

Keeping New England Competitive

A Call to Better Educate the Changing Region

BLEND A J. WILSON



If New England is to remain competitive on the world stage, the region must achieve greater success in both producing and attracting young, well-educated professionals.

New England has long prospered due to an abundance of educational capital. But forecasts for the future are not so bright. In the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's recent report, *New England 2020*, researchers from the universities of Connecticut and Massachusetts predict that, if current education and demographic trends continue, most New England states will suffer declines in the percentage of young workers holding bachelor's degrees by the year 2020.

Why? One, an increasing number of native New Englanders are leaving the region. And two, the region's growing populations of immigrants and students of color face persistent gaps in achievement and educational attainment.

In the 1990s, New England states experienced a stunning exodus of native residents—the core components of their workforces. Connecticut lost 85,000 40- to 64-year-olds between 1990 and 2000—a staggering figure. Massachusetts fared a little better percentage-wise, but lost 96,000 people in this age group.

The full impact of the population decline has been softened by increases in immigrant populations and students of color. The face of the region has changed.

Meanwhile, the minority achievement gap defies simple explanations. In New England, this gap is evident in many measures, including mean SAT math and verbal scores, where African-American and Hispanic students continue to lag behind their white counterparts. Providence, Mount Holyoke and Middlebury are among

colleges that have recently decided to make the SAT exam optional for prospective students, deciding to focus admissions decisions on other indicators of a student's future academic performance. Advantaged students are able to spend thousands of dollars on preparation to increase their SAT scores. So eliminating the SAT as an admissions requirement is one way to level the playing field and promote access for otherwise qualified low-income students and students of color.

Colleges and universities have been generating a steady, reliable supply of “replacement residents”—young people who are crucial to sustaining the regional economy.

Clearly, New England must continue its efforts to promote access to quality education for all its residents. The *New England 2020* authors call for more business/higher education/K-12 partnerships to develop college aspirations and promote college readiness as early as middle school. They also advocate campus-to-workplace “bridge” programs in which industries, state policymakers and higher education institutions collaborate closely to move recent graduates directly into key areas of the labor force.

The New England states, like the nation as a whole, need to pay particular attention to developing a pool of talent for the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) professions. In New England,

the number of STEM-related jobs is projected to grow by 70 percent by 2010. But the pool of qualified STEM professionals is shrinking. Only about 20 percent of SAT-takers are interested in pursuing science, math or engineering majors, with another 15 percent interested in allied health fields, according to the latest College Board data.

There are many good ways to improve the way education nurtures young students in science and math. Mass Insight Education's report *World Class: The Massachusetts Agenda to Meet the International Challenge for Math- and Science-Educated Students* calls for a sizable new investment in math and science teachers in Massachusetts. The report recommends that new and current teachers receive intensive content training in math and science. Mass Insight recommends that students be challenged with rigorous curricula and engaged in active, inquiry-based STEM experiences to build interest in math and science careers. This type of investment in math and science education is needed across New England.

Moreover, despite the fact that New England's government, business and education leaders worry publicly about students' declining math and science achievement, most of the region's parents believe the amount of science and math their children study is about right, according to a Public Agenda survey. Just 32 percent of parents thought their children should have more math and science education. Further, nearly half of New England students say they would be quite unhappy with a career focused on math or science.

Educators, business leaders and public officials have a responsibility

to eliminate this disconnect between the needs of the region's economy and public perception. A public information campaign about the importance of science and math education to the region would be a good start.

Finally, New England's 270 public and private colleges and universities have key roles to play in keeping the region competitive. These institutions contribute to New England's economy by sparking innovation and new technologies and attracting federal funding, but most of all, by educating native students and immigrants.

Colleges and universities have been generating a steady, reliable supply of "replacement residents"—young people who are crucial to sustaining the regional economy. In recent years, more than half of all 20- to 24-year-olds who moved to Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island or Vermont did so for education.

Another way New England has improved its economic competitiveness in the past has been by attracting academically gifted international students to our colleges, universities and companies. International students and professionals provide the region with talent and enrich its scientific leadership. They also boost the regional economy. In 2005, the more than 40,000 international students studying in New England and their dependents pumped \$1.3 billion into the region with their spending.

The large numbers of selective higher education institutions in New England made it the Mecca for attracting the brightest international students in the past. The Institute for International Education recently reported, however, that the number of international students in every New England state, save Vermont, was down in 2004-05 from the

previous year. Countries such as Australia, India and China are now pulling ahead in the international student recruitment race.

New England can ill afford to ignore the writing on the wall. We can remain a vibrant, innovative, prosperous region only by better educating our native students, immigrants and students of color, attracting talent from abroad and educating the public on the importance of nurturing science and math education.

Our higher education institutions are key to the region's future. Education, long the region's beacon, may be—to borrow from Abraham Lincoln—New England's "last, best hope" for sustaining our region's population, workforce and economy.

Blenda J. Wilson is president and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Email: bwilson@nmefdn.org.

The financial resource for not-for-profits.

Like your organization, Webster has a mission. Our is to *Find a Way* to help not-for-profits reach their financial goals. We understand your unique challenges and our dedicated not-for-profit specialists can offer you a full array of financial services tailored to managing your finances, people and risks.

Learn more about how Webster finds a way for not-for-profits. Contact **Nancy Riddle Scirocco, VP, Not-for-Profit Banking** at (860) 692-1619 or nsirocco@websterbank.com.



WebsterOnline.com



The Webster Symbol and We Find a Way are service marks of Webster Financial Corporation. Webster and Webster Bank are registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Member FDIC. Equal Housing Lender.

An email news service only for Friends of NEBHE

Where could you find Robert Reich, Chuck D, Mary Robinson and Dennis Lehane this past summer?

IN THE "EVENTS" SECTION OF

**CONNECTION'S
Campus Newslink**

...brought to you by

**CONNECTION: THE JOURNAL OF
THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.**

For more information on how to become a Friend of NEBHE and receive *CONNECTION'S* Campus Newslink and other benefits, visit www.nebhe.org/friends, email friends@nebhe.org, or call 617.357.9620.