

Chapter Six
Rhode Island’s PK–16 Council

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In his inaugural address, Governor Carcieri vowed to restore the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government by pursuing amendments to the state constitution. Voters overwhelmingly approved these changes that were championed by Governor Carcieri. Today, the republican principle that the legislative branch enacts the laws and the executive branch administers them has been restored to Rhode Island government.

—Governor Donald Carcieri’s website

The smallest state in the union is no lightweight when it comes to political conflict. Deep partisan divisions and a constitutional power struggle between the executive and legislative branches have profoundly shaped the early years of the Governor’s PK–16 Council of Rhode Island. This political landscape provides the backdrop for this case study examining the governor’s attempt to reshape Rhode Island’s education system and economy through the PK–16 Council mechanism. This chapter begins by providing a summary of the political and policy contexts within which the council exists. Following that, I describe the structure and operation of the council, and recount its accomplishments and shortcomings, as assessed by council participants. In my concluding comments, I assess the capacity of Rhode Island’s council mechanism to close the divide between K–12 and higher education, which plagues much of American education today.¹

¹ The research for this case study was conducted by a team of five individuals, under the leadership of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. The team interviewed eleven individuals in a site visit conducted March 17–18, 2008, and some telephone interviews. Interviewees included the governor, staff to the governor, the commissioners of K–12 and higher education, the board chairman for the K–12 Regents, an elected representative and legislative staff person, a labor and workforce agency official, a business representative, and members and staff of the P–16 Council. The case study author, a member of the team, supplemented interview data with an extensive review of available reports and documents. The information reflects a snapshot in time. All information and activities are presented as of the time of the research.

STATE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Governor Donald Carcieri was elected to the first of his two terms in 2002. A Republican, he focused his campaign on the need to rein in state spending, balance the budget, demand integrity in government, and create a coordinated plan for statewide economic redevelopment. A math teacher in his early career, he brought with him as governor a strong school reform agenda that included support for increased investment in both K–12 and higher education. He was elected to his first term with no previous experience in statewide politics, having served as chief executive officer of a large international materials science company. Described by one of our interviewees as “a very aggressive ideologue” favoring smaller government and English-only policies, he brought his education reform agenda into a state with a long history of Democratic dominance in the Legislature and strong teachers unions. Six years into his tenure, relationships between political parties and branches of government are poor—described by one respondent as “open warfare” between the governor and legislative leadership.

At the beginning of his first term, the partisan divide between a Republican governor and a Democratic Legislature was just one piece of a contentious political environment. A long-simmering power struggle between the legislative and executive branches of state government came to a head in 2004 when voters passed a Separation of Powers constitutional amendment to prohibit legislators from sitting on, or making appointments to, boards or commissions with executive powers. Governor Carcieri campaigned actively in support of the measure, which was supported by 78% of voters.

Prior to the passage of the Separation of Powers amendment, the Legislature played a strong role in education policy and had appointments on the Board of Regents for K–12 education and the Board of Governors for Higher Education. According to the outgoing state commissioner of K–12 education, Peter McWalters, who has served in the post since 1992, “most of what I was doing between 1997 and 2002 was legislatively driven.” By contrast, McWalters described the current Legislature as “passive” with respect to education policy in the face of an “aggressive education governor.” The hands-off approach of the Legislature is in large part due to the Separation of Powers amendment, which removed them from boards, but also can be traced to a change of leadership in the House and Senate that occurred the year that Governor Carcieri was elected. The recent death of one of the legislative leaders in education policy further weakened the role of the Legislature in education policy. McWalters summarized the current situation as follows:

“We are looking for voices in the Legislature that would care about the education agenda. Since anyone who touches it would have to collaborate with the governor or take him on . . . you get the feeling that they are waiting each other out.”

Reelected to his second and final term in 2006, the governor will leave office in January 2011. By then he is almost certain to be credited with ushering in major education reforms—covering K–12 and postsecondary education. The primary issue addressed in this case study is the role played by the PK–16 Council in the pursuit of this reform agenda.

STATE POLICY CONTEXT FOR P–16 EDUCATION REFORM

The governor’s education reform agenda is aimed ultimately at increasing the economic competitiveness of the state through better educated citizens. The challenges in Rhode Island mirror those in other parts of the country: increasing numbers of immigrant students with English language needs, strapped state budgets, increasing tuition, and the increased educational demands of a changing economy.

In Rhode Island, the Hispanic population has grown from less than 5% of the state population in 1990 to more than 11% in 2007. The percentage of the state population made up by Hispanics is higher among school-age (17%) and college-age (13%) youth than among adults, which is contributing to increasing numbers of first-generation and underprepared college students. The Hispanic share of the population is much larger in urban than rural areas; Hispanics account for more than 40% of the population under age 18 in Providence. Educating underserved populations that are expanding faster than other groups will be critical to the state’s future. In addition, the manufacturing sector has fallen from 20% of the economy in 1990 to less than 12% today, with the growing industries requiring workers with higher levels of education.

Funding constraints in Rhode Island present major challenges to increasing educational attainment. As a Republican, Governor Carcieri came into office as an unusual proponent of greater investment in education. He proposed significant increases in K–12 funding, called for reversing the long trend of declining state investment in public colleges, and proposed increases in need-based student aid. Funding for higher education has declined, with the flagship public university now receiving less than 20% of its operating budget from the state.

State fiscal problems, however, have impeded efforts to increase the investment in education. Rhode Island was the only state to show a decline in higher education appropriations in 2007–08. Additional cuts imposed for 2008–09 will result in larger classes, the first lay-offs of faculty and staff at the University of Rhode Island (URI) in 15 years, and elimination of several sports programs. As a result of the cuts, tuition is expected to rise significantly at the three public institutions in the state.

These recent cuts to higher education come in the midst of the worst financial crisis in Rhode Island since the state bailed out failing banks nearly 20 years ago. Despite a substantial Democratic majority in the Legislature, the 2008–09 budget also includes cuts to health and welfare programs, and reductions in the state government workforce

combined with reduced benefits for remaining workers. Tax increases were not seen as an option given substantial increases in unemployment.

Rhode Island's performance on the higher education indicators in the 50-state report card, *Measuring Up*, is mixed; the state performs well for its traditional population, but does poorly for the segments of its population that are growing (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2008). Rhode Island is an underperformer in preparing students for college, with its 8th graders earning poor scores on national assessments in science, math, and writing, and its low-income students performing particularly poorly on math assessments. College affordability is another area where the state performs poorly. Families in Rhode Island devote a comparatively large share of income (after financial aid) to attend public institutions, even community colleges. The state's investment in need-based aid is low compared with other states, and students take out larger loans to pay high tuition and other costs.

Despite poor preparation and high costs, Rhode Island students are comparatively likely to enroll in college. Once enrolled, persistence and completion rates compare well with the states earning the highest marks on those indicators, although the share of first-time, full-time students completing a bachelor's degree within six years has been declining in recent years. Relative to the size of its population, Rhode Island still awards more bachelor's and associate degrees than the U.S. average.

The substantial private higher education system in Rhode Island contributes to the state's relative success in awarding degrees, while masking a growing problem with educating native residents, who are more likely than nonnative residents to join the state's workforce. In addition to the state's two public universities and one public community college, there are 10 private four-year universities and one private two-year institution. The division of total postsecondary enrollment across the public and private sectors is nearly equal, with slightly more than half of enrollment in the private institutions. The private institutions account for more than two-thirds of the associate's and bachelor's degrees awarded. As is the case throughout the region, there is considerable movement across state lines to attend college. More students enter Rhode Island than leave the state to attend college, but the state is a net exporter of residents with bachelor's degrees.

The three public institutions are managed by the Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education, which is currently reviewing its strategic plan and assessing progress toward the goal it set seven years ago to improve Rhode Island's educational attainment to that of leading states by 2015. The board recognizes that one challenge to meeting this goal is the need to produce jobs in the economy to encourage college graduates to remain in the state. Another major challenge concerns improving student preparation for college and reducing the need for remediation in postsecondary institutions. In seeking to develop a stronger pipeline from high school to college and into the workforce, the state has been engaged in a variety of reform efforts centered in the K–12 system.

K–12 education in Rhode Island is governed by the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education, a nine-member panel appointed by the governor and subject to confirmation by the state Senate. The commissioner of education, who is appointed by the board, manages the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). Commissioner McWalters has recently announced that he will step down in 2009. In 1997, Rhode Island began taking a number of steps that launched the state and its governor into a national leadership role in the P–16 movement. The following timeline provides a context for a discussion of the beginnings of the Governor’s PK–16 Council:

- In 1997, the state General Assembly passed a landmark education reform act (Article 31) to help implement the state’s Comprehensive Education Strategy, an action plan to restructure the state’s public schools to increase performance.
- The Board of Regents, in concert with RIDE and state-level partners, convened two high school summits (in 2000 and 2002) for a broad array of stakeholders to consider the current state of affairs and future directions for the state’s high schools. The summits documented “substantial underachievement” in high schools, as measured by the state’s standards, and wide disparities across schools.
- The Board of Regents held two years of public hearings on summit findings, culminating in adoption of new high school graduation requirements in January 2003 to apply to students entering ninth grade in fall 2004. The requirements, which called for “graduation by proficiency,” sought to align high school graduation standards with skills essential for future success in college and the workplace. High schools were required to adopt graduation requirements that “include a demonstration of proficiency that involves multiple measures” such as portfolios, certificates of initial mastery, and senior projects (RIDE 2006).
- Governor Carcieri assumed office in January 2003, the same month that the new graduation requirements were adopted.
- In December 2003, Rhode Island received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to help fund the design of new performance assessments that would support the “graduation by proficiency” requirements.
- In February 2005, Governor Carcieri committed Rhode Island to join Achieve’s American Diploma Project Network, a coalition of states committed to aligning high school standards, assessments, curriculum, and accountability with the demands of postsecondary education and the workplace.

- In April 2005, Governor Carcieri issued an executive order creating the PK–16 Council (see appendix to this chapter).
- In June 2005, the Board of Regents adopted the *Rhode Island High School Diploma System*—to provide greater specificity to the Board of Regents’ High School Regulations of 2003 regarding proficiency standards and the means for assessing proficiency.
- In July 2005, Rhode Island received a competitive grant under the High School Honor States Initiative of the National Governors Association’s Center for Best Practices. The grant was to help the state implement some of its key education reforms.
- In October 2005, Rhode Island, in cooperation with New Hampshire and Vermont, adopted the assessments of the New England Common Assessments Program (NECAP) to satisfy a portion of the “graduation by proficiency” requirement. Limited at first to 10% of a student’s overall proficiency score, the value of these standardized tests has been increased to one-third of overall proficiency, with other measures now representing two-thirds.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE PK–16 COUNCIL

Governor Carcieri issued an executive order creating the PK–16 Council early in his third year in office (see appendix), but the seeds of the council were planted earlier from inside the state’s educational bureaucracies. The chair of the Board of Governors for Higher Education ran the governor’s education transition team and recommended a P–16 structure. The recommendation grew out of the strong relationship between Commissioner McWalters of K–12 education and Jack Warner, who has served as the higher education commissioner since 2002. McWalters and Warner were long-standing members of each other’s boards, and the boards worked together to create a Joint Board for PK–16 Subcommittee. The joint board created task forces in English language arts and mathematics that developed grade level standards, which in turn became the basis of efforts to align curricula and assessments across the two systems in order to improve college readiness.

The recommendation for a P–16 structure found a ready audience in Governor Carcieri. As a former math teacher, with a wife and other family members in the teaching profession, the governor had witnessed first-hand the lack of communication across the K–12 and postsecondary sectors. Once in office, he saw the tendencies toward poor communication and cooperation mirrored in the state bureaucracy. In his words from our interview:

“What I found was that they’re not talking to one another for starters. . . . you need everybody around the table. You need people that are the ones

responsible for managing those pieces around the table. So, I took the decision to create this council.”

The executive order identifies the reasons for the creation of the council, in its “whereas” statements that make the following points:

- The future quality of life in the state will depend on the ability of the education system to produce a workforce with the skills and knowledge required to support information-age businesses.
- A high school diploma is a prerequisite for college admission and most jobs, but there is no guarantee that students who earn a diploma are prepared for college or work.
- At the Community College of Rhode Island, 58% of incoming students need two or more remedial courses.
- A coherent state system of education is best carried out by formalized and systemic communication and alignment among elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and workforce development programs.
- The Board of Governors and Board of Regents have already formed a joint board to begin to address common issues.

COUNCIL STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS

The executive order creating the PK–16 Council specified that it be chaired by the governor. As he told us:

“I chair it, which was a conscious decision too, because obviously I want to drive the agenda, and I want to be in the center of the discussion.”

The governor had already signaled his willingness to lead education reform committees. He was at that time chairing a Blue Ribbon Panel on Mathematics and Science Education composed of education and business leaders. That panel had been formed to address the poor showing, regionally, of Rhode Island students on mathematics and science test scores.

The new PK–16 Council was created with no formal powers. It was set up as an advisory committee to recommend policies to the “appropriate board or agency.” We were told that the governor had considered creating a “super agency” with authority over existing agencies, but he met with resistance and chose the advisory model.

The membership of the council, also specified in the executive order, reflects the politics of the state as well as the governor’s governing philosophy. Initial membership was limited to individuals over whom the governor had administrative control, making it more of a management tool than a stakeholder group. There were nine members specified in the executive order:

- Governor;
- Chair of the Board of Governors for Higher Education;
- Chair of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education;
- Commissioner of Higher Education;
- Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education;
- Director of the Department of Labor and Training;
- Executive Director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation;
- Chair of the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council; and
- Chair of the Governor’s Workforce Board.

Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation and a council member, explained that the governor decided to limit the council to those over whom he had direct authority in order to assure that when decisions were made, there would be action taken in response. “It is a very focused group and has all of the key representation on it.”

But another member, Robert Flanders, chair of the Board of Regents, noted that the council membership is “missing the 100 pound gorilla”—in reference to the lack of legislative representation. According to Flanders, the governor said he wanted to be cautious in light of the recently passed Separation of Powers amendment to the state constitution prohibiting legislative service on those state boards and commissions that have executive powers. But as the council lacks executive power apart from its constituent units, it is unlikely that the Separation of Powers provision would prevent legislative appointments. It seems more likely, in light of the governor’s wish to use the council as a kind of mini-cabinet, that he did not believe it was appropriate or useful to include legislators on the council.

Since the council’s creation, other stakeholders have asked to be included among the members. Only one member has been added: a representative of the independent postsecondary sector in 2007. This member is the only one not part of the executive branch and over whom the governor does not exercise direct authority. So far, the governor has resisted requests from other groups, such as local school district superintendents.

The diversity of opinions about the appropriateness of the membership reflects different views of the function of the council. Those who support the council as a vehicle to improve communication among executive players believe the right members are on board. Those who believe the council should function as more of a broad-based advisory group would like to see other groups represented, such as the Legislature and organized labor. An intermediate position, currently under discussion, would be to find ways to engage other stakeholder groups in the conversations without appointing them as

members. At least for the time being, the governor has chosen to accept the price of less buy-in by stakeholder groups in exchange for more direct control over the council.

The council is not highly structured, and this is consistent with its status as primarily a team of state government leaders. It meets quarterly for several hours in the afternoon, drawing a crowd of 40 to 50 observers, most of whom are staff to the participating units. There is no public testimony taken at the meetings. There is no staff other than the governor's education policy advisor, who counts staffing the council among her many other duties. While the council has created two subcommittees (on dual enrollment and workforce readiness), there is no formal subcommittee structure as there is in Arizona.

According to one respondent, the agendas for the meeting have evolved to become somewhat more formal—having been at the beginning primarily a forum for the governor to discuss what he chose to bring to the group. According to Saul Kaplan, the meetings feel like “a directed conversation with a pretty clear agenda.” Minutes and agendas from the meeting are not published online, and there is no separate webpage for the PK–16 Council.

Since the council was not given any policymaking or implementing duties of its own, it functions primarily as a mechanism to refer issues and tasks to the appropriate constituent body for action. As Higher Education Commissioner Jack Warner explains, the council was not designed to have authority or power but to give the governor “a bully pulpit to coordinate the work of these various agencies, . . . a chance for him to weave all of these things together under one umbrella. . . It is a device that coordinates, communicates, and commands.” According to the governor:

“There's someone around that table that's responsible for a piece of whatever this agenda is that we're moving forward, so, for me, it is a managerial technique to get everybody together.”

There is no budget for the council other than that for the governor's education policy advisor and the funds available to the constituent agencies. According to several respondents, the lack of a specified budget is not a problem unless the council were to develop a priority that one of the units would not otherwise be responsible for. In view of the structure and function of the council, however, it appears that most educational priorities are represented at the table. As an example, one priority of the council has been dual enrollment, for which substantial funds were directed out of the budget of the Office of Higher Education.

Likely because the council has its roots in the joint board established by the two education commissioners, the most active participants in the council's conversations are the governor and the two commissioners. Several people commented on how intimately engaged the governor is in the work of the council. Said one: “He has lived up to his intention to be ‘intrusive’—which, in his mind is a good word.” In our interview with the

governor, it was clear to us that he has as detailed an understanding of issues such as curriculum, assessment, alignment, and teacher preparation as anyone would expect of a chair of such a council. A number of respondents complained of scant participation to date by the Labor and Training Agency representative, but a new director had just come on board and several people said they hoped for increased involvement from that sector. The members with strong ties to the business community have been, according to respondents, mostly involved in issues relating to math and science.

As described by one member, the governor looks first for consensus among the group and then looks to the appropriate unit to take the follow-up action. No one was able to recall any major issues that had not reached consensus. The governor's education policy advisor is responsible to follow up with the various units who have been assigned work as a result of the council's discussions and decisions.

COUNCIL PRIORITIES

The overriding purpose of the PK–16 Council, according to the executive order that established it, is to help the state produce an educated workforce to support the information-based economy. The functions outlined in the document indicate that the principal role of the council in pursuing this purpose is to align the expectations and outcomes of high schools, colleges, and the workforce. The executive order, signed in April 2005, specifies that the council recommend policies that:

- “Align standards for achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics so that students graduating from Rhode Island high schools are fully prepared for college-level work;
- Link achievement standards with employer expectations;
- Establish formal high school credit-based transition programs with higher education institutions;
- Improve the quality of teachers and educational administrators who lead schools, districts, and school-related initiatives;
- Support the recommendations of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Math-Science Achievement and track our State's progress; and
- Create a unified data system to connect information between our elementary and secondary education system, postsecondary institutions and workforce development programs.”

The council's priorities have since been updated based on its accomplishments, which are described in more detail in the following section. For example, now that the council believes it has completed its alignment priority in English language arts, mathematics, and science, the council's priority for alignment (see the first bullet above)

has shifted to implementing the multiple assessments of graduation proficiency and using those assessments in college admissions and placement decisions. In this arena, the council is considering the relative weights of the assessment components and the procedures for implementing the individualized assessments, such as portfolios.

Dual enrollment (see the third bullet above) has also become a major priority of the council. The council's goal in this area is to move from a very decentralized system of partnerships between individual schools and colleges to a more standardized set of policies that draws upon common design principles. The addition of the independent sector to the council has enhanced attention to this priority, as the many independent colleges have focused on building their own partnerships with high schools.

Addressing the performance gaps in urban high schools is an additional council priority beyond those identified in the executive order—and it was cited by the governor. He has created an urban intervention task force that is separate from the council but that reports its recommendations to the council.

Mathematics, science, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) issues generally make up another priority area for the council. The Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Mathematics and Science Education released an action plan with strategies in four areas: governance and culture, teacher recruitment, teacher quality, and learning opportunities for students. The panel developed specific strategies and performance measures for evaluating and tracking progress in each area. Strategies include: (1) developing and funding a system of financial incentives, including scholarships, education loan forgiveness programs, hiring bonuses, and pay scale differentials for pre- and in- service STEM educators; and (2) developing a communications strategy and campaign to broaden public support for the importance of STEM subjects.

COUNCIL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Identifying the accomplishments of the PK–16 Council is clouded by the difficulty of distinguishing between the work of the council and that of the agencies and boards that the council comprises. I will address this “value added” issue in the next section. Here I report the major accomplishments to which the council contributed, according to our interviewees.

Although begun by the joint task force of the two education boards before the PK–16 Council was created, the alignment of college readiness standards between high school and postsecondary education is viewed as a significant accomplishment of the council. Commissioner Warner explained that workgroups of high school and college faculty in English language arts, mathematics, and science developed some common understandings on college readiness standards and presented them to the council. The

council referred the proposed standards to the Board of Regents and the Board of Governors, both of which adopted them.

The alignment efforts are part of a larger set of actions carried out under the state's involvement in Achieve's American Diploma Project (ADP). According to Achieve's website, Governor Carcieri committed Rhode Island to join ADP two months before he issued his executive order creating the PK–16 Council. Even with that prior commitment, the decision to join and how to proceed with the ADP alignment agenda has been a topic of considerable discussion in the council, which perhaps explains why the decision to join ADP was widely cited as a council accomplishment. Rhode Island's ADP Action Team is composed of members of the PK–16 Council. In addition, the state's ADP plan of "action steps" adopted in February 2006 set much of the agenda for the council's work. The ADP plan includes the following four main objectives, plus specific steps to be taken in each area over the subsequent two years:

- Align high school standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required for success after high school;
- Require all high school graduates to take challenging courses that actually prepare them for life after high school;
- Streamline the assessment system so that the tests students take in high school can also serve as readiness tests for college and work; and
- Hold high schools accountable for graduating students who are ready for college or careers, and hold postsecondary institutions accountable for students' success once enrolled.

Implementation of the new diploma system was also cited as a council accomplishment, although the relationship between the multiple assessments of high school proficiency and determinations of college readiness is a work in progress. Another accomplishment mentioned by interviewees was transitioning the focus of dual enrollment from high achievers to low-income students. This work was facilitated by receipt of a National Governors Association (NGA) grant. The council was credited with the decision to apply for that grant.

With the addition to the council of a representative from the independent higher education sector, the council has also expanded the state's understanding of the range of partnerships that exist between high schools and postsecondary institutions. With funding from the Rhode Island Foundation, the Rhode Island Commodores, the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the National Governors Association, a comprehensive survey of partnerships was undertaken and a preliminary report was presented to the council in March 2008, with a final report delivered in June 2008. The final report called for the development of statewide principles for effective partnerships and standardized means to evaluate them.

The council is also credited with helping to increase the quality of teaching and learning in math and science in the public schools. It adopted and assumed responsibility for implementing the recommendations of the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Math and Science Education. A specific achievement cited in this area is the “Physics First” initiative, funded in part by a National Governors Association grant, to restructure and add rigor to the high school science curriculum by teaching physics in 9th grade.

Two data-related accomplishments were also cited. One pertains to the high school feedback report, for which the council helped to forge agreement among stakeholders about the kinds of student-performance information that should be provided from colleges back to high schools. The other concerns a larger data sharing issue. While there has not been significant progress in building a unified data system, there has been some improvement in sharing data across units.

VALUE ADDED BY THE PK–16 COUNCIL

An important purpose of this study of P–16 and P–20 councils is to understand if and how the council mechanism adds value to the work that would occur whether or not the council existed. This is a key question because these councils are typically superimposed on existing agency structures and do not themselves hold the power to legislate or even to implement legislative or executive directives. The primary value of the Rhode Island PK–16 Council, and similar councils of which we are aware, derives from its ability to influence the work of existing agencies and organizations. With the Rhode Island council limited primarily to the state’s executive branch leadership, its ultimate value depends on its ability to leverage the effectiveness of the constituent systems and agencies, since that’s where authority for action is invested. As K–12 Board of Regents Chair Flanders said about the council, “it is more discussion than action,” but he added that “as long as you can reach consensus there with the leadership about what things need to be done and they go out and do them, . . . I think these councils can be effective and useful notwithstanding that they don’t necessarily have any power.”

Limited Influence on Policy Agendas

From the respondents who participate on the council, we heard a strong consensus that the council is valuable—but not for *what* gets attended to so much as *how* education issues are handled. We heard two explanations for the council’s limited influence (in terms of value added) on the nature of the education policy agenda. First, as McWalters explained, the council’s constituent systems and agencies were already focused on the appropriate education reform issues. In his case as K–12 Commissioner, the agenda for schools had been clearly shaped by the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. To meet those requirements, the state Department of Education attended to the development of grade-level expectations for proficiency and collaborated with Vermont

and New Hampshire in the development of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). In the case of the postsecondary agenda, the strong working relationships that preceded the council's creation ensured that transition issues were already on the agenda.

The second reason for the council's limited influence on the agenda is its total disconnection from the Legislature. Any new initiatives requiring legislation would simply be "dead on arrival," according to one respondent. McWalters noted that his board, all appointees of the current governor, recognizes that if they want something to move through the legislative process they have to find a way to keep the governor's stamp off of it. Flanders echoed this sentiment, noting that while the council can be effective without formal powers, a problem arises if the council needs legislative action since there is no legislative buy-in on the council.

Value of Collaboration

Respondents were very positive, however, about the council's value in influencing how each participating unit performs its work. Several noted that, contrary to what one might expect in a state so small geographically, collaboration is simply not part of Rhode Island's history and culture. As the governor said, it "always amazes me for a little state, all the people doing these things out there—doing their own thing and not coordinating and not talking." The council has brought an unprecedented level of collaboration that its members find valuable in several ways, including the following.

Seeing the Bigger Picture

Meeting regularly as a collaborative team allows each member to see the issues from a broader perspective. Sandra Powell, director of the Department of Labor and Training, gave the example of dual enrollment. Addressing the issue in the larger forum allowed people to see the big picture and determine the best statewide approaches. For example, she said the council helped her understand how dual enrollment, implemented effectively, can be a good strategy for ensuring that young adults who fail to make the transition into college do not enter the workforce unprepared. Powell added that the Governor's Workforce Board has become more policy oriented as a result of their participation on the council, whereas prior to that the board had focused on distributing grant monies. The governor's education advisor, Janet Hidalgo, praised Powell for the extent to which she has connected education reform issues to the workforce development agenda. More generally, Hidalgo claimed that the council has been successful in getting members to gain deeper understandings of policy issues, claiming that "we absolutely have people who would not be making these connections" were it not for the council.

Highlighting Issues and Setting Priorities

By providing a forum in which participants gain a wider perspective, the council helps its members set priorities within their existing agendas. This can be an important achievement since, as McWalters emphasized, most of what the council is doing “was already being done or was in the works.” He added, however, that the council is useful as a forum to “raise the profile” of certain issues. This happened for dual enrollment and other partnerships between high schools and colleges—helping to move attention beyond local partnerships to the establishment of state policy. This occurred as well for the issue of assessment alignment, where heightened attention has been given to the role of NECAP (standardized assessments for K–12 schools) with respect to admission and placement in higher education. A third issue that was highlighted by the council—with data reviewed at meetings—was the especially poor performance in urban high schools.

Doing a Better Job in One’s Own Unit

Several respondents stated that council participants can be more effective in their own work because they learn how it fits with what other systems and agencies are doing. Respondents had numerous examples of how the broader perspective has influenced the actions of individual units. Hidalgo cited implementation of the new diploma system, noting that the decision to include K–12 assessment results on high school transcripts would probably not have occurred if the council were not engaged in aligning standards and assessments across the K–16 pipeline. Similarly, Warner said that interagency collaboration aimed at developing a referral and placement system to link training programs with local workforce needs “probably would not have taken place if you did not have a forum for bringing people to that table in the first place.”

Warner offered a second example of the value of collaboration. The Rhode Island Assistance Authority, which coordinates student financial aid programs, was developing a web portal, and found that portions of the portal were duplicating a similar one managed by the Department of Labor and Training. That led to a better integration of the portals and some cross-referencing, thereby eliminating some duplication and enhancing the value of each one.

Other examples offered included:

- The Department of Labor and Training, upon reviewing the alarmingly low math scores on NECAP, increased their math-related services to their program participants. As one example, the department increased the extent to which youth focus on math during the summer as part of the Youth Workforce Development Program. The department also worked with local workforce investment boards to address ways to integrate mathematics into youth workforce programs.

- Input from workforce participants on the council is influencing the implementation of the proficiency aspects of the graduation requirements related to the demonstration of applied learning skills.
- Input from business representatives on the council convinced the Department of Education to place a higher priority on math and science issues than they otherwise would have.

The general consensus was that the council helps to break down silos and that this helps individual agencies and systems do a better job.

More Efficient Management

A different kind of added value is probably appreciated most by Governor Carcieri. He designed the council to be principally a management device to bring together people who are under his administrative control. As he said in our interview, “For me, it’s a huge tool—it’s the major tool, so that rather than go to four or five different conversations, and have to repeat the same agenda or discuss the same issue, and do it six different times, this body is a way to vet all of that.”

Accountability

Two council members credited the council with helping increase accountability. One noted that the council creates a public record and the expectation that things get done. Another member said that the governor and his education advisor hold the participating units accountable for following up on decisions made by the council. This is a different kind of accountability than in K–16 councils such as Arizona’s, which have broad-based membership from outside of government, invite public input at meetings, and post council meeting agendas and minutes on a government website. The Rhode Island PK–16 Council facilitates accountability within the chain of bureaucratic command, but not broader public accountability.

BARRIERS TO GREATER SUCCESS

The governor has made his education reform priorities so clear that there is no ambiguity about what “success” would mean for the council. It would mean increasing the capacity of Rhode Island’s schools and colleges to produce a workforce with the skills and knowledge to support an information-age economy. While many respondents were quite positive about the value of the council in helping work toward that goal, there are barriers to its success. One set of barriers cited relates to the difficulty of the goal itself. But I begin with the “elephant-in-the-room” barrier.

Lack of Legislative Buy-in

It is impossible to over-state the ways in which political tensions between the governor and the Legislature limit the effectiveness of the council. The governor, viewing the council as a management tool, believes that the process and the participants are appropriate and that the challenge lies in finding the best strategies and interventions to promote reform. This view is completely at odds with the view from inside the Legislature. Joseph McNamara, chair of the House Committee on Health, Education, and Welfare, believes that the council should have members from the Legislature, unions, business, and industry—the latter apart from state officials who work in the business arena. He questions the effectiveness of a council that is not accountable to the Legislature, asking “where’s the beef?” in a council without commitments to goals, outcomes, timelines, and overall accountability to produce results.

He criticized the governor for not making an effort to reach out to the Legislature about his education objectives, joking that “unless he has the wrong phone number for me” the governor has not invited McNamara to be involved in the council. McNamara said he would be satisfied with some involvement and input by legislators, even if it did not include voting membership.

According to some, however, the lack of legislative participation is a consequence of the establishment of the council as part of the governor’s administrative body. Paula Dominguez, senior education policy analyst in the House of Representatives, acknowledges the lack of higher education champions in the Legislature. She believes that the governor’s strong leadership over the council has contributed to the partisan rift over education policy and discouraged legislators from engaging in the issues themselves.

Flanders, the chair of the K–12 Board of Regents, believes that the legislative frustration stems from their unmet expectation that the council would produce a set of policy recommendations with a legislative agenda. Given others’ comments, however, that proposals with the governor’s stamp would be “dead on arrival,” it is doubtful that this would be an effective council strategy.

One respondent noted that outside funders have declined to support council initiatives because they see the standoff with the Legislature and conclude that there would be no chance for policy reforms—which reveals a considerable disadvantage of the sour relationships. This respondent lamented that “it is more and more clear that the table is significantly hampered by not having legislative representation.” The respondent also said that the governor has not asked the legislative leadership to give support because he is “absolutely at war” with the leadership.

Governor Carcieri created the council with full knowledge of the politics—both legislative politics and union politics, which are closely related because of strong union alliances with the Democratic Legislature. He said he was warned not to use the executive order mechanism because the resulting council would be viewed, particularly by the teachers unions, as being critical of teachers and the schools. But he felt strongly,

he said, that he “just wanted to get some things done for young people” and has tried to do so in spite of the political barriers. He acknowledged that it has been hard but said he is still holding out hope:

“At the end of the day, my message to the unions is ‘Look, this a win-win’—the worst thing you’re going to be doing is fighting this kind of a thing, because people want to see the youngsters do well.”

A Tough Task

Other barriers to success cited by respondents included the difficulty of the task at hand. Turning around low school performance, especially in urban areas with high numbers of English-language learners and special education students, is never easy. The governor cited problems in the urban schools as the chief reason he would not declare the council to have been a complete success. Kaplan described the change being sought as a “transformation” that will require more sustained participation from the business community and more political will than has been evident to date.

While the challenge of transforming Rhode Island’s education system amid budget constraints and rapid demographic shifts is indeed difficult, it seems impossible to separate this task from the political stand-off with the Legislature. Without the prospects of initiating policy change, it appears to be unlikely that significant change, let alone transformation, will occur. As an example, one member expressed frustration with the council’s progress on dual enrollment, explaining that while there has been a report, there have been no statewide solutions or standardization of policies governing partnerships. Such actions would require policy change, which would require confronting the impasse with the Legislature.

As an example of another barrier to success, a council member noted that issues tend to fall back into the silos of the separate agencies after being considered by the council. This is, in his view, because the council does not take the next step and propose policies to change current practice. For this member too, policy reform seems to be off the table.

The fact that the council’s membership is small and limited to insiders may be one reason why follow-through on the council’s priorities appears to be obstructed. An example can be found in the council’s inability to implement the portfolio provisions of the proficiency-based graduation system. Doing so, according to McWalters, would require a bigger presence and commitment from the business community to evaluate student portfolios, “but we have not been able to come up with the actual infrastructure” and how it would be supported over time.

SUSTAINABILITY

Wherever a P-16 council is closely identified with a governor, the question of sustainability beyond the incumbent's administration is a prime concern. In the case of Rhode Island's PK-16 Council, there are several threats to sustainability beyond January 2011 when Governor Carcieri leaves office. The consensus of participants and observers is that the council cannot be sustained in its current form, which, one member suggested, may have become "too political to survive." Not only is the council the creation of the governor, who chairs it and aggressively oversees its work, but its reform agenda is the governor's—and it is an agenda that is not popular with many Democrats and with the teachers unions. Moreover, the governor created the council to conform to his own management philosophy. So even if the next governor were to share Carcieri's passion for education reform, he or she may not want a council composed almost entirely of governor's lieutenants.

Legislative participation and buy-in, even if this does not include voting membership, is seen as critical to sustainability. Although the executive order establishing the council will remain in place unless rescinded by a new governor, most respondents believe that statutory authorization and resources, in the form of a line-item budget, would be necessary to secure its continued operation. But with no education reform champions in the Legislature and with entrenched hostilities between political parties and branches of government, it seems unlikely that the Legislature would authorize the creation of such an entity with any real powers and control over resources.

Some respondents also said that if the council is to be sustained, it would need to have much more involvement from external stakeholders. This would likely require abandoning the management model in favor of a broad-based advisory group with expanded membership. Business community involvement is seen as critical, but is limited now to the three government officials whose agencies focus on workforce development. Local school and college officials are another set of stakeholders whose buy-in might be needed to ensure the council has momentum to continue.

Some interviewees said they expect the governor to address the issue of the council's future before he departs. One member concluded that if the governor does not resolve the issue, then the council's continuation in a new administration would have to be the result of "an accident of personality." The two commissioners noted that since the council was established based on the foundation of their strong working connections, the council's efforts would continue if those connections remained. Since our interviews, however, Commissioner McWalters has announced his retirement early next year—further handicapping sustainability.

The governor seems uncertain as to whether there is a good strategy to guarantee that the council outlasts his term. He acknowledged that others have suggested a statutory approach but he noted that one cannot, through statute, force a governor to feel passionate

about something. He said he was more inclined to leave the current mechanism in place for the new governor to use “if the governor feels as strongly as I do about it.”

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The most obvious lesson to draw from the experience of the state’s PK–16 Council is that politics can thwart efforts that require collaboration among stakeholders in addressing the P–16 reform agenda. The lack of buy-in to the council’s agenda and to its legitimacy in shaping the policy process is preventing the council from achieving the transformation in educational practices and outcomes that its supporters were hoping to see.

A second lesson is that *policy* is an essential tool in effecting a reform agenda. In the absence of legislative support, the Rhode Island council is limited to making changes at the margin *within the bounds of current public policies*. The council has not come forward with a policy agenda to implement its intended reforms, and, apparently, if it did, the proposal would go nowhere in the legislative process.

The governor’s decision to use a management model for the council, absent membership from the Legislature and from other stakeholder groups, has likely stoked the flames of political conflict. But that decision was itself a consequence of the political landscape that prevailed when he assumed office. That landscape probably created limits at the outset to what the council could hope to accomplish. On the positive side, there seems to be ample evidence that the council has made the government entities more effective in their work—even without the prospects to push through major policy reforms. Within the management team, the appropriate individuals are involved and, although this has been somewhat slow in coming, the connections between education representatives and those representing the labor and workforce sector seem to be growing. Collaboration among these entities within the council framework has influenced the respective agendas of the agencies.

While it is understandable that the governor chose not to invite legislative participation, it is somewhat puzzling why there is not broader participation on the council from the business community, the local education community, and organized labor groups that represent sectors of the economy that seek a better-trained workforce. A council with broad support from these groups might have been able to exert influence on the Legislature to engage the council’s agenda. Short of that, broader representation on the council would have helped with one of its key priorities, which is to implement the proficiency-based graduation system. This reform has stalled because of lack of sufficient contribution from the business community to evaluate student portfolios and projects. Faced with requests from numerous stakeholders to participate, the governor is reportedly considering expanding the membership. If that happens, the council might have a greater chance of outlasting the end of his term.

A third lesson from this case is that formal authority for a state P–16 council is probably less important than the capacity of a council to pursue a policy agenda. States across the country are grappling with this question about the appropriate extent of authority for P–16 councils. These councils are established as mechanisms for bridging K–12 and postsecondary education systems that have separate histories, governance structures, policies, and finance mechanisms. Creating a “super agency” with formal authority over existing K–12 and postsecondary governing boards seems problematic, for it threatens the needed cooperation from those boards and creates an additional layer of bureaucracy. On the other hand, councils that lack authority can be easily dismissed as forums for discussion rather than action.

In the case of Rhode Island, that “discussion” has brought demonstrable benefits. The leaders of each constituent system or agency believe they are doing a better job than they would if there were no council to broaden their perspectives. But the council is limited, not so much by its lack of “super agency” powers as by its lack of ability to generate and promote a policy agenda *of the council*.

Use of Policy Levers to Close the Divide

A central purpose of this project is to determine whether the P–16 and P–20 council mechanism is, or can be, an effective means of bridging the divide between K–12 and postsecondary education, which was described in *The Governance Divide*, a report from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (Venezia et al. 2005). In its follow-up report, *Claiming Common Ground*, the National Center recommended that states use four policy levers to close the divide and achieve better results: alignment of curricula and assessments; fiscal incentives; linked data systems; and accountability that reaches across sectors (Callan et al. 2006).

Rhode Island has been a leader in aligning curricula across sectors and has laid the groundwork for alignment of assessments, using its innovative proficiency-based approach. Due to the council’s inability to push a policy agenda, however, the council has not been able to make effective use of the other policy levers—or even to fully institutionalize its alignment agenda. For example, dual enrollment is envisioned as a key strategy to move low-income students across aligned curricula, but the council has been unable to implement statewide policies on dual enrollment, having spent considerable effort learning about the range of local practices. Improvements in the state’s data system have been limited to some enhanced data sharing, with no progress made in building a statewide student tracking system, which would probably require legislation. Despite the governor’s strong support for accountability, there has been no progress in developing a statewide accountability system that would span K–12 and postsecondary education. And perhaps most indicative of the barriers faced by the council in using policy levers to build a seamless education system, the Legislature is devising new funding formulas containing

incentives for collaboration across sectors, but that effort is disconnected from the work of the council.

The Rhode Island PK–16 Council has embraced an important P–16 reform agenda. In doing so, the council has benefited from the passionate engagement of Governor Carcieri and a history of strong leadership and cooperation between the K–12 and higher education commissioners. As the governor told us at the end of our interview, “I love this topic. I could talk about it for hours.” But at the end of the day, it may be that no amount of passion and involvement by a governor can compensate for lack of legislative participation and buy-in. The Separation of Powers amendment may have restored, as the governor’s website describes, “the republican principle that the legislative branch enacts the laws and the executive branch administers them.” The irony, however, is that the governor who strongly supported that amendment finds himself in the position of being unable to *enact* the laws that he would be eager to administer.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 05-08: STATEWIDE PK-16 COUNCIL

April 25, 2005

WHEREAS, the future quality of life in the state will be based on the quality of our education system and its ability to produce a workforce with the skills and knowledge required to support information-age businesses;

WHEREAS, it is widely recognized that the high school diploma is a prerequisite for college admission and most jobs, but students who earn a diploma have no guarantee that they are prepared for college-level work or entry-level employment;

WHEREAS, a recent study conducted by the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education confirms that 58 percent of recent Rhode Island high school graduates who enrolled at the Community College of Rhode Island were required to take two or more remedial courses;

WHEREAS, a seamless, coherent state system of education is carried out best by a formal structure that ensures improved student achievement at all levels through more formalized and systemic communication and alignment between Rhode Island's elementary, secondary and post secondary ("PK-16") education systems and workforce development programs; and

WHEREAS, the Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education and the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education have already formed the Joint Board PK-16 Subcommittee to begin to address some common issues;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, DONALD L. CARCIERI, by the authority vested in me as Governor of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, do hereby order as follows:

1. That within the educational system of the State of Rhode Island, the Statewide PK-16 Council be established, building on the current work of the Joint Board PK-16 Subcommittee;
2. That the PK-16 Council shall be chaired by the Governor and its membership shall be appointed by the Governor and include the Chair of the Board of Governors for Higher Education, the Chair of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education, the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Commissioner of Higher Education, the Director of the Department of Labor and Training, the Executive Director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, the Chair of the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, and the Chair of the Human Resources Investment Council; and
3. The functions of the PK-16 Council will be to recommend to the appropriate board or agency policies designed to:
 - a. Align standards for achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics so that students graduating from Rhode Island high schools are fully prepared for college-level work;
 - b. Link achievement standards with employer expectations;
 - c. Establish formal high school credit-based transition programs with higher education institutions;

- d. Improve the quality of teachers and educational administrators who lead schools, districts, and school-related initiatives;
- e. Support the recommendations of the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Math-Science Achievement and track our State’s progress;
- f. Create a unified data system to connect information between our elementary and secondary education system, post secondary institutions and workforce development programs;
- g. Provide better pathways to higher education for low-income residents; and
- h. Produce a more competitive workforce and promote economic development through quality education, research and workforce development.

This Executive Order shall take effect immediately upon the date hereof.

So Ordered:

Donald L. Carcieri

Date: _____