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Gov. Raimondo: Rhode Island is 'On the Move'

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Gov. Gina Raimondo, governor of the State of Rhode Island, gives the thumbs up symbol to the crowd during her inauguration ceremony held at the Rhode Island State House, Providence, Rhode Island, Jan. 6, 2015. Maj. Gen. Kevin R. McBride, adjutant general, commanding general of the Rhode Island National Guard salutes during the rendering of honors to the incoming governor. (National Guard Photo by Master Sgt Janeen Miller/Released)

By Courtney Gabrielson

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Governor Gina Raimondo, D., is a renaissance woman.

Seriously. Three degrees. Rhodes scholar. Successful venture capitalist. Second female general treasurer in Rhode Island. First female governor of Rhode Island, representing one of five states in the union that have a woman as their chief executive. 2017 Biotechnology Innovation Organization Governor of the Year [award winner](#).

Her resume is extensive, but so is her passion for empowering the Ocean State to reach its greatest potential as a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship.

“We know that most economic growth comes from small businesses,” she said. “Everything I’m doing is aimed at doing easier, cheaper and better in Rhode Island.”

She’s engaged in this process because it’s what she knows. “I made a career investing in start-up companies, working with entrepreneurs, and working to get companies started from the ground up,” she said.

It's that background that served Raimondo well when she took office in 2015. The state needed a bit of tune-up, much like the businesses she partnered with in the past. "For too long, Rhode Island wasn't positioning itself for growth and high-growth industries," she said. The Ocean State's employment rate was one of the lowest in the country, she added.

Not anymore. "Fast forward [to today] and it's below the national average," she told me. In fact, her communications director Mike Raia interjected with some pride, it's "below Massachusetts's."

But this jump didn't come after wishing and hoping or waving magic wands. It came — comes — from stimulating state-wide innovation while continuing to make the state a cool place to live and work. "Rhode Island has a deep talent pool, amazing colleges and universities, terrific hospitals, high quality of life — it has all the ingredients we need to be a vibrant, 21st century economy," Raimondo said.

"We're very focused on making sure there is equity throughout our system."

Energizing those assets means strengthening opportunity at its roots, through programs that help fledgling enterprises (and those who helm them) and through early education initiatives.

Raimondo noted the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation's [Innovation Vouchers program, unveiled in 2015](#) in partnership with the General Assembly, as a group "supercharging our talent pool." The IV provides grants of around \$50,000 to "early stage, innovation-based companies ... in sectors that Rhode Island is really competitive in, like the marine trades, or health care," she said. The funding helps these start-ups partner with local schools, medical centers and research organizations like Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design and the University of Rhode Island. So far, the RICC has provided five rounds of grants worth a collective \$1.4 million.

Educating Rhode Islanders before they become entrepreneurs — or so that they'll be inspired to become entrepreneurs — is also paramount to Rhode Island's continual success.

Every Student Succeeds Act, a federal law, has served as the inspiration for extensive educational overhaul. "We in Rhode Island are using it as a really comprehensive K-8 strategy," Raimondo said. "[We want] to make sure that every single high school graduate comes out of high school either career-ready or college-ready."

What that looks like practically is emphasizing traditional STEM disciplines, computer science and the arts at a younger age and with greater vigor; providing high school students with increased opportunity for access to free college classes, and signing a budget that would make Rhode Island the first state in the U.S. providing community college for all Ocean Staters, a benefit Raimondo said she is hoping to roll it out next year.

"For all" is an operative phrase for Raimondo. "We're very focused on making sure there is equity throughout our system," she said. "Since I've become governor, we've increased our funding for English language learners, [created] all-day kindergarten and we've tripled number of pre-K classrooms."

The bottom line? "We want to have a system where opportunity is equally split," Raimondo continued. "People aren't looking for a handout, but they're looking for an opportunity. They're looking for a chance to get a good shot."

And when they do, businesses perk up. "If we have the talent supply that companies have access to, then companies will want to either come here or stay here," she said. It becomes a delightful Möbius strip of success.

It's already starting to happen. Raimondo cited the forthcoming Wexford facility as one piece of evidence, calling it "a truly transformative project for Rhode Island." It will house Cambridge Innovation center offices, Brown, and a host of other start-ups and innovative companies, and is set to [finish phase one of the project in 2019](#).

"Things are changing in Rhode Island," Raimondo said. "We're on the move."

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