

Unprecedented Effort to Improve Urban Schools Neag School to serve as “hub”

The Neag School and a collaborative of educators have embarked on an ambitious effort, unlike any other in state history, to improve student achievement in urban schools.

The founding members of the Connecticut Alliance for CommPACT Schools began brainstorming last December about ideas for closing the achievement gap, ensuring all children receive a quality education, preparing quality teachers who stay in the workforce and developing strategies for handling behavioral issues.

In addition to the Neag School, the Alliance includes representatives from the American Federation of Teachers-Connecticut, the Connecticut Education Association, the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, the Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents and the Connecticut Federation of School Administrators.

“To my knowledge, this is unprecedented for a university-based school of education to partner with the main stakeholders in public education and work in unison to put the best practices into our most challenging schools,” says Richard Schwab, dean of the Neag School.

“This is the most exciting initiative we’ve been part of in years, says Sharon Palmer, who as president of the American Federation of Teachers-Connecticut represents 26,000 teachers and school personnel. “Urban schools cannot continue along the path on which they are headed,” she warns and suggests that “systemic change is needed and this collaboration allows us to serve students in new ways.”

Her counterpart at the Connecticut Education Association (CEA), representing 41,000 teachers, agrees.

“Collaboration is the hallmark of this effort,” says Phil Apruzzese, CEA president. “This is a huge undertaking and a good deal of hard work is ahead of us as we chart new territory, but we look forward to working together on behalf of Connecticut’s children.”

The Alliance, which received a green light from state lawmakers in July, is overseeing the creation of 12 model schools called CommPACT Schools. The name emphasizes the absolute commitment required from the **community, parents, administrators, and teachers** who must share a common vision of what their school should look like.

By January, the Alliance expects to have selected six schools that will enter into a five-year agreement and be up and running next fall. Six more will follow in 2009.

The schools will operate within their school districts, but will have considerable autonomy in governance, budgeting and curriculum. Teachers will be empowered to select strategies best suited to their students. They will also face greater accountability for student achievement.

"CommPACT Schools will demonstrate the creativity and competence of urban public school educators, while dispelling the false premise that only private or charter schools can make a difference," says Christopher Clouet, New London School Superintendent and chairman of the Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents.

The Neag School, which is creating the Center for Urban School Reform, serves as the hub for this undertaking; first by facilitating the start-up process and then by providing comprehensive assistance. Gene Chasin has been appointed by Dean Schwab to serve as both the Center's director and the Alliance's executive director.

The Center is responsible for providing schools with coaching and professional development, conducting research about what works, annually evaluating the performance of each CommPACT School and serving as the gatekeeper for evidence-based practices from UConn and other research resources as well.

"By sticking with evidence-based practices, we know what works, what context it works in and how to successfully implement it," says Chasin. He has worked with urban schools throughout the U.S. implementing "Accelerated Schools plus" one of the most widely implemented comprehensive school reform programs in the country which has received high marks through numerous external evaluations.

Other Neag-based programs will be also offered through the Center, including the Schoolwide Enrichment Model and strategies from the National Center Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

Roch Girard, president of the Connecticut Federation of School Administrators, believes the mentorship and support aspects of the initiative are essential to its success. "One of the many reasons we are excited about this effort is the Neag School is providing unprecedented opportunity for administrators to enhance their skills with critical support and coaching."

The Neag School is also providing the first year of funding. Dean Schwab stepped forward with \$200,000 to cover the costs of year one -- considered the planning year -- after the legislature approved funding for the second and third years of the initiative.

"We could sit back and let this opportunity to effect real change in our urban schools pass us by, or we could roll up our sleeves and take a risk," says Schwab. "We chose to make a strategic investment by using endowed and reallocated funds, in addition to the expertise of our scholars and researchers."