



# Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

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Good morning Chairman Torsella and Members of the State Board of Education. My name is Bill Bartle and I am the Youth Policy Director for 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. PPC's 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 revising statewide high school graduation requirements.

Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatic shift from unskilled to skilled jobs in Pennsylvania and across the nation – meaning that jobs of today's new economy require education beyond high school. By 2014, 45 percent of Pennsylvania's jobs will require at least some postsecondary education or an associate's degree. Another 30 percent will require a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>1</sup> But we have a serious disconnect in the educational 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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

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 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 when they graduate from high school.

For almost two years, the debate surrounding the State Board's proposal to revise high school graduation requirements has been polarizing – not only among policymakers and organizations representing the interests of children and youth, educators and schools boards, but also among neighbors, business leaders and others who watched the intense debate play out last year. It is hard to remember an issue that has resulted in such a spirited public policy debate.

As a data-driven child advocacy organization, PPC looked at a variety of data on student achievement, graduation, remediation rates at community and state-owned universities and the quality of the local assessments to determine if a problem did indeed exist. Without reexamining all of the data, suffice it to say that there is evidence that there is a problem that makes us question the preparedness of high school graduates for postsecondary education and careers.

As many of you know, last week PDE, the chairman of the State Board of Education and the PA School Boards Association reached an agreement on revised regulatory language to the proposed regulations on high school graduation requirements unanimously adopted by the State Board last January. PPC strongly supports this agreement and applauds the leadership of these three organizations in coming together and negotiating a solution. Thanks to their commitment to the Commonwealth's young people and their willingness to put the emotional debate aside and engage in meaningful discussion, we have a revised proposal before us today that addresses the concerns of our local school boards and yet revises high school graduation requirements to ensure all young

people graduate having achieved the academic standards as measured by comparable, reliable, validated assessment tools.

The changes in the regulatory language are clearly more evolutionary than they are revolutionary. The changes provide more flexibility to local districts, allowing districts to determine the assessment tool that best meets their needs and ensure students have met the state's academic standards. And as I mentioned, the regulations outline a clear, more collaborative validation process to ensure local assessments that are used to demonstrate proficiency of the state standards are rigorous and aligned to the standards. This validation process includes the creation of a Local Assessment Validation Committee comprised of representatives from PDE, the State Board and PSBA and a 50-50 shared split between the school district and PDE on the cost of validating local assessments.

Even with these changes, the revised proposed regulations maintain the fundamentals that PPC considers critical to reach the overall goal of ensuring the Commonwealth's high school graduates are ready for the rigors of postsecondary education and 21<sup>st</sup> century occupations. These 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 provides a process to ensure that any measurement tool used in Pennsylvania schools is aligned to standards and consistently applied to all students. These assessments can include the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA or the 12<sup>th</sup> grade retake; validated local assessments; Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams; or a series of state-developed end-of-course Keystone Exams in English composition, reading, geometry, algebra I and II, biology, chemistry, American history, world history, and civics and government. These end-of-course Keystone Exams provide a number of benefits over one comprehensive exam including: placing

- assessment closer to the point of instruction; providing opportunities to assess more in-depth knowledge; assessing smaller bodies of knowledge at one time; allowing students to begin taking the Keystone exams earlier and having multiple opportunities to take and pass them.
2. A guarantee of remediation for students who are struggling and fail to meet the academic standards. The proposal includes a requirement for remediation of students not achieving their academic goals. Currently, there is no other place in statute or regulation where Pennsylvania provides a guarantee of remediation for students after 5<sup>th</sup> grade.
  3. Tools for school districts to utilize, at their option, that help improve instruction and students' academic achievement. These tools include model curriculum, diagnostics to help educators identify children at-risk of dropping out of school and educational failure as early as 6<sup>th</sup> grade, assistance developing student tutoring programs, professional development for teachers, extended instructional time programs and if desired, technical assistance for school districts in developing quality local assessments.

A key fundamental that is not included in the regulations, and which PPC recognizes cannot be addressed by the State Board of Education but considers necessary to realize the full potential of the proposal, are 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 a more than \$4 billion funding adequacy gap. In a swift response to the results of the Costing-Out study last summer, the General Assembly made a historic investment in basic education, adopted a rational school funding formula and established a goal in the Public School Code to review and meet state funding targets by the 2013-2014 fiscal year. Even in these difficult economic times, Pennsylvania cannot abandon this goal, nor the formula for supporting basic education. Those who seek to assure that high school graduates are prepared for

the rigors of postsecondary education and careers, must also support efforts to provide school districts with adequate and equitable funding to make this a reality.

In closing, I would reiterate that PPC believes that the regulatory language agreed to by PDE, the State Board and PSBA is the right solution for Pennsylvania's students. And we applaud the Pennsylvania School Boards Association for recognizing that a problem exists and negotiating a meaningful solution that will ensure high school graduates have the strong academic background that prepares them for the challenges of postsecondary education and 21<sup>st</sup> century careers.

Although there is still a long way to go before these proposed regulations are adopted, we are now much closer to having a reliable and consistent measure of student success in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your attention.