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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children IRRC Testimony Joan L. Benso, President and CEO August 2007

This statement is presented on behalf of Joan Benso, President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. 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.

PPC endorses the State Board of Education's proposed revisions of its Chapter 49 regulations dealing with teacher education and certification. The Board received a lot of commentary – some in favor, some opposed, some suggesting ways to improve the regulations or make their implementation more practical. And the Board was highly responsive to these recommendations – including those from you and from the House and Senate Education Committees.

You have no doubt continued to hear some negative comments from organizations that represent universities, school districts, professors, and school administrators. PPC has the luxury of not having members, so we can be focused solely on what is best for kids. That does not necessarily make our position more right, but it does more clearly delineate who we think must be the primary beneficiaries of state education policy. And we are convinced that Chapter 49-2 will benefit the students in our PK-12 schools.

One of the primary areas of controversy in these regulations is the proposed change in grade levels that can be taught by teachers holding different certificates. Today, a person with an early childhood certificate can teach children from prekindergarten through third grade; a person with an elementary certificate can teach children between kindergarten (or age 3, effectively including pre-K) and sixth grade; a

person with a middle level certificate can teach children between sixth and ninth grades; and a person with a secondary certificate can teach children between seventh and twelfth grades. The State Board's proposed changes are based upon years of increasingly convincing research about the developmental learning needs of children and should, therefore, promote higher levels of achievement by children.

As you know, the Board has proposed that those with early childhood certificates be permitted to teach children in pre-K through fourth grade; those with elementary/middle level certificates be permitted to teach children in fourth through eighth grades; and those with secondary certificates be permitted to teach those in ninth through twelfth grades. All of this would begin in 2013, so current teachers and those in the collegiate pipeline would not be subjected to these restrictions. Please note that the Board provided for the fourth grade overlap of certificates and delayed implementation for a year in response to comments on the regulations as they were proposed previously.

We think this is a positive and important change for the learning of future generations of Pennsylvania children for several reasons.

1. The revised grade spans recognize and base state policy upon convincing research about the developmental learning needs of children – especially of our youngest learners and those in early adolescence.
2. Teachers in early learning classes need to recognize the wide range of developmental readiness, especially for language acquisition, pre-literacy, and literacy – the foundations of all other learning. That range within a first or second grade classroom is wider than at any later time in the educational continuum. A child who fails to achieve success in the early grades has greatly diminished chances for future success in school and in life. This is absolutely vital for young children and for our collective future as a Commonwealth.
3. Teachers in the middle grades have another set of often difficult developmental issues with which to deal. These are the years in which children grow into early adolescence, begin to establish their own identities as learners, and must start to master more complex curriculum if they are to achieve success in high school and beyond. It is also the time that most high school dropouts begin to demonstrate clear indicators that they will not graduate – poor sixth grade attendance, discipline problems, and failing English or math as noted in a recent research study conducted by John Hopkins University.
4. Teachers in high school are called upon to design and deliver higher level content to students in order to prepare them for college and careers that both require more advanced knowledge and skills than ever before.

But what is wrong with the current system? Why do we need this change in the first place? There are several reasons.

1. Because the current elementary certificate must cover kindergarten (or pre-K) through sixth grade, programs often lack critical elements at both ends of that continuum. They do not sufficiently prepare teachers to teach young learners with their wide range of developmental and language and literacy acquisition needs. And they do not offer enough academic content to meet the needs of today's fifth and sixth graders.
2. The marketplace of school district hiring decisions does not support either early childhood or middle level teachers. Why would a district hire a second grade teacher with an early childhood certificate who can teach in only three other grades when it could hire an elementary teacher who can teach in six (assuming the district does not offer pre-K, as most do not)? Why would a district hire a sixth grade teacher with a middle level certificate who can teach in only three other grades when it could hire an elementary teacher who can teach in six or a secondary teacher who can teach in seven? In short, most districts do not hire teachers with early childhood or middle level certificates.
3. The "highly qualified teacher" requirements of No Child Left Behind require that middle level teachers have subject area expertise that most elementary teachers do not have, while the secondary teachers who have the subject matter background generally lack a deep understanding of the developmental needs of young adolescents.

The State Board's approach to this issue is a sensible one. It will result in more young children leaving third or fourth grade as good readers and good students, ready for the rest of their school experience. It will result in more middle level youngsters having the support they need to make the difficult transition through early adolescence without developing problems that lead so many today not to finish high school successfully.

Let me address some of the concerns that have been expressed about the proposed regulations.

1. Some argue that the proposed regulations will create serious impediments to school district hiring by reducing the grade span to which teachers can be assigned. It is clear that the change will be inconvenient when compared to the extraordinary flexibility granted by current regulations. That is why PPC strongly supported the provision in these proposed regulations permitting the Secretary of Education to grant both specific and general exceptions when they are justified by actual marketplace conditions. Actually, it was PPC at the earliest State Board Roundtables that suggested this approach rather than allowing the exception to become the rule. But in the absence of data clearly demonstrating some cataclysmic result, we are convinced that the benefit to children of having their teachers more appropriately prepared to meet their learning needs should trump a potential inconvenience for school administrators.

2. Some argue that the proposal gives universities too little time to adjust their programs. That is why PPC supported the delay in implementing these provisions until 2012 and now supports the delay to 2013.
3. Some argue that the end result of these changes is that teachers will need to have dual certification or will need more than 120 hours to graduate. Many teachers today are graduating with dual certificates because they know that makes them both better prepared and more marketable. Somehow they and their universities have figured out how to do this. And the 120-hour guideline of State Board regulations and the 120-hour requirement of State System policy do not apply to dual certificates.
4. Some argue that the proposed grade realignment will make it difficult for Pennsylvania graduates to find teaching jobs in other states. Important as it may be to prepare some of our graduates (including students from other states) to work outside Pennsylvania when they graduate, assuring that Pennsylvania's children have the best prepared teachers possible has to be a higher priority of state policymakers. This argument also fails to recognize that many other states are moving in the same direction our State Board has proposed.

There is one other proposed change for which PPC expresses its support. We know that today's classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. Almost every year, there are more children with special education needs and more children who are just learning to speak English. They are not just in our cities. They are not just in special schools or classes. They are in all of our communities, in all of our children's classrooms. The Board has proposed to increase the attention to teaching diverse learners in both the preservice preparation programs and in Act 48 professional development. Both are needed and should be strongly supported.

The Governor's Commission on Training America's Teachers asked new teachers, veteran teachers, and superintendents last year about the qualities of recently hired teachers. Superintendents were most dissatisfied about their ability to "provide appropriate instruction for students with differing abilities;" 38 percent said new teachers were not well prepared or not at all prepared to do so, as did 37 percent of veteran teachers, and 32 percent of teachers in their first three years in the classroom. Interestingly, none of the education deans and department chairs reported that this was a problem. It is. It must be dealt with unless we are willing to write off a lot of our kids. PPC trusts we are not, and applauds the State Board for addressing this issue.

We hope that IRRC will approve the State Board of Education's proposed Chapter 49-2 regulations at its meeting on August 16. Thank you.