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TALKING POINTS
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INTRODUCTION and ENDORSEMENT:

Members of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, The State Board, and the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, I am grateful for the invitation and the opportunity to comment on the State's proposal to require graduation competency assessments.

As superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia, I endorse the effort to reframe and elevate graduation requirements across the Commonwealth. Whether we utilize the PSSA, Keystone Assessments, or validated local assessment tools, testing is an important and transformational methodology. It is a measurement of individual achievement, school quality, and the academic culture of a school district. As such, measurement targets provide School Districts with continuous information for corrective action or program replication.

GLOBAL and NATIONAL CONTEXT:

The 21st century has seen rapid, dramatic changes in the economic and social forces that face the United States. Globalization has contributed to new dynamics in the U.S. economy. Traditional industrial and manufacturing sectors no longer provide employment opportunities to workers

with limited academic skills. The “knowledge economy” increasingly demands well-educated, adaptable workers. Globalization demands an informed citizenry. And, our students deserve an education that is equitable, excellent, and empowering. Testing across all demographics has the potential to level the playing field, equalize opportunity, and force un-attentive school districts to pay attention to their respective reform needs.

Disquiet about the quality of public high schools and the preparedness of high school graduates is prominent in the national debate on public education. If we are to reclaim a global competitive edge and a growing economy in an ever-changing and complex world, then Pennsylvania graduates must be equipped with 21st century knowledge and skills.

LOCAL CONTEXT: District Assets and Challenges

The nation is demanding reform of secondary education, and Philadelphia is poised to embrace that challenge. Local and state leaders are supporting and investing in the School District of Philadelphia (the District), and a growing urgency for change is building among the broader Philadelphia community. As District Superintendent who is committed to a student-centered approach and an alignment of supports and interventions to keep all students on-track for success.

The District’s commitment to a more rigorous and unified core curriculum, high expectations for all, and mandated

measurement targets for graduation is reflected in the newly drafted Strategic Plan. A new mayor, school administration and its governing body, the School Reform Commission, have jointly and clearly articulated focus on education, particularly secondary education and college success.

Incorporated into the initiatives of Philadelphia's new strategic plan—Imagine 2014, is a five-year blueprint for increasing achievement in secondary grades--Embrace the Challenge: 2008-2013. The blueprint is a collaborative project of the School District of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Education Fund.

The seven measurable targets of this project focus on the following indicators:

- On-time progress through secondary education (grades 6-12)
- On-time ninth grade promotion
- PSSA performance at Proficient and Advanced levels (grades 6-8, 11)
- High school graduation rate
- Re-engagement of out-of-school youth (grades 6-12)
- Readiness and success in post-secondary education and careers
- School climate (grades 6-12)

The targets are specifically focused on outcomes for youth, with the exception of one focused on school climate, included as a critical condition for success in all

other targets.

Quantifiable goals and benchmarks (i.e., by percentage) will be determined for each target to allow for ongoing monitoring and analysis of progress towards the target outcomes. An endorsement of the Commonwealth's proposal we are addressing today is clearly evidenced in the District's plan to "Embrace the Challenge."

The "Essential Characteristics" of the Philadelphia plan describes a system-wide vision for community elements needed to support the goal of preparing all youth for success in post-secondary education and careers, and for active civic participation.

These include:

- Equity and Access
- Quality Teaching and Learning that is Aligned, Rigorous, and Engaging
- Shared Leadership and Accountability for Student Outcomes
- Personalized Learning Environments
- System-wide Professionalism
- Pathways and Transitions

MEASURING PROGRESS:

Metrics for each of the seven Targets and benchmarks towards reaching them are essential to student success. Simply said, that means we will test our students, monitor

individual and school progress toward attainment of targets—in reference to benchmark data provided by the District’s Office of Assessment and Accountability. To ensure equity, we will disaggregate data by geographic, economic, racial and gender subgroups.

CONCLUSION:

As many states are putting in place more rigorous high school exit exams, and students understand that a diploma no longer provides entry to the middle class, critics of testing are becoming more vocal. To counter the growing criticism, we need evidence. This proposal will help to provide that evidence.

Over the past two decades, the percentage of low-income students who say they want a four-year degree or higher has tripled, rising to 66.2 percent in 2002, from 19.4 percent in 1980, according to federal statistics. All Parents are stoking the hopes and dreams of their children. I often hear how long and how hard they are working and sacrificing so that their sons and daughters can “do better than me.” Someone has to help them figure out how to do this because the parents may not know themselves.

We—the nation’s school leaders—have a moral imperative to “do better” by our children. They deserve no less.

Thank you.

