



# Putting teachers on notice

Rhode Island's new education commissioner, Deborah Gist, is shaking up the status quo, drawing national praise—and scorn—in the process. The former elementary school teacher says her single-minded focus is on improving schools, not making headlines.

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When it comes to efforts to turn around failing schools, the nation's smallest state is making some of the biggest waves. In January, Rhode Island's new education commissioner, Deborah Gist, set in motion a review of local schools that led to the firing of the entire staff at Central Falls High School, a chronically low-performing school in the state's poorest community. The move made news across the country, not least because President Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, both waded into the controversy, endorsing the action as the sort of dramatic step we must be willing to take to ensure quality schools for all stu-

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dents. But the Central Falls dismissals are by no means the only big move made already under Gist's aggressive agenda for school reform.

In October, she instructed all 36 of Rhode Island's school districts to end the use of seniority as the driving factor in teacher hiring and placement decisions, expanding an order issued by her predecessor that applied only to the state's two lowest-performing districts, Central Falls and Providence. The Providence teachers' union is challenging the new policy in court.

Gist has ordered a complete overhaul of teacher evaluation systems, requiring that all Rhode Island teachers be reviewed annually—and that at least half of their evaluation be based on evidence of student achievement in their classrooms, a measure that unions have voiced strong reservations about. Gist, recruited from Washington, DC, where she served as superintendent of schools, is also dramatically raising the bar for entering teachers, boosting the passing score on Rhode Island's teacher exam from one of the lowest levels in the country to one of the highest.

The one-time elementary school teacher arrived in Rhode Island last summer vowing to bring urgency and energy to the job, and no one can accuse her of not living up to her word, even if it's too early to judge the impact of her reforms on student achievement.

In the Central Falls case, Gist became one of the first education commissioners in the country to identify her state's lowest performing schools, something the federal education department has required for states seeking a share of \$4 billion in school improvement grants. Flagged districts must adopt one of four strategies to try to bring about significant improvement at the underperforming schools.

Central Falls administrators initially proposed an option that would have retained the faculty but made big changes in the high school's operation, including a longer day and a summer training program for teachers. When negotiations reached a stalemate over compensation issues, the district superintendent announced that without an agreement she would move to a second option: dismissing the school's entire staff, with no more than half eligible to be rehired under a complete school-makeover plan. Gist

quickly gave the OK to proceed with the firings at the high school, which has a 50 percent dropout rate and where fewer than one in 10 students are doing math at grade level.

"She has fundamentally shaken up the status quo," says Warren Simmons, executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. "She's brought a fresh perspective, she's ambitious, and she means business on behalf of children."



Union leaders have a decidedly different take. Gist's approval of the firings amounted to "pointing fingers and placing the blame on teachers," Colleen Callahan, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers' representative on the state education department's board of regents, told *The Providence Journal*. The president of the state's AFL-CIO chapter, George Nee, left no adjective behind. "This is immoral, illegal, unjust, irresponsible, disgraceful, and disrespectful," he said.

The common thread in Gist's agenda is a firm belief that having effective, high-quality teachers in every classroom is the single most important thing schools can do to drive student learning. It's "the greatest lever that we have," says Gist, who has been pulling at it with a vengeance.

Gist has shown a willingness to move fast and without fear. "She's certainly not looking to pick a fight. But she's not afraid of one," says Sandi Jacobs, vice president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington, DC, policy and advocacy group.

The 43-year-old Oklahoma native doesn't seem temperamentally given to half measures. She has completed a New York Marathon and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Her unique claim to "going all in" fame, however, may be a feat that showcases the tenacity and warmth that her admirers, at least, say she carries in equal measure. Early last year while still in Washington, Gist set a world record for the most times kissed (on the cheek) in one minute by different people (112), part of a fundraiser for a local cancer charity.

Her freewheeling speed-smooching notwithstanding, in an interview in her Providence office, Gist responds to questions in a deliberate and measured manner. She evinces little of the saber-rattling that sometimes accompanies tough talk on the need for radical school reform. In lis-

tening to her, though, one gets the sense she is measured not because she harbors doubts about the direction that school reform must go—and the urgency of moving there quickly—but rather because she feels so sure about what needs to be done. What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation.

—MICHAEL JONAS

**COMMONWEALTH:** When you arrived, you vowed to do what it takes to make the Rhode Island schools the best in the country. But you've zeroed in from the start on teacher effectiveness. Why this focus?

**GIST:** Because in everything that I have experienced, both as a teacher and in my role as an administrator, and in everything I've read about the research about student achievement, the quality of the classroom teacher is the most important factor. It's the greatest lever that we have to be able to improve the quality of education of our students.

**CW:** Rhode Island has kind of become ground zero in the debate because of the Central Falls case. Your office got the ball rolling by very quickly moving to identify the low-

est performing districts in the state and then instructing the local education officials to identify which of the four strategies that the federal government presented to the states to pursue. You're convinced that this was the right move and a necessary one?

**GIST:** I think that for far too long we have just tinkered around the edges of our schools that have struggled. Central Falls High School is an example of a school like that. For over eight years, [it] has been on various lists of needing to improve. There are wonderful people in that school, there are excellent teachers in the school. They've had strong leadership. They've tried different models for reform. But we tend to do one thing, and then we wait and see if that works. And when it doesn't or maybe it's incremental, we say, OK, let's try some new professional development for the teachers. And then we try that and we see if that works, and a few more years go by, and then we say, obviously we need a new principal because that one's not doing the job. So we bring in new leadership, and we try that. We bring in new materials. We try that.

We just try one thing after another instead of recognizing that it's not just one thing, it's actually the combination of all of those things and the way they fit together.

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When you look at high-performing schools, it isn't just one thing that they're doing. It's a combination of many things, and at the center of all that are high expectations for students. And so part of the work is to change the culture in the school to one where everyone expects that students will achieve and raises the bar for performance.

**CW:** Has that been something that's been generally lacking? I don't mean just at Central Falls, but at urban districts throughout the country. Is that part of the challenge now—what we've expected as the norm?

**GIST:** I think that it is. Many teachers begin to believe that because their students come from difficult circumstances or have challenges in their lives, they can't achieve at higher levels. Just that shift in the thinking means that the expectations are lowered.

I met a young woman a couple of weeks ago. I had gone to meet with a group of youth leaders who were all either in the foster care system or had once been in the foster care system. And one of the young women, who's now a college student here in Rhode Island, talked about when she was a senior in high school living in a group home. She would use her situation to sort of get empathy from her teachers and get out of having to do things. And it worked, because who wouldn't have empathy for a young person who's living out on her own and had been through these difficult circumstances?

She says [that], looking back, she really wishes that her teacher had said, with as much love and support as possible, "Look, I want to make sure you have all the supports that you need, but here's what you need to do, and here's when you need to do it, and here's the quality that I expect." Because now she's in college, and she's struggling. That was a clear example of the way in which the love that teachers have for our students can sometimes cause us to lower our expectations. It's not enough to care. You have to care in a way that says, "I care about you so much that I'm going to make sure that you get everything that you need and that you are being held to your personal responsibility as a student to get your schoolwork done."

**CW:** Did you realize the amount of attention [the Central Falls case] was going to generate?

**GIST:** No. We expected the local concern. We did not expect the national reaction because this is not the first time that a step like this has been taken.

**CW:** It seems to me part of what gave the story national legs was not so much what you did here, but then the president and education secretary, Arne Duncan, both weighed in on it, which a lot of people regarded as very



unusual—to hear them commenting on something happening in one district in the country. They drew both praise, from people who agreed with it, and the ire of union leaders. What did you make of the fact that they felt it was an important issue that they wanted to be heard on?

**GIST:** Well, we obviously appreciate their support very much. And I'm really encouraged to know that both the president and the secretary of education aren't going to shy away from difficult decisions that have to be made, because this obviously is a very difficult situation, and we take it extremely seriously. These are people's lives, and this is why it's often not done.

I know that the folks in that school have dedicated their lives to education. I know how they feel about their students. And I know how important their jobs are to their own lives. At the same time, if we have fewer than 50 percent of our students graduating from high school, which is the case, then those students don't have an opportunity. Their likelihood of having a job and earning a living wage and ever being able to have the kind of quality of life that any of us would want for any member of our family or friends or neighbors is practically gone. So while I care about the adults, I've said since I came to Rhode Island last summer that our decisions have to be about students.

**CW:** Do you think the fact that the president and Duncan weighed in says something about what's going on nationally in terms of grappling with these issues in a way that we haven't done before?

**GIST:** I do, I do. These models [for turning around failing schools] have been in No Child Left Behind all along. But you're right. They hadn't really been used because it's very difficult to do.

**CW:** The teachers' union in Central Falls, and state unions and national ones, have all condemned this as an assault on teachers, or the demonizing of teachers working in one of the state's most challenging districts.

**GIST:** I understand why it seems that way. This is not just about the teachers. Everything at the school is going to need to be different. There's going to be new leadership. There's going to be explicit decisions made about every teacher in every classroom. There will be choices made about the curriculum, making sure that it's closely aligned to the standards. [We will be] making sure there are ways that assessments are used to monitor student progress and to intervene and provide students with extra support as needed—and that parent engagement is increased, that the school day is longer, that tutorials are offered. But it is not about blaming teachers. And my personal reaction when I hear [charges of “demonizing” teachers] is it makes me sad because I know how hard teachers work. I know why they've chosen their career and how much they care about what they do.

**'It is not about blaming teachers.... [I know] how much they care about what they do.'**

**CW:** Some people have wondered whether we're at a point, to use a medical metaphor, where our ability to diagnose failing schools has outpaced our ability to provide reliable, effective treatment. Because of the standards movement, we can identify the schools that are falling short in terms of objective measures of student achievement. But there's so much debate about what you then do with that information. Some people have said we're not really sure that wholesale firing and rehiring of staff is going to do the trick. There's this whole debate about the school turnaround effort. I've heard estimates that the success rate for certain models is as low as 10 percent. That's pretty low odds. Given the obvious amount of disruption to the schools and the lives of teachers, we ought to have a fairly high degree of confidence that what we're going to get is going to be an improvement for the kids [in Central Falls]. Do you feel confident about that?

**GIST:** I would restate what the [US] secretary [of education]

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said about that, which is, we know what doesn't work: what we're doing now. What I know about intervention efforts from my own research is that there's no magic solution. Different models of intervention work in different schools. It's extremely contextual. Those decisions have to be made based on an analysis of circumstances of that school and that community. School district and state leaders have to take each situation and determine what they think the best steps are, and that's exactly what we've done in Rhode Island. We've identified the schools, we've laid out the options, and we've asked the superintendents to take a very thorough examination, engage their community, and make a decision about what's best for that school.

**CW:** The Central Falls case has put Rhode Island on the national radar, but you've really been pursuing in the short time you've been here a much broader set of reforms focused on this question of teacher effectiveness. In the fall you issued a directive based on new state regulations that districts are to no longer use seniority as the only factor in hiring and assignment decisions. That's a pretty wholesale change from what has been practice here and probably in most districts across the country. What's the rationale for that?

**GIST:** It goes back to the same thing that I said earlier, which is that our decisions about how teachers are placed in classrooms cannot be about the teachers. It has to be about the students. When you base something solely on seniority you very often, if not every time, lose the ability to make that decision for the students.

**CW:** One tension here is the idea of professionalism in teaching. You hear from teachers this feeling, in the face of bold, dramatic moves being made, that they're not being respected, they're not treated as professionals. Yet a lot of critics of the status quo, folks like yourself that are trying to drive big change, would say that what we have now doesn't really treat teachers as professionals. It doesn't really hold them accountable for outcomes.

**GIST:** People say that the steps that we've taken are both blaming teachers and not supporting of teachers. In Central Falls, I understand why that conclusion is drawn, even though I know that it's not the case. But even on other decisions—about having quality evaluations in place, not having decisions made based on seniority, raising your expectations for what it takes to enter into a teacher preparation program—some of these steps that we have

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taken this year have been perceived by some as being not supportive of teachers.

**CW:** What do you say to that?

**GIST:** I'm baffled. Because as a teacher, as someone who deeply respects teachers, I think the most important thing we can do for teachers is to treat them as the professionals they are, respect the quality of their work, and give them the ability to advance when they're performing well—and to make decisions about what happens in their school and to be selected for a position based on the quality of their work.

**CW:** You mentioned teacher evaluation. I know that's another area where you've moved quickly by ordering that teachers be evaluated every year and, moreover, that some measurement of student achievement or student learning needs to be the primary criterion in that evalua-

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tion, at least 50 percent of it. There's a lot of support for that. On the other hand, there's some real controversy about whether we can accurately measure teachers' impacts on student learning in a way that we should feel comfortable basing evaluations on. We know we need to make big changes but are the tools ready for use in doing that?

**GIST:** We have to be sure that we're doing it accurately. We have to be sure that we're doing it fairly. We have to be really confident in our data systems, confident in the way that we measure the growth. We can't implement anything like this in a sloppy manner. This is extremely serious, and we have to do it really well.

**CW:** And you think there are ways it can be done now in terms of these models of student growth?

**GIST:** I do. There's no doubt that that work is progressing, but we have the ability to do that now in ways that we didn't before.

**CW:** The president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, popularized the phrase that reform must be done *with* teachers, not *to* teachers. I hear that repeated over and over in all sorts of places. It's one

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of those things that nobody could really be against, but I wonder if that makes it almost meaningless. Doesn't there have to be some kind of basic agreement on the premises of what we're talking about in order for it to be done with them, not to them? For example, are teacher evaluations going to be based in part on whether students are learning? Don't you have to agree on the terms? Otherwise it sort of rings hollow.

**GIST:** I agree that, ideally, what we're doing we're doing *with* teachers. The state is developing a model evaluation system, and we want to have teachers with us as we do that to inform that work. But there is "the what" and "the how." While I want to hear from people and make sure that I'm listening, and make sure that we have all the information, what we do is less something that we're going to decide together than how [we do it]. For example, if we're not going to have seniority in our state anymore, I'm not going to have a discussion about that. I've made that decision, that's just the way it is. But what we put into place and how that's done—every community, first of all, is going to have to negotiate that with their local teachers union. It's not discounting the collective bargaining agreements that are in place, and I would

want teachers to be at the table and have an opportunity to work with their local leaders on the process that they've put into place. But we're not going to discuss whether we're going to do it or not. That's already been decided.

You always have to listen and you always have to be open to something potentially having been the wrong decision and being mature and responsible enough to revisit things as necessary. But I do think that it's [important to not let] your willingness to be open and listen to prevent you from moving forward.

**CW:** I've talked to a few people who have said you're not looking for a fight, but you're not afraid of one either. Is that fair?

**GIST:** Yeah, I think it is. I've said a few times that nothing would make me happier than for us to do this together without any conflict and any kind of disagreements. I have no need to prove that we have the authority to do things or to show how brave we are, or anything like that. I think that's actually not helpful. But at the same time we do need to be brave and just take the steps that need to be taken, and keep the ball moving forward.

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**CW:** Is there an added urgency here? Rhode Island had the second highest unemployment in the country at one point. Unlike your neighbors in Massachusetts and Connecticut, it's not a state that has had high levels of educational attainment. It had much more of an industrial economy, the bottom of which has really fallen out. Does

**'Our state needs this change to come about in order for us to bring our economy back.'**

that factor into your thinking on the urgency of the job that you have and the agenda you have for the schools here?

**GIST:** It absolutely does, and I think that's actually one of the things that also contributes to why I think we're going to be successful—because we have to be. Our state needs this change to come about in order for us to bring our economy back. We often talk in our state about the knowledge economy. Well, in order to grow a knowledge economy we have to improve education, and right now

55 percent of our high school graduates are going on to college. Just to put that into perspective, in [Washington,] DC, it was over 60 percent. So we need to have more students graduating from high school, ready for success and college and careers, and we need more of them going on to higher education and graduating from an institution with either a technical degree or a college degree or what-not. And so, yes, it's really important.

**CW:** You don't seem like you tend to do things halfway in general, from the things I've read about you—running the New York Marathon, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, or even managing to turn kissing into a competitive sport.

**GIST:** I was wondering if you were going to pull that one out of your pocket.

**CW:** Does that say something about you, putting all those things together?


**GIST:** I think that what it says about me is that when I decide to do something, I'm going to do it with everything that I have, just really throw myself into it. That's why I'm here in Rhode Island. **CW**



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