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February 5, 2009
Pennsylvania State Board of Education
Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs)

Good morning. My name is Michael Cherinka. I am a business technology teacher and the Business Technology Department head at the Dallas High School in the Dallas School District.

When I learned you would be holding a public hearing today concerning the Graduation Competency Assessment proposal, I wanted to come and share my input with you, as a classroom teacher with 12 years of experience teaching children. Before I begin, I would like to thank the Board for coming to Allentown to hold this public hearing. It is not too often that we see education policymakers in this area, and I appreciate that you are coming out into the field to give us this opportunity to testify.

As I understand the GCA proposal, there would be 10 new state standardized tests in a range of subjects. Students would have to score "proficient" on six of the 10 tests or essentially they would be refused high school diplomas. There would be an alternative if a school district can afford to get its local assessments "validated" by a firm that I do not believe has been named yet. But I understand that would be virtually impossible for a school district to do, both because of exorbitant costs and the complexity of how local assessments work as multi-year and multi-measure assessments. (I.e. they are not simple paper-and pencil tests given at one point in a school year.)

To me, it is just wrong that students, who come to school every year for 12 years, pass every grade, complete all of his assignments and projects, and shows that he has mastered the material through the assessments his teachers have given him, can then be denied a high school diploma because he cannot score "proficient" on some standardized tests. Standardized tests are not the be-all-and-end-all of education!

The students that I teach in are proficient and can show they are proficient in ways that are not necessarily the way a standardized exam tests. They can put together a piece of cabinetry without any trouble at all, but they may not be able to fill in the bubbles on a standardized test in a way that shows what they really know and really can do and are really proficient at doing. Not everybody has to go to college to have a rewarding and successful career and life. I know this because I see my kids go through our school and graduate and go on with their lives and careers. Many of my students have gone right into the work force and picked up a trade as their career. These students were not motivated by tests but they came to school everyday to complete a project with which they had a connection. I would have any one of these students come work on my house whether it is plumbing, electric,

or construction. They found their passion and this passion would have been crushed if they were not able to graduate because of a test. How many of us could live without our plumbers or electricians?

One other facet of business technology education that you may not be aware of is that we get a high percentage of special education IEP students in our classes. We are happy to have these students, and we are happy to give them these educational opportunities. I have several concerns about the effects of this GCA proposal on these students. I understand you would allow for special education students to be exempted, but this does not really help.

If this proposal becomes law, schools will feel serious pressure to focus resources on getting regular education students ready to score Proficient on the standardized tests because everyone will know they are at risk of not being able to graduate. And what about the special education kids that I care about just as much? They will be able to graduate even if they do not score proficient, so we will not face such pressure to focus on them. This goes against all educational philosophy. In college, when we are learning to become teachers, we are taught to educate all kids, to help prepare all kids to go out in the world to be productive citizens. Then, you talk about this kind of proposal, which really pressurizes our situation, pressures us to focus on one group of kids at the expense of another. It is not fair, I do not want to do it, and I am going to do everything in my power to resist doing it. It is like taking a good idea -- testing -- and giving it way too much power. When a standardized test is given the power to override all of the other assessments, both paper-and-pencil and performance assessments, that is too much power and it is harmful to all of the students.

Also, I cannot for the life of me understand how all of the remediation classes are going to work. Talk about crushing the passion out of a student -- it will be quite an empty victory if we force students to spend their school time in remediation and more remediation in one or two areas so they can score proficient on a standardized test, but then they do not have the school time available to move on to more advanced classes in the areas they love and in which they have talent. In any event, I know our school is not currently staffed or funded to provide all of this remediation, and I am fairly certain most schools are in the same situation. Even aside from the question of where are the hours in the day going to come from, where is the money going to come from to pay for all of this? Those of us on the ground in the classroom realize that this is not a minor hurdle or even a reasonable hurdle. If you are going to require this, I sincerely hope that you have looked at the practicalities and how we are going to pay for these luxury model remediation programs when we can't afford to fund programs we know would help students to achieve. I do not mean any disrespect, but I think you will understand when I say, please do not just order this from Harrisburg and make us try to find ways to make it work. Teachers have been in that position many times with government "reforms", but this is one time that I just don't see how we're going to do it.

Please, the money you would spend on this can be so much better spent to improve student achievement. Where there are half-day kindergarten classes with 30 children, would it not be better to turn those into full-day kindergarten classes of 20 students? As a teacher, it is just so clear to me that this would help those children to succeed academically and personally. I do not believe for a second that another round of standardized tests would have that same effect.

There are also other programs that I would ask you to please fund before you think about GCAs. For my students, more efforts to get their parents involved in their educations would have a very positive effect. My students could use more summer school programs, too. All of this costs money, and money is in short supply these days, as we all know. If there is state money to spend, please spend it on programs that will really help our students.

Thank you again for giving me this opportunity to testify today. We teachers are not always asked for our opinions when the government makes decisions on education. I know many other teachers who feel just as strongly as I do that GCAs are a bad idea that will cause more harm to our students than good. I hope you will find my input useful.

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