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Mayor's message: Our school work has just begun

September 09, 2010 - Rhode Island

It's September and in school districts all across America, students, parents, teachers, administrators and merchants are bracing themselves for the excitement and opportunities ahead.

For business, the commitment to quality public education is an important factor in deciding where to start or grow a company; in Providence, we proudly proclaim educational excellence as our goal. And the confluence of seven major colleges and universities supports that effort.

This year, as tens of thousands of children return to our classrooms, we'll continue to expand on the improvements my administration has spearheaded over the course of the last eight years.

Race to the Top

First, we celebrate the recent achievement of capturing up to \$75 million in Race to the Top education funds for our state. Late last month, I joined with R.I. commissioner of Education Deborah Gist, governor Carcieri, chairman of the R.I. Board of Regents Robert Flanders, R.I. Assembly speaker of the house Gordon Fox and senate president Theresa Paiva-Weed to announce the state's award, which came as the result of a tremendous amount of collaboration among many stakeholders. The city of Providence was fortunate to have the leadership of Providence Schools superintendent Tom Brady and Providence Teachers Union president Steven Smith, as well as the many administrators, teachers, parents and students, participating in putting this winning application together.

Race to the Top funds, awarded by the U.S. Department of Education through a rigorous nationwide competitive application process, will be used to increase student achievement, close achievement gaps between student groups, increase graduation rates, and ultimately bolster college enrollment. As the state's largest school district, Providence stands to gain a significant portion of this grant money. And this award augments the work we have made to date, including:

Statewide funding formula

Good education is good economic policy. Providing a quality public education to every child is critical in America's workforce development, and fundamental to our nation's prosperity, independence and security. Creating this equal playing field allows all children to reach their potential- irrespective of their hometown or economic means.

Through a statewide funding formula, we will now distribute educational aid based on academic need - not on legislative favor. With the foresight and will of like-minded mayors and legislators, I was proud to lead a working group to forge this landmark change in annual statewide funding.

21st Century schools

As important to a student's academic growth is the setting in which it takes place. Under a comprehensive study of our 47 public schools and 4 annexes by DeJong Associates and Gilbane Construction Co, we were able to adopt a timetable for redesigning, replacing or restoring our aging public school infrastructure into 21st Century learning environments. One example of that is our

Providence Career and Technical Academy, which offers a broad range of technical education and training programs in the skilled trades and high-growth, higher wage fields.

\$500,000 energy efficiency grant

Essential to our renovation work is recognition that it be sustainable and mindful of the increasing scarcity of natural resources. New green technologies used at several area schools align with my goal of modernizing school facilities and are in accordance with Greenprint Providence, a comprehensive strategic plan create a more sustainable City government and accelerate the green economy.

Late last month, I also announced the award of a \$500,000 Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant program, through a competitive grant we submitted to the RI Office of Energy Resources for American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding. The new technology , which include solar panels and HVAC updates, support our commitment to invest in energy efficient technologies that create jobs, protect our environment and save taxpayer dollars by reducing energy costs and have an added benefit of introducing students to this important technology.

PASA / Providence After School Alliance

I am particularly proud of the ground breaking work we have done to establish a first-of-its-kind, comprehensive after school initiative in Providence. So successful has this program begun that it has won national awards and headlines for bringing together more than 100 stakeholders to create a free, high-quality after school program, leveraging the best of transportation, academic, social and recreational resources for middle school youth. More than a thousand young people have learned skills and cultivated their talents and interests throughout this program.

The work ahead

Our work does not end here. We have worked hard to increase professional development for our teachers, standardize curriculum across the District, increase graduation requirements and offer students the tools they need to survive and excel in this increasingly global and technological society. Key to their success is the engagement of our community and our business community.

David Cicilline is the mayor of Providence.

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