

**Commissioner's Weekly Field Memo
Wednesday, November 27, 2013**

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Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. OECD Test for Schools provides participating high schools with international calibration, detailed diagnostic reports

It was great to join with folks from six districts, plus one of our nonpublic schools, on the America Achieves webinar yesterday (November 26), which provided us with excellent information on the OECD Test for Schools. As you know, America Achieves has invited Rhode Island high schools to participate in this international assessment, which is modeled on the well-known PISA international assessment, the “gold standard” for critical thinking. We know that we have excellent education in schools across our state, and this assessment gives us the chance to calibrate against an international standard what we are doing well and the assessment will also provide every participating high

school with information to improve from their starting point. We want to lift up the performance of all of our students and all of our schools, and the OECD Test for Schools can help us to do so.

Last year, five Rhode Island districts participated in the pilot version of the OECD Test for Schools – perhaps the highest participation rate in the country, which really demonstrated to the country that Rhode Island educators are thinking globally. Based on last year’s pilot, I was very impressed with the quality of the report that the OECD prepared for participating districts. These reports, about 100 pages each, contain not only in-depth information about how each high school compares with others around the world but also includes results of a survey that every student completes. Of course we have our own longitudinal student surveys in Rhode Island (SurveyWorks), but, again, the OECD survey enables schools to compare responses on an international scale.

Among the key points the folks from America Achieves emphasized during the webinar were:

- the test is data-rich but manageable – administered in about 3 ½ hours and involving anywhere from 50 to 85 students in each participating high school;
- the test is not in any way an accountability measure – it is a diagnostic tool only, and participation is voluntary;
- every participating school will receive a detailed report within about three months of the assessment ;
- the testing contractor (McGraw-Hill) will manage the selection of participating students and the test administration; and

- schools can select the date of participation – any time through the end of March.

I can also add that the vast majority of participating students (randomly selected 15-year-olds) will be in grades 9 or 10 and will therefore not be participating in the NECAP assessments during this school year.

Of course, participation is entirely voluntary – for schools, and for students. We want people to participate because they believe this will be a valuable opportunity. The OECD Test for Schools is an assessment focused on problem-solving and critical thinking, which should have huge value in our state, as we all want to ensure that our students have these vital skills. The report that participating schools will receive will also provide an opportunity for professional development, as you can use these reports with your team to evaluate your current plans, think about what you want to do differently, and consider what new areas you may want to focus on going forward.

The deadline for requesting participation is the **end of January**. Whether you were on the webinar or not, please let me know if you plan to participate so that we can coordinate participation requests across the state. (America Achieves can pay the participation costs for at least 10 Rhode Island high schools, and possibly more.)

More information is available at www.americaachieves.org/oecd. If you would like to speak directly with someone from the team on America Achieves, let me know and I can provide you with contact information.

2. Child Nutrition Programs in schools, communities are expanding across the state

An important part of our work toward ensuring that our schools are safe and healthy learning environments for all students is our commitment to child-nutrition programs. Children who are hungry or malnourished will inevitably find it difficult to concentrate in school and to keep up with their peers. With a great deal of support from federal funds and resources, RIDE administers several child-nutrition programs through our Office of Statewide Efficiencies. To provide the public with better information on these programs, we have just developed a new page for our website that contains a complete compendium of resources on [Child Nutrition Programs](#), including the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Farm to School Program, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetables Program, and more. I invite you to take a look at this new section of our website.

You may also have seen news reports this week about the problem of hunger in Rhode Island. These stories are in the news because on Monday the Rhode Island Community Food Bank released its [2013 Status Report](#) on Hunger in Rhode Island. Many findings in the report are certainly alarming, but I was pleased to see that the report praises RIDE initiatives, noting that our School Breakfast Program has grown significantly over the past five years, with Rhode Island's national participation rank jumping from 38th to 22nd among all states. The report also notes that our Summer Meals Program expanded by 8 percent this year, serving about 6,500 children per day last July.

Our recent successes in these nutrition programs are in large part because of our on-going partnerships with you and your team and

with other programs across the state that serve the needs of our children. Let's continue working together to provide nutritious meals to children across the state during school, before and after school, and throughout the calendar year.

3. Governor Chafee appoints working group to manage Educator Autonomy Project

To meet his objective of seeking out new ways to provide greater autonomy and flexibility for teachers, principals, and superintendents, Governor Chafee, in consultation with the Board of Education and with RIDE, has appointed a 17-member working group to manage the Educator Autonomy Project. Led by co-chairs Yanaiza Gallant, the 2012 Rhode Island Milken Educator Award winner, and Patricia Page, the 2014 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, the working group will meet monthly and, by the end of June, will submit to Governor Chafee recommendations for action. Governor Chafee has noted that:

The objective of the Educator Autonomy Working Group is to make specific recommendations on ways we can ... provide more flexibility for teachers, principals, and superintendents to impart creative learning experiences to all Rhode Island students. I believe that these recommendations will assist us on the road to creating world-class education for the students of Rhode Island.

I am very eager to begin meeting with this group. Many of our most important initiatives over the past four years, such as transition to the Common Core State Standards and implementing the induction program for new teachers, have involved educators in their development but have emanated from the state level. As these initiatives take root in our schools, we need to shift the

focus and find new ways to advance teaching and learning. The Educator Autonomy Project is a major step toward further empowering teachers and school leaders - and toward transforming education in Rhode Island.

We have scheduled the first monthly meeting of the working group for **Tuesday** (December 3), at 4:30 p.m., here at RIDE. Meetings will be open to the public, so you or members of your team are welcome to attend. Smithfield Superintendent O'Brien will represent superintendents and Carolyn Sheehan will represent charter-school administrators on the working group.

4. Data Quality Campaign report highlights Rhode Island initiatives

Last week, the Data Quality Campaign released its annual report, Data for Action 2013. It was great to see in this report that Rhode Island has achieved 8 of the 10 recommended data actions (essential elements of a Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems) – ranking us second in New England, behind only Maine. Even better, the report includes among the highlighted initiatives the Rhode Island [DataHUB](#), which is the public portal for our longitudinal data system partnership with our districts and with other state agencies.

The report notes:

Why is this great?: The DataHUB gives users options to view different reports. Users can look at reports that have already been created and filter down to the specific school they are interested in. Or they can use the Data Catalog to search for specific indicators.

This initiative is entirely dependent on the excellent data collection and reporting that you have implemented locally. By working together to manage timely, accurate, and complete data, we are ensuring that educators have the data they need to make wise decisions about teaching and learning and that members of the public have data they need to understand public education in Rhode Island.

The Data Quality Campaign [report](#) highlights Rhode Island on page 15.

5. Coventry educator named Assistant Principal of the Year

Congratulations to Brooke Macomber of Coventry High School, whom the Rhode Island Association of School Principals has honored as the 2014 Assistant Principal of the Year! A Spanish teacher in high school and middle school for 15 years, Brooke has been Assistant Principal at Coventry High School for the past four years. In honoring Brooke, the association notes that she is a “dedicated, collaborative, and inspirational leader, whose leadership demonstrates that children can learn, anything is possible, and that true collaboration will always result in high morale and high achievement.” The Coventry community is fortunate to have her as a member of the high-school team.

6. Happy Thanksgiving!

I am sending this week’s Field Memo to you ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday. I wish you safe and uneventful travels – especially if you are braving the stormy weather, and I hope you and all in your school community enjoy a wonderful, safe, and thankful holiday with family and friends.

From RIDE

SurveyWorks:

7. RIDE reminds building administrators to participate in administrator survey

As we continue to work together to transform education in Rhode Island, it is very important to account for the point of view of all education stakeholders. Administrator participation in SurveyWorks is very important. We recently calculated our administrator SurveyWorks response rate, and, to date, the response rate is lower than anticipated.

We are, therefore, reminding all school-based administrators who have no teaching responsibilities to complete the online survey, and we ask you to share this reminder with your team.

To take the survey, please follow this link:

<http://surveyworks.ride.ri.gov/survey.html>

If you do not have your school's access code, please call the SurveyWorks help desk, at (877) 787-5725.

Wireless Classroom Initiative

8. LEAs encouraged to complete WCI vendor-selection process, schedule review meeting with RIDE

RIDE will begin issuing Wireless Classroom Initiative (WCI) grant awards on **Friday** (November 29). We have collected sufficient data from opened proposals to project WCI costs across the state,

and we can make funding commitments to LEAs that have completed their vendor selection and provided us with final proposals. At this point, 19 of 56 LEAs have met with us to select their vendor. Those LEAs are in the process of seeking school committee authorization to proceed, completing contracts with the implementation vendors, and determining implementation schedules. The remaining 37 LEAs are in various stages of waiting for additional proposals or scheduling proposal-review or vendor-selection meetings with RIDE. The grant awards will be made on a rolling basis over the coming months, and LEAs that need more time to complete their selections will not be disadvantaged in regard to available funds.

If you have not yet reached the point of selecting a vendor, we encourage you to complete your analysis of opened proposals and notify us to schedule a vendor-selection meeting. To schedule a meeting, send an e-mail to wirelessinitiative@ride.ri.gov requesting an appointment, and include the name of the recommended vendor. We have analyzed all opened proposals, and we will be prepared with observations and analysis of each option. You can direct any questions about the initiative to the wireless-initiative mailbox or to Cynthia Brown, Director of Statewide Efficiencies, at Cynthia.Brown@ride.ri.gov.

From other organizations

9. University of Pennsylvania invites doctoral-program applicants

Please see this notice from Michael Johaneck, of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, and please feel free to share this message with your team:

As states play an increasingly critical role in education, I invite you to learn more about a scholarship opportunity for rising state-level leaders looking to grow professionally and to join a national, supportive, and innovative collegial network.

The University of Pennsylvania brings together a select group of educational leaders each year for its nationally renowned [Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership](#). Our student-alumni-faculty network now serves leaders in 25 states; public and private sectors; urban, suburban, and rural; from school heads to state leadership to national organizational leaders. Collegially, we have developed an innovative, three-year executive-format degree program. We continue expanding the post-degree lifetime supports available to our educational leaders across the country – and soon, internationally.

We would like to invite you to learn more, especially as we have recently received scholarship support to assist qualified rising state leaders in this work.

Should you wish to learn more, I invite you to attend one of our upcoming information sessions:

- Chicago, 6:30 p.m., December 4 – TBD, Rosemont Area near O'Hare Airport
- Boston, 7 p.m., December 11 – Hilton Boston Back Bay Hotel, Washington Room, 40 Dalton Street

You are also invited to a virtual session on December 16, at 6:30 p.m. Please RSVP for any of these sessions to our Program Coordinator, [Martha Williams](#).

Note: I am a graduate of this program, and I would be glad to speak with any interested applicants. – DAG

RIDE will post this field memo on Tuesday, at:

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