

Gist Appointed RI Education Commissioner

By Jennifer D. Jordan
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Promising to make schools places that students “cannot wait” to go to every day and to help Rhode Island “create the world’s best schools,” Deborah A. Gist was appointed the state’s next education commissioner at a State House ceremony Thursday afternoon, becoming the first woman to hold the post.

The Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education unanimously voted to appoint Gist, as did Governor Carcieri, who is permitted by law to cast a vote.

“Our work will begin with an absolute belief going forward that every child can achieve academically,” Gist said after the vote, in a passionate speech interrupted by applause from educators, youth groups, child advocates and employees of the Rhode Island Department of Education.

“We all want more for our children.”

Gist succeeds Peter McWalters, who is stepping down June 30.

Carcieri thanked McWalters, who was not present, for his 17 years of service and efforts to improve education through a series of reforms. He also praised Gist for her “relentless belief” that all students can succeed.

Robert G. Flanders, chairman of the Board of Regents, said Gist brings “a fresh set of eyes,” to the challenges facing Rhode Island.

“What impresses you most about her is her high energy, her obvious commitment, her teaching background and above all, her ability to connect with people,” Flanders said. “When you come down to it, this job is about persuading and communicating with people.”

Gist, 42, resigned Wednesday from a comparable post in Washington, D.C., where she oversaw the district’s school system as a “state superintendent.” Her resignation is effective June 30, and she officially takes over from McWalters on July 1.

However, Gist said she intends to spend time in Rhode Island before then, working closely with McWalters to ensure a smooth transition. Her successor in Washington, a former assistant secretary of education, was announced by Washington Mayor Adrian M. Fenty on Wednesday afternoon, shortly after the news broke that Gist had been offered the job here.

Gist was appointed by former Washington Mayor Anthony A. Williams in 2004 but found herself in an awkward position after Mayor Fenty took direct control of the school system in 2007 and named Michelle Rhee as the day-to-day administrator for the city’s schools. Rhee’s tenure has been marked by upheaval in the distressed D.C. school system. Gist, meanwhile, oversaw the city’s 59 charter

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schools; compliance with federal requirements, including yearly testing of students and classification of schools; transportation; and early childhood and adult education. However, Gist reported only to a deputy mayor.

In Rhode Island, Gist will be paid about \$200,000 a year, including retirement benefits, but the details of her contract were still being ironed out Thursday, said Elliot Krieger, spokesman for the Department of Education.

Gist singled out several high school students who attended the ceremony, saying, "This is really all about you."

After her speech, several students said they want the new commissioner to fulfill her promise to make school more rigorous.

"That's what we want," said Marlie Chatelain, 14, a ninth-grader at Classical High School in Providence. "Raise the standards high. We want to be challenged."

In her speech, Gist said her own eight years as a classroom teacher will inform the decisions she makes as a leader.

"Our state's 150,000 public school students are depending on all of us to do whatever it takes to create better schools," she said. "We must have great resolve to tear down the barriers to an equal opportunity for every child to succeed."

Gist plans to visit Central Falls High School at 8:30 Friday morning to get her first glimpse of a Rhode Island urban school, Krieger said.