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MONTGOMERY COUNTY INTERMEDIATE UNIT

An Educational Service Agency Supporting School Excellence

**MONTGOMERY COUNTY EDUCATORS' CONCERNS
Graduation Competency Assessments (GCA's)**

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Dr. Mary Jane Gales
Director of Legislative Services and Grant Development

Executive Director/Chief Executive Officer
Dr. Jerry W. Shiveley

Assistant Executive Director/Director of Human Resources
Jane W. Mansuy

Chief Financial Officer/Director of Management Services
Stan H. Wisler

The Montgomery County Intermediate Unit, a regional educational service agency, provides dynamic, visionary leadership and effective, efficient services for constituent school districts, schools and students. The MCIU offers more than 200 instructional and administrative programs and services to Montgomery County's 22 public school districts, the 4 vocational-technical schools and more than 170 nonpublic schools in Montgomery County.

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY EDUCATORS' CONCERNS

The school districts in Montgomery County take great pride in the achievement of their students and the efforts being expended by districts to ensure that all students learn.

In Montgomery County's public schools, almost 83% of our students were college bound in 2004-2005. Of the 1,281 students who were not college bound, over 94% of them were gainfully employed.

We have identified the following concerns about the proposed GCA's:

- **Local Control/Unfunded Mandate**

The imposition of Graduation Competency Assessments is yet another unfunded mandate that further threatens local control. The adoption of GCA's reduces local control while simultaneously and dramatically increasing school districts' administrative burden.

- **Narrowing the Curriculum**

Accumulating knowledge doesn't promote a successful career any more than overdosing on vitamins leads to good health. Furthermore, there is concern that the implementation of GCA's will ultimately narrow the rich and broad curricular options currently available - only to be substituted with a statewide mandatory curriculum. Instructional opportunities in subjects such as world language, visual arts and performing arts will be significantly curtailed or eliminated.

- **Teaching to the Test**

The imposition of high stakes testing may result in teachers teaching to the test. Important skills that can not be tested on standardized tests, such as writing research papers, preparing a public speaking presentation or conducting laboratory experiments, may not be taught. Workforce development experts suggest a critical need for more advanced work skills such as the ability to be responsible, self-manage and self-assess, demonstrate a good work ethic, work on teams, influence people, do research, think critically, make decisions, know how to learn and problem solve. Standardized tests generally do not measure these key skills necessary for success in a work environment. Furthermore, granting a diploma based on only standardized skills runs the risk of graduating students who do not possess this host of requisite life skills.

- **Test Administration**

It currently takes approximately 22 instructional days to administer all the PSSA's. It currently costs \$40 million a year to administer the PSSA's. Imagine the costs in both time and money to administer 10 additional assessments, each of which may be taken multiple times. If, as suggested, students are permitted to take GCA's 3 times a year, there could be an additional 30 test administration periods during the school year!

- **Detrimental Impact on Vocational Education Students**

Students attending vocational schools are engaged in highly relevant instruction to prepare them to take multiple vocational competency assessments.

The requirement for vocational students to take GCA's will undermine their current success. In Montgomery County, we are proud of the fact that 94% of these students either attended higher education (56.5%) or were gainfully employed (37.5%) in 2005-2006.

These students graduated having passed multiple competencies in their chosen field. Surely these standardized vocational competency tests should be permitted to substitute for paper-pencil GCA's.

- **Drop Out Rates**

There is growing evidence that the imposition of exit exams has marginalized at-risk youth, leading to an increase in dropout rates. A National Research Council report found that high stakes tests may help to motivate those students who are "just getting by, but know they can do better." However, they likely will harm the lowest-performing students who will "not exert effort when they do not expect their efforts to lead to success."

One question we have not heard addressed is how an increased drop-out rate will affect the economy of our state. The life earning capacity of a high school drop-out is severely compromised. It would be a devastating blow to our state economy to increase the number of drop-outs. Unfortunately, all too frequently, these same individuals will doubly hurt our economy by becoming incarcerated.

Thus far, there has been no discussion on the impact of a lower graduation rate to our Commonwealth's economy.

- **Local Assessment Validation**

The current proposal suggests that districts will be able to use their own final exams if these exams are independently validated. Our educators have repeatedly asked about the validation process, i.e. How much time will it take and how much will it cost? Over the past year, the response has been consistent: "We don't know yet, we haven't gotten that far." We are fearful that this is a disingenuous option because the costs may be prohibitive. We question whether it isn't premature to adopt GCA's without knowing all the facts, implications and costs associated with them.

- **Emotionally Nurturing Environment**

Students, teachers, and administrators alike already feel tremendous pressure surrounding the annual publication of PSSA results. Layering ten (10) more assessments will only increase stress, with no increase in academic competency.

- **Utilization of resources**

Instructional time is one of our most valuable resources in accomplishing the goal of preparing our students for the 21st century. If GCA's are implemented, students will receive fewer hours of direct instructional time. Precious teacher time will be expended in

organizing, securing and administering GCA's multiple times per year. Additional professional time will be needed for record keeping and teacher training. Time is a finite resource; time spent in all the administrative organizational aspects of testing is instructional time lost forever for students.

The cost of test development administration must not be overlooked. It is estimated that the administration of PSSA's currently cost \$40 million annually. It is projected that the development of 10 GCA's will cost \$50 million. No cost or time estimate has yet been provided by the State Board of Education for the annual administration of the GCA's.

We ardently believe that time and money should be invested in additional learning opportunities, not additional testing requirements. School districts already offer ample local and state assessments. The students who need additional instruction, remediation and support have already been identified. No district needs an additional layer of testing to tell it what it already knows.

CONCLUSION

Montgomery County educators are committed to having our students ready to compete in the 21st Century. We recognize that all students must be ready and our districts have taken aggressive strides to reach student subgroups that have traditionally suffered. We have identified both staff development needs and student instructional needs. We don't need another set of tests, such as the GCA's to help us identify the real work that must be done.

It is important for the State Board to recognize multiple pathways for school districts to initiate school district reforms that promise to prepare all students for college and career success. For example, we are fortunate to have many districts working with the Delaware Valley Minority Student Achievement Consortium. All the consortium districts are committed to attending to identified conditions that enhance the achievement of all students, and most specifically increase the achievement, engagement and further success of their minority populations.

Additional testing is not the answer. Changing the culture and climate of the learning conversations for all students is the only approach that can lead to sustainable results. Scholars from distinguished colleges of education such as Brown, Harvard, UCLA, and Vanderbilt have been working with our school districts on systemic change.

We realize that systemic change is the only way to narrow the achievement gap and we are dedicating our time and resources to creating systemic change. We recognize that the most effective efforts to improve student achievement are those that build instructional capacity.

We applaud the Commission's goal, but its basic premise is flawed. Furthermore, the Commission's solution of instituting high stake GCA's is shortsighted and clearly premature. We urge the legislature to recognize that our school districts need to spend their finite resources on direct instruction, not testing. Our current system of relying on multiple measure of assessment ensures that the graduation decision is valid and that multiple assessments more closely mirror the kinds of challenging work that our students will be

required to perform as members of the global community. We implore our legislators to take the money allocated to testing and reallocate it to real programs and direct services to our students. Further testing is not a wise investment of resources.

As Achieve, a national organization of governors, business leaders and education leaders, has noted: "States...need to move beyond large-scale assessments because, as critical as they are, they cannot measure everything that matters in a young person's education. The ability to make effective oral arguments and conduct significant research projects are considered essential skills by both employers and postsecondary educators, but these skills are very difficult to assess on a paper-and-pencil test."

Thank you.

Dr. Mary Jane Gales
Montgomery County Intermediate Unit
1605 W. Main Street
Norristown, PA 19403
Office 610-755-9304