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How's School: Transforming Education in Rhode Island
Commissioner's State of Education Address
June 1, 2011

Mr. Speaker, Madam President, Members of the General Assembly, Governor Chafee, General Officers, members of the Board of Regents, and friends of education:

I want to first thank Speaker Fox and President Paiva Weed for inviting me here to address the General Assembly. It is truly an honor to stand in this great chamber to report on the state of public education in Rhode Island.

To all the members of the House and the Senate, thank you for your dedicated service to the people of Rhode Island and for your continued support for our students. As you wrestle with the profound budget issues that confront us today, you have shown a lasting commitment to improving our public schools. Thank you!

To Chairman Caruolo and the Board of Regents, thank you for your confidence in me and my team at the Department of Education and for your service to the students of our state.

During these economic times, governors across the country have targeted education aid, but here in Rhode Island we realize the importance of education to the lives of our residents and to the future of our state. Governor Chafee's recommended budget maintains solid support for public education. Thank you, Governor Chafee. I am grateful for your commitment to our schools. And I pledge to you that we will use these resources wisely to improve the quality of education for every student in Rhode Island!

As you may know, since becoming Commissioner I have visited more than 100 classrooms across the state to see some exciting examples of teaching and learning in practice. When you visit our schools, you will see that we have students ready and eager to learn, parents seeking the best for their children, and teachers who are improving the lives of our students every day. You will see inspiring learning activities and innovative programs that prepare our students for success.

You will meet students like Daniel McNulty. Daniel is the first student in Rhode Island who, because of illness, took most of his coursework through virtual learning. This month, Daniel will graduate 6th in his class at Woonsocket High School. Congratulations, Daniel, and to Woonsocket's instructional-technology coordinator, Michael Ferry!

We're also proud that the Central Falls High School & Calcutt Middle School chess team won the state championship and represented Rhode Island at the National Chess Championship, in Tennessee. The high-school team finished 6th in their division! Congratulations, chess champions!

And in the Westerly Middle School, Cassandra Lin and other 7th-graders started a program that collected recycled fuel for families in need – enough to keep 92 families warm this winter. Cassandra is one of 10 national winners of a 2011 Prudential Spirit of Community Award. Congratulations, Cassandra!

This year, we had some truly remarkable news regarding our state assessments. For the first time, Rhode Island high-school students outscored their peers in New Hampshire and Vermont in reading and writing. That's right: Rhode Island high-school students were the best.

Across our state, we see examples of success and pockets of excellence. Many of our schools are moving from good to great. We have the skills and the knowledge base to create a system of public schools in which all students have access to excellence. But we are not there yet.

Our mathematics and science scores, particularly in high school, are far too low. And nearly one of every four students fails to graduate.

To transform education in Rhode Island, we need to turn around our lowest-achieving schools and get them on the road toward success. We have to close the achievement gaps that separate some student groups from others.

Wide gaps separate the performance of our students with disabilities, our English-language learners, and our students living in poverty from their peers across the state. Our Hispanic students, for example, are the lowest-achieving in the country in mathematics – a fact we cannot tolerate and must change.

Even our highest-performing schools can improve their achievement levels. We need to raise our graduation rates, increase the percentages of students going to college, and provide multiple pathways for students seeking entry into challenging and rewarding careers.

We can always improve, always do better. The good news is that we have a plan to guide us on this journey.

Our plan, Transforming Education in Rhode Island, sets forth our priorities:

- ensuring educator excellence;
- accelerating all schools toward greatness;
- establishing world-class standards and assessments;
- developing user-friendly data systems; and
- using our resources wisely.

Our plan gives us a vision of where we need to be. But, as the saying goes: Vision without execution is hallucination. The task before us is to put our plan into action. And we have the resources to do so.

While funding is always a challenge, Rhode Islanders do spend generously on education, and we should take pride in that fact. In addition, we won \$75 million through our Race to the Top grant. All of us in the education field deeply appreciate the leadership of Speaker Fox and President Paiva Weed and the support from the members of the General Assembly as we pursued this unprecedented opportunity to invest in public education. Rhode Islanders want, expect, and deserve a return on this investment, and we will deliver.

Yet investments alone cannot move our schools from good to great. To transform our schools, we must also transform the culture in our state.

We must build a “culture of responsibility” and a “climate of belief.”

Over the past six months, I have been holding community forums where I speak directly with parents and other folks interested in education. I have held forums from Woonsocket to Westerly, and from Burrillville to Block Island, and before the end of the school year I will have met with community members in every school district in the state. These forums have been a terrific way to listen and to learn. At every forum, parents are eager to talk about their children – about their progress in school and about their opportunities for success.

Parents care deeply about how their own children are performing in school. Parents are our children’s first and lifelong teachers. The attitudes and beliefs that children learn at home will carry over into the school – and I don’t just mean learning the ABCs and practicing the times tables. I mean learning about the value of education. Families that establish a home environment in which teachers and classmates should be respected and where education is revered are preparing their children for success. There is no income requirement or language proficiency needed for families to do this.

Not every child, however, is fortunate enough to be a part of such a family. Do we turn our backs on these children? Do we write them off and say, well, without strong family engagement, our children are destined to fail? Of course not. The core belief behind the education system in America today is this:

We are responsible for the education of all of our children.

And when I say we are responsible for the education of our children, I mean our entire community: Parents, and our students themselves. Teachers, school leaders, district leaders. I mean labor leaders, and business leaders, and elected officials. I mean myself and the team at the Department of Education.

When I say we are responsible, I mean every Rhode Islander.

Parents and guardians care first and foremost about the success of their own children, and that is as it should be. And educators care about the students they teach. Community members care about the students in the town in which they live and pay taxes. I applaud and honor this spirit.

Let’s work toward a day in which every one of us cares deeply about every student across our state.

In a true culture of responsibility, we would never think in terms of “our kids” or “those kids.” We would see in every child the curiosity about the world, the eagerness to grow and to learn, and a great desire to succeed. For a true “culture of responsibility” to take hold in our state, every one of us must step up to do our part of the work.

We need to speak out in support of public education and the things that we believe in, but we should not question the good intentions of those with whom we disagree. We must never let our dialogue and discourse become toxic.

As a public official, I welcome feedback, accept responsible criticism, and willingly participate in spirited debates on public policy. Criticism and debate are part of the civic life that we cherish in America.

I cannot, however, abide wholesale attacks on the aspirations of our students, the engagement of our parents, or the integrity of the teaching profession. Our students want to learn, our parents

care about the quality of education, and our teachers are dedicated to improving the lives of our students.

I truly believe that the vast majority of Rhode Islanders respect our teachers and the work they do every day. Unfortunately, too often the cries of discontent have drowned out the voices of support, and this has become disheartening to many dedicated educators. We cannot let a vocal minority distort our views or dominate the conversation.

Teachers understand that their work is hard and ever-challenging. Yet they love what they do, and they do not want our sympathy. They want our respect – and they have earned it.

Good teachers and school leaders earn this respect because they believe in our students. They are a part of the “climate of belief.”

A great principal walks through the halls of her school and she knows every student’s name, every student’s family background, every student’s story. She believes that all students can learn and that teachers and school leaders can work well together in the best interest of students. I see this culture in all the great schools I visit.

Let’s imagine a Rhode Island in which every one of us believes in all of our children.

What if each of us asked every child we meet – in every social setting, at family dinners and neighborhood gatherings: “How’s school?”

How’s school?

That would say to them: We care about you. We care about your education. School is something all grownups and kids have in common. School is important to you and to me.

What if each of us asked every teacher we know: How’s school?

That would say to them: Teaching children is an awesome challenge. I appreciate you. How can I help?

What if we asked every parent we know: How’s school?

That would say to them: We care! We want to know how it’s going in school for the children of our family members, our friends, and our neighbors. And we need your encouragement to make our schools great places for learning. We value your role.

And what if we asked the leaders of our teachers’ unions: How’s school?

That would say to them: We value what you do to ensure that our teachers are respected and treated fairly. We want to work with you to help our students learn. We can be true partners.

What if we asked our elected officials, including school-committee members, municipal officials, and legislators: How’s school?

That would say to them: We need you. We appreciate your leadership. In what ways are you continuing to support high-quality public education?

And you can also ask district leaders, the Regents, and me and my team at the Department of Education: How’s school?

That would say to us: We're behind the effort to transform Rhode Island schools. And we are holding you accountable.

We take that responsibility seriously. We have set clear milestones and goals in our plan, and we are pleased to report on the progress we have made.

This year, we have seen significant progress toward closing achievement gaps at the Davies Career-Technical High School, the Virginia Cunningham School (in Pawtucket), the Martin Middle School (in East Providence), and the Park View Middle School (in Cranston).

We are proud to have nominated two schools this year for Blue Ribbon Awards, the highest honor from the U.S. Department of Education: Hope Valley Elementary School, in Chariho, for its high performance, and the Park School, in Warwick, for its dramatic improvements.

And let's give a special shout-out to the Veazie Street School, in Providence, for steady improvements over five years – raising scores by 38 points in mathematics and by 36 points in reading. There's more to go, but what a trajectory!

In addition to these dramatically improving schools, over the past two years we have honored Regents' Commended Schools in Barrington, Central Falls, Cranston, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Lincoln, Narragansett, Pawtucket, Smithfield, and the International and the Kingston Hill public charter schools.

I acknowledge that when I speak about results, I often refer to results on our state assessments – but not because our state assessments are the end-all-be-all.

Our state assessments are one way to measure educational progress, but assessments are not all that education is about.

Great instruction is never about preparing students to take tests.

In my visits to classrooms and schools across the state, and elsewhere, I have seen creative teachers in joyful classrooms, with students who are achieving at high levels on state assessments – and these teachers are not engaged in preparing students to take tests. I absolutely reject the notion that we have to choose between a rich, high-quality learning environment and improving student achievement.

This evening, we're joined by some of our award-winning educators, who have come here to represent the great work their colleagues do every day in our schools. Welcome:

- our Milken Educator Award Winner, Dale Blaess, of the Underwood School, in Newport; and
- our current Superintendent of the Year, Katherine Sipala, of Narragansett.

Our 2011 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, Shannon Donovan, of Scituate High School, could not be with us this evening because of a family emergency. But let's acknowledge Shannon for her accomplishments!

And our principals work hard every day to overcome challenges and to advance student achievement. Our five principals of the year are attending the Association of School Principals dinner tonight. But let us acknowledge them as well:

- Thomas Barbieri, of the Bain Middle School, in Cranston

- Christen Magill, of North Providence High School
- Steven Morrone, of the Ashaway School, in Charlestown
- Dennis Mullen, of Pilgrim High School, in Warwick; and
- Debra Zepp, of the Matunuck School, in South Kingstown.

These educators know that teachers need tools, resources, and support to do their job well, and that significant student achievement is the result of great instruction. And I have seen some great instruction in our schools.

In Mrs. Gould's 4th-grade class at the Clayville School, in Scituate, students work together and on their own, building math models and playing math games with partners, while in Mrs. Scarpeli's 8th-grade math classes, at Slater Junior High School, in Pawtucket, students are deeply engaged in critical thinking about math concepts.

In Mrs. Ward's class in the Wilbur-McMahon School, in Little Compton, students write lab reports as they learn about fulcrums and levers. Did you know that, when the fulcrum is in the right place, a 2nd-grader can pick up a box full of books – or even Mrs. Ward?

There's an abundance of high-quality children's literature in many of our classrooms across Rhode Island, such as Mrs. Faucher's 5th-grade classroom in the Cumberland Hill School, where students work in literature groups and develop a love of the written word.

In Mrs. Civic's kindergarten classroom at the Lineham School, in Exeter-West Greenwich, our youngest students are already beginning to write stories by working together to put sentences into a lively, narrative sequence.

And there's music all over the state! I was totally engaged in the music lessons in Mr. Whitehouse's class in Little Compton, Mr. Davignon's class, at Bernon Heights, in Woonsocket, and at the Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, where Miss Caruso links music symbols to math instruction.

The arts are truly important in our culture and our lives. Students readily experience the joys of the performing arts and the visual arts. Study of the arts greatly improves learning in other subjects as well.

While these teachers are not "teaching to the test," I am confident that their students will test among the best.

From my visits to classrooms and schools across Rhode Island, I believe in our teachers, and in our students.

We have to establish across our entire state this same "climate of belief." We have to break free of the mind-set that our students cannot succeed. We must reject the idea that some of our children cannot learn. We need to believe – every one of us – that our parents care about education, that all of our students can learn, and that our dedicated educators are capable of teaching them.

I want to thank the hundreds of Rhode Island educators who have invited me into their classrooms, the many Rhode Island school leaders who have welcomed me at their schools and in their communities, and the thousands of Rhode Islanders – such as each of you here this evening – who have joined hands in support of public education.

I am confident that, working together, we can make our schools America's best.

Let us share that responsibility, let us believe in success, and let us hope, in the true spirit of Rhode Islanders, that when we ask one another “How’s school?” we will hear three special words:

School is great!