



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations  
**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
Shepard Building  
255 Westminister Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-3400

Deborah A. Gist  
Commissioner

**House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education and  
the House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training**

**Hearing on “Exploring Efforts to Strengthen the Teaching Profession”**

**February 27, 2014 – 10 a.m.**

**Written Testimony**

**Deborah A. Gist, Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education**

Chairman Rokita, Chairwoman Foxx, Representatives McCarthy and Hinojosa, Members of the Committee, I am honored to be invited to speak before you this morning on an issue of great importance to all Americans: strengthening the teaching profession.

My name is Deborah A. Gist, and I am the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education for the State of Rhode Island.

I also serve as a member of the Board of Directors of the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, a member of the Technical Panel for Teacher Prep Review for the National Council on Teacher Quality, as one of the founding members and the vice-chair of Chiefs for Change, and as a former board member of the Urban Teacher Center. I am also a member of the Board of Directors of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which has provided tremendous support for policy development regarding teacher quality and many other issues we face at the state and local level.

Because of my work in these different roles, I have an appreciation for how necessary it is that we make dramatic improvements to our current systems of teacher preparation. I have also seen what quality looks like and what we must aim to create for every aspiring teacher.

In Rhode Island, we have set forth our mission, our goals, and our priorities in our 5-year strategic plan, *Transforming Education in Rhode Island*.

Because the single most important school-based factor in student success is the quality of the classroom teacher, the first priority in our strategic plan is ensuring that we have an effective teacher in every classroom.

Ensuring that we have effective teachers in every classroom and effective leaders in every school encompasses the entire span of an educator’s career. Our responsibility begins with recruiting great teachers into the profession, and the process includes supporting excellent programs of educator preparation, providing support and guidance for new teachers as they enter the profession, providing continuous feedback and support for teachers throughout their

careers, and opening opportunities for teachers to enter positions of school leadership, if that is their desire.

In Rhode Island, we have launched a number of initiatives to improve teacher effectiveness. For example, we have begun a statewide induction program for first-year teachers. Under this program, each new teacher is linked with an “induction coach,” an experienced educator who is relieved of teaching duties and is working full time to help new teachers transition successfully to this challenging profession.

We have also initiated annual evaluations for all educators, based on observations of successful classroom practices, fulfillment of professional responsibilities, and evidence of student growth and achievement.

In addition, we have linked certification renewal to educator effectiveness. Under regulations that our state Board approved in 2011, educators who have been demonstrated satisfactory performance over a period of time will have their certifications renewed. Our certification system is no longer based on inputs, such as hours of professional development, but rather on outcomes: evidence of effective teaching.

These initiatives aside, there is no doubt that the process of bringing great teachers into our classrooms begins with ensuring that we have high-quality programs for teacher preparation. I appreciate that you have included me in this important conversation today to speak about educator preparation.

By way of background, I was privileged to receive my teacher preparation through an excellent program at the University of Oklahoma.

I studied early-childhood education. From the time I entered the program at “OU,” I worked in a lab school on campus, the Institute for Child Development, under the direction of accomplished academics and teachers, including Dr. Joanne Hendrick. I wrote lesson plans, worked directly with children, and received regular observations and feedback on my work. Being in the lab school, planning for learning, and engaging with children began early in the program and included critical support from master teachers.

To teach successfully, graduates of our preparation programs need to know their subject, know how to reach a diverse population of students, and know how to apply their learning and their skills in a classroom setting.

In October 2009, with our strategic plan in place, our initial step toward improving teacher quality in Rhode Island was to set high minimum scores for entry into preparation programs. Students hoping to enter a teacher-preparation program have to attain or surpass the cut score in one of several approved assessments, such as the ACT, the GRE, the SAT, or the Praxis assessments in mathematics, reading and writing. Our goal is to have a teaching corps made up of the best teachers in the country, so we opted to raise the program-entry cut score in stages over the next two year because we need our aspiring teachers to be among the best of today’s college students.

This action to increase selectivity was only a first step, however, toward raising the quality of teacher-preparation candidates and setting us on a path to better-prepared graduates. To do so, we knew we had to revise our educator-preparation program standards, which had been largely unchanged for 12 years.

These educator-preparation program standards set forth the elements that we expect to see in a high-quality program. In Rhode Island, the Board of Education has the authority in state law to “adopt standards and qualifications of teachers.” To carry out this process, the Rhode Island Department of Education is responsible for review and approval of all educator-preparation programs in the state, in both public and nonpublic institutions of higher education. Approval from our agency is highly important to all Rhode Island preparation programs because graduates of approved programs are automatically eligible for certification in Rhode Island, provided they have achieved passing scores on the appropriate licensure tests.

All programs are up for review every five years, and more frequently if necessary. Our program reviews include site visits by a team of department staff and other educators, as well as a comprehensive review of data and information that the programs provide to us. During the process of program review, we use the program-approval standards as a blueprint to focus and direct our work.

The review process encourages programs to maintain excellence and to strive toward continuous improvement, and the process also enables us to rescind approval from programs that we find to be ineffective. We have done so twice over the past decade, for a principal-preparation program at one of our public institutions of higher education and for a reading-specialist program at a nonpublic college.

Recognizing the need to bring our program-approval standards up to date and into alignment with the goals and priorities in our strategic plan, we worked closely over the past year with our partners in higher education to significantly revise our approval standards for educator-preparation programs. The Rhode Island Board of Education approved these new standards in November, and I have attached these standards to my written testimony.

Our new standards, modeled after the standards from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), include five key elements that I would like to bring to your attention. We believe these elements to be essential to the improvement of program quality.

First, we are focused on the importance of classroom practice, with more emphasis on partnerships between preparation programs and schools and on the experiences aspiring teachers have during their field placements.

We expect our teacher-preparation programs to coordinate field placements closely with schools and to develop measures to determine how effectively their aspiring teachers are performing during their placements. In fact, in Rhode Island we require that programs must ensure that their aspiring teachers are placed only in classrooms with teachers who have received evaluations of “effective” or better.

Second, we want our teaching force to reflect the diversity of students in Rhode Island public schools.

Therefore, we expect our teacher-preparation programs to demonstrate their commitment to recruiting diverse candidates for admission and to supporting all candidates as they strive to become beginning teachers.

Third, we expect our teacher-preparation programs to have criteria and assessments for determining whether their students are truly ready to be candidates for certification.

This expectation begins with ensuring that all programs attract and retain high-quality candidates through recruitment and admissions. The programs must also evaluate the classroom performance of their aspiring teachers – while on campus as students and while in the field as student-teachers.

We also emphasize, however, that our programs must consider and evaluate additional evidence of readiness for certification, such as leadership, resilience, and perseverance – all of which are critical traits for effective educators. Our educator-preparation programs are in the process of development measurement protocols for this additional evidence of readiness, and the measurements may include such elements as interviews and observations of classroom practice.

Fourth, we expect our programs to continue to gather information about the performance of their graduates through at least their first year of teaching.

We expect our programs to use feedback from their graduates and data from employers – data such as the number and percentage of graduates to find teaching jobs and the evaluation results of recent graduates – to determine how well their graduates are improving student learning and achievement.

We expect all programs to use this information to continuously improve the quality of instruction, the efficacy of field placements, and the outcomes for their graduates.

Finally, we expect our preparation programs to analyze data, share the data, and report information widely and publicly. We have developed a template for our new Educator Preparation Program Report Cards, which will include data on the grade-point averages of entering candidates, median composite scores of candidates on various normed admissions tests, passage rates on licensure exams, the percentages of program completers receiving certification and employment within various time frames, and the educator-evaluation results of recent completers, including performance-level data on observations of practice, fulfillment of professional responsibilities, and effect on student growth and achievement.

Programs themselves will benefit from this reporting process, aspiring teachers will make good use of this information as they consider program selection, school districts will use the information when hiring, my agency – the Rhode Island Department of Education – will use these reports as we continue to monitor program quality, and Rhode Islanders in general will review these reports to see how well their tax and tuition dollars are invested.

In summary, I urge the Committee to take note of the work of state leaders, national organizations such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), and educators in the field who are engaged in improving teacher preparation. Thanks to the ongoing work in many states, we now have more of a focus on how effectively our programs coordinate their practices with school districts to improve student outcomes. We require more robust data and more frequent feedback loops on teacher-candidate performance throughout their participation in the preparation program.

In Rhode Island, our preparation programs recognize that we need better alignment to our state learning standards and more careful recruitment of diverse and high-quality candidates. Our partners in higher education know we are focused on results and that we demand accountability for preparing highly effective teachers.

You are most likely aware that all states currently provide the U.S. Department of Education with annual reports on educator-preparation programs. These reports contain approximately 400 data points, and it is not evident that these data points all pertain to the quality of the educator-preparation programs.

Going forward, it would be helpful if this data collection were limited to data points that provide evidence of quality and that states and educator-preparation programs find to be truly valuable, such as data on outcomes. It would also be more valuable if states could analyze and report this data not aggregated across the entire preparation program but disaggregated by program type, such as elementary, secondary, and early childhood.

States should certainly retain the authority to set their own benchmarks for measuring the efficacy of preparation programs, but the data and reports on programs will be most useful if states publicly report their benchmarks and measurement criteria for program evaluation.

During our teacher-preparation program quality work in Rhode Island, we have focused on student learning and program improvement. Through it all, we have strived to keep in mind what matters most—our students and their learning.

I remember 26 years ago, when I had just begun a student-teaching experience at a local elementary school, I met a kindergarten girl who was very fascinated with why I was in her classroom. I explained to her a number of times that her teacher was helping me to learn how to be a teacher someday. Finally, she said, “Oh, so teachers teach teachers how to be a teacher!” I said, “Right!” Thoughtfully, she paused for a moment and then said: “I wonder how the first teacher learned!”

We may never know the answer to that question, but we can do much more than we are doing today to ensure that our teachers are better prepared and ready from the first day of school to serve our children well.

Your inviting me and my colleagues here today demonstrates that you want to hear from those of us in the field about the work states are doing to strengthen the teaching profession. Much of this work, quite rightly, takes place at the state and local level, and it is important to let this work go forward, within the frameworks that such national organizations as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation have developed to support continuous improvement in our educator-preparation programs.

I for one believe that decisions about education should take place as close to the student level as is practical and effective. Just as teachers do their work best when school leaders give them autonomy, resources, and support, we at the state level do our work best when given autonomy, guidance, and positive incentives from the federal level. The federal role should continue to be providing states and communities with clear delineations of what we must accomplish in our schools, but not with prescriptions for how to do so. I hope that this kind of guidance and support results from today’s hearing and from other hearings before your Committee.

As a lifelong educator, I believe that teaching is the most important and the most rewarding profession in the world. I hope the initiatives I have described for you this morning will help as you continue your work.

I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

###