



Proud Leadership for Pennsylvania Schools

**Testimony on behalf of the
Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators**

**Before the
House Select Subcommittee on Technical Education and Career Readiness
April 28, 2015**

On behalf of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA) and its members, which include school district superintendents and other public school chief school administrators, thank you for opportunity to share a few thoughts and observations on issues related to career and technical education, career readiness and the work of the Select Subcommittee on Technical Education and Career Readiness.

As technology, innovation and global economic forces accelerate change in Pennsylvania's economy and skill levels demanded by these forces evolve at an ever increasing pace, state leadership, policies and funding must also become increasingly responsive and flexible to support efforts by public schools and career and technical and centers to retool and align their programs to address these demands.

You already heard in previous testimony today about the existing education and workforce preparation system, its many outstanding models of success and its many challenges. I would like to focus on three such challenges during my time with you today. They include:

- Dual accountability requirements of Keystone Exams and industry certification exams (NOCTI or NIMS) for career and tech students and how this policy is already impacting students
- Unintended consequence of new, stricter child abuse and criminal background check requirements on placements of co-op students, internships and other workplace placements
- Ongoing budgetary pressures driving school districts to establish some of their own career and technical programs or consider withdrawing from sponsorship of the local career and technical center

There is no doubt that all students, including career and technical education students, must graduate from high school with the necessary literacy, numeracy and basic scientific knowledge and skills that equip them to be successful in post-secondary education and career

opportunities. State, school district and career and technical center accountability systems must ensure that all students are equipped with these skills upon graduation. However, in the effort to achieve this goal, the new state high school graduation policy has created a disincentive for some students to pursue career and technical training. Let me explain.

Starting with the class of 2017 the new state high school graduation requirements apply for all students, including career and technical education program students. The state policy requires students to pass three Keystone Exams, one each in Literature, Algebra I and Biology, in addition to any locally established requirements, to be eligible to receive a high school diploma. Career and technology program students must also pass the appropriate Pennsylvania Skills Assessment (NOCTI or NIMS). Students who do not pass one or more Keystone Exams must be provided supplemental instruction (remediation) before having retaking the test. Failure to pass a second time, again upon satisfactory completion of supplemental instruction, makes the student eligible to participate in a project-based assessment. Project-based assessment is a time-consuming, intensive process that provides students who are not successful on the Keystone Exam with an alternative to the traditional test.

Keystone Exams are end-of-course tests that are administered to students towards the end of the appropriate course. In many school districts students take the literature course in which the Keystone Exam is administered in tenth or eleventh grade. Likewise many districts provide biology in ninth or tenth grade, hence the Keystone Exam is administered in those years. Algebra is generally provided in eighth or ninth grades. Because some students require additional time to master these subjects, some districts offer two-year sequences of these courses and administer the Keystone Exam at the end of the second course.

So why does this pose a disincentive to some students wishing to pursue career and technical training?

Because most career and technical programs are one or two-year programs (eleventh/twelfth grades), students who have not passed one or more of the Keystone Exams must participate in supplemental instruction to prepare to retake the Keystone Exam or participate in the project-based assessment, in addition to participating in their regular coursework. Given additional time the student must spend on supplemental instruction and/or project-based instruction, they may not have the necessary time in the regular school day to participate in career and technical training. Not passing the Keystone Exam or project-based assessment prohibits the student from earning their high school diploma.

The state accountability system, through the School Performance Profile, holds the sending high school accountable for both student scores on the Keystone Exams and high school graduation. Therefore the home school is driven to do everything it can to make sure that every

student passes the Keystone Exams and graduates on-time. Therefore it is NOT in the interest of the home school to permit a student who did not pass one or more Keystone Exams to enroll in a career and technical center program.

Another unintended consequence is that imposed on employers who accept students placed through co-op education, internships, community service and other school sponsored workplace learning and community service programs. As you know, the General Assembly strengthened the child abuse clearance and criminal background check requirements for nearly all adults who work with students in school sponsored activities. This includes adults in workplaces where co-op students, interns and other workplace learning experiences sponsored by high schools and career and technology centers.

Lack of clarity and inconsistent direction from the Departments of Human Services and Education with respect to who is actually required to have the child abuse and criminal background checks in these situations has resulted in many school administrators hearing from employers that have traditionally accepted students in such programs that, due to the scope, breadth and cost of the background checks, that some may not accept such placements going forward.

An example of this is that, when asked about a student who was to be placed as a co-op student in a hospital, every employee working on the hospital floor where the student was to be placed required the background checks. This would obviously present an insurmountable barrier to the student's placement in that workplace. While clarification later was provided that only the direct supervisor of the student required the background checks, it is an example of what are likely an endless set of challenges schools and employers will face as these new requirements continue to be implemented.

Our final challenge we want to highlight today is certainly no secret, that of continuing budgetary pressures facing school districts due to increasing pension, special education, charter and cyber charter tuition payments. Likewise, with flat state and federal support for career and technical education, the increased cost pressures career and technology centers are forced onto local taxpayers through sponsoring school districts and tuition charged to non-sponsoring school districts. The budgetary pressures are driving school districts to review all costs and educational options. These include reviewing whether the district should continue its sponsorship of the local career or and technical center or establish some of its own lower cost career and technical programs within the district. The district would then pay tuition for its students to attend programs at the career and technical center that are not offered at its high school.

Some school districts are finding this is a less costly, viable alternative. However, as these options are explored, it is fraying relationships between institutions and among school

districts. And as districts withdraw, the impacted career and technology center may have to reduce programing, services and capacity to its remaining students and the employer community that partners with the schools.

To close, given the rapid changes occurring in Pennsylvania's economy and for ever increasing workplace skills demanded by employers, it is essential that state leadership, policies and funding provide flexibility that allows local career and technical programs to respond to labor market needs and future employment demands.

We suggest the subcommittee undertake a comprehensive review of state laws, regulations and policies, including those that have unintended consequences, on the ability of high schools and career and technology centers to readily attract, train and graduate students who meet the workforce needs of Pennsylvania's employers well into the future.

On behalf of PASA, we thank you for your consideration.