



**CHESTER UPLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT**

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1720 MELROSE AVENUE

CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA 19013

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GREGORY E. THORNTON, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

TELEPHONE (610) 447-3610  
FAX (610) 447-3616

## Testimony Before The Pennsylvania State Board of Education

### Graduation Requirements

Good morning, Chairman Torsella and Members of the State Board of Education,

I am Gregory Thornton and I have the honor of serving as the Superintendent of the Chester Upland School District. I preface my remarks by sharing some information about Chester Upland. We are located in Delaware County, but share all of the characteristics of an urban city.

- 72% of district students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, as compared to the state average of 33%.
- One in four families lives below the poverty rate.
- Per capita annual income is \$13,000.
- Almost one-third of citizens over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma.

It is in the context of these facts that I share my thoughts. Last year, Pennsylvania took an important step toward educational equity with the enactment of a funding formula that sets a baseline for the resources needed to deliver a quality public education. I commend Governor Rendell and the PA Legislature for this bold action.

Achieving equity in the academic expectations we hold for students should be our next goal.

The Chester Upland School District has adopted a theory of action deeply rooted in the work of Wagner and Kegan of Harvard University. (I have attached a copy of this model to my testimony). Wagner and Kegan's work, supports the *Standards Aligned Systems* as put forward by the PA Department of Education(PDE). Assessment is critical component of this model. PDE refers to this as *Fair Assessments* which mirrors Wagner and Kegan's terminology of *Diagnostic Data with Accountable Collaboration*. Data is collected at frequent intervals to assess and ensure each student's learning. Those of us who have been in the field of education for many years have been struggling with the concepts of high stakes testing, culture-fair assessments, testing replacing teaching and the newly

coined phrase “test fatigue”. The question is not whether to assess, but how we use the data to further student achievement.

Chester Upland has 3 high schools serving close to 1,500 students. Last year only 3% of students in Chester High School scored proficient in mathematics and only 10% were proficient in reading. Chester-Upland faces significant challenges, but we don’t serve our students well by setting lower targets. We must do better for our young people. Far too many of Chester High School’s students graduate without all of the skills and competencies needed to be successful in post-high school experiences whether they be college or work.

- By 2010, 70 % of newly-created jobs will require post-high school education.
- A four-year college degree is increasingly a prerequisite, with the balance of good-paying jobs requiring at least community college, vocational training, or completion of an apprenticeship.
- Whichever path a young person chooses, advanced skills are necessary.

As Superintendent, it is my responsibility to assure that all students demonstrate mastery of the skills they need to succeed in life. I believe school districts need additional state support to ensure our young people are ready to compete in the most challenging economy of our lifetime. Chester Upland, and many other districts statewide, lack the resources to develop, implement and maintain a rigorous high school curriculum; provide associated professional development for our educators; and design high-quality assessments that can provide both real-time and end-of-course feedback on student learning.

The study released last month by Penn State’s College of Education documents tremendous variance in how school districts measure students’ readiness for postsecondary opportunities, and the degree of alignment between these assessments and the state’s academic standards.

The graduation requirements would fix this. Research has demonstrated that:

- States, schools and districts benefit when standards are taken seriously and are based on the same high expectations and the same basis of evaluation for all students.
- Students benefit when schools are held accountable for meeting student needs.
- Requiring demonstration of proficiencies prior to receipt of a diploma helps hold students accountable for their role in their learning.

The concept of state developed “high school exit examinations” is not new in education. States such as New York, Massachusetts, Florida and North Carolina adopted this approach many years ago. Pennsylvania is well positioned to benefit from the experiences both positive and challenging from other states in areas such as test

development, phase-in of new requirements, building constituencies, and having adequate resources and contingencies in place for students who do not demonstrate mastery.

I applaud Chairman Torsella, Secretary Zahorchak and the leadership of the Pa School Boards' Association for the proposal announced last month. Their agreement ends the unfunded mandate on districts to design local assessments and finds the right balance between our state's tradition of local control and the commonwealth-wide need for employers and higher education to know that a PA high school diploma means readiness. Particularly at this challenging time, it is important to use public resources and policy levers strategically.

This proposal makes sense from both efficiency and educational standpoints:

- The state can develop model curriculum and instructional resources at lower cost than can individual school districts;
- Situating this work at the state-level will increase the consistency of expectations and the quality of the tools across schools and districts;
- Assessment based on rigorous, internationally-benchmarked standards will provide students with important signals about how their skills stack up against competition from across the state – and around the world.
- Moving from one-shot, comprehensive assessments to subject-specific end-of-course tests ensures more coordination between instruction and measurement and will ultimately reduce the testing burden on students.

It is critical that as these new requirements are discussed and debated, the following tenets do not get lost.

- Students have multiple opportunities to take and pass the Graduation Competency Assessments.
- The tests are aligned with state standards that reflect the skills students need to be successful in post-high school experiences.
- Extended learning opportunities for at-risk and struggling students remain and are expanded where needed. Programs such as Project 720, Classroom For The Future, Education Assistance Program, dual enrollment opportunities and alternative education programs are vital to supporting students.
- Accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners are in place.

In summary, I support and applaud the high school graduation requirements. They are right for Chester's students and students across Pennsylvania. These requirements will ensure that a student who earns a high school diploma is truly ready for the real world of

500<sup>09th grade</sup> 237 - graduation  
140 accepted  
70 enrolled - 600% remedial courses

college and high-skilled careers. High school reform is the best tool at our disposal to ensure that our young people can enjoy successful futures and that Pennsylvania survives the current economic crisis and emerges stronger for the challenge. Every school district in this Commonwealth, whether small or large - Chester, Radnor or Scranton, has the same goal-to assure that students graduate with the skills they need to be successful in life.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

# Chester Upland School District's Theory of Action



