



CHESTER UPLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Testimony Before The Pennsylvania State Board of Education

Proposed State High School Graduation Requirements

Good morning, Chairman Girton 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.