

Education official addresses teachers

Commissioner says she will be introducing changes in coming months

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COVENTRY — Carrying the theme of 'celebration' as the school year begins in Coventry, a special guest opened up the beginning of faculty orientation for Coventry Public Schools this year.

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Deborah A. Gist, who began in the state on July 1, addressed all the teachers and welcomed them into the school year.

With the 75th anniversary of Coventry High School approaching this year, Superintendent Kenneth DiPietro has established celebration as the theme of the year, he said. Gist's talk built on this theme.

She never meant to leave the classroom, Gist told the teachers who filled the Coventry High School Auditorium.

"I'm telling you this so that you know that as commissioner I know what it is like to be a teacher," she said. "I know the joy and exhilaration of

teaching, and I know how hard it is to sometimes do your job, thinking that everything you do in your classroom is in spite of us up at the state."

There is a lot of work to do in Rhode Island, Gist said, and while the state has the tendency to focus enthusiastically on improving urban schools, all the schools in the state need to raise their standards.

Formerly the State Superintendent of Education in The District of Columbia, Gist came to Rhode Island "be-

cause I know we can do this," she said. "When you put your foot over the border into Connecticut or Massachusetts, there is no difference between what our students and teachers are capable of doing and what is happening in other states.

"There is not a cell in my body that doesn't believe we can make Rhode Island a model for the country and for the world," she continued.

In her observation of teaching methods around the world, one thing she

hopes to bring to Rhode Island is a higher respect for teachers. "Watching the rest of the world, they hold their teachers up high in society and respect their profession," she said. "We need to give our teacher's time to plan together and discuss their profession."

The Coventry School District impresses her, Gist said, because it already has common planning time for teachers.

State official speaks at teacher orientation

Continued from Page A-1

She is visiting every school district in the state within her first 100 days for several reasons, Gist said. The first is to listen to teachers and administrators. But another reason is to build support throughout the state because she is going to make some big changes over the next few months.

"To be specific, I'll give one example," she said. "We need to work on educator quality. What we have to do in our country is look at the whole lifespan of an educator — how they are recruited, developed, given professional development and rewarded for performance. We have to make sure our educators are the best in the country."

In order to inspire the faculty at orientation, DiPietro also invited a 2003 Coventry High School Graduate to give a musical performance.

Former student Kate Znoj played the ukulele and sang a medley of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and "What a Wonderful World," while accompanied by her mother, Lynn Znoj.

DiPietro invited Kate to help open up orientation, he told the teachers, so her example could help them see beyond what they do and celebrate the results of

their hard work.

Listing her accomplishments since graduating from Coventry High School, which included her degree from Eastern Nazarene College, working in South Providence to teach music to at-risk elementary school students, and her present pursuit of a degree in Urban Ministry and community development at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, DiPietro urged teachers to realize the scope of their task as educators.

"I hope that one day I will be part of a non-profit organization that works with youth in urban areas," he read from Kate's biography. "My goal is to bring compassionate communities together that bring hope to the broken world we live in."

The orientation happens every year, DiPietro said earlier this week. The General Session also included introduction of new teachers and staff, presentations by most administrators and on-site assignments at each school.

Unique to this school year, the teaching staff will also have a professional development day on Friday, DiPietro said earlier this week.

"Because we have so many children in transition this year — there are 600 at the elementary level, 400 entering the middle school, 400 going into high

Coventry High School graduate Kate Znoj, accompanied by her mother, Lynn Znoj, performed some musical selections during Friday's teacher orientation.

Hannah Piecuch •



school and 300 more coming into kindergarten — it's a unique year, so we have the extra day for faculty to prepare."

High school teachers will teach middle school teachers how to score a capstone, middle

school teachers will also have a training on responsive teaching practices and the elementary school teachers will be preparing their classrooms and focusing on the transition needs of all the redistricted students.