



A Secretariat for Education and Workforce Development

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The year 2003 brings an extraordinarily rare opportunity for change in New England. Five of the six states inaugurate new governors in this new year. The five new chief executives will name five new staffs with whom they will advance five new visions that they hope will leave a permanent mark on their states.

Improving the sour economy will be high on their list of priorities. Budgets will be scrutinized in record time to meet legislative deadlines. Alarms will be sounded about declining revenues, unnecessary spending and looming layoffs. The bad news will be emailed to every media outlet and relayed to the public, striking fear in the hearts of all. "It's the economy, stupid" will be resurrected as a catch-phrase in each New England state and as a slogan in the presidential campaign of 2004.

The condition of higher education may not capture the same level of buzz. But all six New England governors inevitably will find they cannot solve the economic problems of their states without solving the educational problems. The two are inextricably linked. Historically, governors who have focused on one and ignored the other have failed to make their mark and, more importantly, failed the people they represent.

Surely, each state has different circumstances and special problems that require different solutions. The problems facing Massachusetts and

Connecticut vary greatly from those facing Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. There are no simple solutions to these problems. But there are some lessons to be learned from the mistakes of the past.

The old *ad hoc* attempts at cooperation won't suffice.

In recent decades, for example, governors have attempted to put new emphasis on links between higher education and economic development by forming commissions, councils, quasi-public agencies and boards comprising interested parties. These groups would convene, sometimes grudgingly, stumble through their different perspectives, issue a news release and then go their separate ways to practice separate policies. Good intentions all, but little success.

Additionally, during the prosperous 1990s, many state agencies took on ever greater independence. Some began to look like fiefdoms. And though the more difficult economic times of the new decade argue for new ideas and new collaboration, the fiefdoms try to hold on to the vestiges of failed practices and isolationism.

It's time to wake up and smell the coffee.

If New England's governors are problem-solvers, and they all must be, then they must be mindful of the mistakes of the past and make bold moves that yield measurable results.

The old *ad hoc* attempts at cooperation won't suffice. These governors must now compel state agencies to work in total cooperation and collaboration.

One concrete way they can do that—and leave their marks too—is to create a single cabinet-level secretariat in each state to firmly direct education, workforce and economic development policy. This consolidated authority would hold the responsible agencies' feet to the fire, and enjoy the full attention and support of the governor. The respective departments of education and economic development must work together not just at a few meetings per year, but all the time. This won't occur unless the governors bring full force to bear on these agencies.

The political obstacles to such consolidation will be great. But the need is clear. The labor-intensive industries of our region are being rapidly replaced by knowledge-driven businesses. New England's present and future economy depends upon a high-quality higher education system. The region's higher education system, in turn, depends upon a healthy economy.

So, now more than ever, New England's students and businesses depend upon visionary and determined governors who will lead in word and deed.

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