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Proposed High School Graduation requirements

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REVIEW COMMISSION
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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.

