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COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA 17126-0333

SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

June 16, 2008

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

JUN 23 AM 10:24

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Mr. James Buckheit
Executive Director
State Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Dear Mr. Buckheit:

Congratulations on involving hundreds of Pennsylvanians in the Public Comment period for proposed changes to Chapter 4. I know the comments shared by advocates on both sides of this issue will be a valuable resource to the members of the State Board, the commissioners and staff of the Independent Regulatory Review Commission (IRRC), and the members of the General Assembly.

I am enclosing additional documents and ask that these be communicated to IRRC and the House and Senate education committees. The attached editorials, legislative testimony, and letters underscore the need for stronger graduation requirements that will signify readiness for college and career.

Please contact me with any questions or concerns, and let me know if there is anything I or my staff can do to support the State Board's plans.

Sincerely,

Gerald L. Zahorchak, D.Ed.

Enclosures

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Testimony of Daniel W. Fogarty
Co-Chair, Governor's Commission on College and Career Success

2008 JUN 23 AM 11:42

Senate Education Committee
May 14, 2008

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Good morning, Senator Rhoades, Senator Musto, and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to offer comments on the proposed changes to the regulations on Pennsylvania's high school graduation requirements.

My comments on these proposed changes will be from two perspectives: first, from my professional experience as a human resources manager for a number of successful Pennsylvania businesses; and second, as the former co-chair of the Commission on College and Career Success.

During my nearly 20 years in business, it has been painfully obvious that we cannot rely on a Pennsylvania high school diploma as certification that an applicant is academically prepared to meet our entry-level employment requirements. As a human resources professional, I need to know that the high school graduate whose application is on my desk grasps the core content needed to succeed in the world of work. And I know that college admissions offices grapple with the same issues with regard to success in college.

We need to ensure that every Pennsylvanian awarded a high school diploma has a real opportunity for success. Unfortunately, recent PSSA results suggest that only slightly more than half of our recent high school graduates are academically prepared for college and work.

What future lies ahead for the 57,000 Pennsylvanians who graduate each year unprepared for the world that awaits them? Sadly, many will find themselves retaking and paying for high school courses in college that do not count towards graduation. Others may be forced to accept lower-paying jobs with few benefits or growth opportunities. Either of these outcomes reflects a failure of our current system.

At the same time, there is an injustice that our current system visits upon the high school graduate who did achieve proficiency, since he or she was awarded a diploma that has been devalued in the eyes of potential employers and post-secondary institutions.

I was honored to be asked to serve as co-chair of the Commission on College and Career Success. Over the course of 18 months, we focused on researching solutions and developing twelve interdependent recommendations that make up the Commission's final report. In reviewing the proposed regulations, I am strongly encouraged that they reflect many of our recommended solutions.

Testifying before the State Board in January, I endorsed the proposed regulatory changes on providing supports to students and teachers as we develop a consistent, substantive diploma. The State Board recognizes the importance of providing the necessary tools to students and teachers through a model curriculum aligned to the standards; tutoring and additional instructional time for students; and professional development for teachers. These proposed changes are consistent with the Commission's recommendations—and will assist our children to gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in high school and beyond.

I commend the State Board for two crucial themes found in the proposed regulations:

1. High school students will be provided multiple options to demonstrate proficiency on the core knowledge and skills they will need for college and career success; and
2. The critical importance of validating these multiple avenues of demonstrating proficiency to ensure a consistent minimum standard across the Commonwealth.

I fully support the establishment of meaningful high school graduation requirements and the creation of Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) as one way for students to show they have met the standards, which was the Commission's first recommendation. The GCAs are not additional tests for students—they instead may replace the final exams students should be taking at the end of their courses in the subject areas of English, math, science, and social studies. Providing our students the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency immediately after taking a course or mastering the content is, quite honestly, the sensible thing to do—test them on a subject when they learn about the subject.

The proposed regulations also recognize that certain tests already in place could serve as reliable evidence of demonstrated proficiency for students. I am pleased that the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs are included among these exams, since, as with the PSSAs, these tests are valid predictors of success.

Furthermore, the language on local assessments recognizes the importance of the validation process for district-developed tests to ensure that the knowledge being taught to all of Pennsylvania's students in the core content areas is aligned to state standards. As a human resource professional, potential employees come to me with diplomas from all over the Commonwealth. I cannot possibly have first-hand knowledge of each high school they attended. That is why the high school diploma must signify a common level of mastery in the core academic subjects.

We should also remember that 26 other states – which together educate three-quarters of the nation's students – have either already implemented graduation requirements or have committed to doing so. We need to ensure that Pennsylvania students are not put at a competitive disadvantage to their national peers.

There are some who will oppose these changes who may be afraid of change or of greater accountability. However, in my view, the status quo is unacceptable. These proposed regulatory changes represent a major opportunity to restore meaning to high school diplomas in Pennsylvania and ensure that the graduates who receive these diplomas are academically well-prepared for the promising future that awaits.

Thank you.

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Testimony Concerning 2008 JUN 23 AM 11: 44
Proposed High School Graduation requirements

Presented by Ronald Cowell INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION
President, The Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC)

To the Pennsylvania State Board of Education
Wednesday, January 9, 2008

Good afternoon, Chairman Girton and members of the State Board of Education.

I am Ron Cowell, President of the Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC). Thank you for the opportunity to offer to the State Board these remarks concerning proposed high school graduation requirements.

The Education Policy and Leadership Center is an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organization based here in Harrisburg and active throughout Pennsylvania. Our mission is to improve the development, implementation and effectiveness of state-level education policies. Our work includes serving as a resource to state policymakers and others who are involved with the development or implementation of state education policy.

Pennsylvanians can be proud of the work of the State Board that has moved Pennsylvania from an old-fashion system of expectations for elementary and secondary students based on course labels and seat time to a modern system that articulates our expectations in terms of student proficiencies relative to standards established for a broad set of academic subjects. In sync with the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Pennsylvania state policy now holds public schools accountable for student success relative to these academic standards.

Currently, in order to graduate from high school, there is a state requirement for each student to complete a culminating project and also the opportunity for each school district to establish additional local graduation requirements beyond state

requirements. For several years now, state policy has provided that students in order to graduate from high school must demonstrate proficiency on the state assessment (PSSA) linked to these academic standards or on local assessments aligned with these standards. This assessment requirement pertaining to the PSSA or a local alternative is what current state law provides to assure some common denominator for the value of the high school diploma across 501 school districts. But there is no requirement for uniformity among the local alternative assessments, no state monitoring, no state review or approval. We do know that in each year since 2004, tens of thousands of high school seniors have failed to demonstrate proficiency on the PSSA, but have graduated because they apparently were able to demonstrate proficiency on alternative local assessments.

As the Board prepares to move forward with a formal proposal on today's subject of graduation requirements, I want to encourage the State Board and the rest of us to consider a series of questions that can help to frame the ensuing discussion.

First, I believe we must begin by asking a fundamental question, the answer to which will decide how the discussion proceeds. The question is: Should state policy ensure that every high school diploma from every school district in Pennsylvania represent a certain level of academic accomplishment on the part of the student who receives the diploma?

If the answer is in the negative, we should pack up and go back each to our bunker back home.

But I believe the answer is "Yes". I believe an affirmative answer to this fundamental question is in the best interest first and foremost of every student who will live with the consequences of our answer and who likely will bear the burden of these decisions for the rest of his or her life. I believe it is reasonable and necessary in the 21st Century that every student, her parents, employers, and post-secondary education officials should be able to have some assurance about

the value of the high school diploma and what it represents in terms of readiness to succeed after high school.

Because the future consequences for the graduating student are so great, I believe that our public policy goal should be to make every reasonable effort to ensure an agreed-to minimum level of academic proficiency for each student who earns a high school diploma.

Second, the next policy question is: What are the academic standards and what is the agreed-to level of proficiency? Do we have the right academic standards? Do we have a definition of proficient that reflects an appropriate measure of both rigor and fairness? The State Board has just completed a review of the standards. Are they too tough? Are they not relevant? That does not seem to be the consensus. On the definition of proficient, are the cut scores too demanding or too unrealistic? Or do they reflect reasonable expectations relative to what students will likely need as lifelong learners, workers, and citizens? If the answer is the latter, then we can move on.

Third, we must go to the assessment methods. Are the assessment instruments proposed for use a fair tool to use to gauge student proficiency? If the PSSA is not aligned with the agreed-to standards, it needs to be fixed. If for any reason reliance solely on PSSA assessment is unfair or otherwise insufficient, we must consider what alternative(s) should be available?

If we need alternatives to the PSSA as a means for some students to demonstrate proficiency relative to state academic standards, what viable alternatives should be available? The current law provides for each of 501 school districts to devise an alternative or alternatives, with no uniformity among districts, no monitoring by the State Board or other state agency, no real assurance of rigor, relevance or integrity embedded in the alternative(s). It seems to me that this system of alternative assessment does not serve the public policy goal to make every

reasonable effort to ensure an agreed-to minimum level of academic proficiency for each student who earns a high school diploma.

So what are better alternatives? That is the matter specifically addressed by the Board's pending proposal, as I understand it.

It seems to me that the Graduation Competency Assessments (GSA's) aligned with state standards offer one reasonable alternative. The idea of GCA's is intended to assure a uniform and appropriately rigorous and relevant assessment alternative be available to all students. It seems to me that it would make good sense for state law to mandate that the Commonwealth bear the cost of developing these alternative assessments, that a student's right to use these alternative tests be assured, and that a district be allowed to use these assessments for other purposes such as a routine end-of-course assessment in lieu of district assessments already in use.

I believe that it also is necessary for state lawmakers to assure that the Pennsylvania Department of Education has the responsibility and resources necessary to provide to schools and educators effective model curricula and professional development opportunities linked to the state's academic standards.

Some observers probably would stop at this point, but in Pennsylvania it probably is politically necessary to go another step. It probably will be useful to also provide for an additional alternate assessment in the form of a locally developed assessment to demonstrate student proficiency to be used in one or more districts as an alternative to both the PSSA and the GCA's.

If one does agree with the previously stated public policy goal to make every reasonable effort to ensure an agreed-to minimum level of academic proficiency for each student who earns a high school diploma, then I believe it also will be reasonable for the State Board to provide a means to ensure the rigor, alignment to state standards, and integrity for this additional alternative assessment. It

seems to me that it would make good sense to provide for some form of professional review and approval for these alternative local assessments if they are to be relied upon to demonstrate achievement of the agreed-to minimum level of academic proficiency.

Of course, there will be questions about who should pay for these local alternative assessments. My personal opinion is that as a state taxpayer I shouldn't have to pay for costs incurred because someone else's school district wants to develop yet another assessment alternative. But I also believe that as a state taxpayer I have an interest in and will pay for a state-mandated and state-directed process to review and validate these alternative assessments. And I also think it would make sense to allow these local alternative assessments to be developed jointly and then used by two or more districts, perhaps even with the facilitation of an intermediate unit.

Do we stop here? Probably not. There remains the question whether this kind of system described thus far provides enough varied but legitimate means for any student to earn a high school diploma by demonstrating the accomplishment of expected academic proficiencies. If there are circumstances under which one or more students is not likely to be able to demonstrate their actual academic proficiency by these varied means, observers need to be specific about what additional alternative valid assessment methods or other accommodations should be made available to such a student.

Also, if there is a group of students for whom the Commonwealth's academic standards or proficiency expectations cannot be fairly applied, observers need to make a compelling argument for the exemption of such students and together we must build an agreement that in some special circumstances, we either abandon our policy goal for the high school diploma to have a common value for all, or we find another means to recognize achievement by such students. These are very important challenges, but they do not constitute impenetrable obstacles.

Finally, the fair implementation of the system that I have described is dependent upon every student in every school district having a real opportunity to succeed. In Pennsylvania, currently, this fair implementation is not possible.

I believe that it should be a fundamental right of every student to have a meaningful opportunity to succeed in this system of state policies for academic standards, assessments, and accountability, including policy intended to ensure an agreed-to minimum level of academic proficiency for each student who earns a high school diploma.

Pennsylvania currently has a very unequal and unfair system of educational opportunity. Access to quality education in Pennsylvania is too often a function of where one lives rather than a fundamental right assured for all.

I believe there is an obligation on the part of the SBE to be a forceful advocate for Pennsylvania's students. I believe you are promoting this discussion about high school graduation requirements because you believe it is in the best interest of students. That interest of students is paramount and it is imperative that it be recognized and honored by all of us.

It is equally imperative that we recognize and honor the right that every student must have to be provided the real opportunity to accomplish the academic proficiencies that would be prioritized by a mandated common statewide graduation requirement.

I implore you to use whatever words you can include in your proposal, and in whatever words you can individually and collectively utter as community and state policy leaders, to state your understanding and conviction that this discussion about graduation requirements cannot culminate without state policymakers addressing the issue of resources and educational opportunity.

Providing technology in some classrooms is not enough. Providing early education to some children is not sufficient. Assuring a little tutoring in the 10th grade will not compensate for fifteen years of academic neglect. Requiring a school district or anyone else to provide supplemental instruction "to assist the student to attain proficiency" does not morally or practically compensate a student who has been deprived of real education for a decade or longer. In short, if the state requirements for graduation are to be common, there must also be common opportunity for every student to succeed.

As you move forward with a proposal concerning high school graduation requirements, a fiscal note will be required. Some analysts will be tempted to simply calculate the cost of developing and administering tests. The real fiscal note should look something like the costing out study that was recently completed at your direction. The implications of such a fiscal note would require a major overhaul of how we fund public education in Pennsylvania and the level of state investment in public education. That honest assessment of cost and serious attention to these funding issues is imperative if anyone seriously intends to implement and sustain policies that assure value to the high school diploma throughout the Commonwealth.

If you will move forward with a proposal for a common graduation requirement, you must also give voice in this Capitol and across the Commonwealth to the needs of Pennsylvania's children to have a fair chance to succeed. If the Governor and General Assembly fail to heed this message, you cannot succeed in accomplishing the policy goal of uniform high school diploma while also protecting and serving the interests of all of Pennsylvania's children.

Thank you.

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Testimony of Diane Castelbuono
Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education
PA Department of Education

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2008 JUN 23 AM 11:42

Senate Education Committee
May 14, 2008

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Chairman Rhoades, Chairman Musto, honorable committee members—good morning and thank you for organizing today's discussion. I'm Diane Castelbuono, Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, and I'm pleased to be here with Jim Barker and Dan Fogarty to discuss proposed changes to Chapter 4 high school graduation requirements.

Over the last six years, the Administration and the General Assembly have worked closely together to make smart investments in public education. Thanks to your leadership, we have directed an additional \$2.4 billion to our public schools to expand the availability of early childhood education, strengthen teacher training and professional development, and support innovative programming like Classrooms for the Future. These investments are paying off: according to the latest "Quality Counts" report from *Education Week*, Pennsylvania ranks 10th in the nation in education performance and policy, and we are one of only nine states that have made significant gains in elementary reading and math on NAEP, the nation's report card.

We should be proud of these accomplishments, but any pause for celebration would undercut our progress and harm students as they prepare to compete in a challenging global economy. Ten years ago, 40% of U.S. jobs were unskilled; today, that number has shrunk to 24% and falling. If Pennsylvania hopes to compete in a high-skill economy, we must provide every student with the academic foundation needed to transition to postsecondary education or directly to the high-skills workplace. Unfortunately, too few students are on this trajectory.

Every year, tens of thousands of students across the commonwealth graduate without achieving a score of proficient or advanced on the 11th grade PSSA. The gap between student performance on the state assessment and local graduation rates is not unique to a particular group of students, or to a single corner of the commonwealth—in 2006, 93% of the state's school districts graduated 20% more students than scored proficient on the 11th grade PSSA. While no standardized test is a perfect measure, these data are concerning because PSSA performance is highly predictive of postsecondary success.

It's not surprising, then, that so many of our students struggle mightily in college. At our state universities and community colleges, thousands of recent high school graduates are enrolled in costly remedial coursework that should have been mastered in high school. While it may be possible for small numbers of students to succeed in college without meeting state standards, the overall picture is stark – significant numbers

of high school students get a check engine light with their 11th grade PSSA scores, and then come to a screeching halt in the midst of their postsecondary plans.

Let me be very clear—we do not want to deny a single high school diploma as a result of this proposal. Just the opposite, our goal is for every student to earn a diploma and for that diploma to have meaning in the real world.

We are also very sensitive to concerns about the amount of testing in students' lives. The newest option in the graduation requirement menu – Graduation Competency Assessments, or GCAs – can take the place of final exams, meaning that students do not have to take more tests under this proposal. Creating standardized final exams is good for students and for educators; they ensure that a student who takes Biology or Algebra I or U.S. History in one school district has access to the same core common content as a student who takes the same course somewhere else – while at the same time placing no limits on schools' ability to go above and beyond.

By adopting meaningful high school graduation requirements, we are asking for fundamental changes in our schools in order to better serve students. If the end result is for every student to demonstrate strong skills in English, math, science and social studies, then we need to ask ourselves: what changes in instruction and supports will be necessary?

The proposed changes to Chapter 4 will provide students with additional resources and time to demonstrate proficiency in the core content areas that undergird postsecondary success. Beginning in the 2013-14 school year, students will be able to demonstrate that they have knowledge in these core subject areas in a variety of ways:

- Scoring proficient or advanced on the PSSA; OR
- Passing a local assessment independently validated as aligned with state standards; OR
- Passing an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exam; OR
- Passing six end-of-course GCAs. A total of 10 GCAs will be developed, all at no cost to school districts.

From an educational perspective, there are clear advantages associated with the end-of-course assessment model. First, teachers and students will receive timely feedback that can inform instructional decisions and target instruction to student needs. Students will take GCAs immediately after covering the material, so the assessment is as close to the instruction as possible. In addition, the format of the GCAs—short, two-hour assessments, administered over a span of years and offering a replacement to final exams—responds to the very real concern that testing has overwhelmed the school year. This model of testing also permits far more in-depth assessment than can be accommodated by a single, comprehensive exam such as the PSSA. Students who do not pass the first time they take a test will receive extra help and then have multiple opportunities to retake the GCA – turning the idea of “high stakes” on its head.

Public school teachers will be involved in all stages of developing the end-of-course exams – from screening test items, to establishing cut scores, to grading completed assessments. To ensure that teachers have the resources necessary to prepare their students for the exams, each new GCA will be preceded by a host of new resources.

This regulation wisely calls for the Commonwealth to provide school districts with additional supports as we prepare for the implementation of the graduation requirements in 2014. The voluntary model curriculum PDE will develop will provide a framework for districts to assist them in mapping a trajectory for students to meet state standards and will include additional resources, such as lesson plans, so that they may build upon this framework as they see best. Again, school districts and teachers will not be required to use the model curriculum.

Another resource that will be available to schools and teachers, at no cost to them, will be classroom-level diagnostic tools. These will be computerized diagnostic assessments designed to assist teachers – in real time – in determining the specific instructional needs of students. The tools will be available in grades 6 through 12 for the core subject areas.

The State Board initiated the regulatory process by unanimously voting for the proposed regulations. We know that there are many strong opinions about this proposal – from superintendents who have expressed their eager support, to stakeholders who have voiced their equally vehement opposition. The public comment period will begin on May 17th; the Department and the State Board look forward to hearing from the education field, as well as the employer and postsecondary communities, and being responsive to their feedback.

Thank you again for convening this morning's discussion. I'd be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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**Testimony of Matt Gandal,
Executive Vice President, Achieve, Inc.
to the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee
May 14, 2008**

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2008 JUN 11: 42

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Chairman Rhoades, Chairman Musto and members of the committee. My name is Matt Gandal, Executive Vice President of Achieve, Inc. Thank you for inviting me to testify today. During my testimony I want to provide a quick overview of Achieve, paint a picture of the policies we see other states adopting in areas you are discussing here today, and then specifically address some of the concerns that have been raised by members of this committee and the public about the proposed policies.

Achieve

Created by the nation's governors and business leaders in 1996, Achieve is a bi-partisan, non-profit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to ensure our young people are prepared for post-secondary education, work and life. To date, 33 states (including Pennsylvania), representing over 80% of America's K-12 students, are pursuing these education initiatives.

- **Standards** -- Nineteen states have aligned their high school standards with post-secondary expectations. Twenty-six states are in the process.
- **Graduation Requirements** -- Eighteen states and the District of Columbia require all students to complete a college and career ready course of study. Twelve states report plans to adopt similar requirements.
- **Assessments** -- Nine states administer college readiness tests to all high school students as part of their statewide assessment systems. Twenty three other states report plans to do so in the future.
- **P-20 Data Systems** -- Nine states report that they have a P-20 longitudinal data system that match K-12 data with post-secondary data. Thirty eight other states are developing P-20 data systems.
- **Accountability** -- Four states factor both a cohort graduation rate and the earning of a college- and career-ready diploma into their systems for evaluating high schools. Seven other states plan to move in this direction.

This work has been championed by democratic governors (Bredesen – TN, Richardson - NM), republican governors (Huckabee – R-AK, Taft – R-OH) , state legislative leaders on both sides of the aisle, state education chiefs, state boards of education, members of the business community, and reform minded education leaders.

I know my time is limited so I want to turn my attention to the current work occurring in Pennsylvania and provide a national context for which it occurs.

The Expectations Gap

Never in our nation's history has the link between a strong academic preparation in high school and success in careers, college and life been clearer. College educators and employers agree that there is no longer a distinction between the academic skills required for college and for work, particularly reading, writing and mathematics.¹ What was once conceived of as "college preparation," is in truth, the needed preparation for all students, regardless of what they do after completing high school. Jobs that require at least some postsecondary education will make up more than 66% of new jobs created between 2000-2010. Those numbers are likely to increase significantly in the coming decades.

In most states, high school students can earn a high school diploma without being expected to gain the knowledge and skills that will ensure success after high school. We know this from having analyzed academic standards, assessments, and graduation requirements in a majority of the states. They are typically pegged at a much lower level than what college professors and employers say is necessary for students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers.

This expectation gap has real consequences for students. In a national poll of high school graduates, both students who went on to college and those who went straight to work reported significant gaps in their academic preparation. A majority would have taken more challenging courses if they could go back and do high school over again.

Nationwide, 28 percent of first-time college freshmen need remediation in mathematics, reading or writing; in community colleges the figures are closer to 40-50 percent. Postsecondary institutions in Pennsylvania report similar statistics. Nationally, higher education institutions, businesses and students themselves are spending upward of \$17 billion each year on remedial classes just so students can gain the knowledge and skills that they should have learned in high school.² Sadly, though, most students who take remedial courses in college will never earn a 2 or 4 year degree. Two thirds to three quarters will drop out of college without earning a credential.

Closing the Expectations Gap

The steps being proposed in the Chapter 4 regulations to develop and administer the Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA) and provide educators with appropriate tools and supports has the potential to close the expectations gap in Pennsylvania and ensure that all students graduate high school with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and careers. Right now the diploma means something very different from district to district across the state, and its value has been diminished. You have the opportunity to restore value to the diploma by giving it a more rigorous, consistent meaning across the state.

¹ Adelman et al., *Postsecondary Attainment, Attendance, Curriculum, and Performance: Selected Results From the NELS:88/2000 Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS)*, 2000, September 2003, Table 11. Carnevale and Desrochers, Educational Testing Service, *Connecting Education Standards and Employment: Course-Taking Patterns of Young Workers*, American Diploma Project: Workplace Study, 2002. ACT, *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work*, October 2004. ACT, *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?*, May 2006.

² Greene, *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991-2002*, Manhattan Institute, 2005.

As mentioned earlier, Pennsylvania is not alone in pursuing statewide graduation requirements aligned to college and career readiness. Over the past several years nearly twenty states have put more challenging requirements in place and more are expected to do so in the years ahead.

End of course exams, like the GCAs, are also becoming more popular in states. Currently, 17 states indicate that they plan to build end-of-course exams into their state testing systems. Because students take these exams immediately after taking the course, rather than at a set grade level, the results are often more useful to students and teachers.

Although assessments are an important part of this proposal, it is very important not to think of this as simply adding more tests. As Deputy Secretary Castelbuono mentioned, the state will work with Pennsylvania teachers to develop a voluntary model curriculum, diagnostic assessments, resources and materials, and professional development. These components are crucial to improving teaching and learning, and our experience in other states is that educators welcome them.

Dropout Rates

Nationwide, a third of students do not graduate from high school. In Pennsylvania that number is 22% - approximately 25,000 students each year. People are right to be concerned about high school dropout rates; they are alarmingly high, particularly in our inner cities. But dropout rates were a problem before states began raising expectations. States and school systems must raise standards, improve student achievement and increase graduation rates all at the same time. To accomplish this, higher standards must be accompanied by more intensive academic supports.

States have taken a number of critical steps to simultaneously raise academic standards and graduation rates. Examples include: measuring dropout and graduation rates accurately and honestly and including these indicators in the state accountability system so that schools have the incentives to pay attention to ensuring students stay in school and graduate; intervening aggressively in the relatively small number of "dropout factories" found in most states; and using early warning indicators of students at greatest risk of dropping out and targeting supports and interventions to them. The State Board's proposal reflects an understanding of the need to couple rigorous expectations with high-quality supports.

The solution to concerns about an increased dropout rate is not to lower expectations for students, but to identify policies, interventions and supports for those students most at risk for dropping out. I am happy to share more specific policies and interventions that states, districts and schools have put in place if you are interested.

Concluding Thoughts

In closing, there is one point I want to highlight -- It is incumbent upon policy leaders to ensure that our education systems are designed to prepare all our children for the expectations they will face upon graduation from high school. We

are doing our children no favors by lowering our expectations when we know what is required for their success.

I have no doubt that some school districts in Pennsylvania have high standards in place for their graduates. The question before state policymakers is whether you are comfortable with only some of your children being well prepared.

Thank you for your time today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have or to provide you with additional information or research.



Head Start / Early Head Start Of Fayette County

492 Coolspring Road, Uniontown, PA 15401

Phone: 724-430-4818 or 1-800-876-2138 Fax: 724-430-4827

January 3, 2008

State Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, Pa. 17126

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JAN 07 2008

PA. STATE BOARD
OF EDUCATION

2696

Dear Chairman Griton:

SERVICES:

I am writing to you to offer my support for a quality and rigorous education for all Pennsylvania students. I support the State Board of Education's efforts to establish statewide graduation requirements to ensure that all Pennsylvania's high school graduates are adequately prepared for life after high school. Student achievement is an extremely relevant factor in our country's economic future.

I believe it is our responsibility to guarantee that all students master the math, science, reading, writing and social studies skills they need to succeed. Those efforts should be recognized with a high school diploma that represents a level of academic achievement that is uniform across the commonwealth regardless of which high school or school district has awarded it. Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) are a common sense way to offer such assurances to students, parents, colleges, universities and employers.

In a world where academic and professional standards are becoming ever more rigorous, we cannot afford to have a patchwork system for awarding diplomas to our students. We need to ensure that every Pennsylvania high school diploma means real opportunity for success.

As an employer working with pre-school aged children and families, it is of extreme importance to me that high school graduates are well equipped to continue their educational journey. Those choosing to stay in the field of education should not be penalized by entering college without the confidence they need to succeed because our school systems have failed to accurately assess and address their needs.

I understand that the State Board of Education will consider graduation requirement regulations that include GCAs at its January meeting. I ask that you move forward with this important effort.

Thank you for your time and I would appreciate hearing your views on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Sandra J. Hall

Sandra J. Hall

Assistant Director of Early Childhood Development

SJH/sab

Division of the Private Industry Council of Westmoreland/Fayette Inc.

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2008 JUN 23 AM 11:43

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REVIEW COMMISSION



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CROZER-KEYSTONE
HEALTH SYSTEM
• • • •

Healthplex Pavilion II
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2008 JUN 23 AM 11:43

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

2696

Eugene Zegar
Crozer-Keystone Health System
Healthplex Pavilion II
100 West Sproul Rd
Springfield, PA 19064
December 27, 2007

Chairman Griton
Pennsylvania Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126

Dear Chairman Griton:

I am writing to offer my complete support for the Pennsylvania Board of Education's efforts to establish statewide graduation requirements to ensure that all Pennsylvania high school graduates are adequately prepared and have core competencies to advance after high school. Student achievement today is inconsistent, and there is a great deviation in basic competencies of high school graduates depending on location, background, etc. In today's world where academic and professional standards are becoming more rigorous, we can not afford to have such deviation for awarding diplomas to our students. We need to ensure that every Pennsylvania high school diploma provides basic steps for achieving success after high school.

As the largest employer in Delaware County, we see a wide variety of job applicants. The variance in basic core competencies is much greater than one would expect from a standardized educational program. The high school programs and expectations are not uniform, however in these days of global competition and increasing demands they should be.

I understand that graduation competency assessments will be considered at the January meeting of the Pennsylvania Board of Education; I ask that you support this important initiative.

Thank you for your attention to this serious matter and I would appreciate your views.

Very Truly Yours,

Eugene Zegar
Vice President of Human Resources

EZ/gms

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4777 Old Berwick Road
Bloomsburg, PA 17815
570-784-2850 ext. 4016

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Pennsylvania Heartland Coalition of Schools

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

November 7, 2007

Mr. Karl Girton, Chairperson
State Board of Education
333 Market Street, First Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Dear Mr. Girton:

The undersigned superintendents from the Pennsylvania Heartland Coalition of Schools write this letter of support for the State Board's proposed Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA).

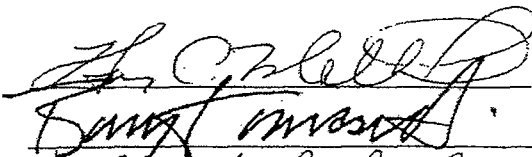
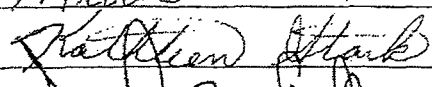
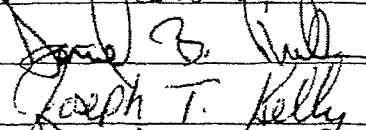
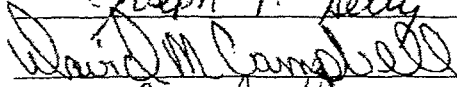
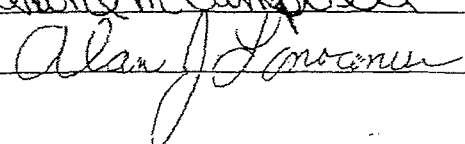
It is our belief that a GCA system, when coupled with the current PSSA, will provide a comprehensive measure of student proficiency on the Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Science Academic Standards. In addition, we believe that such a system will strengthen high school curricula and instruction and will restore the value of the high school diploma. Ultimately, it is our belief that this system will provide for improved student academic achievement and an improved workforce.


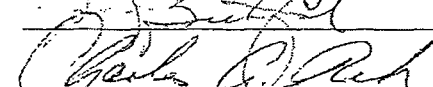
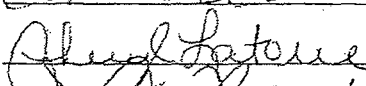
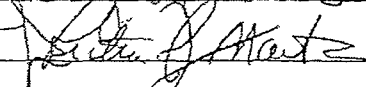
We understand that there are questions to be answered and issues to be worked out. We believe, for example, in the need for ensured validity and reliability—that these assessments will provide a true measure of minimum proficiency and will be consistent with the PSSA. We believe that the flexibility must be provided to schools with varying schedules. We believe that students should have multiple opportunities to pass assessments and that students with disabilities should be provided appropriate accommodations consistent with federal and state law.

However, we believe that concerns can be answered, and that the system will provide for stronger high schools throughout our region.

Please call with questions.

Sincerely,


Mark D. DiRocco

Kathleen Ottaviano

Joseph T. Kelly

David M. Campbell

Alan J. Lomax


Frederick C. Johnson

Charles D. Rich

Charles Latorre

Peter J. Hertz



University of Pittsburgh

2696

*School of Education
Office of the Dean*

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Pittsburgh, PA 15260
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January 7, 2008

Ms. Karen Farmer White
State Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126 0333

Via Courier (Overnight)

Dear Ms. White:

I write concerning the Board's consideration of a graduation examination requirement for high school.

This is a very good idea, and I am especially receptive to the efforts of the Pittsburgh Schools to help pilot such an effort. In order to represent a major step beyond existing examination programs such as PSSA, though, it is essential that any local examinations produced by school districts help the public understand the real goals of the State standards. Specifically, it is essential that test items directly capture the application of high school curriculum to success in real life. This means that the products of project-based education are especially appropriate. Also, tasks that involve applying high school subject matter to real life tasks should be strongly encouraged. The idea is that students and their parents should see the examination as a *demonstration that they have acquired and can use the key knowledge and skills of effective citizenry, further self-directed learning, and everyday life.*

It might be very helpful if the State were to promote some demonstration projects that illustrate ways in which tailored examinations can fulfill this goal of demonstrating successful learning in practical terms. Should there be, for example, a version of the graduation exam that is tied to skilled apprenticeship? Should there be one that is a combination of demonstrated readiness for college (e.g., writing and math) and preparation for full participation in civic functions (e.g., writing an effective letter to a legislator, writing a summary of available research on a consumer issue, etc.)?

Hopefully, the new graduation requirement will be consistent with the important need for the public to better understand how schools prepare our children for success in the 21st century.

Sincerely,

Alan M. Lesgold
Professor and Dean

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

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Pittsburgh Public Schools

Mark Roosevelt, Superintendent of Schools

341 South Bellefield Avenue | Pittsburgh, PA 15213-3516

Parent Hotline: 412-622-7920 | superintendentoffice@pghsboe.net | www.pps.k12.pa.us

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Wednesday January 9, 2008

Testimony to the State Board of Education

Dear Board Members,

I apologize for not being with you in person, but coincidently we are in the midst of major presentations on our plan to dramatically improve the performance of our high schools, which is called *Excel.9-12, The Plan for High School Excellence*.

This issue – the adoption by the Commonwealth of clear standards as to what high school graduates should know to earn a diploma – is of great importance to me and to Pittsburgh.

I support the adoption of Pennsylvania Graduation Competency Assessments as proposed by the Governor's Commission on College and Success. For far too long, local education agencies or school districts have been permitted to issue diplomas to students that are not worthy of the paper upon which they are written. The only way to end this practice is for the Commonwealth to adopt graduation requirements; in fact, I believe it is the state policy most likely to catalyze the significant educational progress that will result in the creation of the educated workforce necessary to make Pennsylvania more competitive in this increasingly difficult global economy.

Of course there will be many critics of state action in this area. Many are resistant to the kind of accountability graduation standards represent. But this is not the accountability we should really fear; we should be far more concerned with the fact that so many of our high school graduates are unable to fully participate in American life as we know it. They are being held accountable in a very cruel way for their lack of skills and knowledge because they cannot compete for 85% of all newly created jobs as these jobs require skills way beyond what they have learned.

Fully 57,000 of the 127,000 students who received high school diplomas in Pennsylvania in 2007 were not proficient in mathematics and/or English language arts according to PSSA data. In other words, 45% of our graduating students did not demonstrate a basic understanding of algebraic concepts and/or literacy at the 11th grade level.

To raise student standards necessarily means raising the standards to which we hold the adults who are charged with their education and care. Administrators, teachers, and support staff must embrace the new challenges that are squarely before us.

I do have some special history with this issue. As a legislator and House Chair of the Education Committee in Massachusetts, I co-authored that state's 1993 Education Reform Act. Among other things, the Act required the creation of a high school graduation test. Back in 1993 the standards-

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Wednesday January 9, 2008
Testimony to the State Board of Education
Page Two

2008 JUN 23 AM 11: 43

based reform movement in American education was still in its infancy, and the opposition to a high-stakes high school graduation exam was fierce. But now, looking back on over a decade of experience, it is clear that these graduation requirements drove massive improvements in student achievement. As a result, Massachusetts now leads the nation in almost every educational category.

Let me say it as clearly as I can. I am 100% convinced that it was the creation of state standards, and most specifically high school graduation standards, that was the single most significant act in catalyzing that state's phenomenal growth in student achievement.

I am also convinced that without clear graduation standards, many students will continue to be underserved and will continue to graduate – in large numbers – without the skills necessary to compete for good jobs.

As you may be aware, for graduates of the Pittsburgh Public Schools beginning with the Class of 2008, The Pittsburgh Promise is now a reality. Thanks to the recent commitment of \$100 million from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center to fund these non-needs based scholarships, higher education will become even more attainable for the students of the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The graduation exam has been included in The Pittsburgh Promise as an immense and wonderful “carrot” for the Pittsburgh Public Schools and its students and families to set higher expectations for ourselves. Once such an exam or series of exams is implemented, the maximum award from The Pittsburgh Promise will increase from \$5,000 to \$10,000 each year. Given the opportunity to double the maximum annual scholarships awarded by The Pittsburgh Promise, we look forward to working collaboratively with the State to implement a graduation exam for the Class of 2012.

We in the Pittsburgh Public Schools believe in and stand ready to work with you on this critical initiative, which 22 states have already embraced.

With warm regards,



Mark Roosevelt,
Superintendent of Schools

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CHESTER UPLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT 2008 JUN 23 AM 11:43

1720 MELROSE AVENUE

CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA 19013

GREGORY E. THORNTON, Ed.D.
Superintendent

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION
TELEPHONE (610) 447-3610
FAX (610) 447-3616

Testimony Before The Pennsylvania State Board of Education

Proposed State High School Graduation Requirements

Good morning, Chairman Girtton and Members of the State Board of Education,

I am Gregory Thornton and I have the honor of serving as the Superintendent of The Chester Upland School District. I preface my remarks by sharing some information about Chester Upland. We are located in Delaware County, but share all of the characteristics of an urban city.

- One of four families live below the poverty rate
- The per capita income is \$ 13,000
- Almost one-third of our citizens over age 25 do not have a high school diploma

It is in the context of these facts that I share my thoughts on the Proposed State High School Graduation Requirements and the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA).

Chester Upland has one high school with an enrollment of close to 1,700 students. Last year only 3% of our students scored proficient in mathematics and less than 10% were proficient in reading. We must do better for our young people. Far too many of Chester High School's students graduate without all of the skills and competencies needed to be successful in post-high school experiences whether they be college or work. As Superintendent, it is my responsibility to assure that all students demonstrate mastery of the skills they need to succeed in life.

Currently, I do not have a method to adequately and independently assess this. Local end of course final examinations are subjective in nature and do not always test and reflect mastery of standards necessary to be successful in post-high school experiences. The PSSA as is currently exists does not test all core subject areas.

The proposed graduation requirements would fix this.

Research has demonstrated that:

- States, schools and districts benefit when standards are taken seriously and are based on the same high expectations and the same basis of evaluation for all students.

- Students benefit when schools are held accountable for meeting student needs.
- Requiring demonstration of proficiencies prior to receipt of a diploma helps hold students accountable for their role in their learning.

The concept of state developed "high school exit examinations" is not new in education. States such as New York, Florida and North Carolina adopted this approach many years ago. Many more states have recently instituted similar systems over the past few years.

Pennsylvania is well positioned to benefit from the experiences both positive and challenging from other states in areas such as test development, phase-in of new requirements, building constituencies, and having adequate resources and contingencies in place for students who do not demonstrate mastery.

It is critical that as these new requirements are discussed and debated, the following tenets remain a part of the final regulations.

- Students have multiple opportunities to take and pass the Graduation Competency Assessments.
- The tests are aligned with state standards that reflect the skills students need to be successful in post-high school experiences.
- Extended learning opportunities for at-risk and struggling students remain and are expanded where needed. Programs such as Project 720, Classroom For The Future, Education Assistance Program, dual enrollment opportunities and alternative education programs are vital to supporting students.
- Accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners are in place.
- School districts are permitted to retain local control through additional options to determine whether students have attained state determined proficiency for graduation as long as they are independently validated to be at least as rigorous as the Commonwealth's test.

In summary, I support the proposed high school graduation requirements. They are right for Chester's students and students across Pennsylvania. These requirements will ensure that a student who earns a high school diploma is truly ready for the real world of college and high-skilled careers. Every school district in this Commonwealth, whether small or large - Chester, Radnor or Scranton, has the same goal-to assure that students graduate with the skills they need to be successful in life.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

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Philadelphia Inquirer

2008 JUN 23 AM 11:44

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Editorial: Graduation Requirements: Waste Paper

May 7, 2008

Any Pennsylvania lawmaker who fails to support tougher high school graduation requirements ought to be flunked out of the legislature. Too many schools are handing out "empty diplomas" to thousands of seniors who graduate without the reading and math skills needed for college or a good job.

This travesty needs to stop now.

Legislators shouldn't listen to those local school districts crying that they should decide when their students are ready to graduate.

They're doing that now, and their track record stinks:

In 2006, more than 56,000 Pennsylvania high school seniors graduated, despite failing state math and reading tests. Many received diplomas for just showing up! How could that happen? State graduation standards have been around since 2003. It happened because districts have been allowed to use local graduation assessments that are often dumbed down.

Statewide, 45 percent of 127,000 seniors flunked at least one of the state tests in 2006, and graduated even though they lacked basic skills. Those disturbing numbers should have lawmakers rushing to enact new graduation requirements that consider the best interest of students. Instead, they're kowtowing to school boards and teachers' unions.

State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak has offered a solid plan that would create graduation tests in 10 core subjects. Starting in 2010, students would take reading, writing, math, science and social studies tests. But instead of taking one comprehensive test their senior year on everything they were supposed to learn in high school, students would take a test on each subject at the time they finished that course. That would be less intimidating to students.

Each district would also have to prove that its local assessments met state standards. Only then will a high school diploma have the same value regardless of which district awarded it.

Critics say the subject tests will discourage students, who will then drop out. Are they saying it's better to have students stay in school under the mistaken belief they are getting a real education?

To graduate, students would have to pass six tests or demonstrate proficiency by other means, such as passing the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. Those who fail a subject would get remedial help sooner and could take several retests. The state would develop a model curriculum for the subjects and increase teacher training.

A pending House bill would block the state from developing the new graduation tests. Some legislators say they don't want to see another set of tests added to those students already take.

They can't see the forest for the trees. The point is to graduate students who can succeed. Taking their pulse periodically to see how they're doing and making adjustments makes perfect sense.

The districts and the state can work out the kinks in this program during a yearlong review phase. The legislature shouldn't be an obstacle. Children's futures are at stake.

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LEHIGH COUNTY
Courier Times

2008 JUN 23 AM 11: 44

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
 REVIEW COMMISSION

Raising the Bar

May 28, 2008

If you're not familiar with the term "empty diploma," it refers to the shameful and destructive practice of graduating kids who lack basic skills. This is a big problem in Pennsylvania.

According to the state Department of Education, more than 56,000 high school seniors graduated from Pennsylvania high schools last year even though they failed state math and reading tests. This happened because the state PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) tests aren't the final word on who gets diplomas and who doesn't.

School districts have final say via so-called local graduation assessments. And so the PSSAs, which are Pennsylvania's No Child Left Behind tests, can be and routinely are summarily dismissed as a graduation requirement.

How it helps graduates to enter the work force or go on to college while lacking basic math and language skills is a mystery to us — and a disservice to the ill-equipped graduates. It's why the Education Department, at Gov. Rendell's urgings, has developed a battery of graduation tests in 10 core subjects. Sensibly, the tests would be administered at the completion of each course as opposed to combining the subject areas into a single comprehensive test in students' senior year.

That would be less troubling for students. And with remediation provided along the way, it would be a more effective way to help students learn the basic skills they need to succeed in today's world. Besides, we have to do something.

State Education officials can't allow watered-down graduation standards to remain in place. It's impractical if not ruinous from a national perspective; it also violates the state's legal and moral obligation to provide students with an education.

Unfortunately, the proposal is getting panned by school districts and teacher unions. They warn against burdening already test-weary students and fret that more students will drop out if standards are raised. Additionally, they claim that districts are the best judges of whether students are qualified to graduate.

Seems to us local standards are much too weak if students who can't pass basic skills tests are getting diplomas anyway.

What's worrisome is that lawmakers are joining the opposition. And so we encourage citizens to chime in.

Public comment on the proposal to standardize graduation requirements will be accepted through June 16.

Stand up for real graduation standards and against handing out diplomas just for showing up.

Mail:

Jim Buckheit,
Pennsylvania State Board of Education
333 Market St., First Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126
Fax: 717-787-7306

E-mail: jbuckheit@state.pa.us

Web: <http://www.pde.state.pa.us/>, click on "Changing High School Graduation Requirements."

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Intelligencer Journal

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

EMPTY DIPLOMAS

June 2, 2008

IF YOU'RE NOT FAMILIAR with the term "empty diploma," it refers to the shameful and destructive practice of graduating kids who lack basic skills. This is a big problem in Pennsylvania.

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Unfortunately, the proposal is getting panned by school districts and teacher unions. They warn against burdening already test-weary students and fret that more students will drop out if standards are raised. Additionally, they claim that districts are the best judges of whether students are qualified to graduate.

It seems to us that local standards are much too weak if students who can't pass basic skills tests are getting diplomas anyway.

What's worrisome is that lawmakers are joining the opposition. And so we encourage citizens to chime in. Public comment on the proposal to standardize graduation requirements will be accepted through June 16.

Stand up for real graduation standards and against handing out diplomas just for showing up.

To comment, contact:

Jim Buckheit, Pennsylvania State Board of Education
333 Market St., First Floor
Harrisburg, Pa. 17126
Fax: 717-787-7306
E-mail: jbuckheit@state.pa.us

On the Web: <http://www.pde.state.pa.us/>, click on "Changing High School Graduation Requirements."

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The Philadelphia Inquirer**Editorial: State High Schools Graduating Failure**

February 3, 2008

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

The numbers are staggering.

More than 56,000 Pennsylvania high school seniors graduated with "empty diplomas" in 2006 because they failed state math and reading tests. They were given diplomas, in some cases, for just showing up. They left high school without mastering the basic skills to get a job or enter college.

That has prompted state Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak to push for tougher new regulations requiring students to pass at least six tests in English, math, science and social studies. This is a smart step.

Instead of a comprehensive test on everything learned over several years, students would be tested at the end of a course, similar to a final exam. For example, a student could take the Algebra I test as a freshman.

The plan would give teachers an annual snapshot of a student's progress. Those who fail could get tutoring and a second chance.

That approach makes sense and would put Pennsylvania in the vanguard with a number of states that have seen improvement after making the switch. However, the new regulations wouldn't take effect until 2014, after this year's sixth graders finish high school.

If this is worth doing, why take so long? Lucky these education leaders weren't in charge of landing the first man on the moon.

Once in place, the plan would close the loophole that allows students who fail the state tests to graduate by passing a local test not sanctioned by the state.

Statewide, 45 percent of 127,000 seniors flunked at least one of the state tests in 2006. That's an alarming figure.

The failures are not just in urban districts, though the rates are the highest there. In Philadelphia, 76 percent of the seniors flunked at least one of the tests. But even in Lower Merion and Unionville-Chadds Ford - two top school districts - about 20 percent of the seniors failed.

This points to a bigger problem that testing alone won't fix. But the testing plan may improve how students are assessed, and ease the pressure of teaching toward one final "make or break" test.

However, the state should reconsider some provisions during the expected yearlong review phase. For example, the current proposal allows districts to select four different testing options for students to demonstrate proficiency. That's too many alternatives and too many tests.

What's wrong with a single option and uniform standards so that students in Great Valley are taught the same basics as students in Garnet Valley? Isn't that the point of the plan?

Critics say the new regulations would hurt students in underfunded districts and could actually increase the dropout rate. That's a legitimate concern. But that's a funding and support issue, not a testing issue.

Despite some shortcomings, Secretary Zahorchak is on the right track in trying to bolster graduation requirements. Too many students are failing, and a diploma should be worth more than the paper it's printed on.

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THE EXPRESS-TIMES

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2008 JUN 23 AM 11: 45

State proficiency tests a smart idea

Friday, January 18, 2008

A higher bar for students

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Students don't like it. Teachers don't like it. Nonetheless, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education's plan to institute high school competency exams in four subject areas is a welcome change, as demonstrated proof of the learning required for a diploma.

Who likes the idea? Employers. College teachers and admissions officers. Gov. Ed Rendell. People who gauge the changes in the world economy and the skills needed to land jobs. And probably plenty of teachers, students and parents, once they get past the misperception that this would be another bureaucratic layer of testing piled atop all the No Child Left Behind requirements.

The plan approved Thursday by the state school board faces reviews and approval by the Legislature. It would create 10 standardized competency tests -- two in English, three in math, two in science, three in social studies. Students would have to pass six to graduate; students who fail would get remedial help and retake them. Schools could also use other tests, such as the PSSAs in reading and math, Advanced Placement tests or local exams that districts use, if they are approved by the state as rigorous enough.

If that sounds like a lot of tests, it is. But the standardized competency exams could replace final exams now used by districts, and that's the general idea. More important, though, is that the state tests would set a bar of achievement to get a diploma and to prepare grads to get a job or go to college. Many students in Pennsylvania aren't meeting basic goals now and graduating anyway. That's not in dispute. Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak calls those promotions "empty diplomas," noting that about 45 percent of the 126,000 high school students who graduated last year did so without demonstrating proficiency in PSSA math and reading exams.

Pennsylvania isn't going out on a ledge. In New Jersey, statewide proficiency tests have been administered since the early 1990s. Those who don't pass the tests in 11th grade are placed in remedial classes and take an alternative test later on. Pennsylvania would have similar programs for those who fail, along with accommodations for special education kids and those struggling with English.

One valid objection is that some students learn and perform well in school, but do poorly in tests. That's the major failing of all such tests. But it is outweighed by the vast number of graduates who move on -- to entry level jobs or college -- without basic skills, and without the ability to quickly pick up basic employment or study skills needed for the next step.

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

Ultimate test: A good plan for certifying high school graduates

Monday, January 07, 2008

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2008 JUN 23 AM 11:46

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

What does a high school graduate know? State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak wants to be able to answer that question but he can't, not with Pennsylvania's current diploma standards. He says they're uneven and that as many as 45 percent of 2006 graduates did not demonstrate proficiency in reading or math on standardized tests. The state cannot afford to leave students unprepared, and it doesn't matter whether they're headed for college or looking for work.

Pennsylvania has a three-part requirement for graduation: course completion, a senior project and demonstration of proficiency in reading, writing and math, either on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test or by "local assessment." That last one is too fuzzy for Mr. Zahorchak, and he is proposing a series of tests for use by 2014. Pennsylvania would be following 22 states that already have graduation exams and four more that will by 2012.

As an alternative to local assessments, the state would develop 10 exams -- three in math, two in language arts, three in social studies and two in science. In most cases, a student would have to pass at least five. The exams would be offered at the end of each semester, as a student completed the course work, and students could take them multiple times if necessary.

This model is far preferable to the one winner-take-all graduation exam offered by some states. Those tests put too much pressure on students and can generate results too late to help those who fail. Pennsylvania's tests would cover smaller amounts of material at a time and, if students don't pass, they would have time for remediation.

This would increase responsibilities for local districts, but Mr. Zahorchak said the new exams need not mean more testing since the state tests could supplant finals already being given. But that's not the only concern. Introducing any new state exam will bring legitimate questions about accuracy and fairness. Just keeping track of who took what test could get tricky.

If the state Board of Education approves this plan -- as early as Jan. 17 -- it must not create an unfunded mandate for districts. The state should put its money where its mouth is. Clearly, appropriate testing alone will not ensure uniformity across 501 school districts or that students have learned what they need for future success. Still, this step is worth taking, with the long-term goal of making sure Pennsylvania diplomas are worth more than the paper they're printed on.

The Patriot-News

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2008 JUN 23 AM 11: 45

TESTING**Aiming for student proficiency in education gets high marks**

Monday, January 14, 2008

INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

When local high school graduates seek to further their education at Harrisburg Area Community College, more than half are not ready to perform at the college level.

Testifying before the State Board of Education last week, HACC President Edna V. Baehre said 55.4 percent of entering freshman require remedial instruction in reading. More than half of the new HACC students also need remedial help in math and a third require assistance with their writing skills.

Despite an Education Week report last week that ranked Pennsylvania 10th in quality of education, this dismal picture is repeated around the state. Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, noted at the hearing that 20 percent more children graduated in 2006 in 461 of the state's 501 school districts than scored "proficient" in statewide tests.

What more evidence is required to make the case that educational fraud is being perpetrated on a huge number of students, parents and taxpayers in the commonwealth?

And this is not a new phenomenon. Overcrowded prisons and companies increasingly seeking better educated employees from abroad are the stark real-world consequences of educational failure. That Pennsylvania is perceived to be in the top 10 states in education only suggests an even more abysmal state of affairs in 40 other states.

The federal No Child Left Behind program, which has been both widely praised and criticized, represented a recognition of the problem, and sought to bring accountability to the classroom. But a more effective program would make students accountable for their educational effort and accomplishments, or lack thereof.

Toward that end, the state board is expected to adopt recommendations from the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success that would require high school students, in order to receive a diploma, to achieve proficiency on at least six of nine end-of-course examinations. These Graduation Competency Assessments would be given in English, math, science and social studies.

Schools would have the option of administering the GCAs, require passage of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test in 11th grade or the 12th grade re-test, or administer a locally determined test comparable to the GCAs, subject to state approval.

This approach offers a critical difference from proposals for a single, all-encompassing graduation test that we have criticized. Under GCAs, students would have to prove proficiency in material they've just been taught. Remedial instruction for students who failed would be mandated. And there would be ample opportunities to retake the test. Students who passed each GCA would be awarded Certificates of Proficiency in that subject, recognition that is important in conveying to students the significance of learning the material and doing well.

There is a danger of too much testing. But the GCAs can be used to replace teacher-composed final exams, and one hopes that they would eventually supplant the PSSA tests required by No Child Left Behind. The experience in other states suggests that GCAs, which are similar to New York's long-standing Regents exams, could prove to be a turning point in education in Pennsylvania. Yet at least one vital piece of the education puzzle remains to be addressed.

Pennsylvania needs to swallow hard and put up the dollars necessary to ensure that every school district has the resources necessary to achieve educational success. Ultimately, that translates into greater economic success for Pennsylvania and its citizens.

And far fewer people crowding our prisons.

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Editorial: High school exit exam poses challenges, but is worth the effort

April 30, 2008

A proposal to require high school students in Pennsylvania to pass competency exams to graduate is stirring up controversy here and elsewhere across the state.

At Mars High School last week a forum on the exit exam proposal passed by the state Board of Education early this year was held with opponents of the exit exam plan dominating the event.

Developing and administering a graduation exit exam program is sure to be difficult- and controversial- but it is worth doing if a high school diploma is to have meaning.

Rather than fight to prevent Harrisburg lawmakers from implementing a high school graduation exam similar to what 25 other states have already done, school officials and education experts in the state should put more of their energy into developing a competency exam program that is effective and fair.

In New York State, students have for nearly 30 years been required to pass the Regents Competency Tests to graduate from high school. Since New York's program was implemented, 24 other states have made some form of competency exam a requirement for high school graduation.

Few people will disagree with the notion that a high school diploma should mean that a graduate possesses basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. But anecdotal evidence suggests that often is not the case.

Employers often complain about the low caliber of job applicants they see boasting a high school diploma. Many community colleges, and even some four year colleges, have had to develop remedial courses for freshmen to boost the basic academic skills that high school graduates should possess.

Clearly, many high schools are failing some of their graduates. An exit exam program would help define the scope of the problem and also would give the diplomas earned by Pennsylvania's high school graduates more value.

At the Mars forum on the proposed exit exam for Pennsylvania, Judith Mosse, of the State Association for Gifted Education, said "Having rigorous, interesting courses with well prepared teachers are more likely to bring about high achieving graduates than exams."

That probably is true. But without competency exams, the school district and its taxpayers don't know if the school does, in fact, have rigorous, interesting courses taught by well- prepared teachers.

Without exit exams, there is no way to know what the students are, or are not, learning. Students can leave high school with a diploma, but a transcript full of C's and B's is really subjective unless and until the students are measured against a standardized exam designed to reflect competency in subjects.

The members of the group meeting at mars said they want to parents to be aware of the graduation test plan and what they view as its dangers. While there are many challenges to creating an effective exit exam program, the greater dangers is in doing nothing- and just assuming that a diploma means something.

Among the objections to exit exams is the argument that exams raise already high dropout rates as students leave school early partly to avoid having to take the tests. But while some support this logical theory, many prominent studies reject the argument, finding no link between exit exams and increased drop out rates.

Other objections include the fact that students already take many standardized tests. Again, there are solutions, including Pennsylvania's proposal that students pass either six of the 10 graduation competency exams, or score "proficient" or above on the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment), or pass advanced- placement or a locally developed assessment that is compatible with state standards.

Critics also knock the program as a "high stakes" test. But Pennsylvania's proposal, like those in other states, would offer students multiple chances to pass the tests, and offer remedial help between tests to help improve students' scores. That is hardly a high stakes proposition.

Another issue highlighted by critics includes the cost to the district. That is a legitimate issue and the state should be expected to provide funding for the exit exam program. But if high schools have to spend more money to ensure that their graduates have basic competences then maybe that is more appropriate than employers and colleges having to pay for remedial programs to teach young people what they should have learned in high school.

A high school diploma should be based on more than class attendance and a record of non-failing grades assigned in a subjective environment. A state-administered test for competency would add value to the meaning of a high school diploma.

Mars along with 136 other of the states 501 school districts has adopted a resolution opposing a graduation competency exam.

Critics of the plan at Mars and elsewhere bring up numerous points worthy of discussion. But it would be better if educators across the state directed their energies toward making sure that Pennsylvania's exit exam program is as good as it can be by learning from other states' experiences, rather than trying to prevent competency exams from becoming law here.

The Patriot News**Raising competency****State's school boards must comprehend that students need to be educated, not just graduated**

Monday, March 24, 2008

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More than 80 school districts in Pennsylvania, including at least four in our region, have voiced opposition to a Rendell administration plan to require students to pass state-approved tests in basic subject matter in order to earn a high school diploma.

And if a school district doesn't feel it can adequately express why it opposes Graduation Competency Assessments, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association has helpfully provided a model resolution to do so. Maybe there should be competency tests for school board members who need a third party to tell them why they don't like something.

It's difficult to believe, given how far American education has gone down the path of standardized testing to appraise student competency, that we would still hear it said that "decades of research show many reasons why standardized paper and pencil test scores should never be the determining factor in making major decisions about students." That's part of PSBA's argument in its model resolution.

So are complaints about the cost of implementing the plan, which seems equally absurd, given the amount of funding the administration has provided, and seeks to provide, for basic education.

It may well be true that students today are overtested, though that doesn't seem to be a factor in the opposition to graduation tests. The difference is that these tests, in fact, will matter to students, unlike too much of existing testing.

And they will matter most significantly to those students who make the effort to study, learn and demonstrate their knowledge. That's because students who pass these tests will be given a piece of paper that -- unlike today's high school diploma -- actually means something, which is that they have proven that they know how to read, write and compute.

What the opposing school districts need to understand is that the educational status quo is no longer acceptable. They need to raise their own level of competency by graduating seniors who truly deserve a diploma. They need to graduate students who are ready for college or the workplace without remedial instruction to bring them up to an acceptable standard of basic knowledge.

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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION**THE YORK DISPATCH.****EDITORIAL: Stick to issue of testing**

May 28, 2008

The state Department of Education's 30-day public comment period on the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments tests expires June 16.

Along with school property tax increases and legislation seeking to outlaw public school teacher strikes, the proposed state mandate has set the Pennsylvania School Boards Association -- you know, those "local control now and forever" types -- squarely against perceived government interference.

The strangest -- and clearly the most specious -- argument against the testing proposal is that students will be "overtested," that such assessments aren't "fair" and would hurt student achievement.

Take the attitude of Fred Botterbusch, a school boards association vice president and also a Dallastown Area School District board vice president, who says testing for diplomas by this method is a "19th -century concept."

That's a bit of a stretch. Competency is competency, period. But as the cries of infringement on local boards' powers grow, it's clear the heart of the issue goes beyond "overtesting."

Karl Girton, chairman of the State Board of Education, says the objective of the assessments is simple, to ensure equal standards for high school graduates.

Unfortunately, the question of whether high school seniors should, or should not, be further tested for competency before graduation has become lost in the age-old squabble over local control vs. state interference.

This is politics clear and simple, and the school boards are dragging out the well-worn argument as their best defense.

Testing frequencies, student competency and their effect on individual performance are complex issues. Reducing the controversy to an us-against-them donnybrook disrespects the students and their future.

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Twin Tiers Perspective: Education secretary admits diplomas lack value

May 30, 2008

On February 12, 2008, Secretary of Education, Gerald Zahorchak, wrote a letter to PA school boards urging them to accept the Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA) or at least not oppose the GCA as recommended by the Pennsylvania School Board Association and the Pennsylvania State Education Association. Stalemate!

Education will hardly reform itself when these groups lobby against reform. It would appear that few in education want to be held accountable, but Zahorchak cites 10 newspapers that have supported the need for a standard diploma.

Currently, students must score proficient or advanced on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) or pass a Local School Assessment (LSA). The GCA would be a standard alternative that would help to validate school diplomas. Zahorchak stated that 45 percent of public high school seniors which amounted to nearly 57,000 students who graduated in 2006 did not score proficient or advanced on the eleventh grade reading and math PSSA. Though this percentage is staggering, this is not news to those who read The Daily Review's July grade report. The unsettling fact is that these students still received diplomas based on the current LSA which can vary in content, difficulty, authorship and grading even within the same building. There have been concerns about the security of the PSSA. Wouldn't this be even more of an issue for the LSA?

What has finally caught up with schools are the incredible numbers of unprepared students who possess a diploma. Industry and secondary education have been screaming for years about the lack of preparation that entry level workers and freshmen possess. The National Association of Educational Progress reported that 28 percent of all college freshmen in the fall of 2000 required remediation in at least math, reading or writing. The lack of preparation is actually compounded when one realizes the percentage of graduates who never attend college. Zahorchak states that 35 percent of companies provide remedial math instruction to their workers.

When students pass the LSA, but not the PSSA, there are four possible reasons to include test validity, test reliability, curriculum and accountability. Much time,

input and money was spent in developing the PSSA. Base lines were established and data have been collected at least since 1996 so test validity and reliability should be easily eliminated. Superintendents are quick to claim that they have a rigorous curriculum. This leaves accountability, but if accountability is in question then curriculum to include the hidden curriculum are back on the table. The implication in the Secretary's letter is that the LSA must be weaker than the PSSA. Businesses, industries and colleges would not have called for the GCA unless there was a problem with the graduate they received. This implication is further supported when Zahorchak states that independent evaluators will need to certify the LSA as equivalent to the GCA.

As school budgets continue to exceed the inflation rate, focus on performance seems to increase. Based on the district spending per pupil, a diploma for a child in Kindergarten in today's dollars will cost about \$156,000. For this cost the student's diploma should be a credential with clout and not just a timecard.

Administrators are quick to use educational jargon, but too often are remiss at showing progress in terms of measurable goals towards their school's mission statement. The taxpaying public wants to see real world success of all graduates that is attributed to the school. Taxpayers, parents and students should examine their district's mission statement and demand tangible progress. This lack of accountability was addressed in a Letter to the Editor on September 23, 2007, but lacked a response.

Board members need to see this requirement for what it is and that is a validation of the diplomas it confers to its graduates. No, this GCA will not fix the problem by itself and it would be ludicrous and ignorant to suggest that it would. What the GCA could do is give a more accurate reading of the "health" of the curriculum and atmosphere. A measurement is only as good as the instrument and the competency of the individual reading the instrument. Based on the facts presented we should fully anticipate more dropouts until districts truly focus on the mission of their schools and their methods to achieve their mission. A decreased graduation rate should not be a surprise; nor should it be a reason to resist using a standard test. Medical professionals do not blame the thermometer for a reading showing that you have a temperature when you actually have a temperature. They treat the problem. They do not hide it by renumbering the thermometer and denying your symptoms.

This is a perfect example of rose-colored glasses. Often the students who shine and would do so in any school are spotlighted as a representation of the student body. Meanwhile, those who do not thrive in traditional schools remain in the shadows. Boards need to remove the tinted glasses and examine the entire spectrum and evaluate whether the school has achieved its mission. Students who do well should be commended for their efforts, but does anyone look at the numbers of students who do not thrive after 13 years of schooling? How do we

know that our students are getting what they need unless we have some instrument to measure their competencies?

If we believe businesses, industries and colleges then we accept that there is a problem. Does anyone have the courage to take a deeper look at reform or shall we continue to spend \$156,000 for a diploma that stands a 1-in-4 chance of requiring remedial classes prior to freshman level college courses or a 1-in-3 chance of needing math remediation through their employer? If districts do not at least create a certified LSA then we can just leave those rose-colored glasses on.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Scott Hall, of Towanda, is acting chief administrative officer for the proposed Family Choice Charter School. Its establishment has been rejected by local public school officials who, Mr. Hall points out, would have to surrender each year about \$7,700 per pupil that attended FCCS, if it were to be approved. He received his principal's certificate through Marywood University, a Master's of Education through Mansfield University, teaching certification at Shippensburg University and a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Scranton. He has taught 12 years in public schools.



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The testing wars: What can prepare our students best?

May 22, 2008

It used to be said that college is not for everyone. Now, however, college is practically a requirement for most professions. So it matters more than ever that our students be prepared for college.

The state's education officials are noticing they are not prepared, leading to costly remedial coursework in college relating to work that should have been mastered in high school. So competency tests that are a requirement for high school graduation have been proposed in math, English, science and social studies.

Naturally, this was criticized by a state Senate panel last week. We're getting test-happy and, besides, it will cost \$160 million to develop and administer the tests over five years. We could accept the argument if today's setup – passing state-mandated testing in the 11th grade or a local assessment test that is supposed to be equally rigorous – was working.

But state officials have determined tens of thousands of failing students have been allowed to graduate each year, in part because the state does not review the alternative local tests to verify they are the equivalent of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests. In 2006, graduation rates rose 20 percent on the 11th-grade PSSA and there's evidence in more recent data that the trend continued in 2007. And yet many Pennsylvania high school graduates are struggling in college.

It doesn't add up. The combination of spiked testing results and more struggling collegians suggests a lack of legitimate testing and unprepared students.

Challenging 10 final examinations covering math, science, English and social studies was predictable. But if we're going to thumb our nose at this accountability, then the local assessment and the PSSAs have to be checked to make sure they are a more adequate indicator of college preparedness. Or something better than what is being proposed has to be suggested.

It does no good to send our kids to college – often at a cost of six figures for four years – if they are not ready to be successful there.

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Beaver County Times & Allegheny Times

EDUCATION REGULATORY
REVIEW COMMISSION

Testing is important

May 28, 2008

A recent editorial ("Test happy," May 18) presented an erroneous argument that state-level graduation requirements amount to little more than additional testing of students. In fact, these graduation standards are not only critical, but long overdue.

Many Pennsylvanians might be surprised, and unsettled, to know that the commonwealth's 501 school districts have no uniform standard for deciding when to award a high school diploma.

Instead, each district is allowed to set its own diploma requirements, resulting in a patchwork system of graduation requirements that vary in scope and rigor.

This has allowed some students to obtain diplomas without demonstrating academic proficiency. Many of these graduates enter the workforce or go on to higher education inadequately prepared for the challenges they will face.

Our proposed graduation requirements would remedy this problem by expanding the menu of options for schools to show their graduates are prepared. The options would include a series of tests known as graduation competency assessments. These tests would essentially be end-of-course exams that a student could take at any time and that school districts could use in place of final exams.

The editorial wisely noted "it does little good to memorize the 'Gettysburg Address' if (students) don't understand the significance of what Abraham Lincoln was saying." I agree we need to go beyond recitation of facts and instill concepts and competencies in our students, and I have worked tirelessly to promote that philosophy.

Still, testing can be an important part of ensuring students understand concepts and think abstractly. The issue is not whether we test, but ensuring the tests are rigorous and truly measure preparedness.

To give diplomas to those who are unprepared is akin to giving them false hope that they are ready to succeed in a high-skills global economy where knowledge equals success.

Gerald L. Zahorchak, D.Ed.
Secretary of Education

