

# Is New England Ready for P-20?

A report card on efforts to expand the K-12 notion from preschool to grade 20.

BY JOSEPH M. CRONIN AND RICHARD H. GOODMAN

While New England schools serve the children of the affluent very well, many children from low-income backgrounds are left behind at key points in the *non-system* we perpetuate from preschool through college and beyond.

In 2006, *The New England Journal of Higher Education*, then *Connection*, published articles on why the segments of New England education should work more closely together so that more children, especially urban and rural students, could complete college degrees. Nationally, the State Higher Education Executive Officers association, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Governors Association (NGA) have defined higher expectations around preschool through “grade 20” collaboration, and, with the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, have invested \$10 million in the New England states.

We recently reviewed how the six states began persuading higher education to work with the early childhood and K-12 systems toward this “P-20” goal. What progress has been made, and what barriers persist? Except in Rhode Island and parts of Massachusetts, many business leaders and their association leaders knew little about P-20.

**Connecticut.** For more than 50 years, the University of Connecticut enrolled 3,500 or so “motivated” (and generally gifted) high school students annually in a cooperative program, now called UConn Early College. Teachers at more than 100 high schools may offer college credit in calculus, chemistry, art and other subjects. Connecticut Collegiate Awareness & Preparation (CONNCAP) programs modeled after federal Upward Bound Programs also provide college preparation for disadvantaged students with high potential. Tech Prep initiatives connect high school students to two- and four-year programs in technical fields.

Governor Jodi Rell proposes major funding increases for preschool programs, and the Connecticut Business and Industry Association supports preschool and all-day kindergarten programs, especially for at-risk city children.

The governor’s Commission on Education Finance called for greater data collection on: student test scores, behavior (truancy, suspensions and expulsions), high school graduation, acceptance to two- and four-year colleges and postsecondary education success one year later. The commission also recommended stronger state instructional audits and intervention strategies including district reconstitution and state management of underperforming schools.

The governor authorized a new P-16 council after hearing from a Connecticut STEM summit that progress in science, technology, engineering and math, including teacher preparation, should be reviewed annually, since only 50 percent of Connecticut students were passing state math and science tests.

**Maine.** A major source of energy for Maine college recruitment has been the Portland-based Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute. When the institute published its first report on “barriers” to college in Maine, the percentage of high school students enrolling in college immediately after high school had dropped to 49 percent. The NGA awarded a \$2 million grant to support the Maine Readiness Campaign, in which high school and college and university faculty work to develop a core curriculum and higher graduation requirements at 50 “Maine Readiness” schools. All Maine students will take the PSAT in tenth grade and the SAT in junior year in lieu of a state assessment test. The Central Maine Power Company financed a “College Roadmap,” a college-planning guide to help eighth graders and their parents prepare for college. The Maine Compact for Higher Education publishes directories of best practices in promoting college access and attainment.

The Mitchell Institute’s “Access College Early” program allows students to take college courses for both high school and college credit. And Maine’s Education Department also supports a bill to require that all Maine seniors complete a college application. Still, serious economic barriers persist, and Maine college students rank seventh nationally in debt.

**Massachusetts.** The Bay State’s education systems are more fragmented today than they were in 1950 with three separate state education boards: one for early education and care, one for K-12, and another for higher education, each with a commissioner. The University of Massachusetts is substantially autonomous, with its own governing board, and its online system separate from the state colleges’ online programs.

But many Massachusetts community colleges work closely with local K-12 schools. Middlesex Community College helps a Lowell alternative middle school for high-risk youth and runs the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, with faculty members dedicated to reducing Lowell’s 40 percent dropout rate.

A Massachusetts nonprofit, TERI (The Education Resources Institute) has expanded the Higher Education Information Centers in Boston’s Back Bay, Roxbury and Brockton. TERI houses the Boston Higher

Education Partnership, issuing wake-up calls on the need to align high school courses with collegiate standards and support students through college access to completion.

The NGA gave Massachusetts a \$2 million grant in 2002. Then-governor Jane Swift signed an executive order establishing a Pre-K-16 council, which brings together the chairs and vice chairs of the boards of education and higher education, the commissioner and chancellor. The council developed a Massachusetts core curriculum, with four years of high school math and science, to better prepare high school graduates for college.

Massachusetts and Rhode Island are among nine states nationally promoting and assessing Algebra II achievement, which many treat as a determinant of readiness for college-level work. Both states have agreed to assess Algebra II performance in 2008 as preparation for college.

The Bay State's new Department of Early Education and Care supervises federal and private programs serving 60,000 preschool children, and 2,500 pupils in a state pilot program. Margaret Blood of the Strategies for Children advocacy organization says that early schools must next agree upon "School Readiness Standards" essential for P-20 success.

The state is ready for reform, but a traditionally strong legislature must be persuaded that a new state education secretary, data systems and budgets would address the problems P-20 tries to solve.

**New Hampshire.** Despite New Hampshire's historical aversion to broad-based state taxes, Governor John Lynch, a former chair of the University System of New Hampshire, understands education and must by court directive find ways to achieve K-12 adequacy. Lynch proposed raising the compulsory school attendance age to 18, and created the NH P-20 "Working Group." Not quite a formal council, and lacking state funds, the K-12 commissioner, community college commissioner and university chancellor meet with state workforce council and the university council heads.

University Chancellor Stephen Reno and state Education Commissioner Lyonel Tracy agreed on several joint K-16 initiatives:

1. An early college program called Running Start, linking more than 50 high schools and providing 3,900 students with access to college courses.
2. A high school student-mentoring program staffed by New Hampshire students who receive academic credit. Several private colleges also provide mentors.
3. An experimental program where two high schools would require 100 percent of their seniors to apply to college.

New Hampshire already offers a high school pre-engineering program (28 high schools, 1,800 students), a K-16 Granite State Distance Learning Network, and

a jobs and college dropout prevention program. New Hampshire has an excellent after-school program called Plus Time New Hampshire, supported by the Eisenhower, Nellie Mae and other foundations.

The state in 2005 dropped the high school Carnegie Unit graduation requirements and requires local school boards to show evidence of achieving defined educational outcomes. A state where more than 20 percent of the workforce is in high-tech fields will need to focus on additional reforms.

**Rhode Island.** Of the New England states, Rhode Island has expressed the greatest enthusiasm about seamless education systems. The state suffers from the lowest high school graduation rate in New England (72 percent), and low proficiency scores on NAEP fourth and eighth grade reading, math and writing tests. The percentage attending college right after graduation (56 percent) is below Massachusetts and Connecticut. Rhode Island in the late 1980s launched The Children's Crusade to encourage the lowest-income children to study hard, stay away from drugs and crime, and be rewarded with scholarship aid.

Governor Donald Carcieri, a former high school math teacher and an experienced business executive, appointed a P-16 council to coordinate all levels of education in 2002. Higher Education Commissioner Jack Warner and Education Commissioner Pete McWalters strongly support the P-16 initiative.

Rhode Island won a \$2 million NGA/Gates Foundation grant to raise higher "college ready" standards for high school students. Carcieri and others envisioned a "science state" with STEM funds for increasing physics, chemistry and pre-engineering enrollments. Rhode Island will also expand dual-enrollment options to guide high school students to college courses in the upper high school grades. Eighteen percent of Rhode Island juniors and seniors now take college-level courses, the highest percentage in New England.

Rhode Island is coming from behind on achievement indicators and shows great commitment. The governor is a national figure in college readiness issues.

**Vermont.** Vermont anticipates a probable decline in the number of college graduates by 21 percent over the next decade or more. Vermont officials worry that there may not be an educated workforce to meet the need for nurses and special education teachers or to staff small high-tech companies.

Only 55 percent of high school students take the SAT, and only 43 percent enter college after high school graduation—13 percentage points below the U.S. average.

The Vermont Business Roundtable issued several reports on manpower needs and complained about a lack of a central education and training system. There is already a Vermont Education and Training Consortium, Vermont Technology Council and a Human Resources Investment Commission, with UVM and other educators involved. Vermont doesn't have a K-16 council. Instead,

there is a Vermont Public Education Partnership which includes the K-12 commissioner, the higher education commissioner, the president of UVM, the head of the community college system, the head of the Vermont Student Assistance Corp. (VSAC) and leaders of the school boards, superintendents and principals associations.

With a staff of 400, VSAC is the strongest agency working to increase college attendance. The VSAC staff travels to rural and remote areas to promote college awareness and packages, including \$84 million in state scholarship aid. The goal is to raise college aspirations to 90 percent—the level needed to maintain the number of college graduates. Director Don Vickers predicts that dual-enrollment in Vermont will change from a service designed for gifted children to one serving all high school students including those at risk.

### What might New England states do together?

Five key recommendations:

1. At least eight separate programs connect high school students to college: AP courses for advanced students, International Baccalaureate for high achievers, dual enrollment, early colleges for lower-income students, Tech Prep for students in technical fields and private university high schools such as those at Clark and Boston University. Yet states rarely discuss this de facto “system” of high school transitions. NEBHE, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), The New England Council, and the six governors should convene periodic summit meetings on Education P-20 and the Economy.
2. NEASC or NEBHE might issue annual P-20 report cards on the New England states, citing progress and identifying achievement and data gaps similar to the formats used by the Southern Regional Board (SREB) that evaluates sixteen states each year.
3. New England states need formats by which college student achievement, remedial needs, dropouts and completion rates get fed back to sending high schools.
4. The New England Council or New England Business Higher Education Roundtable might

discuss what other states are doing, and the stakes for employers. Each state needs a comprehensive plan to upgrade preschool offerings, including defining the expectations and standards for high-quality programs.

5. To make P-20 seamless, NEASC needs accreditation standards that require better communication between education levels. The NEASC accreditation standards should include new language requiring colleges and universities to provide feedback to high schools, and should reward early college and dual-enrollment programs and data systems that facilitate P-20 collaboration. Legislatures need to hold joint P-20 education hearings and integrate budget policies.

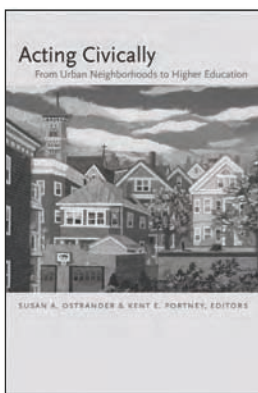
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