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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

To Whom it May Concern:

I'm attaching, for the record, remarks that I delivered on behalf of Mayor Michael Nutter in support of the Keystone Exams. These comments continue to reflect the Mayor's commitment to these assessments, with the goal of improving educational outcomes for students in Philadelphia and across the Commonwealth. Thank you.

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Testimony of Dr. Lori Shorr, Chief Education Officer to Mayor Nutter
State Board of Education Hearing on Graduation Competency Assessments
March 13, 2009

Good morning, my name is Dr. Lori Shorr, and I'm the Chief Education Officer for Mayor Michael Nutter of Philadelphia. Let me first begin by saying thank you to the State Board, for providing me the opportunity to discuss the adoption of Graduation Competency Assessments in Pennsylvania.

The importance of the Graduation Competency Assessments to the educational future of Philadelphia cannot be understated. In Philadelphia we face two major educational challenges that are closely tied to GCAs. The first challenge is our troubling low high school graduation rate. Currently only about 58% of high school students graduate within four years. And while we are proud that this rate has increased steadily over the past 8 years, we still clearly have a ways to go.

Another challenge we face is the low academic performance of the young people who do persist through high school. According to last year's PSSA statistics, only 33% of 11th grade students perform at a proficient or advanced level on the math test, and only 37% of students are proficient or advanced in reading. These statistics tell us even though many of our students do persist through high school, far too many graduate without full mastery of the state standards and are not prepared for the postsecondary world of college and careers.

This low level of educational achievement and attainment is carried into our city's adult population. Currently, approximately 2/3 of Philadelphians lack functional literacy. And only about 22% of Philadelphians hold a baccalaureate degree. These statistics translate into unique challenges for our city's adults, and our city as a whole. Adults with low educational levels are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be dependent on social services, and are less able to earn a living wage. And as a city, it is more difficult for us attract world-class businesses when we lack the strong workforce needed to fill the jobs that they would bring.

Graduation Competency Assessments would help us better target assistance to the students who are lagging behind in high school before they graduate and are no longer attached to our educational systems. Too often we hear about young people who graduate high school and aim to attend college, but face enormous challenges when working toward this goal. One unfortunate example of this problem is the high school graduate who graduated as the valedictorian of his Philadelphia public school, only to enter college having to take a full courseload of remedial courses. We must do more to ensure that our students leave high school ready for the rigors of postsecondary learning. We're doing our students and our communities a disservice if we do not.

Graduation Competency Assessments will help schools better align their expectations for students with the demands of colleges and the workplace. And the exams can be

structured in ways to ensure that they are administered fairly and equitably. Students can have the opportunity to take the exam right after they finish the particular course, and again if they need to. Accelerated students can take the exams as early as they'd like and graduate from high school once they've mastered the state standards. Students who need extra time to graduate can progress through high school focused on mastering course content, instead of being focused on seat time in the classroom.

GCA's will help cities like Philadelphia ensure that no student leaves high school without the skills they need to thrive in their postsecondary lives. I strongly encourage our state leaders to support the adoption and implementation of the GCA's across the Commonwealth.

Thank you.