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**Testimony of Matt Gandal,  
Executive Vice President, Achieve, Inc.  
to the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee**  
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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.