

Rural Partnerships in New England: Learning from Kids

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The New England Association of Schools & Colleges (NEASC), the oldest accrediting association in the United States, established the Office of School/College Relations (OSCR) in 1990 to encourage collaborative activities that strengthen education. While the six-state region of New England boasts more than two hundred collaboratives, chiefly between schools and colleges, fully half were formed some 20 years ago. Rural partnerships define an even smaller number, of which only 110 are listed among more than 2,400 partnerships surveyed by the University of Syracuse since 1986. Few, if any, are involved in systemic reform. This paper focuses on NEASC's recent undertaking of the "Rural Partnerships for Students' Success Project," to enhance conditions which will improve equity and access to postsecondary education. The effort to strengthen institutions' ability to meet accrediting standards reflects lessons learned from the study of student aspirations and implications for rural education reform.

The Partnership Movement

NEASC serves the public and the educational community by establishing and maintaining high standards of education excellence through self-evaluation and peer review. Schools and colleges which demonstrate that they meet those standards are accredited and thus become members of the association. While initially devoting exclusive attention to New England schools and colleges, in recent years it has served educational institutions abroad, particularly at the K-12 level, thus advancing the ideal of self-regulation through peer review in regions outside the United States. NEASC now serves almost 1,700 schools and colleges in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont and almost 70 American international schools in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

NEASC was founded in 1885 to promote linkages for elementary and secondary schools with higher education throughout the six-state New England region. It is the oldest of the nation's six accrediting associations, distinguished by its singular role in serving all educational levels, K-16, and in establishing an office devoted to promoting partnerships for this constituency. Interest in such collaboration nationwide decreased by the 1930s, emerging once more in the 1960s with the release of Sputnik, with another incarnation by the mid-1980s following the release of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). By 1988, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-

Milwaukee concluded that "virtually every avenue of educational change has been explored and reported, however, one very promising development—school/university collaboratives—has received considerably less public attention and evaluation because it is less dramatic and its effects are harder to demonstrate" (Mickelson, Kritek, Hedlun, & Kaufmann, 1988, p. 1).

Citing its founding mission, NEASC formed a committee that supported educational partnerships in 1960, and later established the OSCR in March 1990 with funding from various foundations and regional education departments. Fully half of the partnerships identified by NEASC in New England (OSCR, 1996) were formed in the 1980s, and to paraphrase a current pitch in advertising, 'have grown up, not old', becoming "institutionalized," according to Syracuse University's Frank Wilbur (1995).

New Connections for "Have-Not Schools"

NEASC Commissions encourage and assist in improving the effectiveness of affiliated institutions through what its mission statement calls "a process of assessment, particularly as it focuses on institutional self-evaluation and self-improvement."

Beginning in 1994, the OSCR received funding from the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust and the Nellie Mae Fund for Education to support the needs of rural schools, encouraging them to collaborate with regional partners in higher education, and other interested institutions to provide much-needed equity and access for students. Attention to rural schools is up nationwide according to Wilbur (personal communication, February 15, 1996) with 1994 data reflecting a rise in partnerships to 23.6%, up from 20.6% in the 1989 survey. This not only reflects the ability of rural schools to engage distant university partners, but

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also a growing interest in a number of state higher education offices and, particularly, by a number of funding sources, both private and federal, to disburse support to as broad a range of interested partners as possible (Angus, 1995).

General classifications of partnerships, as found in the American Association for Higher Education (Wilbur & Lambert, 1995) survey results, are becoming more detailed, with greater interest in school restructuring, facilities, and resource sharing. Programs that serve underrepresented and at-risk populations including poor and minority students are increasingly turning to orientation programs that focus on improving study skills, problem solving, and individual responsibility. Guidance and counseling services become critical factors as partnerships address school-to-work or school-to-college needs. Inevitably, these partnerships require greater parental and community involvement and a new opportunity for higher education to help shape the future of public education (Barth, 1996).

Improving Access and Equity for Rural Schools

President Clinton's 1996 State of the Union address (Washington, DC, January 23, 1996) recommended greater access to postsecondary education as a vehicle for improving Americans' lives. A later address to the Democratic National Convention (Chicago, IL, August 29, 1996) repeated the exhortation of "expanding opportunity through education," stating that "by the year 2000, the most critical thing we can do is to give every single American who wants it the chance to go to college. We must make 2 years of college just as universal in 4 years as a high school education is today." According to national data compiled by the Education Trust, "about 86% of students in 1994 earned high school diplomas or the equivalent by age 24," but the numbers drop dramatically for the poor and disadvantaged (Haycock, 1996a, p. 4).

National Department of Education figures of 1995 indicate that workers with bachelor degrees are expected to earn over 85% more than those with high school diplomas and nearly triple that of a high school dropout. A December 1996 Education Trust report relies on the compilation of data in an understandable form to assist Americans in combating underachievement of both schools and students "so that we can close the achievement gap forever." Nonetheless, "only 62% of all high-school graduates enter 2- or 4-year colleges, just about half of these students earn a degree" (Haycock, 1996a, p. 4). While further education reduces the probability of reaping many individual and social benefits, access is barred for many. As Donald Stewart (1996), President of the College Board, asks, is it fair "when an estimated 4% of those from the poorest families will earn a BA, while 76% of the wealthiest will?" (p. 9) According to the College Board, "one in-

dicator of how income affects college attendance is the small proportion of low-income students among the more than one million high school seniors who take the College Board's SAT each year. Approximately 15% of seniors in the class of 1995 . . . identified themselves as having family incomes of \$20,000 or less. In this small group, only 66% report plans to attend a 4-year college or university, versus the 80% to 85% of middle and upper-income seniors who took the SAT" (King, 1996, p. 1).

Proportionately fewer rural than nonrural seniors intend to pursue college degrees, and as the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and the National Center for Student Aspirations (NCSA) have found, rural students have lower aspirations, thus even further limiting their access to educational opportunities that are critical to improving their prospects for life. Overall, rural poverty rates equal or exceed those in urban areas. More children live in poverty than within the last 2 decades—more than in any year between 1967 and 1991. In 1995, 14.7 million children were living in poverty, that is, 21% of all America's children, a rate almost twice that of the adult poverty rate of 11%. One in five of these children are from nonmetropolitan areas (Children's Defense Fund, 1997).

The curricular news is also dismal: whether or not students have high aspirations, low-income students were 44% less likely than students from more affluent families to be enrolled in more demanding college-prep courses, in part, because of their low self-esteem and limited instructional resources and staff.

The OERI's Joyce D. Stern (1994) reports that nonmetropolitan, completely rural counties and nonmetropolitan, small urban center counties share the lowest per capita incomes in the nation. Rural schools and their students represent 17% of students in public education, about 3.3 million students in approximately a quarter of American public schools. Rural schools have the potential "to be at the forefront of the drive to redesign America's schools" (p. 72), in part because of their size, little bureaucracy, and tradition of sharing common values with their communities (Stern, 1994). Stern's report provides the first comprehensive study of the unique circumstances and outcomes of rural education, providing a significant guide to data that should be considered by policymakers. (Overall, while targeting rural students and rural schools for purposes of improving education, the report determines that there may be a number of definitions for what is rural, rather than a homogenous term. NEASC does not employ such a definition in describing its members, although the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that the northeast has its share of rural districts and rural students. These are, in descending order: Vermont and Rhode Island with almost 64% of rural districts, followed by Maine with 54.6%, New Hampshire with 44.87%, Connecticut at 13.6%, and Massachusetts at 8.6%. The percentage of rural students in the

region, however, is led by Vermont with 30.5%, Maine with 28.4%, leaving New Hampshire at about 20%, with Massachusetts almost at 11%, and Rhode Island and Connecticut at 5% and 3.5% (Kysilko, 1996).

A key condition for successful reform is high expectations for students which not only increases student motivation but also their aspirations for the future—a condition often absent in rural sites. Although rural students have significantly higher graduation rates from high school than do those from urban areas, they have limited access to institutions of higher education and apply to college less frequently. In addition, twice as many seniors in rural schools have no plans after they graduate from high school than do those from urban schools (Stern, 1994). Families in impoverished regions are less likely to consider the value of a college education. Lowering matriculation rates for rural students, and lessening their incentive to enroll in curricula (if available) that will strengthen their college preparation. As a cohort, parents and community experience combines in leaving rural youth with in the lowest aspirations and self-esteem of any group (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989).

Poor self-esteem continues to be an overriding determinant in both matriculation and in retention rates, leading to a dropout rate of more than 50% for rural students. According to recent studies, low-income rural youth, experience many, if not more of the same dilemmas of urban youth raised in poverty. In fact, poverty in rural areas equals or exceeds that of urban areas in the past decade, affecting the achievement gap among poor and minority students that began to decrease over the last 2 decades, to again widen since 1991.

If schools provide students with less, and students in rural areas are known to have low self-esteem and aspirations, how can we break the cycle? The rallying point, according to researchers at the NCSA, may well be encouraging and training teachers and staff in partnerships that emphasize raising student aspirations. This provides schools with much-needed information that can dramatically shift efforts from what is taught to how it is learned. Accordingly, schools are better able to create conditions that support the development of student aspirations.

Designing Partnerships Where Students Choose to Achieve

If an educational goal is to achieve equity in college access and retention for rural youth, then we must design partnerships where students choose to achieve.

A 3-year demonstration project, undertaken by NEASC in September, 1994, began with four rural high schools interested in creating partnerships to offer greater access to more students for further education. Much like their students, these schools found themselves limited by region and by economic realities with little opportunity to enlarge

the experiences of their students or teachers beyond the classroom. Poverty, as expressed by Title I funding or subsidized school lunches was high, school facilities were outdated and, in some cases, unsuitable for modernization; and achievement rates were low. Funding from the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust and the Nellie Mae Fund for Education enabled schools in northern New Hampshire, western Massachusetts, central Maine, and northeastern Rhode Island, to embark on channeling diverse energies into more focused activities. (Recent Nellie Mae Fund for Education grants in New England were awarded almost equally between rural and suburban/urban sites.) Each high school gathered some 30-50 participants throughout the year and quickly undertook no more than five doable tasks, each designed to provide real and immediate academic and counseling support to all students, whether college-bound or not.

New partnerships were forged while others were better defined and articulated. Year two (1995-1996) activities provide analysis of student aspirations as generated by the University of Maine's NCSA at the College of Education in Orono. Maine's Aspirations School Improvement Project was a comprehensive working relationship between the University and four rural, disadvantaged school districts formed in 1984. University personnel assisted in planning, implementing, and evaluating strategies to "bring about measurable educational improvements and serve as stimuli to similar reforms elsewhere" (Center for Research and Evaluation, 1994; R.A. Cobb, personal communication, December 1, 1995). Currently, aspirations survey instruments have been prepared and used in even broader contexts, ranging from school systems in Bangladesh to Native American communities in the southwest and schools in northern Mexico. The Rural Partnership schools involved with NEASC now have access to important tools and collaboration by researchers to make informed and powerful programmatic decisions affecting student outcomes.

Reinvigorating Education at All Levels K-16

Consolidation of small, rural schools may offer a more comprehensive curriculum, while losing the advantage of lower student/teacher ratios. A 1988 study on school restructuring offers solid evidence of improving student learning. Valerie Lee and Julia Smith (1994) researched the effects of structural practices defined as traditional, moderate, and restructuring. Their analysis of data from 820 high schools involved a nationally representative sample of 11,794 students in their early years of high school. The "significant departure criteria" followed school restructuring criteria developed by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, validating hypotheses that "distribution of gains in achievement and engagement" were more likely to be found in "restructured settings and even

more, in smaller schools" (V. Lee & J. Smith, personal communication, July 15, 1995).

Commonality involving greater input and opportunity for shared involvement "may heighten the commitment of both teachers and students to succeed," report Lee and Smith, substantiating the accepted, but little proven notion that partnerships may truly reinvigorate education at all levels, helping educators assure that their institutions meet their responsibilities.

The small, but growing body of research related to partnerships and similar collaborations indicates that institutions themselves can and are being reformed. Research collection remains problematic, however, in an educational system which does not agree upon critical terms for reporting requirements of any type or genuine comparability among institutions, as noted in a U.S. Department of Education report in 1992. Changes in definitions and methodologies are needed to "create a more comparable and complete set of institution-level student outcomes statistics at a national level" (U.S. Department of Education, 1992, p. 118).

NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education began a study of the relationship between regional accreditation and institutional improvement in 1992, providing an extensive and systematic examination of its success in carrying out its mission of assessment for purposes of institutional improvement (Robinson, 1994, 1995). Its Director has proposed that an academic audit conducted by regional accreditation agencies be a necessary component of any balanced quality-assurance system (Dill, Massy, Williams, & Cook, 1996). Currently, the Commission on Public Secondary Schools plans to build and document its work in linking accreditation to change in education. Specifically, it will consider data gathered from recently evaluated middle level and high schools in New England over the past 8 years and explore various strategies for presenting a coherent picture of this diverse information. The product of this projected 18-month study should offer yet another picture of how accreditation revitalizes and contributes to systemic change in education.

Furthering NEASC research capabilities contributes to the activities of the OSCR which assists educators in crafting new collaborations at all levels. Evaluation of initiatives beginning with the work of the Rural Partnership schools project can help institutions learn, furthering evidence found in the Stanford study that learning communities can "generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their effort to reflect, examine, experiment, and change" (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993, p. 18). Although longitudinal studies are beyond the framework of the original 3-year project, they are being considered to gain insights into various models for improving student outcomes in other demonstration projects that are

being developed for underachieving students in the middle level grades, 6-8 and lower, to grades K-5. The NCSA has developed an instrument—*Student Aspirations Survey*—which has been distributed to the Rural Partnership schools in New England. Information generated by this survey provides schools with an opportunity to do self-analysis and develop programs to enhance the conditions in schools which impact student aspiration. Aspirations are the single method of, or research tool for, identifying a commonality among all underachieving students in all age groups. The model includes programming, professional development for teachers, monthly support and follow-up, with all activities designed and developed by the adapting teams.

Systemic School Reform and Student Aspirations

The nation's governors convened on March 26-27 to consider the lack of progress in meeting National Education Goals of 1989, and focus on setting specific standards for student achievement (Applebome, 1996). While their action reaffirmed commitment to improving schools and supporting high academic achievement, it does not necessarily net a positive and immediate response from students. Although much continues to be written and stated about the creation of and implementation of standards, little is based on asking students how they might become better learners. Mandates alone have very little relationship or effectiveness in fostering and maintaining the conditions which lead to raised aspirations. Data collection and analysis is equally unrewarding, as Kati Haycock (1996b), Director of the Education Trust, notes "there is way too much educational data on the things nobody wants to know, and way too little on what matters most."

Real change in student achievement is unlikely, however, unless students are inspired to learn and understand why they should learn. Recognizing the importance of student aspirations and fostering conditions in schools that positively affect them are essential in any educational reform effort. Creating a school environment that respects and encourages the talents and efforts of every child costs little more than a change in attitude that establishes an educational environment beyond academics (Quaglia, 1996c).

Current collaboration in NEASC's Rural Partnership project with the NCSA, however, strives to move beyond measuring what students *know* into what they *think* and *feel*. This represents a crucial shift from standard research methodology to a much-needed, reflective experience or "holding up a mirror to the schools." Addressing student aspirations can change the teaching and learning environment of a school and make a tangible difference in the lives of students. "Society must look at students as the potential instead of the problem," states Dr. Russell Quaglia, Director of the NCSA, urging us to look at potential, moving

from the seemingly popular view that one should “fix what’s wrong with kids,” to changing the culture of the organization (Quaglia, 1996b).

Student and teacher aspirations increasingly are viewed as important and identifiable components of quality schools. Today, social and economic conditions exist which adversely affect individual aspirations and too often lead to apathetic performance, dropping out, and antisocial or self-destructive behaviors. The work in our partnership is based on the belief that all children of the school community have value and can be productive contributors in educational environments, if such is expected of them and they are given support and opportunity. NEASC’s OSCR and the NCSA serve as a central resource providing leadership, research, and interventions to help schools assess and respond to the perceptions and needs of all students and improve overall educational environments. The establishment of these partnerships responds in a unique fashion to the growing interest in systemic reform, but does this with the engine of a decade of research on aspirations that can now involve practitioners in action either through sharpening assessment methods to measure conditions affecting student aspirations or by professional development and on-site involvement in educational improvement initiatives.

As recent research has shown, aspirations are an important component in the growth and development of students of all ages. “Student aspirations are defined as one’s ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work towards achieving them” (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996, p. 130). The learning laboratory experience of the University of Maine is now harnessed to new opportunities to make a difference in the lives of children by identifying and thus providing an environment in which aspirations can flourish and grow.

Researchers, working with practitioners in rural schools throughout Maine have identified eight conditions which are believed to have positive effects on developing and raising student aspirations. The eight conditions, drawn from exploratory studies conducted over the past 12 years, are listed as Achievement, Belonging, Curiosity, Empowerment, Excitement, Mentoring, Risk-taking, and Self-confidence (Quaglia, 1996a). This template assists educators in changing the culture of their institutions by involving students in establishing a mission of improving student outcomes by creating and maintaining conditions which foster the growth of aspirations. Although nonexhaustive, each condition remains essential at any age, whether kindergarten or doctoral work, in order to secure inspiration, ambition, and thus aspirations. Age appropriate aspiration surveys are used to obtain baseline data that is the impetus for projects chosen by the school/college team, drawing on direct involvement and leadership of students.

Conditions for Creating Partnerships with Students to Raise Aspirations

Schools (and their partnerships) vary considerably, as do the individual approaches used to adapt many, if not all of the conditions described below. Overall, however, understanding and recognition of these eight conditions has begun to reap demonstrable results in raising student aspirations, as mentioned in the conclusion.

These eight conditions have been observed in schools noted for student populations with a high level of both inspiration and ambitions. The eight conditions require a commitment from the entire learning community to behave in ways that support the development of each individual’s aspirations. All of these conditions carry personal and organizational dimensions, which must be understood, adapted, and in many cases, improved, in order to foster the conditions known to raise aspirations.

There are many challenges for today’s youth. Setting high expectations and standards for what students should know and be able to do at various stages of their careers, may be one approach to a solid start to life-long learning, but it is not enough. As the 1996 Agenda of the Education Commission of the States urges, “more attention must be given to the connection between state policy and changes in the classroom that produce increased student learning.” Further, it is not enough to recognize and record dismal statistics, as portrayed in the Bill Moyers’ (1996) documentary, *Children in America’s Schools*, where commentators debated what Kozol called “a basically flawed, inequitable system . . . because it guarantees that a family that can afford to buy a million dollar home automatically can buy a million dollar education for that child.” The work of some inner city Catholic schools with half the funding of some urban schools in Ohio contradicts the notion that funding alone is the culprit. (Again, believing in students’ potential far outdrew economic limitations in affecting students’ success for those Catholic schools.)

The Rural Partnerships project has been characterized by schools with severe challenges that affected their ability to remain accredited. A combination of student and district factors, common to rural areas, appeared to doom efforts to agree upon which school improvement issue to tackle. Nonetheless, principals and other facilitators in creating the partnerships turned to raising student aspirations as the vehicle for promoting a wide variety of options for the entire school. Although the partnerships were formed to increase the number of college-bound students, it became transformed into changing the culture of the entire school. Instead of focusing simply on successful college preparation, and the traditional methods for approaching these goals such as supplemental instruction, additional services and/or staff, the partnerships turned instead to

working on improving the school by involving students as shareholders. Thus the partnership moved from other successful approaches that are in many cases, top-down such as the work of the GE Fund and its college-bound sites to one that is client-based. A solid student-based effort was designed in each of the schools with higher education partners from the NCSA, together with partnership guidance from NEASC, building on natural internal strengths and values of each of the communities.

Although activities varied among the New England partner schools, the success of raising student aspirations midway through the 3-year project includes the following highlights: student performance on standardized tests rose some 120% to 160% in one school, following a decade of below-state average results; absenteeism and visits to the principal dropped from 86 for 25 students in a 2-month period to fewer than 5 truancy days and no visits; students created a variety of leadership activities such as newspapers highlighting the nontraditional accomplishments of their peers, building new respect and admiration for those previously not connected to the school; mentoring from the high school to the middle school, and even from K-1 to incoming kindergartners led students to promote learning in new ways while building their community; students undertook research that extended their risk-taking abilities, leading them to singular roles as presenters at national conferences alongside research scientists and graduate students; cocurricular activities including new ones designed by students enriched each school and provided a positive impact on individual and group morale. Gains have been documented in academic performance as well as academic zeal, improving 50% in some content areas. More than 75% of these increases were of one full grade or more in one representative school. Finally, the number of students choosing to enroll in further study either doubled or rose in all the partnership high schools, with one partner's matriculants rising from 30% to almost 60%.

Believing in students made these preliminary successes happen, and as they occurred, support in many other forms ranging from direct funding to new alliances with regional colleges to provide courses, counseling, and access to technology occurred. Possibilities grew as confidence rose. Talk became action, even as simple as organizing 2-day visits for rural students as a group to visit Boston-area colleges while using one as a home base. Respecting students as learners and giving schools the information they needed propelled many exciting projects that continue to lead each student to be responsible for his or her own personal, social, and academic growth. The conclusion of the Rural Partnerships project within 3 years is too brief to come to full fruition if the goal is simply to significantly raise the percentage of college-bound students.

Identifying a commonality of student aspirations work that can be invoked at each of these sites, whether urban or

rural, whether high school or other level, appears to have a ripple effect beyond that admirable goal. The demonstration schools themselves appear to have connected to the eight conditions, taking on risks, gaining confidence, etc. In documenting the changes in the schools, we see a vibrancy and excitement that will sustain the partnership and influence true school reform, as well as what the Education Commission of the States 1996 Agenda calls "the serious engagement of higher education in identifying and making necessary contributions to K-12 reform." As E. Robert Stephens (1994) reports, such collaboration has occurred in Kentucky, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, in part, because of mandates and fiscal incentives statewide while it has been endorsed by a number of groups that influence educational policy in the nation. Involvement by the accrediting association's office established to support such partnerships is a signature of this association's belief that K-16 collaboration is an important contribution to education reform.

The serious challenge for educators, particularly in rural, impoverished areas, is to dismiss rhetoric and anxiety over how things will be done, evaluated and paid for, but rather to consider the needs of students. Students must be motivated, involved, and invested in the educational processes, not just the end result. Regardless of high expectations—even regulations—that students will learn and demonstrate specific knowledge and understanding, first they must want to learn, be inspired to learn, and understand why they should learn. In short, they must be full partners, not just subjects, in the learning process.

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