

July 11, 2014

Commissioner Deborah Gist
Rhode Island Department of Education
255 Westminster Street
Providence, RI 02903

HAND-DELIVERED

Dear Commissioner Gist:

Our organizations write you with an urgent request.

Earlier this month, as you know, a law took effect establishing a three-year moratorium on the use of “high stakes” testing as a high school graduation requirement. We are writing to request, if you have not already done so, that you send out within the next week an advisory to superintendents formally instructing them on the new law and the obligation it imposes on them to ensure that no student has been unlawfully denied a diploma in their district.

Of course, we assume all superintendents are aware of the new law, and everybody has also acknowledged that it directly impacts this year’s seniors. However, because the law was passed after June graduations had taken place, we are concerned that some districts may not have taken the necessary steps to rectify those situations where a student might have been initially denied a diploma because of his or her NECAP score. Further, because of language barriers or other issues, there may be some parents of students affected by the law who do not know about the new statute or its ramifications for their child.

It is worth emphasizing that this is no longer a matter of districts issuing discretionary waivers to students who did not “pass” the NECAP. Instead, a legislative mandate has issued, and it is critical that all school district superintendents formally confirm that any students entitled to a diploma pursuant to this new law are so informed and that they receive their diploma forthwith.

The most recent “field memo” on RIDE’s website, dated July 3rd, references the new law, as well as a phase-out of NECAP assessments next year, but it does not address this particular and more pressing issue. Since the new law has superseded RIDE’s regulations, we believe it is incumbent upon RIDE to make sure that this law is appropriately implemented at the local level. A prompt advisory to that effect would seem to be the simplest way to effectuate that.

Please advise us if you agree with this request, or if you plan on ensuring proper implementation of the law in some other fashion (or if you have already taken such steps). However it is done, we trust you agree that prompt action is essential to make sure that no student is accidentally left behind.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this, and we look forward to your response.

Very truly yours,

Joanne G. Quinn
The Autism Project
1516 Atwood Avenue - Johnston, RI 02919

Maggi Rogers
George Wiley Center
32 East Avenue – Pawtucket, RI 02860

Jim Vincent
NAACP Providence Branch
PO Box 5767 – Providence, RI 02903

Jean Ann W. Guliano
Parents Across Rhode Island
155 Grand View Road - East Greenwich, RI 02818

Zack Mezera
Providence Student Union
62 Camp Street – Providence, RI 02906

Steven Brown
Rhode Island ACLU
128 Dorrance Street, Suite 220 – Providence, RI 02903

Nancy Cloud
Rhode Island Teachers of English Language Learners (RITELL)
c/o 9-D Eagle Run - East Greenwich, RI 02818

Kinte Howie
Young Voices
150 Miller Ave - Providence RI 02905

Robert L. Houghtaling
Eastern States Youth to Youth
98 Pitman Road, Warwick, RI 02886