

# DEMOCRATS

*for* EDUCATION REFORM

January 26, 2011

The Honorable Lincoln D. Chafee  
Governor  
222 The State House  
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Public Charter school expansion/Race to the Top funding

Dear Governor Chafee:

First, Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) would like to extend our congratulations on your recent election and inauguration. We are hopeful you will prove to be a strong partner in a sustained effort to ensure every child in Rhode Island has access to the first-rate public education they need and deserve.

With that goal in mind, I write to express our deep concern over your recent call to take a “thoughtful pause” (*The Providence Journal*, Fitzpatrick column, January 16, 2011) before moving ahead with the development of new public charter schools in Rhode Island.

As you know, one of the key elements of Rhode Island’s successful Race to the Top (RttT) Grant application was a commitment to expand the role and accessibility of high-performing public charter schools. As stated in the application, “the Commissioner and Board of Regents have committed to grow the number of high performing charters and other innovative schools as a key element of the *RIDE Strategic Plan* to transform public education.” Furthermore, “RIDE will move rapidly to recruit and select organizations to open high-performing charter schools.”

Rhode Island’s successful RttT application reflected a hard-earned consensus built over many months by House Speaker Fox, Senate President Paiva-Weed, Commissioner Gist, components of the labor community, as well as numerous additional education and community stakeholders. One manifestation of this collaborative effort was passage of legislation in the House by a vote of 69-3 and by unanimous consent in the Senate, raising the state’s cap on public charter schools with the specific intention of aligning state law with the RttT plan. A hallmark of this bipartisan bill was its emphasis on holding public schools that operate under a Rhode Island charter accountable for demonstrating “substantial progress in improving student achievement” as they grow. The extraordinary consensus represented by the votes in the House and Senate should make Rhode Island proud. We would strongly urge you not to turn the clock backwards on such a significant accomplishment.

We would also strongly urge you not to leave tens of millions of federal dollars on the table at a time when Rhode Island's public school students and teachers could use every penny.

To date, Rhode Island has yet to receive its allotment of RttT funding. If you move forward on altering or amending what is now a successful application, we believe the \$75 million grant awarded through RttT will be placed in serious jeopardy.

As stated in the Department of Education's (ED) rules for a RttT Grant Amendment Submission Process "in the event that the ED determines that the Grantee is not meeting its goals, activities, timelines, budget, or annual targets, ED will take appropriate enforcement action(s), which could include... putting the Grantee on reimbursement payment status, withholding funds, disallowing costs, or exercising any available legal remedy." It is clear that failing to grow the number of high-performing public charter schools would constitute a failure to meet a stated "key" goal of Rhode Island's application and there is no guarantee that the award will not be rescinded should an amendment be submitted. Moreover, if the lengthy review of the application process were any indication of an overall timeline, an attempt to amend the application would undoubtedly delay receipt of funding Rhode Island urgently needs.

The time for a "thoughtful pause" on this issue has come and gone. Rhode Island's school children only have one chance to get an excellent education. Any additional delay would deprive real students of that important opportunity. As such, we would respectfully request you embrace the goals articulated within *RIDE's Strategic Plan*, and support the reforms necessary to improve Rhode Island's educational system.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and I am certainly available to answer any questions you may have. Please do not hesitate to contact me through our lobbyist in Rhode Island, Bill Fischer at 401-228-8016.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joe" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Williams".

Joe Williams  
Executive Director  
Democrats for Education Reform

Cc: House Speaker Gordon D. Fox  
Senate President M. Teresa Paiva-Weed  
Representative Joseph M. McNamara  
Senator Hanna M. Gallo  
Commissioner Deborah A. Gist  
Ms. Beth Cotter, House Policy Analyst  
Ms. Marie Ganim, Senate Policy Analyst