

The Maine View

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The Promise of Public Charter Schools: Closing Maine's Achievement Gap

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by Hon. Stephen L. Bowen, M.Ed.

Last summer, in the midst of high school graduation season, *Education Week Magazine* released the results of an extensive, nationwide study of high school graduation rates. Among their conclusions was a finding that Maine's long-celebrated above-average high school graduation rates may have been inflated through poor statistical analysis. They calculated Maine's graduation rate to be 74 percent, far below the 87 percent rate cited on the state's own Department of Education website.[1] According to published reports, Maine's Commissioner of Education "did not dispute the new findings" and indeed admitted that the report's conclusions were "probably more accurate than the state's calculations." [2]

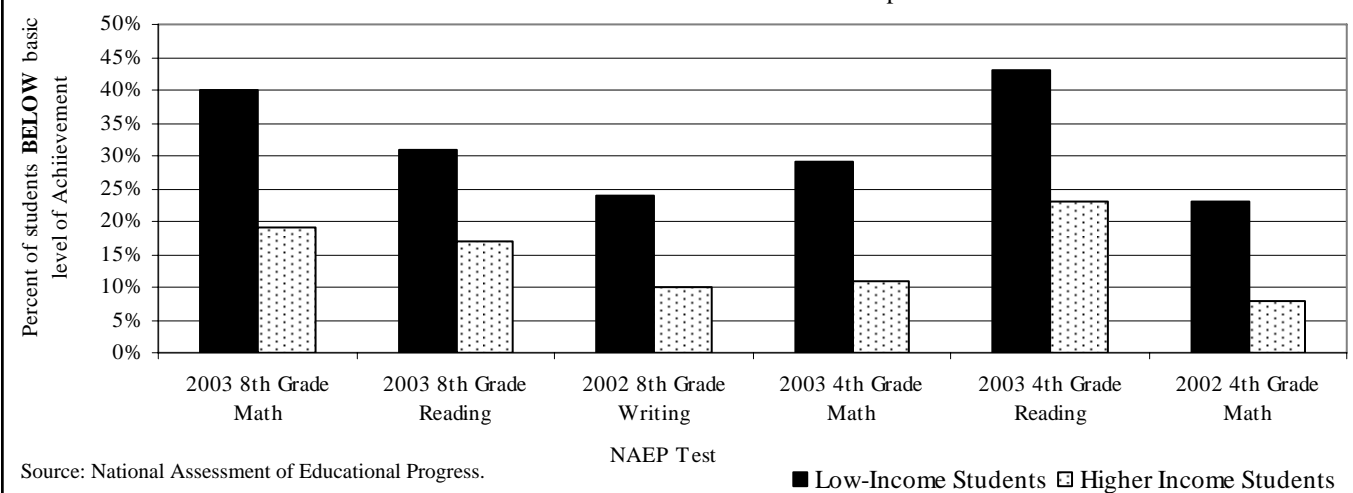
The fact that more than a quarter of Maine's students fail to complete high school strongly suggests that Maine's schools are simply not meeting the needs of many Maine students. Testing data seems to confirm this assumption. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a widely used achievement test known as the "Nation's Report Card," reveal that Maine students from families that struggle financially have particularly poor academic development. NAEP testing scores of students from low-income households indicate a substantial income-based achievement gap (see Chart 1 and Table 1).[3]

These results reveal that thousands of Maine school children are simply failing to succeed in Maine's schools, despite the best efforts of dedicated teachers and administrators. Indeed, the fact that low-income Maine students have even lower achievement in math and writing in 8th grade than in 4th grade indicates that in many cases, the longer students remain in traditional Maine schools, the further behind they get.

Charter schools offer the following advantages:

- Charter schools tend to embrace more innovative approaches to teaching.
- Research shows that charter schools effectively reach at-risk students.
- Charter schools have more autonomy than traditional public schools and as a result, they are more accountability to several different parties.
- Research and experience in other states suggests that public charter schools can have a positive effect on neighboring traditional public schools.

Chart 1
Maine's Low Income Achievement Gap



NAEP Test	Low-Income Students	Higher Income Students
2003 8th Grade Math	40%	19%
2003 8th Grade Reading	31%	17%
2002 8th Grade Writing	24%	10%
2003 4th Grade Math	29%	11%
2003 4th Grade Reading	43%	23%
2002 4th Grade Math	23%	8%

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The Call for Change

Last year, recognizing the need for what they called “dramatic change,” the Maine Board of Education’s *Select Panel on Revising Education* undertook an extensive study of Maine’s schools with the intent to develop aggressive strategies for reform. The Board’s proposed changes, though, such as longer school years, a restructuring of current school system administration, and an increase in teacher pay, would attempt reform within the existing K-12 educational system.[4] The State Board would endeavor, in short, to create the schools we need only by trying to change the schools we already have.

However, across the nation school reformers are adding a different approach to reaching low-income and at-risk students. The approach consists of developing a new kind of school that operates outside the traditional public school establishment, schools run by innovative educators who adopt non-traditional approaches to helping students reach their highest potential.

These new schools are called public charter schools, and though they hardly even existed fifteen years ago, today they educate approximately one million American schoolchildren in forty states.[5]

Public Charter Schools – A Primer

Calling charter schools “one of the most innovative developments in public education in recent years,” the non-partisan Education Commission of the States defined charter schools in a 2005 report as:

“Semi-autonomous public schools, founded by educators, parents, community groups or private organizations that operate under a written contract with a state, district or other entity. This contract, or charter, details how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be taught and expected to achieve and how success will be measured. Many charter schools enjoy freedom from rules and regulations affecting other public schools, as long as they continue to meet the terms of their charters. They can be closed for failing to satisfy these terms.”[6]

Charter schools, therefore, are public schools that operate independently of the existing school bureaucracy. As public schools, charter schools are free; non-sectarian; must meet all applicable healthy, safety, and civil rights regulations; and must be open to all applicants, though they may focus on a specific population, such as at-risk students.[7] Because they are “schools of choice,” students cannot be “assigned” to a charter school as they are to a traditional public school. Charter schools must attract parents and students and keep them coming back by offering quality educational programs.

Whereas traditional public school are funded and managed directly by municipalities or school districts, charter schools are established and monitored by a public chartering authorizer, and managed according to their chartering document, which describes how the school is to be operated. In a 2006 report on charter schools, Flint Hills Center analyst John LaPlante equated school charters with any contract that lays out “the expectations of the people entering into it.” “In the charter,” LaPlante explains, “the managers of the school lay out their academic, administrative, financial, and other goals and plans.”[8]

In its recent charter school study, the Maine State Board of Education outlined a series of educational policy issues that might be established by the charter document, including a school’s “purpose and mission, governance, organization, funding plans, degree of autonomy, relationship to the authorizer, monitoring responsibilities and procedures, outcome goals, accountability, innovative practices in teaching and learning programs,” among others.[9]

The charter document thus establishes the details of the agreement between the school and its “authorizer.” The authorizer is the entity that approves and oversees the school. In the vast majority of cases nationwide, that entity is an existing school district. Alternative authorizing bodies, such as universities, state education agencies, regional educational authorities, or non-profits have also established charter schools in many states.[10]

The charter and chartering process are also important in setting the standards by which the success of the school will be measured, and the grounds upon which a decision might be made to close a charter school. The prospect of closing is a primary way that a charter school differs from traditional public schools, which rarely ever close as a consequence of failing to meet the needs of students. Because charter schools are schools of choice for parents and students, as John LaPlante observes, “parents provide another check on charter schools; if they withdraw their students, the school shuts down.”[11]

The Advantages of Public Charter Schools

The number of public charter schools has increased dramatically in the past decade, as school systems across the nation,

under increased state and federal pressure to improve student achievement, have looked to charter schools as a means of providing an innovative alternative to traditional public schools. In the short time that they have been in use, charter schools have already exhibited several advantages compared to the more traditional public schools such as those described below.

Educational Innovation

Since charter schools operate independently of the public school establishment, they tend to embrace more innovative approaches to teaching. In its 2003 report on Charter Schools, the Maine State Board of Education found the prospects for new styles of school management to be among the most appealing aspects of the charter school model, observing that “some schools have parents playing a central role, others have teachers in a dominant role and still others have a core of administrative leaders who make a deep imprint. In some cases students occupy important roles well beyond what occurs in local districts. Leaders tend to come from more varied backgrounds offering the promise of more innovation flowing from a variety of backgrounds.”[12]

The Board’s conclusion appears well supported by research. While curriculum and teaching practices vary from school to school, a 2007 review of charter school research by the University of Washington found that public charter schools were “more likely than traditional public schools to use interdisciplinary teaching, paired or team teaching, and block scheduling.” Charter schools were also “more likely to offer before-school and after-school enrichment programs” and “more likely to use special instructional approaches, such as Montessori.”[13]

A 2004 U.S. Department of Education report on innovation in charter schools likewise found the schools it studied to be “infused with the spirit of innovation. At one charter school, innovation takes the shape of a longer school day; at another, it is in the teaching of pedagogy or scheduling configuration. While such practices may have been developed and tried in

other places across the country, the novel ways charter schools can put them together often results in a school culture and operational structure quite different from those in neighboring schools.”[14]

Effectiveness at reaching at-risk students

Though charter schools are public schools and open to all students, the Center for Education Reform finds that “an average of 75 percent of students in charter schools fall into categories defined as “at-risk.”[15] In fact, many charter schools have been developed specifically as a means of providing schooling to students who have otherwise failed to thrive in more traditional settings. The increasing popularity of these schools nationwide is a testament to the success many have had at bringing achievement to students who have struggled elsewhere.

- In the District of Columbia, where 61 percent of public school students qualify for the low-income national school lunch program, students in the city’s charter schools dramatically outperformed those in traditional schools. Proficiency in math is 10 percent higher among charter school students, six percent higher for reading proficiency.[16]
- According to the Center for Education Reform, a 2004 Harvard University study found that “charter school students are more likely to be proficient in reading and math than students in neighboring conventional schools” with the “greatest achievement gains” among “low-income students.”[17]
- A RAND Corporation review of charter school research cited a study done by Harvard and Columbia Business Schools, which found “statistically and substantively significant” gains in student achievement at charter schools in “three low-income neighborhoods in Chicago.”[18]
- The Maine State Board of Education’s 2003 report on charter schools cited 2001 data from Texas which showed that “at-risk student performance improves in the chartered schools in math and reading over time in comparison to those who

Table 2
Comparison of Public, Charter, and Private Schools

Public Schools	Public Charter Schools	Private Schools
Free – No Tuition	Free – No Tuition	Charge Tuition
Non- Sectarian	Non-Sectarian	May be Sectarian
Students assigned to school	Parents have choice	Parents have choice
Governed by School Boards	Governed by Charter Document with oversight by Authorizers	Governed by Private Boards of Directors
Accountable to Local School Board, Voters, State and Federal Authorities	Accountable to Authorizing Entity, Parents, State and Federal Authorities	Accountable to Parents, Governing Board
Rarely ever closed for poor performance	Can be closed for poor performance	Can be closed for poor performance

Source: MHPC.

remain in the traditional system.” Similar results can found, the Board wrote, in “Louisiana, Michigan, Florida and Wisconsin, to mention a few.”[19]

Greater Accountability

Charter schools have more autonomy than traditional public schools and as a result, they are more accountability to several different parties.

- **The State.** The U.S. Department of Education observes, “Because charter schools are public schools, state accountability systems and oversight responsibilities apply to them.” The Department found that the vast majority of states have thorough oversight systems in place, monitoring student achievement, school finances, compliance with state and federal law, and a host of other indicators of school performance. As a consequence, their oversight of charter schools differs little from that used for traditional public schools.[20]
- **The Charter School Authorizers.** A charter school’s authorizers are given the power to sanction and even close a charter school for failing to meet the conditions of its charter; but do they? The 2004 study *High Stakes: Findings from a National Study of Life or Death Decisions by Charter School Authorizers* found that charter authorizers have indeed “proven willing to close under-performing schools.” In the 50 cases the study analyzed, they found “only one case in which the authorizer failed to close a school despite clear evidence of underperformance.”[21] Charter school opponents have often taken the closure of some charter schools as indicative of a failure of the charter school model, but, as the Wall Street Journal observed, “All charter schools aren’t successful, but the bad ones tend to close in due course, which is a good thing and more than can be said for failing traditional public schools.”[22]
- **Parents.** Charter schools are schools of choice, which means that if they are unable to provide a quality product, parents will move their children to other schools, and the charter school will close. Charter school opponents often suggest that “parents don’t have the information they need to make a knowledgeable decision about what schools are best matched to the needs of their kids.”[23] Yet, a recent report from the University of Washington found that “there is little support for this claim” in their research. Researchers concluded that “most parents do a great deal to gather information about the schools they consider” and that “low-income families are no different.” The study further showed that the majority of parents reported “extremely high levels of satisfaction” with the decision they made. [24] These findings suggest that when given a choice, parents take their accountability role very seriously.

- **Taxpayers.** Charter schools are also more accountable for how they spend tax dollars. As the Freedom Foundation’s David Kirkpatrick observes, “unlike public school boards, charter school authorities cannot levy taxes. They cannot compel the public to pay whatever they choose to spend.” Funding provided to charter schools, therefore is “usually less than the local public schools receive and includes little money for facilities.”[25]

Improved Traditional Public Schools

Research and experience in other states suggests that public charter schools can have a positive effect on neighboring traditional public schools.

The Manhattan Institute found that “many superintendents and principals are responding” to charter schools by “making changes designed to produce more appealing and effective schools.” Their research described a Massachusetts school district, for example, that changed the curriculum of one of its schools and implemented a new remedial study initiative in others, “mimicking” programs at area charter schools.[26]

The superintendent of Dayton Public Schools rose to the challenge of area charter schools, telling reporters that he was committed to making his school system the “system of choice in the community.” He then “led the district to focus as never before on boosting academic achievement” including developing “a variety of programs to serve as magnets across the district to improve student achievement within neighborhood schools.” [27]

Perhaps most importantly, the presence of alternatives has led many schools to focus a critical eye on themselves. “Affected schools districts,” according to one study, “engage in careful self-examination and devise meaningful strategies” to improve their educational product.[28]

Federal Funding

Charter schools have access to sizable federal grants. During the Clinton administration, the Federal Charter School Grant program was begun. At the time, the program provided \$6 million in federal money for the planning, start-up, and operations of charter schools that met federal requirements. Today, the amount of grant money available from the federal program has grown to well over \$200 million. A 2004 review of the program by the U.S. Department of Education calculated that the average federal grant per charter school in 2002 was approximately \$100,000, though some grants were as high as \$250,000 per charter school.[29]

Today, charter schools receive approximately \$100,000 per year for each of the three years that the federal grants have existed.[30] At a time when state education budgets are extremely tight, the federal charter school program provides a source of funding that makes investing in the charter school approach extraordinarily cost-effective. This is an especially

good investment if such schools can bring success to students whose academic failure would otherwise represent additional costs to the state in the form of increased remediation and social service spending.

Public Charter School Legislation in Maine

Charter school proponents have tried for years to put into law the statutory changes needed to enact public charter schools in Maine, one of only 10 states in the nation without them. After a series of bills in the late 1990's, and near passage of charter school legislation in 2001, the Legislature's Education Committee had the state Board of Education undertake a study of charter schools in 2003.[31]

The Board concluded that charter schools "will maximize the chances of students succeeding in meeting high standards," and recommended "that special attention be given to the encouragement of regional chartered schools in the at-risk category. [32] The board suggested a pilot program be established, and provided suggested guidelines for implementation of a limited charter school program for Maine.

Sharing the State Board's enthusiasm for charter schools, the Advisory Committee to the Department of Education's Office of Truancy, Dropout, and Alternative Education voiced its support as well. "As a committee whose primary focus is on disengaged students who are underserved by the current system," they wrote, "we see the availability of public charter school options as helpful in providing additional learning and teacher options for disaffected students, families, and teachers." [33]

In order to enact the recommendations of the State Board, LD 1640 was introduced in the 122nd legislature. The bill, as amended by the committee, would have established a 10-year pilot charter school program, with a maximum of 20 charter schools statewide, funded with federal grants and authorized by existing school districts or schools of the University of Maine system. The new schools would have had extensive oversight, were expected to meet all state and federal standards for student achievement, and were to have focused exclusively on "at-risk students, those with high absenteeism, who had fallen behind their peers or who have other special needs." [34]

The bill won widespread praise. In urging its passage, the Bangor Daily News editorialized that "Charter schools aren't an assault on public schools, but a chance to provide alternatives to students who do not thrive there." [35] The Portland Press Herald called charter schools "a well-crafted idea that Maine should adopt," adding that the proposal would "provide a needed burst of innovation and energy to Maine's public school system." [36]

Despite broad and bipartisan support, the charter school bill narrowly failed passage. Charter school supporters now have set their eyes on the 123rd legislature, currently in session, where similar legislation awaits public hearing and delibera-

tion.

Conclusion

Though state law currently prohibits public charter schools in Maine, there are already privately funded schools across the state that provide the kind of alternative education programs envisioned by public charter school supporters.

- The *Community School* in Camden is a nationally recognized alternative school with a focus on at-risk students and those that have dropped out of public schools. In a 2002 Boston Globe Magazine article on the 33 year-old school, Northeastern University president Richard Freeland praised the school for its "ability to reach such kids and get them involved in a more productive path." According to the Globe story, more than 80% of the school's 400 graduates have received high school diplomas, and 40% go on to further education, statistics that rival traditional public schools and exceed state averages.[37]
- The *New School* in Kennebunkport began in the fall of 2000 as an extension of the *School Around Us*, a 30 year-old parent-run K-8 school with a focus on community involvement. [38] The school's mission statement outlines the reason why community members felt the need to expand the program to the high school level: "Many young people do not thrive in large public schools, particularly if they are unusually creative, have non-traditional learning styles, and need to belong to a small supportive community of learners." [39] With its holistic focus and broad community involvement, *The New School* provides an innovative alternative to area public schools.
- The *Carleton Project*, in Presque Isle, was formed in 2000, in response to trends that its founders described on the school's webpage: "the fine art of teaching has been lost. It has become more about classroom management, adequate progress, test scores, appropriate conduct and dress, security and a variety of other things that seem to have little to do with the important things we need to learn." [40] In response, the school offers its 40 students a customized curriculum, developed in cooperation with teachers, which may include work experience, independent research and community-based learning. [41]
- The *Hyde School* in Bath has achieved so much success in its 40-year history, that it is now taking advantage of public charter school legislation elsewhere in the nation and is duplicating its program at charter schools in Connecticut, Washington D.C., California, Delaware and New York City. Hyde schools in other states are in development. With its innovative focus on character development and personal responsibility, the school has attracted a wide following, but the lack of charter school legislation in Maine has put tuition for the school in Bath effectively out of reach for many of the students most in need of the school's services right here in the state that was home to the school's founding. [42]

Schools like these have proven that their alternative approaches to educating low-income and at-risk students can succeed here in Maine. However, as the example of the Hyde School demonstrates, the absence of the kind of charter school legislation found in forty other states puts Maine's most needy students at a financial disadvantage in accessing these services. Since many of these schools struggle financially, they must limit their enrollment, denying the benefit of their academic success to thousands of students who desperately need alternatives to the traditional public schools.

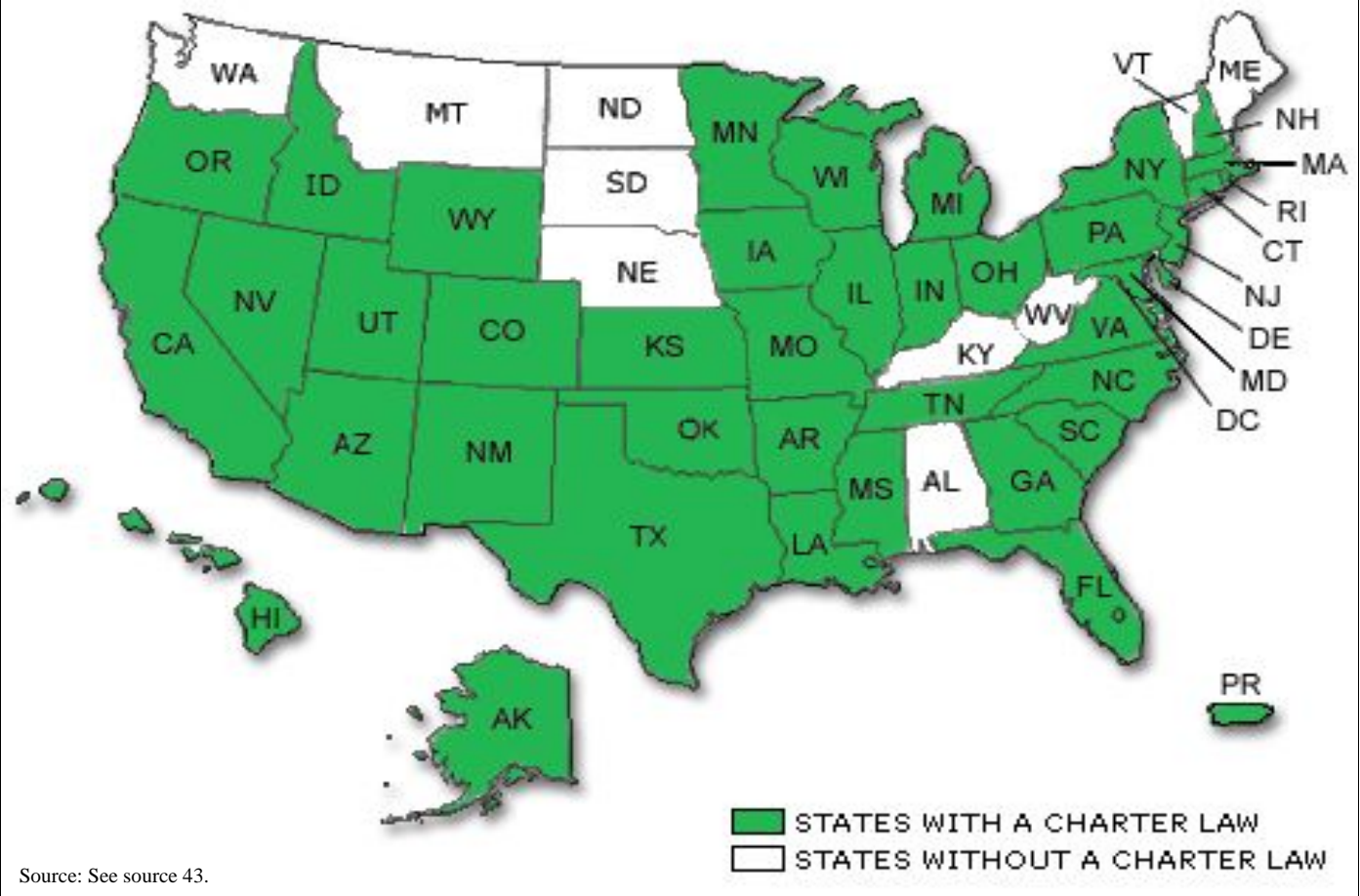
As Maine's high dropout rate proves, these students are voting with their feet, walking away from existing public schools that do not meet their needs in frightening numbers, and thereby committing themselves to lives of lost opportunity. As the need for the high skills demanded of the new economy continues to grow, these students will find themselves further and further behind, and Maine with them. The times demand innovation, boldness and a commitment to exhausting every alternative, including public charter schools, as part of a committed

effort to close the achievement gap, and provide a quality public education to every child in Maine.

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Chart 2
U.S. States with Public Charter Schools



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Stephen L. Bowen is a teacher with MSAD 28, a former state legislator, and an adjunct scholar at The Maine Heritage Policy Center. The author can be reached at sbowen@mainepolicy.org.

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Editor and Director of Communications, Jason A. Fortin

P.O. Box 7829
Portland, ME 04112
207.321.2550 (p)
207.773.4385 (f)

<http://www.mainepolicy.org>
<http://blog.mainepolicy.org>
info@mainepolicy.org

Additional MHPC Staff:

Bill Becker
President & Chief Executive Officer

J. Scott Moody
Vice President of Policy & Chief Economist

Tarren Bragdon
Director of Health Reform Initiatives

Heather Noyes
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Sandy Cleveland
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