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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HARRISBURG

September 8, 2009

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Dr. Joan Duvall-Flynn, Education Committee Chair
NAACP
Pennsylvania State Conference
6661 Germantown Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19119

Dear Dr. Duvall-Flynn:

Thank you and the statewide education chairs of the NAACP for your letter dated August 20, 2009 letter to the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus (PLBC.) As a member of the NAACP and a student of history, I appreciate the diligent advocacy of the organization on behalf of underprivileged children.

As a member of the PLBC, Education Subcommittee Chairman of The House of Appropriations Committee, and a member of the House Education Committee, I have targeted my efforts towards educational initiatives that can close achievement gaps and ensure greater opportunity for children of color and those who are less fortunate. While Pennsylvania's students are making steady academic gains, there is still much to do. It is because of my dedication to our children that I am writing this response.

In respect to the organization's legacy and viewpoints on education as a strong advocate for equal opportunity, your letter to the PLBC raised various legitimate concerns. The regulations approved by the State Board of Education, while not perfect, respond to many of these concerns. For example:

- No student will be denied a high school diploma based on test scores alone.
- Stronger graduation requirements will be preceded by new, state-developed resources, including a voluntary model curriculum that will improve the equity of academic expectations statewide.
- Struggling students will receive extra support and all students will benefit from less testing.

Your letter argued, "The Keystone Exams system creates unfriendly regulations that will immobilize nearly 30% of Pennsylvania's youth; relegating them to lives of poverty, ending their hopes for further education, employment, and the opportunity to improve their circumstances." Yet business and post-secondary leaders, in overwhelming numbers, report that today's graduates are not prepared for career and college. In the midst of the most challenging economy of our lifetimes and international competition for good-paying jobs, our students must meet higher targets.

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I support stronger graduation requirements for a number of reasons:

- The proposed regulation allows students to meet graduation requirements in a number of ways, avoiding the pitfall of "one size fits all," high-stakes testing. By embracing choice for districts and students, the proposal strikes the right balance between our state's tradition of local control and the need for more consistent academic requirements.
- Under the proposal, students who struggle to meet these new requirements must be offered supplemental instructional support. *Opportunity to learn* is the cornerstone of any effective education reform, and I will continue my fight for the funding levels that will ensure this protection for every student.
- In 2012-13, three Keystone Exams will replace the 11th grade PSSA and 12th grade retest. Students will take these assessments in their regular classes, preserving 18 hours of instructional time every school year (the equivalent of three school days). This approach will result in fairer assessment for students and less "teaching to the test" – critical strategies in closing the achievement gap.

My position is not that graduation requirements are a cure-all for complex and systemic education challenges; however, it is a positive step-one that nearly 25 states have already taken. I believe that our current system lacks the ability to meet the needs of all of our children due to disparities, low expectations and the faulty assumption that our children will not be able to achieve at high levels.

Doing nothing or fighting against an attempt to raise the expectations, rigor and support for our children is a gamble I am unwilling to take.

I support this attempt to further raise the bar for our students. It is not a silver bullet solution to all of the problems of our educational system, but it is a compromise that I can support in good faith.

Sincerely,



Rep. Jake Wheatley, Jr.

CC: Governor Edward G. Rendell
Secretary Gerald Zahorchak
Speaker Keith McCall
Representative Todd Eachus, The Majority Leader
Rep. Ron Waters, PLBC Chairman
All House Members
Secretary Colleen Kopp, Governor's Office of Legislative Affairs
J. Whyatt Mondesire, President, NAACP Statewide Conference