

**Testimony of Dr. Gerald Zahorchak
Secretary of Education
PA Department of Education**

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Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Stairs, honorable committee members—good morning and thank you for organizing today’s discussion. I’m Dr. Gerald Zahorchak, Secretary of Education, and I’m pleased to be here to discuss the proposed changes to Chapter 4 high school graduation requirements.

Over the last six years, the Administration and the General Assembly have worked closely together to make smart investments in public education. Thanks to your leadership, we have directed an additional \$2.4 billion to our public schools to expand the availability of early childhood education, strengthen teacher training and professional development, and support innovative programming like Classrooms for the Future. These investments are paying off: according to the latest “Quality Counts” report from *Education Week*, Pennsylvania ranks 10th in the nation in education performance and policy, and we are one of only nine states that have made significant gains in elementary reading and math on NAEP, the nation’s report card.

We should be proud of these accomplishments, but we should not assume that our task is completed. We must continue to make progress in preparing our students to compete in a challenging global economy. Fifteen years ago, only 60% of U.S. jobs required training beyond high school; today, that number is nearly 80%. If Pennsylvania hopes to compete in a high-skills economy, we must provide every student with the academic foundation needed to transition to postsecondary education or directly into the high-skills workplace. Unfortunately, too few students have the skills they need to succeed in this environment.

Every year, tens of thousands of students across the commonwealth graduate without achieving a score of proficient or advanced on the 11th grade PSSA. While no standardized test is a perfect measure, PSSA performance is highly predictive of post-secondary success, which makes these numbers alarming. The gap between student performance on the state assessment and local graduation rates is not unique to a particular group of students, or to a single corner of the commonwealth—in 2006, 93% of the state’s school districts graduated 20% more students than scored proficient on the 11th grade PSSA.

It’s not surprising, then, that so many of our students struggle mightily in college. At our state universities and community colleges, thousands of recent high school graduates must spend valuable time and money on remedial coursework that should have been mastered in high school. While it may be possible for small numbers of students to succeed in college without meeting state standards, the overall picture is stark – significant numbers of high school students get a check engine light with their 11th grade

PSSA scores, and then come to a screeching halt in the midst of their postsecondary plans.

Let me be very clear: we do not want to deny a single high school diploma as a result of this proposal. Just the opposite, our goal is for every student to earn a diploma and for that diploma to have meaning in the real world.

We are also very sensitive to real concerns about the amount of testing in students' lives. Our goal is not to mandate additional testing with this proposal, which is why the newest option in the graduation requirement menu – Graduation Competency Assessments, or GCAs – could replace final course exams. Creating standardized final exams is good for students and for educators; they ensure that a student who takes Biology or Algebra I or U.S. History in one school district has access to the same core content as a student who takes the same course somewhere else – while at the same time placing no limits on schools' ability to set even higher standards.

By adopting meaningful high school graduation requirements, we are asking for fundamental changes in our schools in order to better serve students. If the end result is for every student to demonstrate strong skills in English, math, science, and social studies, then we need to ask ourselves what changes in instruction and in extra supports will be necessary to achieve those goals.

The proposed changes to Chapter 4 will provide students with additional resources and time to demonstrate proficiency in the core content areas that under-gird postsecondary success. Beginning in the 2013-14 school year, students will be able to demonstrate that they have knowledge in these core subject areas in a variety of ways:

- Scoring proficient or advanced on the PSSA; OR
- Passing a local assessment independently validated as aligned with state standards; OR
- Passing an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exam; OR
- Passing six end-of-course GCAs. A total of 10 GCAs will be offered, all at no cost to school districts.

From an educational perspective, there are clear advantages associated with the end-of-course assessment model. First, teachers and students will receive timely feedback that can inform instructional decisions and target instruction to student needs. Students will take GCAs immediately after covering the material, so the assessment is as close to the instruction as possible. In addition, the scope and sequence of the GCAs—short, two-hour assessments, administered over a span of years and offering a replacement to final exams—responds to the very real concern that testing has overwhelmed the school year. This model of testing also permits far more in-depth assessment than can be accommodated by a single, comprehensive exam such as the PSSA. And students who do not pass the test the first time will receive extra help and then have multiple opportunities to retake the GCA – turning the idea of “high stakes” on its head.

Public school teachers will be involved in all stages of developing the end-of-course exams – from screening test items, to establishing cut scores, to grading completed assessments. To ensure that teachers have the means necessary to prepare their students for the exams, each new GCA will be preceded by a host of new resources provided to schools and teachers at no cost to them, including a voluntary model curriculum and classroom level diagnostic tools.

The voluntary model curriculum, which PDE will develop, will provide a framework for districts to assist them in mapping a trajectory for students to meet state standards and will include additional resources, such as lesson plans, so that they may build upon this framework as they see best. Again, school districts and teachers will not be required to use the model curriculum.

Classroom level diagnostic tools are another resource that will be available. These will be computerized diagnostic assessments designed to assist teachers – in real time – in determining the specific instructional needs of students. The tools will be available in grades 6-12 for the core subject areas.

The State Board initiated the regulatory process by unanimously voting for the proposed regulations before you. We know that there are many strong opinions about this proposal – from superintendents who have expressed their eager support, to stakeholders who have voiced their equally vehement opposition. During the public comment period, which began on May 17th and just concluded on Monday, the State Board received over 900 comments from the education field and from the commonwealth's employers and colleges, and we look forward to addressing their questions and feedback.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important proposal. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.