

Governor Gina Raimondo
State of the State Address
January 15, 2019

Good evening, Speaker Mattiello, Senate President Ruggiero, members of the House and Senate; members of the Judiciary, my family -- and most especially -- my fellow Rhode Islanders. It's an honor to join you at the start of a new year and with so much at stake for Rhode Island and our nation. I'm humbled by the opportunity to continue serving as your Governor. My family and I are deeply grateful for your trust.

When we began our work together four years ago, Rhode Island was stuck -- and everybody knew it. Our unemployment rate was among the nation's highest, schools were crumbling, and our roads were ranked the worst in the country. Rhode Island is a small and connected state so we all knew someone who was out of work. The struggle was everywhere you looked.

After spending so much time talking with so many people who had been out of work, some for over a year or more, I vowed to be the Governor who would get Rhode Island back to work. Rhode Island is a place where people have always taken pride in our work, and we're proud to call Rhode Island home. So together, we shook up the old ways of doing things, and brought the change needed to get back on our feet again -- and to create jobs and build a bright future for our children.

As a direct result of our new approach, we went from the having the highest unemployment rate in America to now having more jobs in our state than at any time in our state's history. We went from having the worst roads in America to more road construction happening right now than at any other time in our lifetimes. More Rhode Islanders are on track to graduate from CCRI than ever before. And thousands of people are getting good jobs because we worked with employers to build new job training programs that have become a national model. We've cut taxes, regulations and red tape for small businesses. And given middle class Rhode Islanders a tax cut every single year for the past four years. When we started, there was a freeze on school construction. But today, we're fixing our schools, and last year Rhode Islanders approved a once-in-a-generation investment to bring all of our school buildings into the 21st century. TF Green is thriving. We're the only state in America with an offshore wind farm. And we are number one in the nation for Pre-K.

We have stopped the decline and ignited a comeback. And it's because of you, Rhode Island -- all of us -- working together. We should feel proud of the work we've accomplished. But we have so much more to do. Our work's not done until every Rhode Islander has a shot at a good job. Until every child has a chance to attend an excellent public school -- until no one who works full time is in poverty.

Let's make the decisions that will sustain our economic progress and build an economy that's strong, resilient and inclusive -- one where everyone has a real chance to get ahead. Let's show that it's possible to be business friendly and fair to employees. Let's prepare people for jobs of the future. Our world is changing rapidly, and the state of our state is strong -- and much stronger than it was four years ago. But our future depends on the decisions we make today.

This week, I'll send to you a budget that expands our investments in job creation and job training; protects our most vulnerable; preserves our investments to finally end the opioid and overdose crisis;

gives every Rhode Islander a big cut in their car tax; invests in our beautiful, cherished public parks, beaches and public spaces; and sets Rhode Island on a path for long-term prosperity.

When it comes to our future, nothing is more important than our children. In the past four years, we've made record investments in K-12 education, and it's starting to pay off. We've increased the number of high-quality career and technical training programs at our high schools by nearly 60 percent. We're the only state in America to teach computer science in every public school. And 40 percent more students are taking AP and advanced classes.

But the recent test scores are just not acceptable. We've lagged behind our neighbors for far too long. Let's resolve to do whatever it takes to make Rhode Island's schools competitive with our neighbors and give every single one of our children a shot at a bright future -- no matter their background or their zip code.

Now, this won't be easy, and we all have a role to play, at both the state and local level. We need the courage to set an ambitious plan and stick to it despite the inevitable challenges and controversies that will come our way. We need to get even more serious about addressing our lowest performing schools and implement the highest-quality curricula in every school across the state, similar to how they do it in Massachusetts. We need to support and empower teachers so they can do their best work.

And I want to thank the thousands of amazing teachers and educators who are working hard every day in the classroom, including Amy Thompson and Marie Quinn, third grade teachers for Varieur Elementary School in Pawtucket, who are here tonight with some of their students.

Change takes time and determination. States that have been successful, like Massachusetts, have stuck with the same strategy for 25 years. In Rhode Island, we've had a pattern of not sticking with an approach long enough to generate results. For years, we've bounced from test to test, until finally last year embracing what Massachusetts has consistently used for years. Tonight, I'm announcing an additional \$30 million in school funding. This funding for local communities is the single biggest increase of any part of the state budget.

Let's all step up and make the necessary changes to improve student performance.

Standing with parents and working with our dedicated teachers, we won't stop until all children can get the education they need for a bright future.

To ensure every child is set up for success, we need to start before they get to kindergarten. We know that kids who go to high-quality preschool are more likely to graduate high school, more likely to get a good job and keep a good job, and less likely to commit a crime. Investments in Pre-K can save us money in the long-run because more Rhode Islanders will enjoy the economic benefits of a fulfilling life with a good job. In my first term, we tripled the number of public Pre-K classes and expanded all-day kindergarten to every district in the state, giving thousands of our littlest learners the right start in life. It's time to do more.

Tonight, I pledge to be the Governor who brings universal public Pre-K to Rhode Island. By the time I leave office, there will be a Pre-K seat for every four-year-old whose parents want it. The budget I'll submit later this week sets us on a path to make that happen. Let's get this done.

During the last recession, three out of every four jobs lost were jobs that only required a high school degree. But nearly every job created since then has gone to people with a certificate or degree beyond high school. In fact, 99 percent of the jobs created since the end of the recession have gone to people with a certificate or degree beyond high school.

There is nothing more important to the future of Rhode Island -- to the economic security of our friends and our family -- than making sure that everybody has the credential or degree they need to get a good job in today's economy. The most important factor businesses today look at when they expand is the education and talent level of the local workforce.

Given this new reality, four years ago, we changed the way we do job training. We're partnering more closely with businesses to make sure that we're training people for jobs that actually exist. We're also transforming CCRI into a workforce development engine. Our approach is helping young people who are just starting out and Rhode Islanders in the middle of their careers. Already, thousands of Rhode Islanders have gotten good jobs and other states are looking at us as a model for how to do effective job training. Our goal is to provide job training to any Rhode Islander who wants it. The budget I submit this week will make it easier for adults to earn a degree at CCRI, and it expands Real Jobs RI, guaranteeing job training and apprenticeships for thousands more Rhode Islanders.

Two years ago, we took an historic step and made community college tuition-free for every high school graduate. Since then, the percentage of students on-track to graduate on time has nearly quadrupled. Enrollment has doubled. And I can't go a week without meeting a parent or a student who stops me to say that the Rhode Island Promise scholarship has changed their family's lives.

Tuition-free community college is one of the lowest-cost, highest-impact investments the State of Rhode Island has ever made. So, this year I propose an expansion of Rhode Island Promise to make the last two years of a four-year degree at Rhode Island College tuition-free.

Too many students start at RIC, but can't finish because they can't juggle a full course load and two or three jobs to cover tuition. The number one reason students drop out is cost. Most RIC graduates stay in Rhode Island. They're our teachers, our nurses, our IT technicians that keep our economy going. This small but smart investment -- a few million dollars in a \$10 billion budget -- will change lives, strengthen our economy and help us fulfill our obligation to ensure that every Rhode Islander can get a good job. If we do this, Rhode Island College will arguably offer the most affordable four-year degree in America. Let's lead the way.

And before these four years are done, let's bring Promise to our state's flagship university, the University of Rhode Island.

To build an economy that includes every Rhode Islander, we also need to do more to propel the working poor into the middle class. Across our state, tens of thousands of people work full time, some working two or three jobs, struggle to make ends meet. Since I've been Governor, we've raised the minimum wage three times. In the budget I submit this week, I will propose another minimum wage increase to \$11.10 to keep us on pace with Massachusetts and Connecticut and put us on a pathway to a \$15 minimum wage.

No one who works full time should live in poverty. Work should have dignity, it should provide stability, it should give purpose.

Our new approach to economic development is creating thousands of jobs, and we can't take our foot off the gas. Companies big and small are growing here, hiring Rhode Islanders and making investments. We need to continue to make it easier and cheaper to do business in Rhode Island.

When I first started as Governor, most other states had a small business loan fund. But we didn't. So, we started one. It provides loans to small companies -- the neighborhood bakery that outgrew its first kitchen, the local shop where you can buy a communion dress for your daughter or granddaughter. Here in Rhode Island, small business is big business. Over the last four years, 75 small businesses have gotten one of these loans, and they've added hundreds of new jobs and added millions to our economy. Last year, we set a goal to double the number of small business loans awarded. We hit that goal. So, tonight I say, let's double it again.

And while we are supporting our local businesses, let's remain open to new investment, new industries, and new companies. Cynicism has long been one of our worst enemies, and I'm proud that we've stood strong against cynicism. I'm even prouder of the results. Over the last four years, nearly 30 companies have moved here or expanded here because of our economic development initiatives. Those companies are creating thousands of jobs that pay on average \$65,000 a year.

Thousands of Rhode Island families like Nafissa Hassan's have economic security because of it. Two years ago, she was in a low-paying job with no opportunity to grow. She enrolled in a Real Jobs IT training program and got an internship with eMoney, a global company we brought to Rhode Island because of our new business programs. Today, Nafissa is an associate engineer at eMoney earning a good, family-supporting paycheck. And she promises me that she's not done climbing.

A healthy economy also requires a healthy workforce. No one can be a good employee or do well in school if they aren't healthy. And no one should go bankrupt because of medical bills or panic when their kid gets sick because they can't afford the bill. The Affordable Care Act is working in Rhode Island. It's working better here than in nearly every other state. Since I've been Governor, we've cut our uninsured rate by roughly half, nearly all Rhode Islanders have health insurance, and health insurance premiums on our exchange are some of the lowest in America.

But Washington's constant attacks on the ACA put all of that at risk. Rhode Islanders with pre-existing conditions and thousands of families who count on the ACA for coverage have a target on their back. We have to take action to protect them and preserve their health care. Let's pass legislation this year that protects the Affordable Care Act in Rhode Island. And let's take steps to lower premiums and reduce insurance costs for people and small businesses.

And while we are talking about health care, let's make this the year we codify women's access to reproductive health care here in Rhode Island.

If we fail to protect health care, our economic recovery will be on life support.

And again this year, I am asking that we continue to be a national leader in expanding access to mental health care for all Rhode Islanders. Last year, I met privately with small groups of teachers to ask them what it's like to be an educator in America today. In every single meeting, the number one concern they raised was their students' mental health. If our kids are going to succeed and reach the high standards we have for them, then we really need to meet all of their needs today.

This year, we will launch a new initiative to address mental health in our schools. We're going to make sure that kids can have access to health care for their anxiety and depression just as they do for a broken arm or the flu. The budget I'll introduce this week will also include funding to provide educators with the training they need to support their students' mental health needs. Today's kids are struggling with mental health issues far more than we did. And as a mom, I can see why. We didn't grow up with the pace or pressure or technology our kids have today.

And sadly, our kids are growing up in a country where they have to worry about gun violence. Across the country, 100 people are killed every day by a firearm. And since 2015, I've ordered our flags to half-mast 13 times because of a mass shooting. The plague of gun violence is one of the most disturbing and preventable public health crises of this generation. Last year, we passed a red flag law and banned bump stocks. And I'm deeply thankful to the legislature and advocates for your help to get that done. But we didn't finish our work. This year let's ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and let's ban guns in schools.

It's time. We can't sit back and deny a generation of Rhode Islanders their right to safe schools and safe communities. Later this month, I will submit a comprehensive package of gun safety reforms that we know will save lives. Rhode Islanders overwhelmingly support stronger gun laws. Let's pass these bills this year.

In the end, our efforts to strengthen gun laws, to end the overdose crisis, to protect health care, to expand job training, to support businesses and provide our children with a world class education are all about one thing: the future.

We can profoundly shape and strengthen the state we pass down to our kids. The decisions we make, the actions we take, the tone we use, all have the potential to be lasting and impactful.

Years from now, we'll look at the state that we've passed down to our children. If, and only if, we've made good on our promise to leave no one behind; If, and only if, we've actually delivered economic opportunity for all; If, and only if, Rhode Island is the place where if you work hard you really can get ahead ... Then -- and only then -- can we say we were successful.

I think we're up for it.

Thank you. God bless you. And God bless Rhode Island.