

May 7, 2013

Members of the Rhode Island Board of Education
Office of Higher Education
80 Washington Street, Ste. 524
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Dear Chairwoman Mancuso and Members of the Board of Education:

A high quality education system is a necessary pillar of a vibrant economy. Though Rhode Island consistently ranks poorly in relative business climate measures, and its economy continues to lag its New England neighbors, Rhode Island's public education system is headed in the right direction. At a time when the state's economy is in critical need of realignment—so that our workforce is prepared for the employment demands of the present and future—we cannot afford to lose the admirable leadership of the Rhode Island Department of Education's Commissioner, Deborah A. Gist. As a coalition of some of the largest business membership organizations in the state, we are writing to support the Governor's decision to renew the Commissioner's contract.

Commissioner Gist's arrival in Rhode Island in 2009 brought a renewed sense of urgency, and initiated a collaborative process for reforming Rhode Island's approach to public education. A few of the Commissioner's many successes include: leading the efforts to win the \$75 million Race to the Top Grant, and the \$50 million Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge; developing and adopting specific policies to improve educator excellence; overseeing the development and implementation of the Funding Formula; and enhancing education-related information, data and technology by increasing transparency and efficiencies.

Rhode Island needs to continue striving for performance-based improvements, as the state has significant room for improvement. National Assessment of Educational Program (NAEP) scores suggest Rhode Island students continue to lag other New England states in math and reading. Similarly, the percentage of individuals ages twenty-five and older with less than a high school degree was higher than both regional and national levels in 2011. In terms of higher education, Rhode Island had roughly five percent fewer degrees conferred in science, technology, engineering, and math fields than national levels.

These trends in K-12 and higher education worsen the problem of the state's chronic workforce gap. Our associations' employers consistently report a misalignment of their needs and the offerings of the workforce. Rhode Island's unemployment rate of 9.4 percent—the fifth highest in the nation (behind Nevada, California, Mississippi, and Illinois)—demands increased focus on labor supply and demand. By 2020, estimates suggest that the state will have an economy in which 48 percent of all jobs are entry level or below. While efforts such as the Governor's Workforce Board have confronted these shortcomings, employment-related state agencies such as the Department of Education, need leaders who understand these dire circumstances, and who are willing to take bold action for reform.

Commissioner Gist has a track record of developing a rigorous, reliable, and transparent education system. If granted the opportunity, our associations and organizations are confident that she will continue to lead our state towards a brighter future, in which education and the economy grow together. We encourage the Commissioner's contract renewal, and look forward to her continued leadership.

Sincerely,

Associated Builders and Contractors of Rhode Island- Robert J. Boisselle, President
Central Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce- Lauren E.I. Slocum, President/CEO
East Bay Chamber of Commerce- Mark G. DeVine, Chairman
East Greenwich Chamber of Commerce- Stephen M. Lombardi, Executive Director
East Providence Area Chamber of Commerce- Laura A. McNamara, Executive Director
Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce- Laurie White, President
National Federation of Independent Businesses- Bill Vernon, State Director
Newport County Chamber of Commerce- Jody Sullivan, Executive Director
North Central Chamber of Commerce- Deborah J. Ramos, President
North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce- Martha Pughe, Executive Director
Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce- John C. Gregory, President/CEO
Rhode Island Association of School Committees – Timothy C. Duffy, Executive Director
Rhode Island Builders Association- John V. Marcantonio, Executive Director
Rhode Island Hospitality Association- Dale J. Venturini, President/CEO
Rhode Island Independent Contractors & Associates- Matthew R. Olson, President
Rhode Island Manufacturers Association- William McCourt, Executive Director
Rhode Island Mortgage Bankers Association- Deborah A. Imondi, President
Rhode Island Small Business Economic Summit- Gary Ezovski, Regulations Committee
Chairman
Rhode Island Small Business Economic Summit- Grafton Willey, Tax and Budget Committee
Chairman
Rhode Island Society of Certified Public Accountants- Robert A. Mancini, Executive Director
Smaller Business Association of New England (SBANE)- Philip M. Papoojian, Chairman
Southern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce- Elizabeth Berman, Director of Mission
Development
Utility Contractors Association of Rhode Island- Robert E. Lafleur, Executive Director

Cc: His Excellency Lincoln D. Chafee, Governor of the State of Rhode Island