

CONNECTION

NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL

OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CONNECTION: NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT is published four times a year by the New England Board of Higher Education, 45 Temple Place, Boston, MA 02111. Phone: 617.357.9620 • Fax: 617.338.1577

Vol. XIV, No. 1 Spring 1999

ISSN 0895-6405

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Publisher: John C. Hoy

Executive Editor: John O. Harney

Assistant Editor: Susan W. Martin

Director of Publications: Charlotte Stratton

Design and Production: The Publication Group

Advertising Sales and

Marketing Coordinator: Christine Quinlan

Subscription Information: \$20 per year (4 issues); regular issues \$3.95 each; annual FACTS issue \$14.95.

Advertising rates are available upon request.

CONNECTION is printed in New England. CONNECTION is indexed in PAIS International and in ERIC's *Current Index to Journals in Education*. CONNECTION is available in microform and electronically from University Microfilms, 800 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. A cumulative index of CONNECTION articles and abstracts of recent articles are accessible on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nebhe.org>.

The **New England Board of Higher Education** is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to foster cooperation and the efficient use of resources among New England's approximately 260 colleges and universities. NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

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EDITOR'S MEMO

How do New Englanders and their "opinion leaders" in government, education, business, the media and the civil sector view their region at the millennium? In an attempt to find out, the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) and the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts-Boston recently asked 1,000 New England movers and shakers and 1,000 New England households their opinions on pressing public policy issues, regional economic prospects and opportunities for interstate collaboration in America's smallest region.

NEBHE then invited six forward-looking New England political figures to review the survey findings and take part in a mock *Race for Governor of the State of New England*.

The "State" in this case, of course, is a bit of imagery employed to get people thinking about regional cooperation. And did it ever. Freed from the constraints of spin doctors and fundraisers, the six "candidates" engaged in a no-holds-barred, regional brainstorming session that yielded proposals ranging from a six-state pension fund to a "Buy New England" campaign to a pact ending *intraregional* competition for businesses and jobs.

Maine state Senate Majority Leader Chellie Pingree imagined New England becoming the first region to provide health care for all and, rather than fearing the cost implications for business, talking up universal care as a competitive advantage in attracting companies and skilled workers to the region. Former New Hampshire state Rep. Deborah "Arnie" Arnesen wondered whether a regional funding source could be created to keep schools open from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. and from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. when a lot of New England kids are on their own and at risk.

On the issue of improving K-12 education—New Englanders' No. 1 public policy priority, according to the NEBHE/McCormack survey—all six candidates moved thoughtfully beyond the test-bash-defund model that has passed for policy innovation in some places. Several spoke of New England's potential leadership in true *lifelong learning*, beginning with the practical application of recent brain development research in early childhood education and parenting.

A real governor on the panel was clearly moved by the proceedings. "When NEBHE asked me to come up here and talk about the State of New England, I thought it was a joke," said former Rhode Island Gov. Bruce Sundlun. "But I have listened to my fellow candidates talk—and it is a good idea. It really is a good idea."

Media interest in the survey and debate was extraordinary, and the promise of regional action seems to have resonated with many New Englanders whose problems and their solutions, noted Arnesen, have little to do with state boundaries created by "some king."

Actually, Colonial authorities did New England one favor that was not lost on the candidates pondering New England's fictitious statehood. Thanks to the compact size of the six states, 13 million New Englanders elect 12 U.S. senators, while 30 million Californians, for example, elect only two. The population-based House of Representatives is another story. New England once could claim roughly the same House representation as Texas, Florida and California combined. Now those three megastates together send about five times as many reps to Washington as slow-growing New England, which is expected to lose another seat soon.

Survey respondents and candidates alike fretted a great deal about New England's slow population growth—not so much as it affects the region's clout in Washington as it contributes to a nagging shortage of skilled labor. The region's unemployment rate has hovered around 3 percent since the beginning of the year, and many employers report difficulty in filling high-skill jobs, even as hundreds of thousands of New Englanders lack the skills needed for good jobs in the knowledge economy. Such paradoxes surely warrant further regional examination.

Several of the reporters who so ably covered the mock race for governor posed a predictable question: Who won? We're pleased to report New England won.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.