

## Offering High School Credit Through Expanded Learning Opportunities

FORUM – Friday, July 9, 2010

This forum showcased New Hampshire's recently implemented Expanded Learning Opportunities (NH ELO) Initiative, one of the state's high school redesign initiatives driven by the passage of NH's Minimum Standards for School Approval in 2005. The standards advocate for the adoption of expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) focused on harnessing local community resources, personalizing student learning, and using competency-based assessments in student evaluation. Following the adoption of these standards, the New Hampshire Department of Education and Plus Time NH partnered with four schools in four different districts to implement an ELO model that aligns with state education standards and provides a means of assessing student learning conducted outside of the traditional classroom setting.

**Paul Leather**, Deputy Commissioner of the NH Department of Education, began the discussion by sharing the experience of two ELO students. Both of the students were high school dropouts who had returned to school. They were both having trouble succeeding in high school English courses. One of the students heard about a poetry slam, and because of his interest in rap, decided to pursue an ELO. The two students worked with their English teacher to design an ELO in which the students would study the origins of slam poetry, write their own poetry, and publically present their work for an audience of peers, staff, and the school superintendent at a nearby poetry café. The end result: each student discovered a passion for expressive language arts; the students continue to study poetry; and all five students earned English credit. The students received their high school diplomas at the end of the 2009-2010 school year.

After sharing this example of NH ELO's success, Leather directed his attention toward the impetus for the initiative's genesis: the changing expectations for college and career success. Employers today are looking for advanced, flexible, and diverse skills for even entry level jobs; students, meanwhile face boredom in the traditional classroom, no longer willing to be passive learners of a curriculum they view as outdated. In light of these shifts, Leather cited the Mott Foundation's "New Day for Learning" approach, in which active learning takes place in school and out of school, during the traditional day and afterschool, through the school year, and during weekends, summers, and even vacations. Leather cited the 2009 HS Survey of Student Engagement, by the University of Indiana, which showed that fully two thirds of students are bored daily, including 17% who are bored in every class, all the time. Though students said information in classes is not relevant or interesting, 82% said that more opportunities to be creative in school could make a difference.

Economic concerns also motivate broad changes in education, Leather argued. The demand for jobs continues to change dramatically as routine and non-routine manual jobs are outsourced and more cognitively demanding fields that require non-routine interactive and analytic skills continue to experience growth. Leather reference the work of David Conley, a researcher from the University of Oregon, who argues that U.S. schools teach and assess the wrong kinds of skills, only tangentially contributing to the development of the interactive and analytic skills that today's jobs require. Conley argues the skills needed to succeed in college are: problem formulation, structured research skills, the ability to interpret information for analysis and evaluation, the ability to communicate and construct arguments, and the ability to self monitor for precision and accuracy. Demonstration of these skills separates the passive student from the active productive learner.

Many changes in NH have been driven by NH Governor John Lynch's commitment to the elimination of college drop outs in New Hampshire by the year 2012. The state passed legislation raising the compulsory age of

education in NH from 16 to 18 and has provided resources for personal student planning and multiple pathways to graduation. Through the NH State Board of Education rule-making process in 2005, New Hampshire increased flexibility regarding learning conducted outside the classroom, allowing ELOs for credit to be completed outside the traditional school day. The 2005 changes also incorporated increased flexibility in student evaluation, allowing course competencies rather than seat time to be used in the evaluation of ELOs. High schools can now be highly flexible as to how information and skills are learned. Learning can become more personalized, focusing on the academic, personal, physical and social development of the child, while still maintaining rigorous standards aligned with NH's State Assessment and Curriculum Frameworks. Leather argued that secondary schools must fundamentally redefine their vision for secondary education – to a vision that is not based on students attending class from 7am to 3pm, but one which defines competency as the unit of learning and expected take-away from high school courses.

These high school redesign initiatives and large scale changes taking place across the state have important implications for education as states and policymakers move forward. Leather notes that these redesign strategies require a wholly different approach which requires modeling; extensive professional development and expertise; new ways of looking at curriculum, instruction, assessment and program design; and strong visionary leadership and structure redesign to support personalization and instructional improvement.

The four ELO pilot schools have shown great success in decreasing the dropout rate of students, even though these schools are some of the most challenged schools in the state. In 2002, the combined dropout rates for Franklin High School, Laconia High School, Manchester Central High School, and Newfound Regional High School was a combined 8%, compared to 4% statewide. Due to greater personalization of learning with the NH ELO Initiative, these schools have closed the gap to less than a 1% difference.

Leather said New Hampshire has been working on developing competencies and competency-based assessments since 1995, when it became clear that colleges and businesses in the state were much more interested in what students knew and could apply in novel settings than in how many courses students had passed. At that time, the state developed a competency system and piloted it with roughly half its high schools. In 2009, the New Hampshire DOE required schools and districts offer greater freedom in measuring student success for credit through demonstrated mastery of competencies. A group of education and government leaders from New Hampshire participated in a National Governors Association (NGA), State Legislatures, Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Mott Foundation Initiative to expand extended learning in schools, particularly to high schools, which fit the state's plan for high school redesign. After the Nellie Mae Foundation conducted a feasibility study showing that New Hampshire had the right balance of leadership, expertise, policy development, and intention to move to the next level in using ELOs as part of its high school redesign plan, the foundation gave the state a \$3 million dollar grant to implement the pilot program.

New Hampshire defines ELO as “the primary acquisition of knowledge and skills through instruction or study outside of the traditional classroom methodology, including, but not limited to: independent study, private instruction, performing groups, internships, community service, apprenticeships, and online coursework.” Leather stressed that this type of learning does not simply occur afterschool or during summer school, but encompasses all learning conducted outside traditional school hours, including weekends, vacations, and after school hours.

**Janice Hastings**, VP of Program and Resource Development with PlusTime NH, continued the discussion with a broad overview of the NH ELO Initiative, currently in its third full school year of implementation in the four pilot schools. Janice outlined the timeline for funding the initiative, which began in 2006 with an S3 planning grant and continued with grants from Nellie Mae in January 2008 to fund the planning and implementation of the program in the four pilot schools. The 2010-2011 school year will be the last year for the pilot program, but the pilot schools are expected to shoulder the initiative in the future. An I3 application has been submitted in the hope of securing federal funding to expand the initiative state-wide.

Hastings detailed the vision of the NH ELO Initiative, which seeks to expand traditional classroom options by creating rigorous, relevant, and personalized learning experiences connected to students' communities and lives and grant credit based on demonstration of mastery of course competencies. The goals of the initiative are: to pilot developmentally appropriate ELOs for high school students; to demonstrate that ELOs enrich and improve learning outcomes for underserved students; and to prove that the ELO initiative meets the diverse educational needs of underserved students, while still ensuring rigorous academic standards.

Hastings described the complex structure of NH ELO, which is headed by the strong partnership between the NH Department of Education (DOE) and PlusTime NH. The initiative coordinates a number of key organizations and funders, including: Center for Secondary School Redesign, CACES, QED Foundation, NH DOE Follow the Child Coordinator, Plus Time Program Support Services, the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, the four pilot high schools (Manchester, Laconia, Newfound, Franklin), and seven other NH high schools that did not receive pilot funding (Monadnock, Oyster River, Raymond, Nute, Mascenic, Mascoma, Farmington). Each partner serves an important function: independent evaluation, specific technical assistance around certain issues, community connections. PlusTime NH, for example, plays a key role in connecting schools to the local community by identifying and seeking partnerships with community-based organizations that students may be interested in working with for ELO projects.

The ELO planning process is a collaborative, student-centered process, in which a student works to co-design an ELO project with a community partner and a highly qualified teacher (HQT) who will award the student credit. Through this process, the student, HQT, and community partner outline what activities will be involved, what the student will be accomplishing, what research and reflection will be done, what the final presentation will look like, and the competencies to be demonstrated at the conclusion of the ELO. The process includes an evaluation of the resources available within the community setting as well as the student's own needs and resources. Factors taken into consideration include: how much time the student has to dedicate to a project; the student's transcript; Follow the Child (a longitudinal data system used to analyze the results of the state assessment and other standard assessments) data; and other student profile data. Through the collaborative efforts of the student, the HQT, and the community partner, the formal ELO plan is established, including the setting, hours, experience, competencies, and assessments. Once the ELO plan has been fully outlined, the student completes the ELO, concluding the experience with a final exhibition of learning in order to determine mastery of competencies. Students build relationships with teachers and community members who serve as mentors and the ELO projects developed have clear relevance for the student and for real life, thereby resulting in a rigorous, student-centered ELO. A grade and credit is assigned by the HQT.

Hastings conceded that the creation of an individual ELO is a time-consuming process but pointed out that many students participate in group ELOs. PlusTime is looking at existing activities within school communities and cross-examining these projects to determine what experiences for groups of high school students might look like.

Hastings asserted ELO partnerships involve many parts of the community. Creating innovative and worthwhile ELO experiences for students requires that communities, families and students come together to create unique and worthwhile opportunities for students.

**Michael O'Malley**, principal of Newfound Regional High School, continued the discussion with a more personalized look at how the ELO initiative has impacted his high school, including how the school became involved in the project as well as the outcomes stemming from the initiative.

Four high schools in New Hampshire were invited to develop an ELO model that could later be used by high schools statewide. O'Malley provided an overview of Newfound High School's motivations for joining the initiative: the school's current position as an afterschool program site utilizing a 21<sup>st</sup> Community Learning Center (CCLC); the school's desire to broaden student opportunities and emphasize individualization and personalization of student learning; the school's desire to develop strong analytic abilities in students; and the initiative's alignment with new state standards, such as the burgeoning requirements for performance assessments. O'Malley acknowledged that the pilot was also a great opportunity for Newfound to both learn through and contribute to ELOs in conjunction with other rural, neighboring high schools who shared the school's demographics and experiences, particularly Franklin and Laconia. As the pilot continued in winter 2008, the staff of Newfound became more comfortable utilizing resources and received training and support from a number of consultants in the projects, including Plus Time NH, MC2, CACES, and CSSR, which enabled Newfound to introduce ELOs into mainstream curriculum. Principal O'Malley particularly cited the establishment of an ELO Coordinator position, initially funded by both 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant money and the start-up money but soon to be fully funded by the school as a full-time position, as a key player in Newfound's ELO success. The ELO coordinator has ensured that the initiative is very student-centered and often feeds ELO opportunities for students to Principal O'Malley and his staff.

After three years of the pilot program, ELOs are fully integrated into Newfound, and the program has full support across the school community, including the superintendent. Newfound's school board policies, teachers, and course listings advocate for diverse pathways and opportunities for students. The school's course listings list ELO options side-by-side with core course descriptions. The high school has implemented a diploma pathway program, which invites students to individualize both a personal learning plan and a schedule for its completion, which may include up to four ELOs for credit. The guidance department provides course selection sheets each quarter with the ELO option listed in the same fashion as traditional course offerings. Students are well-aware of ELO opportunities – they know they have a choice to be creative and to work outside of the traditional classroom setting. The process begins when a student conveys interest in a particular topic (or in ELO participation in general). The ELO coordinator then interviews the student about their interests to pair the student with a highly qualified teacher (HQT) and subject area. The HQT reviews course competencies, the ELO coordinator recommends a community partner based upon the subject area, and then the HQT, ELO coordinator, and student meet to review the proposed study and assessment criteria required to obtain credit.

O'Malley praised the ELO program for its successes and its creation of new opportunities for personalizing learning. He heralded the ELO program as a rigorous, rewarding program that changes the way teachers and students think about education. In the past 2.5 years, the school, which has 461 students, has awarded credit to 50 students for completing an individual ELO and to 250 students for completing a group ELO. Students have completed projects in art, social studies, English, journalism, computers, music, and many more diverse subjects. The school has established relationships with 12 community partners. Half of the school's teachers have

committed to serving as highly qualified teachers in the ELO process. Principal O'Malley also noted the changes in the school culture, for both teachers and students. Previously concerned and anxious about the ELO initiative, teachers at Newfound are now designing and exploring potential ELOs for their students. The teachers are optimistic about the future and growth of the program and its ability to help teachers meet students' aspirations in ways that were previously unimaginable. Student mindsets have also changed as a result of the ELO initiative, as students recognize their ability to create within the learning process and the fulfillment that comes with the completion of rigorous, individualized ELOs that cater to their passions and interests.

A video clip was shown which shares the ELO experience of a previously disengaged, low-performing high school student who partnered with his theater teacher to write, direct, and perform his own theater production. ELO Coordinator at Newfound Regional High School, Beth Colby, discusses the ELO program's impact on the student. The video can be viewed on AYPF's forum website (<http://www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2010/fb070910.htm>)

### ***Question and Answer Period***

The first question asked how the ELO initiative would continue in the absence of foundation funding and what creative strategies schools are using to ensure the continuation of the ELO programs. Principal O'Malley noted that Newfound has already established the ELO coordinator position as a school-funded position. He also acknowledged that a primary budget concern for rural schools implementing this program is the cost of transportation for students between the school and community sites. He confirmed that this cost has already been built into the general budget for the upcoming school year, and the district will be moving to buy a vehicle to link students to community-based organizations and their sites. Hastings added that some districts have incorporated ELO duties into newly hired staff positions and that PlusTime has advocated that CBOs play a strong role in the initiative by adopting ELO partnerships with local schools as part of their missions. Leather acknowledged that funding was a primary concern and the NH DOE is currently exploring additional funding sources.

Another question inquired as to how much teacher support the ELO program has garnered at Newfound since its implementation. Principal O'Malley explained the incremental buy-in process, noting that while at first teachers saw the program as an additional demand on their busy schedules, they now see the program's long-term benefits and have realized that the program does not undermine their roles as teachers but allows them to play a strong role in offering suggestions and helping craft unique ELOs for their students. Teachers have also found that while the program does demand extra efforts, these demands are not strenuous, and that often additional responsibilities in one area result in diminished responsibilities in another. Newfound's teachers, though initially hesitant, now realize they can play a creative and innovative role in the ELO program, which has led to broad acceptance in the school.

In a response to a question raised about the opportunities for federal and state policymakers to remove existing legal barriers, such as the Common Core, so that 24/7 assessment becomes incorporated into education nationwide, Principal O'Malley commented on NH's success in removing one important obstacle: the Carnegie unit. He acknowledged the unit as a barrier to 24/7 assessment due to the limitations on school districts' freedom to innovate outside the stringent measures that clock hours and seat time require. Leather added that a discussion regarding performance-based assessment and the kinds of skills students need, especially in secondary education, needs to emerge in the national consciousness. He noted the focus on the unit cost of assessment and the ease of test-based assessment as two additional barriers to transitioning to performance-based assessments but suggested policymakers and practitioners need to consider the value of these assessments before moving forward.

Leather responded to another question which asked if this initiative, which takes place in a small, northeastern state with few urban areas, could be transported and utilized in bigger states with larger urban centers. Leather referenced a program in Chicago that creates afterschool opportunities for urban students and incentivizes students to attend classes during the day but had ultimately decided not to integrate the programs into the high school curriculum itself. Leather used this example to suggest the ELO program could be utilized nationwide, but that state leaders and policymakers need to have the will and vision to implement these types of innovations.