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NEWS RELEASE

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Education Commissioner Gist: “Make Our Schools the Best in the Country!”

Addressing a joint session of the General Assembly this evening (April 7, 2010), Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist called on Rhode Islanders to “make our schools the best in the country and the envy of the world.”

Doing so, she said, will require Rhode Islanders to “break out of our comfort zones” and to take a serious look at the current status of our schools.

“If we truly aspire to be the best in the nation and the envy of the world, we must be ready to take an unvarnished look at the state of all of our schools — and recognize how much better we can and must do,” Gist said. “I’m convinced that we have the capacity: a talented, dedicated force of teachers and principals; an engaged and focused business community; a bold, balanced, and realistic blueprint for success; a united political and educational leadership; and all the advantages that come with being a small, resourceful state. The real question is: Do we have the will?”

Citing a number of troubling statistics — only 55 percent of Rhode Island graduates go directly on to college, Rhode Island Hispanic students have the lowest test scores in the country — Gist said that she is committed to transforming the lowest-performing schools in the state.

“Turning around our most troubled schools is no longer just an issue of educational equity for the students in those schools. It’s a matter of economic survival for all of us,” Gist said. “We are committed to radically transforming our chronically low-achieving schools — the bottom five percent — to give their students a way up. . . or a way out. If these schools do not or cannot significantly change their culture and improve their performance, we will not hesitate to change them and to give these students the education they deserve.”

During her address, Gist praised the proposal from Providence Schools Superintendent Thomas M. Brady to reform the lowest-achieving schools in Providence by reopening them under a joint management-labor team.

“We are the only state in the country that has made a management-labor partnership one of the options for restarting a school,” Gist said. “Once again, the Rhode Island is at the forefront of school reform, and the nation will be watching.”

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Gist said she will work closely with teachers and school leaders as she implements the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) plan to transform education in Rhode Island.

“We must ensure that teachers play an active role in our school-reform initiatives,” Gist said. “When teachers join the decision-making process, we show our respect for them as professionals, we get the benefit of their experience and judgment, and we ultimately get better results.”

She also said she will hold “town hall meetings” in every school district to get public feedback on the plan to transform education.

State law requires the commissioner to deliver an annual address on the status of education in the state to a joint session of the General Assembly (RIGL 16-7.1-4, Annual report by Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education). The speech had been scheduled for March 31, but was postponed for one week because of the statewide flooding.

The speech is posted on the [RIDE Web site](#).

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