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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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SENATE RESOLUTION

No. 156 Session of  
2009

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INTRODUCED BY PICCOLA AND DINNIMAN, JULY 23, 2009

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REFERRED TO EDUCATION, JULY 23, 2009

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A RESOLUTION

1 Encouraging the State Board of Education to adopt the final-form  
2 regulation, Reg. No. 006-312, establishing new high school  
3 graduation requirements, and development of voluntary  
4 Keystone Exams for use by school districts in this  
5 Commonwealth to ensure our high school graduates are ready to  
6 compete in the 21st century in our global economy and succeed  
7 in the arena of higher education.

8 WHEREAS, A February 2009 study by The Pennsylvania State  
9 University found that many of this Commonwealth's 500 school  
10 districts failed to appropriately measure whether their students  
11 can perform at the 11th grade level in reading and math in order  
12 to award high school diplomas; and

13 WHEREAS, One in three high school graduates requires  
14 remediation in math or English in the Pennsylvania State System  
15 of Higher Education universities and community colleges, costing  
16 taxpayers \$24 million annually; and

17 WHEREAS, In the 2006-2007 school year, 43% of the students  
18 who graduated from Pennsylvania high schools had not scored at  
19 grade level in the 11th grade math and reading Pennsylvania  
20 System of School Assessment (PSSA); and

21 WHEREAS, Pennsylvania began moving toward a system of

1 accountability in public education with Executive Order 1996-6  
2 on September 30, 1996, which formed the Governor's Advisory  
3 Commission on Academic Standards; and

4 WHEREAS, This strong commitment to building accountability  
5 has been bipartisan through Republican and Democratic  
6 administrations; and

7 WHEREAS, The first set of standards, Reading, Writing,  
8 Speaking and Listening and Mathematics, went into effect January  
9 16, 1999; and

10 WHEREAS, The PSSA was developed in the 2000-2001 school year  
11 to assess the academic standards and became the mechanism by  
12 which the Commonwealth complies with the No Child Left Behind  
13 Act of 2001 (NCLB); and

14 WHEREAS, As a natural extension of the creation of the  
15 standards and first level of assessments in the system of  
16 accountability for the almost \$23 billion of Federal, State and  
17 local dollars spent each year on public education, the State  
18 Board of Education in May 2007 announced its plans to consider  
19 the development of Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs); and

20 WHEREAS, From May 2007 through May 2008, the State Board of  
21 Education held 22 meetings and public hearings with legislators,  
22 parents, teachers, students, administrators, school board  
23 members, business leaders and taxpayers and heard testimony and  
24 concerns regarding GCAs; and

25 WHEREAS, In May 2008, the State Board of Education published  
26 proposed regulations implementing GCAs and received 934 letters,  
27 e-mails and resolutions in response to the proposed regulations;  
28 and

29 WHEREAS, From May 2008 through May 2009, the State Board of  
30 Education had 15 additional meetings and public hearings and

1 many informal discussions with education stakeholders, parents,  
2 business leaders, students and taxpayers; and

3 WHEREAS, From February 2009 through July 2009, the Education  
4 Committee of the Senate held three public hearings on GCAs; and

5 WHEREAS, As a result of the debates and deliberate  
6 discussions arising out of the many meetings, public hearings,  
7 informal discussions and legislative hearings, the chairman of  
8 the State Board of Education engaged in developing a compromise  
9 proposal in an attempt to find a resolution to the contentious  
10 issue; and

11 WHEREAS, In July 2009, the chairman of the State Board of  
12 Education announced a compromise on GCAs developed after  
13 conversations with at least 60 legislators and education  
14 stakeholders providing for development of voluntary Keystone  
15 Exams; and

16 WHEREAS, The resulting compromise has the potential to  
17 accomplish three purposes, serving as an end of course  
18 examination in ten subject areas, satisfying NCLB Adequate  
19 Yearly Progress requirements and replacing local assessments  
20 where a school district voluntarily chooses to adopt the use of  
21 the Keystone Exams; and

22 WHEREAS, The Keystone Exams would be optional for school  
23 districts to use, counting as one-third of a student's overall  
24 portfolio to pass a course, and the exams would be administered  
25 at the completion of a subject, in some cases as early as the  
26 7th grade; and

27 WHEREAS, The Keystone Exams would replace the 11th grade PSSA  
28 for NCLB requirements, thus freeing up 18 hours of testing in  
29 the classroom that can then be used for classroom instruction,  
30 while allowing school districts the option of using one test in

1 place of three tests, including the current PSSA, local  
2 assessments and classroom exams; and

3 WHEREAS, Classroom instruction will no longer be geared to  
4 "teaching to the test," but rather the test will lead to and  
5 reflect a renewed direction of student learning of the curricula  
6 through the Department of Education's development of model  
7 curricula and diagnostic tools; and

8 WHEREAS, School districts would be permitted to continue  
9 using local assessments if the assessments are aligned to State  
10 standards and validated, with the Commonwealth and school  
11 districts splitting the cost of the validation; and

12 WHEREAS, In addition to being allowed to continue to use  
13 local validated assessments, school districts would also be  
14 permitted to substitute successful passage of Advanced Placement  
15 or International Baccalaureate exams in place of utilizing  
16 Keystone Exams; and

17 WHEREAS, The new Keystone Exams will be phased in over an  
18 eight-year period, spreading out the costs for the exams, which  
19 will allow the Commonwealth to realize savings through the  
20 elimination of the 11th grade PSSAs, provide the opportunity to  
21 seek Federal funding to help offset costs associated with the  
22 exams and redirect close to \$40 million to other educational  
23 programs; and

24 WHEREAS, The proposed compromise gives districts the  
25 discretion to allow students who perform at an advanced level on  
26 any particular Keystone Exam prior to taking a course to "test  
27 out" of the course and be granted course credits without needing  
28 to take the course; and

29 WHEREAS, The compromise recognizes that some students do not  
30 test well on standardized tests by permitting alternative

1 pathways based upon the Maryland Bridge Plan for students who  
2 have difficulty learning, recognizing the need to continue  
3 alternative measures of proficiency for students with an  
4 Individual Educational Program and providing for a waiver by the  
5 Secretary of Education for extenuating circumstances; therefore  
6 be it

7       RESOLVED, That the Senate encourage the State Board of  
8 Education to adopt the final-form regulation, Reg. No. 006-312,  
9 to provide accountability for the almost \$23 billion of Federal,  
10 State and local dollars spent annually on public education and  
11 to ensure that the Pennsylvania high school diploma provides  
12 graduates with the tools to compete in the 21st century and to  
13 succeed in the arena of higher education.