

Good Morning Chairman Rhoades, Chairman Musto and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Joan Benso, President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the State Board of Education's proposed regulations revising Chapter 4 regarding high school graduation requirements.

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.

As outlined in the Pennsylvania Constitution, the Commonwealth must provide for a thorough and efficient system of public education. To PPC, this means that the state has an obligation to ensure that **all** young people in Pennsylvania have the opportunity and education to build productive and successful lives for themselves and their families.

Unfortunately, data from a number of sources indicates that many of our high school graduates are not prepared for the next phase in their lives. Students themselves feel that something is amiss. Almost 40 percent of college students think they are not prepared for college; and more than 40 percent of their professors agree.

The facts speak for themselves: far too many students need remedial education when they reach college. Stated plainly, remedial education is meant to fix education gaps that students bring with them to college before they can even begin to take credit

bearing courses. In data reported to the PA Department of Education in May 2008 by Pennsylvania's fourteen community colleges, about 53 percent of first-year community college students, who were 18 to 21 years of age and recent high school graduates enrolled this past fall semester required remediation. This represents more than 15,000 students. Rates of remediation in some schools were well in excess of 50% and only four of the fourteen community colleges reported a rate of much less than 45%. And remediation is not just an issue for community colleges. The fourteen universities that make up the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) report that nearly 22 percent of entering freshmen required remediation. Students who take remedial courses are also much less likely to graduate. Only 17 percent of college freshmen who take even one remedial reading course will receive a bachelor's degree within eight years of high school completion versus 60 percent of students who don't need remediation. This represents a very serious problem and a strong indication of how well our high schools are preparing our students for post-secondary education. We share this data because many opponents of GCAs continue to argue that there is no real proof that students are not ready when they graduate from high school.

The cost of higher education can be a big drain on a family's finances. The need for remedial education just adds more to the economic strain of working families and young adults. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that if community college remediation in Pennsylvania were reduced by just one course per remedial student, the savings would be nearly \$82 million per year. PASSHE estimates the cost of remediation at \$10.3 million per year. Pennsylvania must do a better job to ensure that high school graduates have gained the knowledge and skills they need in order to move on to post-secondary education and careers. We challenge the opponents of GCAs and policymakers to explain to families who are personally bearing the high costs of remediation in post-secondary institutions why their children left high school without the skills required to be take credit bearing courses.

Since 1999, students in Pennsylvania have been required to demonstrate achievement of the state standards by scoring proficient or above on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSAs or a local assessment that is aligned to the state standards to graduate from high school.

Generally speaking, this requirement has not resulted in our high school graduates being college or job-ready.

The most recently available information indicates that a great number of our high school graduates are not adequately prepared for the next chapter in their lives. Slightly more than 44 percent of our 2007 high school graduates failed to demonstrate proficiency on the PSSA in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade retake, or did not take the PSSAs but graduated based on local assessments. PPC has been repeatedly criticized that the data we were using was old and didn't reflect the gains schools have been making. We updated this data recently as the graduation information on last year's high school class became available. Our hope was that we would see a strong indication that one more year of increased public education funding and moving one year closer to the NCLB goal of all students achieving proficiency by 2014 would demonstrate a positive change. That is not at all the case. Statewide, we saw a very slight improvement of 1 percent more students being proficient but more schools districts did worse than the year before. We clearly have a problem that is not resolving itself – it must be addressed.

These students live in communities all across our state - 473 school districts graduated at least 20 percent more students than demonstrated proficiency on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA or the 12<sup>th</sup> grade retake. Many have argued that the PSSA isn't a fair test for all students and some students don't take it seriously meaning it isn't a good indication of student readiness. Does that mean that a 20 percent difference between graduation rates and proficiency is too high of a target? Okay, let's consider what happens if we cut the data in other places. The outcome is still very troubling: 401 school districts graduated at least 30 percent more students than demonstrated proficiency; 280 school districts graduated at least 40 percent more students than demonstrated proficiency; and 148 school districts graduated more than 50 percent more students than demonstrated proficiency.

Many local stakeholders and some policymakers have suggested that we should make GCAs apply only to the districts that really need our help. We have asked over and

over again...”Which districts would that be?” But, no one ever offers an answer to that question. Today, we are asking you as the Senate Education Committee to consider that question. Please also consider if there is a better solution to our problem than the State Board’s proposal. To date, no one has suggested any fleshed out alternatives and we think the time has come to do more than oppose what is on the table and to offer meaningful solutions to the challenges facing our children. Our high school students and their families are counting on you to do something about this serious problem.

Given the state requirement to demonstrate proficiency, how can this be happening? It is happening because students are graduating under the local assessment, which can have 501 meanings in 501 school districts. There is no guarantee that any local assessment is aligned to our academic standards. Let’s all agree, we have a problem on our hands. We need consistent assessment of student achievement that is tied to our academic standards. But this is not enough; we also need tools and supports for students, teachers and schools in order for every student to meet the state standards.

The State Board’s proposed regulations provide a sound system of academic supports and assessment options to help ensure that ALL high school graduates are college and job ready. It’s an attempt to assert the Commonwealth’s authority and obligation to provide a thorough and efficient system of public education system and to do it in a manner that is mindful of our history of local control.

Many individuals and organizations testifying today have been very critical of the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs). GCAs are one of several options for school districts to assess student achievement under the rulemaking. They are best thought of as final exams in key courses – not another layer of testing to burden students. GCAs would be administered as final exams throughout a student’s high school career. For example, the Algebra I exam would be taken upon completion of Algebra I, usually in 9th grade. The GCAs do not represent more tests, but a better testing for students. The State Board proposes that students pass a number of these

final exams in order to graduate from high school. Other graduation requirements would remain in the hands of local school districts.

We strongly support the use of GCAs because they work when used with a system of academic supports. The State Board is proposing a strong system of supports including the establishment of a voluntary model curriculum, mandated remediation for students who fail to score proficient, and professional development for teachers to improve instruction, remediation methods and utilize the model curriculum and new assessment tools. Other key issues can influence student outcomes such as disabilities or students who are English language learners and the regulatory proposal makes accommodations to address those concerns. It is critical to note that NO mandate for remediation currently exists for our high school students while some have erroneously suggested that is the case. The only mandate for remediation currently in PA is focused on students in K-3 and completing grade 5 who have failed to demonstrate proficiency in reading and mathematics. The time has come to assure that students receive the remediation they need to succeed as a guarantee and not simply as a result of what happens in their local school district.

The State Board's proposal nicely complements the pending statute introduced by Senator Musto in this chamber to codify a meaningful school funding formula. It is important that the Commonwealth state paying its fair share of education funding and fully fund its share in six years. The additional monetary resources and the academic supports and assessment tools in the State Board's rulemaking will help ease differences among school districts and level the playing field as well as expectations for our students.

I would urge you to fully explore that other witnesses will share will you and look deeply into the information you will hear about other states – because oftentimes, these comparisons are quite a stretch. Most other states – while they have implemented some model of graduation assessments – have not done so in such a complete and thoughtful manner as the State Board has proposed. You will hear about increased

drop-outs rates and other horror stories. But, when you dig you will realize that you will also be hearing about states that haven't offered model curriculum, technical assistance, professional development, appropriate accommodations and maybe most importantly mandated remediation. You will hear about states that delay getting test scores back to school districts soon enough to drive remediation. You will hear about states that use one test, late in a child's high school experience without giving a child the opportunity to retest. You will hear about the nightmare this has created for children in other states. What you will not hear about – is what is being proposed in Pennsylvania.

So, I ask you to be very careful as you weigh the “evidence” and be completely certain it is truly evidence to regret this proposal. What you might find out if you dig deep enough is that this can make a difference in student achievement. Consider the case of Virginia.

Only Virginia's support and assessment system closely resembles the State Board's proposal. Implemented in 1998, it has led to a dramatic improvement of student achievement without resulting in an increase in high school dropouts. In 2007, passing rates in Virginia (defined as scoring proficient or above) in key subjects, like reading, writing, algebra I, chemistry, and world history II were around 90 percent. Other key subjects were just below 90 percent. For a comparison, Pennsylvania's PSSA results in 2006-2007 showed 11<sup>th</sup> graders scoring 53.7% proficient or above in math and 65.4% in reading. It must also be noted that scores for most student subgroups have also improved on most of these assessments in Virginia. Where they have not, the 2007 passing rates were still between 83 percent and 91 percent.

Many here today contend that the State Board's proposal – specifically the GCAs - are not fair to students. I ask: Is it fair to hold students to lower standards because of where they live, the school they attend, their income level, or race? Is it fair sending students off to college and jobs when so many are not prepared? Is it fair to colleges and employers if they have no assurance of a basic knowledge level of high school

graduates? Is it fair to grant high school diplomas to so many students who then must be remediated in college to learn what they should have learned in high school?

I think we all recognize that the Commonwealth and our school districts as a whole can do a better job of preparing our students. The State Board's proposal is a strong step to address our current situation. Unfortunately, many here today do not choose to engage in a meaningful discussion. Instead, they want to shut down the regulatory review process, kill the proposal, and not allow meaningful public comment. Members of the General Assembly and the public should be encouraged to participate in the regulatory review process by offering constructive comments - not eliminate it. Only through constructive participation will we do what is best for our students and the Commonwealth as a whole.

Just saying no to the proposal does absolutely nothing to improve student achievement. It does nothing to help make high school graduates college and job ready. It does nothing to reduce the need for remediation at colleges and universities. It does nothing when it's clear, based on the data about the readiness of high school graduates, we need to be doing something to address the current situation. Just what is the solution of those who oppose the State Board's proposal? Do nothing? That is the only solution they have offered to date.

I hope that my comments have put the State Board's proposal in some perspective. I urge you to move forward and to do what is in the best interests of Pennsylvania's children –and not stand still and allow the status quo to continue.

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