

# An Independent Path to College Success

MICHAEL P. DANZIGER

In Hartford, Conn., more than \$11 million was recently committed to support college access for low-income students. Federal funds under “No Child Left Behind?” Nope. A gift from the Gates Foundation? Not that either.

The millions were pledged by a group of Hartford-area private, or *independent*, high schools as part of Mayor Eddie Perez’s campaign to improve college matriculation rates in Connecticut’s capital city.

Faced with a long-term economic crisis if the city’s school system fails to show marked improvement, Perez charged a Blue Ribbon Commission in 2004 to “open the doors of economic opportunity for Hartford residents by increasing the number of Hartford youth obtaining bachelor’s degrees.” With the support of business, education and community leaders in the city, Perez set a goal to increase the number of Hartford public high school graduates who enroll in and graduate from four-year colleges by 25 percent over a period of five years.

In support of the mayor’s goal, more than 20 Connecticut independent high schools have committed \$11.5 million in scholarships for Hartford students. Perez’s inclusion of independent schools in the plan is unconventional and controversial, but critically important. Fully half of Hartford’s 125,000 residents are age 14 or under, and education is crucial to developing and retaining a skilled workforce. But the Hartford public school system posts lower high school graduation and college enrollment rates than any other urban area in New England. Less than 5 percent of the high school Class of 2003 is expected to graduate from a four-year college by 2008. “Education is the great equalizer in our society,” said Perez. “I want to increase the number of options for Hartford students and their families to even out that playing field.”

No one, including the mayor, would argue that independent schools are the solution: these schools enroll fewer than 10 percent of U.S. students and do not have the resources to provide financial assistance to vast numbers of students who lack the funds to attend them. Sustainable college access on a broader scale is contingent upon progress and additional investment in public schools, and indeed, Perez is implementing curricular and structural changes in the Hartford public school system. Still, local independent schools are important fixtures in the long-term health of their communities and often-overlooked resources for students and families.

As Perez and other community leaders began designing the independent school initiative, called The Hartford Youth Scholars Foundation (HYSF), members of the HYSF board traveled to Boston to learn about the Steppingstone Foundation’s experience preparing urban students for success at independent and public exam schools. Founded in 1990, Steppingstone is a privately funded nonprofit organization that has prepared more than 1,000 fifth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade students in Boston and Philadelphia for admission to top “college-preparatory” middle schools and high schools. Through a selective process, Steppingstone enrolls motivated students from underserved, low- to moderate-income neighborhoods who would not otherwise have access to these educational opportunities.

Beginning in the summer before fifth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade, Steppingstone students—dubbed “Scholars” upon acceptance to the program—are immersed in a demanding 14-month academic preparation component that consists of two full-time summer sessions and classes after school and on Saturdays during the school year. Classes are taught by teachers from partner placement schools such as Belmont Hill School and Milton Academy and area graduate schools such as Harvard, Boston College and Lesley and are designed to prepare the Scholars for the rigors and expectations that await them at college-preparatory schools. Courses range from literature and science to test prep and study skills. On a typical day at Steppingstone, Scholars might dissect a passage from *Newsweek* in search of words with Latin roots, discuss censorship and civil liberty issues raised in reading *Fahrenheit 451*, and practice their critical thinking skills in a math clinic focused on word problems. The focus of the 14-month component is academic skill development, including self-advocacy skills; the goal is to prepare students to get into and succeed at schools whose graduates go on to college.

Over the years, 90 percent of Steppingstone Scholars who have completed the 14-month academic component have been placed at independent or selective public exam schools. But Steppingstone’s responsibility to prepare and support Scholars doesn’t end when they enter new schools in sixth, seventh or ninth grade. Unlike students for whom a college-preparatory education is a birthright handed down for generations, these young people need support in their new environments. Steppingstone offers comprehensive services to ensure that the students are thriving—academically and socially—at their new schools. Similarly, Steppingstone provides college-counseling support, such as college visits and SAT

preparation, to ensure that college matriculation is an obtainable goal for all Scholars. Fully 95 percent of Scholars who complete the 14-month preparation program graduate from high school, and 96 percent of Scholars who graduate from high school enroll in a four-year college or university.

Through further discussions with Steppingstone, Mayor Perez and other members of the HYSF board, including Trinity College President Jim Jones, determined that adapting a tested and replicable program model was not only good for Hartford students and families, but also made good business sense. Citing Steppingstone's record of getting kids into college and helping negotiate financial aid packages, Perez concluded the program "will resonate with Hartford families."

As a result of a formal partnership with the foundation, HYSF will launch the Steppingstone Academy Hartford this summer with its first class of eighth-grade students. Middle school teachers and guidance counselors from the Hartford Public Schools have already nominated more than 450 students for one of the 30 spots in the

Academy's pilot class. Upon acceptance, Steppingstone Scholars in Hartford will spend the following 14 months preparing for placement into and success at one of more than 20 partner independent schools in Connecticut, including day and boarding schools, single-sex schools and Catholic schools.

While many mayors and community leaders might not include independent schools in a campaign to increase college access, Perez, HYSF and the Steppingstone Foundation have provided a model of public/private partnership for other cities with clusters of college-prep-oriented independent schools to follow. As one initiative within a larger campaign to increase college access in Hartford, independent schools serve as an important resource to help city leaders address the achievement gap, while contributing to the portfolio of school options available to Hartford students and families.

---

*Michael P. Danziger is co-founder and president of the Boston-based Steppingstone Foundation. Email: mdanziger@tsf.org.*

---

## What's in Your Valise?

### Determining What Students Learn in College

CLIFFORD ADELMAN

What would we think of U.S. higher education if we knew that 59 percent of bachelor's degree recipients completed two or more courses in college-level mathematics such as statistics or calculus? Or that 35 percent completed a writing course beyond freshman composition, a course such as technical writing, creative writing or journalism? Would we think better of our business majors if we knew that 84 percent crossed that two college-level math course threshold and better of our chemistry, physics, and geology majors if we knew that 55 percent crossed the advanced writing threshold? If we asked students what's in their knowledge valise when they leave college, would we consider these markers to be sufficient evidence of quantitative and communication skills?

I didn't make these numbers up: they come from the transcripts of college graduates in the most recently completed national longitudinal study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education. They are what is

called "unobtrusive evidence," generated in the natural course of students' higher education. Transcripts don't lie, and common sense would hold the data to be transparent markers of achievement. Sure, a calculus course at MIT is not the same as a calculus course at Old Siwash, but it's still calculus. A journalism course at Northwestern is not the same course as that delivered at Greentree Valley Community College, but they both have freshman composition as a prerequisite. We can do better, particularly in evidence of writing attainment, but with data such as those cited, do we need a test to prove it? If we do, then what kind of test?

The issue of how we determine what college students learn and who might report the answer to that question didn't arise yesterday, though the recent report of U.S. Education Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education treated it like the discovery of a new planet. The Commission report grabbed everything that crossed its selective radar screen, every test or survey that someone told them did the job, and beat up on the higher education accrediting bodies for not doing enough to make sure that colleges provide sufficient evidence that something positive happened inside their students' heads. Continuing down this narrow road will not