

Commissioner's Weekly Field Memo
Friday, January 31, 2014

Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. [State of Education address](#) reports on accomplishments, goals
2. RIDE releases [NECAP results](#), graduation rates
3. Certification of compliance with guidance on constitutionally protected school [prayer](#) due by Monday, **February 10 – Action Item**
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5. Western Hills Middle School students win state title in [Verizon Innovative App Challenge](#) for middle schools

From the R.I. Department of Education (RIDE)

Common Core State Standards:

6. RIDE offers professional development in the Common Core State Standards for teachers of secondary-school [geometry](#)

From the U.S. Department of Education

7. President Obama highlights education in [State of the Union](#) address

Action Item Calendar

Today (January 31): Deadline for checking [demographic file](#)

Monday (February 3): Grade-12 [NECAP files](#) due

Monday (February 3): Deadline for [evaluation surveys](#)

February 10: School-prayer compliance due (see [below](#))

March 7: [School Health Profiles](#) due

Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. State of Education address reports on accomplishments, goals

Last night (January 31), I delivered my annual State of Education address to the General Assembly. I used the occasion to speak about the accomplishments we have made by working together across the state during the past year, the connection between public education and workforce development, and the positive results we are seeing regarding preparing students for success beyond high school. I also identified several topics that will be part of our focus going forward.

I reported to the General Assembly that “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.” I noted that “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 part of the address, I called for an increasing focus on technology in the classroom – “not just as a tool or resource but as an essential element in the process of teaching and learning.” I also called for further development of STEM to STEAM (science, technology, engineering, *arts*, and mathematics) and on instruction in world languages: “Why not 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.”

In conclusion, I asked:

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. ... 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!

It was very important to me last night to recognize many of our students, teachers, school leaders, and friends of education who have contributed so much to our success over the past year. The members of the General Assembly greeted our teachers and students enthusiastically, and I am confident that our legislators will continue to support public education during the current session.

2. RIDE releases NECAP results, graduation rates

This morning, we released the 2013 NECAP results, including results for the seniors who retook the assessment in order to meet their graduation requirements.

The results show that 73 percent of the students who took the NECAP in 2012 are eligible to earn a diploma this spring. As we reinforced to the media, those seniors who have not yet met the state-assessment graduation requirement can still do so by reaching partial proficiency or better or by significantly improving their score when they take the assessment again in February or in March. They may also meet the requirement by attaining passing scores on any of 10 other assessments that RIDE has approved, and they may be eligible for waivers from their school district if they have demonstrated academic readiness by other means.

Other highlights from the results we released today are:

For the Class of 2013, the four-year graduation rate moved up to 80 percent, a 3-point improvement over the previous year.

Improving trends continue among high-school juniors (grade 11). Among students grade 11, 36 percent attained proficiency or better in mathematics, a 2-point improvement over the 2012 results and an 8-point improvement over the past five years.

Students scoring “substantially below proficient” stood at 36 percent, a 4-point improvement over 2012. At present, 64

percent of the Class of 2015 has met the graduation requirement in mathematics.

In reading, 82 percent of the students in grade-11 attained proficiency or better in reading, a 3-point improvement over 2012 and an 8-point improvement over the past five years. At present, 93 percent of the Class of 2015 has met the graduation requirement in reading.

NECAP scores in grades 3 through 8 show some modest one-year gains (in grades 4 and 5 reading) and one-year declines in mathematics. Except in grade 3, the five-year gains remain stable or strongly positive, especially in grade 8.

I appreciate the challenges you have faced over the past week, as you have been notifying high-school seniors about their outcomes and about next steps, as well as fielding inquiries from the media. I am always glad to speak with you if you have any particular issues or concerns about our data or about the Diploma System. I know we all can expect many inquiries from the media and from families going forward, and my team stands ready to provide you with any guidance you may need on these issues.

3. Certification of compliance with guidance on school prayer due by Monday, February 10 – *Action Item*

The U.S. Department of Education has reminded us that we must collect from all LEAs a certification that “no policy of the LEA prevents, or otherwise denies participation in, constitutionally protected prayer in public elementary and secondary schools as set forth in the Guidance.” A link to the guidance is here:

http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html

You may copy and paste the text below and send to Elliot Krieger (Elliot.krieger@ride.ri.gov or 222-6178) a *signed and dated* pdf file or fax certifying the compliance of your LEA. (Be sure include the name of your LEA). Please respond by Monday, **February 10**. We will send you a copy of this text as a template, by e-mail, under separate cover:

Certification of Compliance with the Law on Constitutionally Protected Prayer

This is to certify that no policy of my school district/s prevents or otherwise denies participation in constitutionally protected prayer in public elementary and secondary schools as set forth in the “Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools,” issued February 7, 2003. This certification applies to the school year 2011-12.

4. Free, online course offered on “Teaching Character”

I want to let you and your team know about this announcement from Coursera, an education company that partners with universities and other organizations to offer courses online for anyone to take, for free:

We’re excited to announce that Relay Graduate Schools new free online course, [Teaching Character](#), goes live in less than one month. We’re hoping you’ll join Dave Levin (Co-Founder, KIPP; Co-Founder, Relay GSE; Co-Founder,

Character Lab) as he leads this course on how you can bring psychology's cutting-edge research on character into your classroom or home.

Three things that we are particularly excited about:

Based on Research: Some of psychology's leading researchers have joined us to share their guidance on what every teacher should do to teach character. What happens when Angela Duckworth, Carol Dweck, Walter Mischel, and Greg Walton watch classroom footage of great teachers in action? We'll show you.

Practical: We've documented great character lessons in action in public, private, Montessori, and charter classrooms. We've also created practice exercises designed to help participants build muscle memory and traverse the "get it-do it" gap. I can only imagine the power of an entire grade-level team working on their character behavior language at the same time.

Not Just for Teachers: While this course is built by educators, it's not just for teachers. Parents, coaches, school leaders, camp counselors... the course is full of insightful takeaways for anyone who works with young people.

We're shifting the conversation from "Why teach character?" to "How should I teach character?" We're building a bridge between the research and the classroom.

We want you to join us. Class starts February 9:

<https://www.coursera.org/course/teachingcharacter>

5. Western Hills Middle School students win state title in Verizon Innovative App Challenge for middle schools

Last week we learned that a team of students from Western Hills Middle School was recognized as a Best in State winner in the 2014 Verizon Innovative App Challenge for middle schools. According to Verizon, the team's app concept, *Jobbies*, which solves the problem of unemployment by allowing users to find and apply for jobs, earned top points in Rhode Island for its creativity, innovative design, and application of STEM principles to the development process. The Western Hills Middle School team now is in the running for the Best in Region and Best in Nation titles, which the Verizon Foundation and the Technology Student Association will announce next month. Congratulations, Western Hills Middle School teachers and students – and good luck in the next stage of this awards competition!

From RIDE

Common Core State Standards:

6. RIDE offers professional development in the Common Core State Standards for teachers of secondary-school geometry

We are pleased to be able to offer professional development for secondary-school geometry teachers focusing on transformations in the coordinate plane as outlined by the Common Core State Standards. This two-hour, after-school session will provide educators with a hands-on exploration of the new demands for

the instruction of transformations. Links will be made to the concrete treatment of this geometric concept in middle school to the more formalized and abstract nature of the concept in high school.

The session will be conducted at West Warwick High School, 1 Webster Knight Dr., on Wednesday, March 26, from 4 to 6 p.m., and again at Lincoln High School, 135 Old River Rd., on Wednesday, April 16 from 4 to 6 p.m.

If you have questions regarding this professional development, please contact, Susan Pagliaro, at susan.pagliaro@ride.ri.gov, or Patricia Carnevale, at patricia.carnevale@ride.ri.gov.

From the U.S. Department of Education

7. President Obama highlights education in State of the Union address

Please see this message from the Office of Communications and Outreach, U.S. Department of Education:

Starting with his opening line - “Today in America, a teacher spent extra time with a student who needed it and did her part to lift America’s graduation rate to its highest levels in more than three decades” - President Obama highlighted the importance of education during his 2014 [State of the Union address](#) (see [education excerpts](#)). The President laid out an agenda (see [fact sheet](#)) that emphasizes the Administration’s commitment to equity and opportunity for all citizens. This commitment underlies nearly every major activity of the U.S. Department of Education.

The President shared specific executive actions he will take to ensure students have the skills and opportunities they need to get ahead, including:

- connecting 20 million students in 15,000 schools to high-speed broadband to enrich and personalize K-12 education; and
- increasing college opportunities and graduation, building on the White House Call to Action on College Opportunity with over 150 new commitments from colleges, universities, businesses, and others to improve college access and success for low-income students.

The President also outlined key areas where he will continue to work with Congress, including:

- building on the progress in 30 states and the District of Columbia to provide high-quality preschool for every child; and
- redesigning high schools to better connect students with college or careers and better equip them with the real world skills they need for a good job.

RIDE will post this field memo on Tuesday, at:

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