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Maine could become a model for nation in education efforts

By NONA LYONS

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is another in a series of guest columns that examine President Clinton's performance based on his campaign agenda. **Nona Lyons** is director of Teacher Education at the University of Southern Maine. The next column, by Maureen Tsao, an attorney with Preti, Flaherty, Beliveau & Pachios, is scheduled for June 26.

When President Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act last March, he set in motion legislation aimed at making America's public schools and their students achieve "world class" standards.

But Goals 2000 simultaneously produced something else: a new federal approach to education focused on supporting – not enforcing – efforts of states and local schools with an emphasis on partnerships.

One subtle byproduct of the law could shift the ways local schools interact with America's colleges and institutions of higher education, pushing both toward unprecedented cooperation, ventures in which the local schools take the initiative.

Given Maine's track record of partnerships for education, the state could become a national model.

GOALS 2000 is a centerpiece of the Clinton administration's educational agenda, the framework for other initiatives. It seeks to improve student learning by setting high goals and expectations for students and schools, encouraging grass-roots efforts by states and school districts to adopt rigorous standards for their education systems and improving the quality of teaching in kindergarten through grade 12.

It calls for setting standards in terms of performance, that is, what students must know and be able to do to demonstrate their competency in such areas as math, science, English, etc.

Goals 2000 also:

- Defines eight standards to serve as national benchmarks for the achievement of all students and all school systems.
- Authorizes funds for K-12 school improvements.
- Links the renewal and reform of schools to the reform of teacher education.
- Encourages partnerships among local educational agencies, institutions of higher education, parents, and local labor, business and professional associations to provide support for the professional development of teachers.

INDEED, THE DISTINCT notion of partnership is a paramount feature of Goals 2000. It redirects the federal role in education from regulator to supporter of schools and states. No state, for example, is required to meet the national standards, nor seek federal endorsement of state or local standards in order to receive federal funding.

But while encouraging relationships between universities and schools, Goals 2000 shifts the initiative to the schools, asking them to take a lead in setting high standards, designing projects, or in initiating school reform. Institutions of higher education, for example, are not to be direct recipients of federal funding. But they are expected to be key players in these efforts. Schools that submit Goals 2000 proposals in collaboration with colleges and universities will be given priority.

IN MAINE, a strong tradition of partnership already exists within the education community. It has produced The Common Core of Learning, an agreed-upon set of expectations about what students should learn and be able to do when they come away from schooling. The Maine State Education Department is engaged in defining and determining Learning Results that are in keeping with Common Core goals, clearly what Goals 2000 would like states to have.

Other examples of the school-university relationship in Maine include the Southern Maine Partnership. Now in its eighth year, the venture involves some 25 school districts in a range of partnership activities focused on the continuing renewal of schools.

Then there is the work of the University of Southern Maine's Extended Teacher Education Program. Teachers and administrators from five school districts, from Portland to Fryeburg, join University of Southern Maine faculty in intensive relationships to educate cohorts of new teachers in these school settings. The reputation for excellence in the teachers graduating from this program is growing, witnessed by the successful job rate they have experienced.

Currently the Extended Teacher Education Program is collaborating with the Maine State Education Department and two other institutions – the University of Maine at Farmington and Bates College – to try to determine just what new teachers ought to know and be able to demonstrate in their classrooms. This project is being looked at by other states, not just for what it is but for the collaborative way it is being carried out.

Maine's grass-roots approach to education change is one that could be a national model.

YET GOALS 2000 COMES at a critical moment in Maine's history. There are real challenges. While schools and universities have been working together for some time, especially successfully, the difference today is in the economic constraints of the times. They force reconsideration not only of new resources, which at best will be slim, but of other ways to do what needs to be done, especially how to think about the issues.

I believe that what is called for is not necessarily something new. Rather, it is looking to what exists, to how to deepen existing partnerships. That will call for new inventions. Some additional resources will have to be found to fully embrace the possibilities of these partnerships.

But there will have to be ways to rethink the models we now hold for the work we do. Such inventions can only happen in true, mutual partnerships. And this demands, as the Common Core proclaims, that our work make a difference for each of Maine's children. They are our future.

Maine stands at an exciting intersection of a local and national educational vanguard. Goals 2000 points to the possibilities of partnerships. Maine schools and universities together can enact them. They must.