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Board Chairman

Good morning Chairman Torsella and Members of the State Board of Education. My name is Joan Benso and I am the President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC).

I would like to begin my comments by thanking Chairman Torsella, Senator Dinnaman, Senator Piccola, Representative Roebuck, members of the State Board and staff, PSEA and PSBA, other education associations, and other stakeholders who recognized that we have a serious problem with the college and career readiness of Pennsylvania's youth and committed to finding some common ground to address the problem rather than simply oppose change and settle for things to continue as they have in the past. All of your hard work has resulted in the proposal the State Board is considering today. The children of Pennsylvania will benefit from your commitment to them in the years to come.

PPC supports the proposal and urges the members of the State Board to move this process forward today by adopting the final-form regulations. The regulations will assure that more of our children will graduate from high school, college- and career-ready by providing a reliable and consistent assessment system for all students, with appropriate accommodations for diverse learners. The proposal 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.

Over the three years that Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children has been working on this issue, many stakeholders have raised legitimate concerns. We have often heard that the unintended consequence of this proposal will be that more children in Pennsylvania will drop out of school. As we have shared in the past, evidence from comparable proposals in other states don't support that assertion. Far too often the comparisons have not been with other states that have taken a comprehensive approach to this issue. At times, opponents have mischaracterized this regulatory package as simply a testing proposal and bemoaned all that

will happen is that students will take more tests. This is not the case. A cornerstone of the proposal and a long-term condition of the support of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is the core academic supports designed to assure students succeed. These include guaranteed supplemental instruction for struggling students, voluntary model curriculum for teachers, diagnostic tools to help 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, technical assistance for school districts in developing quality local assessments and professional development for teachers. These supports, coupled with Keystone exams - a common-sense accountability system - provides an effective approach to ensure student success.

Maybe the most important element of the proposal from the perspective of the student and his or her family is the supplemental instruction guarantee. Currently, Pennsylvania's high school students are not guaranteed remediation if they fail to meet our academic standards. While most school districts do their best to provide supplemental instruction for every student, it is important to realize that students and their families have no right in law or regulation to demand this today. The enactment of this regulatory body puts that fundamental flaw in our commitment to students to rest. Moving forward, a high school student who is struggling and cannot demonstrate proficiency through course work including Keystone Exams, locally aligned assessment or other approved means will be assured the supports they need to succeed. They are guaranteed supplemental instruction beginning with the 2011-2012 school year, which is the year that students entering high school will be required to meet the conditions of this regulatory body to graduate. Instead of driving the dropout rate, the outcome will be to increase the number of students who graduate fully prepared for the next phase of their lives. The tragic stories we have heard over these past few years from young people concerning the costly remediation they needed when they went on to post-secondary education will come to an end. We respectfully urge the members of the State Board of Education to approve the proposal in front of you today. It will provide a 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.

Again, I want to personally thank you for your leadership and commitment to our students.