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**Testimony on Behalf of The Arc of Philadelphia
Stacey Charles, Advocate and Parent
Graduation Competency Assessments Philadelphia Hearing
March 13, 2009**

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Good Afternoon. My name is Stacey Charles and I am a parent of a young boy who receives a free and appropriate education in the great city of Philadelphia and I am an Advocate for The Arc of Philadelphia, a non-profit organization celebrating 60 historic years of providing advocacy and resources for citizens of Philadelphia with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. Along with other Arc chapters, we struggled for the right to education for children regardless of ability. Our roots lie with ARC parents who advocated for necessary systemic educational change that became a federal law—IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). Thirty years after the signing of IDEA, children with disabilities are still not receiving adequate educational support. Despite the services offered, the IEP (Individual Education Plan) which is to guide the student's educational success is now being compromised because of the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments.

First of all, the proposed regulations allow IEP teams to exempt special education students from scoring proficient to graduate, but it does not provide for them to be exempt from taking the exams. They can take the exams, but not pass. So what is the motivation to learn and get a good evaluation? Why even bother with testing? This just doesn't make sense. What you are saying is that if a student who is borderline and disinterested in school and learning can now become even more unmotivated to achieve because he doesn't have to be proficient? I thought we wanted "No Child Left Behind."

Expand this scenario to include the child who scores poorly on standardized tests or has challenges because of a specific learning disability. This person can be successful when supported by specialized services. That is what we want—support for people who truly need the extra service. But, with this proposed legislation, parents can try to convince the school that their child must have an IEP. Parents don't have to worry about the child graduating because with an IEP, they don't have to show competency to graduate. And, as long as a child has an IEP, how can you ensure the teacher will pay attention to my child's educational progress? How sad that we are not giving children more credit for their abilities.

I have concerns about my son. What happens if he is included in the regular classroom? With an IEP, what is going to make the teacher pay extra attention to his attainment of knowledge when clearly the focus for the teacher will be adequate yearly progress for those who must meet proficiency?

What if my child needs modifications and accommodations? What level of remediation would be for him if he is not successful? This is not clear.

The Arc of Philadelphia is in full support of The Arc of PA along with 24 other educational organizations, some represented today who are in opposition to the GCA's. We believe that this should be delayed and researched more. Find out what other states have done to implement these assessments especially for those students receiving special education. What were the unintended consequences and how successful was the implementation? What made it work?

We understand that several other alternatives to the Graduation Competency Assessments have been proposed and we are in total support of the use of local assessment systems that offer a variety of local graduation standards that are determined by the school district. The proposed GCA assessment has barriers that would undermine the ability of our local district to evaluate through a variety of processes, how a student is progressing academically. For example, the system of PSSA tests provide for modified academic standards and accommodations, but they are not available on the GCA's. As advocates, we struggle to get as many students as possible to take the PSSA instead of the PASA. This proposed bill will only make this harder. Students with more challenging disabilities will "opt out" and it is likely that the schools will use the PASA so that students can be "passed on" to the next grade. Please consider evaluating the local assessments and study the effectiveness of the PSSA and PASA tests before you do anything further.

You know, the decisions you make will have either positive or negative consequences for my son and others. If this was your child, what would you want? May I suggest only what is fair and something that would help your child to succeed?

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and we welcome the chance to be part of this continuing dialogue for the sake of every student in the Commonwealth deserving of a free and appropriate (and quality) public education.