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Testimony on the Graduate Competency Assessments

According to the proposal, one of the greatest motivating factors behind the State's recommendation to implement the Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) is that "every student must graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills that are essential for college and career success if this Commonwealth's economy is to fulfill its promise." Certainly, no one can dispute such a goal. Our district's recent work on creating proficiency requirements for graduation reflects our commitment to graduating students with essential knowledge and skills. Throughout the process of working on the proficiency requirements, we have asked, "Who would argue against graduating all students at a proficient level?"

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We do not have to look far to find reports that paint a dismal picture of our students failing after high school. *Reading Next* tells us "some 70 percent of older readers require some form of remediation." And, although the TIMSS Report is somewhat mixed regarding increases and decreases of students' abilities in math nationwide, overall, students in the United States never rank higher than 9th in their average scaled scores, falling well behind students from Asian countries. Such information does point to the need for monumental improvement among our students so that they may be as successful as possible upon graduating from our schools.

While we cannot dispute the story we are told through the data, we also recognize that a single way of measuring student proficiency on a single test does not necessarily tell the story of students' abilities. For too long, the PSSA, a "one-size-fits-all" measure, has been the only opportunity students have had to show proficiency. Consequently, we have

read and heard of numerous accounts of how our schools have become focused on “the test” at the expense of non-tested areas, or areas that do not count toward AYP, such as writing. The GCAs, if implemented correctly, could provide the opportunity for determining student proficiency in a more meaningful way. It would, however, be counterproductive to continue to set aside PSSA test time concurrently with the administration of the GCAs.

In reviewing the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) paper, it appears that important issues such as the proximity of the test to the conclusion of the course, the opportunity for students to take the test more than once, the modules of “sequenced, related content” so that students only need to retake areas in which they were not proficient, and the three-tiered support system are all appropriate attempts to address the issue that some of our students may need additional support in demonstrating proficiency. If it is the State’s intention to use this model with the GCAs, it would certainly lend merit to the implementation. What seems to be missing from the recognition of the different needs among students is that some students may demonstrate proficiency in different ways. Consequently, we recommend that the State consider allowing for differentiation in the actual assessment of students in the vocational field, and others who may demonstrate proficiency in ways beyond a paper and pencil test. Although it may seem somewhat extreme to allow for alternative assessments, we should ask whether we are looking for a way to have students demonstrate their proficiency, or whether our ultimate goal is to have students demonstrate that they know how to take tests.

In developing the tests, we recommend that districts be allowed to maintain local control, as a number of districts already have in place common assessments, which are appropriately aligned, in core content areas. The State could impose a deadline for having all assessments developed, and a regional volunteer board comprised of active content experts and administrators, would then review these assessments. Upon approval, the assessments would be stored in a secure, electronic “clearinghouse” from which all districts could choose. This approach would be more cost effective than what is currently outlined for development and implementation in the “Proposed Rulemaking” document. In this way, funding could be spent more appropriately on supporting the schools’ efforts to ensure students reach proficiency.

Overall, we find the best of the State’s proposal to be in the “options” that are offered on several fronts, and that it seeks to ensure students attain proficiency for success beyond high school. The plan also appropriately notes awareness of the needs of students with disabilities and our second language learners. Areas of concern within the proposal are generated through the potential cost of developing GCAs and the added burden of more traditional testing. We have standards in place to work toward and beyond. We have anchors and eligible content to drive instruction and assessment. We have a statewide, “one-size-fits-all” test that has been designed to “establish baseline expectation of minimum knowledge and skills that a high school diploma signifies.” If we are seeking to ensure that our students reach at least an acceptable level of proficiency in order to achieve success past high school, then it would seem logical to set aside more money for the support of schools to help their students work toward such proficiency, and to be more judicious in our spending on the development of the GCAs. And, because the GCAs

are more immediately related to the content and essential skills within the content areas than are the PSSAs, it would also seem to be illogical on both an instructional level and on a fiscal level, to continue to implement these tests along with the GCAs.

Ultimately, we need to make sure that our actions are aligned with our true goal. If that goal is to help our students develop the skills necessary to reach proficiency, rather than to learn how to take tests, then our spending and our approach should reflect that goal.

Respectfully submitted by:

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