

Rhode Island's Future - Providence teachers step up for good of students

Written by Rep. Joseph Almeida

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By Rep. Joseph S. Almeida and Rep. John M. Carnevale

When our schools are in trouble and children aren't learning, teachers get blamed.

When our schools become better in a few years (they will), and student achievement improves (it will), who will get the credit? Probably not teachers.

It's human nature. Criticism flows more freely than praise. It's easier to make it someone else's fault when things aren't going well, than it is to compliment someone for making difficult choices that lead to success.

Make no mistake about it – success is on the horizon for Rhode Island's school children, thanks in large part to the courageous and progressive decision by Providence classroom teachers to endorse the national "Race to the Top" school reform plan that could bring nearly \$125 million in education funding into the state, with about \$35 to \$50 million of that headed to Providence.

The 2,000-member Providence Teachers Union became the only urban district to sign on and support the reform plan, which was submitted by Rhode Island Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist. The proposal calls for ambitious reforms that could change every aspect of public education in the state, and it demands improvements in teacher quality and student achievement, especially in the state's lowest-performing schools. And though it is only at the application stage at this point, it is roundly believed that the action of the Providence classroom teachers to support the effort gives Rhode Island a much better chance of receiving funds.

Providence teachers have put school children first, and not just in the capital city but throughout the State of Rhode Island. Approval of funding for Rhode Island will bring a wave of reform to schools from one end of the state to the other. Said Commissioner Gist of the Providence teacher union endorsement of the plan: "It shows they are willing to sit down with us and work through changes that will benefit every teacher and student across the state."

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The \$4.35 billion Race to the Top Fund, for which Rhode Island has submitted its application, is a national competition that will highlight and replicate effective education reform strategies in four significant areas: Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace; Recruiting, developing, rewarding and retaining effective teachers and principals; Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers how they can improve their practices; Turning around the lowest-performing schools. Rhode Island has been named one of 16 state finalists for the first round of funding.

There is no question our state's schools need help, need a new direction, new progressive action if we are to build an educational program that gives our school children a chance to succeed. And their success will translate into greater success for our state, which must have well-educated individuals to do the jobs of the future.

Certainly there are things about the Race to the Top effort that are of concern to the 2,000 Providence teachers, such as collective bargaining and collaboration required in order to receive and implement the grant. In the end, the teachers chose to act for the good of the students, rather than sit idle. The Providence teachers chose to take a chance on bold and creative reforms.

We compliment Providence teachers for what they have done. Our school children deserve it. We need more progressive action such as this from other entities in our state – both in the public sector and the private sector – to shed the status quo and position Rhode Island to grow and excel as we come out of our prolonged recession. Everyone knows – teachers, school officials, parents of students and we, as legislators, as well – that change is urgently necessary in our schools. We've talked for years about consolidation and regionalization, of other ways to find savings, of ways to improve scores.

Talking isn't enough, anymore. We must act, as the Providence teachers have done, and we must set aside self-interest and re-focus on the reason schools exist – to teach our children well.

We compliment Providence teachers – not only for the work they do daily in the classroom, but for stepping up in the Race to the Top. Leading by example – what better lesson can we teach our children?

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We call on the citizens of Providence and all their elected officials to acknowledge the actions of the Providence teachers and to support them as they try to make our schools better and give our children a better chance to succeed.

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