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NEWS RELEASE

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Governor Carcieri, Education Commissioner Gist, and Regents' Chair Flanders Release NECAP Science Results

Test Scores Disappointing - Continue to Lag Behind N.H., Vt.

Governor Donald L. Carcieri today (Sept. 23, 2009) joined Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) Commissioner Deborah A. Gist and RIDE Board of Regents Chairman Robert G. Flanders, Jr., Esq., at a State House news conference to announce the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) science results for Rhode Island students.

NECAP science tests measure student achievement in four science areas: physical science, earth and space science, life science, and inquiry science. RIDE administers NECAP science tests annually to all students in grades 4, 8, and 11. This marks the second year of administration of the NECAP science tests.

Results of the NECAP science assessment, administered in May 2009, showed that, statewide, roughly 25 percent of Rhode Island students were proficient in science, which is a slight increase (1.4 percentage points) from the previous administration of the test, in May 2008. At the elementary-school and high-school levels, fewer students scored "significantly below proficient" and more students scored proficient or higher.

The scores were best at the elementary-school level, where slightly more than two of five students (40.3%) were proficient, an increase of nearly 4 percentage points over last year. Middle-school and high-school results were lower, with fewer than one of five students reaching proficiency in both 8th grade (18%) and 11th grade (19%).

"This is the second year that Rhode Island has administered the NECAP science assessment. It is important to bear in mind that science is still a subject that we have only recently begun to test statewide," said Governor Carcieri. "We do have some improvement, but overall the results that we are releasing today are unacceptable. Even though there was a 1.4-point gain over 2008, we, as a state, must take even more rigorous action to change these results."

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“Though we have made some progress, we have a long way to go to bring these science scores to an acceptable level,” said Robert G. Flanders, Jr., Esq., Chairman of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education. “We want all of our students to be prepared for college and for the competitive, high-technology fields of the 21st-century economy. Proficiency in science is essential if our students are to succeed, and we will do everything we can to improve science instruction across the state.”

In response to the results, particularly the low proficiency in inquiry-based science, Governor Carcieri called for the creation of a roundtable of higher-education officials, school administrators, teachers, and others to identify ways to enhance both teacher preparation and professional development to further align teaching practices and curriculum to standards. Governor Carcieri will co-chair the roundtable with Commissioner Gist.

“Using scientific methods in problem-solving proved to be a significant challenge for students at every grade level, and it points to the fact that this is a systemic problem that we must work together to address and find solutions,” continued Carcieri.

“These scores are nowhere near where they need to be,” said Deborah A. Gist, the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. “The results are basically stagnant, and some districts are going down from an already-low starting point. Based on these results, it appears that science is not being effectively taught. School districts must work with RIDE to ensure that science instruction is aligned with state standards and that teachers have the skills, resources, and support that they need to teach science well to all students.”

Some student groups performed significantly below the state averages. More than 95% of black, Latino, and Native American high-school students scored below proficiency.

“We must do more to improve performance for all of our students, and in particular we must urgently address the inequities contributing to our alarming achievement gaps in science,” Commissioner Gist said.

The tests were administered simultaneously in the other two NECAP partner states, New Hampshire and Vermont. Rhode Island test scores, at all grades, are below New Hampshire and Vermont. Grade-4 proficiency lagged behind New Hampshire by 13 percentage points (53% proficient compared with 40%) and behind Vermont by 12 points (52% compared with 40%). For 8th grade, all three states saw proficiency at 25% or less, with New Hampshire at 24% and Vermont at 25%, as compared with 17.6% for Rhode Island. Rhode Island experienced the largest gain in the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient in 11th grade (3 points compared with 2 points for N.H. and Vt.).

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“Though we are beginning to make headway in closing the gap between Rhode Island and our NECAP partner states, our overall student performance continues to lag the region,” Governor Carcieri said.

In response to the low science test scores last year, RIDE embarked on an initiative to work with districts to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment to each other and to the state science standards.

“Our curriculum-alignment work, which is under way this year in 17 districts, will help improve science instruction across Rhode Island,” said Commissioner Gist. “I am confident that Rhode Island is ready. We have brilliant students and strong educators. We must continue to hold educators and students to high expectations, but we will also provide them the supports that they need to advance learning for all.”

Other ongoing science initiatives in Rhode Island include:

- Physics First, which places physics as a foundational science course;
- The STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) Center, housed at Rhode Island College;
- RITES and RI-ITEST, two programs funded by the National Science Foundation that focus on technology-enhanced science instruction; and
- Project Arise, which focuses on biology.

Detailed information on the NECAP science test results is posted on the RIDE Web site:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/assessment/default.aspx>

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