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Friday, March 14, 2014**

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Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. Rhode Island receives approval for Race to the Top no-cost extension

Over the course of the four years of our Race to the Top federal grant, we have used the \$75 million to support transforming education in Rhode Island. Among the major initiatives the grant has supported are:

- professional development for educators on transition to the Common Core State Standards,
- development by educators of curriculum in English language arts and mathematics aligned with the standards,
- professional development for educators on the use of data,
- implementation of annual evaluations for all educators,
- induction program and supports for new teachers,
- academy for training aspiring principals,
- development and implementation of virtual learning math modules for students.

At this time, Rhode Island has met almost all goals in our Race to the Top application, and the state and all 52 participating school districts have expended almost all of the \$75 million grant

funding. This entire project has been a success thanks to the ongoing and extensive partnerships formed among RIDE and the teams from your LEA and all other participating LEAs. I am deeply grateful for your hard work and support as we have implemented these many new systems and initiatives over the past four years.

On Wednesday, we learned that the U.S. Department of Education has approved our request for a no-cost extension to our Race to the Top Scope of Work, which will give us additional time to complete a few specific projects that RIDE initiated using funds from the grant. As its name implies, the no-cost extension will entail no additional cost to Rhode Island; rather, it gives us an additional year to expend remaining funds and to achieve our Race to the Top goals.

The U.S. Department of Education has approved our request to use \$2.4 million in remaining funds. Of this total, \$1,952,000 will enable RIDE to complete work on a system, now known as the Instructional Support System, that will provide all educators with support and resources, including:

- information to better serve our students;
- a bank of Common Core-aligned items, for classroom use;
- model lesson plans and units of study;
- assessments for measuring student progress (Interim Assessments); and
- other resources and information that support teaching and learning.

The Instructional Management System is still available for your use. The redesign of the system, which will be called the Instructional Support System, is under way; phase 1 will be ready

for use in June, and the redesign will be completed by the end of the calendar year.

As our team discussed with you yesterday at the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association general meeting, you have met your commitments regarding this Race to the Top-funded initiative, so no further steps on your part are necessary for you to begin using the Instructional Support System. Thanks to the no-cost extension, however, you will have the opportunity to request unspent Race to the Top funds to further your expertise in the use of the data and resources in the Instructional Support System.

Our no-cost extension provides funding for two additional components of the Race to the Top Scope of Work:

- \$200,000 for develop a “platform” to provide educators with better access to professional development; and
- approximately \$280,000 to provide additional professional development to educators preparing to work in the lowest-achieving schools.

Our Race to the Top team will communicate further with you regarding potential changes to your approved Scope of Work, the rollout schedule of the Instructional Support System, and opportunities for further professional development regarding data, resources, and support for struggling schools.

I am very pleased to say that, thanks to this no-cost extension, Rhode Island is on course to expend all Race to the Top funds and to meet the goals agreed to in our Race to the Top Scope of Work.

2. Next year’s junior class to take NECAP, not PARCC assessments

One topic we discussed this week at the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association general meeting concerned our testing schedule for the next school year (2014-15). I know there has been some confusion in the field, so I want to clarify the matter: Next year's junior class (Class of 2016) will take the NECAP assessments in the fall (October 2014); next year's junior class will *not* be required to take the PARCC assessments and the students will not be "double-tested." Next year's freshman and sophomore classes will take PARCC assessments, beginning in the Spring of 2015. These students (Class of 2017 and Class of 2018) will be the first to take the PARCC assessments as part of both our annual state assessments and our diploma system.

As you may be aware, we will describe these accountability-system revisions in the application we will submit to the U.S. Department of Education for an extension of our Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver. To help guide us in developing this application, we are working with a focus group, which includes superintendents and heads of school. I am interested in any and all feedback from the field, so if you have any comments or concerns about these revisions to our accountability system please feel free to share your concerns with me. Your opinions (including support for our transition to the PARCC assessments) will help us prepare our request for a waiver extension.

3. RIDE developing options for cyclical structures within annual educator-evaluation systems

Last year, based on feedback we received, we put in place the option for differentiated educator evaluations, which has reduced the workload and streamlined the process for evaluators – but we know that there is more to do. Over the past several months, we

have been working with folks from a handful of LEAs and we have been using feedback from our mid-year educator-evaluation surveys to review the differentiated model for educator evaluations. Our goal is to see how we can create cyclical structures (something many have been advocating) within the system of annual evaluations. We plan to come up with some options for LEAs, which you will be able to try out locally, as early as the coming school year. We will be providing you with more information about these cyclical structures in future communications.

4. Housing aid available for repairs needed for health and safety

You may have seen a news story last week that reported on unhealthy conditions in one of our public schools. The report implied that state funding (housing aid) would not be available for repair work in this school because of the current moratorium on school construction. Please keep in mind that maintaining the health and safety of our students and staff members is our highest priority. The current moratorium on school construction does allow for construction or repairs necessary “for immediate health and safety reasons,” (RIGL 16-7-41.1) and several such emergency projects have received approval during the time of the moratorium.

As a reminder from our Office of Statewide Efficiencies, state law requires annual school-facility inspections by local or state building inspectors and fire chiefs, as well as by other authorities having jurisdiction. Establishing and maintaining high standards for [indoor environmental quality](#) requires ongoing maintenance and operations efforts involving all members of the educational community. On our website, you can access applicable healthy

school-building laws and regulations, posted under our [Coordinated School Health Program](#) and [School Construction Program](#).

5. Families informed about PARCC Field Test

As we prepare for the beginning of the PARCC Field Test on **March 24**, I have prepared this letter to all friends of education, which we will distribute over the next few days through our list-serve and on social media:

As we continue working together to transform education in Rhode Island, one of our top priorities has been adopting college- and career-ready standards that clearly state what our students should know and be able to do at each grade level. Over the past three years, we have worked with teachers and school leaders across the state to prepare for the new Common Core State Standards, and I am pleased that this year these standards are guiding instruction in all of our public schools.

Another priority for us has been developing assessments to help us see whether students have mastered the Common Core State Standards. In partnership with educators in 16 other states, we have been working for three years to develop a new set of assessments called PARCC (Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers). Next year, our schools will transition to these new PARCC assessments. Students in grades 3 through 10 will take PARCC assessments in the spring of 2015. (Students in grade 11 will take the NECAP, in October 2014.)

To help everyone get ready for PARCC, about 9,000 students in most of our schools will participate in a PARCC “field test,” beginning on Monday, March 24. For most participating students, this practice test will take a total of about 3 to 5 hours, over two or three sessions. The experience of participating in the practice run will give students and teachers the opportunity to become more familiar with PARCC, helping to get them ready for the actual assessments next year. Keep in mind that there will be no report of results from this year’s practice run, so there is no need for any anxiety about performance during the field test. And by the way – we expect glitches to occur during the practice run. We want to iron out the bugs now so that everything will go more smoothly when we roll out PARCC assessments next year.

I truly believe PARCC assessments will improve teaching and learning in our state in several ways. Like our current assessments, PARCC assessments will ask students to provide written responses to many questions, giving students the opportunity to show what they know and can do. Unlike our current assessments, however, PARCC will be offered in the spring – in line with the materials students are taking in their current classes. Unlike the NECAP, students will take PARCC assessments during two separate testing windows – but the total number of testing hours will be very similar to the current testing schedule: about 9 hours per student, depending on grade level. (One difference is that PARCC will assess writing proficiency in grades 3 through 11, not in three grades only.)

For most students, PARCC will be computer-based and therefore more engaging for students. Teachers will receive

results much more quickly than they received NECAP results, so they can use information from PARCC to better guide instruction and to support individual students. Of course the questions on PARCC line up with the standards in the Common Core, so the PARCC material will be familiar to our teachers and to the students taking the assessments. We have posted a number of helpful materials on PARCC assessments on our [website](#), and the PARCC consortium [website](#) has important materials on the field test as well.

Our students have made significant progress over the past five years, and I believe the Common Core and the new PARCC assessments will help us continue on the right course in the coming years. The PARCC field test will be an important step on this exciting journey!

6. NECAP retest process completed

On Tuesday, we completed the NECAP retake process for high-school seniors who had not yet fulfilled the state-assessment component of the Diploma System. I am extremely grateful for the excellent organization and the spirit of hope and accomplishment that our assessment team encountered in school districts across the state. The hard work and positive attitude from you, your staff members, and your students made this process proceed smoothly. Every report I have received has emphasized that the students and staff members took this retest opportunity seriously, that students were trying hard to show their best work throughout the testing, and that many students felt proud and optimistic on the completion of the assessments. We will have results for you by the end of next month, and I believe that many students will show improvement and that the

Class of 2014 will be more ready for success beyond high school than any other graduating class from our state.

7. Presentation scheduled on Common Core, PARCC

The Rhode Island ASCD has announced a professional-development opportunity, “Keeping Up with the Core: What Rhode Island Educators Need to Know to Implement Common Core Thoughtfully and Prepare Purposefully for PARCC,” to be held on **Wednesday** (March 19), from 4 to 5:30 p.m., at the Cranston Public Library, Sockanosset Cross Road.

The RI-ASCD notes that this high-level presentation and discussion will provide an overview of what the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) mean for our students and our classrooms and how the CCSS prepares our students for college and challenging careers. The presenters will provide an overview of the latest information that Rhode Island educators should know to implement CCSS thoughtfully and to prepare purposefully for PARCC assessments. The presentation will also discuss and model ways to discuss the CCSS with parents and the community. A question-and-answer period will allow for dialogue on common issues related to CCSS implementation. Handouts will be provided. Register at www.riascd.org

From RIDE

Health and Safety:

**8. National Youth HIV and AIDS Awareness Day to be held
April 10**

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that, in 2010, young people aged 13 to 24 accounted for 26 percent of all new HIV infections in the United States, and nearly half of the 19 million new sexually transmitted diseases reported each year are among young people ages 15 to 24. In an effort to bring attention to this issue, **April 10** has been designated as National Youth HIV and AIDS Awareness Day. The 2014 theme is: Engaging Youth Voices in the AIDS/HIV Response. Today's young people are the first generation that has never known a world without HIV and AIDS. An AIDS-free generation is not possible without our nation's youth. Please feel free to share the HIV/AIDS Awareness resources that are available on the Advocates for Youth website, at <http://amplifyyourvoice.org/nyhaad> with your school staff. The Department of Health has additional resources for HIV prevention, at:

<http://www.health.ri.gov/healthyliving/sexualhealth/about/safersex/index.php>

From the U.S. Department of Education

9. Information released on federal budget, early learning, FAFSAs, nutrition, poster contest, emergency preparedness

Please see these notices from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Communications and Outreach:

Education Budget

On March 4, after sending his [annual budget request](#) to Congress, President Obama visited Powell Elementary School in Washington, D.C., highlighting the school's

preschool program as a model for the nation. “These kids may not be the most excited people in town on budget day,” the President said, “but my budget is designed with their generation and future generations in mind. In my State of the Union address, I laid out an agenda to restore opportunity for all people.... The budget I sent Congress this morning lays out how we’ll implement this agenda in a balanced and responsible way. It’s a roadmap for creating jobs with good wages and expanding opportunity for all Americans. And at a time when our deficits have been cut in half, it allows us to meet our obligations to future generations without leaving them a mountain of debt.”

The President is requesting \$68.6 billion in discretionary funding for the U.S. Department of Education, an increase of \$1.3 billion – or 1.9 percent – over the Fiscal Year 2014 level. “The President’s budget request reflects his strong belief that education is a vital investment in the nation’s economic competitiveness, in its people, and in its communities,” Secretary Duncan said. “Despite the encouraging progress we’ve seen, wide opportunity and achievement gaps continue to hurt many families, which puts our nation’s economy and future at risk.”

The President proposed a new initiative called [Race to the Top-Equity and Opportunity](#), which would create incentives for states and school districts to drive comprehensive change in identifying and closing both achievement and opportunity gaps. Grants would enhance data systems to sharpen the focus on the greatest disparities and invest in strong teachers and leaders in high-need schools. Grants would also support other strategies that mitigate the effects of concentrated poverty, such as expanded learning time,

access to rigorous coursework, and comprehensive student supports. (See also [Equity of Opportunity](#).)

The President also proposed the new [ConnectEDucators program](#), which would provide funding to help teachers and principals better leverage new resources made available through technology to improve college- and career-ready instruction and personalize learning. Technology can help educators teach to more rigorous standards, but technology alone cannot improve student learning. Educators must know how to make the best use of technology – such as creating and sharing high-quality open digital content – and how to use data to help students learn. (See also [Teachers and Leaders](#).)

Among the continued priorities, targeted to strengthen the education pipeline from cradle-to-career, are:

- making high-quality preschool, infant and toddler care, and home visiting available for children ([more](#));
- improving affordability, quality, and success in postsecondary education ([more](#)); and
- making schools safer and creating positive learning environments ([more](#)).

Want to dig deeper? Among the resources online are a [press release](#), a [blog post](#), the [budget summary](#), and [fact sheets on cross-cutting issues](#). Furthermore, one can [view video](#) from the agency's budget briefing for stakeholders and [listen](#) to the agency's press call.

Early Learning

Last week, Secretary Duncan and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius [visited the newest preschool](#) among the Child and Family Network Centers in Alexandria, Virginia, to observe a quality bilingual program in action and discuss the President's budget request for Fiscal Year 2015. He proposed \$500 million – double last year's funding – for Preschool Development Grants and reintroduced the Preschool for All initiative, with an initial \$1.3-billion investment. There is also additional funding requests for Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grants, and evidence-based home visiting.

This week, the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services held a stakeholder briefing on federal investments in early learning and development ([view video](#)).

Also, both agencies are seeking additional input on the 2014 Preschool Development Grants competition through a [dedicated website](#), as well as a public meeting on Thursday (March 20), from 3:30 to 5 p.m., in Washington, D.C. ([watch live](#)).

Student Loans

Last week, at an event with the First Lady at Coral Reef High School, President Obama laid out [details of his plan](#) to equip all Americans with the education and skills they need to compete in today's global economy and launched a new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion initiative to give more students the opportunity to attend, afford, and graduate from college. "Unfortunately, there are still a lot of young people all across the country who say the cost of college is holding them back," he asserted. "Some of you may have sat around the kitchen table with your

parents, wondering about whether you'll be able to afford it. FAFSA is – by far, the easiest way to answer that question.”

Under the [FAFSA Completion Initiative](#), the U. S. Department of Education will partner with states so that they can identify individual students who have not completed the FAFSA. States can then use this limited information to support school and district efforts to increase FAFSA completion, starting in the 2014-15 school year. These efforts build on the success of a pilot project launched by the agency in 2010 working directly with about 100 districts. (Note: In a [letter to the nation's governors](#), Secretary Duncan explains the history, requirements, and procedures for this initiative.)

Healthy Lunchtime Challenge

The First Lady is again challenging America's most creative junior chefs to put their talents to use and whip up delicious lunchtime recipes. The third “[Healthy Lunchtime Challenge and Kids' State Dinner](#)” invites children, ages 8 to 12, and their parents or guardians, to create and submit an original lunch recipe that is healthy, affordable, and tasty. All recipes must adhere to the guidance that supports the U.S.

Department of Agriculture's [MyPlate](#). Recipes must also represent each of the food groups, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy foods, with fruits and vegetables making up roughly half of the plate or recipe. Fifty-six children and their parent or guardian - one pair from each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and U.S. territories – will be flown to Washington, D.C., to attend a Kids' State Dinner at the White House, during which a selection of the winning

recipes will be served. Recipes may be submitted online through **April 5**.

Poster Contest

The White House invites elementary- and middle-school students to submit original [poster designs](#) for the 2014 Easter Egg Roll. This year's theme, "Hop into Healthy, Swing into Shape," promotes the First Lady's [Let's Move!](#) initiative to help kids grow up healthy and reach their full potential. The deadline for submissions is **March 21**, and the winning design will be part of the White House's 2014 Easter Egg Roll program.

Emergency Preparation

Communities are better prepared to withstand an emergency and recover quickly when everyone is involved. Yet, despite an increase in weather-related disasters, nearly 70 percent of Americans have not participated in a preparedness drill or exercise – aside from a fire drill – at their home, school, or workplace in the past two years. In an effort to continue building resilience, the federal family is pleased to announce [America's PrepareAthon!](#) The first America's PrepareAthon! National Day of Action is April 30. It will focus on preparing individuals, organizations, and communities for tornados, hurricanes, flooding, and wildfires. (Note: All are invited to participate in a webinar – Tuesday ([March 18](#)) or Thursday ([March 20](#)) – to learn more about the campaign and ways to be involved.)

10. New round of Investing in Innovation grants announced

Please see this notice from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement:

The Office of Innovation and Improvement has published a Notice Inviting Applications for awards up to \$3 million each in the “Development” category of the 2014 [Investing in Innovation](#) (i3) grant competition. In its fifth round of competition, the i3 program continues its aim to develop and expand practices that accelerate student achievement and prepare all students to succeed in college and careers. This year’s areas of focus include English Learners, students with disabilities, and technology-enabled learning, among others.

11. Schools, students encouraged to sign up for updates on First Lady’s visit to China

Please see this notice from the U.S. Department of Education Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnership:

The First Lady will travel to China from Wednesday (March 19) through March 26. During the trip to China, as on previous international trips to Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, the First Lady will be focusing on the power and importance of education, both in her own life and in the lives of young people in both countries.

She will also be visiting important historical and cultural sites in China, and will [share](#) with students in the U.S. the stories of the students she meets in China, as well as interesting facts about China’s history and culture – emphasizing the importance of students learning from one

another globally. The First Lady is encouraging students and classrooms across the U.S. to follow her trip by [signing up](#) for updates throughout the visit. View the First Lady's message to students [here](#).

[PBS LearningMedia](#) and Discovery Education will offer engagement opportunities for young people surrounding the trip, along with resources available for U.S. classrooms that explore the culture, geography, current events, and people of China.

If you know of any high school students that want to get involved, have them sign up to join live webinars and opportunities to ask questions that will be answered by the first lady.

From other federal agencies

12. U.S. Department of Labor awarding grants for education of disadvantaged youth

The U.S. Department of Labor will award YouthBuild grants to organizations to oversee the provision of education, occupational skills training, and employment services to disadvantaged youth in their communities while performing meaningful work and service. The program addresses affordable housing, education, employment, crime prevention, and leadership development. The application deadline is April 22. For more information, click [here](#).

From other organizations

13. College Board seeking nominations for Guidance and Admission Assembly Council

The College Board is seeking nominations for two member positions on the Guidance and Admission Assembly Council. The committee is in search of experienced professionals who are knowledgeable about College Board programs and services. Individuals who have been active volunteers in College Board regional activities might be particularly well qualified for nomination. Information about the council and nomination forms are available [here](#). The nomination deadline is **April 22**.

14. ResilientKids to hold workshop on mindfulness

A Rhode Island nonprofit, ResilientKids, is working with 1,300 students in nine Rhode Island public schools, most of them in high-need districts, teaching mindfulness and yoga as part of the school day. Students and teachers report excellent results - increased focus, reduced stress, fewer behavioral referrals.

ResilientKids is offering a workshop for teachers, principals, social workers, parents, guidance counselors, psychologists, and school nurses, featuring two national leaders in mindfulness in education. The workshop has two goals: explore the concept of mindfulness and how it can be applied to support adults working in your school, and engage in hands-on learning about mindfulness concepts and techniques.

The [workshop](#) will take place on Friday, **April 11**, from 8 a.m. to noon, at the Squantum Association, 947 Veterans Memorial Parkway, East Providence.

To learn more about ResilientKids, see:

<http://www.resilientkids.org>

15. Boston Globe offers classroom materials to Rhode Island educators

Please see this message from The Boston Globe:

[The Boston Globe News in Education \(NIE\) program](#) is pleased to extend an exciting offer to Rhode Island educators and their students.

Thanks to the generosity of private donors and corporate sponsors, Boston Globe NIE digital classroom subscriptions and educational resources are available free of charge to Rhode Island teachers in kindergarten through grade 12.

Teachers can register for their free Globe NIE subscriptions at:

<http://nieonline.com/bostonglobe/order.cfm>.

The registration process is quick and easy. Once registered, teachers and their students will have 24/7 access to the following:

- The Boston Globe e-paper, which includes translation into 12 languages and the ability to listen to individual articles
- BostonGlobe.com, which includes archived articles from 1872 to present.

In addition to their NIE subscriptions, teachers will have full access to Boston Globe NIE Common Core lesson plans, a weekly Boston Globe news quiz and newsletter, daily science webcasts, a Words in the News vocabulary quiz generated by grade level, a caption contest for editorial cartoons, and much more.

RIDE will post this field memo on Tuesday, at:

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