



Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

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Good morning Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Joan Benso, President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). PPC is a statewide, non-partisan, independent child advocacy organization committed to improving the health, education and well-being of the children of the Commonwealth. Our vision is to make Pennsylvania one of the top ten states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the State Board of Education's proposed regulations on statewide graduation requirements, Senate Bill 281 and Senate Bill 307.

For almost two years, the debate that surrounds the proposed regulations and now these two pieces of legislation has been polarizing – not only here at the state level among policymakers and organizations representing the interests of children and youth, educators and schools boards, but also among neighbors, business owners and others who watched the intense debate play out last year. In my many years of state policy work, it is hard to recall an issue that has caused such a visceral reaction both from supporters and opponents, alike. It is also difficult to recall such a spirited public policy debate where there was no consensus that a problem exists.

As a data-driven child advocacy organization, PPC finds this lack of consensus, or even basic acknowledgement that we have a problem, quite troubling. Data on student achievement, graduation, and remediation rates at community colleges and the state-owned universities have all been shared and far too often dismissed as unreliable measurements. Today, PPC continues to maintain, as we have since this debate began, that there is a problem; a real disconnect between Pennsylvania's high schools, postsecondary education and employers that fails to serve the academic advancement and career preparedness of the Commonwealth's youth. In the coming weeks we look

forward to hearing the results of the study Penn State University has been conducting reviewing our local assessments systems. Should this information suggest that other data has misled us, we will be happy to reconsider our position. Should the Penn State study validate the assumptions we have drawn based on other data sets, I would urge my colleagues to re-examine their opposition.

Ten years ago during the Ridge administration, Pennsylvania adopted rigorous academic standards. These standards set a uniform expectation for all students. But standards are only as good as the accountability systems that accompany them to determine if students meet those standards. Currently, students can demonstrate their proficiency against our academic standards by scoring proficient on the 11th PSSA, the 12th grade retest, or a locally aligned assessment. Our state's academic standards were based on the knowledge that the demands of our economy were changing and that we needed to do more to assure that every Pennsylvania high school graduate would be adequately prepared to compete.

Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatic shift from unskilled to skilled jobs – meaning that jobs of the future require education beyond high school. By 2014, 45 percent of jobs will require at least some postsecondary education or an associate's degree. Another 30 percent will require a bachelor's degree or higher.¹ But we have a serious disconnect in the education attainment of the Pennsylvania workforce and the credentials required for jobs in the new economy as only 22.5 percent of Pennsylvania workers have some postsecondary education versus the demand for this credential in 45 percent of the available jobs; and a little more than 25 percent of our workers have attained a bachelor's degree or higher while 30 percent of jobs require this level of education.

We live in a state and a country where a strong back and a good work ethic is no longer enough to help you land a job that will pay a family sustaining wage. As much as we

¹ U. S. Bureau of the Census and PA Department of Labor & Industry, Center for Workforce Information and Analysis: Educational Attainment and Median Earnings – 2007 American Community Survey

would like to think otherwise, to remain competitive as a state we must do more to assure that nearly every child is college and career ready.

Again, we have had many challenging conversations in this building about the reliability of the data PPC and others have used to demonstrate the lack of readiness of our high school graduates. But, it is worth reviewing. In Pennsylvania's 2007 high school graduating classes, more than 44 percent of the graduates failed to demonstrated proficiency on the PSSA in 11th grade, the 12th grade retake or did not take PSSA and graduated based on local assessments. While many people have strong feelings about the PSSA, we cannot ignore that an independent study released by the State Board of Education in November 2005 found a high correlation between students' performance on the PSSA and university proficiency or entrance exams. Students who scored at the advanced or proficient level on the PSSA also tended to score high on college entrance exams like the SAT. In fact, at least 90% of students who scored at or above proficient on the PSSA took at least the standard level freshmen courses in English and math at the universities sampled by the study.²

These young people live in communities all across our state - 473 school districts graduated at least 20 percent more students than demonstrated proficiency on the 11th grade PSSAs or the 12th grade retake. In response to this data, many people have argued that the PSSA isn't a fair test for all students or that students don't take the PSSA seriously and it is, therefore, not 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? 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.

² Sinclair, Andrea L. and Arthur A. Thacker. Human Resources Research Organization. *Relationships Among Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Scores, University Proficiency Exam Scores, and College Course Grades in English and Math*. September 2005. Page 31.

Given the state requirement to demonstrate proficiency on Pennsylvania's academic standards, how can this be happening? It is happening because many students graduate under the local assessment, which has 501 meanings in 501 school districts. The Penn State study will shed some light on this issue.

But that wasn't the only thing that convinced PPC that there was a problem. Pennsylvania's postsecondary education institutions also reported that many freshmen needed remedial education before they were able to take credit-bearing courses. According to data released by PDE last month, one in three recent Pennsylvania high school graduates, or 20,000 students, who enrolled in a Pennsylvania community college or state-owned university could not pass a first-year college math or English course and were required to take one or more remedial classes. When combined with the report that found 90% of students who scored advanced or proficient on the PSSA were able to take freshman level math and English courses at Pennsylvania universities, it is undeniably clear that a disconnect exists between what it means to graduate from a Pennsylvania high school and what it means to be prepared to enter postsecondary education institutions, ready to do freshman level work. You heard this data detailed today from others who represent some of those institutions.

Furthermore, these remedial courses - which cost students, their parents and taxpayers more than \$26 million each year – make college that much further out of reach for many young people at a time when research shows 75 percent of jobs require postsecondary education or training. Students and families who are personally bearing the high costs of remediation in postsecondary institutions deserve an explanation as to why their children left high school without the skills required to take credit bearing courses. Equally so, local taxpayers that provide financing to community colleges, either through their counties or school districts, deserve an explanation as to why they must essentially pay twice for youth to be prepared to take credit bearing courses – first in high school and then through remedial classes.

So, where does all of this information leave us? From PPC's perspective, a problem *still* exists — too many of our young people are graduating from high school without the

academic foundation needed to build a successful 21st century career. The status quo is not acceptable and will not assure students, parents and taxpayers that the problem has been solved. I would therefore challenge all of us here today to make this debate about what is in the best interests of the Commonwealth's youth. We all want the best for Pennsylvania's children. We all want students to achieve at their highest level. We all want kids to grow into successful adults. How we help children become successful adults who are prepared for the rigors of a 21st century economy is where our differences lie. But if we can all at least acknowledge that there is a problem that requires us working together to solve, we can make the public education system better for Pennsylvania's students, parents and taxpayers.

At this juncture we need everyone's commitment to solving the problem with the best interest of children as our first and foremost concern. Stopping GCAs or prohibiting PDE to develop model curriculum, diagnostics, and voluntary end-of-course exams (GCAs) is not a solution. Spreading misinformation such as "this is one high stakes test," "this will require much more testing" or "there is no evidence that this will work," is not a solution.

The proposed GCAs do not represent more testing – remember, most students already take final exams to count as part of their course grades – but GCAs could represent better testing for students by ensuring that that assessment is placed closer to instruction. In fact, PPC believes that GCAs could very well replace the current 11th grade PSSA exams. Of the 26 states that currently have high school exit exams, all but three use these assessments to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind.

You've heard assertions from opponents of the regulations that GCAs will increase dropout rates as evidenced by some other states' experience with graduation assessments. But what you haven't heard is that these states have not offered the critically important supports found in the State Board's proposal that help improve student achievement. End-of-course exams can improve student achievement when coupled with meaningful supports. Let's consider the case of Virginia.

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 2008, passing rates in Virginia (defined as scoring proficient or above) in key subjects, like reading, writing, algebra I, chemistry, and world history were over 90 percent. For a comparison, Pennsylvania's PSSA results in 2007-2008 showed 11th graders scoring 55.8 percent proficient or above in math and 64.8 percent 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 2008 passing rates were still between 80 percent and 88 percent. They are best thought of as final exams in key courses – not another layer of testing to burden students.

Inaction or opposition to any sort of change means nothing improves for kids. We need more than just opposition – we need meaningful solutions.

With solutions as our goal, I want to thank Chairman Piccola for recognizing that there is a problem and putting a legislative proposal on the table for discussion. I hope the other testifiers here today will also recognize the problem and put forth solutions so we can work collaboratively to improve student outcomes. Over the last year, I have heard few solutions recommended beyond “stop GCAs” and “let the legislature determine the requirements for high school graduation.” PPC is ready to join any conversation, any place, at any time that is focused on the goal of assuring more of our children graduate from high school, college- and career-ready. With all due respect, little of this debate has truly centered on the needs of children. As we move forward, there are key fundamentals that PPC maintains are essential to fix the problem. These fundamentals include:

1. A reliable and consistent assessment system for all students (with accommodations for special needs children). This doesn't necessarily mean that each school district must use the same tool for measurement, but the Commonwealth should ensure that any measurement tool used in Pennsylvania schools is aligned to standards and consistently applied to all students.

2. A guarantee for remediation of students who are struggling and fail to meet the standards. The State Board's proposal included a requirement for remediation of students not achieving their academic goals. PPC's support of the State Board's proposal was contingent on that provision, because other than the proposed regulations, there is no other place where Pennsylvania takes steps to guarantee remediation for students after 5th grade.
3. Tools for school districts to utilize, at their option, that help improve academic achievement. These tools should include model curriculum, diagnostics to help educators identify children at-risk of dropping out of school and educational failure as early as 6th grade, and model assessments aligned with the state standards. Not every school district, school board, educator and superintendent is opposed to the State Board's proposal. As many have heard, some school districts want to be able to use the tools, assessments included, to drive instruction and improve achievement. The fact that some school districts support the proposed regulations, including the GCAs, and want the tests to be developed so they can utilize them, demonstrates that this proposal is not unreasonable.
4. Resources to help school districts pay for the programs and services needed to get all students to proficiency. The 2007 Costing-Out Study found that Pennsylvania has an over \$4 billion funding adequacy gap. Last summer, the Commonwealth took an historic step forward by making a significant investment in the basic education subsidy and establishing a funding formula taking into account student enrollment, English language learners and poverty. But perhaps even more importantly, the General Assembly established a goal in the Public School Code to review and meet state funding targets by the 2013-2014 fiscal year. PPC maintains that we must make progress to closing the adequacy gap even under these difficult economic conditions to assure adequate and equitable funding for school districts. But, closing the adequacy gap is not an excuse to delay a reliable statewide assessment system. It is reasonable to have them run in tandem, assuring the funding targets will be realized when assessment requirements are required for all graduates.

The State Board's proposal, minus the funding pieces which is clearly under the jurisdiction of the General Assembly, includes all of the fundamentals and that is why PPC has steadfastly supported the proposed regulations.

While PPC supports the proposal, it doesn't mean that we wouldn't look at other solutions with our fundamentals in mind. The data clearly calls on all of us to take decisive action and come up with a solution – the right solution for Pennsylvania's students. The time has come to do more than merely mount opposition to the status quo and instead to offer meaningful solutions that will ensure high school graduates are ready for the challenges of postsecondary education.

We forward to working the Chairmen Piccola and Chairman Dinniman and the members of the Senate Education Committee to find the right solution. Thank you for the opportunity to present comments. I'll be happy to take your questions.