

The New School Chief

Deborah Gist, named Rhode Island's new education chief by a unanimous vote of the Board of Regents and Governor Carcieri, seems to be a promising choice. Ms. Gist, 42, oversaw the Washington, D.C., school system as its "state superintendent." She takes over on July 1 for Peter McWalters, who spent 17 years presiding over a system of Rhode Island schools that are expensive and generally poorly performing. The pace of improvement has been glacial.

Regents Chairman Robert Flanders cited Ms. Gist's "high energy, her obvious commitment, her teaching background and, above all, her ability to connect with people. When you come down to it, this job is about persuading and communicating with people."

The new education commissioner will need all of those skills, because improving Rhode Island schools is not a job for the faint of heart. It requires the hide of a rhinoceros and the ability to sway legislators who have long seemed largely indifferent, at best, to improving education for Rhode Island pupils.

Ms. Gist comes from one of the country's more notoriously disastrous public-school systems, so she surely knows all about the difficulties of dealing with hidebound bureaucracies and overweening teachers unions. Here, she will confront a maelstrom of troubles: sharply declining state aid for local communities; school committees that are often loaded up with special interests (teachers, union members, etc.) who are resistant to progress; some bureaucrats and teachers more interested in job security than improving schools; state laws that make it difficult to shift focus and resources to the needs of students; an extremely high percentage of expensive special-needs students; a polity that has resisted raising the standards and challenging students to be their best.

On the other hand, she will also confront: citizens who care about public education and are willing to pay a high premium for it; a growing number of parents and taxpayers who are well aware that the current approach is not working and are demanding better; an increased public scrutiny of teacher-union contracts, and long-overdue discussion about whether those hurt students by shifting too many resources into benefits and taking away too much management authority; increasing calls for accountability, with better pay for exceptionally good teachers, especially those willing to teach in troubled schools; local mayors and town managers who are demanding change, as seen in their support for the concept of mayoral academies — public schools given the freedom to focus on serving pupils and to treat teachers as valued professionals.

If she can build on these positive developments and keep the momentum going, she could force through real change. Ultimately, her job will require convincing legislators that Rhode Island can do much better, if it is only willing to change laws that give too much clout to special interests and pay too little heed to great teaching and the needs of students.