

Commissioner's Weekly Field Memo
Friday, February 27, 2015

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Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. Rhode Island outlines progress toward transforming education in final Race to the Top report

Rhode Island has made significant progress toward transforming education through the use of the \$75-million Race to the Top grant, as we describe in “Rhode Island’s Race to the Top: Five Years of Transforming Education (2010-2015),” the summary report that we have submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. The report highlights what Rhode Island has accomplished over the five years of implementation, what Rhode Island educators have learned in the process, and what work lies ahead.

The investments we have made through our Race to the Top initiative show how much we can accomplish when we work in partnership. Throughout, the report highlights the strong partnerships established among RIDE and all of the LEAs in the state. Without forming and developing these partnerships, we would have been unable to meet the goals and objectives in our scopes of work. As our Race to the Top success shows, Rhode Island is a national model for collaboration between state and local education agencies.

Over the span of this grant, we have narrowed several achievement gaps, reduced the dropout rate, and seen evidence that our graduates are better prepared for college. While much

work lies ahead of us, the systems we have put into action thanks to Race to the Top funding will continue to improve instruction and to raise student achievement for years to come.

The summary report that we submitted to the U.S. Department of Education notes that the goals for Rhode Island as a state have been to “build a strong foundation for educator effectiveness, develop rigorous curriculum and assessments, promote powerful use of data, and accelerate school performance – and [to] sustain this transformation beyond the grant period.” We have posted the [report](#) on our website.

2. Rhode Island ranked first in country on teacher-preparation program policies

The National Council on Teacher Quality has rated Rhode Island first in the country (tied with Florida and Indiana) based on state policies for teacher-preparation programs. The council awarded Rhode Island a grade of B+, tops in the country and unchanged from last year. In 2011, Rhode Island received a grade of D+.

Much of the improvement is a result of the new set of standards for educator-preparation programs that the Board of Education approved in late 2013. I am very pleased that the National Council on Teacher Quality has recognized the quality and rigor of our standards and policies for educator preparation. Ensuring educator excellence has been our top priority over the past five years, and it is gratifying to receive national recognition for the progress we have made in this area.

The [report](#) from the National Council on Teacher Quality, *The 2014 State Teacher Policy Yearbook*, notes that Rhode Island fully meets 5 of the 11 goals that the council has set and “nearly

meets” five other goals. The only goal unmet is for elementary-teacher preparation in reading instruction.

Ensuring educator excellence begins with improving the quality and rigor of our educator-preparation programs. The standards that we developed, in partnership with our colleges and universities and based on feedback from teachers in our schools, will help to recruit great candidates to the teaching profession and to prepare aspiring teachers and school leaders for success throughout their careers.

3. PARCC assessments: We expect all students to participate

As you are no doubt aware, the National Education Association – Rhode Island, has called for a one-year delay in PARCC assessments and has taken the public position that parents have the right to refuse to have their children participate in state assessments. I strongly disagree with this opinion. We expect all students to participate in state assessments, just as they participate in all other aspects of public education once they enroll in school.

Assessments provide important information to parents and families about the progress their children are making in school – where children may need extra support and where students may need additional challenges. Assessments provide teachers with information that will help them improve and personalize instruction, and they provide all of us with information about how well our schools are making progress.

The PARCC assessments are well aligned with what students are expected to know and be able to do at each grade level. During the PARCC assessments, students will be reading real text

passages, writing essays, and solving real-world mathematics problems. PARCC assessments encourage students to think critically, analyze information, and explain their answers. Writing is expected in every grade, something that did not happen in our previous state assessments.

Participation in these high-quality annual assessments enables all of us to see whether schools and districts are doing all they can to help students succeed. Parents and students deserve to know to what extent schools are meeting students' needs and where schools need to improve.

4. Advisory opinion issued on PARCC participation

In response to a request from the South Kingstown School Committee, on Wednesday (February 25) I issued an advisory opinion on various aspects of participation in statewide assessments. I have broken out some of the key points in the advisory opinion and present them here in question-answer format:

Is there a law allowing parents to “opt out”?

Neither the ESEA nor RIGL § 16-97-8 contains a provision that permits school districts to afford parents an option to ‘opt out’ of state assessments.

Is there a law requiring students to participate in state assessments?

It is also true, however, that neither the ESEA nor any section of State law affirmatively requires an individual student to participate in the State assessment. The ESEA

requirement of a performance measure for participation underscores this approach; it is clearly the LEA that bears the burden of ensuring sufficient student participation.

Can a student be forced to take the PARCC assessment?

I have repeatedly stressed in my own communications that RIDE fully expects that *all* eligible students will participate in state assessments, which are an integral part of the process of education in Rhode Island public schools. There is no formal procedure for parents to remove their children from participation in any school activity – including state assessments. RIDE will not recognize any attempt to refuse participation in the state assessment, but we also understand that it is not possible to compel a student to actually participate in taking any exam (or in any school activity).

Can there be consequences for students to who refuse to take the PARCC assessments?

There can be consequences for students who refuse to participate fully in the state assessment. For example, RIGL §16-97-8 allows the reintroduction of the state assessment as a graduation requirement for the class of 2017. Students in that class are currently in high school, and many of these students will be eligible for PARCC assessments this spring. If any of high-school students “refuse” to take a state assessment, their ability to graduate will be severely compromised.

Can school districts adopt policies requiring students to participate in PARCC assessments?

I have been clear in previous field memos that LEAs can adopt local policies that require participation in the state assessment (as some school districts have done). It is worth repeating that RIDE does not make a distinction between participation in the state assessment and participation in any other aspect of the education process, which, ultimately is a matter under local control.

May school districts provide parents the opportunity to opt out? Must school districts recognize attempts to “opt out”?

You posed the question of whether there is any applicable provision of the law that “permits school districts to afford parents an option to ‘opt out’ of state assessments.” The short answer is no, but there is, likewise, nothing in the law that requires an LEA to recognize attempts at parental refusal. RIDE will certainly not recognize such attempts.

Can school districts establish policies requiring participation?

It is well within the legal authority of the LEA to require participation in the State assessment as a matter of local policy. School administrators whose school committees have established such policies would of course be bound to follow local policy and would therefore be prevented as a matter of law from recognizing a parent’s attempt to refuse participation in the State assessment on behalf of his or her child.

5. Council approves revised Secondary School Regulations

On Monday (February 23), the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, after months of public hearings, public comment, and statements issued during the open-forum portion of Council meetings, approved revisions to the Secondary School [Regulations](#). Under the revised regulations, the use of state assessments to determine eligibility for graduation will be in place statewide beginning with the Class of 2020. The revised regulations also specify that you may use state assessments as a local graduation requirement beginning with the Class of 2017, if you so desire. Here is the section of the revised regulations relating to assessments and graduation requirements:

L-6-3.3. Use of state assessments for high school graduation.

(a) Commencing with the class of 2020, students shall be required to reach a minimum achievement level on the state assessment or assessments in content areas designated by the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. The Council shall (1) designate the content areas in which the state assessment serves as a graduation requirement and (2) establish the minimum student achievement levels on the state assessment necessary for graduation. The Council will determine the minimum level of required achievement; however, LEAs may set higher levels of student achievement as a requirement to receive a diploma. LEAs may choose to use the state assessment or other standardized assessment as one of the local graduation requirements prior to the 2020 date set forth above but no earlier than for the class of 2017.

6. U.S. Department of Education to contact selected high-school principals for survey on graduation initiatives

The U.S. Department of Education Offices of Elementary and Secondary Education and Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development have informed me that they have selected several Rhode Island high schools to participate in a survey as part of the High School Graduation Initiative. The Offices or their research partners – SRI International and RTI International – will reach out directly to the selected schools within the next week to seek the participation. They will ask an administrator from each selected school to complete a 30-minute online survey on initiatives to help students stay in school and graduate. The Offices state that the responses will be protected from disclosure. I hope that you will encourage members of your team, if selected, to participate in this survey.

From RIDE

Textbooks:

7. RIDE requests annual listing of textbooks by March 27 – *Action Item*

Each year, RIDE collects and distributes a listing of textbooks used in all public schools in the state. The purpose of this list is to meet the requirements of General Laws 16-23-2 and 16-23-3, which provide for the loan of textbooks in the areas of mathematics, science, world languages, English language arts, and history or social studies, in grades kindergarten through 12, to nonpublic schools in Rhode Island.

LEAs are required to submit to RIDE a complete listing of all textbooks planned for use during the next school year (2015-16) by using the eRIDE system, the electronic process through which

you manage your textbook lists by adding and deleting titles and other pertinent information.

RIDE will send a memo to all textbook coordinators and data managers requesting them to update their complete list of textbooks currently in use by **March 27**. The memo will include instructions for the use of the eRIDE system, including the details for uploading textbook titles and ISBN numbers, as well as frequently asked questions for textbook-list management. Once we receive updates from all LEAs, we will post the information on the RIDE website.

Professional Development:

8. RIDE recruiting districts, schools for Rhode Island Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Rhode Island Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (RI MTSS) is a training and technical-assistance opportunity that provides professional development and systems-development support for the implementation of an integrated model of supporting academic (RTI) and behavioral (PBIS) interventions, strategies, and practices. The goal of participating is for districts and schools to develop a self-sustaining integrated RTI/PBIS framework for providing evidence-based and data-based decision-making procedures to enhance student development across all tiers of support (Universal [School-Wide] Prevention, Targeted Group Interventions, and Individual Intensive Supports). Districts and schools interested in receiving this training should visit <http://sherlockcenter.MTSSLetterofInterest.sgizmo.com/s3/> for more information and to complete an initial Letter of Interest online application by **March 20**. After submitting the online Letter of Interest, districts and schools are welcome to attend an

informational session at the Rhode Island College Sherlock Center, from 9-11:30 a.m. on either March 25 or April 7. RI MTSS is a joint venture by RIDE (Rhode Island Department of Education) and the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities at Rhode Island College.

For additional questions on this initiative, please contact Emily Klein, at 222-8985 or Emily.Klein@ride.ri.gov .

9. RIDE to hold two-day Teacher Resource Summit

RIDE is pleased to announce the Teacher Resource Summit – an event to gather Rhode Island educators to discuss identifying high-quality resources for sharing across the state. The goal of the summit is to upload a variety of high-quality, Rhode Island educator-approved resources into the Teacher Resource Library in the Instructional Support System.

Work during the summit will include:

- using the rubrics to evaluate materials – self-authored or found – for alignment to standards and other metrics of quality;
- uploading high-quality materials to the Teacher Resource Library; and
- training on the EQulP rubric for mathematics, English language arts/literacy, or science; or
- training on similar rubrics for other content areas (social studies, fine and performing arts, physical education, health, and world languages, among others).

The summit will take place on April 23 and 24, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., in Providence. Participants *must* attend both full days to be compensated.

All participants will receive a stipend of \$300 per day for the two days of work. Once the summit is complete, teachers will have the option to independently evaluate and upload resources for an additional stipend of \$300. Total possible compensation is \$900.

Educators must be currently working in a Rhode Island LEAs to qualify for the stipend.

Educators from all content areas are encouraged to apply here:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/teacherresourcesummit>.

Applications must be entered by Friday, **March 13**. Applicants will be notified of their acceptance by Monday, March 23.

Please direct any questions or comments about the summit to Kate Schulz, at 222-8489 or kate.schulz@ride.ri.gov.

Assessments:

10. *Reminder: LEAs to receive alternate-assessment student details for review*

LEAs have been doing a great job at getting ready for the PARCC testing; however, we also need to start thinking about the alternate assessment for students with severe learning disabilities. To aid in this process, the details about students in each school taking the alternate assessment will be prepopulated in the testing site. The student details will be pulled from eRIDE

and distributed to LEAs for review. Once the student data files are accurate, you can then upload the files, along with the teacher information, to the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) testing site.

11. RIDE issues reminders in preparation for PARCC assessments

LEAs urged to perform infrastructure trials

Infrastructure trials are an important milestone in determining the technology readiness for the PARCC assessment. It has been determined that those LEAs that have performed infrastructure trials have had significantly fewer issues during the testing block than those LEAs that did not do an infrastructure trial. It is highly recommended that you perform at least one infrastructure trial. Pearson, the testing vendor for PARCC, has documentation regarding how to configure [Windows and Mac PCs](#), along with [mobile devices and Chromebooks](#). It is important to run an infrastructure trial, even if you have run one in the past, as the technology for PARCC testing is constantly being updated and enhanced. All of Pearson's documentation for the PARCC testing can be found at <http://parcc.pearson.com/technology-setup/>.

LEAs reminded to maintain, update student records

You must maintain your Student Information System at the local level, along with the Performance Based Assessment (PBA) and the End of Year (EOY) assessment blocks in PearsonAccessNext. We have released documentation on how to maintain student registration information within

PearsonAccessNext. This documentation, along with all of the RIDE-generated technology documentation, can be found on the [RideMap District Exchange public PARCC Toolkit folder](#).

It is important that you export your student data from PearsonAccessNext to verify that you have the most accurate information about your students. You can import this data into Excel to update any student information and then import it into PearsonAccessNext to make the updates. If you do not follow this process, you could overwrite any updates that you or users in your LEA may have made to student records. You could also overwrite any updates to critical warnings, and that would need to be corrected. Always use the most recent export files for file maintenance; do not use the original spreadsheets used for the initial student upload.

As you may know, we have been running scripts to resolve critical warnings within the PBA and EOY assessment blocks. The scripts update only student records that have no value associated with the warning so as not to overwrite your LEA's student data; however, if the correct process of maintaining student records is not followed, these critical warnings are reintroduced into PearsonAccessNext and will need to be corrected again. The scripts correct 95 percent of the critical warnings; the rest have been placed in your LEA document folder on [District Exchange](#). These critical warnings need to be cleared by your test coordinator.

RIDE to take snapshot of student registrations on March 14

On March 14, we will take a snapshot of your student registrations that will be used for accountability; this date has been moved back from the March 6 so as to reduce the number of data reviews for the LEAs. This snapshot will be used to validate and clean the data for accountability reporting. It is critical that you ensure that your student registration data is as accurate as possible by **March 14**, especially the resolution of duplicates.

*Process for ordering additional PARCC materials opens **Tuesday***

As students are enrolled in LEAs or as the needs of a student change, you may need to order additional paper material. This can be accomplished during the Additional Order window that starts on **Tuesday** (March 3). In the [PARCC toolkit on District Exchange](#), you will find the Pearson and RIDE instructions regarding the process for ordering additional material during this window.

Procedure in place for resolving issues regarding PARCC testing

Please call the Pearson call center first with any issues regarding PearsonAccessNext or PARCC testing. When you call, write down and keep track of the ticket number they assign to your incident. We have been working with the call center management to improve the experience and quality of the interaction with the call center agents. If you believe any incidents that are not resolved by the call center need to be escalated, contact Greg Martin, at Gregory.martin@ride.ri.gov. There is a process in place for Pearson to review these escalated incidents.

Contact established for questions about PARCC technology preparedness

If you have any questions or concerns about PARCC technology preparedness, please contact Greg Martin, at Gregory.martin@ride.ri.gov or 222-8495.

Data use:

12. Human-resource personnel to have access to eCert District Portal

As part of our efforts to support data-informed conversations regarding human capital decisions, RIDE will now allow personnel from human-resource teams at LEAs to access the eCert District Portal. Your team will be able to access this portal from RIDEmap. RIDE will grant this access only to those individuals whom you have explicitly designated. We will reach out to you directly through email to request the names of your designees. Data managers will be included in this communication.

For any concerns or questions about this access, please contact Shoba Annavarjula, at shoba.annavarjula@ride.ri.gov .

From the U.S. Department of Education

13. Guidance issued on protecting privacy of students using online educational services

Please see this message from the U.S. Department of Education:

The U.S. Department of Education has released [model terms of service guidance](#) and a [training video](#) aimed at helping

schools and districts protect student privacy while using online educational services and applications.

The guidance offers examples of terms of service provisions to help school officials identify which online educational services and applications have strong privacy and data security policies and practices.

“Reading and understanding terms of service agreements is tough, even for lawyers. We hope this guidance will help school officials identify privacy-friendly apps and online services and avoid providers that might abuse student information,” said Kathleen Styles, the U.S. Department of Education’s chief privacy officer.

“This guidance will help schools and districts evaluate potential agreements and offer direction regarding terminology frequently used in these agreements,” Styles said. “By understanding commonly used provisions in these agreements, schools and districts will be better able to decide whether to consent to the terms for online educational services and applications.”

Additionally, school officials can check to see if the company in question has signed the [Student Privacy Pledge](#) from the Future of Privacy Forum and The Software & Information Industry Association.

Among the recommendations:

Marketing and Advertising: Terms-of-service agreements should be clear that data may not be used to create user profiles for the purposes of targeting students or their parents for advertising and marketing, which could violate privacy laws.

Data Collection: Agreements should include a provision that limits data to only what is necessary to fulfill the terms.

Data Use: Schools and districts should restrict data use to only the purposes outlined in the agreement.

Data Sharing: While providers can use subcontractors, schools and districts should be made aware of these arrangements, and subcontractors should be bound by the limitations in the terms of service.

Access: Federal student records laws require schools and districts to make education records accessible to parents.

Security Controls: Failure to provide adequate security could lead to a violation of the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#), which protects student education records.

The document also provides links to the [Privacy Technical Assistance Center](#) and other resources that offer additional best-practice recommendations related to terms of service agreements.

In addition, a 9½-minute training video has been produced by the U.S. Department of Education, intended to help K-12 school officials better protect student privacy while using online educational services and applications.

The video offers a summary of the issue and provides examples to help educators identify which online educational services and applications are privacy-friendly and protect student data from improper use and disclosure.

From other organizations

14. Workshop scheduled on response to active shooter

Please see this message from the FBI Citizens' Academy Alumni Association:

The FBI Citizens' Academy Alumni Association, a non-profit, citizen-led organization that provides education and training to our members and safety professionals and financial support for the FBI, has conducted 2 active shooter workshops in the past and has scheduled its third one for April 2:

Goal: Provide tools and resources for K-12 school systems, universities, retailers and corporations to minimize an active shooter incident or react to one most effectively. The focus of workshop is on planning a course of action and identifying where you might have risks in your incident response plans and how to mitigate them.

Date: April 2, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Location: Bryant University, 1150 Douglas Turnpike, Smithfield (Chase Wellness Center)

Cost: \$35 per person

The goal of the workshop is to provide professionals responsible for our safety in education, retail, corporate and law enforcement insights into how to prevent and prepare for an active shooter or threat incident. Our first two workshops sold out at 350 attendees so we have identified a venue where we can seat over 500!

We would like as many educational professionals such as principals, superintendents, administrators, or anyone

concerned with safety in our schools to attend this workshop.

To learn more, download a detailed agenda or to register, please visit www.FBIBostonCAA.org.

Our last two workshops sold out weeks before the event so make sure you register early.

RIDE will post this field memo on Tuesday, at:

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