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Pittsburgh Public Schools
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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 coincidentally 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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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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