

Commissioner's Weekly Field Memo
Friday, June 27, 2014

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Action Item Calendar

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July 18: [UCOA](#) preliminary data due

July 18: [Physical-restraint](#) report due

September 30: [UCOA FY 2014](#) data due

Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. General Assembly wraps up 2014 session

Last Friday evening, the General Assembly altered one aspect of the Board of Education regulations on the Rhode Island Diploma System by [voting](#) to postpone the use of state assessments as a graduation requirement until the year 2017. I am naturally disappointed that the General Assembly has taken this step, particularly in light of the thousands of students who significantly improved their core mathematic skills as a result of this policy. Student readiness for college, careers, and life remains our highest priority, and we will continue working with you to ensure that all students receive the instruction, support, and resources they need to prepare them for success. I strongly encourage you to continue with any current plans you have in place to provide additional support, instruction, and resources, over the summer and during the coming school year, to students who lack the knowledge and skills they need in mathematics and reading.

Pending Governor Chafee's action on this bill, we will be reviewing the potential legal and practical implications and I will communicate with you regarding any developments.

Also on Friday evening, the General Assembly [voted](#) to modify evaluations for most Rhode Island teachers. Annual evaluations for all educators was a key component in the standards that the former Board of Regents approved in 2009. We worked with the leadership of both chambers toward development of the final version this bill on teacher evaluations, which is similar in many ways to the Cyclical Evaluation Model that is already an approved option. I believe in the importance of annual evaluations for all teachers and school leaders, but I also recognize the need to make the evaluation process more streamlined. I hope and expect that, even without formal annual evaluations, all teachers will continue to receive feedback and support as they work to improve their professional practices. Given the direct connections between evaluations and our certification system, the bill might require us to revisit our requirements for certification renewal. We are considering the ramifications of this now, and we will continue working with the field on any necessary adjustments.

Overall, our education community enjoyed many accomplishments in this year's session of the General Assembly. I am pleased that the Fiscal Year 2015 state budget includes full funding for the Funding Formula for aid to education for a total of \$813 million – a \$31-million increase over the current fiscal year and a \$142-million increase (21 percent) since the funding formula went into effect four years ago. The state aid to education includes an additional \$1 million for early-childhood education (bringing total funding to \$2.95 million), an additional \$500,000 for high-cost special education (total: \$1.5 million), an

additional \$1.1 million for transportation (total: \$4.35 million), and an additional \$500,000 for career-technical education programs (total: \$3.5 million). The General Assembly also restored funds for textbooks for nonpublic schools (\$240,000) and for the school-breakfast programs (\$270,000). Governor Chafee signed the budget into law last week.

The General Assembly also approved a [bill](#) that we have supported for many years, which moves back the mandatory date to notify teachers of potential layoffs, from March 1 to June 1. This change makes the notification process far more meaningful and reasonable for planning purposes, both for you and for potentially affected teachers.

The General Assembly also approved [legislation](#) to provide, beginning in Fiscal Year 2017, full funding for districts that implement full-day kindergarten programs. Another important piece of [legislation](#) that the General Assembly approved will strengthen career-technical education (CTE) across the state by establishing a CTE advisory committee and a CTE trust that could raise funds independently and create partnerships with employers for internships, apprenticeship programs, and other initiatives to advance student learning and career readiness.

Finally, the General Assembly passed a [bill](#) that will expand opportunities for those who are pursuing a GED or another high-school degree equivalency certificate.

Taken together, these actions will help us to strengthen our commitment to building multiple pathways that students can pursue toward graduation, challenging careers, and postsecondary education.

2. Statement released on assessments and graduation requirements

Here is a statement that I released to the media on Monday regarding the legislation on state assessments and graduation requirements:

On Friday, the General Assembly approved the Rhode Island Board of Education Act regarding the use of standardized assessments as a graduation requirement. Pending the passage of this bill into law, we recognize that many students in Rhode Island high schools may have questions about whether they have met the current requirements to earn a diploma.

Specifically, the act states that “prior to the graduating class of 2017,” no standardized assessment “shall be used to determine a student’s eligibility to graduate from high school.” It is important to note, however, that local school districts have the authority to set local graduation policies and to determine whether students are eligible to earn a diploma. School districts make these decisions on an individual-student basis, based on whether students have fulfilled all graduation requirements, including course completion and performance-based demonstrations of proficiency, such as senior projects and electronic portfolios, as well as any locally determined graduation requirements.

The R.I. Department of Education (RIDE) therefore suggests that students and families with questions about eligibility for graduation address their inquiries to their local school district, which retains the authority to make graduation decisions. Each student has the right to receive a fair

decision, and RIDE has the responsibility of protecting that right. Should any controversies arise between students and their local school districts regarding interpretation of the law on graduation requirements, students may appeal the matter to RIDE for a decision through the standard hearing process.

3. Summer Learning Tour kicks off with visit to zoo

In order to highlight some fun opportunities for summer learning, this afternoon I spent some time visiting with children in the ZooCamps at the Roger Williams Park Zoo, in Providence. This visit is part of my annual “Summer Learning Tour.” Rhode Island offers students and their families excellent opportunities to have fun and to learn – in afterschool hours and during the summer months. When children are involved in fun and productive activities throughout the summer, they’re better able to retain what they’ve learned and to perform well in school in the fall. To help families think about opportunities for summer learning, we have posted our Summer Learning in Rhode Island 2014 list on our website (on the home page, under “In the Spotlight”) and we have distributed copies of the list to all media.

4. Summer meals programs begin next week

On Tuesday, I will join folks from the city of Providence and Undersecretary Concannon, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to open the summer meals program in Providence. Cranston and Pawtucket will also have summer meals kickoff events next week. I’m really pleased that this summer 10 of our school districts will be partner agencies and will run summer meals programs, including two new partners this summer: North

Providence and Warwick. We'll have a total of 210 summer meal sites across the state, serving meals to children and youth in all of our urban communities. To give you a sense of the scope of this program, last summer we served a total of 312,425 meals and I'm sure we will reach even more people this year. Rhode Island is truly a living example of public agencies, nonprofit agencies, and local school districts working together in the best interest of the children of our state.

5. Nellie Mae Education Foundation to survey New England high schools

For years, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation has studied public-education systems in New England and has funded efforts to make education more equitable and effective. This year, for the first time, the foundation is surveying all 900 public high schools in New England. Developed by the UMass Donahue Institute, this survey looks broadly at educational practices – with a focus on finding out who is pursuing student-centered approaches – with a goal of tracking the impact of future investments that the foundation may support. At the request of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, which has provided support for a number of important initiatives in Rhode Island, I will be sending an e-mail message to all high-school principals, asking them to complete the survey. The results of the survey will help the foundation make funding decisions in future years.

From RIDE

Educator Evaluations:

6. RIDE provides reminder about reporting evaluation data, due July 14

Standard Six of the Evaluation Systems Standards outlines expectations for reporting evaluation data to RIDE. The deadline for submitting the required educator-evaluation data to RIDE is **July 14**.

Schools and districts fully implementing the Educator Performance and Support System (EPSS) will have the required evaluation data reported automatically to RIDE once evaluations are finalized. For schools and districts not fully implementing the EPSS, a reporting spreadsheet along with directions is available on the RIDE website. The spreadsheet allows LEAs to document the required evaluation data for all teachers and building administrators in a simple format that can then be uploaded to EPSS. The evaluation-data upload tool is accessible under the “Config Admin” tab in EPSS, beginning with the individual who has been designated by the LEA as the EPSS District Configuration Administrator.

Additional information, including evaluation-data submission guidance, is available on our website, at:

www.ride.ri.gov/EPSS.

Transportation:

7. School Bus Monitor Variance requests due June 30 for summer transportation, August 15 for the coming school year

If your LEA is planning to use one of the approved School Bus Monitor Variances for the coming school year (2014-15), it is time to submit your requests through the eRIDE system. Please submit requests by **June 30** for any July through August K-5 transportation. Requests for September through June of the 2014-15 school year should be submitted by **August 15**. If you have any questions regarding access to the variance module through eRIDE or the allowable variances, please contact Cindy Brown, at 222-4257 or Cynthia.Brown@ride.ri.gov, or Patti Durfee, at patti.durfee@ride.ri.gov or 222-4273.

RIDE will post this field memo on Tuesday, at:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/InsideRIDE/CommissionerDeborahAGist/FieldMemos.aspx>