

States Team for High School Makeover With Eye Toward '21st-Century Skills'

By Catherine Gewertz

Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island are moving ahead with a joint effort to remake the high school experience in their states.

The New England Secondary School Consortium aims to create high schools that are "flexible, borderless, multidimensional community learning centers" in which students would have the chance to study at the secondary and postsecondary levels, do research in their communities, build real-world skills through internships, and immerse themselves in technology.

This learning would be infused with "21st century skills"—a bevy of strengths from problem-solving prowess to global awareness—and assessments that properly gauge such a diverse set of skills would have to be carefully designed or chosen, leaders of the initiative said.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is using \$500,000 of its own resources and a \$500,000 partnership grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to fund the first 18 months of the consortium.

The group's work will be coordinated by the Great Schools Part-

nership at the Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute in Portland, Maine. It builds on the work of the New England Common Assessment Program, which has brought New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont together to design and share assessments for their schools.

Maine announced last month that it was joining the program as well. (*See Education Week, May 26, 2004.*)

Seeking Consensus

In a mark of the high aims of the New England Secondary School Consortium, three of the four states' governors appeared at a series of news conferences announcing it on Dec. 15. They were accompanied by an array of leaders from all four states' education departments, legislatures and professional organizations.

Nicholas C. Donohue, the president and chief executive officer of the Quincy, Mass.-based Nellie Mae, said he sees the new consortium as "an enormous opportunity for states to learn from each other" in the thorny work of re-envisioning high school learning.

"The thing that really excited us about it is the leadership of the people in the states: gover-

nors, commissioners, other state education champions all coming together and saying we want to work on this together," he said.

David Ruff, the co-executive director of the Great Schools Partnership, said the initial phase of the consortium's work will feature a review of education policies in the four states and how they support or hinder the work the consortium envisions.

The group also will strive to forge a consensus about what constitutes 21st-century standards—what students should know and be able to do in order to thrive in a global environment. He said those standards would be more "skills-based than content-based."

The consortium also will examine international test results and education practices to determine what "inputs" or educational practices—are worth replicating in its quest for a sound way of educating New England high school students, Mr. Ruff said.

Policy Leverage

Then the lessons from that phase can be put into action, by opening new schools or revamping existing ones, he said. Still, the goal of the project is not to im-



prove individual schools, he said, but to use the lessons to influence policy so that all schools have the conditions they need to do likewise.

"The goal is to get examples of practices we can use towards policy leverage," he said. "We're talking about all the schools in these four states, and all the kids. We're talking about going to scale. At its core, we are pulling together policy and practice."

Joe Harris is the director of the National High School Center at

the Washington-based American Institutes for Research, which advises 16 federally funded Regional Comprehensive Centers about high school improvement.

He said it isn't uncommon for groups of states to work together to share information on high schools.

But he said he knew of no other multistate group dedicated to undertaking a profound revamping of secondary education, and commended the consortium for "thinking outside the box." JAR