



Strategies to Maintain New England's Education Advantage

MICHAEL K. THOMAS

Spurred by recession and fiscal emergencies, individuals and organizations flooded New England's statehouses this past spring to lobby exhausted governors, legislators and staff to preserve worthy programs and policies.

While the paths of the national and state economies remain unclear, New England educators in K-12 and higher education know that now is the time to invest in people, their skills and their futures.

How? Just as today's students and tomorrow's workers need to work smarter and collaborate, New England's decision-makers should jointly develop tools to ensure that more New Englanders are prepared for college and career, and to help the region meet the goal of the Obama administration and major foundations to increase college attainment.

Among key principles:

Requiring Rigorous Statewide Curricula. The New England states have increased the rigor of high school curricula and better aligned them with the expectations of postsecondary institutions. Yet such college- and career-ready curricula are not *required* for graduation, so many students—particularly underrepresented ones—are simply not ready for college.

Are New England leaders willing to accept that some students receive the courses and content knowledge they need to succeed after high school, while others (often unknowingly) do not? Twenty U.S. states have emphatically answered “No” and adopted graduation requirements aligned with entry standards to their state's public four-year

institutions. New England states must do the same, ending the guesswork of what it means to be academically prepared for college and career.

Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems. One can track a small parcel from a post office in Augusta, Maine, to a mailbox in Kuala Lumpur—real-time and point-by-point via the web—but cannot track an individual student's progress through the education pipeline toward a postsecondary degree. Several New England states have made progress, buoyed by strong leadership and national data standards, toward expanding and integrating data systems to these ends.

K-12 and higher education leaders must use the improved, integrated student-level data to drive policy. To markedly reduce postsecondary remediation and improve readiness and degree attainment, we must employ timely data to work smarter. Data must track individual students' progress toward key elements of readiness, provide early warnings and timely feedback on performance and inform teaching and learning. And the data must follow students into postsecondary institutions.

Early Commitment Financial Aid Programs. While progress has been made in closing the achievement gap between low-income and minority students and their peers, the gap will continue to erode New England's advantage in postsecondary attainment. Hitting the problem head-on, several states have created programs to engage low-income students (many of them minority) and their families in making an early commitment to college readiness and success. As early as sixth

grade, students pledge to take rigorous courses and to participate in activities to prepare for and get accepted to college.

The College Crusade of Rhode Island is an outstanding model. By fulfilling their part of the “contract,” students earn financial aid and tuition waivers at public institutions.

Statewide Goals for Postsecondary Attainment. Only one New England state has articulated statewide targets to expand postsecondary attainment in the coming decade or beyond. Maine's statewide goal calls for an additional 39,500 degree holders beyond the projected or “natural” growth rate by the year 2019.

It's time for the other five New England states to thoughtfully develop specific goals to educate new degree-holders. Doing so will require creating a shared understanding of how a state produces graduates, as well as data-driven analyses of K-12 and higher education performance, demographic projections, migration patterns and regional, national and international comparisons. It will require examining the key junctions of the education pipeline and the condition of state and institutional policy levers that are most critical to reaching such goals.

Working smarter and more collaboratively, using better data and intervening with students earlier in the pipeline, New England can maintain its education advantage.

Michael K. Thomas is president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education and publisher of THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION. Email: mthomas@nebhe.org