

Testimony of
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Senate Education Committee

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Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman and honorable committee members, it's a pleasure to be with you this morning to discuss the Board's work on two fronts: the emerging "Common Core" of academic standards in English/language arts and mathematics and our efforts to strengthen nutrition and physical activity standards for Pennsylvania's students. I'm Corrinne Caldwell, Chair of the Board's Student Health and Wellness Committee, and I'm joined by Adam Schott, the Board's Executive Director. Since I know you'll agree that student wellness is a precondition for student learning, I'll begin by discussing our proposed Chapter 12 regulations.

Almost daily, we're grappling with new revelations about the alarming increase in child obesity rates. Just two weeks ago, more than 130 retired senior military leaders released a report that draws a clear connection between obesity rates and national security. At a time when American forces are stretched thin, more than nine million young adults are disqualified based on their weight.

In fact, today's schoolchildren are part of what may be the first generation with a shorter life expectancy than its predecessor. A 2005 study by the National Institute on Aging predicted a two- to five-year drop in life spans due to rising obesity rates. Nearly one in three children are obese or overweight, and the rates are even higher (37.8 to 45.1%) in 16 counties across the commonwealth. These young people are at heightened risk for costly hospitalizations in the short-term and debilitating diseases later in life.

Their schooling experience is similarly imperiled. After adjusting for factors such as socioeconomic status and special needs, overweight and obese learners face "significantly increased odds of not being engaged in school, to have repeated a grade in school, and to have missed more than two weeks of school during the school year."¹ Obesity is also linked with lower grades and test scores, discipline issues, and emotional effects that create obvious consequences for academic achievement, including feelings of low self-esteem and depression.² And when you consider that childhood obesity is far more prevalent in high-poverty communities – communities that already face significant challenges in providing a strong public education – it's clear that many of our young people are at a tremendous disadvantage.

¹ Bethell, C., Simpson L., Stumbo, S., Carle, A., & Gombojav, N. (2010). National, state, and local disparities in childhood obesity. *Health Affairs*, 29, 347-356.

² Institute of Medicine. Preventing childhood obesity.

These troubling academic indicators are at the heart of the Board's focus on health and wellness. The strategies outlined in the draft regulation before you include research-based practices that can be implemented quickly and effectively and without significant costs to schools at a time when public resources are severely strained. In broad strokes, the regulation:

- Encourages school entities to establish community partnerships that would leverage school facilities to extend nutritional programs and opportunities for physical fitness beyond the regular school day.
- Promotes the use of locally- or school-grown fruits and vegetables in school food service programs. Even in the most challenging settings, these programs have proven to be both cost-effective and tremendous teaching tools.
- Sets baseline nutritional standards for foods provided outside reimbursable school meals, including items sold through vending machines and school stores and fundraisers.
- Builds on a reform from the last revision of Chapter 12 – which banned the use of corporal punishment in schools – by making clear that it's inappropriate to deny access to food or physical activity as a punishment, or to provide them as incentives.
- Encourages active commuting that would allow students to bike or walk safely to and from school.
- Helps students meet the HHS-recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity by requiring schools to provide at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. Students could satisfy requirements through physical education classes, recess, classroom energizers or curriculum-based physical activity. And...
- Outlines clear expectations for access to physical education at all grade levels. (It's important to note that physical education courses can satisfy the 30 minutes of daily physical activity requirement, but that the physical activity requirement cannot supplant more formal physical education offerings.)

To be sure, these reforms will not solve the childhood obesity challenge. Educators, medical professionals, policymakers and families must come together to send consistent signals about the lifestyle choices that will allow our youngsters to reverse a stubborn and worrisome trend. But it's difficult to imagine a strategy to combat obesity that doesn't involve the schools in which our young people spend easily one-third to one-half of their waking hours.

Moreover, situating many of these strategies in our schools is entirely consistent with the role education has historically played in child health. From vision and scoliosis screenings to nutrition programs – programs that have their roots in the 1940s and the public goal of ensuring that young people were well enough for military service – schools have long been in the business of ensuring adequate levels of nutrition and physical activity for young people. Our goal is to

move away from what are oftentimes unhealthy practices and toward clear, common-sense and measurable guidance on student health issues.

Finally, a bit on process: the regulations before you are in proposed form. If the Board opts to advance, the next step will be a detailed analysis of fiscal impact, followed by external budgetary, legal and policy reviews. Following those, your committee – and your colleagues in the House – will have an opportunity to provide input, as will members of the public. It's important to note that at this initial stage, nearly 100 stakeholders representing more than 50 organizations have already participated in discussions around the regulation. These engagement efforts, including three public roundtables, are supported by a generous grant from the National Association of State Boards of Education. Ultimately, the regulations could be back before the Board in final form in six to nine months ahead of adoption for the 2012-13 school year.

I'll now turn to Adam for a brief update on Common Core –

Good morning, Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman, and honorable committee members.

Since the early 1990s, Pennsylvania has been a leader in the area of standards-based reform. The state's current curriculum framework, which is based upon twelve sets of state academic standards, was established in 1999. The Board was in the process of revising and updating these standards in early 2009 when common standards appeared on the horizon. In response, the Board put its state-level standards revision on hold – as did at least three other states that were engaged in similar work at that time.

The Common Core initiative, while closely linked with Race to the Top, is a *state*-led effort, facilitated by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association (NGA). Forty-eight states, two territories and the District of Columbia have joined in the process of writing a common set of English/language arts (ELA) and math standards that are “research and evidence-based, aligned with college and work expectations, include rigorous content and skills and are internationally benchmarked.”

After examining the policy questions around Common Core, conferring with colleagues from other states, and briefing education stakeholders, the Board has cemented its intent to replace our state's existing mathematics and ELA standards with the Common Core, so long as:

- 1. The State Board will be provided ample opportunity to conduct a thorough and public vetting of the Common Core that will support successful implementation; and*
- 2. The Common Core will be no less rigorous than the revised state-level standards the State Board was in the process of adopting in early 2009.*

To provide education stakeholders and policymakers with assurance on the second count, the Board has commissioned an independent study, led by Professor Suzanne Lane from the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education, to examine the public draft of the Common Core against our state-level standards in ELA and math. Teachers from across the commonwealth worked with Dr. Lane and her colleagues to compare the content and depth of knowledge of the

Common Core with the state standards that our public resources have funded and our educators have perfected. Common Core offers great promise if it advances the standards-based reforms at the core of Pennsylvania's student achievement gains.

Looking ahead, preliminary results of Dr. Lane's report will be presented at this week's State Board of Education meeting and then shared at a series of roundtables to be held across the state between May 21 and June 9. We'll likewise share the final report with you and your staff and the leadership of the state education associations. Like our efforts on health and wellness, our goal is to invite and take stock of feedback – both on the immediate policy question before us and on the steps that can ensure successful implementation should the Board vote to adopt.

Finally, I'm pleased to be joined today by Mr. Dane Linn, Director of the NGA's Education Division, who can provide some national – and international – context for this initiative, including its connection to Race to the Top.

Chairman Torsella expresses his regrets that he couldn't be here this morning. He asked me to note that clear, measurable standards – whether for high school graduation, core academic subjects, or nutrition and physical activity – are critical components of the definitions for success that guide education policy and practice. Chairman Torsella extends his thanks for the contributions of this committee in establishing them. Mr. Linn and I are happy to take your questions on Common Core, as is Dr. Caldwell on the proposed Chapter 12 regulations.