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October 19, 2009

*Independent Regulatory Review Commission  
333 Market Street  
Harrisburg, PA, 17101*

Attn: Chairman Arthur Coccodrilli

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY  
COMMISSION

Dear Chairman Coccodrilli:

Hard work and dedication by the State Board of Education, many legislators, and key education groups in Pennsylvania have led to a successful compromise proposal to establish a consistent, statewide assessment of high school graduates' readiness for college and the workforce. The current proposal is known as the Keystone Exams.

State Board of Education Chairman Joe Torsella announced in July a compromise on the politically contentious issue with, among others, the Republican and Democrat chairs of the Senate Education Committee, and the chairman of the House Education Committee. The Pennsylvania State Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union, dropped its opposition to the plan after the compromise was announced.

There is general agreement on the problem. Too many Pennsylvania high school graduates don't have the basic skills and knowledge, especially in math, reading, and writing, to compete in college or today's global economy.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education found one in three high school grads enrolling in State System of Higher Education universities or Pennsylvania community colleges needed remedial courses, and 40 percent of students not reaching grade level proficiency on 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA tests still graduated, with no record of having ever achieved proficiency. Penn State found only 18 of the state's 500 school districts have acceptable assessments to measure whether students are meeting the statewide requirements that are in place.

A recent statewide poll of businesses found only seven percent are very confident that Pennsylvania high school graduates have the knowledge and skills needed to enter the workforce. Two-thirds of business leaders see entry-level applicants who lack the skills for the position they are seeking, and almost half of businesses say they spend at least some time and

money giving new hires the skills and knowledge they should have learned in high school.

These are reasons 80 percent of business leaders support a set of statewide graduation requirements measured by rigorous end of course exams.

The Keystone Exams will achieve the goal of making sure our high school graduates have the knowledge and skills they need before they leave high school. The compromise struck after months of hard work by Mr. Torsella has addressed the reasonable concerns in the education community and earned the support of a wide array of leaders across the political spectrum.

The Keystone Exams as now proposed will:

- 1 Count for one-third of a student's final grade in a subject, enough to be consequential, but addressing the concern this was an "all-or-nothing" test
- 2 Require remediation in the subject area a student failed, with opportunities to re-take the test, BEFORE graduation
- 3 Allow use of state designed exams, locally designed exams approved by a state/local board, or alternative methods to prove proficiency in a subject, such as projects, to answer the "one size doesn't fit all" concern
- 4 Replace the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA exams, thus REDUCING testing time by 18 hours, or three instructional days, answering the excessive testing concern
- 5 Be given as end-of-course exams, rather than at a specified time, to best measure mastery of the subject
- 6 Allow students to test out of courses by proving proficiency earlier, giving even more local flexibility
- 7 Through delayed implementation and phase out of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA, this course of action will cost \$40 million less than the original proposal.

The State Board of Education has achieved a masterful political solution. The compromise proposal answers educators' reasonable concerns, yet it retains the essential goal of the Keystone Exams: high school graduates will have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and the work force when they leave high school.

We owe this to our businesses, which must have employees who can do the jobs available in our high-tech economy. We owe it to our communities, which must have companies that can compete globally.

Most of all, though, we owe it to our young people, to give them the best educational foundation possible to succeed in the years ahead.

As someone involved daily in the education of our young people, and who has worked in policy

development for the Pennsylvania Legislature, I wholeheartedly support this compromise proposal as a significant achievement in education policy for our state. It will lead to better lives for our young people and to a better workforce for our businesses.

Respectfully Submitted By:

*A. J. Whelan*

Arthur J. Whelan  
Senior Vice President