

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Leading the Way Toward a More Prosperous, Equitable New England by 2030

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation's Theory of Change





## ABOUT THE NELLIE MAE EDUCATION FOUNDATION

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is the largest philanthropic organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. The Foundation supports the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches to learning at the middle and high school levels across New England—where learning is personalized; learning is competency-based; learning takes place anytime, anywhere; and students exert ownership over their own learning. To elevate student-centered approaches, the Foundation utilizes a four-part strategy that focuses on: building educator ownership, leadership and capacity; advancing quality and rigor of student-centered learning practices; developing effective systems designs; and building public understanding and demand. Since 1998, the Foundation has distributed over \$180 million in grants.

For more information about the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, visit [nmefoundation.org](https://nmefoundation.org).

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## A Bold Goal

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is embarking on an ambitious new agenda, one that builds on our position as a promoter of equity and excellence in public education in New England and our recognition that bolder action is required to ensure that all of our young people can fully participate in our region’s economic and civic landscape.

Today, a high school diploma is no longer a sufficient terminal degree. Among many things, a high quality secondary education—one that encompasses high academic standards, as well as the skills and dispositions required to thrive in college and careers—is what young people need to be ready for a successful post-secondary experience.

Because of these educational realities, it is time for us to think more boldly and strategically about the upgrades our K-12 public education system needs to produce deeper learning outcomes for all and propel New England to a more prosperous and equitable future.

### BIG GOAL

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#### Universal College and Career Readiness for New England

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Unconscionable gaps in school achievement and completion have left far too many New England residents on the sidelines, at great cost to themselves, their communities, and the region. The chances of being ready for a successful post-secondary education are too low for all students and slimmest for the state’s most underserved populations, including immigrants, youth from low-income families and children of color. While we’ve seen incremental improvements in the high school to college pipeline over the past decade, the current rate of improvement is simply not fast enough to address a serious attainment gap that threatens our region.

Given the urgency of the need, the Foundation’s Board of Directors has approved an unprecedented opportunity to increase annual expenditures, capacity, and effort, which will allow us to set in motion a series of activities that we believe will significantly accelerate improvement. That work is organized around a simple but visionary goal: universal post-secondary attainment supported by universal college and career readiness for all New England public school graduates, especially and essentially those groups least served by our current system.

We define college and career readiness as the ability to enroll in a post-secondary program without need for remediation—a powerful predictor of eventual completion—and we’ve set an aggressive near-term benchmark: *at least 80% college and career readiness for every subgroup and New England as a whole by 2030*. This target adds precision to the Foundation’s mission of equipping all learners to become “civically engaged, economically self-sufficient, lifelong learners,” forcing us to think strategically and act courageously to ensure all New England youth achieve the deep learning outcomes they deserve and need.

## ADJUSTED FOCUS

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### Student-Centered Learning and Systems Change

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Many factors contribute to and perpetuate New England's educational attainment divide, but we have strong evidence that secondary schools can make a substantial difference in closing achievement and attainment gaps.<sup>i</sup> In recent years, the Foundation has invested in identifying and spreading methods that help students master strong academic standards at the same time that they develop higher-order skills and dispositions that research links to success in college and careers, a group of instructional approaches that we call *student-centered learning*. A growing body of research suggests that student-centered approaches—those that meet each learner where she is, differentiate to help each learner achieve mastery, use time and place flexibly, and attend to student ownership of the learning process—can maximize learning outcomes for all students and especially those historically underserved.<sup>ii</sup>

While we've helped generate significant traction for student-centered learning already and see great potential for student-centered learning to hit its stride in the years ahead, we've yet to see the methods adopted at scale. Additionally, student-centered learning approaches are not as comprehensive as we envision. We have come to recognize that we won't see full-fledged adoption of student-centered learning until we focus more squarely on the systemic challenges that inhibit its uptake and effective implementation.

In response, we at the Foundation have adjusted our strategy, keeping student-centered learning at the core, while shifting our energies from seeding effective practices at the school level to a more deliberate focus on system redesign.

## THE STRATEGY

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### Four Interdependent Initiatives

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**A bold goal requires bold strategies.** While we recognize that one philanthropic institution cannot bring about such expansive change through its efforts alone, we posit that if we select the most promising levers and work in alliance with others who are tackling other critical factors that influence students' likelihood of post-secondary success, we can generate enough enthusiasm and momentum that we reach a tipping point, after which many more local communities, investors, and partners will join the push, propelling the region to the finish line.

The following four strategies represent a significant increase in Foundation investments and are intended to work in tandem, unlocking the link between research-based innovations in instructional practice, the systems conditions that support their adoption at scale and setting in motion a change process rooted in public discourse that will result in dramatically better outcomes for New England youth by 2030.





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## INITIATIVES

1

**Build educator ownership, leadership, and capacity** by developing quality resources for educators to implement effective student-centered practices, empowering teachers to play a role in shaping state and district policies and decisions, and incubating models of effective teacher and principal professional development.

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2

**Advance the quality and rigor of student-centered learning** with a multi-district evaluation that helps pinpoint which practices, policies, and conditions produce the most dramatic results for underserved populations, a research collaborative to amass strong evidence and examples of effective student-centered practices, a common set of principles and measures to judge instructional quality and guide educators and schools through cycles of improvement, and a network of researchers and practitioners who identify common challenges and design innovative solutions.

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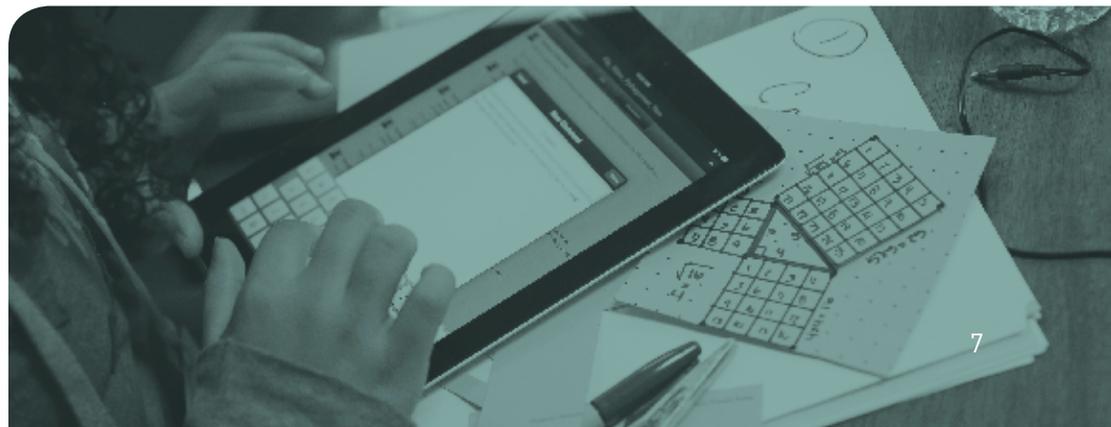
3

**Develop system designs and policies** that nurture student-centered learning, enable the spread of innovation, and foster a culture of continuous improvement via redesign grants for districts, cross-district learning networks, investments in game-changing innovations with potential to produce breakthroughs in key systems, and ongoing state and local policy analysis and advocacy that is informed by our other research.

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4

**Influence and shape public understanding and demand for rigorous, equitable public education** through the development of a compelling, positive narrative about education in New England that leverages the public's sense of fairness and concern for one another's welfare, engagement and support of public education leaders and traditionally marginalized voices as forces for change, and participation in and support of alliances that share a common agenda of universal college and career readiness.



## THE LEAP

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### How the Right Forces, in Combination, Can Accelerate Progress

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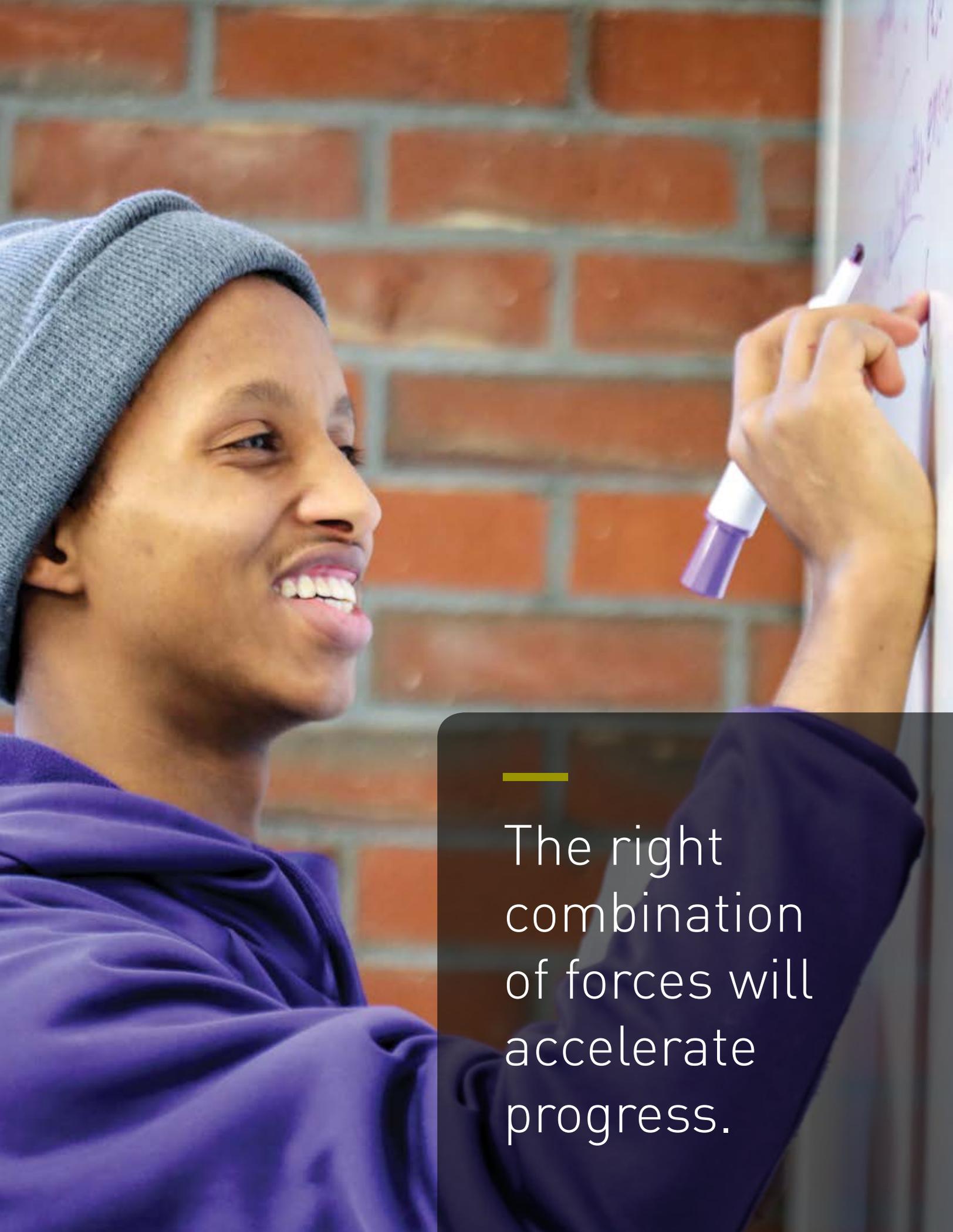
The Foundation's revised strategy represents expansive thinking, solid research, and some leaps of faith. While we do not—and could not—have a precise map for the road ahead and expect to adjust as we learn from our work and others', we believe the time is ripe to act. With strong research, compelling examples, and thoughtful integrative, state-based engagement strategies, we believe we can generate the public demand and momentum necessary to achieve dramatically better outcomes for all New England students.

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**Bottom line:** The goal of universal post-secondary attainment is essential for the region to have a strong future. And since this goal is dependent on dramatically increasing post-secondary readiness, the work is too important not to pursue. Right now our youth and our communities need so much more than our public schools are ready to provide. By concentrating our efforts to advance systems defined by student-centered learning—in partnership with many others—we can pave the way for a more equitable, prosperous, engaged New England for many generations to come.

<sup>i</sup> Friedlaender, D., D. Burns, et al. (2014). Research brief. Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap. Stanford, CA, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE).

<sup>ii</sup> Tatum, A. W. (2012). Literacy practices for African-American male adolescents. Students at the Center Series. Boston, MA, Jobs for the Future; Yonezawa, S., L. McClure, et al. (2012). Personalization in schools. Students at the Center Series. Boston, MA, Jobs for the Future; Walters, K., T. M. Smith, et al. (2014). An up-close look at student-centered math teaching: A study of highly regarded high school teachers and their students. Washington, D.C., American Institutes for Research.



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The right combination of forces will accelerate progress.



[www.nmefoundation.org](http://www.nmefoundation.org)