

**Testimony of  
Mary Ramirez,  
Director of Community and Student Services  
Senate Public Health and Welfare Hearing  
Drug and Alcohol Program  
February 10, 2009**

Good morning Chairman Erickson, Chairman Hughes, distinguished members of the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee and guests. On behalf of the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Secretary Gerald Zahorchak, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important issues of drug and alcohol prevention and intervention. I am Mary Ramírez, Director of the Bureau of Community & Student Services.

The link between youth wellness and academic success cannot be overstated. The use and abuse of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs by students continues to pose grave problems for our educators, parents and communities. We all know the tragedies of students killed in auto accidents, the pain of families dealing with youth in treatment centers, and the crime and violence involved with drug distribution. With modern technology, children can also more readily access potentially lethal sources such as prescription drugs. This unfortunate reality demands our full attention. Student health is a comprehensive responsibility, starting in the home and extending to the local community and state.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education is invested in several prevention and intervention programs. The Bureau of Community and Student Services works closely with the Department of Health, county authorities, interest groups and school administrators to coordinate an effective counter to societal pressures, connecting students with responsive, responsible outlets. Our cumulative efforts reach inside the classroom and beyond.

The State Board of Education, in consultation with the Department of Health, sets academic standards that schools use as a basis for instruction, defining what our students should know at minimum. These requirements place the study of alcohol, tobacco and drugs alongside other core concepts of health, such as nutrition and disease prevention.

The Department of Education builds on this foundation through supports and services to school districts. One such support is the federally funded Safe and Drug-Free Schools program - the primary source of grant funds that supports alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention in our public and nonpublic schools.

In order to receive funding for this program, schools are required to implement, science-based programs proven to address the specific alcohol, tobacco and drug prevention needs of their students. In the grant application, schools clearly define their needs based on the data collected from their violence report statistics, the Pennsylvania Youth Survey or direct experiences with their students. . The Department then reviews applications and assessment data to ensure that school districts are implementing programs appropriate to address identified, student-based needs. The Bureau of Community and Student Services also continues to work with the Department of Health to improve on a common set of measures to provide administration officials, parents, and interested parties with a concrete, consistent picture of what our students face and how we can improve.

The Department also continues to offer assistance once the grants have been administered. Each school that applies for Safe and Drug-Free schools money is required to form an advisory council comprised of a school administrator, a parent, student and an expert from the drug and alcohol community. The council meets at minimum three times per year and reports back to the Department. Each year, the Department sends two-person teams to look at a representative sample of schools to examine the advisory council's minutes, policies and curriculum. The teams interview students to get their perspective on the ground. If deficiencies are identified, bureau staff works with administrators to implement a Corrective Action Plan. To enhance coordination, the Department shares this plan, the school's annual report and Safe and Drug Free application with the appropriate Drug and Alcohol Single County Authority.

Historically, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program serves as a catalyst for community involvement and allows schools to leverage additional funding from other sources. For the 2007-08 fiscal year, more than \$10 million were distributed by formula grants to our schools, serving more than 2 million Pennsylvania students

In addition to administering and providing technical assistance on the safe and Drug Free Schools program, the Department works with Departments of Health and Welfare to provide integral intervention support through the commonwealth's Student Assistance Program (SAP). SAP is a school-based team consisting of educators and liaisons from community-based mental health and drug and alcohol agencies. SAP teams identify issues such as alcohol, drug abuse, or other behavioral issues that pose a barrier to a student's academic success. During the 2007-2008 academic year, more than 78,000 students were referred to SAP teams across the state. Issues involving alcohol abuse were among the major reasons for these referrals. Truly, the Commonwealth Student Assistance Program was one of the first interagency collaboration efforts in Pennsylvania.

Our partners, the Departments of Public Welfare and Health, have provided the valuable link to bring consultation to the SAP teams and provide drug and alcohol and mental health assessments to students and their parents. Our agencies collectively serve an active and vital role in shaping SAP policy and funding the delivery of services for students identified through the process. The Department of Education also works cooperatively with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board, the Center for Schools & Communities and many others to ensure that intervention services are provided in a timely, coordinated, and effective manner.

Our efforts have become more focused in recent years, but we must increase our vigilance. The current fiscal straits once again force a hard lesson home: Everything is connected. A student who cannot withstand social pressures will fail academically. A student who fails academically becomes a burden on society. We must all hold up our ends, from family to schools to the state government, to improve the well being of our youth. The Department is addressing this fundamentally by raising student achievement.

To that end, Governor Rendell and the Department of Education, with the support of the General Assembly, have initiated a plan to close the funding gap between school districts, clearing a major hurdle to student achievement and youth wellness. We know that the best drug and alcohol prevention is to provide for both academic and emotional needs of students. The General Assembly laid the groundwork for this by including Social and Health programs as an eligible investment for Accountability Block Grants

and builds upon it with the continued goal to adequately fund every school district so that every student achieves academically.

The bottom line--we all want our students to be safe physically, emotionally, socially, and academically. We must be proactive and emphasize an approach of both prevention and intervention and provide the resources and supports. Most importantly, we must educate our young people to make the right decisions so that they can become productive citizens in our commonwealth. Our schools are moving in the right direction. However, it will take continued diligence from every section of our society to keep these threats out of our homes and schools.