



An Education Mandate for New England's Governors

EVAN S. DOBELLE

New England jobs that were once open to smart, ambitious high school graduates now require a college degree. But New Englanders face two daunting barriers to college success. One, many are simply not prepared for college academically or in other ways; at least 25 percent of those who enter ninth grade will not even graduate from high school. Two, many cannot afford the high price of college—or believe they can't.

Here are some regional strategies for the six New England governors to consider in tackling the twin problems of college readiness and affordability:

- Hold a summit meeting on how we finance public education. New England is failing its urban, rural, low-income and first-generation students from Bangor to Bridgeport. All our best intentions about making these students “college-ready” and closing the “education gap” are empty as long as tax-poor cities depend on local property taxes to finance schools.

- Create a regionwide forum for best practices in teaching. Some education reformers would put creative teachers in a straitjacket of curricular requirements and tests. If we want innovation, we need to give teachers and administrators financial incentives to try new ideas and to share information on what works.

- Expand kindergarten and make preschool mandatory for three-year-olds. This one's a no-brainer. The six states can invest in early childhood education now or spend the money in the criminal justice and social welfare systems later.

- Develop a regional network of policymakers and educators, from pre-kindergarten through college, to explore ways to make sure what our

schools teach is aligned appropriately with what colleges expect of freshmen. New England could create a regional exchange program enabling college professors to spend a semester working in K-12 schools and giving school teachers time off to undertake research projects at New England colleges.

- Develop marketing campaigns targeted at those groups of students who face the most difficulty in entering and succeeding in college. These campaigns should work in partnership with after-school and enrichment programs administered by community organizations. Their goal must be to impress upon students and their parents the value of a college degree in today's job market, and to direct them to one-stop web sites for the information they need to successfully navigate college options.

Some of these steps are already being undertaken by the New England Board of Higher Education's “College Ready New England” initiative. This effort marks the first time in history that the region's governors, state higher education executives and education commissioners have come together with the business community to increase college preparedness and success.

The region's governors and other key officials also need to step up to the plate to make higher education affordable.

According to federal estimates, in this decade, more than two million low- and moderate-income high school graduates who are college ready will not complete college due to financial barriers. Here are some ways New England can reverse this fortune:

- Use political leverage to lobby for strengthened Pell Grants. The recent Commission on the Future of Higher Education recommended raising the

purchasing power of the average Pell Grant to cover 70 percent of average in-state tuition at public four-year campuses, up from the current 48 percent. Five years of efforts to raise the maximum Pell Grant have failed. But Congress and the administration might now be ready to listen to New England's bipartisan delegation of governors if they went to D.C., unified, to argue for more need-based aid.

- Direct aid dollars to need, not merit. The recent history of student aid is marked by two trends: 1) a shift from grants to loans and tax breaks and 2) a shift away from aid based on student financial need to aid based on sometimes dubious measures of merit. Merit aid often benefits students who would go to college anyway. If we are serious about the value of higher education to our future, we need to use scarce resources to fund students who would not otherwise go to college.

- Create a regionwide corps of students, including nontraditional students, to address our teaching and nursing shortages by waiving tuition in exchange for a guarantee that they will practice their profession for four years in New England after graduation.

- Make community college free and ease transfer of credits to four-year institutions. Harry Truman suggested 60 years ago that education be tuition-free through “14th grade.” It's time to make this happen.

College readiness and affordability present a quagmire for too many New England students. Working together, the region's six governors have a brilliant opportunity to offer those students and their families new hope.

Evan S. Dobelle is president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education and publisher of CONNECTION. Email: edobelle@nebhe.org.