

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

**House Education Committee  
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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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Testimony to House Education Committee**  
**By**  
**Karl R. Girton**  
**State Board of Education**  
**On**  
**Proposed State High School Graduation Requirements**  
**Chapter 4 – Academic Standards and Assessment**

Good morning Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Stairs and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Karl Girton and I am here representing the State Board of Education.

It is important that we take a moment to first review how the state's high school graduation policy developed as currently established. The State Board of Education first approved a policy in 1964. It required students to successfully complete 13 course credits in grades 10 -12. The courses and course content were prescribed by the Board. Over the next three decades the Board gradually increased the credit requirements raising the credit requirement to 21 in grades 9-12.

The Board first began a statewide testing program in 1970 that was designed to assess statewide academic performance which was eventually expanded to measure achievement in ten subjects including reading, writing, math, citizenship and science and technology based on the state's Standards of Quality Education.

In 1993 in recognition that seat time in class does not equal knowledge of the subject the Board eliminated the state's course credit requirements replacing them with 56 student learning outcomes. The outcomes represented what students were to know and be able to do in order to receive a high school diploma. The Board established the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) which was originally designed to measure how successful schools prepared students to meet the learning outcomes.

In 1999 the Board adopted its current policy. This policy requires school districts to include at least four criteria in their high school graduation policies:

- 1) course completion and grades
- 2) completion of a culminating project
- 3) proficiency in all state standards not assessed by the PSSA, and

4) proficiency in reading, writing and math as determined by the PSSA or local assessments that are aligned with the state standards and level of proficiency set for the PSSA.

Since 2002-03 the Board has continuously reviewed the gap between the number of students issued diplomas and number who are proficient on the PSSA tests administered in reading, writing and math given in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and for those who do not pass in 11<sup>th</sup> grade the 12<sup>th</sup> grade retest.

The numbers are startling. More than 57,000 students are awarded high school diplomas each year without being able to pass the state test. This indicates to the Board that school district local assessments are not aligned with state standards and level of rigor of the PSSA. This means that far too many students are awarded diplomas without showing they have the fundamental knowledge and skills in reading, writing and math they will need to be successful in life.

Over the past five years the Board has explored ways to address this challenge, culminating with the unanimous vote on January 17 to approve the proposal that is now before you. The Board now believes that it is possible to improve the existing language by making assessment more “student friendly” and at the same time bring some basic uniformity to the high school diplomas issued by the 501 school districts.

The proposal expands and refines the options school districts may use to determine whether students are proficient in reading, writing, math, science and social studies. School districts would have a menu of options:

- The PSSA
- New end of course exams – which could replace final exams and which will be made available at no cost to districts – called graduation competency assessments. Ten would be given, and students would have to pass six. Students who do not pass the first time would receive extra help and could retake the GCAs up to three times per year until they pass.
- Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate tests
- Local assessments that are certified to be at least as rigorous as the state GCAs

We believe it would be beneficial to expand the ways and opportunities for students to demonstrate they have mastered the content necessary to earn a diploma. The new proposal will permit student to take a validated state assessment or a validated local assessment at the conclusion of 10 of their traditional courses such as Algebra I and II, Geometry, English Composition and Literature, Biology, Chemistry, American History, World History and Civics and Government. These tests would be taken as the final exam at the end of the course.

The state's Graduation Competency Assessments would be offered 3 times each year in each content area so students would have multiple opportunities to take or retake the exams. Additionally, the assessments would be constructed in modules so that a student struggling with one major component of a particular course could be tutored in that specific area and then be allowed to retake only the module of the assessment that they were unable to pass on the original administration. This has the distinct advantage of moving the assessment much closer to the instruction so that students would not need to wait until the 11<sup>th</sup> grade to discover that they have a knowledge gap that is related to content that they studied several years earlier.

Students would still be able to demonstrate that they have earned a diploma by scoring proficient on the relevant 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA content areas and they would also be permitted to use the results of Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams to earn a diploma. Tests that many of our most advanced students are already taking.

This plan opens multiple pathways to a diploma for all of our students and because all of the assessment instruments begin used would be assessing the same body of knowledge at the same level high school diplomas in Pennsylvania would uniformly represent that the person whose name appears on the document has a basic set of skills and knowledge regardless of which school district awarded the diploma.

We believe this is important for employers, colleges and universities and most importantly to the young man or woman who earned the diploma.

There are other important parts of this proposal including a requirement that the Department of Education develop and publish a model curriculum for use by any school

district that choose to use it. Also, the Department is required to provide schools with interventions necessary to help struggling students gain proficiency.

There are a couple of important things this proposal is not:

- This is not a single high stakes test. Quite to the contrary, it provides multiple assessment options and opportunities for students to demonstrate they have earned a diploma.
- This is not more testing – Schools would test with the same frequency but would have a greater variety of assessment instruments from which to choose.
- This will not in anyway change how special education students are currently permitted to earn a diploma.
- This will not lower the Standard for high performing students and schools. They will all be encouraged and expected to expand course offerings and enrich their content.
- And, based on what we have learned from other states this will not increase the dropout rate.

The one thing I think most of us agree on is that the status quo is not acceptable. This builds on what we know works, it is fairer to our students and we are convinced will improve academic performance when it is implemented in 2014—6 years from now.

I would be pleased to respond to your questions.

Thank you.