

## HOLDING TEACHERS RESPONSIBLE FOR FIXING FAILING SCHOOLS: THE BATTLE OVER EDUCATION REFORM IN CENTRAL FALLS, RHODE ISLAND

When students are not succeeding in their studies, what's the reason why? Which types of institutional adjustments need to be made? And how should the interests of major stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, school administrators, education officials—all be taken into account in the process of change? During the 2009–10 academic year, these issues surfaced with surprising intensity in the small city of Central Falls, Rhode Island. Once ignited, the controversy spread rapidly, capturing the attention not only of local and state officials, but also President Obama and his top education policy advisers. Beyond its immediate implications for a community already struggling with economic distress and other social ills, this fractious episode could hardly be more instructive as a guide to the daunting politics and policy dilemmas of contemporary education reform.

### Portrait of a Community at Risk

At 1.27 square miles, Central Falls is a “postage stamp of a home (1).” The state’s smallest municipality geographically, the 2000 census counted 18,928 residents, making this one of the most densely populated places in the nation. Central Falls, where the median household income falls below \$23,000 annually, is also the poorest city in Rhode Island. As many as 41 percent of its children live below the federal poverty line, and 21 percent of children live in “extreme poverty,” defined as households with income below 50 percent of the federal threshold.

The picture was not always so grim for city residents. Central Falls was once a thriving manufacturing center, powered by the strong waters of the Blackstone River. This fortunate location gained the city both its namesake and its population. Following the American Industrial Revolution, the city’s numerous factories created a high demand for unskilled labor, attracting an influx of diverse immigrant groups in search of steady work. The post-war economy further fed the city’s growth, which reached nearly 24,000 in 1950. During the following decades, however, cheaper labor costs overseas lured heavy industry from the city, leaving behind empty mills and a largely uneducated workforce. By 1980 the population fell to fewer than 17,000, and Central Falls carried the undesirable label of “cocaine capital” of New England.

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Despite this story of decline, over the most recent decade crime rates have dropped and the population has once again surged in Central Falls, the latter fueled mostly by the arrival of Hispanic newcomers. Additionally, those who call this picturesque locale home find much to like about their close-knit community. As one resident told a newspaper reporter doing a feature story, the city is “A little place...So you pretty much will know everybody (2).” Many locals also embrace the city’s rich ethnic mix. Surveying his neighborhood, the resident quoted above invoked this melting-pot sense of cultural variety and harmony: “The people over there in the yellow house are from Africa. The second house over here is black. Colombians over here. Portuguese, too. I’m French-Canadian. They’re Polish. The next house down is a retired fireman who’s French-Canadian. This neighborhood—if you want to call it integration, everyone gets along fine (3).” Balancing this rosy perspective, however, is the reality of such problems as urban blight, unemployment, high rates of teenage pregnancy, and political corruption, as well as youth violence. In the spring of 2010, one teenager killed another in Jenks Park, site of the annual high school commencement. The following night, a second teenager was shot to death in a related incident. These events cast a pall on the end of the academic year; administrators at the high school opted to relocate their graduation ceremony to a staid community college campus some 15 miles away.

The diversity of the Central Falls community is reflected in the halls of the high school and its 800-member student body. Other than the United States, the most common birthplaces for students or their parents are Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Columbia, Guatemala, and Cape Verde. The aggregate ethnic breakdown of the student population is 72 percent Hispanic, 15 percent Black, and 13 percent White. Given harsh local economic conditions and fresh memories of deprivation in other lands, Central Falls parents understandably want something better for their children. For many, the local school system is the vehicle for realizing these hopes and dreams. As one parent, who was also a member of the high school’s governing committee, declared before a public meeting after the education reform firestorm erupted in Central Falls: “When my daughter was in eighth grade, she was told that she could become a hairdresser. I asked her, ‘What about becoming a professor, an engineer, a teacher (4)?’”

### Entering the Spotlight of Reform

The academic outcomes of students at Central Falls High School (CFHS) have long lagged behind average school performance in the state of Rhode Island. In 2005, 271 freshmen entered Central Falls High School, but less than half (47 percent) reached graduation four years later. Among the others, 33.5 percent dropped out, 12.5 percent were held back, and 7 percent received a General Equivalency Diploma. According to standardized test results, only 55 percent of the student body were deemed proficient in reading, and just 7 percent were proficient in math. While this latter statistic may have marked an improvement over the 3-percent proficiency level achieved in 2008, it provided little cause for celebration.

In January 2010 CFHS was one of six low-achieving schools identified by state education commissioner Deborah A. Gist as in need of overhaul. Gist stated: “While there are great teachers in every school in Rhode Island, these schools have struggled to provide a high-quality education. The time has come to act more decisively and comprehensively. Our students and their families deserve access to the very best education system, and the economic well-being of our state depends on it (5).” Among the factors resulting in such high-level focus on Central Falls, state officials noted poor test results not only in math but also science, reading, and writing, a low graduation rate, and the vulnerable nature of the high school population, which included a high proportion of minority and low-income students combined with those needing to learn English as a second language and those receiving special education services.

Commissioner Gist was relatively new to her position and to Rhode Island. Hired in July 2009 she had served previously as State Superintendent of Education in the District of Columbia. Among her other duties there, Gist was responsible for putting into effect the accountability systems of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which exposed her to federal policies driving school reform at the state level. Prior to her work as an administrator, Gist taught elementary school in Fort Worth, Texas and Tampa, Florida. In both locations, she won “Teacher of the Year” honors. Gist’s own educational background included a Master of Public Administration degree and a master’s in elementary education. After arriving in Rhode Island, she began her first staff meeting with a bold challenge: “Are you ready to change the world?” This was no mere rhetorical question (6). State officials had hired Gist following a national search for a “change agent,” delivering her a clear directive: “Do whatever it takes to dramatically improve student performance in Rhode Island (7).” Gist wasted little time taking action and executed her mission with what has been described as a “reformer’s zeal (8).”

The larger public policy context in which Commissioner Gist’s announcement took place was set by the Obama Administration, which secured \$4.35 billion to incentivize ambitious state-led education reforms as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Through a highly competitive federal grant program, termed “Race to the Top,” states were encouraged to apply for a portion of this money. As part of the grant application process, states would now have to begin identifying their persistently lowest-performing schools “based on student academic achievement, student growth, and graduation rates” and begin the process of turning them around (9). In each of these schools, states and districts would be required to implement one of four “school turnaround models,” the specific choice to be made by local administrators. Although each intervention model is distinct, some overlap exists among them. Following is a brief description:

- The *transformation* model requires replacement of the school principal, strengthening of staffing, implementation of a research-based instructional program and new governance and flexibility, and extended learning time for students.
- The *turnaround* model requires replacement of the school principal, a rehire of no more than 50 percent of the school staff, implementation of a research-based

instructional program and new governance structure, and extended learning time for students.

- The *restart* model requires the school to be converted or closed and reopened under the management of an effective charter operator or education management organization.
- The *school closure model* requires the school to be closed and students be enrolled in higher-performing schools in the district.

Under Commissioner Gist's direction, Rhode Island became the first state in the nation to accept the Obama Administration's challenge to overhaul the lowest of its low-performing schools.

The Race to the Top program, though ambitious enough in its design, represents only a small part of President Obama's larger education reform initiative, known as the "Blueprint for Reform." The Blueprint is a proposal to reauthorize and reshape the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, first established in 1965. The most recent reauthorization of the Act came in 2002 with the passage of President George W. Bush's education reform plan, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Obama's proposed Blueprint is an effort to overhaul NCLB, in part by replacing the pass-fail school grading system with one that would measure individual student growth and judge schools based not on test scores alone, but on other measures such as attendance, graduation rates, and learning climate. The Blueprint would also encourage states to adopt ambitious new "college- and career-ready" student education standards (10). Although the president's package arrived on Capitol Hill in March 2010, Congress has yet to take action on the sweeping reform.

### The Troubled Path of Intervention

When CFHS made the list of lowest-performing schools, Central Falls Superintendent Frances Gallo was neither caught unaware nor without a plan. "It comes as no surprise. We've been a failing district for a number of years and the high school has been failing for seven years. We will embrace it and make it work for us (11)." Hired in March 2007, Superintendent Gallo was a veteran teacher and former principal herself. During a career spanning almost four decades, Gallo had spent five years as superintendent on the small island town of Jamestown, Rhode Island, and also had served as principal of three elementary schools. Just prior to earning the superintendent position in Central Falls, she was a deputy superintendent in Providence, the state's capital city. Gallo's educational background included a master's degree in education and a doctorate in educational leadership.

From the outset, Gallo indicated her preference for an approach having four primary components: [1] replacement of the high school principal; [2] school-wide instructional reforms; [3] greater community involvement; and [4] increased flexibility in regard to scheduling at the school and the length of the school day. According to Gallo, who had been trying to move in this direction for several months already, it was an approach that "honors our dedicated teachers and their expertise (12)." The estimated amount of money

available to CFHS for making changes in Year One of its prospective multiyear effort was reportedly in the neighborhood of \$750,000 to \$1 million.

Within less than a month, events turned in a dramatic new direction. On February 9 Superintendent Gallo announced her decision to fire all 74 teachers at Central Falls High School. While current staff could reapply for their lost positions, it would not be with the same job description and only 50 percent, at most, could be rehired. Gallo changed course after failing to reach agreement with the local teachers union concerning her ideas for change. At a meeting of the school district's Board of Trustees, the superintendent gave the teachers three days more to accept her ultimatum of a school day longer by 25 minutes, a commitment to tutoring before and after school hours, a weekly 90-minute meeting to discuss educational improvements, two weeks of professional development during summer vacation (paid at a rate of \$30/hour), and a new system of third-party teacher evaluations. Central Falls teachers and their representatives, who had balked at Gallo's initial plan due to compensation issues and lack of detail about their added responsibilities, staged a candlelight vigil in protest outside the board meeting. Others thronged inside the hall and took the floor to speak. Marcia Reback, president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers (RIFT), called for moderation and characterized the threatened firings as "blackmail" and "extortion." Reback told Gallo, "The union is willing to work with you, but it's a two-way street (13)." Also at the meeting were students who spoke on behalf of their teachers as, in the words of two *Providence Journal* reporters, "friends, mentors and family members (14)."

Gallo and teacher-union officials met one additional time before the deadline arrived for accepting or rejecting the superintendent's "transformation" school reform plan. This did nothing to breach their impasse, and on Friday, February 12 the Central Falls Teachers Union refused to back the superintendent. Gallo, in turn, informed state officials of her intention to go ahead with the alternative "turnaround" model, including teacher firings. Gallo stated: "I am saddened and shaken at the core by the enormous ramifications of my responsibilities. The only solace I have is that I know I provided every opportunity possible, in fully public and transparent ways, the means to avoid this (15)."

Dr. Gallo's decision to terminate the entire Central Falls High School staff—93 in total counting reading specialists, guidance counselors, the school psychologist, physical education teachers, the principal, and three assistant principals in addition to 74 classroom teachers—was, in reality, only a recommendation. Once approved by Education Commissioner Gist, the superintendent's resolution required endorsement by the local Board of Trustees. Following a brief but intense public meeting on February 23, the board gave this approval by a margin of 5-2. Immediately following the vote, one dissenting board member, a Providence schoolteacher and former student at Central Falls High School, delivered a surprisingly harsh public message to the teachers: "By every statistical measure I've seen, we are not doing enough for our students...this is exactly why we need for you to step up, regardless of the pay, regardless of the time involved...I demand of you that you demand more of yourself and those around you (16)."

## A Contagious Conflict

With a clear line in the sand drawn between Superintendent Gallo and the teachers, the conflict continued to escalate. And as it did, the debate over who was right, who was wrong, and the nature of Central Falls' educational malaise played out in full public view. Into the fray came those directly affected by the dispute, public officials and policymakers from all levels of government, and an assortment of interested outsiders.

Superintendent Gallo had accused the teachers union of “callous disregard” with respect to the situation needing remedy at the high school. She repeatedly expressed her frustration with the group's intransigence, explaining the necessity for quick action in light of a contractual requirement that teachers being laid off must be notified in writing by March 1 of that year. To miss this deadline, she pointed out, would mean postponing the overhaul of Central Falls High School for another year. Eager, perhaps, for a less polarized venue than Central Falls in which to air her views, Gallo appeared in March before the Rhode Island Statewide Coalition, an anti-tax, anti-big government group. She spoke of her long career in education, her commitment to doing right by students in the high school, and the vehemence of her opponents, some of whom she labeled “thugs” for their extreme words and deeds (17). At other times in her debate with the teachers, Gallo sought to undermine their economic arguments by citing the extra pay her original plan would have put in their pockets, potentially an estimated \$3,400 per year. She also referred to average teacher salaries at the high school—\$72,000 to \$78,000 per year—a relatively high figure for this low-income community. (Gallo, who made her home in the suburban community of West Warwick, had an annual salary of \$144,900 in 2009, according to the Rhode Island Department of Administration.)

Teachers and their union representatives had a different take on the standoff. For them, much of the issue boiled down to their rights as working professionals. RIFT president Reback told reporters: “There's a difference between doing outside-of-school work like going to a workshop on a voluntary basis...and compelling teachers to work (18).” Reback also complained about the teachers being rushed to adopt sweeping changes under pressure of an artificial deadline. Jane Sessums, president of the local Central Falls Teachers Union, articulated her members' grievance in contractual terms: “We still hold this termination of the entire faculty is a violation of the contract and contrary to state law and federal law as well. This is a termination of the entire faculty without cause, we believe (19).” An English as a Second Language teacher put the matter in more emotional terms: “It's all about the politics, about making Fran Gallo look good. The issue is having the right to negotiate. Once we allow the superintendent to get her foot in the door, where will it stop (20)?” A similar thought seemed to occur to a speech pathologist from the nearby Woonsocket school system who turned out for an outdoor rally on behalf of Central Falls teachers. Worriedly she commented, “If they can do this here, they can do this anywhere (21).” At the same time, some teachers urged a broader awareness of the factors contributing to poor outcomes at Central Falls High School, a perspective going beyond teachers and the role they play. As Sessums stated, “We don't make excuses, but we do have to speak about reality. Children in poverty come to school with a lot of issues (22).” When a group of fired teachers addressed the CFHS Board of Trustees in late

March, they urged attention to poor administrative leadership and turmoil in the curriculum as factors more weighty than teacher effectiveness in the performance of their school.

During this period, numbers of students rose to the defense of their beleaguered teachers, now facing the unemployment line. Speaking to reporters, one senior said: “They are very sweet. They help us out and get the job done. They treat us with respect (23).” Another added: “It’s sad. They stay when we need help. They love us. I was shocked when I heard the rumors [of termination].” At the board meeting where Gallo finalized her plan to fire the teachers, a high school junior took issue with the superintendent: “What you are doing is wrong. After all they [the teachers] have done for us, it’s not fair. They are pushing me to reach my potential. As a freshman, I didn’t care. Now, I’m an honors student (24).” On the other side, a statewide youth group called “Young Voices” rallied in Providence on behalf of Superintendent Gallo claiming that student interests, which deserved to be first and foremost, stood at risk of becoming subordinated to teacher demands in Central Falls. Sometime later, two CFHS students who were also members of Young Voices appeared at a news conference in their home city to say they supported Gallo.

On balance, parents seemed deeply concerned about the teachers’ plight. Several complained publicly about unfair treatment. As characterized by *Providence Journal* reporters, these parents “praised teachers for their dedication, their willingness to go beyond the call of duty (25).” One parent whose own children had been inspired to want to join the teaching profession because of their experience in Central Falls classrooms stated, “I think these teachers should be given another chance (26).” By contrast, certain other parents struggled to make sense of the dismal results of their local high school. Parent and CFHS board member Ana Cecilia Rosado voiced this criticism, “Very seldom have I heard students say how much their teacher demands of them or how hard they have to work (27).”

Rhode Island Education Commissioner Gist, whose department had initiated the chain of events leading to the Central Falls showdown, remained an important figure as the drama unfolded. As Gallo and the teachers came to loggerheads, Gist made it plain where she stood. “It would be very difficult for us to believe that [transformation] would work if the teachers union and superintendent are not on the same page,” stated the commissioner (28). Gist “commend[ed] Dr. Gallo for her courageous steps” while clearly asserting authority for having ordered the revamping of Central Falls High School, “We’re very confident we are following both state and federal laws carefully, and, in fact, it’s the expectation both in state and federal law that we take these steps (29).”

Leading political figures in the state could not resist the temptation to get involved in such an epic battle in their own backyard. Governor Donald Carcieri, a former teacher, was an early supporter of Superintendent Gallo. Also a member of the audience when Gallo addressed the conservative RISC group, Carcieri commented: “She’s doing absolutely the right thing (30).” More, the governor had his own pointed attack to launch, “The sad thing is that the teachers unions are making the teachers themselves look

terrible. The unions better wake up and decide [to] be a part of the solution (31).” Lincoln Chafee, former Republican senator from the state and former mayor of the city of Warwick who was now an Independent with gubernatorial aspirations, suggested that a mediator be appointed to help teachers and local education officials work out their differences. At a press conference he staged outside CFHS, Chafee said, “It would be a step back to have labor unrest in our schools (32).” Republican and Moderate Party contenders for the governorship chided their rival’s meddling in the Central Falls dispute and quickly added their own demands for tough, wholesale education reform as the necessary fix. Curiously, the Democratic candidates for governor withheld comment when contacted by the media, whether due to restraint or uncertainty it cannot be said.

The Central Falls firings drew a fierce response from labor unions locally and nationally. George Nee, president of the Rhode Island chapter of the AFL-CIO, took a defiant stance on the mass firings before a rally of over 500 supporters: “This is immoral, illegal, unjust, irresponsible, disgraceful and disrespectful. What is happening here tonight is the wrong thing...and we’re not going to put up with it (33).” The American Federation of Teachers dispatched a national representative, Mark Bostic, to Rhode Island as a gesture of solidarity from that union’s 1.4 million members. Bostic’s message: “We are behind Central Falls teachers, and we will be here as long as it takes to get justice (34).”

Yet teachers were not the only ones to be graced with high-profile support. The same day that termination letters went out, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan “applauded” officials in Central Falls for “showing courage and doing the right thing for kids (35).” Days later, none other than President Obama made his opinion known. During a speech before the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, he said the drastic steps being taken by education reformers in Rhode Island were both necessary and appropriate:

If a school is struggling, we have to work with the principal and the teachers to find a solution. We’ve got to give them a chance to make meaningful improvements. But if a school continues to fail its students year after year after year, if it doesn’t show signs of improvement, then there’s got to be a sense of accountability. And that’s what happened in Rhode Island last week at a chronically troubled school, when just 7 percent of 11th-graders passed state math tests—7 percent. When a school board wasn’t able to deliver change by other means, they voted to lay off the faculty and the staff. As my education secretary, Arne Duncan, says, our kids get only one chance at an education, and we need to get it right (36).

Like nothing before it, the president’s comment placed Central Falls squarely in the middle of the national education policy debate. It also served as a lightning rod, ratcheting up the rhetoric on both sides of the issue and drawing in a myriad of political heavy-hitters. As encapsulated by the *New York Times*, “A Rhode Island school board’s decision to fire the entire faculty of a poorly performing school, and President Obama’s endorsement of the action, has stirred a storm of reaction nationwide, with teachers



condemning it as an insult and conservatives hailing it as a watershed moment of school accountability (37).”

So it was that one day after the president’s remarks, the executive council of the AFL-CIO unanimously condemned the teachers’ removal, adding it was “appalled” that the president and Education Secretary would endorse the firings.<sup>38</sup> President of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, further noted that “Teachers were taken aback—and profoundly disappointed” by the president’s position.<sup>39</sup> She warned that “Teachers will watch carefully whether Washington, the states and local districts will be partners that help us do our job or whether they’ll be scapegoating and demonizing.” Similarly, Dennis Van Roekel, President of the National Education Association, complained that the president’s stance “set us back in how we work together.” He even hinted at electoral reprisal: “[T]he worst thing that can happen would be for President Obama to be seen as anti-teacher. I think that would harm him (40).”

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, conservative groups found themselves in the rare—perhaps awkward—position of praising the president. For example, Alex Johnston, chief executive of the business-backed education advocacy group Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, commented approvingly: “The administration is putting down a real marker here.”<sup>41</sup> Locally, Governor Carcieri also expressed satisfaction with the Obama Administration’s position: “US Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who himself closed low performing schools in Chicago, is absolutely correct—our students only have one chance for a quality education. We have an obligation to take every measure available to us to ensure each student in Rhode Island has access to a quality education (42).”

Whether this bright spotlight of national curiosity and concern impacted the final outcome of the Central Falls dispute is difficult to say. Without question, however, the increased scrutiny raised the stakes—and the discourse of conflict—on all sides while upholding the Central Falls case as a telling example to fans and detractors around the nation.

### Negotiations, Legal Action, and Delay

Amid the posturing touched off by President Obama’s statement were also tentative moves toward re-engagement by the Central Falls Teachers Union and Superintendent Gallo. In early March, the teachers formulated a reform strategy similar in many respects to Gallo’s original proposal, while calling for a “research-based high school reform plan.” Said union president Sessums, “We cannot afford to experiment with our students—there needs to be a connection to programs that we know work (43).” Very close to this same time, the union also filed unfair labor practice charges against the school district. Choosing to highlight those areas in which she and the teachers seemingly agreed, Gallo responded that the newly released plan “so closely mirrors my requests for reassurances that I am pleased to reassure the union their place in the planning process (44).” After Commissioner Gist acceded to union requests for a state mediator, the Superintendent

and the Teachers Union resumed meetings, holding four closed-door sessions during March and April.

All the while, a high level of public emotion surrounded the unresolved conflict over next steps at Central Falls High School. When Gallo and union officials spoke before a meeting of the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education on March 5, an estimated 200 union supporters rallied outside. On March 10, several dozen current and former students held a candlelight vigil before the high school to show support for fired teachers and staff. The Education Action Group Foundation, an anti-union educational advocacy group, paid for a billboard in downtown Central Falls that “Salutes Superintendent Frances Gallo for Putting Kids First (45).” An unfortunate incident that received national media attention was the discovery of a 12-inch doll of President Obama in one teacher’s classroom. Positioned to dangle from the whiteboard, the doll wore a sign that said “Fire CF teachers.”

On April 29, the Central Falls Teachers Union filed suit against Superintendent Gallo and Commissioner Gist in U.S. District Court. According to the six-count lawsuit, Gallo’s actions had violated the teachers’ constitutional rights. More specifically, the administration had violated due process, the suit alleged, by terminating each teacher without providing cause, a fair and impartial hearing regarding any charges, and an opportunity to respond and present evidence relative to the reasons for termination. Additionally, the legal filing claimed that the defendants had “maliciously and in bad faith terminated the employment of the CFHS teachers” in retaliation for the “Union’s attempt to bargain with the District over the changes and conditions of employment,” thus stifling the exercise of free speech (46). The suit charged Gallo and Gist with contradicting the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which prohibits states or local districts from altering collective bargaining agreements. Finally, the union called for injunctive relief to block the district’s dismissal of all teachers until settlement of the dispute in court.

Two weeks later, all Central Falls High School teachers reapplied for their jobs on the advice of union leaders that this would be a way “to protect their rights (47).” Superintendent Gallo then released information that her department had already received more than 700 applications to fill their positions at the high school.

## Resolution

On May 17, the *Providence Journal* reported a tentative agreement between Superintendent Gallo and the Central Falls Teachers Union, the result of some 40 hours of mediation capped by a final meeting among Gallo, Teachers Union President Sessums, and James Parisi, Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, which took place at Gallo’s West Warwick residence. The next day, members of the union met at the high school and gave their overwhelming approval. According to terms of the settlement, the teachers accepted several conditions first introduced by Gallo in early February before the decision to fire teachers had been made. Included were a longer school day, summertime professional

development, provision of tutoring services, and a revised procedure for teacher evaluations. In return the union received a commitment that all teacher jobs at the high school would be saved, as well as a pay supplement of \$4,800 per teacher for extra duties under the reform plan. The union announced withdrawal of its lawsuit against the Central Falls School District.

At a joint news conference following the vote, the principal figures offered comments on their four-month struggle. Observed Gallo, “It got us all to the table and talking about what it takes to move a school, what it takes to build real reform (48).” Union leader Sessums hoped that “the rest of the country can learn from our experiences and avoid the pitfalls of mass terminations (49).” Earlier in the week, Commissioner Gist, who judged the compromise to be favorable to Central Falls students, said: “When we can work collaboratively, that’s the right thing to do (50).” And U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan gave this reaction: “On behalf of the Obama Administration, I salute the administrators, union leadership and teachers in Central Falls and Rhode Island for working through what has been a very difficult period and coming to agreement on a plan to improve their school. Turning around a high school is very tough work...It is clear from this agreement that everyone is willing to give more in terms of time, training and tutoring (51).”

### Aftermath: Beyond Central Falls

Just one month after union and administration officials reached agreement in Central Falls, the Rhode Island Department of Education published statewide student test scores for the 2009–2010 school year. The numbers were sobering. Students at only half the state’s 57 high schools made enough progress in 2009–2010 to satisfy federal guidelines. “I am concerned that a large number of schools, including nearly half of all of our high schools, have missed their targets,” said Robert G. Flanders, chairman of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education. “Our graduates must be ready for success in college and careers (52).” In previous years, Rhode Island had rarely imposed significant changes on schools that routinely missed federal “targets.” The experience of Central Falls now raised the prospect for more aggressive types of intervention.

The Central Falls example also may have inspired education officials elsewhere. In July 2010 Washington, D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee announced the firing of 241 teachers based on low student performance on standardized test scores. In a statement following her decision, Rhee employed language very similar to that used by officials in Central Falls. “Every child in a District of Columbia public school has a right to a highly effective teacher—in every classroom, of every school, of every neighborhood, of every ward, in this City. That is our commitment. Today...we take another step toward making that commitment a reality.”<sup>53</sup> And, just as in Central Falls, the Washington, D.C. teachers union immediately announced it would contest the firings.

Last but not least, the Central Falls episode helped establish Commissioner Gist as a formidable new player in Rhode Island education politics and policymaking. The

*Providence Phoenix* weekly put Gist on its cover at the end of April, labeling her “a startling bolt of energy in a stagnant political culture.”<sup>54</sup> While noting concern in certain quarters about Gist’s captivation with neo-liberal, market-driven education reforms, as well as her “brusque” personal style, the author of the feature story concluded enthusiastically: “Gist, the teacher, faced down poverty and hunger in the classroom. And Gist, the commissioner, is doing the same.”<sup>55</sup> That same week, Gist’s leading role in Central Falls also earned her high-profile national accolades as one of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people (56).

Marking the end of her first year on the job, the *Providence Sunday Journal* also emblazoned its front page with a photo of the smiling Gist on July 18, 2010. Despite the article’s title, “First Report Card,” the writer withheld a letter grade for Gist, thus leaving her evaluation as something akin to an Incomplete. The article also included a cautionary statement from national education expert Diane Ravitch linking Gist to a “very powerful and very punitive movement [nationally] to close schools and fire teachers.” In Ravitch’s view, “The assumption is that this is the road to school improvement. But no nation on Earth uses this model. These are not remedies (57).” Still, the positive treatment by the state’s leading newspaper was unmistakable and based not only on the outcome in Central Falls, but also other causes Gist had championed successfully, among them a new statewide school-financing formula, higher standards in Rhode Island’s teacher education programs, expanded development of charter schools, and the arrival of Teach for America in the state. Even while acknowledging the long-term development of some of these accomplishments, the *Providence Sunday Journal* staff writer assessed the commissioner’s contribution in this way: “[I]t is clear that Gist’s aggressive leadership has accelerated the pace of change and made possible many reforms that would have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago (58).”

On August 24<sup>th</sup>, only a month after the *Providence Sunday Journal*’s assessment of Gist’s year-one performance, Education Secretary Arne Duncan declared Rhode Island one of only ten winners in the second phase of Obama’s Race to the Top program. Commissioner Gist and her staff had spearheaded the process, applying for and receiving \$75 million in federal money. During the awards announcement, Secretary Duncan singled out Rhode Island’s reform initiatives. “Rhode Island did a couple of things that the peer reviewers were very impressed with, including linking teacher preparation and evaluation and support. They also liked how the state plans to strengthen the pipeline of future teachers and how to incorporate student growth in terms of the teacher certification process.”<sup>59</sup> In a press conference following Duncan’s announcement, Gist noted that the application was so strong, in part, because of the support of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers (RIFT). In fact, RIFT President Marcia Reback and Providence Teachers Union President Steve Smith were two of the people Gist thanked first—a far cry from the heated rhetoric that had marked the Central Falls controversy only months earlier (60).

At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether or not Gist will remain in Rhode Island to oversee the changes she helped set in motion. In September, not long after start of the 2010–11 school year, the *Washington Post* listed her as one of four possible replacements

for D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee. It was widely believed that Rhee would soon lose her job because the city council president she often clashed with, Vincent C. Gray, was the heavy favorite to take over as mayor of D.C. following November elections (61). Responding to swirling speculation about her future plans, Gist sought to reassure those Rhode Islanders who might lament her departure: “My efforts are completely focused on our work in Rhode Island, and I am very enthusiastic about our current progress and the direction in which we are heading. My plans are to stay in Rhode Island to continue with this exciting and vital work (62).”

### Attachment 1: Source Material

The conflict regarding Central Falls High School was given extensive coverage by the *Providence Journal*, which subsequently grouped together all of its articles on the subject, as well as important public documents, in a special area of the [www.projo.com](http://www.projo.com) web site. This record of events and commentary provides the essential source material that made this case study possible. Helpful additional articles also appeared in the *Providence Phoenix*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*. Below is a listing of all items consulted by the authors.

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## Attachment 2: A Chronology of the Central Falls Case

January 12, 2010: State Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist targets six of Rhode Island's lowest performing schools for overhaul, including Central Falls High School.

February 1–5: Superintendent Frances Gallo and union leaders meet, but are unable to reach an agreement on pay issues and extra work associated with implementing the “transformation model” in Central Falls.

February 11: Negotiations between Superintendent Gallo and union leaders fail. Gallo announces her plan to switch to the “turnaround model,” which includes firing every teacher at Central Falls High School.

February 23: The Board of Trustees votes to fire all Central Falls teachers. Education Secretary Arne Duncan “applauds” the action taken by Rhode Island’s state and local education officials.

February 24: Termination letters are sent to the Central Falls teaching staff.

March 1: President Barack Obama singles out Central Falls in a national education reform speech and signals his support for the firings.

March 3: Superintendent Gallo and the teachers union agree to resume talks.

March 10: Current and former Central Falls students hold a candlelight vigil in front of the high school to show their support for fired teachers and staff.

March 15: A teacher at Central Falls is disciplined after a doll representing Obama is found hanging upside down in the teacher’s classroom.

April 29: The Central Falls Teachers Union files suit against Superintendent Gallo and Commissioner Gist in an effort to block the mass teacher firings.

May 18: The Central Falls Teachers Union votes overwhelmingly to ratify an agreement with Superintendent Gallo, accepting several reform conditions it previously rejected.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Wayne Miller, "Central Falls 'Is Full of Heart,'" *Providence Journal*, February 22, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Linda Borg, "Lines Drawn over Mass Firing at Central Falls High," *Providence Journal*, February 18, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "R.I. Education Chief Targets 6 School for Overhaul," *Providence Journal*, January 12, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Teacher Unions Challenged in Unprecedented Face-Off," *Providence Journal*, February 28, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "First Report Card: Commissioner Deborah A. Gist Completes Her First Year on the Job,"

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act," March 2010. Available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Sam Dillon, "Obama Calls for Major Change in Education Law," *New York Times*, March 13, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Jordan, "R.I. Education Chief Targets 6 Schools for Overhaul," *Providence Journal*, January 12, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Linda Borg and Paul Davis, "Central Falls Superintendent Acts to Fire City's High School Teachers," *Providence Journal*, February 11, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan and Linda Borg, "Central Falls to Fire Every High School Teacher," *Providence Journal*, February 13, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Every Central Falls Teacher Fired, Labor Outraged," *Providence Journal*, February 24, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Downing, "Gallo Receives Warm Reception from R.I. Tax Group," *Providence Journal*, March 1, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Supt. Sets Friday Deadline for Central Falls Teachers," *Providence Journal*, February 11, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Disagreement Surfaces over Central Falls School Reform Talks," *Providence Journal*, February 22, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Jordan and Borg, "Central Falls to Fire Every High School Teacher," *Providence Journal*, February 13, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Central Falls Thrust into School Reform Forefront," *Providence Journal*, February 25, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Central Falls Voices, Reporter's Notebook," *Providence Journal*, February 25, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Jordan and Borg, "Central Falls to Fire Every High School Teacher," *Providence Journal*, February 13, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Borg, "Lines Drawn over Mass Firing at Central Falls High," *Providence Journal*, February 18, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan and Linda Borg, "Gist May Support Cutting Teachers in Central Falls," *Providence Journal*, February 12, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Jordan and Borg, "Central Falls to Fire Every High School Teacher," *Providence Journal*, February 13, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Downing, "Gallo Receives Warm Reception from R.I. Tax Group," *Providence Journal*, March 1, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Chafee Calls for Mediator in Central Falls Teacher Dispute," *Providence Journal*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Jordan, "Every Central Falls Teacher Fired, Labor Outraged," *Providence Journal*, February 24, 2010.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> John E. Mulligan, "Central Falls at Center of National School Reform Debate," *Providence Journal*, March 2, 2010.

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<sup>42</sup> Office of the Governor, "Governor Carcieri Praises Superintendent Gallo, Board of Trustees, and Commissioner Gist for Supporting Efforts to Improve Quality of Education at Central Falls High School," Press Release. Available at: <http://www.ri.gov/press/view/10822>.

<sup>43</sup> Central Falls Teachers Union, "Central Falls Teachers Union Proposes Comprehensive Reform Agenda," News Release, March 2, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Central Falls School District, "Statement from Central Falls Superintendent Dr. Frances Gallo Regarding Central Falls Teacher's [sic] Union Press Release," March 3, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Kyle Olson, "Nation's Schools Should Follow Rhode Island Superintendent Gallo's Example." Available at:

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<sup>46</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Obama Effigy Found in Central Falls, RI, High School Classroom," *Providence Journal*, March 19, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Central Falls Teachers Reapplying for their Jobs," *Providence Journal*, May 12, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Central Falls Teachers Union Approves Once-Rejected Plan," *Providence Journal*, May 18, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>54</sup> David Scharfenberg, "Shaking Up the School System," *Providence Phoenix*, April 23-29, 2010.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Jordan, "First Report Card: Commissioner Deborah A. Gist Completes Her First Year on the Job," *Providence Sunday Journal*, July 18, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Jennifer D. Jordan, "Rhode Island Schools Win \$75 Million in Federal Race to the Top Grants," *Providence Journal*, August 25, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Bill Turque, "Rhee is Likely to Head for the Door," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Alisha A. Pina, "R.I. Education Commissioner Deborah Gist Reportedly Eyed for D.C. Post," *Providence Journal*, September 20, 2010.