

JEP REMARKS – JULY 14, 2009

PUBLIC HEARING ON GCA COMPROMISE

Almost six months ago, this committee held a public hearing on Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) as they were then known. We heard from all sides of the debate and this session was critical to educating the members of our committee and staff on GCAs. Much has transpired since then.

Countless further conversations, debates and the unveiling of Keystone 1.0 and Keystone 2.0. have occurred. Sen. Dinniman, Rep. Roebuck and I even convened a summit meeting among the most active participants in an attempt to bring parties together. Our low point, of course, was the Department's signing of the multi-year contract with DRC and this committee and the Senate's reaction to that contract signing with passage of Senate Bill 281. At the root of our anger and frustration was the lack of legislative input on whether the exams should be developed and how they would be utilized.

Of my 32 years of legislative service, this is clearly one of the most difficult and contentious education issues I have witnessed. Enter into this debate, Joe Torsella, appointed by the Governor in January to chair the State Board. Chairman Torsella, recognizing the passion, frustration and anger within the Legislature and within the education community over GCAs, stepped forward and offered to engage all parties and develop a compromise representing the best possibility of common ground while maintaining the integrity of the exams. Chairman Torsella met with scores of legislators and interest groups spending countless hours over the last six weeks hearing those concerns.

Is his proposal perfect and does it represent absolute compromise among all the interested parties? It does not. In fact, there are a few things I would tweak but will avoid the urge to do so knowing this is a carefully calibrated compromise that in the end

gets to the root of what has been important to me since the day we began this debate and that is accountability.

Chairman Torsella heard all the voices and comes to us today with a proposal he hopes to take to the State Board in August or September. Prior to the State Board considering the final-form regulation, however, Joe made an extraordinary pledge recognizing the Legislature's need to have buy-in which is why he is here today to present his proposal. I accepted Joe's commitment and pledged that I would take the actual regulatory language and introduce a "Sense of the Senate" resolution for this committee to first consider and then the entire Senate with the goal of vetting this regulation before the State Board actually adopts the final-form regulation. When the State Board officially acts, this committee and the House Education Committee will have a second opportunity to weigh in through the IRRC process.

Let me take a moment to thank the Democratic Chairman, Sen. Dinniman, who along with his capable staff has spent an extraordinary amount of time talking with the various interested parties listening to their concerns. Sen. Dinniman came to this committee with some very strong concerns about special education, alternative pathways for students who do not test well, cost, and duplication of testing in the classroom. I appreciate the open mind he has maintained and the impact he has on this issue by helping to shape the points I mentioned above.

Lastly, I would like to address my fellow Republican members of the General Assembly. I appreciate the passion some Republican legislators have on this issue and appreciate your desire to have a voice on an important educational debate which is why I have urged legislative buy-in before the State Board moves forward. I also appreciate your frustration and anger with how PDE has bungled this issue. I would ask you to consider this compromise with an open mind and understand that at the core is accountability for the billions of dollars we spend in Pennsylvania on public education (over \$23 billion in state, federal, and local dollars). Yes there is a cost to developing these tests but they will ultimately replace the PSSA which is fast outliving its usefulness in assessing our students' skills and mastery levels. Further the PSSA was never intended to assess individual student mastery levels and to be used as the Keystone

Compromise will be used – as an end of course exam that will count 33% towards the final grade – **IF school districts wish to use the exam**. Their use will be strictly voluntary. If a school district wishes to use a local assessment, they may do so as long as that assessment is aligned to state standards and meets the test of rigor that taxpayers are demanding. Republicans have always proudly supported local control and accountability and the Torsella compromise encompasses both principles in my view.

I would ask my fellow Republicans to look beyond the costs of developing these exams – and I would note that Chairman Torsella has through his compromise developed significant cost savings over the original GCA/Keystone proposal – and consider the cost to industry of remediating students who lack basic math and reading skills to compete in our global economy. We know without a doubt that higher education is also spending huge sums of money to remediate students who come to higher education classes without the basic foundations needed to succeed in that important arena. Here in my own backyard, I have had several conversations with the president of HACC and she has attested that this is a significant problem for our local community college.

There will be a cost but I believe it is an acceptable cost when put in the context of the billions we spend without any mechanism to ensure accountability for this extraordinary investment. The keystones will help ensure our high school diploma means something.

Finally, this process the committee is engaged in with Chairman Torsella and the State Board is only part of the process. The Governor will need to convince the budget negotiators and ultimately the General Assembly to fund the first phase of the keystones and this will be the case in succeeding budgets as well.

At this time, I would ask my Democratic colleague, Sen. Dinniman, if he has any opening remarks before we invite Chairman Torsella to make his presentation.