

A partner for New London public schools

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About a million years ago, when my youngest child was a sixth-grader at Nathan Hale in New London, I dropped by his classroom with a field trip permission form. The class was taking an open book science test.

I didn't give it a second thought; open book tests that ask students to deduce from what they look up have value. But the teacher felt I needed an explanation of why the kids were allowed to look for answers. It was, she said, because many of them had no place or time for homework at home. Her goal was to get some science into them by having them find the facts in the book.

Let's be clear: No one is judging the New London schools by the students of the last century. But it is equally clear, to a group of business, educational, academic and social services leaders, that the "opportunity gap" remains. They have formed a Community Partnership to support just such needs as an after-school time and place for homework — mentors and enrichment classes outside of regular school hours.

Nobody was more disappointed than the members of the partnership, which is led by the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut and anchored by LEARN, the regional education collaborative, when Superintendent of Schools Manuel Rivera announced his departure. They had been just about to publicize their intention of supporting the public schools' strategic plan, principally authored by Rivera. They had already raised enough funds to pay for a three-year salaried position at LEARN that would coordinate mentoring and enrichment for grades 6-12. A major goal was to make sure no student gets left on the wrong side of the opportunity gap.

That still is the goal, after the partnership took stock of how to proceed without Rivera. This month the group, which has included me since the midway point of their months of research and planning, sent a letter to the Board of Education. It pledges to undertake programs that can be built immediately upon existing ones that benefit some, but not all, New London students.

Besides LEARN and the community foundation, the partnership includes Connecticut and Mitchell colleges, Child & Family Agency, the city, the schools, Liberty Bank Foundation, New England Science and Sailing (already at work with the schools), the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. It is asking the board to select as its next superintendent a person who embraces the concept of having an auxiliary force to supplement what the schools can afford to provide. Recognizing that this is a time of transition, the coordinator position has been scaled back to part-time for now, but the funding remains available to take it full-time once the board and the new superintendent give the word.

The public schools' strategic plan calls for catchword goals heard all the time: kindergarten readiness, at or above-grade reading by grade 3, improved test scores and attendance, readiness to move from elementary to middle and from middle to high schools, ninth-graders equipped for grade 10 and a steadily increasing graduation rate that will reach 90 percent by

2021. But these remain goals, and while the schools are working on them, kids are also moving on through their school years.

The partnership wants to back up the public schools' best efforts with funds, expertise and the means to measure success, starting right now, with today's students. It should be an offer the school board and the incoming superintendent can't refuse.

Lisa McGinley is a member of The Day Editorial Board.