

2696

Testimony
of Joseph W. Mahoney, Jr.
Executive Vice President, Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce
before the
Pennsylvania Board of Education
Friday, March 13, 2009,
Montgomery Auditorium, Free Library of Philadelphia, 1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia,
PA (between 19th and 20th Streets on the Parkway)

Good morning. My name is Joseph W. Mahoney, Jr. and I am Executive Vice President of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce. I am pleased to be here today to offer comments on the efforts of the Pennsylvania Board of Education to improve the Commonwealth's high school graduation requirements.

In addition to our traditional priorities of advocating for business friendly legislation, the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce (GPCC) launched an initiative this year to support Pennsylvania's intellectual infrastructure through a new, adequate public education funding plan for school districts that includes measures to increase accountability, reduce costs and streamline governance.

Chairman of the Board of Directors David L. Cohen introduced this new focus when he accepted his position at the GPCC Annual Meeting in October, 2008.

"When we shortchange our investment in education, we shortchange our children and our future. And in the end, it is the region's employers who pay the price," he said.

The Chamber believes that maintaining an educated workforce is essential as Greater Philadelphia and Pennsylvania strive to compete in the global marketplace.

Even during the current economic downturn, we are encouraged that increased funding for education has received attention at the local, state, and federal levels.

We are pleased that the budget proposal currently being debated in Harrisburg includes a call for increased funding, as well as additional accountability measures. We support efforts to continue closing the funding gap in public education and initiatives to evaluate academic outcomes and performance.

The Chamber is convinced that under-funded school districts will not be able to close the achievement gap without sufficient resources. But we also do not believe that additional funds alone will ensure that one hundred percent of our students graduate with 12th grade skills.

The fact that 30 percent of students who graduate in the school districts in the four Philadelphia suburban counties cannot read or do math at the 11th grade level is unacceptable. We need tomorrow's workforce to perform at a higher level.

We have urged Governor Rendell and lawmakers to adopt accountability requirements on school districts which ensure that with new funds come new expectations for performance. Clearly, there must be effective ways to measure progress and document improved performance.

We know that the Rendell Administration has been urging the implementation of mandatory, statewide high school graduation requirements to ensure that everyone who earns a high school diploma has the basic skills to enter college or the workforce.

While this proposal has created controversy among stakeholders and lawmakers, we were pleased to learn of an agreement last week by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association; Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak and Board of Education Chairman Joseph Torsella to endorse a new, compromise testing plan that would make the state tests voluntary and permit the use of local assessments.

We commend these leaders in the education community for their perseverance in seeking a workable plan to ensure that the graduates of Pennsylvania's high schools obtain the basic educational standards that will prepare them for higher education or meaningful employment. We understand that the new, compromise graduation testing proposal is to be formally proposed by the state Board of Education this summer, could apply to seniors graduating in June 2015.

We would urge that lawmakers and others involved in the regulatory process, as well as interested and affected parties, give serious consideration to this compromise plan that is designed to improve the educational attainment of students across Pennsylvania.

Again, we support an increased investment in public education and in Pennsylvania's intellectual infrastructure because we have been encouraged by the improved outcomes in school districts where funding has risen and accountability measures and proven academic programs have been initiated.

We commend the Department of Education for conducting this and other public hearings across Pennsylvania to obtain input on proposals to strengthen Pennsylvania's high school graduation requirements. We look forward to working together with you and with all stakeholders to develop a strong and capable workforce that will enable Pennsylvania to compete in the world economy.

Thank you.