

The Education of Deborah Gist

BRISTOL, R.I. — Deborah Gist, Rhode Island's Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, is all business. She is very stern on the phone, answering many of my questions with one word answers like "no" or "yes" and even "I don't know" once in a while. The other questions, she answers with two to three sentences, and pauses quietly for the next question.

Perhaps Gist is guarded from being hounded by the press so much. Since Gist backed the superintendent in Central Falls for firing all the teachers at their high school for their low achieving performance, there has been national attention, including support from President Obama. Gist is fighting for education reform and will stop at nothing to make sure that the quality of teachers remains on par.

"Our education plan is the most important economic plan in the state," said Gist. "This work is really difficult and is going to require a bit of tenacity."

The Board of Regents initially hired Gist a year ago with a three year contract. They were looking for a candidate who was going to "change things." Gist, a former elementary teacher and a go-getter, was the perfect contender. When Gist was first hired Robert G. Flanders Jr., chairman of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education, told the Providence Journal that Gist "brought a reformer's zeal," said Flanders Jr. "You can't help but admire her courage, energy and tenacity. Her drive. I think there's a whole new momentum around education reform in Rhode Island, and there's no question she's leading it."

A year later, the Board of Regents seems thrilled with Gist's work thus far. The board has just renewed her contract for an extra year, meaning she will still be the commissioner for a total of four years, regardless of who is elected Governor. Though Gist has no favorite in mind for the upcoming Gubernatorial election, she is confident that whomever is elected will recognize the importance of education in Rhode Island.

Gist's work doesn't seem to just be validated in the state of Rhode Island either. Recently Gist was named one of Time Magazine's Most Influential People of 2010 under a category dedicated to thinkers, along with people such as Steve Jobs and Michael Pollan. Gist was also cited as one of the 19 people risking their reputations, fortunes, and lives in pursuit of big ideas in the *Atlantic Monthly* for changing the way teachers are evaluated in Rhode Island and enlisting a campaign for change in the state's education.

June Speakman, President of Barrington's Town Council and a parent whose children went through the Barrington school system, applauds Gist's strides to do more for the education in Rhode Island. One thing

Speakman is concerned about with the upcoming election is where the money is going to come from to improve education. Many Gubernatorial candidates have indeed promise not to raise taxes, but Speakman fears that if taxes aren't raised, then education will suffer.

“[The Gubernatorial candidates] talk about education generally but it doesn't play the role it would have if our economy would've been in better shape,” says Speakman, “Education needs more money, not less.”

Like many parents in Rhode Island, Speakman would like to see better facilities for students, more professional development, and smaller class sizes. A reform movement nationally in education is essential but the proper direction currently remains unclear for Gubernatorial candidates in Rhode Island. Though Speakman, typically a Democratic voter, admits that she is unsure who she will vote for in the upcoming Gubernatorial election, she is sure about Deborah Gist.

“She has the energy and innovative ideas to shake up the system,” says Speakman. “I commend her for advocating for the school formula.”

Despite who wins the election, Gist will continue to fight for proper education statewide. Gist is confident in her plans going forward with her strategic plan to transform education between now and 2015. Gist outlines clear expectations for systems, educators, and students to ensure educator excellence, accelerate all schools toward greatness, establish world-class standards and assessments, develop user-friendly data systems, and invest finances wisely.

“It's not just teacher quality, just a quality curriculum, just teacher involvement,” says Gist. “It's not just one thing. We need every piece of the puzzle.”