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**TESTIMONY OF DR. BRIAN A. BLISS
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
SOLANCO SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**PENNSYLVANIA BOARD OF EDUCATION
HEARING ON HIGH SCHOOL REFORM
FEBRUARY 5, 2009**

RECEIVED
FEB 9 2009
10:21 AM

Good morning; my name is Brian Bliss, Assistant Superintendent for the Solanco School District, which occupies southern Lancaster County. I appreciate the forum to express Solanco's regard for the GCA proposal.

I intend to briefly share some of the concerns the Solanco School District has with the GCA proposal, with the note that we support many of the philosophies driving the GCAs; in fact, PDE's desire to implement GCAs state-wide mirrors our own efforts to implement high quality assessment practices district-wide.

The bulk of my comments, however, will detail how Solanco would seek to implement the GCA proposal with fidelity in its current form and what we believe will be the resultant negative effects of this implementation.

Solanco's reform efforts center on four very focused areas: exemplary teaching practices, high quality curriculum, sound assessment strategies, and a commitment to providing emotionally healthy environments for student learning. We are committing significant time and resources towards enhancing these four areas. As you can see—two of the four areas—quality curriculum and sound assessment strategies, are in line with PDE's GCA proposal. In truth, Solanco would be highly supportive and appreciative of a PDE initiative that will enhance the quality of curriculum and assessment practices.

The GCA proposal contains some aspects that are in line with these goals; other aspects, however, we do not anticipate being realized under this plan. In fact, some aspects we believe will prove counter to our efforts to enable all students to succeed.

We agree strongly with the concept that well-designed assessments are an essential component of high quality instruction. In fact, Solanco has invested significant time and resources devoted towards developing exemplary, common assessments. We do this by bringing in teams of teachers, introducing them to a quality assessment writing protocol, and then supporting them as they develop, pilot, revise, and package the assessments. This is a labor-intensive, time-intensive process that, if done well, yields significant benefits to students.

As an example, we have recently finished revising common unit math assessments in grades 1-5, and the process has been a good one. As a result of developing and implementing common assessments, we have learned two key lessons: first, common high-quality assessments encourage frank discussions about expectations and rigor for students—the end result of those discussions is a commitment to a higher level of expectation for students, and, second, we have learned that a high quality curriculum is implemented more faithfully and with a higher degree of fidelity once the assessments are in place. Without common assessments, too many informal substitutions to the curriculum result in a diminished quality of the curriculum progression.

With that said, I would like to describe how Solanco would respond if GCAs were implemented in their current form.

Our goal would be to develop the most meaningful and substantive implementation process for the betterment of our students. We would start with the belief that we wish to afford our students every possible opportunity to demonstrate proficiency prior to graduation, and our implementation plan would seek to reduce the high stakes nature of any one exam.

Solanco students would take validated local exams first, GCAs second, and the PSSA third in order to demonstrate proficiency. While a fourth option could be AP or IB exams, we do not consider them meaningful options because we are not an IB district and we do not envision we have any students who can pass an AP exam yet could not pass a GCA or PSSA.

Our first response would be to validate as many course final exams as possible through PDE's validation process. We would administer these validated final exams in the earliest possible grade where students would be reasonably expected to perform well.

Specifically, all of our students would take a validated final exam in algebra at the end of their 8th grade year. At the end of 9th grade, all students would take the Algebra II exam; in 10th grade all students would take the Geometry final exam. Since students take final exams in these courses anyway, making sure they are validated presents the best first option for students to demonstrate proficiency.

Students who do not demonstrate proficiency on these exams, or students wishing to accelerate meeting their graduation requirements, would take as many GCAs as relevant to their proficiency demonstration needs.

We would see the PSSAs as the last option available for the demonstration of proficiency and would hope the great majority of our students had demonstrated proficiency well before the PSSAs.

What, then, are our concerns?

First, we know little about the validation process. We do not know how long it will take, and we do not know what timeframe we would need to engage teachers in the revision of final exams with the validation process in mind. Assessment is a large field, and validation is significantly broad as well—we have articulated a validation process at the local level, but it may or may not mirror PDE's validation process. We would want to engage this process meaningfully, and without the introduction of the validation process and the allotment of an appropriate amount of time for districts to evaluate their own assessments, we will have a difficult time responding in a reasoned and rational way, especially if the GCAs are introduced simultaneously or soon thereafter.

Second, the SAS is not ready for social studies. We are currently in curriculum revision for social studies. Specifically, I brought the Solanco Social Studies Task Force together in November believing that the SAS system for social studies would be complete, but now I am told that it would be at the end of this school year at the earliest. So our decision was to either delay curriculum revision until the SAS was ready or to move forward with our process, and we decided to move forward with our curriculum revision process.

Third, we are concerned that, despite our efforts, students who have already demonstrated proficiency either through validated local exams or GCAs may not put forth their best effort on the 11th grade PSSAs. At a roundtable discussion of the GCAs last year that I attended, PDE representatives were asked why students who had already demonstrated proficiency would still be required to take the PSSAs even though the exam was less relevant. PDE's response was, "that's how we measure schools." If we meaningfully implement GCAs, give students numerous opportunities to demonstrate proficiency prior to 11th grade, and are successful doing this, then the PSSAs are largely not relevant to a significant number of our students. Yet their performance is the chief way PDE measures our school and our district. Essentially, our efforts on behalf of our students could decrease our ability to meet AYP requirements, not to mention we would devote significant class time to a testing window whose primary purpose is to measure our schools.

Fourth, we believe there is a conflict between honoring local control and implementing GCAs. If our local assessments are as broad, as rigorous, and as reliable as GCAs, then they likely are nearly identical to GCAs. Since assessment drives instruction, good curriculum and assessment are aligned—in this sense, GCAs and SAS have the potential to become the default curriculum for many districts, especially if we are not given much lead time to develop our own assessments. This is in conflict with the notion of local control.

What would we hope to see implemented?

Bring the validation process in first, well before the implementation of the GCAs. Allow us to meaningfully examine our curriculum in conjunction with SAS and then allow us to engage in a process of validating our final exams. We are greatly concerned that the GCA timeline will not allow us to have fully prepared for our students to start meeting these new graduation requirements beginning in their 8th grade year.

Finish the SAS for social studies first and allow districts to engage their curriculum revision cycles in comparison with SAS. If the GCAs are to be implemented *en masse*, consider delaying the social studies requirement. Without SAS, and since there is no PSSA in social studies, the social studies GCAs are certainly a high stakes graduation exam.

In sum, our concerns with the GCAs are not with their underlying rationale. We must avoid falling prey to the fallacy of false dilemmas—we are for high standards, high quality assessments, and meaningful diplomas, but we are largely against this plan. There is a better way that makes more pedagogical sense and will have a better chance of improving the academic outcomes of students. This plan, in its current form, we believe is ambitious yet rushed, broad yet lacking in details, and will likely have more negative effects than positive ones.

Thank you.