



Deborah A. Gist
Commissioner

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

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Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
US Department of Education
Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ)
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20202

RE: State of Rhode Island - ESEA Flexibility Extension Request

Dear Secretary Duncan:

The State of Rhode Island respectfully requests from the U.S. Department of Education a one-year extension of our ESEA Flexibility, which the U.S. Department of Education approved in May of 2012. Enclosed with this letter you will find a completed form requesting the extension, our amended ESEA flexibility request, a template summarizing these proposed amendments, and a set of attachments providing further information in support of our request. In submitting this request, I assure you that Rhode Island remains committed to meeting the fourteen (14) assurances that we provided in our original application in 2012.

Thanks to the ESEA Flexibility that the U.S. Department of Education granted to us two years ago, the R.I. Department of Education (RIDE) has been able to put into action the Rhode Island Accountability System, which is designed to recognize outstanding performance and to provide support to low-achieving schools. This accountability system enables us to:

- focus on achievement gaps;
- diagnose school performance by identifying specific shortcomings and achievements at each school; and
- provide Focus and Priority Schools with the ability to select interventions that respond to their context and their needs.

Our system allows us:

- to honor the schools that have advanced student achievement and closed achievement gaps; and
- to concentrate our efforts on providing support and guidance to the schools most in need of improvement.

Two innovations that the U.S. Department of Education approved for Rhode Island in 2012 are particularly notable:

- the use of consolidated students subgroups, which enables us to hold the vast majority of our schools accountable for the performance of low-incidence student groups; and
- the use of closing achievement gaps as one of the two most heavily weighted factors in determining school classifications.

Our use of consolidated subgroups has ensured that 227 of our schools (80 percent) were held accountable for the performance of English learners; without the consolidation, only 54 schools (19 percent) would have been held accountable for the performance of English learners. Similarly, the consolidation of black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students into a subgroup ensured that 269 schools (95 percent) were held accountable for the performance of these students; without this consolidation, only 121 schools (54 percent) would have been accountable for the performance of Hispanic students and only 75 schools (27 percent) would have been accountable for the performance of black students. Please note that we hold schools accountable for meeting annual objectives for both the consolidated groups and the individual, composite subgroups.

Additionally, under our accountability system 30 percent of the Composite Index Score for each school is based on closing achievement gaps between these consolidated groups and their "performance reference group." Closing achievement gaps is, along with total percent proficient, the most significant factor in our system of school classification. This emphasis is in keeping with our strategic plan for transforming education in Rhode Island, which sets closing achievement gaps as our top priority.

Overall, the results we have seen in the two years since the initial approval of our ESEA Flexibility have been promising, although we know we have much more work to do. Our latest assessment results (Fall 2013) show that black and Hispanic students have made improvements in both mathematics and reading over the past four years; white students have made similar gains, however, so the achievement gap remains unchanged. Achievement gaps continue to narrow at all grade levels between economically disadvantaged students and other students, both in mathematics and reading. The performance of English learners and students with disabilities has been unchanged in reading and has declined slightly in mathematics, so the achievement gaps have widened for these students. It is important to note, however, that this assessment – measuring results from the 2012-13 school year – provides us with baseline information regarding the effect of ESEA Flexibility; we will need more years of assessment data to better measure the long-term effect of our new accountability system.

Last year, we were pleased to be able to recognize 24 schools, representing about half of our school districts, as Rhode Island Commended Schools. We acknowledge, however, the veracity of the desk audit findings regarding Reward Schools in Rhode Island, and we are committed to providing more extensive recognition to honor these schools, teachers, and students for their accomplishments.

We also identified 21 Priority Schools and 7 Focus Schools through our classification and accountability process in 2013. Once we designate schools for state intervention, which entails a diagnostic screening process to determine the strengths each school has and the challenges each school faces, the superintendents select an intervention model for each Focus and Priority school and then develop school-reform plans, which include numerous reform strategies in the areas of leadership, support, infrastructure, and content. The plans are designed to address the specific needs of each identified school. During the previous school year (2012-13), all Priority and Focus schools completed a diagnostic review, which included a thorough review of school culture, school climate, and student, parent, and staff survey results. After this diagnostic review, each school developed an intervention plan specifically designed to strengthen its areas of need and to capitalize on its strengths.

The most frequently selected interventions that schools selected to advance student achievement included increasing common planning time for teachers, increasing student access to a rigorous set of core academic courses, and implementing a system of peer support for struggling teachers. All Priority and Focus schools have been actively implementing their plans for school improvement.

Our accountability system is designed to ensure that schools identified for intervention continue to administer their plans for school improvement over a course of multiple years. Even if schools significantly raise their Composite Index Score – as four Focus Schools did last year – they must continue to implement their school-improvement plans to ensure that the gains are substantial and sustainable.

Priority Schools retain their classification for at least three years, regardless of annual improvements. Several Priority Schools have made gains, due in part to the new accountability system and the targeted interventions. For example, over the past four years Central Falls High School has significantly improved performance in mathematics and has raised its four-year graduation rate by 22 points, to 70 percent. In one year, the Agnes Hennessey Elementary School in East Providence has improved its percent of students attaining proficiency by 17 points in reading and 12 points in mathematics. Two Pawtucket high schools, identified as Priority Schools because of graduation rates of 53 and 57 percent respectively, have both improved their graduation rates to 67 percent. These are all positive examples of school-improvement plans beginning to take effect, and we fully expect more significant improvements in other Focus and Priority Schools in the coming years.

Extension of our ESEA Flexibility would clearly be in the public interest in Rhode Island and would serve the best interest of Rhode Island students. As we continue our commitment to advancing achievement for all students, we must ensure that we hold our schools, our districts, and the state as a whole accountable for closing achievement gaps. We must also recognize and honor our schools for their accomplishments, and we intend to do so through a greater emphasis on recognitions for our Reward Schools (Rhode Island Commended Schools). Finally, we must continue to provide our lowest-achieving schools with support, tools, and resources to help them develop improvement plans targeted to their specific needs and shortcomings – and to put these plans into action. Our system for school classifications and intervention, in its current approved design, supports each of these initiatives for recognition, accountability, and support. With these promising initiatives in place, we stand at the beginning of a journey toward school improvement. Renewal of our ESEA Flexibility will enable us to continue to work in partnership with Rhode Island educators as we advance toward our mutual goal: great public schools for all Rhode Island students.

Very truly yours,



Deborah A. Gist
Commissioner of Education

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