



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Shepard Building
255 Westminster Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-3400

Deborah A. Gist
Commissioner

Working for All: The State of Public Education in Rhode Island, 2014
Deborah A. Gist, Commissioner
January 31, 2014

Speaker Fox, President Paiva Weed, members of the General Assembly, Governor Chafee, Board Chair Mancuso and members of the Board of Education, school leaders, teachers, students, and all friends of education:

I am honored to stand before you once again to report to you on the state of public education in Rhode Island. Good afternoon! *Buenas tardes! Boa Tarde!*

Thanks for the special greetings from some of our world-language scholars – students from the International Charter School and from the Leviton Dual Language School, in Providence.

I am especially grateful this evening for the opportunity to speak to you near the outset of your legislative session. In the coming months, as you grapple with issues such as economic development and workforce readiness, I have faith that you will uphold our Rhode Island tradition of support for our schools and our students.

As Governor Chafee reported to you in his State of the State address two weeks ago: “Education has always been the great equalizer. No matter where you start, if you get access to a good education and work hard, you can succeed.” Governor Chafee, you recognize that great schools today will bring Rhode Island a brighter future and that transforming education in Rhode Island is the most important economic development plan we have in our state. Through your three years as Governor, in the face of really tough economic challenges, you have been steadfast in support for public education. I am sure that everyone assembled here this evening joins me in saying: Thank you, Governor Chafee!

Speaker Fox and Senate President Paiva Weed, you have also served as champions of public education. You and your colleagues have put forward legislation that:

- ensures equitable education funding across our state;
- provides greater safety measures for all of our schools, our students, and our educators;
- expands opportunities for early learning and for children to attend charter public schools; and
- embraces the great potential of technology and digital learning – to cite just a few examples.

Thank you for these important decisions and for your unwavering support!

Successful implementation requires steady support from the Board of Education. Under the leadership of Board Chair Mancuso, the Board of Education has maintained its commitment to:

Telephone (401)222-4600 Fax (401)222-6178 TTY (800)745-5555 Voice (800)745-6575 Website: www.ride.ri.gov

The Board of Education does not discriminate on the basis of age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, race, color, religion, national origin, or disability.

- high expectations,
- strong support systems, and
- multiple opportunities for all students.

Thank you, Chair Mancuso and the members of the Board of Education.

The gap between high-school graduation and college- and career-readiness is narrowing as we engage in on-going policy discussions with our partners at the Community College of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, and the University of Rhode Island. Thank you, Presidents Di Pasquale, Carriuolo, and Dooley for your vision, your leadership, and your partnership.

Throughout the past year in our new structure, we have worked even more closely to support all Rhode Island students – from early childhood, through elementary and secondary schools, adult-education programs, college, and beyond. Looking back on the past year, I see many accomplishments that we have achieved by working together:

Thanks to funding you approved last year, we expanded the state prekindergarten program and awarded grants to four districts to expand full-day kindergarten.

The Board of Education made Rhode Island the first state in the country to adopt the Next Generation Science Standards, which will help prepare our graduates for careers in science, technology, and engineering.

The Community College of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College worked with some of our school districts on summer programs to help students improve in math and prepare for graduation.

In partnership with the Emergency Management Agency, we developed regulations and policies on school safety as well as a model School Safety Plan.

In partnership with the Rhode Island Food Bank, we expanded the Summer Food Services Program – and earned national recognition.

Due to outstanding and unprecedented performance by our adult-education programs, we became one of only 15 states to earn a \$670,000 Workforce Incentive Grant.

In 2013, two of our schools won Green Ribbon awards for environmental excellence from the U.S. Department of Education. Congratulations to The Compass School and the Providence Career and Technical Academy.

Two of our schools won Blue Ribbon awards, the highest honor the U.S. Department of Education awards to schools. Congratulations: Stony Lane Elementary School, in North Kingstown, and the William M. Davies, Jr. Career and Technical High School.

We received word just this month that Exeter-West Greenwich, Lincoln, and Portsmouth have made the AP Honor Roll, for improvement in both access to and performance in Advanced Placement courses, an accomplishment in line with our goal to ensure more challenging

coursework for all students including those at the highest academic levels. South Kingstown received special recognition as a multiple-year member of the AP Honor Roll –Congratulations!

This work is possible because Rhode Island invests wisely in our children and our schools. In fact, education is the biggest investment we make in the economic prosperity and success of our state. Each year we make a total investment of \$2.1 billion! For that, Rhode Islanders expect and deserve results.

We are getting results, and we are improving each year. Three months ago, the U.S. Department of Education released the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as The Nation's Report Card. On all four assessments in mathematics and reading, the percent of Rhode Island students attaining proficiency now stands above the national average - for the first time ever. This progress has been particularly dramatic in grade 8, where our improvements far exceed the national average in both mathematics and reading.

And what about our high-school seniors? Tomorrow morning, we will release the statewide results of the 2013 NECAP assessments. Already, after the first retake opportunity, 73 percent of students in the Class of 2014 have earned the math assessment component of their graduation requirements. This is up from just 60 percent a year ago. As you know, the remaining students have many other opportunities to continue to improve and a variety of ways in which they can demonstrate their math accomplishments.

After ten years of working toward this moment, this is the year our Diploma System is fully in place, and it has already resulted in better prepared students. We have much more to do over the next few months to successfully graduate our seniors, and we will get it done.

Our schools are already making sure that our younger students are increasingly better prepared before they get to high school. So let's not lose sight of the magnitude of what Rhode Island has accomplished. More students today are ready to graduate – and they are much more ready to succeed beyond high school. We are on the right course.

We cannot give up on our students or limit them by lowering expectations. We cannot consign our graduates to lives of economic dependence. We must demonstrate to our students that their hard work will pay off and that they can rise to meet a challenge. We must show them time and again that we will do whatever it takes to help them.

Our students need us to believe in them, to expect that they can and will achieve, and to help them do so. When we give students and teachers the support they need and when we hold one another accountable – students, families, teachers, education leaders, myself included – we get results.

Look what has happened in Central Falls High School, where the four-year graduation rate has moved from 48 percent in 2009 to 74 percent in 2013. Look at Charles E. Shea Senior High School, in Pawtucket, where the four-year graduation rate has climbed from 57 percent in 2009 to 83 percent today!

But despite the progress we have made, we have much more to do to ensure that all students in Rhode Island are achieving. We must be sure that every school and classroom in our state is a place where learning is meaningful, joyful, and dynamic.

A great education prepares students for challenging careers and a rewarding quality of life. Our graduates must have a civic responsibility, a respect for others, a love of learning, a sense of our cultural history, and an understanding of our role within a global society. We need schools that engage students across the curriculum – through the study of:

English and mathematics,
science and technology,
social studies and civics,
economics and history,
world languages and the arts,
health and physical education,
career, technical, and business education.

In Rhode Island, what goes on in the school and in the classroom remains a local responsibility – as it should be. When I was a teacher, I had a tremendous amount of autonomy in the classroom, and I hear from teachers all the time who share with me their frustrations about not having the ability to make decisions concerning their students.

Decisions about instruction, curriculum, classroom assessments, and learning materials should be made by and with those closest to our students. Recognizing the importance of this concept, two months ago Governor Chafee convened the Educator Autonomy Working Group. This group meets monthly, and the members will make specific recommendations on ways we can provide more flexibility for teachers, principals, and superintendents.

As just one member of the group, I am proud to be working under the leadership of two terrific co-chairs: Yanaiza Gallant, last year's Milken Educator Award Winner and Patricia Page, a business-education teacher for East Greenwich High School and our 2014 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year. Thank you, Yanaiza and Pat, for your commitment to this work and for all that you do.

The first priority in our strategic plan for transforming education is to ensure that we have highly effective teachers in every classroom and highly effective leaders in every school and district. I'm honored that some of the leading educators in Rhode Island have taken the time to join us this evening.

Our 2013 Milken Educator Award winner teaches mathematics and serves as Academic Dean at the Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy and she works with the teachers in Central Falls as well – truly showing her commitment to teaching and learning for *all* Rhode Island students. Please welcome Marielle Emet.

The 2014 Superintendent of the Year joins us tonight, all the way from Foster-Glocester. Please welcome Superintendent Michael Barnes.

Joining our Rhode Island Teacher of the Year Pat Page tonight are our 2014 District Teachers of the Year.

One of the highlights of my schedule is the weekly presentation of Golden Apple awards to educators, based on nominations from parents and from students themselves. Please join me in thanking NBC 10 and Hasbro, our Golden Apple partners, along with the winners of this year's Golden Apple Awards.

I am also grateful to meet regularly with an advisory group of teachers, the Educators in Action to discuss a wide range of professional issues. In the fall, this team of distinguished teachers hosted a statewide forum on the Common Core State Standards—by teachers and for teachers. I look forward to continued input from this team of excellent educators.

It may seem like only a short while ago, but nearly four years have passed since we received our first Race to the Top grant. From the outset, our work has been guided by the Race to the Top Steering Committee – under the leadership of co-chairs Colleen Jermain, now superintendent of the Newport Schools, and Neil Steinberg, CEO of the Rhode Island Foundation. Thank you, Colleen, Neil, and the members of your Steering Committee!

We are in the 2nd year of the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge. The Rhode Island Early Learning Council guides our work on this initiative. Thank you, Elizabeth Burke-Bryant, of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, and all the members of the Early Learning Council and the early-childhood community, for your continued support of all that’s best for our littlest Rhode Islanders!

I’ve shared some of the highlights of the past year. As we approach the fifth and final year of our Strategic Plan for Transforming Education, I would like to take a moment now to consider some images of the future. I would like to share a sense of the aspirations we can embrace together, and a vision of what our schools can achieve as we continue our journey to become the home of America’s best public schools.

Can you imagine a school that is truly designed from the ground up to meet the best interest of students? What would such a school look like? Well, we figured the best place to start is by asking the students themselves. So we have formed a partnership with the Business Innovation Factory and Youth in Action to bring a group of students together in the Students Design for Education – the SD4E – project. Through SD4E, students will brainstorm, share ideas, design, and create a school of their own – and then our plan is to make that school a reality that will educate young people in Rhode Island for years to come.

As we envision the schools of tomorrow, we need to be sure to welcome technology into the classroom – not just as a tool or resource but as an essential element in the process of teaching and learning. Thanks to your leadership and support through the Wireless Classroom Initiative and the Statewide Virtual Education Act, Rhode Island school leaders and teachers are embracing technology and digital learning.

In our Innovation Powered by Technology model schools – Pleasant View Elementary School, in Providence, and Wakefield Hills Elementary School, in West Warwick – students and teachers are creating learning environments that others are emulating.

Virtual learning and online instruction are transforming the way all of us think about schools, classrooms, teaching, and learning. In our model schools, in schools like the Village Green Virtual Public Charter School, and in many classrooms across the state, we see teachers and students who are even more engaged, as they work in small teams and one on one, using technology to create and collaborate and to meet the individual learning needs of every student.

Last month, about 50 of our schools took time to participate in a unique national event called the “Hour of Code.” Participating schools took an hour during the week to introduce students to computer science

and to show that “anyone can learn the basics to be a maker, a creator, an innovator.” I had the pleasure of joining the Hour of Code in Warwick, where I saw some students explain computer code before a school assembly. Carter Clifton, one of the computer-science students, is here with his teacher, Tracy Mollock, of the Warwick Neck Elementary School. Let’s say hello to Ms. Mollock and to Carter!

I bet you weren’t expecting a first-grader.

Over the past several years, we have focused intensely on the so-called STEM subjects - science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – and quite rightly so. There is no doubt that the sciences and technology are driving forces in today’s economy, in Rhode Island and across the world.

In fact, an international movement called STEM to STEAM began right here in Rhode Island at the Rhode Island School of Design. It’s pretty simple: take STEM and add an A - as in science, technology, engineering, ARTS, and mathematics. With our world-renowned creative-arts culture, our history of innovation in manufacturing and design, and our growing “maker movement,” Rhode Island is the perfect home base for what has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Just visit some schools to see how our students are exploring the connections between the sciences and the arts and design! Students at Slater Junior High School, in Pawtucket, are making the connections between technology and design. The 7th-grade robotics team at Slater just won the Inspire Award at the First Tech Challenge – competing against teams up to grade 12!

And if you want to see for yourself some examples of STEM to STEAM and marine technology, visit the Providence Boat Show, which begins tomorrow at the Convention Center. There you’ll see boats that students in our career-technical programs and engineering classes have built.

Congratulations to the students and teachers in Slater Junior High, Chariho Career and Technical Center, Tiverton High School, and the Warwick Area Career and Technical Center.

After more than 20 years, we have adopted new regulations on career-and-technical education. Under this new design, career-tech in Rhode Island has:

- opened opportunities for students across the state; and
- focused our resources on fields that will drive the Rhode Island economy– a central tenet in the important plan that the Senate released last week, Rhode to Work.

So, let’s make our own STEM to STEAM moment right now as we welcome educators who have won key awards this year in science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics:

The winners of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching,

Regina Kilday, of Exeter-West Greenwich;
Clare Ornburn, of Chariho;
Gary Monuteaux of Barrington, and
Mike Starring, of Smithfield, the Technology Teachers of the Year; and
Patricia A. Lucciola, of North Providence, the Art Educator of the Year.

The work we do is designed to prepare our students to succeed in and contribute to our rapidly changing global community. No matter what field our graduates enter – health care, social services, hospitality, business, engineering, military intelligence, to name a few – they will prosper if they understand other cultures *and* other languages.

We know learning languages also exercises the brain in important ways. Let's welcome Margarita Dempsey, of Smithfield High School, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Teacher of the Year for the entire Northeast Region and a finalist for the national honor. Congratulations, Margarita!

If we are truly committed to preparing students for success in challenging careers, we need to expand opportunities and encourage immersion in world languages, beginning in the early grades.

What if we set an ambitious goal for ourselves? By 2020, every district in Rhode Island will offer dual language immersion opportunities beginning at kindergarten with a plan for progression through middle and high school. Imagine our students leaving elementary school fluent in two languages! States such as Utah have shown that schools can offer dual language immersion at scale with no additional ongoing cost.

Rhode Island, with our rich history of cultural diversity, can surely become the national leader in world languages. Let's go! *Avanti!*

As I know from the many letters, e-mails, and phone calls I receive every day, parents in Rhode Island are serious about success in school.

Parents are very clear that they want us to:

- know their children well;
- keep them safe;
- challenge them to reach excellence;
- support them in their endeavors; and
- inspire them to reach for the stars.

Who can disagree? We know what we can accomplish when we all work together – parents, students, teachers, school leaders, community members, labor leaders, and elected officials. We won't always agree, obviously, on every policy, every decision, every detail. But I truly hope and believe that we will put our differences aside and focus on the goals we share:

- pride in our schools;
- belief in our students;
- support for our teachers ;
- opportunity for our graduates; and
- a bright economic future for our state.

It's not every day that Rhode Islanders come together, as we have tonight, to reflect on our place in the world and the future of our children.

Can what we do in Rhode Island really affect the world? Yes. Our power is greater than we often realize. After all, our state is not really an “island.” We have long, deep, historic connections to many cultures across the globe. When we see our ethnic and cultural diversity as an asset, we can attract businesses to our state, as the Rhode Island Foundation initiative, Make It Happen, has emphasized.

Rhode Island may be a micro-state, but we are also a microcosm. We can innovate, take risks, and lead the way – as a state. Let’s show the world what we can do when we come together – with our hopes, our faith, and our talents – to work in the best interest of our students!

###