

Whole System Change: States Create New Vision of Reform



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Most of us involved with education can name an exceptional high school—a school that despite the challenges of high poverty enrollment, community decline, a sudden growth in English language learners, or a bitter budget cutback, has nonetheless succeeded at having most students graduate, head on to college, and otherwise achieve.

“Often when we talk of such schools we find ourselves using the past tense,” says Ted Hamann, research and evaluation specialist at The Education Alliance. “This school was great. It was great when... and we fill in the blank with ‘when it had that charismatic principal’, or ‘when it had that special grant’, or ‘when the drama program or athletic program were bringing kudos to the school.’ But these single school success stories are too often ephemeral if they’re not accompanied by, and aligned with, more systemic change.”

Three states in New England want their schools to become more than solitary and temporary success stories. The state departments of education in Maine, Vermont, and Rhode Island have invited The Education Alliance to help them create viable, systemic improvements that will both endure and favorably influence what students gain from high school.

Maine creates the centerpiece

In 1997, concerned about the quality of secondary education in Maine, then Commissioner of Education Duke Albanese undertook a comprehensive, statewide study of high schools. He wanted to work with The Education Alliance's LAB, he said, because “At that time, there weren't a lot of folks recognizing the importance of rethinking teaching and learning at the high school level. We really found a very interested and enthusiastic high school reform partner in the LAB.”

The Alliance responded by having program specialists Karen Weller and Joe DiMartino provide research and resources to help document Maine's vision. “We want to make every high school in Maine a school of great promise,” says Albanese. “We want Maine people to be

among the best educated people in the world, with kids who are second to none in technological savvy and who are responsible, involved citizens. ... No other policy issue is as important right now as having highly literate, ethically sound students. It will decide the future of our state."

This vision became Maine's *Promising Futures: A Call to Improve Learning for Maine's Secondary Students*, a framework that helps guide schools toward improvement through the articulation of core principles and practices, mostly related to the personalization of learning and the alignment of instruction and assessment with standards. Since its publication in 1998, *Promising Futures* has drawn national attention, and was a central reason for Maine receiving a \$10 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation last year.

Through the publication of *Promising Futures* and the creation of a Center for Secondary Inquiry of Education and a Center on Literacy to help sustain the new statewide reform efforts, Maine's Department of Education has been positioned to promote *Promising Futures* as the centerpiece of systemic change. The Alliance has documented how this has successfully played out over the last three years in its publication, *We're From the State*.

The model for what high schooling should look like is being redefined in Maine. Rather than issue a mandate, the state created a vision and support for schools to move toward that vision. More than half of Maine's high schools have formally agreed to implement *Promising Futures* core practices.

Vermont builds on Maine's success

In Vermont, the Alliance has been supporting systemic high school change through researching innovations at five high schools, documenting promising practices, offering formative feedback, and including key players in the Alliance's Secondary Schools Restructuring Network.

As part of this network, the Alliance facilitated a discussion in Washington, D.C. between Albanese, others associated with *Promising Futures*, and the Vermont High School Task Force—a group of education experts established at the request of the State Board of Education. The task force developed the publication, *High Schools on the Move: Renewing Vermont's Commitment to Quality Secondary Education*.

Like *Promising Futures*, *High Schools on the Move* is a guiding

framework for efforts across the state. It describes twelve recommended principles for personalizing the learning of high school students, thereby increasing both their engagement and academic achievement. It also recommends discontinuing common practices that do not contribute to students' success.

"High Schools on the Move's sustainable, systemic change recognizes the difficulties schools will face and simultaneously infuses hope for what we can achieve by working together," says Andrea McManus, state coordinator for High Schools that Work. "We believe that Vermont secondary schools can become places where all students are deeply cared for, where they actively choose among many different pathways toward adult engagement, and where they learn to meet the high standards outlined in *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*."

Rhode Island begins the work

When Commissioner of Education Peter McWalters invited the Alliance to support a Rhode Island High Schools Summit three years ago, the multi-day conference led to the drafting of a report documenting the impersonal and unengaging climate of the state's high schools. The report also recommended several guidelines and strategies for tackling these problems, guidelines that have subsequently been made into policy by the Rhode Island Regents.

Next steps

"We're continuing to support the work of the states in a variety of ways, including helping states move toward personalized learning by offering a series of workshops that take a multi-level approach to personalization," says DiMartino. "You need to look at all levels of school organization in order to make changes, and the state plays a pivotal and key role in this process."

Exciting and substantive as these states' efforts are toward systemic high school change, the forthcoming work in each of these states and the dissemination of both success stories and cautionary tales will be crucial. DiMartino explains, "We need to learn more about how states can either support or impede the major changes necessary to get all high school students to achieve at a higher standard than ever before."