



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations  
**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Regents To Appoint Deborah A. Gist as Education Commissioner**

PROVIDENCE – The Board of Regents will vote tomorrow (April 2, 2009) to appoint Deborah A. Gist, the State Superintendent of Education for the District of Columbia, to serve as the next R.I. Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education.

As State Superintendent, Gist is the chief education officer for all public education in the District of Columbia, which includes more than 71,000 students in the District of Columbia public schools and in 59 public charter schools, as well as more than 22,000 students in early-childhood programs and more than 10,000 students in adult and family education programs.

“Deborah Gist has shown strong, innovative leadership in Washington, D.C.,” said Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education. “At a time when schools all across America need to get better to compete in the global economy, Deb will be a force for real and meaningful reform. I look forward to working with her and the State of Rhode Island to give our children the best education possible.”

“I am pleased to welcome Ms. Gist to Rhode Island and congratulate her on this critical appointment as our state’s new Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education,” said Governor Donald L. Carcieri. “Ms. Gist has a substantial background in urban education and is well positioned to build upon the strong reform foundation that has been created through the leadership of Commissioner McWalters. She is a committed educator who recognizes the importance of community as we accelerate our efforts to get all our students to proficiency and close the achievement gap that exists between our urban and suburban schools. Rhode Island is now poised to realize the promise of our current reform efforts and move all our students to the highest levels of performance.”

“I have been greatly impressed by Ms. Gist’s energy and passion for reforming and improving education,” said Robert G. Flanders, Jr., Esq., Chairman of the Board of Regents. “Her commitment to raising the bar for all students and her diligence show me that she is an extremely hard-working person who will be a tireless reformer. I look forward to working with her, as we continue on the journey of bringing all students to the high level of achievement that they will need to succeed in life.”

The Board is scheduled to vote on the appointment at a meeting tomorrow at 3 p.m. in the State House. The Governor will join the Board as a voting member for this decision, as required by state law. Gist is to begin serving as Commissioner on July 1, replacing Peter McWalters, who has served as Commissioner for 17 years.

“It is a tremendous honor to be asked to serve the people of Rhode Island, and I am excited for this opportunity,” Gist said. “I will work hard every day with the great educators and community leaders here to improve our schools. Our work will begin with the absolute understanding that every child can learn and that every child deserves the best teachers, the best community support, and the best educational programs, technology, and other resources that are available. This will be an era of the highest expectations for our children and the strongest commitment by adults to work for better schools.”

Education leaders from around the nation have offered support and endorsement for the Regents’ selection.

“With the selection of Deb Gist as Commissioner of Education, Rhode Islanders have a dedicated leader who is committed to eliminating the racial and ethnic achievement gap in public schools,” said Joel I. Klein, Chancellor of the New York City Schools and co-founder of the Education Equality Project. “Now is the time for Rhode Island to seize this opportunity and accelerate its efforts to close the state’s Hispanic-white achievement gap, which is the largest in the nation. The Education Equality Project looks forward to working with Commissioner Deb Gist to put in place proven solutions that will help to create effective teachers and schools for all of the students in Rhode Island.”

“I could not be more pleased that Deborah Gist has accepted the position as Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education in Rhode Island,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. “Deb’s selfless devotion to children throughout her career, beginning as teacher and moving into administrative positions, has been evident everywhere she has worked. One of Deb’s true strengths is her ability to work collaboratively with all interests as evidenced by her success in the District of Columbia in leading the development of learning standards, creating the first data collection system to follow students’ progress, and her efforts to dramatically improve college access to students in the District of Columbia. Our members in Washington wish her well; our members in Rhode Island look forward to working with her.”

“The news of the appointment of Deborah A. Gist as the new State Commissioner of Education for Rhode Island bodes well for Rhode Island’s children, school systems, and school leaders,” said Tim Quinn, Ph.D., Managing Director of The Broad Center. “Deborah is a national thought leader on educational issues and urban educational reform. We are thrilled that Rhode Island is the first state to attract a Broad Fellow as not only the superintendent of its largest schools system, with Tom Brady in Providence, but also a Broad Fellow as a State Commissioner who can partner in addressing the challenges of transforming the state’s educational systems to a position of international leadership.”

“Through Teach for America’s close work with Deb Gist in Washington, D.C., we found her to be a driven reformer and a true model for the country in her ability to meaningfully connect every policy decision to the best interests of students,” said Wendy Kopp, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Teach for America. “She has taken an innovative approach in her work and made decisions that challenge the status quo on issues like certification of new teachers. She leads change inclusively, bringing together individuals with diverse perspectives and interests and aligning the group with focus and purpose in answering the question, ‘what will be best for our students?’ ”

Gist, who taught and served directly in schools for more than a decade early in her career, was appointed state superintendent of education in the District of Columbia in June 2007 after serving as the state education officer for three years. As first state superintendent of education in the District, she has been responsible for transitioning all state-level education functions to the newly formed office of the state superintendent of education and for putting into effect the accountability systems of the federal No Child Left Behind education law.

As state superintendent of education, Gist created new, progressive educator-certification policies for teachers and school administrators, allowing school districts and nonprofit organizations to apply to certify educators, and she enacted new standards for teacher-

preparation programs to improve quality, expand opportunity, and encourage innovation. Gist worked with first state board of education in the District to transition its role to that of a policy-setting body during the first year of existence, and she developed many important state-level education policies, including standards for health and physical education, world languages, arts education, and early-childhood learning.

Previously, as the state education officer, Gist restored the confidence of Congress in the Tuition Assistance Grants program, resulting in a federal funding increase of more than 100 percent for a program that now serves more than 5,000 college students in the District each year. She also oversaw dramatic improvements in much-maligned child-nutrition programs in the District, including the Summer Food Service program, which was subsequently named the best-performing summer-food program in America for four consecutive years.

Gist began her career in education 21 years ago, as a teacher in the Ft. Worth, Texas, elementary schools, where she focused on literacy education and applied learning. She later taught in Tampa, Florida, where she founded and directed a center on environmental education and later conceived, designed, and initiated Hillsborough Reads, which served families in 108 elementary schools in Hillsborough County. She won “Teacher of the Year” honors at her schools in both Ft. Worth and Tampa.

“Deborah Gist has been a powerful voice for improving education for D.C. residents of all ages,” Washington, D.C., Mayor Adrian M. Fenty said. “Her leadership as D.C.’s State Superintendent has been critical in the improvements that we have all worked so hard to bring about in the District. I am grateful for Deborah’s service to the children of Washington and wish her the very best.”

“I have worked with Deborah Gist as a colleague through the national organization of Chief State School Officers, and I know that she is one of the most respected school leaders in the nation,” said McWalters, current Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. “She will bring the right credentials to Rhode Island, as she has been deeply engaged in Washington with the challenges of an urban education system. I will work closely with her over the next few months to ensure a seamless transition to new leadership and to keep our reform agenda on track.”

In addition to spending 10 years serving directly in schools, Gist was a senior policy analyst at the U.S. Department of Education. She advised the secretary and deputy secretary on top issues, analyzed proposed policy initiatives, and conducted research and feasibility studies. Gist also served as the marketing and development director of the Discovery Creek Children’s Museum, in Washington, and she later worked for the Office of the Mayor, in Washington, as the executive director of the office on volunteerism and service programs, Serve DC. A resident of Washington, Gist is a volunteer mentor and a board member for Mentors, Inc.

Gist earned a master’s degree in public administration from the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, where she was also selected as a Kennedy Fellow and received the Littauer Fellowship for academic excellence and community service. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in early-childhood education from the University of Oklahoma and a Master of Arts in elementary education, with an emphasis in curriculum, from the University of South Florida. Gist became a certified public manager, following successful completion of a joint program with the District of Columbia government and the George Washington University. In 2008, she completed a fellowship with the Broad Academy for Superintendents, which prepares talented leaders to take on executive leadership roles in urban education.

Regents Amy Beretta and Angus M. Davis co-chaired the Search Committee that led to Gist’s appointment. The members of the public who served on the committee are:

Chace Baptista, Co-Director, Young Voices  
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director, Rhode Island Kids Count  
Frederick K. Butler, Vice President Business Ethics, Textron

William Daugherty, Board Member, National Federation for Teaching Entrepreneurship  
Dr. Hans Dellith, Superintendent, Pawtucket School Department  
Dr. Michael Magee, Director, Office of Children, Youth, and Learning, Town of Cumberland  
Ramon Martinez, CEO, Progreso Latino  
Kathleen Mellor, 2004 National Teacher of the Year  
Meg O'Leary, Co-Director, The Learning Community Charter School  
Robert K. Taylor, Partner, Partridge Snow & Hahn LLP  
Ronald A. Wolk, Founding Publisher, Education Week  
Dr. Kenneth Wong, Chairman, Education Department, Brown University