

Time for a renovation

We need to update our approach to K-12 education to meet the challenges of the new century **BY NICHOLAS C. DONOHUE**

OUR REGION AND nation are coping with how to meet the economic and civic demands of the 21st century.

The economic downturn has placed heightened attention on these demands, but the writing has been on the wall for some time. Both our economy and our way of life are evolving at an unprecedented rate.

At the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we've been considering this evolution.

A few years ago, our board of directors and our staff began a rigorous process to evaluate our work and the impact we were making. We commissioned research revealing that New England, the region we serve as an education funder, was in the midst of a shift toward a more knowledge-based economy. The days of a high school diploma as the key to middle-class America were indeed behind us. Now, the research tells us, if New Englanders want to achieve success, they need a postsecondary degree or certificate indicating a certain level of skills and knowledge. It has become clear that, while basic skills remain of utmost importance, today's students also need additional skills if they want to succeed economically and participate in civic life.

At the same time, the face of our region has changed. The good news is that we've enjoyed slight growth in our population, thanks largely to increases in immigrant populations and young people of color. However, these demographic groups have not been traditionally served well by our educational and economic systems. We realize that in order to improve New England's prospects for the future, we need to update our education system so that everyone can be prepared for the challenges of the 21st century.

We pondered how our organization, a supporter of education programs, could best contribute to the type of change we need. The prevailing K-12 approach has not changed in over 100 years. A relatively narrow set of skills is still being measured by convenient, large-scale testing. It has become clear that the education system is in need

of a major upgrade. As with an old house that has endured numerous piecemeal updates, the time has come for a major renovation. While we were confident in the validity of our organization's previous contributions, both our continued desire for a more equitable society and the reality of the current state of the world told us that more needs to be done. Our work, it is now apparent, must also evolve.

After a thorough process of research and analysis, we decided we could accomplish the largest improvement in education by focusing on the promotion and integration of year-round, student-centered approaches to learning at the



middle- and high-school levels. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to education, we want to support models of education that take into account the fact that different students learn in different ways, often at different times

and different rates. Today's students need to know not only basic math and English, but also how to collaborate, solve problems, and utilize technology. We feel that student-centered approaches best attend to both the basic and the additional skills necessary for success in today's world.

These approaches draw on the science of how people learn and are characterized by: innovative uses of time; the inclusion of a wider variety of adults to complement teachers in all aspects of learning; the measurement of skills and mastery of content using a combination of demonstration and traditional testing; an acknowledgement that learning takes place both in and out of the classroom; and a persistent focus on the needs and interests of learners. In this type of educational experience, learning becomes the constant and the where, when, and how it happens—as well as who the adults are that facilitate it—become the variables.

THIS EXPANDED VIEW of learning is long overdue. Young people already learn at various times in various settings. For example, some young people are lucky enough to have the resources to benefit from rich learning experiences over the summer months. There are also after-school programs which provide young people access to vital experiential learning, often inspiring a desire to master some new skill. And then there is the effect of increased technology in the information age. The Internet has become not only a faucet of learning and information; it is often an opened hydrant, exploding with knowledge for all who will come and drink, whether via desktop computer or via palm-held phone. By focusing on high-quality, student-centered approaches, we're acknowledging all the ways young people acquire skills and digest information, and we're incorporating them into educational opportunities that benefit all students.

The fundamental ideas behind these approaches can already be seen in programs across the country. In New York City, the School of One program combines classroom instruction with online tutors, allowing middle school students to proceed at their own pace over the summer months. Progress is assessed daily, and seat time

plays no part in that measurement.

In New Hampshire's Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) program, high school students receive credit for learning that takes place outside the classroom. For example, ELO students may receive credit for work performed at a newspaper as long as they can demonstrate to a qualified teacher that what they have learned ties back

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to pre-determined requirements.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation itself recently awarded grants to 12 schools and educational organizations across the region for previous efforts to put students at the center of learning. The fact that there is sufficient momentum for these approaches is encouraging.

That's because our goal at the Foundation is to help student-centered approaches move beyond the level of "one good model" applied only in some areas or only to some students as an alternative to "regular" schooling. We hope to elevate these approaches until they become a core facet of schooling. We believe that this will help create a

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more equitable system that will help all of us meet the economic, social, and educational challenges we face together as a society.

In order to achieve that goal, we'll be implementing a strategic approach that aims to change three dimensions of the system simultaneously. We will work with practitioners to develop and integrate effective student-centered approaches to learning. We will also dedicate ourselves to policy efforts that allow student-centered approaches to flourish. And, because systems naturally resist change, we will concentrate on increasing public demand for high quality educational experiences for all learners.

This three-pronged strategic approach will be applied through all aspects of our work, especially our new primary grant-making initiatives: **District Level Systems Change**, which includes not only the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches, but also policy and advocacy work at the school district level; **State Level Systems Change**, which focuses on statewide education policies that affect learning at the district level; **Research and Development**, which serves to inform not only our work, but that of practitioners in the fields of education and philanthropy; and **Public Understanding**,

which aims to increase both awareness of student-centered learning experiences and the will to implement them. These initiatives are designed to complement each other and will evolve as specific funding opportunities are designed and implemented across the region.

We know that the type of change we're talking about will take time. The status quo is entrenched, and any movement will need to be earned with special attention to maintaining high standards as we seek more flexible, innovative approaches. Innovation for innovation's sake is not a responsible proposition. That's why we're going to work tirelessly to engage and support a diverse group of stakeholders that includes students, parents, educators, elected officials and the business community. It's also why we'll be reaching out to our philanthropic colleagues across the region and beyond. No matter how daunting the task ahead may seem, we believe that together we can move toward a system that is properly aligned with the needs of today's learners and the realities of our society. Together, we can be catalysts for the change we need. **CW**

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