



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Ken Wagner
Commissioner

The State of Public Education in Rhode Island, 2016
Ken Wagner, Ph.D., Commissioner
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Good afternoon Speaker Mattiello; Senate President Paiva Weed; Governor Raimondo; members of the General Assembly; Barbara Cottam, chair of the Board of Education; Dan McConaghy, chair of our Council on Elementary and Secondary Education; other members of the Board; and distinguished guests.

Thank you for inviting me to address you on one of the most important priorities in our state: the education of our children. My standard for success is simple: I'll support whatever helps teachers teach and helps students learn.

Over my first few months on the job, I've enjoyed open and honest conversations with students, families, teachers, principals, and superintendents – the people doing the hard work every day that makes learning happen.

While other states are cutting back, putting children and teachers and schools at risk, Rhode Island has boosted education funding – thanks to your efforts. So, I start this afternoon by saying: Thank you. Thank you, Governor and members of the General Assembly, for your commitment to education. You understand that education is an investment in our future. What's good for our children is also good for our economy and our state.

In this chamber and beyond, Rhode Islanders are passionate about education, and we're proud of our progress. In the last year alone, thanks to your work:

We've made all-day kindergarten universal across Rhode Island – thank you, Senate President Paiva Weed and Senator Gallo, for your leadership;

We've created a School Building Authority to modernize our schools, and, in the first year alone, invested \$20 million in projects at 86 schools benefiting more than 30,000 students – thank you, Speaker Mattiello, for taking the lead on this work;

We've launched PrepareRI and made it possible for high-school students to take college classes for free – thank you, Chairman Joe McNamara, for supporting this initiative.

And there is amazing work going on in our schools. Let me tell you about some of the people doing this great work, and I'll ask them to stand at the end for your recognition.

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Tracy Lafreniere is a teacher, reading specialist, and literacy coach at the North Smithfield Elementary School. Tracy knows there is nothing more amazing and empowering than teaching a child to read. As the 2016 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, Tracy is raising awareness about the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, and she's organizing our first statewide sharing conference on teaching and learning.

Alan Tenreiro is the State and National Principal of the Year. Alan has transformed Cumberland High School, dramatically expanded access to advanced coursework, and introduced options that allow students to move at their own pace. Any student at Cumberland High can enroll in advanced courses, and 70 percent of seniors take AP or honors classes.

Yanaiza Gallant is the principal at Orlo Avenue Elementary School in East Providence. Yanaiza and her teachers have built a culture of trust and joy that allows them to take teaching and learning to the next level. They bring the entire school together every morning – students and parents, staff and community are invited – and set the goals for the day, based on the core values of respect, responsibility, and cooperation.

Tom Barbieri helped transform Bain Middle School, in Cranston, through teacher leadership and family engagement, including literally knocking on the doors of parents to invite them to engage. Now at Cranston High School West, Tom is doing excellent work integrating a comprehensive high school with best-in-class career-and-technical education offerings. Now, Tom couldn't be here tonight because he's hosting the Cranston West community dinner. And I'd say Tom's priorities are in exactly the right place.

Superintendent Colleen Jermain and Principal Jeffrey Goss and their team at Rogers High School, made Newport one of only one hundred and thirty (130) school districts in the country named to the College Board "Opportunity Honor Roll." Rogers High has opened AP courses and college options for all kids, while offering high-quality career-and-technical education.

Finally, Pawtucket Superintendent Patti DiCenso is providing amazing leadership to her entire community. With support from Hasbro, Patti introduced a No Bully curriculum across all district schools. With support from the Rhode Island Foundation, she formed a partnership with the International Charter School and the South Kingstown schools to introduce dual-language and world-language programs in English, Spanish, and Chinese, beginning in kindergarten.

Now let's have them stand and give a round of applause for these educators – and for the many other top-notch professionals who work hard for our kids every day.

These accomplishments are remarkable, but we also know there is more work to be done. Too few of our students meet grade-level expectations in reading and math. We need to do an even better job for all students, but especially students of color, English Learners, students with disabilities, adult learners, and students whose families have been left behind in the economy. Too many of our students who enroll in college need remediation when they get there, and they end up paying college prices for what they should have learned in high school. By the year 2020, more than 70 percent of jobs in Rhode Island will require some form of postsecondary education. But less than half of Rhode Islanders meet that benchmark now.

The Governor has a robust plan to put people back to work and grow our economy. Among the most important things we can do is to strengthen our neighborhood schools. I'm confident we can do this – together – not just because it's good for our economy, but because it's good for our kids.

So today, let's talk about a plan – a plan that's designed to strengthen our public schools. It is a plan rooted in the core belief that all kids deserve to attend a neighborhood school that prepares them for success. It is a plan based on confidence that we can work together to build school cultures of excellence and continuous improvement. I will highlight today three strategies to advance this work.

First, we need to provide all students with access to advanced coursework – and we need to prepare them for success. Second, we need to re-imagine how we do schooling to better balance rigor, relevance, and student engagement. Third, we need to empower our principals and teachers, our students and families, so they can make it all happen in their neighborhood schools. Let's talk about each of these strategies.

First – building skills through advanced coursework. Whether we realize it or not, we track our students. By the time students are in middle school, we've sorted them into accelerated and non-accelerated tracks. Too often, we decide who will move into high-level math, study world languages, persist in music and the arts, and take AP classes. And too often, we decide who will be left behind. This must stop.

All high-school students should have access to and be prepared for advanced coursework, based on their passions and their interests. This preparation must start early – in elementary and middle school. And we must continue to support high-quality early-childhood programs.

Our students need much more than just math and reading skills. They also need to learn how to collaborate, how to solve problems, and how to be digitally literate, particularly in computer science.

In general, it is much better to take a more challenging course than it is to play it safe. Persisting through difficulty – with the guidance and support of a great teacher – provides the kind of social and emotional skills that can make the difference between success and failure later in life – in college and the workplace. So, please: Please work with us to inspire the best in our students.

Let's provide free access to the PSAT and SAT in school so all students get early feedback on college readiness and a jumpstart on college applications.

Let's grow the PrepareRI program and the Advanced Coursework Network to give all students even more free access to college and other advanced learning experiences.

Let's expand high-quality career-and-technical education programs that blend academic readiness with growth-sector job skills.

Let's build more dual-language and world-language programs, because being bilingual is one of the most important assets in the 21st century.

Let's expand STEM and STEAM programs because our children need to be able to dream and design and build out their visions for the 22nd century.

And let's expand computer-science programs into all schools, because coding touches virtually every aspect of our lives and coding deserves to be in our classrooms, not just in our basements and garages.

But it isn't enough to just provide access to advanced coursework. Students do not achieve in school unless they are fully engaged in their learning, and they will never be fully engaged until learning matters to them.

The way we do schooling – how we divide up the school day and knowledge and learning – was designed to meet the assembly-line and factory needs of the 19th century. As a result, we have a dropout problem in Rhode Island. Not just in high school, but in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades. These students may attend school, but too many of our students disengage.

We tend to focus on fixing the kids who fail in the current system rather than on fixing the system that fails too many of our kids. We need to bring all of our schools into the 21st century. Let's expand hands-on, integrated, project-based approaches that leverage technology and are both rigorous and relevant for students and teachers.

When students and teachers are engaged, when they experience school in a way that makes sense to them, when they see themselves in their studies and their schoolwork, when they have both rigor and relevance, you cannot stop kids from learning. They want it, so they do it.

But as we re-imagine the way we do schooling, we must continue to invest in our schools and be fair in the way we fund them. Rhode Islanders from the field of education, business, and the community recently completed a review of our funding formula. Thank you to Representatives Amore and Ruggiero and Senators DaPonte and Gallo for serving on the funding-formula work group. Also, thank you to Don Sweitzer and Elizabeth Burke Bryant for leading this effort. We must put their recommendations into action because our schools need these resources to put our kids on a path to success.

But increased funding alone is not enough. If we want true equity for all kids, we must recognize that achievement gaps are really opportunity gaps, and we must create opportunities for our teachers and principals, our students and their families, to build out their visions of what their schools should look like. Which leads me to my third and final topic – empowerment.

To truly reimagine our schools, we need to give principals and teachers more flexibility to meet the needs of their students. They know their kids best. Too often we've taken a top-down approach and we've said: "Here's the right way to do things – and if you don't agree, we will force you to do things our way."

We cannot change a school by mandating excellence. The only people who can create that culture of excellence and continuous improvement in schools are the people who work in the school day after day, closest to the action or, as the Governor says, "Where the magic happens."

Of course, our superintendents, school committees, and teacher-union colleagues need to create the context for excellence at the district level. And, of course, we need to hold schools accountable for results that matter. But principals and teachers are the ones who can deliver these results. You can't do it, and I can't do it.

So this year, Governor Raimondo proposed funds to help build this leadership and empowerment work. The budget includes:

- \$1 million for teacher and principal leadership pipelines;
- An additional \$750,000 for expert classroom teachers to provide statewide instructional leadership; and
- \$1 million for school and district teams to design their empowerment plans.

And today, we submit for your consideration a voluntary School and Family Empowerment Package: a set of opportunities for autonomy and flexibility that can help take our neighborhood schools to the next level.

The idea is to give neighborhood schools – our teachers and principals – more authority to make decisions about things that directly affect their students – things like teaching materials, the school day, and personnel.

This empowerment package is completely voluntary. If a school community wishes to adopt the empowerment package, the school – with local approval – will decide which components they need and which components they don't need.

Empowerment is completely voluntary and will be phased in over three years, including a year set aside for planning. But by creating the legislative framework for empowerment to happen, we give all of our schools the option to take advantage of some or all of this flexibility, whenever they are ready. The key is that teachers, principals, superintendents, and school committees will be able to decide for themselves if some or all of this approach will work for them and their kids. This proposal will cut bureaucratic red tape and let teachers spend more time teaching.

With autonomy and flexibility, empowerment schools will be much like the “schools of choice” first proposed in 1988 by then-American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Al Shanker. The schools that Shanker envisioned would be a way for “parents and teachers to cooperate with each other, to build a new structure,” an autonomous school or school within a school – which could lead, over time, to large-scale improvements. And, more than 25 years later, I and many others share former-AFT president Shanker's vision for re-imagining schooling.

But it won't work just to empower schools. We also need to empower families.

The vast majority of families want their children to attend their neighborhood school, but one size never fits all. We need to recognize that sometimes the assigned school cannot possibly meet the needs of all of its students all of the time. Unfortunately, we have created a system where families who want something different for their children may have just two options – charter schools or private schools. This system excludes too many of our families.

Now, I believe we need quality charter schools. Quality charter schools make the whole system stronger. But we absolutely need a strategy to reduce the demand for charter schools. Pretending the demand for charter schools doesn't exist is not a strategy. We must level the playing field: strengthen our neighborhood schools so they can compete.

Under this voluntary package, neighborhood schools must always serve their residents first. But if an empowerment school has the space and the interest, we should let them open their doors and their innovations to parents who might otherwise choose a charter or private school.

Every student deserves the same chance to succeed. Open enrollment will let families choose the school that has a teaching approach that best suits the needs of their child.

Let's imagine. Imagine families and students able to enroll in an empowerment school because of its great program for the arts, or its academy for science and engineering.

Let's imagine. Imagine even more dual-language schools where students who speak Spanish would not be viewed as deficient, but as experts, because they would be the experts when we teach in Spanish in the morning, just as their peers are experts when we teach in English in the afternoon.

Let's imagine siblings of a deaf student enrolling in the School for the Deaf so they could learn American Sign Language and communicate, maybe for the first time, with their deaf brothers and sisters.

Imagine if we could do an even better job with dyslexic students by creating model programs throughout the state so these students would finally be able to enjoy a lifetime of fluent reading.

Imagine if we could eliminate – not reduce, but eliminate – student academic mobility and the challenges that come with it, by allowing students who change addresses to stay in their school and continue learning with their trusted teachers.

None of the ideas I've outlined today are new. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. For more than 20 years, Massachusetts has had high standards, fair funding, a focus on teaching and leadership, school-based empowerment, and inter-district enrollment transfer, and Massachusetts has moved to best in the nation. Adhering to these core principles – high standards, fair funding, great teaching and leadership, accountability, school empowerment, and expanded choice – Massachusetts saw achievement levels rise, students succeed, and the economy boom. We can do this, and we should.

I'll close with a brief story. A few months ago, I met with a group of principals and discussed my initial observations about our schools. One of the principals stopped me and asked: "How are you going to improve our schools? What is your plan?" I turned to him and answered: "You. You and your teachers – you are the plan!" The principals looked shocked, maybe a little nervous, but they were also proud – they were proud of our faith in them and our belief in the importance of their role.

And I say the same thing to you tonight. You are the plan. Each of us must do our part.

We appreciate that the Governor and General Assembly, even in these tough economic times, have stood up as champions for our schools. But we have more work to do.

Today, we have outlined a set of strategies to take this work forward:

Let's take skills development to the next level through universal access to and preparedness for advanced coursework.

Let's take student achievement and engagement to the next level through innovations in how we do schooling.

Let's support those cultures of joy and excellence and continuous improvement through increased options for school empowerment.

And let's reduce the demand for schools outside of the district system through increased choice for families within the district system.

Let's work together to achieve these goals, to ensure the economic prosperity of our state, and to make Rhode Island the envy of the nation.

Thank you.

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