



Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

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**PENNSYLVANIA PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHILDREN
STATEMENT TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ON KEYSTONE EXAM COMPROMISE
JULY 14, 2009**

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) congratulates the Chairman of the State Board of Education, state policymakers, education leaders and all other stakeholders who worked to find common ground concerning high school graduation requirements. The proposal announced by State Board of Education Chairman Torsella last week would establish a consistent statewide measurement of the knowledge and skills that the high school diploma signifies, as well as a system of supports for students who are struggling and for educators.

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 the position as one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child.

This issue of high school graduation requirements has been one that PPC has been working on for nearly four years. PPC's president and CEO, Joan Benso, chaired the workgroup of the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success in 2005 and 2006 that developed the recommendation to – *require all Pennsylvania high school students to demonstrate proficiency on the academic standards to graduate. Students can demonstrate proficiency by scoring proficient or advanced on the 11th grade PSSA or by passing a series of state-*

developed end-of-course exams. Since the release of the Commission's report, it has been a long and intense journey to where we are today – with an emergent agreement that is the right solution for our kids.

When PPC testified in front of the Senate Education Committee last February, we stressed the importance of moving the contentious debate over high school graduation requirements forward to find solutions to assure that more of our children graduate from high school, college- and career-ready. At that time, PPC outlined the three key fundamental elements that have been and remain essential for our support of a proposal. Those elements included a reliable and consistent assessment system for all students; student supports including mandated remediation; and tools for teachers and school districts.

PPC believes that a reliable and consistent assessment system for all students (with accommodations for diverse learners) must be in place. This does not mean that every school district be required to use the same exact tools for measurement, but advancing a system that protects local control while providing a rigorous process to ensure that any measurement tool used in Pennsylvania schools is aligned to standards and is consistently applied to all students.

The plan announced last week clearly addresses this requirement. It strikes the right balance between accountability and local control by providing school districts multiple pathways for students to demonstrate proficiency of the state standards and earn a diploma, including end-of-course Keystone exams as well as local assessments that will be appropriately validated. In addition, PPC supports the inclusion of a project-based assessment model to demonstrate proficiency of the state academic standards for the small number of students who are unsuccessful in passing one or more of the Keystone exams after multiple attempts with the safeguard of independent review.

Although the end-of-course exams were always considered a replacement for the current final exam in the course, there was a concern about the Keystone exams

resulting in students being required to take more tests than they do today. In deference to this concern, the revised plan would replace the 11th grade PSSA with Keystone exams in reading/literature, algebra I and biology. Throughout this process, PPC always urged that these end-of-course assessments should replace the 11th grade PSSA as the tool to determine Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.

The Keystone exam model provides 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 in their academic careers; and, having multiple opportunities to take and pass the exam, or a module of the exam. We have all heard the argument from some opponents that students do not take the PSSA seriously and therefore it isn't a reliable measure. But, if the Keystone exam counts for one-third of a student's final grade in the course, students are very likely to take the exam seriously and do their best – which could help more schools meet AYP.

It is important to note that the latest Keystone exam proposal is about more than just testing as has been the case with its predecessors. Throughout the discussion of high school graduation requirements, PPC has strongly asserted that students who are struggling and fail to meet the academic standards must be guaranteed remediation. Simply put, if we are going to hold students accountable for achieving the standards we must provide the academic supports to help get them there. The guarantee of remediation was not only essential to gain PPC's support, but it remains a crucial component of any plan that seeks to ensure students are meeting the academic goals set out by Pennsylvania's academic standards before they graduate from high school. Fortunately, this proposal includes this guarantee of supplemental instructional support for students who are not achieving.

PPC also strongly supports the inclusion of tools for teachers and school districts to utilize, at their option, that help improve instruction and students' academic achievement. The latest proposal includes voluntary model curriculum, diagnostics to help educators identify children at-risk of dropping out of school and educational failure as early as 6th grade, assistance developing student tutoring and remediation programs, extended instructional time programs and provides for technical assistance for school districts in developing quality local assessments. These supports for students, teachers and schools, coupled with a common-sense accountability system provides an effective approach to ensure student success.

PPC strongly supports Keystone exams 3.0 and believes that is the right solution for Pennsylvania's students. We would like to thank and congratulate all of the groups involved in this agreement for recognizing that a problem exists and for 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 21st century careers.

We respectfully urge the members of the Senate Education Committee, and all members of the General Assembly to support Keystone exams 3.0 to provide a reliable and consistent measure of student success in Pennsylvania that is mindful of our rich history of local control and meaningful supports for students and schools to help promote academic achievement.

Thank you.