

EDUCATION

First report card

Commissioner Deborah A. Gist completes her first year on the job



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / CONNIE GROSCH

Deborah A. Gist became the state's first female commissioner for elementary and secondary education in 2009, replacing Peter McWalters. To see Gist reflect on her first year as commissioner, go to projo.com/video.

By **JENNIFER D. JORDAN**
 JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Deborah A. Gist was so impatient to start her job last summer as the state's new education commissioner, she was at her desk weeks early and ventured out publicly June 30 — a day before her official start date.

Before long, Gist was zipping around the state in her black and silver Smart car, her own silver hair streak making her instantly recognizable.

Her first goal, she said, was to visit every school district, charter and state-operated school, a feat she completed in four months, aided by 15-hour work days and

too many Diet Cokes to count.

Gist was hired for a single, urgent purpose: to do whatever it takes to dramatically improve student performance in Rhode Island.

State education leaders and Governor Carcieri were clear when they launched a national search for a new commissioner: They wanted a "change agent."

A leader who was not afraid to take on teacher unions, dysfunctional districts, ineffective school leaders or anyone else who stood in the way of what they saw as radical improvement of the state's struggling public school system.

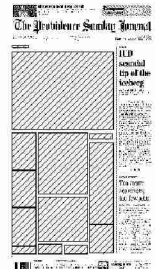
A year later, it's clear they got

what they wished for.

But Gist's ambition to transform Rhode Island's school system has also alienated some teachers, parents and members of the charter school community who say she has pushed too hard with some of her reforms.

"The teachers I talk to in Rhode Island are deeply concerned about things she's done," said Larry Purtill, president of the National Education Association of Rhode Island.

"She talks a lot about great teachers and says she stresses the positive, but I don't think Rhode Island teachers feel she stresses the positive enough. They construe a lot of what she has said and done as anti-teacher."



“She brought a reformer’s zeal,” counters Robert G. Flanders Jr., chairman of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education. “You can’t help but admire her courage, energy and tenacity. Her drive. I think there’s a whole new momentum around education reform in Rhode Island, and there’s no question she’s leading it. She’s the public face of education reform in Rhode Island.”

Gist keeps an exhausting schedule, meeting with student groups, parents, lawmakers and business organizations in schools, the State House and even the Adult Correctional Institutions. She has reorganized the state Department of Education and charged her staff with implementing a dizzying array of aggressive changes.

Everywhere she goes, she asks people to visualize where the state will be five years from now. She expects to be here, she says, proudly unveiling a new sign by the side of the highway:

“Welcome to Rhode Island, home of America’s best public schools.”

“She absolutely exudes a sense of urgency,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count. “You get the sense she’s determined to put the best interest of students before every decision she is making. And there is no time to waste.”

The student group Young Voices has met with Gist several times, and students have been appointed to key efforts, including the state’s Race to the Top steering committee.

“She’s different. She’s young, she’s a woman and she has a lot of power,” said Amanda Pereira, 17, who will be a senior at Classical High School. “For a lot of young people, that really raises awareness about education, in a positive way.”

Gist has also brought national

attention to the Ocean State.

She’s part of a new breed of education reformers who are seeking novel ways to fix old problems and are willing to take big risks.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan leads this group, and Gist has eagerly embraced his controversial federal approaches to intervene in the nation’s worst schools.

The most spectacular result — in the nation — of the reform

SEE GIST, A10

push was the mass teacher firings in February in Central Falls. The firings were the result of Gist’s insistence on immediate reform in the worst-performing schools in the state, and it landed her in the national media spotlight. In April, Gist was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine.

Not everyone, however, is a fan.

Some of her own staff have chafed under her aggressive style and demanding schedule. Several department employees have departed in the past year, most noticeably Keith Oliveira who used to oversee charter schools.

He resigned after clashing with Gist, in part over her recommendation to grant the popular Highlander Charter School a one-year extension rather than the customary five-year reauthorization, because of uneven test scores. The one-year extension was perceived as a threat to close Highlander’s doors at the end of the 2010-11 school year.

Even the Board of Regents seemed to think Gist, in her zeal to reform, overstepped. After passionate outcry from parents and community leaders, the Regents approved a three-year compromise.

Perhaps more damaging is Gist’s frayed relationship with

the state’s teachers’ unions.

“I think she listens but she doesn’t always hear,” said Purtill, NEARI president. “I sometimes think she has her mind made up about something before we talk and you are not going to budge her. I don’t think anyone should compromise their beliefs or principles, but she does need to have teachers and teacher unions at the table.”

Despite these concerns,

when she reflects on her eventful first year as education commissioner, Gist says she has few regrets.

A lot has happened in the past 12 months:

■ She and her staff developed and managed to get the General Assembly to pass a school-financing formula after two decades without one.

■ Rhode Island now requires rigorous evaluations for all teachers, principals and superintendents, tied to student growth and test scores.

■ Gist raised the standards for acceptance into the state’s teacher-preparation programs to the highest in the country, a move she says will help raise the caliber of incoming teachers.

■ She invited in the first batch of 34 Teach for America fellows, who will start working in Rhode Island schools this fall.

■ She persuaded lawmakers to lift a cap on charter schools, paving the way for large charter school management companies to open schools here.

But overshadowing all of these accomplishments were the dramatic, painful events in Central Falls, when the entire staff of struggling Central Falls High School was terminated after teacher union officials and the superintendent failed to agree on what it would take to turn around the

low-achieving school.

The firings on Feb. 23 by the board of trustees for the city schools drew the ire of labor unions across the country, especially after President Obama singled out Central Falls in a March 1 speech, saying the firings were a “last resort” for a broken school.

Nationally, some teachers felt betrayed by a Democratic president they helped to elect. They questioned why he was blaming teachers for problems beyond their control, such as poverty, family instability and the challenges of teaching students whose first language is not English — all huge issues in Central Falls.

And many teachers here felt betrayed by their new education commissioner.

Gist herself is concerned about the perception she is anti-teacher.

She knows the wounds have still not entirely healed, even after the Central Falls teachers’ union and the superintendent reached an agreement in May that saved the teachers’ jobs.

“The Central Falls situation was difficult at times,” Gist said in a recent interview in her office in downtown Providence. “I felt really concerned when I heard people talk about teachers in our state. I do what I do out of the deepest respect for teachers and what they do every day and the fact they were getting another message, I was concerned about that.”

“I hope that educators can see that I am supportive of them, but I will not waver on working for the improvement of schools for our kids. I don’t see those things as mutually exclusive.”

By any measure, this has been an extraordinary year for education in Rhode Island. Several initiatives that have

come to fruition over the past 12 months took root during the tenure of Gist’s predecessor, Peter McWalters. The design for the yearly educator evaluations, the development of a new set of requirements for schools called the Basic Education Program and the guiding principles that influenced the financing formula — three significant accomplishments — began long before Gist arrived.

But it is clear that Gist’s aggressive leadership has accelerated the pace of change and made possible many reforms that would have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago.

“She’s willing to shake the tree, and I think that’s a good thing,” said House Speaker Gordon D. Fox. “What we were doing wasn’t working.”

Fox credits Gist with taking a lead role in the development of the financing formula, one of the most important pieces of education legislation in at least two decades and a risky move during an economic recession. Some districts will receive more state aid under the plan, while others will receive less.

“She saw that this is a moment in time, that if we didn’t do this now, we might not have the chance again,” Fox said. “She put together a proposal that was defensible, in terms of who was behind it, while not making [the cuts] so egregious that it was a non-starter.”

But Gist’s leadership style has also antagonized the very people she needs to implement her reforms: teachers.

“Nationally, what’s happening is there is a powerful and very punitive movement to close schools and fire teachers,” said Diane Ravitch, a professor and education his-

torian at New York University and a former assistant education secretary who is critical of many of the reform efforts promoted by Duncan and Mr. Obama. “The assumption is that this is the road to school improvement. But no nation on Earth uses this model. These are not remedies.”

Gist’s approach has pluses and minuses, says Larry Cuban, professor emeritus of Stanford University’s School of Education.

Gist “is part of a large movement of entrepreneurial-driven educators who come out of a business frame of reference around efficiency and effectiveness,” Cuban said. “The benefit I see is the singular focus on student outcomes. That’s a decided plus. The negatives are the anti-union rhetoric and a misunderstanding of what school and classroom practices entail on a daily basis, and the gritty difficulties of changing routines, and just how hard that is.”

Gist says she intends to move purposefully as the state rolls out dramatic interventions in Central Falls and Providence, the two districts identified as having persistently low-achieving schools, and she is hoping the road to reform in both places will be smoother in the future.

At the same time, Gist says she will remain steadfast in her goal to boost student achievement and narrow gaps between middle-class and low-income children.

“If the feedback shows another way to get there, I’m very open to discussing that,” Gist said. “There have been a lot of things during the past year that I’ve listened to and we’ve made changes... But I am unwavering about what we need to accomplish.”

Gist has shown an ability to

compromise. For example, when local colleges balked at her decision to raise the score students must reach to be accepted into teacher-training programs, Gist agreed to phase in the change over a two-year period. She also incorporated some teacher union suggestions in the state's second Race to the Top application, a concession that earned the endorsement of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, support that greatly strengthened the application.

But she also has shown a stubborn side, declining to apologize publicly to worried charter school supporters for her harsh treatment of Highlander, instead saying that she regretted her recommendation had been "misunderstood."

Nonetheless, Julie Nora, president of the Rhode Island League of Charter Schools, says her organization holds no grudges and is eager to work with the commissioner to improve the oversight and quality of the state's 15 charter schools.

"I consider her a colleague, and it's all about making changes in Rhode Island," Nora said. "It's important that we continue to have a dialogue. And I admire her for bringing attention to the state and to the issues currently at the forefront, locally and nationally."

Purtill says his union also wants to work with Gist, despite the tensions.

"I've sat through too much to not be a bit skeptical, but there is still opportunity there," Purtill said. "The bridge isn't completely burned."

In late June, Gist welcomed the Teach for America fellows, college graduates who have never studied education,

yet will teach in Rhode Island schools this fall. Considered the best and the brightest from the nation's most select colleges, these novice teachers represent the type of educator Gist is hoping to cultivate in Rhode Island — super-smart, eager to make a difference and ambitious.

At a lunch held at the Rhode Island Foundation, she mingled with the three-dozen fellows, who just weeks earlier had received their bachelor's degrees. A student herself, currently in a doctoral program, Gist seemed at ease.

Her passion for teaching was evident. "There is no better job in the world," she told them with conviction. She shared her favorite vision with the group, asking them to join her five years from now, when she erects the sign proving that Rhode Island's schools are the envy of the world.

Gist appeared reflective about her first year, and her own evolution as a leader on the front lines of reform.

She shared a bit of advice with the young, hopeful teachers-to-be, perhaps hinting at a new focus as she begins her second year as commissioner.

"What I've learned about being a change agent," she said, "is it's all about the relationships that you build. Those are important."

jjordan@projo.com / 277-7254

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BIO

Deborah A. Gist

Age: 43

Marital status: Married to Jock Friedly, owner of Storming Media, an online company that provides documents and reports from the Pentagon and other U.S. government agencies.

Salary: \$203,000 a year, plus \$2,400 a year for car expenses.

Contract: Three years, expires June 7, 2012.

Administrative experience: 2007-2009: District of Columbia's first state superintendent of education, analogous to Rhode Island's education commissioner.

2008: Broad Superintendents Academy Class graduate.

2004-2007: State education officer for D.C.'s education office.

2001-2004: Ran community service organization Serve D.C.

Academic credentials: Enrolled in three-year doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania in educational leadership.

2000: Received a master's in public administration from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

1997: Master's in elementary education/curriculum, University of South Florida.

1988: Bachelor's degree in early childhood education, University of Oklahoma.

Classroom experience: 1994-1996: Taught second grade in

Hillsborough County School District, Tampa, Fla.; won Teacher of the Year award. 1988-1994: Taught first, second and third grade in Fort Worth Independent School District; won Teacher of the Year award.

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Gist a grade, A to
F, go to **projo.com**



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / **MARY MURPHY**

Gist, right, leaves the Teach for America lunch with two deputies: Paulajo Gaines, left, director of teacher certification, and Mary Ann Snider, chief of educator excellence and instructional effectiveness.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / **MARY MURPHY**

An educator at Roger Williams Park Zoo shows Gist and Luis Guerrero, 11, a rare American burying beetle. Gist was spending the day with middle schoolers from the YMCA Day Camp at Joslin Park.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / **MARY MURPHY**

Commissioner of Education Gist works at her desk at the Department of Education offices.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / **MARY MURPHY**

Gist talks with a group of inmates before a graduation ceremony and GED certificate presentation at John J. Moran Medium Security Facility at the ACI in June, where she spoke and helped hand out certificates.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / **BOB THAYER**

Gist greets teachers during a visit to the Northern Lincoln Elementary School.