



"Creating Pathways to Opportunity" for All Students

2017 State of Education in Rhode Island

Embargoed until May 8, 2017 at 7 p.m.

[Introduction]

Thank you for that introduction, Sam.

Good evening members of the General Assembly and other elected officials; Barbara Cottam, Chair of the Board of Education; Dan McConaghy, Chair of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education; members of the Board; and distinguished guests.

Thank you for joining me today to kick off a conversation on one of the most important priorities in our state: creating pathways to opportunity, through partnerships in education.

Thank you to our host, Davies Career and Technical High School, and Interim Administrator Fred Slemmon. Thank you, especially, to the young people here this evening showcasing the amazing work happening in our schools. Tonight's event offers a small glimpse into the talents of our teachers and students. Let's give them a round of applause.

[Recognizing Educators]

In addition to the student showcase, we are joined by extraordinary educators who step up every day on behalf of kids. I'll highlight a few, and let's hold applause to the end.

Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, Nikos Giannopoulos, helps his students at the Beacon Charter High School for the Arts build skills, believe in themselves, persist, and succeed.

Denise Missry of the Asa Messer Elementary School and Dr. Jason Masterson of the McCourt Middle School are Rhode Island's 2016 Elementary and Secondary Principals of the Year. They set the bar for how strong leadership can build a culture of high expectations and continuous improvement.

Superintendent of the Year, Kristen Stringfellow, shapes South Kingstown's policies and practices, so that each school has the support needed to be successful and grow.

There are so many educators to celebrate, especially today, during Teacher Appreciation Week. I ask Nikos, Jason, and Kristen, and each of the educators in the room, to please stand. We thank and applaud each of you.



[Defining the Challenge]

My standard for success is simple. I'll support anything that helps teachers teach and students learn. An investment in them is an investment in our future, because a highly-skilled workforce, a growing economy, and vibrant communities are all anchored in education.

But our economy has changed, and our students have changed. If we want our children to be competitive – if we want Rhode Island to be competitive – education needs to change, too.

For many of our kids, the future is uncertain. College seems out of reach, and they feel lost when thrust into the world of work.

That's on us. Too many of our children are not prepared for their futures. We need a path forward that provides equity of opportunity for all, especially students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and adult learners.

If you ask business owners whether they plan to plant roots or grow their businesses in Rhode Island, one of the most common concerns raised is the perceived quality of our schools.

It's time to take back the narrative, showcase the great work we're doing, and highlight our next steps.

We cannot rest until public education is one of the top reasons why families want to live here and businesses want to grow here.

Tonight, I will review a plan that can bring this story to life.

[Early Childhood]

The story of education in Rhode Island begins with high-quality early learning. It's the starting point for a strong and comprehensive system of education.

Thanks to the leadership of Governor Raimondo and the General Assembly, we increased access to state-funded pre-K, for a total of 60 classrooms this fall, and every district in the state now has full-day kindergarten.

The Governor also set a goal that at least 75 percent of third graders read well by 2025. Students who do not read well by third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school. Following the Governor's challenge, we now have a comprehensive birth to grade three reading plan to ensure our youngest learners are prepared for their futures.

These pre-K and kindergarten classrooms may seem disconnected from the work students do in elementary and middle school, or from Advanced Placement and college classes in high school, but early education provides the foundation upon which we build lifelong opportunities.



[Advanced Coursework]

When our system is strong and connected, from families to communities, from elementary to middle to high school, from colleges to workforce, students are better prepared to challenge themselves and succeed.

And challenge them is exactly what we must do.

Too often, we decide who will move into high-level math, study world languages, persist in music and the arts, or take AP classes. But what if, instead of sorting students and closing doors, we opened challenges, opportunities, and pathways for all?

That's our focus: it's an opportunity agenda.

If we want true equity for all kids, we must recognize that achievement gaps are really opportunity gaps.

We need to close those gaps, and working with the Governor and General Assembly, we made real progress over the past year.

We provided free access to the PSAT and SAT, so all students get early feedback on college readiness and an edge on college applications. It worked. Compared to last year, more than 3,600 additional students registered to take the SAT this year.

Working with our colleagues in higher education and beyond, we grew the PrepareRI early college program and the Advanced Course Network to increase student access to college and other challenging courses, with more than 120 offerings through 14 providers.

Schools all across the state are making this happen. I'll share some examples from Providence.

A seventh grader at Nathan Bishop Middle School is taking college courses. A Central High School student wants to enroll in a specific course at New England Tech, so he takes the bus from Kennedy Plaza to the New England Tech Warwick campus and then a shuttle to the East Greenwich campus. A student at Juanita Sanchez High School, who started middle school not knowing English, earned A's in college courses in Public Speaking and Nonprofit Management.

These are middle and high school students – teenagers – who are laying the foundation for their futures. Like more Rhode Island students than ever before, they will graduate high school with college credits, at no additional cost.



[Career Pathways]

By the year 2020, more than 70 percent of jobs in Rhode Island will require some form of postsecondary education, but only 4 out of 10 Rhode Islanders meet that benchmark now. Of the 11.5 million jobs created nationally since 2010, only 80,000, or less than 1%, went to people with a high school diploma or less.

Not every student will attend college, but each student should be prepared to have that option, if they so choose.

At Woonsocket High School, Principal Henderson and his team enroll all 9th graders in a “Success” course, where each student creates a 10-year plan of what they want and how they will get there.

All students need a skills roadmap – the skills they build now will stay with them even when the destination changes.

Working with our partners in school districts, the Commerce Department, the Department of Labor and Training, the Governor’s Workforce Board, and the Career and Technical Education Board, we now offer more than 130 career programs that blend academic readiness with in-demand job skills.

We also won a New Skills for Youth grant, with support from JPMorgan Chase, to bring career exploration and readiness to all Rhode Island classrooms.

Look no further than our hosts here this evening. The Davies Career and Technical High School is doing excellent work to prepare their students, and we look forward to the launch of a statewide advanced manufacturing center, with funds proposed in this year’s budget.

We’ll also have in place five P-TECH programs, where students earn a high school diploma, an associate’s degree from CCRI, and a job opportunity with the business partner.

These P-TECH programs are focused on computer science with CVS in Woonsocket; healthcare with Lifespan in North Providence; Information Technology with FM Global and United Natural Foods in Providence; cybersecurity with SENEDIA and defense employers in Newport; and advanced manufacturing with Electric Boat in Westerly.

In these industries and beyond, technology skills are critical, so Governor Raimondo’s Computer Science for Rhode Island initiative will bring computer programming into every school in the state by the end of 2017.

These investments send a powerful message to employers that Rhode Island is creating high-skill, next-generation opportunities for both our students and our economy.



It's amazing what can happen when we partner across government, business, and communities.

It's even more amazing what can happen when we believe in our kids strongly enough to really prepare them and challenge them.

[RI Promise]

And what's a more powerful message than to challenge all students to pursue higher education? Just as early childhood education is a critical piece of the system, so too is post-secondary education.

As Senator DiPalma recently pointed out, the promise we make to our kids needs to be reviewed from time to time.

In the 19th century, we promised our children only an 8th grade education, to meet their basic needs to read, write, and do arithmetic.

In the 20th century, we upgraded that promise and guaranteed students access to high school because it became clear that more preparation was needed.

Now, in the 21st century, Governor Raimondo has proposed we upgrade our promise to kids once again, because it is clear at least two years of postsecondary education are necessary in today's economy.

Rhode Island Promise makes a simple commitment. If you work hard enough to meet the acceptance criteria, there will be a seat waiting for you at a Rhode Island public college or university.

I ask you to support this new promise, and let it anchor, inspire, and hold accountable our entire K12 enterprise. This is good for our kids and good for our economy.

[Personalization]

Building college and career readiness are just two examples of how we can bring Rhode Island schools into the 21st century.

We must also place the student at the center of education. This means developing student-centered pathways across all academic areas, and expanding hands-on, integrated, project-based approaches that leverage technology.

Beginning next year, our new diploma pathway endorsements will allow students to demonstrate deeper learning in a chosen area – such as the arts, humanities, languages, science, or math. A pathway endorsement on the transcript will communicate to colleges and



employers that a student acquired skills aligned to interests and careers, skills beyond the traditional high school diploma.

And here's the most important part. It will be the students who determine the pathways they pursue. It is their diploma, not ours. Let them make it their own.

Giving students and their families a voice is critical if we want schools to reflect the needs of communities.

Working with the Parent Outreach Design Team, we completed a campaign to increase student, parent, and teacher participation on our climate and culture survey, called SurveyWorks.

I'm proud to recognize Ella Risk Elementary School in Central Falls as the school with the highest percent participation on SurveyWorks, including over 80% of their parents and families.

At Ella Risk and beyond, nearly 17,000 parents and family members told us what is and isn't working in their schools. We will learn from and respond to this feedback.

[Leadership]

Just as student and family empowerment are critical, so too is educator empowerment.

We need to give principals and teachers more opportunities and pathways to meet the needs of their students. They know their kids best.

RIDE is providing grants to help develop school-based shared leadership. We clearly hit upon a need, because our initial call for applications, with only \$350,000 in funding, produced more than \$1.5 million in requests from our teachers, principals, and school district leaders.

We're working with the Rhode Island Foundation and business leaders from CVS, Bank of America, Hasbro, and beyond to build even more shared leadership capacity in our schools and districts, and the Governor will make an announcement about this work in the coming weeks.

RIDE also launched the Learning Champions initiative, with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, which brings together 90 educators from across the state to articulate the core competencies that must anchor our student-centered and personalized learning approaches.

Student-centered learning, including blended and project-based approaches, is growing in our schools and generating national attention for Rhode Island. We thank our partners at the Office of Innovation, Highlander Institute, New England Basecamp, and the Project-Based Learning Committee at Providence College.



In each of these examples, partnerships and shared leadership are producing opportunities and pathways for kids.

[Empowerment]

I've talked at length about preparing students to adapt to the challenges and changes they face.

But our schools must also adapt, be creative, entrepreneurial, and nimble.

We can't expect families to change where they live just to find the outcomes they deserve.

We can't expect local policies, politics, and elections to keep up with the pace of change in our economy.

We have students in schools that have been low-performing for more than a decade. That is unacceptable, and they deserve better, now.

I believe student and family choice is the best pressure to drive quick change in our education system.

Students and families already pressure the system to improve when they choose to enroll in a charter school or a state school.

But students and families will also pressure the system when they choose to enroll in a course pathway.

For example, students can choose to attend any Career and Technical Education center or program in the state.

It's working. We're seeing an unprecedented increase in CTE pathways for kids, in reaction to this healthy competition and comparison across school district boundaries.

This is not about building a parallel system; it is about building a strong and responsive system that offers children parallel pathways to preparedness.

One size doesn't fit all.

Schools and districts can't possibly afford, on their own, to offer all options to all students. So they must form partnerships – with public and private colleges, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and with other schools and districts.



In the traditional model, the student must adapt to what the system offers; in the partnership model, the system must adapt to what the student needs.

If you don't believe your district can do this, we will help you form stronger and more powerful partnerships.

Course choice through partnerships can be just as powerful as school choice, if not more so, to drive innovation and improvements in education.

[Coherent and Long-Term Strategy]

By staying the course on core principles – high expectations, engaged students, great teaching and leadership, and empowered schools and families – we will see achievement levels rise, students succeed, and the economy expand.

As we finalize our federal accountability plan, we will incentivize these core principles within the guard rails of equity and opportunity.

These core principles also fit with the legislation sponsored last year by Representative Gregg Amore, which calls for Rhode Island to develop a coherent system of standards-based curriculum, professional development, and school-based leadership.

And, as we recently announced, by aligning our measures of student progress with Massachusetts in the elementary and middle school grades, and the College Board in high school, we will have long-term and stable partnerships that support teaching and learning well into the future.

[Closing]

This opportunity agenda must be powered by bold decisions and actions in our schools and communities.

I close by mentioning again one of the most bold and innovative actions we can take in education.

In today's culture, love is an innovation.

Each time I mention love, some say I'm foolish and some say I am naive. Others just say thank you.

Love is not the same thing as care or relationship.

Care and relationship are safe words. Love is disruptive. Talking about it in public space makes us uncomfortable.



But it shouldn't. Love is the connective tissue; it is an activation agent.

Once you activate it, and tie it to high expectations and great teaching in schools, then everyone becomes an engine of transformation. Everything is then possible.

Think of the shoots of a plant that sprout quickly following a long period of growth below the ground.

We need to grow this connective tissue in our schools. We need to activate it and tie it to great teaching.

Without love as part of our plan, true transformation in education will never be possible.

But we have much more work to do.

Today, we reviewed steps to take this work forward:

Let's take skills development to the next level through high expectations, great teaching, and challenging learning opportunities for all kids.

Let's take student engagement to the next level through pathways and approaches that re-imagine how we do schooling.

Let's foster love and joy and excellence and growth in the classroom by empowering schools, students, and families.

And, through shared leadership and partnerships, let's strengthen our system of schools, grow our economy, and prepare our children for success.

That's why we care about education, and that's a Rhode Island story we can be proud to tell.

Thank you.