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January 25, 2008

The Honorable Edward G. Rendell
Governor, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Room 225 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Rendell:

I find it a stunning testimony on the state of education in Pennsylvania for the Secretary of Education to call most high school diplomas "empty." Certainly, this is a disappointing editorial on the advances that we (the Administration and General Assembly) have made over the past few years in education – including state support for quality pre-K programs, smaller class size and Accountability Block Grants.

As I'm sure you've read, heard and gleaned from countless educational organizations, school administrators and others in the education field, there is little support in the trenches for requiring graduate competency assessments. Discussion of imposing these types of exams on the heels of the federal testing requirements under No Child Left Behind begs the question of the actual value of these types of standardized tests.

Rather than repeating the arguments offered by many of my local school officials, which I can forward if you would like, I will say that I agree with the educators in the field that if exit exams are required in Pennsylvania, we would be focusing all of a student's education on passing exams (rather than learning and developing a love of learning), and also that this money would be better invested in education initiatives that begin in elementary school to adequately prepare students.

I would also like to point out that the \$86 million estimated cost to develop, implement, administer and score the tests would be more wisely invested by creating a benchmark test earlier in a student's education – perhaps fifth grade. This would give the student and the school ample opportunity for remedial work and an adequate education for every student. In its current form, the test will do little but to diminish the number of students who can graduate and unfortunately the schools will be faced with telling these students this during what should have been their final year. This could spell an increase in Pennsylvania's high school dropout rate, which I do not believe is the goal of this initiative.

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I am fortunate that in the 17th District, a high percentage of high school graduates leave school with skills that place them in some of the best institutions of higher education across the country. This makes the imposition of another test on these schools an unnecessary expense. And requiring that schools that already have final exams to gain state approval for those tests, even if they already boast a high placement rate seems like a misuse of the Commonwealth's time and a poor use of taxpayer dollars.

Perhaps I am naïve, but I still believe that given the proper tools – from creating a more standardized system for educating our educators, to ensuring every student is given the tools he or she needs to learn, to providing access to grants for students who would like to pursue higher education, but can't afford to – Pennsylvania's system of education will produce results that can be validated not by a series of exit exams, but by the number of students who graduate with the knowledge and skills not only worthy of a high school diploma, but also worthy of the best institutions of higher education and the careers of their choosing.

In a letter that you recently sent to legislators concerning an Education Week report "Quality Counts" you said that Pennsylvania "did great." You highlighted the fact that we placed 10th out of 50 states overall and ranked 5th best in the nation in "student achievement." In nearly every category, it was obvious that Pennsylvania was far ahead of the national average, especially when it came to outcomes from Pennsylvania's "record investment" in early education.

Rather than fast-tracking an expensive mandate, such as graduate competency assessments, Pennsylvania should continue the efforts begun by your administration.

Sincerely,

Connie Williams

Constance H. Williams
State Senator
17th District

CHW/eahb

Cc: Jim Buckheit, State Board of Education
Independent Regulatory Review Commission
Sec. Gerald Zahorchak
Sen. Raphael Musto
Sen. James Rhoades