

SUMMARY OF THE USNY SUMMIT REGIONAL CONVERSATIONS

In preparation for the Education Summit in November 2005, the Board of Regents sponsored seven regional conversations to bring together a wide range of leaders from educational and cultural institutions, businesses, community organizations, the licensed professions, and government to discuss the aims of the University of the State of New York and how to achieve them.¹ The meetings were held from April to June 2005 in Syracuse, Rochester, Glens Falls, the Hudson Valley, Long Island, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. In all, approximately 400 people participated in these conversations.

WHAT WE LEARNED

A Few Vital Steps We Might Take:

- ❑ *Giving every child a good start is the right place to start.* Ensuring that young children are healthy — both physically and emotionally — and ready to learn when entering school is an investment that will pay dividends throughout the child’s education. Accomplishing this will require the work of many partners.
- ❑ *High school is not an end, but a bridge.* All students, upon completion of high school, should be ready to obtain good jobs, pursue further education, and assume productive adult roles. Accomplishing this will require educators to attend to the quality of the educational experiences that prepare students for high school as well as to strengthen connections between the high school curriculum and what postsecondary institutions expect of their incoming students and businesses need from the employees they hire.
- ❑ *New York’s higher education system must remain vibrant and affordable.* Challenging undergraduate programs, a strong research and innovation capacity, and a habit of partnering with others to improve preK-12 education are prerequisites to staying competitive in an increasingly global economy where the skill requirements of the workplace continue to grow and become more complex. We should build upon our current examples of excellence to make postsecondary education accessible and affordable for more New Yorkers.

And More Broadly:

- ❑ *Aims, results, targets.* The five draft aims held up well in the discussions. Yet, the aims need to capture the idea of continuous learning. The data showed how close we are to achieving the aims now. We can set targets to encourage greater achievement in the short term.
- ❑ *Joint venture will get us there.* Each aim naturally seems to fall within one part of the educational system. For example, “Every child will learn to read by the second grade” appears to belong to early elementary schools. But we saw that achieving this aim

¹ An 8th USNY conversation occurred at the Regents meeting in Binghamton, where leaders from the Southern Tier discussed many of the same concepts as participants in the seven regional Summits.

actually depends on university preparation of teachers, family literacy, and all the actions needed prior to elementary school to give each child a good start.

- ❑ *Finding institutional self-interest in joint venture is critically important.* As one president said, we of necessity spend our time thinking about our own institutions. Joint venture becomes a rational strategy when we discover that the interests of our own institution, whether it is a college, a pre-K program or the State Education Department, match those of another in pursuit of a particular goal.
- ❑ *USNY is a competitive advantage to communities, regions, and the state as a whole.* Why? Because the global economy rewards knowledge and skill, and the institutions of USNY create those generators of wealth. New York has an advantage that others lack because all of the institutions are linked, and thus could become even more effective. A powerful economy will continue to generate the wealth needed to sustain these institutions. The global economy also rewards speed and innovation, which are not consistent hallmarks of USNY.
- ❑ *USNY has to be more visible.* People don't know what USNY is. Without this awareness, we are unable to take full advantage of the potential that exists when all of the State's educational and cultural institutions act as one system.
- ❑ *We have to change.* Achieving the aims, seizing the advantages that are potential in USNY, and surviving in the global competition requires that leaders and institutions change in many ways, large and small. Do we have the will to address the inefficiencies in the present system and its infrastructure? How will we change?

COMMON THEMES

The Proposed USNY Aims

Participants expressed strong support for the five proposed aims and understood the promise of enhanced performance that a commitment to shared goals represents. This was so, even while some participants challenged particular aims, proposed modifications in the wording, or suggested additional aims.

Aim 1: Every child will get a good start

The discussions around this aim were rich and impassioned. Participants overwhelmingly agreed with the aim, while observing that the phrase "a good start" needs to be defined. A good start in one community may mean something very different in another. For the most part, participants saw "a good start" as including: 1) more access to high quality early childhood education programs that focus on both academic and age-appropriate developmental goals; 2) greater integration of the educational and health systems; and 3) stronger support for families.

Since this aim centers on children before they enter the formal K-16 education system, it invites USNY to reach beyond its traditional core constituencies to connect with a broad range of potential partners in health care, community-based organizations, and service

providers. No one questioned the value of doing so. Yet there was some doubt about whether educators can, in fact, influence others outside the system they control.

Aim 2: Every child will read by the second grade

Participants implicitly endorsed the emphasis on reading at an early age as a foundational skill for further learning. However, there was some discomfort around what some participants saw as a rigid deadline, since children come to the classroom from different circumstances and learn at different rates. Time frames should be flexible.

Aim 3: Everyone will complete middle level education ready for high school

This aim generated little discussion, although a few participants observed that middle school has become a political issue.

Aim 4: Everyone will graduate from high school ready for work, higher education, and citizenship

This aim also generated much discussion, mainly focused on how realistic this goal is and whether it is universally appropriate for young people. Several pointed out that not every student will graduate from high school and that those who drop out will need to be just as ready for work and citizenship as those who graduate. Also, some students take longer to graduate than the traditional four years, which led some participants to question the performance measure associated with this aim (the percentage of students who graduate four years after entering ninth grade). Other participants questioned the need for every student to graduate ready for formal higher education. Instead, many felt that students should exit high school prepared to pursue further educational opportunities in keeping with their personal and career goals. A few comments stressed that ready for citizenship should mean being prepared to live in the global village, not simply being a citizen of one's local community or nation.

Aim 5: People who begin higher education will complete their programs

A few comments directly addressed this aim and were extensions of the comments made about the fourth aim. A couple of comments questioned the appropriateness of a performance measure that shows completion rates within certain timeframes. Other comments questioned the insistence that students complete the programs they begin.

Suggestions for Additional Aims

Participants made many suggestions of alternative language for the proposed USNY aims, often with the effect of making the aims more concrete or operational in nature. Additional aims were also suggested. Lifelong learning was the new idea most frequently mentioned. Adults need to know how to learn and to continue their education throughout their work lives. Participants acknowledged that this learning could occur under many different circumstances, often outside the traditional pre-K-16 educational system.

Performance Data on the Aims

Every participant received a data packet as part of the background materials for the regional conversations. The packet provided key results data relevant to each of the five proposed aims. At every session, participants mentioned that this document was informative, persuasive, and helpful in focusing conversation on desired outcomes and needed change. The Department was encouraged to distribute this document more widely.

Matching Expectations and Results from One Stage to the Next

Participants clearly understood that the key benefit to “thinking USNY” was the prospect of more deliberate and systematic communication about expectations and results throughout the educational system. Participants spoke about a vision for education where the various levels were well connected and seamless. Many specific, actionable ideas for better managing transitions were generated. This would suggest that efforts to improve transitions would be supported by USNY leaders. The participants were also confident that they could effect change here.

The transition from high school to postsecondary education and the workplace is the most challenging and was the most discussed. Many participants made the case for beginning college preparation well before high school, by offering middle school students college counseling, exposure to colleges, and better preparation to do college-level work. Participants noted that many students enter college with serious skills deficits, especially in mathematics, writing and critical thinking. Better coordination and communication between the K-12 and higher education communities, including communication between high school and college teachers, would also help smooth the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

Roles and Responsibilities

Parents and Guardians

Parents/guardians and schools are dependent on each other to ensure children’s educational success. Schools need parents and guardians who are informed, supportive, and involved, while parents/guardians need schools that are welcoming, informative, and accommodating. School personnel should be proactive in reaching out to parents/guardians. Schools should be an integral part of their community so that they access a variety of means to connect with parents.

Teachers, Administrators, and Other Personnel

Teachers are key to student success and teacher quality is paramount. Participants suggested a number of opportunities and strategies for strengthening the preparation and practice of teaching, including: more content knowledge, especially in mathematics and science; stronger skills in classroom management, pedagogy, and collaboration; more support systems for teachers; and permission to be more creative. College faculty also need better preparation to teach. Leadership skill development for district administrators and school board members was cited as another opportunity.

Participants also commented on teacher recruitment, building assignment, retention, and collective bargaining. High-needs students in particular need capable teachers, but are less likely to have them in their classrooms. Recruiting good mathematics and science teachers is a particular challenge because of the competition from higher-paying private sector jobs. Both monetary and non-monetary incentives for getting teachers to work in hard-to-staff schools or shortage areas were mentioned. A few participants observed that collective bargaining affects education policymaking, especially policies involving teachers. Accordingly, unions should be involved in decisions to change teacher preparation or working conditions.

Partnerships

Partnership was a key theme of the regional discussions. Participants collectively supported investments to strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones. They saw these investments as having potentially significant returns in terms of both efficiency and educational results. Partnerships that would be most beneficial include:

- ❑ *Business, Industry and Unions:* Partnerships with businesses should be a priority. Businesses are key to helping educators and students in the K-16 system understand what knowledge, skills, and abilities are demanded by the global economy. This implies that business representatives should be present at the standard-setting table. Additionally, internships, mentoring programs, field trips, and contributions of financial resources and expertise were all mentioned as specific strategies for involving businesses at the local level. The trades represent a source of well-paying, respectable jobs, yet several trades are having difficulty attracting new workers. Building partnerships with trade unions could easily be a “win-win” for students and business.
- ❑ *Health and Social Services:* Adequate health screenings; nutrition; and access to medical care, dental care, and mental health services are essential prerequisites for children getting “a good start” and being ready to learn in all grades. Many children do not have family resources to access these services. Schools can provide an invaluable service to families, while also bolstering learning outcomes by bringing health services into the schools.
- ❑ *Judicial System:* Better communication and cooperation among schools, the court system, and local police departments could also help keep children in schools.
- ❑ *Community Organizations:* Schools should be better integrated within their communities, and for that stronger collaboration within communities is necessary. Education is, in many ways, a local enterprise; consequently, closing the gap will require strengthening communities as well as schools. Also, all children should have a caring adult who is an advocate for them. Community organizations could play this role where circumstances do not permit a family member to do so.
- ❑ *Other USNY Institutions:* Participants strongly supported strengthening connections among USNY institutions and had many ideas for making this happen. Several suggestions focused on partnerships between schools and higher education institutions and using libraries and museums to enrich the school curriculum.

What Students Should Know and Be Able to Do

- ❑ *Mathematics and Science:* Instruction should place a greater emphasis on applied mathematics and science. Students should be able to see how these subjects connect with real life and to exciting career possibilities. Teachers -- especially elementary school teachers -- should be better prepared to teach mathematics and science. Maintain high standards for these subjects and ensure that students have access to advanced courses.
- ❑ *Reading, Writing, and Communication Skills:* Reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking are the essential foundation skills, no matter what career a student pursues later in life. Yet, a number of the higher education participants indicated that high school graduates are entering postsecondary institutions with deficiencies in these skills.
- ❑ *Workforce Preparation:* Students need to know what knowledge and skills will be expected of them when they enter the workforce. The school curriculum and higher education programs must provide students with the opportunities to acquire this knowledge and practice these skills.

At the same time, students should be introduced to the world of work while in middle school, which is earlier than typically done now. Middle school and high school students should have many opportunities for career exploration, internships, and career counseling. Career and technical education (CTE) programs and BOCES vocational education programs are excellent options for many students.

- ❑ *Foreign Language:* Since students will one day be working in an economy that is truly global in scope, learning a second language will be an asset.
- ❑ *The Arts:* The performing and fine arts allow many students to find something they are passionate about and can be used effectively to teach theory and concepts in other subjects. Several participants were concerned that the arts are being squeezed out of the school day and their contribution to education devalued.
- ❑ *Other Skills:* While not formal academic subjects, study habits, interpersonal skills, self-management, citizenship, and positive values will prepare students for adult success and independent learning.

A Context for Cooperation

Shared Beliefs about Educating Students

- ❑ *Meeting Individual Student Needs:* Many participants felt strongly that learning must be tailored to the needs of the individual student and that the educational system must have sufficient flexibility to do this. There should be multiple pathways to success, a variety of methods to assess learning, and flexible timetables to meet standards. Several people suggested providing every student with an Individual Education Program (IEP), similar to what is now used for educating students with disabilities. Teachers should have a deep understanding of their students' individual needs (current proficiencies, learning styles, their personal circumstances, etc.) and how to use this understanding to raise academic achievement.

- ❑ *Motivating Students:* Participant comments reveal a strong-shared belief that the educational system is responsible not only for providing educational opportunities for students, but also for motivating students to make the most of those opportunities. Participants talked about the need of young people to feel successful, special, and connected to at least one caring adult. They need to find something in their school day that incites their passion. The classroom must be relevant to their career interests and life outside of the school building.

Sharing Best Practices

Participants expressed broad support for sharing best practices. Research on efforts to improve education offers important lessons that could be applied in New York. At the same time, many spoke about the need for flexibility and the ability to adapt a given model or approach to fit local circumstances and specific student needs.

Regionalization

Several participants encouraged colleagues to take on a regional mindset. Are there opportunities to promote efficiencies and share costs if USNY institutions operate in concert, rather than as single entities? Are there possible economies of scale in the delivery of or purchasing of services? If so, then institutional leaders need to build the structures or networks required to do this work. BOCES could provide the vehicle for bringing regional stakeholders together.

Justice and Equity in Education

USNY leaders must acknowledge and confront the challenges posed by the State's diverse student population and their differential access to opportunities due to poverty, geography, language skills, disability, or other factors. Participants noted that:

- ❑ Students attending schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods often do not have sufficient successful role models and opportunities to develop leadership skills.
- ❑ Schools are not equipped to prepare students from poverty backgrounds for success in the workforce.
- ❑ People of color need a voice and an opportunity to be heard. They must participate in every gathering about achieving the USNY aims.
- ❑ Immigration brings both challenges and models for success.
- ❑ High achieving students in all areas of the State should get support and be encouraged. The academically gifted are not always challenged.

Public Image

Many participants said that the general public, elected officials, and the business community need a better appreciation of the importance of education. Advocacy, public relations, and marketing of consistent messages are needed. Schools, the business community, churches, health care organizations, community groups, and cultural institutions

should be standing together and sending the same message: that education is the pathway to realizing the American dream.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the seven regional conversations highlight both the potential of USNY and its most glaring weakness. USNY does appear to have a branding problem: low name recognition, a misunderstood governance structure, and no shared habits of joint venture, or common focus. Yet, participants said that the USNY Summit could be an effective way to build regional cooperation and develop partnerships among USNY institutions. The regional conversations have stimulated an awareness of the interdependency, and a greater sense of shared fate, among USNY members. The proposed USNY aims have the potential to mobilize leaders of numerous and diverse organizations in the service of common goals. Many encouraged the Board of Regents and the Education Commissioner to continue this important and promising work.

