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**From:** Mars R&R Services [mailto:marsrrservices@zoominternet.net]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 15, 2009 10:21 AM  
**To:** Schalles, Scott R.  
**Cc:** Wilmarth, Fiona E.; Totino, Michaele  
**Subject:** Submit to Chairman Coccodrilli

Dear IRRC,

Good morning! Would you please submit this letter to Chairman Arthur Coccodrilli of the IRRC on my behalf? I did not have his email address and could not locate it.

Thank you very much,  
Kim Geyer

Kimberly D. Geyer  
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"Never Doubt That a Small Group of Thoughtful, Committed People Can Change The World. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."  
~Margaret Meade

Representative Cherelle L. Parker  
Pennsylvania House of Representatives  
112 Irvis Office Building  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

September 15, 2009

Dear Honorable Representative Parker,

I found the perspectives of Dr. Arlene Ackerman interesting in her argument to you for supporting the State Board of Education's adoption of the Keystone Exams on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009 as well as disputing the Pennsylvania NAACP's recent concerns. I have studied education policy since 1993 and have taken a hard look at what works with the General Assembly's attempts and history to fund new reforms and direct additional funding specifically to urban school districts such as Philadelphia, with little return for their investment. On an inflation-adjusted per capita basis, education spending has doubled in the past thirty years with, at best, meager results. A typical black or Hispanic child enters school behind and stays behind. These dismal results are compounded by the fact that only 30% to 35% of black students who go onto college graduate within six years. One might be pardoned for thinking that such disparities would have been reduced by all the efforts and money expended over the past 15 years, but, the truth to the matter is, the gulf is widening. Why? That's the most important question confronting our society today.

As you are aware, nearly 8% of Pennsylvania's high schools have high drop out rates, with 60% or less of their incoming freshmen making it to graduation. More than half of the Pennsylvania schools identified amongst the 1,700 nationwide by John Hopkins University researchers as "drop out factories" are located in the Philadelphia region . In addition, drop out rates officially reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education are far more lower than the 35% found by Rand Study. This is because the state/s calculation of drop outs includes only students officially reported as dropping out over the course of the a 12-month period, and because the state calculation divides the number of dropouts by a district's total enrollment in grades seven through twelve. This includes middle schools, where official drop out rates are virtually zero.

Pennsylvania will begin public reporting of graduation rates using the new cohort graduation rate definition as agreed to in 2005 by the NGA Graduation Rate Compact beginning with the class of 2010 and Maryland, 2011. As with our peers across the nation, there is anticipation that new cohort graduation rates may be lower and drop out rates higher than what is currently reported in Pennsylvania. For anyone to hold the state of Maryland up as the poster child for student achievement is dubious at best due to simple fact that they, like Pennsylvania, have yet to comply with the NGA's Compact formula which will determine a more accurate graduation rate. Maryland has a unique statewide student identifier, however, it does not yet connect student data across key databases across years; Maryland is working toward this. Furthermore, the new federal regulations for the NGA Compact requires that only students who graduate in four years

or less count as graduates in the four-year graduation rate, Maryland's current policy does not comply and will need to be adjusted to meet the federal requirements by 2011. Until that implementation occurs, I would not be inclined to be misled by Maryland statistics, in general.

Contrary to Dr. Ackerman's fourth paragraph, there is nothing to stop any school district at the current time, at the local level from implementing a more rigorous curriculum, higher standards which are more rigorous than the state academic standards, and map sequencing of courses to prevent students from descending into the lower level courses rather than accelerating to higher and more challenging, advanced courses of curriculum. This can all be done at the local level without mandates coming from the state and I belong to a district which has imposed such self-imposed mandates which extend beyond those required by the state and federal government. The state board of education's proposal has nothing to do with increasing access to more rigorous curriculum when that can be achieved locally. Economically disadvantaged students and minorities can not access these courses because some of them lack or are weak in some of these skills and that deters them from accessing these courses once they reach the high school level....not because they are not there in existence.

Research based evidence by John Hopkins University researchers indicate that currently students who repeat 9<sup>th</sup> grade is perhaps the strongest risk factor towards dropping out.(Studies 1998,2001, & 2004). Students who repeat 9<sup>th</sup> grade are typically students with very weak academic skills and poor attendance habits. Absent strong and sustained interventions, there is little evidence that students who failed to be promoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade will right themselves by simply being given a second try. For example, in Philadelphia School District, most 9<sup>th</sup> grade repeaters during the 1999-2000 school year did not do substantially better on their second try than in their 1<sup>st</sup> year. The typical student only passed half of their courses and for a second time failed to be promoted. This research makes sense and validates the rationale that if a student enters the 9<sup>th</sup> grade with weak skills in math and reading, they cannot access the higher order and more rigorous maths and courses needed to complete and fulfill graduation requirements. Which is why we need to direct our funding at developing these skills at a much earlier age and down at the lower levels of school beneath the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, as 9<sup>th</sup> grade is much too late to begin remediation. New assessment tests or end of course exams, are not going to change this fact nor yield the results Pennsylvania hopes to get in their return in the event they invest these millions into Keystone Exams. Students and educators would be better served to have money directed into the local classrooms for interventions at a much earlier stage than 9<sup>th</sup> grade, to meet the basic needs of students to ensure they have the skills which are needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Contrary to Dr. Ackerman's claims to persuade you that "these new tests will serve as an excellent way to measure whether students have met our statewide graduation requirements are ready to succeed in college, or the workforce, and will enhance the equity...." We are currently achieving these same diagnostic results with the PSSA. The notion that a new series of ten end of course tests is going to better prepare our students and provide a better workforce, is not going to yield the results this state is hoping unless

we develop the skills and knowledge base during the younger years. Currently every school district and school board has the flexibility and local control to increase their graduation requirements for their respective students in order to receive a high school diploma and can achieve this action without a mandate from the General Assembly or State Board of Education at the current time. I know this first hand, as I belong to a district which has increased our maths from 3 to 4 required and sciences, the same. It was our district's own self imposed will and commitment to education to ensure that our students are prepared for the world in which they are about to enter with the skills and knowledge base necessary. This same course of action can be initiated in each and every district with or without the advisement of the Chapter 4 education regulations. This course of action stimulates the lower grade levels to reach higher for the bar and to achieve Algebra I skills no later than the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in order to access the four higher order math courses once they reach the 9<sup>th</sup> grade with the skills needed to access them and perform successfully.

Students scoring below basic on a Keystone Exam or one of six modules get no credit for that they do know. If the cut score is 69 and a student gets a 68, they do not get a 68 averaged into their course work, they get a ZERO. This lowers students grade point averages and will make it more difficult for Pennsylvania students competing against students from other states into getting accepted into colleges. Contrarily, this initiative is not voluntary as alluded to by PDE, as districts will be led down a path to a mandatory state curriculum and exams due to affordability factors of mandates outlined in the Torsella/Keystone Exams Plan, some of which are outlined for you below.

Maryland's Bridge Plan for Academic Validation is approximately one year old as it was initially implemented in May 2008. There is no history of evidence proving it is an effective education reform. This reform is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and costly to local school districts who will bear the costs of the project based assessments. Montgomery school officials in Prince George's County estimated the Bridge Project for their school district alone would cost at least \$1.5 million for its inaugural year. (May 2008- May2009) The additional costs come as school systems face tightening budgets.

Despite the PDE's efforts to shave \$40 million from the original Keystone 1.0 Plan, \$25 million in contract adjustments, and a potential \$15 million in the event the PSSA is eliminated, there are two additional costs to contend with, one which did and one which did not exist in the original Keystone Exam 1.0 plan.

Both of these costs are yet to be determined...Both of these costs ARE NOT FACTORED INTO THE \$201 MILLION CONTRACT WITH DATA RECOGNITION CORPORATION.

Cost #1: Validation of Local Assessment (State's 50/50 Share) Language as contained in the original Keystone 1.0 Plan.

Cost #2: Validation of the Keystone Exams themselves. (New Language as contained in the Torsella Compromise and NOT contained in the original Keystone 1.0 Plan. It must be noted to the reader that the original Keystone Exam 1.0 plan NEVER INCLUDED a cost in validating themselves as it was determined to be TOO EXPENSIVE! However, the PDE was and is going to make the local school districts pay for their selves to have their own local assessments validated in both the Keystone 1.0 plan and the Torsella Compromise.

**Costs Not Considered Under Torsella Compromise**

- Alternative Pathways: Regional Scoring is very lucrative and controversial. The project based assessments will be administered locally, but, scored regionally. In Virginia, estimates are \$500,000 for 5 days of Regional Scoring alone. The Torsella Compromise does not address this, nor the increase of funding which will be needed. Local school districts will incur this unfunded mandate.
- Testing Out: Addition of Classrooms and Teaching staff
- Combination of GCA and Local Assessment: Tests and Curriculum (As determined in a Florida Court Ruling, schools are required to have curriculum aligned with assessments if it is part of a student’s grade. If schools are using the Keystone Exam(s), they are required to have the supporting content curriculum. If schools are utilizing a combination of Keystone Exams and Local Assessments, they must have a combination of curriculum.)
- Students denied high school diploma: Returning and Drop Out Students.
- Local Costs associated with transitioning to the State Model Curriculum, professional development and new textbooks, materials, and resources.
- State Costs associated with development, marketing, and field piloting State Model Curriculum.

**Torsella Compromise: Cost Breakdown (6 year period) \$40 million in savings is a line item shift, NOT A REDUCTION**

Original Cost of the PSSA	\$150,908,972
Savings available from PSSA Phase Out	\$15,000,000
Proposed Cost of Keystone Exam (Tests Only)	\$126,194,829
Savings from replacing PSSA	\$24,744,143
Total Savings/Funds Available	\$39,744,143
*PSSA line item funding to be shifted into Keystone Exam/GCA	

**Total Contract Cost Breakdown (6 year period)**

Total Contract Cost	\$201,100,000
Shifted PSSA Funding	\$39,744,143 (This money will not be a reduction but will be
Remaining Funds).	\$161,355,857

In closing, the fact remains that there is no data demonstrating that passing exit exams or end of course exams provides any subsequent benefit in college or career success. There is no distinctive research or empirical evidence to suggest that other states that have these exams in place have outstanding and/or distinctive results to prove this reform and investment has legitimate merit. If there was one, we'd all be doing it and emulating them. Of course, politically, each and every urban school district is going to support the Governor in this and his other initiatives, as 80% of their funding comes from the State. There will always be a need to direct funding to these schools and this reform will be no different as this will only exacerbate the achievement gap in urban and low performing school districts across our commonwealth, thus creating a whole new set of problems for these districts and costing taxpayers more in the future to address fixing them.

This planned initiative is a far cry from Dr. Ackerman's first sentence on page two of her letter in which she states "Putting all high school students on an equal footing should help disadvantaged and minority students." Apparently, even she is not sure, as she uses the word "should" in lieu of erasing your doubts by utilizing the word "will". Again, exams, new, additional, or replacements are not the panacea to addressing education's issues in better preparing students, it is equipping students with the skills which are needed in the younger grade levels, to enable them to take tests successfully and go out into the world prepared and equipped to meet the demands and expectations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Kimberly D. Geyer  
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cc: Arthur Coccodrill, Chair of the IRRC  
Senator Jeffrey Piccola  
Senator Andrew Dinniman  
Representative Paul Clymer  
Representative James Roebuck  
Representative Rosita Youngblood  
Joan Duvall-Flynn, PA NAACP

# THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

440 N. BROAD STREET, SUITE 301  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19130

ARLENE C. ACKERMAN  
SUPERINTENDENT

TELEPHONE (215) 400-4100  
FAX (215) 400-4104

September 9, 2009

Representative Chelle L. Parker  
Pennsylvania House of Representatives  
112 Irvis Office Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Representative Parker:

As the superintendent of our state's largest public school system, an urban district where most of our students are minorities, I am writing to reaffirm my strong support for the proposed strengthened high school graduation requirements as approved by the State Board of Education on August 13, 2009. These tests will serve as an excellent way to measure whether students have met our statewide graduation requirements, are ready to succeed in college or the workforce, and will enhance the equity of the academic experience for all public school students across the state.

In particular, I want to address some recent concerns raised by the Pennsylvania chapter of the NAACP. While I have great respect for this organization and the work it continues to do, I believe on this issue, we must agree to disagree.

We are all concerned about dropout rates, but there is no evidence higher academic standards increase the chances of students dropping out. Those of us in education have learned that the reasons students drop out are complex. These reasons often include a lack of a challenging curriculum or poor teaching, uninspiring school climate, lack of connection with any adults in the school, or family and personal struggles outside of school.

To the contrary, there is evidence a more challenging curriculum helps more students stay in school. The State Board's proposal is based in part on reforms in high-performing states, including Maryland, where fewer than 100 members of the class of 2008-09, out of approximately 55,000 students statewide, did not receive a high school diploma as the result of not meeting testing requirements. The State Board also looked to Massachusetts, where the dropout rate declined to 3.4 percent in the 2007-08 school year.

In addition, studies have found for every two additional math courses offered below the level of algebra, students experience more than a 30 percent increase in the odds of dropping out. In the urban district of San Jose, California, graduation rates improved slightly after all students were required to take all courses needed for admission to the state's public universities.

No student will be denied a diploma based on these test scores alone. Indeed, graduation decisions will be based on multiple measures. Students will have the chance to retake the tests in whole or in part, depending on the areas where they may show weakness. Teachers will have help in developing curriculum and diagnostic tools, and struggling students must be offered extra help. Local districts may use their own tests, provided they are vetted by a state/local board. Finally, students have the option of completing a rigorous project-based alternative to the tests.

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Page two

Putting all high school students on an equal footing should help disadvantaged and minority students. Currently these students earn fewer mathematics credits and are less likely to enroll in higher-level math courses, such as trigonometry and calculus, than their socio-economically advantaged peers. Partly because of this, Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented in college as compared to their percentage of the total 18-year-old population.

Overall, the State Board's current proposal will increase access to rigorous curriculum in subjects such as algebra II and chemistry, and provide new resources to close these achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged and minority students.

It's also important to note the current proposal actually reduces testing time in our high schools by about 18 hours annually, the equivalent of three school days. Starting in the 2012-13 school year, three end-of-course exams will replace the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA for compliance with the No Child Left Behind Law, which will be a fairer way to measure students' mastery of a subject, and less costly to taxpayers.

Superintendents in the largest and most diverse school districts in the commonwealth, including Altoona, Chester-Upland, Erie, Harrisburg, Johnstown, Lancaster, Lebanon, Pittsburgh, Reading, and York join me in supporting these stronger and standardized graduation requirements. So do youth advocacy organizations, such as the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Business and higher education leaders across the state also say our high school graduates must be better prepared.

The State Board is giving us the chance to make sure all of our students, regardless of economic or minority status, are better able to compete in college and the global workforce. But, by providing better opportunities for minority students to take tougher classes and get more targeted help in high school, the opportunities are truly there to help these students succeed. We must take this opportunity. I urge in the strongest terms your support of the State Board of Education's plans to strengthen Pennsylvania's statewide graduation requirements.

Respectfully,



Arlene C. Ackerman, Ed.D.

cc: Arthur Coccodrilli, Chair  
Senator Jeff Piccola  
Senator Andrew E. Dinniman  
Representative Paul I. Clymer

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JAMES C. CORE  
State Senator