the culminating comment to this research project and its findings.

Soon after the demise of Graduation Competency Assessments in the summer of 2008, Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Gerald Zahorchak discussed the topic with a gathering of educational administrators. He vowed to them that the issue of proficiency assessment at the local level for students that had failed to meet proficiency on the State exam was not dead. He summed up his points by hinting at some possible directions for

a new plan, noting that “As a community, we need more conversation about what a high school diploma should mean” (2008, Zahorchak). For the School District in this study, at least, that conversation has already begun.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

How do two very different measures of proficiency serve as a bridge to post-graduation success?

1. What meaning does your child's score on the state test and/or local assessment have in relation to his or her future career or life success?
2. Do you believe that high percentages of students with proficient scores are a good indicator of the quality of the school? Why do you believe this?
3. What other skills and habits, in addition to the Pennsylvania state academic standards, should students demonstrate proficiency in before earning graduation?

How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of proficient students (as defined by the state test) link with their post-graduation reality?

How do the pre-graduation aspirations of a group of students proficient only on the local District proficiency assessment link with their post-graduation reality?

4. Are schools doing a better job of preparing students for future success because of the PSSA? Why or why not?
5. Can a school be a good school even if its PSSA scores are lower than the state average? Please explain your answer.

How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient on the state test in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?

How did the pre-graduation experiences of the students proficient only on the local assessment of proficiency in the areas of each of Schwan and Spady's universal values (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, caring, respect, citizenship, pursuit of excellence and accountability) contribute to their individual development?

6. In what ways does your child's score on graduation proficiency exams accurately reflect his or her abilities to achieve success in his or her chosen post-high school path?
7. What other skills and attitudes do they possess that have contributed to their current place in life?
8. Where and how did they develop these other important skills and attitudes?

Appendix B

Individual Interview Questions

1. In your opinion, what should be the job of a high school?
2. In your opinion, what is a “good” school?
3. Summarize the impact on your son/daughter of the state test and local assessment.
4. Have you or your son/daughter witnessed any increase in drop-out rates due to the increased accountability and the state test? If so, did the local assessment help reduce this possibility in concerned students?
5. Did your son/daughter lose any activity or curriculum because of the state test? Why and what was it?
6. Was your son/daughter scheduled for any additional activity or class because of state testing requirements? Why and what was it?
7. In your experiences, what are the positives associated with a state test?
8. In your experiences, what are the negatives associated with a state test?

Appendix C

SPRING COVE SCHOOL DISTRICT



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Rodney L. Green
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John E. Clark
Board Secretary/Business Manager
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TO: IUP Institutional Review Board for the Protection of the Human Subjects (IRB)
FR: Rodney L. Green, Superintendent
RE: Permission For David A. Crumrine To Conduct Dissertation Related Research
DT: January 8, 2007

The Spring Cove School District hereby gives permission to David A. Crumrine, Central High School Principal, to conduct doctoral studies research activities in the Spring Cove School District. It is the district's understanding that his activities will be approved and conducted in accordance with the IUP Graduate School Institutional Review Board for the Protection of the Human Subjects (IRB) guidelines.

Appendix D

[IUP letterhead]
Informed Consent Form

February 29, 2008

Dear Spring Cove School District Parent:

It has been several years since your son or daughter graduated from Central High School. But we still hope to learn some lessons from you. You are invited to participate in a research study that will help evaluate our assessment practice. Any parent of a student who passed the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) or the Spring Cove School District local assessment rubric is eligible.

The purpose of this study is to examine what parents believe about the validity of those tests. Participation in this study involves taking part in a one to two hour group discussion. You could also be asked to take part in a follow-up interview that may last approximately one hour.

If you participate, you will be asked to provide information about your child's achievements since high school. You will then take part in a discussion with other parents. You will be asked to share your experiences regarding the tests and your son or daughter's readiness for the "real world." This session will be audio taped. A transcript will be made available to check accuracy. That information will be compared with what is said by a group of parents whose children achieved proficiency on the other test.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no penalty or reward for your involvement. All information will be held in strict confidence. Any data shared will not be traceable to you or your son or daughter. You are free to decide not to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying the Project Director or me. If you decide to withdraw, all your information will be destroyed.

Appendix D
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If you are willing to participate, please sign and return the enclosed statement. Please contact me at 793-2111 or by e-mail at ddtcd5crumrine@atlanticbb.net with any questions. Your experiences are unique and are highly valued!

Principal Investigator: David Crumrine
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This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730).

Enclosure: study overview

Appendix E

March 29 ,2008

Dear Spring Cove School District Parent:

As you know, a research study is underway to examine parent attitudes toward graduation proficiency exams. Any parent who participated in the first round of focus group discussions is eligible to participate in round of interviews.

The purpose of this study is to examine what parents believe about the validity of proficiency tests. These interviews will allow us to go deeper in your experiences and beliefs. This follow-up interview may last approximately one hour.

If you participate, you will be asked specific questions about the information you shared in the group discussion. You will also be asked about other details of your experience with the tests. This interview will be audio taped. A transcript will be made available to check accuracy. That information will be compared with what is said by other parents whose children achieved proficiency on either test.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no penalty or reward for your involvement. All information will be held in strict confidence. Any data shared will not be traceable to you or your son or daughter. You are free to decide not to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying the Project Director or me. If you decide to withdraw, all your information will be destroyed.

Appendix E
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If you are willing to participate, please sign and return the enclosed statement. Please contact me at 793-2111 or by e-mail at ddtcd5crumrine@atlanticbb.net with any questions. Your experiences are unique and are highly valued!

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Enclosure: study overview

Appendix F
[IUP letterhead]

Parent Acknowledgment of Principal as Investigator

I, _____ verify that I have discussed the concerns of my being the parent of a student in Central High School with the principal researcher in the study *Effective Graduation Proficiency Assessment: Parents' Perceptions of High-Stakes vs. Multiple Assessment as a Predictor of Future Success*. I acknowledge that he has notified me of his position as Principal of the High School, and of the concern of the possible perception that I have been coerced into participation or answering in such a way as to attempt to obtain favor. By my signature I verify that I have considered these concerns, believe that I can provide my experiences and perceptions in an unbiased manner, and wish to participate in this study.

_____ Date _____
(parent)

_____ Date _____
(researcher)