



Pennsylvania State Board of Education
Chapter 4 - Academic Standards & Assessment
State High School Graduation Requirements
January 9, 2008

Good Morning Chairman Girton and members of the State Board of Education. I am Joan Benso, President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). PPC is a strong, effective, and trusted voice for improving the health, education, and well-being of the Commonwealth's children. Our vision is that by 2014, PPC will have helped Pennsylvania move into position as one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child.

To achieve its vision, PPC seeks substantial gains toward these public policy goals:

- All children enter school ready to learn.
- All children have access to health care that meets their needs.
- All children are raised in loving and knowledgeable families.
- All school-age children have access to effective after-school and youth development programs.
- All children have access to high quality public education.

I had the pleasure of serving on the Governor's Commission for College and Career Success and chairing the workgroup that created the recommendation for Graduation Competency Assessments. The Commission was comprised of a diverse group of concerned Pennsylvanians representing basic and higher education, business, the legislature and others who worked for 18 months to develop a series of 12 recommendations to ensure that all students leave high school adequately prepared for success in college and careers. I want to thank the State Board for taking action on GCAs and a number of the other recommendations contained in the Commission report to the Governor.

The workgroup that I chaired entered the process of reviewing graduation requirements with a blank slate. What we discovered was discouraging as it became apparent that we have failed as a Commonwealth to assure that the high school diploma has meaning for

every child. We reviewed the graduation requirements of more than a dozen states and consulted with a number of national experts along with gaining the perspective of our committee members and other commissioners. We determined that our current assessment regulations for graduation are inadequate and allow too many young people to graduate without providing assurances that they have met the state's academic standards. We concluded that the PSSA alone would not be a better alternative as it would be one high-stakes test – interesting enough, something that many suggest is exactly what the Board has proposed. Rather, we unanimously endorsed the concept of GCAs for a number of reasons that align with PPC's support of this proposed regulation.

I appreciate the opportunity to share PPC's thoughts regarding the State Board's draft regulations on high school graduation requirements as provided in Chapter 4 (Academic Standards and Assessment). The draft regulations revise high school graduation requirements to establish a consistent statewide baseline expectation and measurement of the minimum knowledge and skills that a public high school diploma signifies and a basic system of academic supports necessary to help students achieve the standards.

To be successful in a 21st century economy, young people must graduate from high school prepared to transition to postsecondary education and/or the workforce. A high school diploma is not enough anymore and the knowledge base that the diploma represents is more important than ever. In 1950, 60 percent of jobs were classified as unskilled, attainable by workers with high school diplomas, or even high school dropouts. In 2005, only 14 percent of jobs were unskilled, while 86 percent were skilled or professional jobs requiring higher levels of education and training. In addition, more than two-thirds of new jobs being created today require some education beyond high school – and many of these are “gold collar jobs” for workers with some postsecondary education after high school, but not necessarily a 4-year degree. These “gold collar” jobs pay good wages – wages that can support a family. Every child must have an education foundation that allows them to earn a family sustaining wage. Today, ALL students need to achieve the Pennsylvania academic standards so they have the skills to be successful in postsecondary education (including 2- and 4-year colleges, community colleges, technical schools, workplace training programs, etc.), in careers, and as citizens in an increasingly complex world.

Under current regulations, one of the requirements to graduate from public high school is that students must demonstrate achievement of the state standards by scoring proficient or above on the 11th grade PSSAs or a local assessment that is aligned to the state standards.

Our concern is that when a student graduates from high school in Pennsylvania there is no assurance that he or she has met the state standards. What leads us to believe this is that in 2006, the latest year that graduation data is available, 45 percent of high school graduates did not score proficient on the reading and math 11th grade PSSAs, the 12th grade retake, or did not take the PSSAs but graduated based on these local assessments. The disconnect between graduation rates and proficiency on state

assessments is cause for very serious concern for anyone who cares about the well-being and future of our children.

Let me say that again – nearly half of Pennsylvania’s 2006 high school graduates left high school without any assurance that they achieved the state academic standards. And not just in our most distressed schools either (please see the attached data sheets for local district results). Incredibly, 461 school districts graduated at least 20 percent more students than scored proficient or above on the PSSA. While some argue that the PSSA is not a good test and students fail to take it seriously – this disconnect between proficiency and graduation cannot be ignored and simply chalked-up to a “bad test” or students who think the test doesn’t matter so they don’t take it seriously. Clearly, Pennsylvania needs a consistent common-sense accountability system that is aligned with the standards and that assures **every child in every school district** is meeting the standards - an accountability system that not only demands rigor but provides relevance to students. The draft regulations establish a regulatory landscape that provides just that assurance.

While the draft regulations balance the critical need of the state to take action to remedy this disconnect by improving accountability it does so with deference to our history of local control. While some argue that the proposal undermines local control, the draft regulations allow districts to use a combination of assessment instruments including PSSAs, local assessments that have been validated through an approved independent review for alignment with the state standards, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams, and Graduation Competency Assessments or GCAs. It should be noted that districts can take action without incurring additional local costs – therefore, not creating an unfunded mandate from the state. PPC supports the regulatory scheme embodied in the draft rulemaking. We believe that it provides strong statewide accountability that protects the best interest of our children with a significant number of options for local assessment of student achievement.

We strongly support the development of GCAs as an assessment tool for student achievement. However, opponents of the draft regulations will assert that students take enough tests, and that the draft regulations unnecessarily impose additional tests. Not true. GCAs could (and should) replace the current final exams in related courses and therefore would not result in additional tests. Actually, local districts and their teachers could spend less time on developing tests such as final exams if they chose to use GCAs. GCAs are not more tests, they are better tests. GCAs place assessments closer to the point of instruction and create a sense of relevance and progression for students.

For example, students would take an Algebra I test right after they took the course, most likely in 9th grade – rather than waiting until the spring of their junior year to be assessed in the PSSA. If they fail to demonstrate proficiency on the test, they would be remediated (not a suggestion but a requirement in the regulation) in the content they have failed to master allowing them to stay on grade level and progress to graduation. Today, we may first learn that a student fails to meet the state academic standard when his or her PSSA results arrive in the fall of their senior year. If they are still in school, they have most likely fallen behind academically with no requirement for their school to provide remediation. Or worse yet, they will have dropped out because they are

unwilling to attend school and fail to progress oftentimes placed in classes with students who are younger than they.

GCA's also present an opportunity to assess more in-depth knowledge and smaller bodies of knowledge at one time. Students would take the GCA's when they complete the relevant coursework and have multiple opportunities to pass them – and if they don't pass them, the Board's draft regulations require mandatory remediation which is a critical safeguard for students. GCA's should be composed of modules thereby allowing remediation efforts to focus on the course material where a student needs additional support, rather repeating courses. Students would then be required to retake only the modules they failed. Again, assessing smaller bodies of knowledge closer to instruction and giving students a better sense of relevancy. GCA's could also be utilized as a valuable credit-recovery tool for dropouts returning to school.

A number of states are moving toward standards-based end-of-course exams. This movement is in clear response to the information we now possess about the skills young people need to be successful in post-secondary education and the workforce. According to the Center on Education Policy, states including New York, Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas require students to pass end-of-course exams to graduate from high school. Opponents of GCA's will tell you that many of these states have had difficulty implementing the assessments, and that is true. What they fail to mention however, is that these states, unlike the draft regulations for Pennsylvania, have not created a comprehensive system of supports for districts and students such as the Board proposes including: model core curricula; mandatory remediation for struggling students; professional development for teachers in content areas; technical assistance for districts to design remediation, tutoring and extended instruction; accommodations and modifications for English language learners and students with disabilities; and, quick turnaround of student scores to enable targeted remediation. PPC would not be supportive of these regulations if the Board had not directed the Department to take such action.

Supports work -- consider the progress in Virginia. Virginia implemented end-of-course exams (similar to the proposed GCA's) in 1998 and began to withhold diplomas in 2004. Virginia has seen student achievement increase substantially since the assessments have been administered. In English/writing, 88 percent of students passed the assessment – up 17 percentage points in eight years. In Algebra I, 84 percent passed – up an incredible 44 percentage points during that same time period! Opponents may also speculate that implementing this draft regulation will result in higher dropout rates, but this was not the case in Virginia. The high school class of 2005 had the same percentage of students graduate from high school as the class of 2002, which was not required to pass the exams to graduate with the additional knowledge that more students have achieved their standards.

The draft regulations expand the subjects in which students must demonstrate proficiency through state or local assessments beyond reading, writing and mathematics to include science and social studies. We are supportive of this expansion. As previously noted, jobs of the 21st century require firm content knowledge

beyond traditional reading, writing and mathematics. The sciences and social sciences are essential to a well-balanced education that supports students to be ready for postsecondary education, the workforce and productive citizenship.

Despite some assertions to the contrary, the regulatory scheme presented by the draft is not one high-stakes graduation test. It is a menu from which districts can choose to accurately and equitably measure student achievement. Students would pass six tests if a district chose to use the GCA option, not one.

Again the draft rulemaking acknowledges that assessments alone don't yield successful students who are ready for postsecondary education and the workplace; it directs the Department of Education to provide supports to school districts to help students attain the academic standards. For PPC, this is an essential and very important facet of the rulemaking. It makes the regulatory scheme one which encompasses accountability and support. We recognize that there could be negative consequences for students who are not adequately prepared and that worries us greatly. PPC is the statewide child advocacy organization – we would not support a regulation that would hurt children. Rather, we feel the current situation hurts children. When challenged and supported, every child can succeed. Expecting anything less from our young people is selling them short.

Aren't we already failing a large number of our students by awarding high school diplomas that don't necessarily mean they have met the standards and can achieve in the next chapter of their lives? Consider the evidence: nearly one-third of all students entering 2- or 4-year colleges in the U.S. need to take – and pay for – remedial courses in one or more subjects because they lack the skills they should have mastered in high school. For students entering predominantly minority colleges it's even worse – 43 percent are required to take remedial coursework. But, we also sell students short if we fail to make the related and needed investments in support initiatives designed to help students achieve.

The regulations direct the Department to establish a voluntary model curriculum aligned with the state academic standards in each of the content areas assessed by the GCAs. Not all districts have the capacity to devote significant resources to curriculum development and maintenance. Offering model curriculum would be especially helpful for these districts. Curriculum, coupled with the recommended opportunities for continuing professional development for teachers, will help improve instruction in the key content areas.

The Department is also directed to assist districts with the development of effective student tutoring, remediation and extended instructional time programs. The Commonwealth must dedicate resources to help districts provide core academic support to students to achieve the state standards. Tutoring, remediation and extended instructional time programs are proven strategies that help students achieve.

It is also highly appropriate for the Department, as directed by the draft rulemaking, to provide appropriate accommodations and we hope modifications for students with disabilities and for English language learners. The Board has a strong track record on

providing supports for diverse learners – oftentimes, against very vocal opposition – and we congratulate you for taking this important step once again.

PPC strongly supports the draft Chapter 4 rulemaking. We believe that it presents a common-sense accountability and academic support system that should help improve statewide student achievement. Upon final promulgation, the Chapter 4 rulemaking will help assure that a high school diploma is relevant to the world in which a student lives, regardless of where they attended high school and whether their future plans involve attending postsecondary education or going directly into the workforce.

We support this proposed regulation, but will continue to advocate that more be done to increase student achievement and improve chances for a successful transition to adulthood for all students. We need a strong system of education finance in the Commonwealth and thank the Board for its work on the “Costing Out Study” which provides the Governor and General Assembly a roadmap for action. We urge them both to embrace this in the coming budget cycle. Additional integrated academic, social, and physical and behavioral health supports that help both struggling students and districts should also be provided. The draft regulations provide an excellent step on the academic side of these supports. Finally, the Commonwealth should provide meaningful rewards for low income students who achieve our rigorous standards and graduate high school but cannot afford college.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to entertain any questions at this time.