

Reinvention, Not Reforms

Current School Structures Are Obsolete

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New England's reputation for world-class educational excellence is well-earned but tenuous, especially as a changing world demands increased levels of learning for a much broader population.

We know our current K-12 system is not producing enough students with the knowledge necessary to succeed in college. Too few enter higher education. Too few of those who do matriculate persist through graduation. By some estimates, only 18 of every 100 students who enter ninth grade graduate from college with at least an associate degree, the minimum level necessary to be competitive in tomorrow's world. For students of color, the numbers are even worse.

Education reform efforts, meanwhile, have been well-intentioned, but alarmingly incremental in their gains. The slow pace of progress, coupled with a need for higher levels of achievement from many more of our learners, leads to a sobering conclusion: we need a new approach. The obsolete nature of current school structures is evident in the way large groups of students with the same birthdays move from subject expert to subject expert in incremental blocks of time, in the way success is measured by seat time and rote return of information, and in the way what is learned during the "school year" is lost during the summer, perpetuating the difference in learning levels for various socioeconomic groups. Rather than continuing to try to improve our existing education "systems," we need to fundamentally rethink how we organize to educate many of our citizens. And we'd better do it soon.

As a first step, we need to abandon the convenient excuse that "this is a K-12 problem" or "that is a higher education problem." It is both. We need to continue the K-16 articulation efforts underway in various forms in all six New England states. But the resulting education continuum will need to be different and more rigorous than today's if we are to ensure that New Englanders possess the variety of 21st century skills demanded by the global economy. The recent study *Tough Choices or Tough Times* states, "the best employers the world over will be looking for the most competent, creative and innovative people" and "this will be true ... up and down the length and breadth of the workforce." These employers will be looking not for a specific type of degree, but rather for a set of skills that allows students to succeed.

Next, we must significantly rethink the educational experiences we organize for learners in a world defined by this dramatically different endpoint.

Our success in this reinvention will be determined in part by how well we: maximize access to technology in order to personalize student engagement; establish wider varieties of educational experiences by demanding experimentation that goes beyond improved classroom-based models; promote applied learning in real-world settings as the norm rather than the exception; and move beyond the bounds of the "school day" to embrace the notion that learning based on high standards happens in many different places, facilitated by many different people.

While classroom instruction will always have its place, we must finally and honestly align education with what we know about how people learn—especially if we are to bolster the achievement of underserved learners.

As we recast standards for the world we live in, and modify instruction to keep pace, it will also be necessary to create a sensible alternative to current approaches to student assessment. We must embrace experimentation with fair and robust, creative instruments that assess complicated and important skills. We must investigate measurements that complement or eventually replace current narrow testing regimens with measurements that effectively gauge individual progress and competency through evidence and demonstration. If we want to nurture complex problem-solving, then we will have to teach it and value it enough to actually measure it.

In addition to being the right thing to do for alignment's sake, this next venture in re-examining how we measure student performance could inform the emerging battle over accountability and assessment in *higher* education. While we have learned much about the positive aspects of a universal accountability system in K-12 in recent years, we must not transfer an incomplete system to higher education without the benefit of retooling from our hard learning experiences.

Our goal should be to build a shared, portable instrument that would permanently bridge K-12 and higher education—one that would capture what students know and are capable of, while telling us how much value individual institutions are providing toward those important ends.

This alignment between K-12 and higher education may mature from a series of bridging exercises—shared standards, dual-enrollment programs, varied pathways that blur the lines between the levels and a shared

assessment process—into a thoughtful effort to blend systems. This should amount to a redefinition of educational opportunity that is aligned with the emerging threshold all citizens must achieve—skills and knowledge commensurate with a two-year degree.

Eventually, this will lead to a serious conversation about the future of the high school diploma and a new role for our community colleges. If the skills and knowledge that come with a high school education are inadequate today for almost everyone, then why do we perpetuate the myth that this level of achievement is sufficient for anyone?

Some people still seriously debate whether the vast majority of citizens need to achieve at high levels. Some even attribute our society's economic success to date to a paradigm of economic winners and losers.

To be sure, championing high standards does not mean suggesting that everyone achieves at the same levels, but rather that everyone can achieve at a high level—with variation of attainment above the bar.

We cannot give up on those whom the system fails. We have been stuck in refashioning a system that many agree had original purposes of culling, sorting and, by default, failing some of its participants. We have not exhausted our creativity in terms of fashioning educational opportunities in which vastly greater numbers of learners succeed.

High expectations, investments in quality and a commitment to increasing opportunity are consistent with our ideals of an equitable society. But our quest for equity is not a moral matter only. Given our collective needs for greater achievement by more of our fellow citizens, it is now a pragmatic proposition as well.

Historically, New England has been the home of practical pioneers. Our region is experienced in innovation and risk-taking for social gains, and the time could be ripe for fundamental change. There are already policies and practices that suggest we are capable of changing how people view education. The “extended learning time” movement in Massachusetts has changed perceptions of the K-12 school day. Early learning is taking hold regionwide. The campaign around increasing the number of college graduates in Maine acknowledges the type of public buy-in necessary for true systems change. New Hampshire is exploring different ways of assessing success through competency. Many postsecondary institutions are exploring alternative approaches for “nontraditional” students who are soon to be the majority. These and other efforts point to a growing movement to rethink basic assumptions about schools and schooling. Instead of working together to fix an outdated system, New England could become the national model for the creation of a new standard—a new system, a new way of educating our citizens.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is positioning itself to spur reinvention by investigating and re-evaluating long-held assumptions about the basic structures of our education systems. We will work with New England's private, public and philanthropic sectors to help grow an approach to improvement that is different. It will be an approach focused on what we know about how people learn and what they will need to know in tomorrow's world in order to be successful. It will be an approach that addresses what we know about our region's emerging workforce needs and builds on the quality of education—especially higher education. Reinvention is important for the entire region and for all who care about the future of education. And it is possible.

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