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State Board of Education
Public Hearing on High School Reform
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Testimony of

Elmer D. Gates

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the State Board. Thank you for the opportunity to offer my comments to you this morning on the vexing issues of high school reform in Pennsylvania. I approach this subject from the perspective of an entrepreneur and businessman for many years here in the Lehigh Valley and across the world. I come before you today very troubled by the way America is preparing our young people. Or rather, not preparing them.

I believe that preparation is the single most important task of our schools; that is, preparation of our young people to be informed, thoughtful citizens of our democratic society and to be productive, creative, tax-contributing members of our communities. Schools should be teaching students the content and skills they need in math, science, social studies and English; how to read critically, how to write and speak clearly and how to research information and use it to solve problems.

My personal business experience in recent years tells me that this is simply not the case.

High school graduates are entering the workplace – my workplace – without the ability to read, write and do math at the levels necessary for entry level employment. They don't have the skills to communicate in a professional manner, either verbally or in writing or to efficiently manage the technology that is now a feature of every workplace. They lack "soft skills" such as regular attendance, respect for rules and regulations, knowledge of appropriate attire or how to work collaboratively with supervisors or colleagues. When entry level workers are ill prepared in these basic areas, the businesses who need to hire them must spend time and money training them.

My personal experience is reinforced when I read in the newspaper that 44% - more than 56,000 students - graduated from Pennsylvania high schools in 2007 without showing mastery of grade level reading and math skills on state tests.¹ Just last month, I read that one-third of the students attending community colleges or state universities in Pennsylvania must take and pay for non credit make-up classes for coursework they should have learned in high school.²

This makes me angry and frustrated.

¹ http://www.papartnerships.org/ensuring_success/table_math_reading_all_UPDATED.pdf

² Study finds state grads require remedial work,
<http://www.pennlive.com/patriotnews/stories/index.ssf?/base/news/123259563383110.xml&coll=1>

Schools need to re-think the content they are teaching students, how they are teaching it and how they measure student learning.

In the last twenty years, business has been told - in no uncertain terms - that it must re-invent itself in order to remain competitive. Technology has eliminated some jobs while raising the required skill levels for others. Markets have become global and communications instantaneous in ways that would have been unthinkable just two decades ago. Yet schools have not re-invented themselves to meet this same challenge and the result is students graduating from high school unprepared to compete effectively in the global economy.

Schools need to use the power of technology the same way business has; to re-invent the process of education by teaching students to be creative problem solvers and innovative thinkers.

Just consider how American students are stacking up in international academic comparisons. Four decades ago, America had the best high school graduation rate in the world, but by 2006 it had fallen to 18th out of 24 industrialized countries.³ As recently as 1995, America still tied for first in college and university graduation rates, but by 2006 had dropped to 14th. That same year it had the second-highest college dropout rate of 27 countries.⁴

This evidence makes clear to me that at this moment in time, other countries have created better educational systems while we have allowed our systems to stagnate. Other countries have higher expectations for academic achievement and have made greater investments in time, resources and strategic thinking.

It is not that our schools do not know what excellence is. Our public school systems graduate many well prepared students with excellent academic and personal credentials and these students go on to great success in higher education, the military and the workplace.

But when our systems are content to graduate 20% or 30% or even more of their students who can not show mastery of grade level skills or require make up classes before taking college level courses, then as a citizen, a parent, a businessman and a taxpayer, I am greatly dismayed.

It is for all of these reasons that I come before you today to offer my support for the State Board's graduation requirements proposed last January. Businesses simply must be able to understand the value represented by a high school diploma in Pennsylvania whether it is awarded in Parkland or Pittsburgh. And the value of that high school diploma must represent attainment of skills necessary for success in postsecondary education or training

³ Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. *Education at a Glance 2008*. Paris:OECD, September 2008, p. 65, Table A2.1. cited in *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive A World-Class Education*, <http://www.nqa.org/Files/pdf/0812BENCHMARKING.PDF>

⁴ Ibid.

or an entry level position at a bank or a factory or any other workplace. The experts tell us that unlike 20 years ago, the skills and knowledge needed today for success in college or the workplace are essentially the same.

If a high school diploma does not signify readiness, then I wonder just exactly what I have been paying my taxes for all these many years.

I am not impressed with the cries that more tests are a bad idea or that tests make teachers "teach to the test." If the material being taught is what is going to be tested, then teaching the material is teaching to the test!

Likewise, there are high stakes tests all around us, starting with the first "high stakes" test most young people ever take: their driving test. If you can't "pass" the test, you don't get your license to drive a car, period.

I will let others discuss the specific elements of the graduation requirements the State Board has proposed. Let me just finish by saying that I believe it is essential that we end up with graduation requirements that guarantee that a high school diploma represents a student's mastery of the skills and knowledge he or she will need to be successful in college or the workplace of the 21st century. For if we do not make sure that our schools prepare our students to succeed in global competition, we can be sure that students in other countries will be only too happy to take those jobs.

