

Another Proposal for Bradford College

Can Kids with Social Computing be Catalysts for Excellence in Education

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Earlier this year we offered a potential solution for the Bradford College campus in Haverhill, which has been vacant for several years. That solution, the establishment of a Green Chemistry Research and Demonstration Center, the Bradford Institute, is in its early planning stages. You can read the latest status at <http://www.ivalley.org/blog/>. This month, we draw your attention to another potential solution for the campus.

The state Department of Education is currently bearing down on Haverhill's school system because of poor MCAS results across the city. Mayor James J. Fiorentini and other city leaders have called for a new program to require kids who failed the MCAS to stay after school for remedial classes. While this is likely the best short term action that can be taken on behalf of the students who failed, it obviously is not going to get to the cause of the underlying problems plaguing the Haverhill public schools and many other school systems.

We suggest that the institutional barriers to excellence in education, such as siloed classrooms, and a bureaucracy that does not offer significant incentives for innovation and excellence may finally be showing cracks. However, instead of educators, politicians and activist parents leading the way, it may well be kids, along with the relentless evolution of natural selection, and the emerging phenomenon

known as social computing, that are the catalysts.

Social computing leverages digital media, such as mobile devices, e-mail and instant messaging to address social interaction and political issues. According to Wikipedia, "easy connections brought about by cheap devices, modular content, and shared computing resources are having a profound impact on our global economy and social structure. Individuals increasingly take cues from one another rather than from institutional sources like corporations, media outlets, religions, and political bodies." We believe that schools should also be included.

Today there are only a few random students with the courage to challenge the status quo and associate the institutional barriers with low test scores. However, with social computing, a community of students, even global, can emerge with a common mission to find examples of best practices in education by exploiting collaboration on the web, and stump for better approaches in their schools. And the communities started by kids can grow to include

educators, politicians and proactive parents to form an ecosystem for excellence in education.

The Department of Education and public schools will need to respond by ceding some control: offering communities a platform to discuss and decide what they want, and then providing it. The public schools will have to respond with the agility to support the Google approach to success: devise and try out many early stage "small chunk" innovations with promise, watch, learn and iterate. Overarching, monolithic solutions that take years to first implement and then validate just don't work.

The Bradford College campus could be a Center for K-12 Education Excellence that addresses best practice teaching and learning processes, including how to exploit social computing to make public education agile enough to continuously improve based on the interaction of the "Excellence in Education" ecosystem or community. It can be a best practices showcase for K-12 high performance educational processes and methods and associated educational technology tools.

As examples, other research areas could include integration of digital media and global collaboration tools into classroom instruction, as well as how to securely create, store and access accurate and pertinent student records and profiles, so that each student, his/her parents and appropriate educators can have this information on demand to ensure continuous improvement and prevent kids from falling through the cracks.

A key research area would be to identify what performance indicators or metrics can best characterize how well a student is doing.

This is a good example of why the community addressing the problem will need to include lawmakers, so that past legal hurdles concerning access of student records can be dealt with. Many school systems around the world have solid candidate approaches to this problem that may already qualify as best practices.

Further, the Haverhill schools and other cities in the Merrimack Valley could benefit

directly by having students participate in beta trials in model classrooms. Tackling the low MCAS scores, by getting to the core of the problem, could be the first target. Many colleges and businesses could collaborate with K-12 schools in a campus environment by buying/renting space. The colleges, businesses and schools could share and sell best practices across the country or even globally.

On its own, this idea is a long shot to generate enough interest and then investment to develop the Center for K-12 Education Excellence on the Bradford College campus. However, it begins to be more realistic when you couple it with other proposals for use of the campus. For example, it would be a perfect fit with a private Science High School being proposed for the campus by a North Andover resident, and the Hillview Montessori Charter School, which is looking for a permanent home. Both entities could help form the community needed for the Center for Education Excellence to succeed and the schools could interact and help each other achieve their goals. Further, all three entities can leverage each other's potential funding to purchase the campus and make the needed renovations.

Now let's take this thought process one step further. The Green Chemistry Research and Demonstration Center would also be a good match with the Center for Education Excellence and the two schools. One of the goals for the Green Chemistry Institute is to introduce Green Chemistry training in K-12 schools.

The schools can be a feeder system to the Green Chemistry Institute, while the Green Chemistry Institute can provide leading edge training to schools to give students an edge in a potential new industry. A good analogy is with the biotech industry, which is centered in Boston and Cambridge. Biotech basics are being folded into the Boston public school curriculum.

Finally, there are some interesting potential funding sources for the Center for K-12 Education Excellence. The National Science Foundation and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are two of many big funding sources for research and technology in education. Further, major manufacturers such as Raytheon, General Electric and IBM have been cited for the investment that they have made into improving math and science in K-12 education, primarily because they predict a shortage of well trained scientists and engineers in the not too distant future.

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The Innovation Valley initiative seeks to help stimulate economic growth and quality-of-life enhancements in the Merrimack Valley. Every month we will report on innovative businesses, practices, and ideas that are helping to make Merrimack Valley the place to be. Look for our article in print media and online at www.ivalley.org.



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