



## Education

# When talking about the problem raises a problem

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Over an early-morning hot tea, Deborah Gist, Rhode Island's new (as of July) commissioner of education, chatted with me about how she felt things were going. With her extreme-energy style, she's working for reform on myriad fronts, demanding that everyone from Department of Education officials to parents and teachers step up and work harder.

But rather boldly, to my mind, she's put teacher quality at the center of her administration. She believes that a laser-focus on improving everything about the quality of instructors will break the Rhode Island curse of paying top dollar for generally underwhelming educational results.

She's been all over the state, visiting every district and holding public events to give everyone an opportunity to respond to her initiatives. But educators often react to her concern for quality with defensiveness, even taking much offense.

At one such event, she'd finished her own presentation, complete with PowerPoint slides, and opened the floor to questions. The last slide had been left up on the screen, which read: "All educators will be excellent." A man, presumably a teacher, got up to the microphone and angrily demanded to know why she assumes "we're NOT excellent?" She replied, "What makes you assume I think that YOU'RE not excellent?" To which he had no answer.

Oy. It's not about you, sir. It's nothing personal. But criticizing the poor performance of some teachers is almost inevitably taken as an insult to them all.

Gist looked a little hurt herself for a moment and declared, "I feel like I am the biggest champion for teachers you could ever find!"

Welcome to my world, Ms. Gist. When I point out patently obvious problems such as some teachers don't care about their subject, or yell at the kids, or just can't teach worth beans, I'm immediately labeled a "teacher-basher" or "teacher-hater." When I mention that powerful unions and their contracts keep those teachers in place, I'm a "union basher." How on earth can we teach problem-solving to the kids if just identifying a problem is so insulting that the specifics can't be discussed?

Gist says, “The single most important factor in education is the quality of the teacher. People say ‘That’s ridiculous. It’s their parents!’ Well yes, but I’m talking about education, so what can we do within our schools? While welcoming parents is important, there’s so much more we can do as educators. Honestly, I don’t understand what it means when I’m ‘blaming the teachers.’ Aren’t they responsible? But am I blaming? No. We need to help them be as successful as they can be. So I’m holding school committees and principals accountable. All of us have to be accountable, starting with me!”

She sips her tea and discretely checks messages on her hand-held. At the time we met she was consumed with Rhode Island’s \$126.6 million-application for the hyper-competitive Race to the Top federal grant. She feels we have a real shot at the big bucks because Rhode Island has already built a rock-solid foundation — rigorous assessments aligned to high standards, a progressive Basic Education Plan, and more.

“We are perfectly positioned for success!” she says. But more darkly she notes, “We have our challenges, the budget certainly being the biggest problem. But challenges always offer an opportunity to do something creative. Race to the Top money would help us kick-start some of the things we want to see. Professional development is a huge part of our application. And tracking teacher results back to the preparation programs,” which would look at students’ achievement results in relation to where their teachers received pre-service training.

“But that,” she sighs, “brings us back to blame. Blame the students, teachers, leaders. It’s not blame. It’s accountability. When we use data to track the teachers back to their preparation institution, sometimes we’re going to say [to the college or university] that you need to improve your program, or not prepare teachers any more.”

Just for the record, she held me accountable for a recent column I’d written about the downside of rewarding the best teachers financially with a “merit-pay” system. She pulled out a copy so she could take exception to certain specifics. In the end, I shrugged, asserting that after years of effort in many states, not a single merit-pay system has successfully avoided becoming onerously expensive or undermining teamwork.

She insisted, “I know. But why can’t we be the first?”

Wow. I think I actually said out loud: You go, girl! Why can’t we be first, indeed?

Frankly, I still think merit pay distracts from more important business, but disagree as we did, we had the conversation. We discussed specifics. I asked if it wasn’t massively frustrating for her to run into so much defensiveness.

“Oh, no,” she said firmly, “I’m not at all frustrated in the least! I’m just as excited and hopeful, more so than when I came, which says a lot because I was really excited.”

Creating a culture of accountability in Rhode Island will be a steep, uphill, time-consuming battle. Fortunately, Gist’s energy is monumental.

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