

Pennsylvania Senate Education Hearing, February 19th, 2009, Testimony by Kimberly D. Geyer of Mars Research & Retrieval Services

Good morning! My name is Kimberly Geyer. I am President of Mars Area School District in Butler County, Western Pennsylvania, a board director of Midwestern Intermediate Unit 4 in Grove City, and sole proprietor of Mars Research and Retrieval Services, which is an independent policy research and information retrieval service available to all local and state policymakers statewide. I have actively engaged myself in advocating, studying, and researching education policy here in Pennsylvania since 1993 when the Casey Administration was in office. I researched and wrote the first Pennsylvania “white paper” on the PSSA in 1999 which has since acted as a template for other statewide education organizations long before it was popular to broach the issues associated with state testing and state assessments. Any views or opinions presented in this testimony are solely those of myself and may or may not necessarily represent those of Mars Area School District, its administration or board of directors.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to be invited by the Senate Education Committee to share my recent research in an effort to help connect some dots, so to speak, on issues contained within the core issue surrounding the Graduation Competency Assessment process being currently proposed by Governor Rendell’s administration. In my testimony today, I am going to address some distinguished information related to the GCA process which will not be addressed by any other individual and/or entity here today at this hearing which will hopefully help you to formulate some present and future decisions with a bigger picture in mind.

I have compiled some actual quotes from The Gates Foundation website for your use, to point out how this is relevant to your deliberations pertaining to the proposed Graduation Competency Assessments. The Gates Foundation (Bill & Melinda Gates) financially support Achieve, Inc. who is the Washington D.C. based organization collaborating with Governor Rendell who sits on the board of Achieve, Inc. which contains three democrat governors and three republican governors. The Gates Foundation also financially supports The Education Trust and the efforts of The National Association of Governors. As you will see in my written testimony, the quotes in red print are related to The Gates Foundation and the quotes in blue print are related to those coming from Achieve, Inc.

“Standards for courses, high school graduation requirements, and state exit/end of course exams rarely translate into readiness to succeed beyond high school.”

Source: The Bill and Melinda Gates website: “The College-Ready Education Plan: Basing Action on Evidence”.

So why does it matter what Bill Gates thinks? The Gates Foundation has studied and evaluated formative research in the national field, as well as their own work since the year 2000 and should be commended as one of a small minority of Foundations nationwide who evaluate the effectiveness of the policies in which they promote and use this data to re-evaluate and shape new strategic plans. The evidence garnered over this

eight year span has enabled them to shift and shape their college-ready education plan which was announced November 11, 2008 in Seattle. As the Gates Foundation moves forward, they are committed to using evidence to guide their future education investments. Therefore, it is obvious The Gates Foundation is not going to support an agenda that is counter productive to that of their own foundation's goals and objectives.

For those of you who may be unaware, Achieve, Inc. who is responsible for promoting the agenda associated with the American Diploma Network which standardizes the states with exit graduation exams, published and released a report calling for the use of multiple measures in lieu of one assessment called "Measures that Matter : A Guide for State Policymakers" dated and copyrighted November 2008. As the seven blue printed excerpts below footnoted with page numbers demonstrate, Achieve, Inc. shifted their original policy stance in the Fall of 2008 the same month it was announced in Seattle by both Bill and Melinda Gates that they would be shifting their past policy stance. Contained in this comprehensive report, States are called to more closely align their standards, curriculum and course requirements, accountability and assessment systems and work with school districts to create a stronger foundation for high school improvement that is less punitive and has positive rewards and incentives. In addition, research and options intended to help states consider the various issues in developing a coherent college and career-ready policy framework is provided.

The Five Quotes Listed Below are from Achieve, Inc.'s November 2008 Report "Measures That Matter : A Guide for State Policymakers"

1. *"Rather than requiring students to pass college and career-ready tests for graduation, states should consider attaching more positive incentives. If the collaboration on tests is done correctly, students who score at the college-ready level can be guaranteed enrollment in credit-bearing, non-remedial courses in college. This will enable postsecondary systems and institutions to waive placement exam requirements, thus creating greater coherence between the two systems."* (Page 29)
2. *"States don't have to choose either large-scale summative tests or classroom tests; they can build high school assessment systems on a foundation of higher-quality standardized tests coupled with assessments that teachers will find particularly valuable. Combining multiple kinds of assessments strategically in state systems will generate better information about student's college and career readiness and shore up support among educators. States can play a leadership role in making these sorts of assessments available—and ensuring a consistently high level of quality—to schools and districts."* (Page 32)

3. *“However, in most cases, the exit exams are not challenging enough to be modified into college and career readiness tests, so states will need to determine whether both are needed. If all students are being given an assessment of college and career readiness, and this assessment opens doors to higher education, does the state also want to guarantee that students have met the minimum skills tested on the exit exam? In some states, the answer will be Yes, and state education leaders will need to figure out How the exit exams relate to the new anchor assessments and how results will be factored into school accountability determinations. Other states may decide to phase the exit exam out over time as anchor assessments of college and career readiness take root.” (Page 29)*
4. *“The state role here should not be to mandate a single statewide interim assessment; states should take responsibility to ensure that all schools and districts have access to at least one full set of high-quality interim assessments. Districts should be free to use their own if they are of high quality. States may want to take a firmer approach with low-performing schools and districts by requiring those systems to use the state-provided tools unless they can prove that their own tools are equal or superior.” (page 38)*
5. *“Whether new tests are created or existing tests are modified, what is most important is that the statewide assessments measure essential skills and knowledge from the career readiness standards—and that the assessments do so in a way that guides instruction in the right direction.” (page 32)*

Quotes listed below is from Page 7 of Achieve, Inc. & The Education Trust’s November 2008 Report entitled: “Making College and Career Readiness the Mission for High School:

A Guide for State Policymakers” as contained in “Measures That Matter” report.

“The current standards-test-accountability model also has failed to prove itself to be very effective in improving high schools. These efforts have suffered from, among other things, a serious unwillingness to set very high standards, for fear too many students would be denied diplomas; from an overemphasis on sanctions, and an under use of positive incentives; from mixed and inconsistent signals to the co-producers of achievement: students and teachers; and perhaps most of all, from inattention to what happens in the basic unit of high school; the courses students take.” (page 7)

“States need a new approach to the system of standards, tests, and accountability in high school—one that makes college and career readiness the central driver and acknowledges where greater state leadership and state resources are essential to success.” (page 7)

The following month, Dec. 19th, 2008, Achieve, Inc. with the collaboration of the National Governor’s Association, released a report funded by The Gates Foundation called “Benchmarking For Success” now proposing “International Benchmarking” which would require national standards (meaning all states would have the same uniformed standards, same curriculum, technology, and same teacher alignment). Once national standards are in place and all states are standardized, international benchmarking can proceed in drawing international comparisons amongst countries globally, country by country.

Source: The Gates Foundation website entitled: “Encourage Commitments to Common State Standards and Goals Nationwide.”

“We’re working to ensure that schools and government define and measure graduation and college-readiness rates in similar ways. For example, for many years there has been no universal way to count students who drop out and those who graduate. To set goals and measure progress accurately, education stakeholders need to use a common language and arithmetic. We also support efforts to develop common state standards so that students in Massachusetts will learn the same key skills as students in Mississippi.” Quote from Bill Gates on The Gates Foundation website

My comment on the quote just read is that Common State Standards is another way of saying “national standards” or “standardization of all states”.

Let’s play devil’s advocate, let’s hypothetically imagine, I am wrong in my research assumptions. Let’s hypothetically suggest that Achieve, Inc., Secretary Zavorchak, or even the Governor himself, walk into this hearing room and suggest to you I am dead wrong and that I may have misinterpreted the report “Measures that Matter’s” findings and have thus drawn inaccurate conclusions based on the small sampling of quotes and excerpts from the report listed above in blue print. If that’s the case, let’s take a look at what The Gates Foundation is proposing, specifically, Bill Gates who is Achieve’s main funding source, in the red printed quote listed below:

“The first step in identifying effective teaching has to be setting fewer, clearer, higher standards that are aligned with the goal of graduating students from high school college-ready. You can’t compare teachers if they’re not pursuing a common standard. I believe strongly in national standards. Countries that excel in math, for example, have a far more focused, common curriculum than the United States does.” Quote from Bill Gates, November 11, 2008 Seattle Address

My comment: Again, reiteration is shown through words for support of national standards and international benchmarking as consistent with and supported by the recent release of the December 19, 2008, National Association for Governor's national report done with cooperation of Achieve, Inc. (same group proposing the GCA's) and funded by The Gates Foundation, to prepare states through policy shifting to move toward a national standards to enable international benchmarking when countries can be compared to other countries in a uniformed fashion.

The question begs to be asked, if this is the case, then **WHY is Pennsylvania contemplating moving toward the GCA process, during "the worst economic crisis of our lifetime" as quoted by Governor Rendell during his February 4th state budget address, if "The Gates Foundation" who is the "Source of Funding" and "The Influencer" is proposing an agenda course counter to what both Achieve, Inc. and our Governor is advocating and pushing to contractually commit our Commonwealth to?**

Why not wait to just move us to national standards and save our Commonwealth and taxpayers millions of dollars, extensive manpower, and extraordinary energy and effort? The December 19th NAG report has already been conceived and adopted by the National Association of Governors, so this agenda is not going to idly fade away, its going to take course within the next ten years maximum. There is a sense of urgency, so it will be hypothetically less than ten years is my estimation of time on national standards.

Furthermore, there are mechanisms, structures, and processes currently in place as required under Chapter 4 for measuring accountability, state academic standards and more specifically anchors, for identifying low achieving schools and students, requiring remediation and tutoring efforts. In addition, as you will see and I can prove firsthand, local school districts can and should take proactive measures into their own hands to ensure ALL students are meeting proficiency and identify those who are not and provide interventions which are evidence and research based, beyond remedial efforts. All school districts should be taking these measures regularly as the PSSA process is a continual refining process which helps to facilitate local refinery of curriculum, strategies, interventions, best practices, course sequence, budget prioritization, and accountability measures as required under No Child Left Behind.

Let's demonstrate where words are put into action and done so at a much more affordable cost:

Schools such as Mars Area School District as you will see on your pink sheet as contained in your packet, have restructured their math curriculum, restructured their math sequence of course offerings in a way that no student can circumvent moving toward a lower math and can only elevate themselves. This course of local action by design prevents these same students from having the ability to drop out of math after two years, and pushes them with the necessary support structure in place to proceed through at least three math courses in high school as required locally in

both our strategic plan and graduation requirements. Those who are in the higher maths, naturally can not descend into a lower math sequence. The majority of our students take four years of math. As you will see on pages six and seven of the pink packet, we can identify the students and make projections into five year plans and budget resources accordingly. MASD is in the process of passing a policy that will require all students to take at least three math courses inclusive of geometry in order to graduate. This course of action lends more rigor and relevancy to our curriculum and ensures that all students are leaving high school with measurement skills as 30% of the PSSA is based on measurement. In addition, we are contemplating passing a policy that states that any student in the eighth grade who scores basic or below basic in any area of the PSSA immediately goes into remediation upon 9th grade high school in lieu of having the ability to choose elective course offerings. This will also help aid in providing an incentive to those students to do well on the PSSA so they can take advantage of the wide course offering opportunities made available to high school students and also will allow us to remediate students before the 11th grade PSSA when it is too late to remediate students. Remediation at a lower grade level also strengthens the support system for failing students who are more inclined to drop out of school and as national research and evidence indicate, usually do so in their ninth-grade year of school. Mars Area School District has a less than 1% drop out rate and I know from experience, that we do everything in our power to ensure students stay in school by providing a safe and effective learning system to enable them to reach their maximum learning potential and earn their high school diploma because we are well aware of the alternatives for those who do not. As you will see on the bottom of page five of your pink packet, I've outlined the costs incurred to the Mars School District for the remediation software program selected by our teachers, staff, and administrators. This software will be utilized in a mobile lab capacity and used by students requiring remediation on a schedule of three days of class work and two technology lab days. This mobile computer lab will be made available to all students needing remediation in any of the four areas of the PSSA, such as reading, math, writing, and science to supplement their daily coursework and reinforce concepts. It is important to note that the Classrooms for the Future Grant provides one mobile lab to each school recipient of the grant. So it is very likely, if a district already has a Classrooms for the Future Grant, they could already be potentially prepared to implement a mobile lab at no additional cost to their district.

Let's read below a quote by and from The Gate's Foundation as per their new approach as contained in their executive summary of their college-ready plan:

“We have set an ambitious goal for our work and investments: to help ensure that 80% of high school students graduate college-ready, with a focus on low-income and minority young people reaching this target.” Source of Quote: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

My comment: The Gates new approach does not make mention of the use of EXIT EXAMS in their entire new college-ready plan, other than to suggest their eight years of

research and evidence does not support they make a difference in college readiness. Do you think with exit exams in place, that the above mentioned ambitious goal of The Gates Foundation, could be realized?

Why not? I believe it is evident that the Gate's Foundation's own findings over the course of the last eight years, have proven themselves that exit exam processes in other states who have them, is a gatekeeper to minorities and all student sub groupings under the No Child Left Behind Act, preventing these students from pursuing higher education opportunities. It is my impression that The Gate's Foundation believes and states on their website "that every life is equal" and every life deserves to have the same opportunities as they believe that education is the great equalizer globally and is also the objective of escaping life long poverty in all countries. The Gate's Foundation to their credit recognizes these facts, and is intent and focused on clearly helping low income and minority youth to achieve and gain access to post secondary education.

National research and evidence suggests that the exit exam process in various states deters minority, ESL, low income, and immigrant students from achieving this goal. Exit exams are and act as a gatekeeper in preventing those to have access to the same opportunities as other students. They are penalized ten fold when they are a product of their own school system who may be low achieving and under performing as a result of their zip code and not necessarily to any fault of their own. States with exit exams, even the New York Regents, have thousands of students not graduating with high school diplomas annually and are now remediating young, unemployed adults in statewide GED Centers, just as Florida and California are, and being done so at taxpayer's expense to some extent. GED remedial costs far exceed the 30% remediation rate in colleges nationwide which has been the same rate of remediation since 1989 according to the National Center of Education Statistics. Remediation is needed as we have various intellectual levels of students, child by child, student by student. Some kids get it which enables them to be at the higher achieving level, some simply do not, which are at the lower end of the spectrum, and some are middle learners. There will always be remediation and there is no test, standards, or assessment which will eliminate it entirely. We should be asking ourselves, "What supports can we provide for students needing remediation to help these students reach their maximum learning potential?" While much of the focus of this aspect has been entirely on the high school level, we now understand the need for early basic skills and knowledge at the primary and middle levels as well as the need for identifying students at earlier ages and grade levels in lieu of pushing them through the system. For example, schools, in general do no favors for students who are promoted to the next grade level with their chronologically aged peers when they are two grade levels behind in reading. With the use of multiple measures, primary and intermediate levels of local school districts can identify younger and younger students and provide resources and remediation. With the use of Pennsylvania value-added assessment we can combine assessment data to offer a more meaningful evaluation of individual students by tracking student's growth from year to year. So even if a student does not score at a proficient level on the PSSA, a value-added assessment using the PSSA data could reveal the student's individual growth. For example, a student may be two years behind in math at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the school

year the student may only be six months behind. Although the student may continue to score in the basic or below basic range on the PSSA, he has actually learned more than a full year of math.

In closing there are five questions policymakers need to ask before deciding to implement the Graduation Competency Assessment process as proposed:

1. Why are we implementing a NEW education program when it is not necessary and much of the same goals and objectives can be accomplished with the refining of the current process and mechanisms which currently exist associated with the PSSA?
2. Why are we implementing a program proven to be ineffective in enabling students to be college-ready as evidenced by other states and with no distinctive track record proving otherwise? (Gold Paper in Packet)
3. Why are we implementing a new initiative that will cost our commonwealth millions of dollars, when it will cost even more millions to convert to the new policy shift and agenda being proposed by the catalytic and political winds of the NAG which counter the current proposal by our own Governor and his administration?
4. Why would we implement and invest millions of long term debt and new spending into committing our Commonwealth to a reform when it is currently not clear and concise as to what the federal education agenda will be by both the new President of the United States and/or his new Secretary of Education who is able to begin a new strategic plan for education in lieu of No Child Left Behind?
5. Why would we be implementing any new programs, structures, and/or processes when we cannot afford to sustain the effective programs and services we currently have throughout the Commonwealth?

Conclusion:

This process began back in 2005 when PA became a part of the American Diploma Network and in 2007, the Governor and his leadership team introduced this proposal as addressing a disparity issue between the local assessment and PSSA, when they were reminded there was already a process which allows the PDE to intervene in the event there are deficiencies or disparity within any given district with the local assessment and the PSSA, the new argument became about “making the high school diploma more meaningful”, when due to lack of research and evidence that the states who’ve implemented this initiative had no outstanding distinctive evidence supporting this argument, the shift and crisis became about “remediation”.

Remediation will not be eliminated regardless if you implement the GCA process as proposed or any other exit exam alternative. Remediation will not be eliminated if you keep the PSSA or do both the PSSA and the GCA. There are numerous variables which play into whether or not students are college ready or not. There are no easy solutions and there’s no amount of money to fix all the variables which make up the total equation.

High schools are working hard to prepare students, however two and four year colleges in the state of Pennsylvania have not clearly articulated the baseline knowledge and skills entering students need, to begin college without remediation. There needs to be a consistent message sent by Pennsylvania's two and four year college institutions which is consistent to ensure educators who teach and prepare our students at the middle and high school level, as well as, our students **know exactly first-hand what college-ready actually mean. That has not happened yet. There is no consensus, no consistent baseline established statewide.**

There is an obvious disconnect in education between the high school and college level and the college level and workplace....lack of communication as well as consensus. Of the 65% of public high school students that must pass an exit exam in order to graduate, the 24 states with exit exams (done with the help of Achieve, Inc. through the American Diploma Project) only six states indicated their exit exam process was designed to measure the knowledge and skills needed for college, while only nine of the 24 states said their tests were intended to measure readiness for the workplace.....this according to the Center on Education Policy's national survey and white paper on "High School Exit Exams" released on September 6th, 2007. (Gold Paper in your packet.)

There is a process in place is with the PSSA, however, there is no denying that refinement is needed in a multi-pronged approach to address these and other issues which can enable us to prepare our students to be college ready without the extensive proposed course of action our Governor is now proposing for millions of dollars. It will take work, but, it can be achieved and it can be achieved with less tax dollars than the alternative proposed and we can still proceed forward competitively as a Commonwealth regardless if national standards see fruition or not. The process of having students graduate high school with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in college or the workplace begins much earlier than the beginning of high school or in the 11th and 12th grades of high school.

Senate Bill 307 will provide an incentive and instill a serious expectation for ALL STUDENTS in taking the PSSA as early as 3rd & 4th grade. The phase-in will enable education buy-in by all as the expectations and consequences will be spelled out ahead of time and will be consistent statewide. The course of this action will force remediation to take place in the lower grade levels and at an earlier age for identifying students through various multiple assessments and screenings. While advocates of local control will not be pleased with the state level making the decision for student promotion from grade level to grade level....one way of looking at this, is the pressure will be lifted off the building administrators and staff for this decision-making which would entail some subjectivity in the criteria utilized by school officials for making student determinations and enable consistency with no room for subjectivity or public influence district by district statewide. Schools will be able to continue to provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of those needing remedial help and that continuity can continue with the use of the PVASS (Pennsylvania Value Assessment System) and other models which evaluate student achievement and this can be accomplished at a much more affordable cost to local districts in comparison to the GCA model currently being proposed. Furthermore,

schools will be forced to align their curriculum to the standards earlier in the lower grade levels, make internal adjustments to their curriculum and instruction, evaluate best practices, and work to refine their education programs and services. The language as contained in Section 1611 of Senate Bill 307 will help to safeguard and preserve the integrity of the process of establishing statewide graduation requirements and expending funds only by an act of the General Assembly as actions speak louder than words when the Governor's administration disregarded not only the regulatory moratorium but also the public's trust. Their actions related to this matter demonstrated that while they may respect the legislature's usefulness, they don't respect their authority.

Pennsylvania will support leadership which acts responsibly in supporting sound educational practices and principles to Pennsylvania's schools. Never forget the difference between good-sounding reasons and good sound reasoning.

May you have the courage and fortitude to do what is necessary for our Commonwealth's best interests and more importantly, our student's futures.

Thank you,

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