

THE CALL

The Blackstone Valley's Neighborhood Newspaper

Friday, October 23, 2015

Governor announces school aid task force

Panel to study state aid formula

BY JOSEPH B. NADEAU
jnadeau@woonsocketcall.com

PROVIDENCE — In a move appearing to target recent criticisms of the state's fair funding school aid formula, Gov. Gina M. Raimondo on Thursday announced the creation of a 30-member task force charged with reviewing its effectiveness in meeting the needs of all of the state's public school students.

The Governor, announcing the creation of the task force by executive order in the State Room, linked the work to ensuring that every student in the state will be prepared for entering the work force or higher education when they leave high school.

To conduct the study of whether the current funding formula can accomplish that goal, Raimondo named a group of Rhode Island educators, government leaders, social service representatives and successful members of the business community to see what works in the current formula for distributing state financial aid and what needs to be improved.

"As you know I've made no secret of the fact that my primary focus as Governor is to supercharge this economy and spark an economic comeback of Rhode Island," the governor said while addressing the group on her study plans. "And I wake up everyday thinking about this and a core piece of that is making sure that our young people have the skills they need to be successful in today's economy," she said.

Raimondo related how her father had been the first person

in his family to receive a college education with the help of the G.I. Bill and how that also affected her own success in life and the future success of her children.

"And that is what we are talking about here, providing every child in Rhode Island with an opportunity to get a great education and the skills they need in order to have a future and to fulfill their potential," she said.

"And I know you all believe that and when I look around here I see mayors and town administrators, town managers, reps and senators, who have agreed to serve on this task force. You're here because you believe as I do that schools matter, skills matter and our kids deserve the best that we can give them," Raimondo said.

The Governor pointed to her work with the General Assembly in the past session to create a new School Building Authority to assist districts with capital spending, the implementation of a program to ensure every child in Rhode Island will have all day kindergarten in public schools for the first time, and also to the work to improve access to pre k classes.

"And we put in a new program called Prepare RI making Rhode Island one of only a handful of states in the country to provide universal and dual concurrent enrollment so that every kid in public high school in Rhode Island can take college classes for free while they are in high school," she said.

"We've done all that together and now we are going to build on that work," Raimondo said.

"Today, in couple minutes, I'm going to sit over there sign an executive order to review

for the first time our state's education funding formula. Why are we doing this? This funding formula is an excellent funding formula. I see many people in the room who were here putting it in place five years ago and you all deserve amazing credit. It is a good formula, it has been working and it is the envy of the country in many ways," Raimondo said.

"But it's been around for five years. We have five years of actual experience. We know what's working and what needs to be tweaked and that is what this about," the Governor said.

"And I believe our kids deserve that. They deserve the best. They deserve to know that every penny is being spent as efficiently and effectively as it can be and that is what this about. And I think the public deserves that. Policies deserve regular scrutiny," she said.

The state's education aid budget is "almost a billion dollars of state money," she noted while asking "are we getting the most out of our money?"

"And if there are some tweaks that can be made to be more effective with taxpayer money then let's do that," she said.

The Governor said Rhode Island is ranked 7th in the nation in terms of spending per student but added that in turn "we are seeing average results on many measures, 29th in the country.

"So you got to ask yourself why are we spending around the top and but in the middle of the pack for results," she said.

"And this is particularly true for our most disadvantaged students," the Governor continued. "One of the things that troubles me so much is that in Rhode Island we have one of the greatest gaps in the country, achievement gaps, between our lowest income learners and our highest

income learners. That shouldn't be," she said.

"Just because you are poor doesn't mean you are not smart. Just because you are poor doesn't mean you don't deserve a chance. You do," she said.

Raimondo thanked those in the audience who would be serving on the new board and pointed out Donald R. Sweitzer, chairman of IGT Corporation, and Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, as its co-chairs.

Other members of the panel include Rhode Island College President Nancy Carriuolo, Sen. Daniel Da Ponte of the Senate Finance Committee, Patti DiCenso, Pawtucket Superintendent, Georgia Fortunato, Lincoln Superintendent, Victoria A. Gailliard-Garrick, Principal at William M. Davies Jr. Career and Technical High School, James Vincent, President of NAACP-Providence, Kenneth K. Wong of Brown University, and Alan J. Tenreiro, Principal of Cumberland High School.

Tenreiro caught the Governor's attention when she said "I have, well I have the best principal in America apparently, right there, Alan Tenreiro. I love that. I brag about it every chance I get," she said.

"I have best principal in America, I have leaders in the business community I have reps and senators with passion, I have members from labor, I have superintendents. I have people who care," the Governor said.

"The guidance I'm giving this committee is: Let's make sure our funding formula is fair and supported by the data. Let's look at the data and make sure we are doing the best that we can. Let's enable flexibility at the school level to meet the needs of all students. Let's be responsive to the unique need of families, communities and schools. Let's direct resources to the areas where they are needed

most. And let's encourage savings and efficiency wherever possible," Raimondo said. "Let's incentivize the best outcomes possible. I feel unbelievable lucky to have this working group," the governor said.

Commissioner of Education for RI Ken Wagner said he wished to thank the governor "for her focus on education, innovation, and workforce development. I am confident that the working group she has established will come up with proposals to make education funding in Rhode Island more equitable, more responsive to local needs and more supportive of great teaching and learning," Wagner said.

Raimondo said she expects the task force to report back to her and the General Assembly as the new session begins so that any necessary legislation can be submitted early on in legislative process.



Photo by Joseph B. Nadeau

Cumberland High School Principal Alan J. Tenreiro, the nation's principal of the year, will be among those tasked with reviewing the state's funding formula for state aid to local districts. The formula was originally scheduled to have an update review but that was never done so now it will be, Tenreiro said at the Statehouse on Thursday. As for how he is being asked to do more for education in the state in light of his recent tribute, Tenreiro said that isn't a problem thus far. "My schedule is definitely filling up but it is all a labor of love," he said.