

New Neag institute to advance urban education reform

by Robert A. Frahm

The Neag School of Education's new Institute for Urban School Improvement received the formal endorsement of UConn's Board of Trustees recently, the latest step in the University's effort to become a national model for school reform.

The institute places UConn among a select group of universities making urban education a key part of their mission, says University President Michael Hogan.

UConn's intensified focus on urban education is consistent with its new Academic Plan, which serves as the University's guide for becoming one of the top 20 public universities in the nation and cites the importance of partnering to improve K-12 education.

The poor academic performance of many of America's urban schools "is a huge issue," Hogan says.

The creation of the institute signals an aggressive agenda "not only to advance urban school education reform but also to advance the research mission of Neag," he says. "It's such an important step for us."

Collaborative research

The institute grew out of a task force on urban education formed more than a year ago by Richard Schwab, dean of the Neag School of Education.

"Education schools at major universities have conducted research with limited collaboration with public schools, but we're changing that," Schwab says.

The institute serves as the vehicle for conducting research hand-in-hand with urban schools on practices that directly affect student achievement and then, Schwab adds. "We'll share our findings and best practices with schools in Connecticut and across the nation."

One of the institute's key elements is the newly created CommPACT Schools project, supported by the state legislature and developed by an unusual alliance of state teacher unions and school administrators' organizations.

CommPACT is a five-year plan to redesign eight schools in Connecticut's largest urban school districts, attempting to stem a pattern of chronic low achievement that finds many low-income and minority schoolchildren lagging far behind their peers. That achievement gap is one of the nation's most perplexing educational problems.



Richard Lemons, assistant professor of educational leadership and director of the Institute for Urban School Improvement, conducts a leadership training session for school superintendents.
Photo by Janice Palmer

“The urban achievement gap in Connecticut is as large as it is anywhere in the United States,” says Richard Lemons, assistant professor of educational leadership and director of the institute.

Students who fail academically are at risk of a host of other problems, he says.

“They show up in mental health institutions, they receive social services more often, they are incarcerated more,” Lemons says.

“If we want to have a positive impact and invest in the future of the state, we have to invest in one of the most precious commodities we have – human capital.”

Boosting school reform

The institute is the home for two other major school reform organizations: Accelerated Schools and ATLAS Learning Communities. ATLAS, with a 17-year track record that includes promising results in places such as New York City and Detroit, recently moved its headquarters to UConn from Cambridge, Mass.

Accelerated Schools has been based at the Neag School for the past nine years.

Like the ATLAS and Accelerated Schools reform models, CommPACT focuses on strengthening schools from within by promoting collaboration among teachers, principals, parents, unions, local civic leaders, and others.

The focus on urban education, including direct involvement with the eight CommPACT schools, is in keeping with UConn’s land grant mission to reach out into the community, Lemons says.

“Urban education is so entwined with other issues we have facing our state,” he says. “The vast majority of our students go to schools in these metropolitan areas.”

Across the nation, public schools have sought new ways to address the achievement gap, especially since the creation in 2002 of the No Child Left Behind Act.

UConn joins a growing number of colleges and universities forging partnerships with urban public schools, says Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a nonprofit organization representing the nation’s largest school districts.

“These partnerships look very different from place to place, but they are much stronger than they used to be,” he says. “Where you see good ones, they can be enormously helpful to the schools and the universities.”

The schools benefit from “the expertise the universities have and from an outside objective perspective,” he adds. “On the university side, what they’re getting is a grounding, a connection with the real world that textbooks at the university can’t provide.”

Support for the urban institute is coming from both the public and private sectors. In addition to a \$480,000 appropriation from the state legislature to establish the first round of CommPACT schools, the institute has received \$250,000 from

The NEA Foundation to support research and \$55,000 in grants from the Fairfield County Community Foundation, JPMorgan Chase, and the Near & Far Aid Association to support the institute’s efforts at Bridgeport’s two CommPACT schools.