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717-720-4000 | www.passhe.eduINDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

June 11, 2008

Mr. Jim Buckheit
Executive Director
State Board of Education
333 Market Street, 1st Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Dear Mr. Buckheit:

On behalf of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), I write in support of the proposed changes to Chapter 4, *Academic Standards and Assessment*, as published in the *Pennsylvania Bulletin* on May 17, 2008. These changes—strengthening high school graduation requirements—are designed to set clear expectations for students, parents, teachers and administrators that will ensure students are on a path to succeed in their career or college plans after graduation.

Why is PASSHE interested in this issue? All too often, students with high school diplomas moving to the next phase of their lives find they are not prepared for jobs or to succeed in college. The fourteen PASSHE Universities enroll more than 110,000 students, somewhat less than 100,000 of them at the undergraduate level. Ninety percent of PASSHE students are Pennsylvania residents. More Pennsylvania high school graduates begin their college careers at PASSHE Universities than at any other postsecondary education provider in Pennsylvania.

More than 4,000 incoming PASSHE students each year—about 22% of all first-time freshmen—learn that despite having received very good grades throughout their school years, they must start their college careers with remedial courses in one or more areas, e.g., mathematics, reading or writing. There is nothing more disheartening to these thousands of students (and their parents) than to learn that they need remediation upon entry to college. More troubling, however, is that for all too many of these students, this is just the first domino to fall. Not as well-prepared as their peers in courses they take in their freshmen year, their grades suffer and they drop courses, completing their first year with fewer credits and lower grades. Fewer remedial students return for a second year of college. Those who do return take longer to graduate or fail to graduate, despite extensive academic and student support programs designed to put them on track to success. National studies report that only 17 percent of college students who take just one remedial reading course complete their bachelor's degree within eight years of high school completion.

Will achieving proficiency on PSSA and related assessments help students succeed? Studies conducted three years ago demonstrate that PSSA scores correlate highly to our placement exams. That is, students who score proficient or better on the PSSA were placed in college-level courses. Conversely, students who score at the basic- and below-basic levels were placed in remedial courses. To put it simply, we know that when a student fails to achieve proficiency, remedial work in college is a strong likelihood. Further, to serve our prospective students better, clearer comparable information about students' mastery of the high school curriculum will help PASSHE Universities and colleges, universities and community colleges across the Commonwealth make more informed

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decisions about admissions and placement. In so doing, students' chances for success and timely graduation from college will improve markedly.

Why change the requirements of Chapter 4 now? When Chapter 4 was established initially, I served as the Executive Director of the State Board of Education and helped to shepherd it through the regulatory review process to final adoption. A major point of concern was raised by members of the General Assembly in the final steps in the process: *How could we be certain, they asked, that school districts would align locally developed assessments with the academic standards and the PSSA to ensure that all students would demonstrate similar levels of proficiency? Would they be as rigorous?* At the time, we believed that school districts would take the steps to ensure that students would be graduating with proficiency. We were wrong. In 2006 alone, 57,000 students graduated not because they achieved proficiency on the PSSA, but because of local assessments. The performance gap—the difference between those students attaining proficient or better on the PSSA and those deemed proficient by local assessment—is huge, and proves that schools have not aligned local assessments with the academic standards and the PSSA in a meaningful way. If that had occurred, changes to Chapter 4 would not be needed.

The mixed message that this sends about expectations for what high school graduates should know and are able to do is not fair to them, their parents or their teachers. Improving student success begins with clear expectations for performance that can drive curricula, focus teacher professional development, identify needs for student support and create the data needed for accountability.

How will universities use information from assessments to better serve students? Since Chancellor Judy Hample co-chaired the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success, we have discussed the need for consistent rigor in high school diplomas with PASSHE University presidents. They were briefed more extensively in February 2008, and out of that discussion developed a joint statement (Attachment A). They believe strongly that the variance in the knowledge and skills students possess upon graduating high school makes it difficult to best match students and Universities, and to place them in appropriate courses to ensure a successful transition to college. Weighing heavily on their minds is the continuing need for large-scale remediation programs for recent high school graduates.

In closing, the State Board of Education should be applauded for its effort to establish clear expectations for students while permitting considerable flexibility in the ways that proficiency can be demonstrated. By ensuring greater rigor in high school and stronger integrity in the high school diploma, these changes provide considerable flexibility for schools in enabling their students to demonstrate their proficiency. In this design, we can be certain that our educational system from pre-K through college is focused on students and their success as they enter college or careers.

Sincerely,



Peter H. Garland, Ph.D.
Executive Vice Chancellor

Enclosure

Attachment A**Statement on Proposed Changes to Chapter 4, *Academic Standards and Assessment***

We support the renewed efforts of the State Board of Education to ensure that all Pennsylvania public high school graduates demonstrate proficiency in the academic standards necessary for them to succeed in college and career. An essential part of the proposal—to require students to take a series of Graduation Competency Assessments in selected disciplines—will provide important information about student achievement useful to the admission and placement process for incoming students to PASSHE Universities.

To be certain that *students* are provided the instruction necessary for success, timely and effective remediation and other instructional interventions must be provided to students at any grade level who do not demonstrate proficiency. Furthermore, to be certain that *schools* are provided the resources necessary for student success, we join with the Board and other interested parties in calling for adequate and equitable financing of the Commonwealth's public education system.

PASSHE University Presidents
March 2008

