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Testimony on Graduate Competency Assessments
State Board of Education
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I am delighted that the State Board has reopened the issue of GCA's and has modified the original proposal to elicit greater school district support. I hope you are also actively seeking input from both employers and college admissions officers, who are tremendously disadvantaged by the current situation in which a high school diploma, especially from an urban neighborhood high school, may have no meaning as an indicator of academic skills.

I have been involved in public education for 38 years in numerous roles including special assistant to one PA Secretary of Education and consultant to another; a community teacher in the Parkway Program when it was a "school without walls;" president and executive director of one civic public education advocacy organization and founder of another; consultant to Community College of Philadelphia, Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania on partnerships with the School District; faculty member in a teacher certification program geared to upgrading paraprofessionals, most of whom were teacher aides in the School District; creator of a summer academic enrichment program for 900 Philadelphia neighborhood high school students supported with workforce development funds; program designer and evaluator of a five-year college prep program for neighborhood high school students; and, currently, as adviser to the Chief of School Operations and to the Mayor's Office of Education. I come before you today speaking only for myself.

Throughout my checkered career, and especially in my work with Philadelphia Futures' Sponsor-A-Scholar college prep program for 13 years, few things have been more distressing than seeing A's and B's on report cards next to Basic and Below Basic PSSA scores, and 300's and 400's on SAT's. For generations these disconnects have misled thousands of students about their career and college readiness. It is time to connect the dots and give every student a clear, consistent, fair, standards-based picture of his or her academic skills.

That is, on one level, the easy part of the challenge you face. The tougher question before you is, "How do we institute GCA's without punishing students for the inadequacies of the adults who have failed them both literally and figuratively?"

I hope your answer is to ensure that all districts can afford the necessary supports for students at risk of failure. I believe that these supports must begin no later than grade 3 and include for every student below grade level:

- smaller classes taught by exemplary teachers with special skill in accelerating the achievement of struggling students
- homework help and encouragement from a school staff mentor
- afterschool, Saturday and weekend enrichment that reinforces academic skills through games, projects, clubs, trips, competitions, and other informal learning methods
- recognition for improvement to enhance academic confidence.

To parallel the student support services, districts should adopt promotion policies beginning no later than grade 3 that ensure that students are within shouting distance of grade level in order to be promoted. To minimize the stigma of being held back, repeating students should be offered the opportunity to transfer to different schools for a fresh start.

For decades, educators have known about the impact of teachers' expectations on students' performance. I think we need to look upon GCA's as a statement of educational policy-makers' expectations of teachers' performance. Years ago, a Chancellor of the New York City Schools announced, in what he admitted was a precipitous move, that all students would be required to take Regents' exams the following year. Everyone, including the Chancellor, knew that there would not be sufficient time for all the necessary professional development for teachers and instructional materials to address this new higher standard. Yet the following year more poor students and students of color passed the Regents than ever before in the history of NYC schools.

Teachers need to know that we have high expectations of them—no matter how poor or dirty or ill-fed their students. They also need to know that we will provide them with the conditions they need to help their most vulnerable students attain educational success.

Combined with resources for intensive support of struggling students and high expectations for all teachers, GCA's can become the rising tide that lifts all boats.