

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

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September 9, 2009

Representative Cherelle 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.

September 9, 2009

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 11th 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arlene C. Ackerman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Arlene C. Ackerman, Ed.D.

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