



## The Empty Pipeline

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Perhaps the most disturbing data in this “Trends & Indicators” issue of CONNECTION concerns the “education pipeline.” For every 100 public high school ninth-graders nationally, only 69 will graduate from high school four years later, only 39 will enter college the fall after they graduate, only 27 will return to their college for sophomore year and only 18 of those original 100 will earn associate degrees within three years of enrolling in college or bachelor’s degrees within six years of enrolling.

The New England states perform a little better than the nation as a whole but not well enough to meet the challenges posed by today’s global knowledge economy and complex civic and political environment.

If you live in New England, chances are, you are just a few minute drive from sixth-graders who believe they have two choices in life: find a paycheck job (as opposed to a career) or join the military. College is not even part of the cultural equation for them or their parents.

The main reasons for this are by now familiar: inadequate preparation and lack of financial resources for too many New England families and communities.

Despite the best efforts of teachers and professionals, too many of our students—particularly in urban environments as well as rural parts of New England—either drop out of high school or are allowed to graduate without having learned what they need in order to succeed academically or socially in college.

Others work hard only to find out the resources society invests annually

in various student aid programs and educational tax benefits still do not provide them with a real chance to achieve the American Dream.

An American from the top quartile of family income is six times more likely to have completed a bachelor’s degree by age 24 than his counterpart from the bottom quartile, according to research by Iowa higher education analyst Tom Mortenson. This lopsided attainment, Mortenson observes, is “driven by disparities at each of the three hurdles along the path to a bachelor’s degree.”

He’s talking about high school graduation rates (93 percent for the top income quartile; 69 percent for the bottom quartile); college continuation among high school graduates (87 percent for the top; 59 percent for the bottom) and bachelor’s completion (90 percent for the top; 31 percent for the bottom).

Of course, this gap takes hold long before students enter high school. A benchmark University of Michigan study found that children in the highest socioeconomic group entered kindergarten with cognitive scores 60 percent higher than those of the lowest socioeconomic group.

These children—and their teachers—need our engagement. But it takes a region to raise a college-ready child. That’s why the New England Board of Higher Education is working in partnership with the Burlington, Vt., Boys and Girls Club to instill college aspirations and preparation among the young people who participate in activities at the venerable community organization. The idea would be to expand this partnership to Boys and Girls Clubs and other community

groups across New England that engage with students afternoons, weekends and summers.

We also need to stop making it easy for children to fail. One sensible step would be to adopt a policy like Indiana’s in which a rigorous college- and work-prep curriculum becomes the default high school course. If a student really wants to opt out of the college-prep curriculum, the student *and* his parents or guardian should have to explicitly choose that life-altering assignment.

Another step would be to encourage New England employers to pledge not to hire permanent workers who do not have a high school diploma unless they have a solid plan to earn a GED.

Finally, the region’s higher education institutions, many located in the very same urban and rural communities where college aspirations are lowest, have a keen self-interest in getting the pipeline flowing. They need to strategically deploy their students, faculty and facilities to provide the role models, mentors and support programs that give their young neighbors a real chance to enroll in the future.

There is much at stake. Our excellence as a nation and a society requires that we fight relentlessly to make sure our young people are prepared academically and financially to succeed. Unless the current pattern is altered, we will lose our collective capacity to sustain a vibrant democracy, let alone compete economically in a global marketplace.

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