



Senate of Pennsylvania

Committee on Education

Written Testimony of:

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On behalf of:

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Chairman Folmer, Chairman Dinniman, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to submit testimony relevant to the Committee's hearing on Pennsylvania Common Core Standards. I am honored to have this opportunity to detail my support for Pennsylvania's Common Core Standards and aligned assessments not only for the benefit of our children, but also for our future national security.

My name is Daniel J. O'Neill and I am a retired Major General. I served this great nation for over 35 years in the United States Army and the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. I also served as a public school teacher, administrator and retired as the Superintendent of Schools at Wayne Highlands School District. I was recently appointed by Governor Corbett as the Pennsylvania State Commissioner for the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission. Pennsylvania is one of 45 states that has adopted this Compact. The mission of the Compact is to guarantee a level playing field for the children of the military families who move so often in the k-12 period.

I am also a member of MISSION: READINESS, a national, nonprofit national security organization of over 350 retired general and admirals, like myself, who are dedicated to ensuring our nation's continued security and prosperity through smart investments in the upcoming generation of American children. This organization's members are mainly concerned with the recent data from the Department of Defense, indicating that most young Americans aged 17 to 24 are unable to join the military. To be sure, this disquieting reality threatens to diminish our military strength and put our national security interests at risk.

When thinking about military service, most people consider the physical demands. Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan routinely carry between 60 and 100 pounds of gear including body armor, weapons and batteries. Equally important though are the mental demands. Today's service men and women operate complex high-tech weapons systems and find themselves in intense situations that require not only proficiency in technology, but strategic thinking as well as decisiveness and diplomacy.

This makes it all the more alarming that poor educational achievement is one of the biggest reasons why an estimated 75 percent of all young Americans are unable to join the military. On average, one out of five students in Pennsylvania will not graduate from high school. Of those who do graduate and want to join the military, twenty-two percent do not possess sufficient skills to pass the military's entrance exam testing math, literacy, and problem-solving.

This situation has clear implications regarding international competitiveness and was a focus of the recent Council on Foreign Relations task force led by (among others) former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The task force report challenged America's schools to do better "in order to produce citizens who can serve" either in uniform or in the civilian sector.

Full implementation of the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards and aligned assessments is such an effort to strengthen the education of the students of this Commonwealth.

Pennsylvania's Common Core Standards make English language arts and math education more rigorous and relevant to success in the 21st Century. They challenge students on critical thinking, complex problem solving and effective communication—all essential skills for today's and tomorrow's military.

Standards alone, however, are not enough. To have an impact on student outcomes, there must be accountability. That accountability comes when standards are accompanied by aligned assessments (based on the standards) and a system for reporting results, so everyone will know how students are really faring. If we

do not know how students are really performing, we do not know the scope of potential problems, nor can we make informed efforts to solve it.

Historically, there has been a lot of confusion about student achievement levels because each state had its own standards and tests that yielded achievement data that was not comparable with other states. For example, in Pennsylvania, there was a dramatic difference in reporting proficiency levels for 4th grade reading depending upon the assessments utilized. When the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment was used, only 37 percent of students scored proficient or higher, versus 72 percent scoring proficient or higher on the state PSSA exams.

Aligned assessments to the Pennsylvania Common Core State Standards (aligned PSSA's and Keystone Exams) would remove these inconsistencies and yield a clear picture of student achievement in Pennsylvania and subsequently provide a stimulus for reform that would improve outcomes for students.

Despite the many short-comings of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), one positive outcome of that effort was to demonstrate the important role of accurate, common measurement. The NCLB required states to use a valid, common method of computing graduation rates and publicly report the results. As a result, states could no longer manipulate how graduation rates were computed in order to maximize their results. Instead, they had to implement real reforms that contributed to a real change in student outcomes: more students graduating.

Also of special concern for our nation's approximately 2 million children from military families is student mobility. On average, a military child will move six to nine times during their Pre-K through 12th grade education. This can be a frustrating experience as these students often find themselves either ahead or behind their new school peers because of the lack of consistency between different states' education standards.

This is an issue that military members have addressed through various avenues, including Mission: Readiness, the Military Child Education Coalition and the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission.

Defense Department officials support the Compact's goal of enabling cooperation between states and allowing for the uniform treatment of military children transferring between school districts and states. The unification of states in the Compact helps ensure that military children have the educational opportunities they deserve within and across state borders.

Pennsylvania's Common Core Standards will go even further in maintaining consistency and expanding educational opportunities for military children and other children who relocate in the midst of their education.

In doing so, all students, no matter where they live, or how often they move to a new school, will be better prepared for success in postsecondary education, the workforce and the military, if they choose to serve.

Just as business and industry need a highly qualified workforce to compete in the 21st Century global marketplace, our Armed Forces need the same highly qualified soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen to protect our future national security. Full implementation of the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards and aligned assessments is an important part of our future national security.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.