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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.