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Testimony to the Pennsylvania State Board of Education
High School Reform Hearing
February 5, 2009
Allentown, PA

Presented by Christine Yardley
Pennridge School Director
Representing the Pennridge Board of School Directors

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Good morning. My name is Christine Yardley, and I am a school director at Pennridge School District, and I am here to present the views of the Pennridge Board of Directors. In addition, my professional experience includes 8 years as a Pennsylvania public high school teacher. I am also the parent of four children currently in grades Kindergarten through grade 6, all of whom would be affected by the proposed high school graduation reform. I would like to thank the State Board of Education for the opportunity to publicly present our concerns.

The Board of Directors of the Pennridge School District opposes the State Board of Education's proposal to enact Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) and any other regulation or legislation that takes the authority of local school districts to determine whether their students have earned a high school diploma and replaces it with set of high stakes exit exams. The Pennridge School Board passed a resolution stating such on April 14, 2008, and this was sent to the State Board of Education, and I have included another copy of that resolution with my testimony.

Governor Edward Rendell and the State Department of Education continue to push for high school exit exams. I will present four main reasons why GCAs should not be developed and there should not be any high stakes exit exam or exams for a Pennsylvania high school diploma.

1) THERE IS NO GOOD RATIONALE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF GRADUATION COMPETENCY ASSESSMENTS OR ANY OTHER FORM OF A HIGH STAKES EXIT EXAM.

Adding more tests will not improve education. Instead it will take time for learning away from students. Students are already over tested. Starting in 3rd grade, students lose weeks of learning time every year to PSSA test prep and test taking. The problem gets worse for high school students, especially 11th graders who must take PSSA reading, writing and science tests and who also take AP exams and college entrance exams such as the SAT. Do you understand the impact and stress weeks of testing have on high school students and their time to actually learn? How will adding more tests improve the achievement of students? In order for you to better understand the impact of extensive testing, the Board of School Directors of the Pennridge School District would like to invite members of the State Board of Education or any other interested state party to Pennridge High School to talk to 11th and 12th grade students about testing.

Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, non-profit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability, and it was created by the nation's

governors and business leaders. Pennsylvania Governor Rendell is a board member of Achieve. Achieve, who urges states in the American Diploma Project to adopt a common agenda for high school graduation requirements, and The Education Trust, another Washington D.C. education reform organization, have issued a new policy agenda called "Measures that Matter." This policy REVERSES their earlier recommendation to have a standardized exit exam, and they now recommend the use of multiple performance measures. In "Transforming Statewide High School Assessment Systems: A Guide for State Policymakers" dated November 2008, the report emphasizes that the current "standards-test-accountability model" has failed to prove itself to be very effective in improving high schools and that states need a new approach.

In Core Principle Three of the report, Achieve calls for better assessments, not just more assessments. Achieve states, "Not all important college- and career-readiness skills can be tested on the anchor assessments – and so additional measures will be needed." Furthermore, "states also need to give weight to and help stimulate locally led performance measures. Performance assessments can include graduation projects, writing portfolios, science experiments or many different demonstrations of student learning." Even more importantly, Achieve recommends in Core Principle Four that states must eliminate tests that serve similar purposes or provide similar information. Smarter testing is the goal, not more testing. "Simply adding more tests, without reducing and streamlining when possible, will frustrate educators, students and the public." The State Department of Education is proposing to do exactly the OPPOSITE of what Achieve recommends; they are adding tests that serve a similar purpose without reducing or streamlining.

Furthermore, the State Board of Education's proposed GCAs for students to show they are ready to graduate do not take into account the different curriculums students pursue or the differences in learning abilities and styles of students. The requirements and exams will be the same for all students, whether they are taking college preparatory or vocational courses, are English language learners or have individualized education programs. How is this appropriate or fair to these students?

2) THE DATA USED TO SUPPORT GRADUATION COMPETENCY ASSESSMENTS IS INSUFFICIENT AND FLAWED.

The State Department of Education has no evidence that the local assessments and requirements for graduation are insufficient. It is misleading and incorrect to make the assumption that because students demonstrate their achievements on local assessments rather than the PSSA or the proposed GCAs that there is a disconnect between proficiency and graduation.

The State Department of Education issued a press release on January 21, 2009, which asserts "our high school graduates are not ready to succeed in college-level courses." The State Department of Education made the following claim: "One in three Pennsylvania high school graduates who enrolls in a state-owned university or community college cannot pass a first-year math or English course." This recent study of state college remediation classes was misleading. The State Department of Education states that during the 2007-2008 school year, "20,465 of the 62,247 recent Pennsylvania high school graduates who enrolled in state system institutions or community colleges required one or more remedial courses in core academic subjects so they could catch up to their college-level peers." Yet there is no account of how many of those students had learning disabilities and/or emotional disabilities, were financially disadvantaged, or were misplaced into those courses. Furthermore, the numbers would provide a better picture

with data from the state-related universities such as Penn State, the University of Pittsburgh and Temple University, in addition to data from the state-owned universities and community colleges. The press release states: "Education Secretary Gerald L. Zahorchak said the findings show the commonwealth must do more to better prepare its graduates, including implementation of statewide graduation requirements." To make the jump from the insufficient data to the need for Graduation Competency Assessments is just wrong. More tests do not improve education; better instruction, more time for learning, more resources for under funded programs are what improve students' education.

3) THE COST OF DEVELOPING AND ADMINISTERING GRADUATION COMPETENCY ASSESSMENTS IS A MISAPPROPRIATION OF FUNDS.

The cost for the development of the ten GCAs is approximately \$45 million. The State Department of Education claims this will be a one-time expense, but it has not provided a full accounting of exam costs. How much will it cost and who will pay for the administering of 10 exams three times each year in each school district, for the revisions and updates of the tests annually, for the administration of the exams, for the scoring of the exams three times each year and for the districts' additional record keeping? School districts are faced with declining revenues in this floundering economy as well as Act 1 caps for raising taxes. How can school districts afford these tests? How can the state add another unfunded mandate to school districts? Even the Independent Regulatory Review Commission (IRRC) noted that the State Department of Education failed to estimate the costs to local school districts.

The state already has spent millions of dollars on the PSSA tests. Why are we throwing money away to develop more tests? Why are we wasting millions of dollars of taxpayer money on assessments that school districts, school directors, state legislators and independent education reform organizations such as Achieve and the Education Trust do not support, especially in light of the fact that the state is predicting a \$2.3 billion shortfall for this fiscal year? This makes absolutely no sense.

Additionally, the costing out study published in 2007, which was commissioned by the General Assembly and overseen by the State Department of Education, found that school districts are already underfunded by \$4.38 billion ("Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania's Public Education Goals, December 2007). The report also defines the inequalities among the state's school districts; "the commonwealth's least wealthy districts (based on property wealth and personal income) are the furthest from the costing out estimate of resource needs. On average, the poorest 20 percent of districts have to raise spending by 37.5 percent, while the wealthiest 20 percent only have to raise spending by 6.6 percent." The state must address the insufficient funds it provides to school districts as well as the inequalities among the districts before it changes the high school graduation requirements.

4) STATE LEGISLATORS PASSED ACT 61 TO PUT A MORATORIUM ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF GCAS YET THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CONTINUES TO PURSUE THEM, AND THE INDEPENDENT REGULATORY REVIEW COMMISSION HAS MANY CRITIQUES OF THE GCA PROPOSAL WHICH THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION MUST ADDRESS.

The Pennsylvania state legislature passed Act 61 of 2008, the omnibus School Code statute accompanying the 2008-09 state budget, which contained a provision requiring a moratorium for the remainder of the fiscal year on the further development of regulations that would impose the GCAs statewide. The Pennsylvania School Board Association's White Paper on the GCAs, dated December 2008, states: "Despite the opposition and legislative language prohibiting further efforts to develop the tests, PDE continues its march towards implementation. Immediately after Act 61 was signed into law, Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak issued a letter to school districts emphasizing that the department would not abandon the GCA plan and would continue to move forward."

In addition, the Independent Regulatory Review Commission stated that the State Board's justification for the GCAs to restore the value to the high school diploma needs more explanation because there are concerns that the new exams would make additional problems for special needs students, children living in poverty and students learning English. IRRC also noted that it is not clear how school districts will be able to execute the regulation since there are 10 GCAs that must be administered three times each year. Furthermore, the IRRC noted that it is not clear that the State Board has the authority to make final graduation decisions for students, yet School Code is clear that school districts do.

In conclusion, changing the state high school graduation requirements to include Graduation Competency Assessments or any other form of high stakes exit exams is wrong. If we want to improve the education of students, the State Department of Education should ensure adequate resources for all school districts, rather than spend money on more tests.

Testimony submitted by

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RESOLUTION OPPOSING PROPOSED HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION COMPETENCY ASSESSMENTS BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE PENNRIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

WHEREAS, the State Board of Education has approved a proposal to revise the current high school graduation requirements under the Chapter 4 regulations to require students to pass a series of standardized high-stakes Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) in order to get a diploma; and

WHEREAS, these new requirements and exams will be the same for all students, whether they are taking college preparatory or vocational courses, are English language learners, or participating in individualized programs, and all students effectively will be required to follow the same curriculum in order to pass this new battery of state tests; and

WHEREAS, Chapter 4 currently allows districts to use either the PSSA or rigorous local assessments for their students to demonstrate proficiency of the state academic standards; and it is misleading and incorrect to make the assumption that because students demonstrate their achievements on local assessments rather than the PSSA that there is a disconnect between proficiency and graduation; and

WHEREAS, although the GCA proposal permits schools to use a local assessment option, it establishes numerous limitations, including the elimination of the ability to use various assessment strategies now available to local entities and requires local tests to be closely modeled to the GCAs; and

WHEREAS, decades of research shows many reasons why standardized pencil and paper test scores should never be the determining factor in making major decisions about students, and that a diploma should be granted based on the coursework, tests, presentations, projects and proficiency demonstrations throughout the student's career; and

WHEREAS, the State Board of Education has not prepared a cost analysis or fiscal note, even though this proposal will have a large financial impact on state and local budgets, and the State Board's own costing-out study (which did not include the costs for this new system) found that the state already is \$4.4 billion short in helping school districts prepare students to meet mandated academic standards by 2014; and

WHEREAS, the proposal requires school districts to absorb many new costs related to aligning curriculum, professional development, test development and validation, test preparation and administration, remediation and other costs; and

WHEREAS, given the state's funding shortfall and the Act 1 limitations on tax increases, school districts have limited ability to fund these potential new costs,

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of School Directors of the Pennridge School District opposes the State Board of Education's proposal to enact Graduation Competency Assessments and any other regulation or legislation that usurps the authority of local school districts to determine whether their students have earned a high school diploma. This resolution will be shared with the State Board of Education, state legislators including local legislators and members of the Senate and House Education Committees, and the Independent Regulatory Review Commission.

Adopted this 14th day of April, 2008.

Signed:

Dr. Peter Yarnell
School Board President

Attest:

Anita M. Cron
Board Secretary (seal)

Anita M. Cron, Board Secretary
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