

GOVERNOR GINA M. RAIMONDO



STATE OF THE STATE JANUARY 14, 2020

****AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY****

Speaker Mattiello, Senate President Ruggerio, members of the House and Senate; members of the Judiciary; my Cabinet, my wonderful family; and my fellow Rhode Islanders. Thank you for trusting me to deliver results for our great state.

Tonight, I stand before you truly optimistic about our future. In the past few years, we've dug our way out of a deep economic hole and are preparing Rhode Islanders for success in a fast-changing economy.

Right now in Rhode Island, we have more than half a million jobs.¹ That's more jobs than at any time ever in our state's history. Unemployment is at its lowest point in three decades.²

Just think about that. That means our economy today is the strongest it's been in a generation. It hasn't always been that way. In fact, a few years ago our neighboring states had strong economies, but we didn't. So what's changed?

What's changed is that we've put aside the old way of doing business and we're working together to tackle our biggest challenges. And because of our hard work, the state of our state is strong.

Now what we have to do is maintain that economic momentum into the future. We need to stick with what is working – like investing in job training and education, and guaranteeing affordable, quality healthcare for all Rhode Islanders. But we also have to embrace innovation in all that we do, from the jobs we bring here to the way we run our government.

We're changing lives and making Rhode Island more competitive. Our new approach is a proven success.

A couple years ago in the midst of setbacks, we deepened our commitment to the Blackstone Valley, and it's beginning to pay off. A few months ago, we cut the ribbon on a new manufacturing training center at Davies High School in Lincoln. We are finally building the Pawtucket-Central Falls rail station. And a few weeks ago, we announced the largest economic development project in Pawtucket's history, including a new professional soccer stadium. It will revive downtown and create thousands of jobs.

¹ As of the November 2019 jobs report, Rhode Island had 507,000 jobs. <http://www.dlt.ri.gov/lmi/ces/cescompare.htm>

² As of the November 2019 jobs report, Rhode Island had an unemployment rate of 3.5%, the lowest since March 1989. <http://www.dlt.ri.gov/lmi/laus/state/histadj.htm>

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For years, the land made available when we moved Route 195 was just a vacant lot. Today, it's home to a vibrant Innovation Center – a physical symbol of our economic future.

We've made it easier to do business in Rhode Island, cutting thousands of pages of regulations and providing 120 loans to small business – more than half of which have gone to women and minority-owned businesses.³ That small business loan fund didn't even exist when I became governor.

We've added thousands of jobs at the Quonset Business Park.⁴ Electric Boat just keeps on growing, and more than two dozen companies have moved or expanded there. In fact, Quonset is bursting at the seams and we need more industrial space. Tonight, I'm announcing a bond to develop new industrial sites all across Rhode Island. It's a proven success. So let's do more of it.

We've made all this progress while cutting taxes every year. So let's continue on that path by cutting the car tax again this year for every single Rhode Islander. Let's also cut taxes for small businesses, who for almost 25 years saw no relief from their unemployment insurance taxes. Tonight, I'm proud to announce the third cut in unemployment insurance taxes since I took office.

Over the past few years we've completely changed our approach to job training. We've worked in partnership with hundreds of businesses. As a result, we've trained nearly seven thousand Rhode Islanders for good careers.⁵ In fact, because of this new approach, 7 out of 10 people trained find a good job right away.

For some, this training has been truly life-changing. Take Jennifer Brown from Warwick. Like my dad, Jennifer started her career in jewelry manufacturing. When those jobs left Rhode Island, she got a job at a bank – until that job was eliminated. Also like my dad, Jennifer was in her mid-50s and found herself looking for a new career. Thanks to our new job training, she was able to start over.

Today Jennifer works at Mearthane Products in Cranston. She says we gave her skills for a new career. But, even more than that, she has confidence, hope, and optimism that she never thought she'd have again.

Because of the success of this new approach to job training, Rhode Island businesses are calling on us to expand it. They tell us they need it to find the right talent. So let's do it. Tonight, I'm proposing expanding the Real Jobs RI initiative. It has a proven track record of success. Can't we all agree that every Rhode Islander deserves a shot at getting a good job?

I also hear from Rhode Islanders about the importance of transportation and infrastructure. Businesses want to grow, and people want to live, in well-connected communities.

Thanks to RhodeWorks, we're fixing our roads quicker than we ever have. Projects that used to sit on the drawing board for years, like the 6-10 connector, are finally under construction. In fact, in the last four years, we've fixed more than 100 roads and bridges,⁶ and right now, we're fixing another 100.⁷

Now, just imagine what Rhode Island would look like if we improved our trains, buses, and public transit the same way we've tackled fixing our roads and bridges. Imagine a day when high speed commuter rail connects Providence to Boston; when electric buses powered by solar panels zip through dedicated bus lanes.

³ 62 of the 120 loans given out by Commerce went to women or minority-owned businesses.

⁴ Quonset Business Park has added 1,795 jobs since December 2014.

⁵ 6,745 Rhode Islanders have participated in Real Jobs RI.

⁶ DOT has completed 105 projects since October 2015.

⁷ 68 projects are currently in construction, 18 are being advertised for construction, and 24 are in the design phase.

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That's within our grasp right now. It's not 10 or 20 years down the road. It's today. We came together to change the way we invest in roads and bridges. Now let's take that same proven approach to improve our public transportation for every Rhode Islander.

Let's also invest in our beaches, parks and in our drinking water. Like so many Rhode Islanders, my family's memories have been made on our beaches. Don't you think it's time to renovate our tired bathrooms at our state beaches and fix the pavilions and concessions? I think it's time to make a once-in-a-generation investment in our beaches.

Millions flock to our beaches every summer.⁸ So, let's protect this beauty – the beauty that sets Rhode Island apart.

And if we want to ensure Rhode Island's beauty is enjoyed for generations to come, we have to address climate change with urgency.

About three years ago I set an ambitious goal to increase our clean energy ten-fold by the end of 2020. Tonight, I'm proud to tell you that by the end of the year, we'll exceed that goal.⁹ We're the nation's leader in offshore wind, and in a few years, we'll have enough offshore wind energy to power half of the homes in Rhode Island. It's time to set our sights higher.

This week I'll sign an executive order to make Rhode Island the first state in America to be powered by 100% renewable energy by the end of this decade.

You know, from the day I became governor, so many people warned me to stay away from the toughest challenges. They said: It might be too difficult, too controversial. Others have already tried, and it hasn't worked. But improving education for our children cannot wait – and we cannot think small. I'm committed to doing whatever it takes to set public education on a better path.

Now I know our students are capable and our teachers are dedicated. I've been in classrooms all over the state and I've seen great work happening. We need to build on what's working and fix what isn't working.

We're starting to see some results. Last year Rhode Island saw improvements in third-grade reading scores – a key indicator of a child's future classroom success. But we still lag behind Massachusetts. We're behind because for decades our decision-making lacked direction, and too often we shied away from the most difficult decisions. Those days are over. We have a moral and an economic obligation to do better by our kids.

Nowhere is our challenge more obvious than in our capital city. Providence's test scores last year were a call to action for all of us. The deeper we dig, the more we see a system in crisis. No consistent curriculum. Not enough student learning. Brown drinking water. Bats in classrooms.

Our teachers and our students are working hard every single day in a system that's broken. They deserve to know they're not alone, and they deserve better. So we took action with unprecedented state intervention. We've begun the hard work of transforming a system that has failed students, teachers and families for decades.

We're moving to high-quality curricula across the district; expanding career education and college-level classes; making smarter investments in our buildings so everyone can be safe. Most important, we will end the culture of low expectations for our kids.

Students, teachers, parents, and the community – you are the ones driving this change, and I want to thank you. It's only going to work if you stay at the table.

⁸ Rhode Island beaches saw 1,096,358 visitors in 2019.

⁹ As of Q3 2019, Rhode Island currently has 809MW and is on track to hit 1000MW by the end of Q4 2020.

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I also want you to know our work is certainly not limited to Providence. We are every bit as focused on improving outcomes for every child in every school district across our state. We're applying the lessons learned to make schools better everywhere. Every single one of us has a stake in improving outcomes in all of our schools. Ask yourself: What can I do to support the work?

We have to challenge ourselves to see beyond the borders of our own city or town. Of course, we all want the best for our own children. But we also all have a stake in the future of the child in the next town or on the other side of the state. These kids are our future – our future teachers, police officers, doctors, and computer programmers.

Schools in every community have to do better, so tonight, I am announcing an additional \$30 million to support students and teachers in every community. In every district across the state, we'll invest in high-quality curricula and ensure more students have access to advanced classes in high school. We'll invest to support multilingual learners for whom the playing field is still devastatingly unequal. We'll increase the number of mental health professionals in our schools – so children's learning needs are met.

We all know that having a good teacher can change your life. So we're going to do more to support our teachers. That means providing them more professional development and mental health training – and doing more to keep science and math teachers in Rhode Island by helping them out with their student loans.

A very bright spot in our education system is our public PreK. Rhode Island is a nationally recognized leader. The problem is, for too many people, it's unaffordable. Parents of young children routinely spend a quarter of their income on childcare. In fact, chances are if you're a parent of two or three kids, you're paying more for child care than you are for your rent.¹⁰

Ashleigh Ortiz couldn't afford it. She's a working mom, who recently went back to school to become a nurse. Her oldest son didn't get to go to PreK because it was too expensive. Her two younger children did, and they are thriving thanks to public PreK classrooms in Woonsocket.

So let's invest in what we know works. Kids shouldn't have to be lucky or rich to get a strong start. Tonight, I'm proposing a more than 50% increase in the number of high-quality public PreK classrooms throughout the state. That's taking a big step forward toward our goal of Universal PreK for every 4-year-old in Rhode Island.

Now, in order to do this, we actually need to build more high-quality classrooms. The lack of available space is one of the greatest barriers to expanding PreK and high-quality child care. Tonight, I'm calling for a bond to build these spaces for our kids. Massachusetts broke through the barrier with a similar successful program, and our kids deserve the same.

The only way to give our children a shot at a bright future – and to give our businesses access to talent that they need – is to make sure every Rhode Islander can continue their education past high school. A few years ago, we tried something new to help more young people get a college degree and training for a good job. We enabled high school graduates to enroll at CCRI tuition-free. At that time, it was an innovative approach few states had taken. But since then, more have followed our lead.

¹⁰ According to the Economic Policy Institute, child care for an infant and a 4-year-old costs 51.8% more than average rent in Rhode Island. <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/RI>

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Today, the Promise Scholarship is a proven success. CCRI's graduation rate has tripled.¹¹ Statewide, we hit a record: more students than ever are enrolling in college.¹² In fact, our very own CCRI recently earned the distinction of best two-year college in America.¹³

That's the good news. But there's a risk. That scholarship is set to expire. If we don't take action now, this year's high school seniors will be the last class of Promise scholars. We'll be pulling the rug right out from under all of our other high school students, and we'll be putting an end to a proven success.

Economic experts agree the most important thing we can do to strengthen our economy is to have a more educated workforce.¹⁴ We can't go backward. Let's make the Promise Scholarship permanent and cement affordable higher education and job training into the very foundation of our economy.

We can't talk about taking care of our children without thinking about our most vulnerable. Too many kids in Rhode Island live without a stable, loving home. Many of them live in the shadow of trauma or addiction. They arrive on our doorstep through no fault of their own. We do what any of you would do. We take care of them.

Tonight, I am proposing that we make additional investments to strengthen our child welfare system so that we can meet our obligation to the kids in our care. This investment will support our dedicated staff on the front lines, allow us to recruit and license more foster families so we can get more kids out of group homes, and make sure that no child remains in limbo a day longer than necessary.

If children can't be reunited with their biological parents, it's on us to find them a stable, loving family that they can call their own. Tonight, I'm announcing a new initiative to find and support more foster and adoptive homes. No one needs our love more than these kids. This is my commitment, and I'm asking that you make it yours too.

As every parent knows, we also have to protect our kids from the risks of vaping. Last year, facing a developing public health crisis, I took immediate action to temporarily ban flavored e-cigarettes. Public health experts tell us these dangers are real. Let's make this ban permanent and protect our children.

When we say everyone deserves a shot, that really means everyone. We're doing that in Rhode Island by securing access to health care. When I became governor, we decided to keep running our own state health exchange instead of giving it to the federal government. Because of that decision – and a lot of hard work – almost 97% of Rhode Islanders have health insurance.¹⁵ That's higher than almost any other state. While premiums are increasing across the country,¹⁶ here in Rhode Island most premiums will decrease this year on our exchange.¹⁷ No one should have to choose between going to the doctor and buying groceries.

¹¹ Last year, CCRI's two-year graduation rate reached 19%, more than triple its historical average of 6%.

¹² In 2019, 68.4% of Rhode Island's high school graduates enrolled in college. That is the highest percentage in history, up 1.4% from the previous year and up 9.1% since the class of 2016.

¹³ Education Dive: higher Ed named CCRI the nation's "2-Year College of the Year."

https://ccri.edu/marketing/news_events/2019/December/HigherEd.html

¹⁴ According to the Economic Policy Institute, expanding access to high-quality education is the most effective way a state can strengthen its economy. <https://www.epi.org/publication/states-education-productivity-growth-foundations/>

¹⁵ According to the latest Rhode Island's Health Information Survey, only 3.7% of Rhode Islanders were uninsured in 2018, down from 4.2% in 2016. <https://healthsourceri.com/healthsource-ri-enrollments-up-by-nearly-2000-customers-as-ris-uninsured-rate-reaches-all-time-low/>

¹⁶ A number of our neighbors, including CT, NY, VT, and PA, have all announced increases in their individual market rates this year.

¹⁷ The Rhode Island 2020 rates for individual market plans had an overall average decrease compared to rates last year. Without the reinsurance program, average individual rates would have increased up to 7% higher than 2019 rates.

<https://healthsourceri.com/rhode-island-health-insurance-premiums-significantly-reduced-for-2020/>

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Since I've been governor, we've raised the minimum wage three times. Our hardest working Rhode Islanders deserve a raise. Let's do it again this year. At the same time, let's expand the earned income tax credit so hardworking Rhode Islanders can keep more of their money in their pockets. No one who works full time should live in poverty.

No one should struggle to keep a roof over their head either, and right now too many working families do. This affects everyone: the young working couple who struggle to be good employees because they don't have stable housing; small businesses that struggle to recruit people who are priced out of the community; even kids who fall asleep in class because they slept on a relative's couch the night before.

Our housing shortage threatens all of the economic progress we've made. This year I propose a housing bond and -- for the first time ever in Rhode Island -- a dedicated funding stream to build more housing. Nearly every other state already has this. Let's do it, and let's get to work building more homes.

Protecting our future means protecting our neighborhoods, workplaces and schools from gun violence. It's a nationwide crisis that in the past few weeks has hit very close to home in Westerly and Pawtucket.

Even one tragedy with an untraceable, homemade firearm is one too many. Loopholes that allow extremely dangerous people to get guns need to be closed. Military-style assault weapons don't belong in our communities and should be banned. So this year, I will once again propose a comprehensive package of gun reforms. Stand with me and keep Rhode Island safe.

As we tackle these defining issues of our time, we need reforms that ensure citizens and businesses have confidence in their leaders. That means it is time to pass line item veto.

We know this is something the vast majority of Rhode Islanders want. Nearly every other state uses line item veto to reduce waste in government spending and corruption -- and to ensure that tax dollars help all citizens, not just those with connections.¹⁸ Let's restore Rhode Islanders' confidence in government and put line item veto on the ballot.

As we sit here tonight, imagine yourselves 20 years down the road. It's 2040 in Rhode Island. What do you see? Maybe your kids are grown. Maybe you've retired. Maybe you've started a new career, bought a house or started a family.

I see a Rhode Island where the opportunity for an excellent education from PreK to college is guaranteed for everyone. Our public schools are thriving. Our economy is booming because of our educated workforce. High-speed rail and electric buses make it easy to commute across the state and across the region.

I see a Rhode Island where young couples, unburdened by student loans, can afford to buy their first home. Headlines about gun violence don't fill the news anymore, and everyone has access to health care.

We are on track to make this vision a reality, and we're going to get there if we continue to invest in what works. So, let's find the courage to stay on this path and strengthen our state for decades to come. This bright future is ours if we build it together.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless Rhode Island.

¹⁸ Rhode Island is one of only six states without the line item veto.