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June 4, 2008

Independent Regulatory Review Commission  
333 Market Street  
14<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Harrisburg, PA 17101

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY  
REVIEW COMMISSION

2008 JUN -9 AM 10:01

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Dear Commission:

Ten of the 15 school districts in Beaver County have come together and created the attached position paper on the State Board of Education's proposal (IRRC No. 2696/Regulation No. 6-312) to institute graduation competency assessments. While the county's position does not completely reject the concept of graduation competency assessments, we do qualify our support. In particular, our position paper identifies a prerequisite need to realign core educational practices and beliefs in our commonwealth with the State's Standard Aligned System prior to the adoption of any graduation competency assessments proposal.

Representatives from our group are eager to enter into a constructive dialogue with you, members of the State Board and PDE officials to determine how to increase the probability for all students to become adequately prepared for post secondary education and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Sincerely,

Ronald R. Sofo, Ph.D.  
Superintendent

RRS/smd

Attachment

APRIL 24, 2008

**TESTIMONY TO PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE AND SENATE ON THE  
GRADUATION COMPETENCY ASSESSMENTS,  
INCLUDING THE EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

**PRESENTED ON BEHALF OF THE  
SUPERINTENDENTS OF BEAVER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA  
APRIL 2008**

The following testimony is offered on behalf of 10 of the 15 school districts in Beaver County and the Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit to help inform Harrisburg public education policy makers on the important topic of the state Board of Education's preliminary adoption of high school Graduation Competency Assessments.

**GRADUATION COMPETENCY ASSESSMENTS AND REDUCING THE  
ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

Secretary Zahorchak, in his letter dated February 12, 2008, to Pennsylvania school districts, stated that the state Board of Education "took a positive step toward ensuring the readiness of Pennsylvania's high school graduates by giving preliminary approval to regulations that would bolster our graduation standards". He further states in the letter that "the goal behind these new graduation requirements is straightforward. We want to ensure that a diploma has meaningful, substantive value. We want to give graduates the assurance they have what they need to succeed." While we support the goals of the state Board of Education and Secretary, we believe the addition of new graduation competency assessments for all high school students at this time will take us further away from our professed goal of true student academic success.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has been working vigorously to create a standards aligned system of academic assessments, curriculum standards and instructional strategies. More core work needs to be done and adopted by all Pennsylvania school districts to ensure the highest probability for all students to be successful on the proposed new graduation competency assessments.

We need to look deeply into the core of our long held beliefs and values concerning the purpose and function of public K-12 education. Some of these beliefs and associated practices must change to create a reinvented system of K-12 education where success is the only option for all students, **if this goal is what we actually desire for each and every one of our students**. For example, it is impractical to believe that we could modify the current automobile, a capable form of transportation, to take all of our youth to the moon. It is the same type of errant thinking to expect our current K-12 system of public education to achieve the professed goals of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

**The current American public education system is not broken! It is simply not the most appropriate system, based upon certain outdated beliefs and associated practices, for the new mission of all students to reach high levels of academic achievement and application in the real, unpredictable world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

We need to create a system of K-12 public education that is based upon: increasing all students' willingness to bring their best effort to the learning process on a daily basis; a system that balances the value of learning with student performance; and a system with educational practices that are aligned and consistent with a mastery model of learning. We propose a new 21<sup>st</sup> century compact for student success. The components of this compact/promise include specific recommendations for state policy makers as follows:

## **FOR POLICY MAKERS & FUNDERS**

We pledge to:

- Create and maintain a funding system for public education that is adequate, equitable, accountable, efficient, and predictable to maximize all students' progress in achieving rigorous and relevant 21<sup>st</sup> century academic standards and skills.
- Work collaboratively with local school boards, state legislators and officials, along with the federal government, to determine each partner's equitable share of the cost, based on local measures of wealth, to adequately fund all students to high levels of academic achievement that includes, but not limited to, youth in poverty, learning disabled, gifted and English as second language learners.
- Create and/or modify current educational policies and practices that will insure a high probability that both students and their teachers will experience continuous success in the classroom. Some existing educational policies and practices have the effect to weed and sort students based upon their current performance, which discourages many students from giving their best effort to learn challenging knowledge and skills.

- Encourage the formation and operation of positive school / community / business partnerships that contribute to: the rigor and relevance of student learning and teacher instruction; assist students and their families to positively address physical, social and emotional needs that must be met to allow students to give their continuous best effort in learning; and connect students to post secondary, career oriented programs of study.
- Create and fund a system of academic accountability that allows for student diversity and choice.
- Support educators with the development of multiple measures of student knowledge and skills for students to demonstrate achievement of rigorous and relevant 21<sup>st</sup> century academic standards and skills. If the state Graduation Competency Assessments are to be implemented, we recommend the following to insure the maximum probability of all students' success:
  - A. Eliminate all high school PSSA testing, as redundant, resource consuming, and taking time away from the goal of true mastery learning sought by the Graduation Competency Assessments initiative.
  - B. Insure that these new tests are truly CRITERIA REFERENCED and are not based on the construction of traditional standardized achievement tests.
  - C. Insure that these new tests are highly aligned to school based curricula with substantial input from high school teachers, business, the trades and post secondary institutions to insure appropriate levels of rigor and relevance applicable to **all** students regardless of their post high school career/education plans.
  - D. Adopt a mastery model of education by the state Board of Education that encourages the implementation of mastery aligned educational practices at the local level including, but not limited to:
    - **The establishment of grading systems, such as "A, B, C, Not Yet". (Mastery Learning)**
    - **The keeping of students with their teachers over multiple years. (Looping: two years or more)**
    - **The infusion of 21<sup>st</sup> century technology into the learning process and curriculum to support project/problem based student learning.**
    - **The creation of continuous, high quality, job embedded teacher professional development that is data driven and based upon teachers' needs (e.g., lesson study, instructional coaches).**
    - **High quality pre-kindergarten; full-day kindergarten and class size reduction with appropriate instructional strategies that individualize instruction (kindergarten thru grade 3).**
    - **Adoption of the 4Rs instruction model (Rigor, Relevance, Relationships and Reflection).**
  - E. Provide adequate funding and time for the appropriate development and scoring of these new exams.

- Create opportunities for all students to select the type of diploma they earn during high school, based upon their chosen post secondary goals identified in their individual learning plan. This plan needs to be initiated no later than the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

We offer these recommendations as a basis for our districts to provide the best possible education for all students in partnership with the state so they can be adequately prepared for the ever changing 21<sup>st</sup> century work force and economy.