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**Testimony of Dr. Lori Shorr, Chief Education Officer to Mayor Nutter
State Board of Education Hearing on Keystone Exams
March 13, 2009**

Good morning, my name is Dr. Lori Shorr, and I'm the Chief Education Officer for Mayor Michael Nutter of Philadelphia. Let me first begin by saying thank you to the State Board, for providing me the opportunity to discuss the adoption of Graduation Competency Assessments—or Keystone Exams—in Pennsylvania.

The importance of Keystone Exams to Philadelphia's educational future cannot be understated. We here in Philadelphia recognize the need for bold action to ensure that more of our students graduate from high school career and work ready.

When he first took office, our Mayor committed to cut the dropout rate in half within 5-7 years. But we face to major challenges in this work. The first challenge is our alarmingly low high school graduation rate. Currently only about 58.7% of high school students graduate within four years. And while we are proud that this rate has increased steadily over the past 8 years, much work still lies ahead of us. And getting more students to graduate is just one part of the work necessary to build a quality workforce. Ensuring that a high school diploma represents a student's ability to succeed in college and the workforce should be our paramount concern.

Another challenge we face is the low academic performance of the young people who do persist through high school. According to last year's PSSA statistics, only 33% of 11th grade students perform at a proficient or

advanced level on the math test, and only 37% of students are proficient or advanced in reading. These statistics tell us even though many of our students do persist through high school, **far too many** graduate without full mastery of the state standards and are not prepared for the postsecondary world of college or careers.

And the problem of postsecondary readiness isn't just limited to Philadelphia alone. The recently-released national Quality Counts report found that while Pennsylvania can boast a high graduation rate, we have one of the lowest postsecondary rates in the nation. These trends should tell us that there is a **fundamental disconnect** between our expectations of students in high schools, and the expectations that will be placed upon them once they leave our doors.

I often think of a high school student who I learned of, who graduated as the valedictorian of his Philadelphia public school, to later enter college having to take a full course load of remedial courses. Keystone exams could have ensured that this student was educated to high standards and graduated with the skills he needed to succeed in college.

Philadelphia's low level of educational achievement and attainment is carried into our adult population. Currently approximately 2/3 of Philadelphians are low literate. And only about 22% of Philadelphians hold a baccalaureate degree. These statistics translate into unique challenges for our city's adults, and our city as a whole. Adults with low educational levels are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be dependent on social services, and less able to earn a living wage. And as a city, it is more

difficult for us attract world-class businesses when we lack the strong workforce to fill the jobs that they would bring.

The recently released Penn State study underscores this problem, as less than four percent of districts actually have tests that appropriately measure whether students can read and do math at the 11th grade level. We must do more to ensure that our students leave high school ready for the rigors of postsecondary learning. We're doing our students and our communities a disservice if we do not.

The Department, the State Board, and the School Boards Association are to be applauded for taking clear steps to ensure that these graduation requirements are not unfunded mandates. Districts may assess their students using a combination of the PSSA, Keystone Exams, local assessments and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams. And for those districts that choose to use local assessments, the Department will share the cost for validating them.

In addition, we know that our students will be well served under the proposed regulations, as districts will be required to provide supplemental instruction to students who do not score proficient or above on their exams.

Keystone Exams in particular will help schools better align their expectations for students with the demands of colleges and the workplace. The exams can be structured in ways to ensure that they are administered fairly and equitably. Students can have the opportunity to take the exam right after they finish the particular course, and again if they need to do so.

Accelerated students can take the exams as early as they'd like and graduate from high school once they've mastered the state standards. Students who need extra time to graduate can progress through high school focused on mastering course content, instead of being focused on seat time in the classroom.

Keystone Exams will help cities like Philadelphia ensure that our students will not leave high school without the skills they need to succeed in their postsecondary lives. The current state of our economy heightens the need for this work. As our unemployment numbers grow from month to month, even the most qualified applicants in the job market are struggling to find and keep a good job. I strongly encourage our state leaders to support the adoption and implementation of the Keystone Exams across the Commonwealth, and to turn the tide in Pennsylvania's educational and economic future.

****Pipeline metaphor****

Thank you.