

## Playing the Education Card

By Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson

For centuries, New England's six states have been holding aces in higher education. The powerful cachet of "a New England education" has drawn generations of America's keenest young minds. The region's premier universities have more recently attracted tens of thousands of students from abroad, seeking degrees in science and engineering, medicine and computer technology.

In this dawning century of the intellect, what's to worry about?

A lot, we found -- an education machine wracked by inflating costs, slow to adjust to global online competition, and hampered by lack of New England students competent in the 21st century's high demand areas of math and science.

In this article we'll recommend a classic "disruptive technology" -- a totally new, six-state-wide operation that enables students to focus on their needs and life prospects rather than simply responding to pre-set college curriculums. We'll call it Opportunity New England, nicknamed (of course) ONE.

ONE would be the truly ONE-stop shop often talked about but never done. A place (on-line and in person) to find out about career choices and preparation needed, counsel on how to combine the best courses from multiple institutions, help getting enrolled, a hand finding financial aid. Then, at completion, ONE becomes a placement agency and sticks with a graduate's career development.

Nothing as ambitious exists in the U.S. today. It could be an historic New England "first."

But why such a radical new departure? What's come on the scene that justifies it?

Take your pick:

**Competition.** Higher education is a bigger part of New England's economy than anywhere else in the U.S.: 270 colleges and universities, 860,000 students, 250,000+ employees, \$20 billion in yearly operating costs. But the region's edge is slipping as new first-tier universities pop up across the U.S. and the world. The region's share of national college enrollment is declining. In the '90s, bachelor

degrees granted across the U.S. rose 18 percent, but in New England, just 2 percent.

**Cost and class.** Combined tuition, room and board costs at many of New England's private colleges have soared to \$40,000, in some cases close to \$45,000. Academia seems unable to control its costs. Unless blessed with rich parents, even academically brilliant middle-class students can't afford private colleges. Public colleges are also becoming more expensive, as state governments cut support and campuses respond by raising fees. Stratospheric tuitions aren't likely to deter demand for the Harvards, Dartmouths, MITs and Yales. But the economics may turn perilous for the less famous of the region's 170 private, independent colleges and universities; though it's not happened yet, the demise of many, with big blows to their local economies, is a distinct possibility.

**Critical labor shortages.** There's growing danger that New England won't have enough scientists, engineers, information technology and health care professionals to keep its entire economy stable, much less growing. The big

have become both bigger and better. With their home economies gathering steam, fewer of the foreign students who still come will be tempted to stay and enrich New England's economy.

**Looming skills deficit.** Not nearly enough New England youth are being motivated to take the challenging math and science courses they need to qualify for the economy's most promising jobs. The problem's serious at all income levels, exacerbated by the fact that the total number of students graduating from New England high schools is projected to decline by 11,000-- some 7 percent between now and

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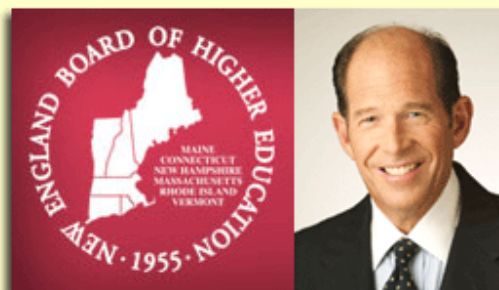
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But the math-science skill deficit is especially alarming among students of color, an ever-growing portion of New England's students. Only 4 percent of African-American and 7 percent of Hispanic math-1 SAT test takers in New England score in the top fifth of the math score distribution (a threshold for advanced study in science, engineering and computer technology).

**Degree dearth.** A high school diploma no longer assures a decent income; the new minimum, to qualify for more than routine labor jobs, is a two-year (associate) degree, normally from a community college. Notwithstanding a few bright spots, New England has a weak community college system. Nationwide, associate degrees grew 25 percent in the '90s; in New England they declined 7 percent.

Education experts say there's a huge disconnect between today's high schools and colleges. The sectors operate in separate orbits, don't talk, don't collaborate.

And the results show. Overwhelming percentages of high school students say they're aiming for college. But take 100 New England 9th graders and ask what actually happens to them. There's not a state in the region in which more than 77 graduate from high school four years later, 52 actually enter college, 40 are still enrolled for a



Evan Dobbelle, President of NEHBE.

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enrollments of foreign students that swelled New England graduate student rolls in the '90s are falling fast -- partly because 9/11 led to tightened visa policies, partly because universities in Europe, Australia, Singapore, China and India

second year, or 29 graduate with either an associate or bachelor's degree.

And some states' scores (Rhode Island and Vermont in particular) are much worse. The late Frank Newman, longtime head of the Education Commission of the States, lamented that New England has "a hole in the bucket... There's a ton (of students) coming in and a trickle making it through."

**The online revolution.** Today's students, notes Blenda Wilson of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, start out as "wired little people," with phones on their belts, earphones, bluetooths, iPods. But schools are painstakingly slow to adopt computer training methods (notwithstanding breakthroughs like Maine's issuance of laptops to seventh graders, at the suggestion of then-Gov. Angus King).

"For the next generation, the web is oxygen, community is virtual, perspective is global, and the career expectations is to reinvent one's self several times over," University of Phoenix president Laura Palmer Noone told a rather astounded group of New England educators meeting in Woodstock, Vt., last year.

Indeed, with 228,000 students, facilities in 34 states, 17,000 faculty (full-time working people in their professions), and an overwhelmingly online operation, the University of Phoenix seems the antithesis of New England small, intimate, college green life.

Internationally, reports New England education expert Joe Cronin, the University of Phoenix is competing with such mega-providers as Britain's Open University and India's Punjab Technical University.

So what about New England? The region has more online than first looks show. MIT was a leader in online course material. UMass Online has 17,000 students. Connecticut has a model Distance Learning Consortium, serving students in 49 member institutions. But the initiatives are growing in vintage New England way -- each effort in its own contented silo, wary of collaboration across lines.

But can New England really exercise its powerful education brand shuffling disjointedly, state-by-state, into the online age?

The answer is no; instead, one observer told us, its institutions collectively, resemble "a centipede with MS." But is paralysis inevitable? No, says Evan Dobbelle, president of the New England Board of Higher Education, asking: "Why not assemble our resources and have a unified New England Online?"

Indeed, why not? Once such things happened. In the 1950s, New England stepped crisply ahead of other American regions by agreeing to a visionary New England Higher Education Compact and creation of a New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). Far-sighted governors of the time -- among them Maine's Edmund Muskie, Massachusetts' Christian

Herter and Connecticut's Abraham Ribicoff -- led the way.

And they didn't stop there. Next came a Regional Student Program, administered by NEBHE, giving New England residents a substantial tuition break when they choose a major offered in another New England state but not their own. The program lives on, close to a half-century old, a smashing success

The Five Colleges consortium in the Pioneer Valley -- UMass Amherst and four private colleges -- suggests New England colleges can, with compelling vision and steady leadership, actually work together. Steven Reno, chancellor of the University of New Hampshire System,



Photo: Students at the University of Vermont

"For the next generation, the web is oxygen, community is virtual, perspective is global, and the career expectations is to reinvent one's self several times over," University of Phoenix president Laura Palmer Noone told a group of New England educators.

speaks eloquently of making a seamless web of the public colleges in his state; a web site and call center opened this fall to help students plan courses of study leading to an assured degree from one of the state colleges.

The ONE (Opportunity New England) program we're proposing -- potentially the world's most student-oriented gateway to higher learning -- builds off and expands on that idea. Chartered or run directly by NEBHE, it would have four arms:

First, "**the Gateway.**" Today's high schoolers, even adults looking for advanced training, are often obliged to start blind, thrashing through stacks of course catalogues.

The Gateway would create a "high-tech, high-touch" solution to the maze. The tech side would present software chock-full of answers on courses, costs, and program conditions at colleges and universities across New England, matched to data on real-world emerging job needs. The high touch side would be staffed by advisers to discuss students' thoughts and ideas, interests and ambition, and suggest a workable course of study, mix or match between colleges, online and on-campus.

Second, the **Negotiation Center**, would take the student's preferences and negotiate a plan with one or more colleges and universities. ONE handles the registration, and helps the student

apply for any grants or loans. It could assemble the costs and hand the student one simple invoice.

Third, the **Coaching Center**. Once enrolled in college (or community college), students all too often face difficulties -- academic, financial, social -- that lead many to drop out. ONE would be available to counsel on how to stay enrolled, or make a smart transfer.

That advice could start cutting back on today's alarming rates of college dropouts.

Finally, a **Career Center**. Working closely with businesses on employment needs, ONE would be available to act as career counselor and placement agent. Armed with the graduate's credentials, the career center could be an ongoing job broker.

Building on knowledge of the best instructed courses across the region, ONE would be the clear choice to create an Online New England service, guiding students across the region and across the globe to the region's superior academic offerings.

But its special magic -- setting it apart from such existing leaders in computerized college information services as the College Foundation of North Carolina and the Southern Regional Education Board -- would be its active, ongoing role as broker for the student.

We predict the consumer-oriented, on-line age will soon produce a service like ONE in some region of America. Shouldn't the region whose very name reflects education be the "one"?

What about turf issues? Would New England's colleges and universities want to ante up and be a player?

Most of the information to be gathered is already public. The web site alone would represent: consumer power. Sure, ONE would be making judgments. But if it succeeded in forging degree plans with high standards of academic integrity and career sensibility, in channeling qualified students to New England's colleges and universities, in embellishing the New England education brand and reality, it's a safe bet that turf jealousies and protections would fall away.

How would ONE be funded? A first likely source would be New England's largest employers -- the likes of Bank of America, Northeast Utilities, Raytheon, Fidelity, Mass Mutual, The Hartford and United Technologies -- figuring their seed money is a prudent investment in their future worker supply. Each state, in proportion to its population, could then be called on to match that capital. Later, modest credit card like fees could be implemented.

Would ONE, on its own, solve New England education problems? Of course not. But by quality guiding and brokering of students, sticking with them past hard spots, creating a flow of graduates for New England businesses, it would symbolize a new New England -- online and campus-based, as modern as the latest software, fully career oriented. And more than competitive by global standards.

In a nation that's short on college and university space and New England with a surplus capacity in its colleges; ONE could attract thousands

more students to the region and pep up the economy. As Robert Woodbury, former Maine chancellor, comments, ONE could offer "online advantages like the University of Phoenix with

the campus ambience of historic New England colleges." More college-going, more sticking in college, a better educated workforce would result.

## Immigrants and Us: Is Public Education Ready?

By Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson

The flow of immigrants into New England -- on a strong upswing since the 1980s -- presents big opportunities and tough challenges.

An immediate positive: immigrants have helped to soften the blow of young people leaving the region; in the '90s Massachusetts and Rhode Island would actually have lost population without immigration. Many are skilled, university-trained, often coming into the U.S. on special H1-b visas, ready to fill critical spots in the region's sophisticated economy.

But there's a big challenge, too: the new immigration wave is spectacularly diverse. Ireland, Canada, and Eastern European dominated the early 20th century flood of migrants, notes Andrew Sum of Northeastern University. But today, it's generally small percentages, from diverse places such as Brazil, Ecuador, China, Haiti, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Italy... a seemingly endless list. Immense numbers of Hispanics are now found in cities like Lawrence, Asians in nearby Lowell. Drive down the streets of Framingham and read the signs in Portuguese.

Many of the new immigrants are poor and uneducated. Surveys suggest as many as one in three does not speak English well. Adult literacy programs are under enormous pressure to meet this need, but long and growing waiting lists are reported. In Massachusetts, basic adult education courses are so stressed and underfunded they can accept less than half the applicants who come to them. For basic English language courses waiting times range from six months to two years. Similar situations are noted across the region.

And what of the immigrant children? The school dropout rate among them is so high in Rhode Island, one foundation official suggested, that it ought to invite legal action. Many kids are reportedly "pushed out of school," literally set up for later problems with the law. Their college-going rate is extraordinarily low.

Problems with immigrant integration aren't, of course, peculiar to New England. But the implications for New England's workforce are especially acute. The region has lots of college degree-holders-- but they're clustered at the older end of the work force. High living costs

force many people, especially young families, to leave the region. A serious, potentially out-of-control worker shortage is in prospect. That's why Kip Bergstrom, executive director of

Some community colleges, in New England, are performing miracles. It's tough, for example, not to admire Springfield Technical Community College -- expert, as one observer put it, in such transitions as "turning Puerto Rican kids into laser technicians." The institution just radiates a solid pragmatism with its gentle fortress structure and student-led, student-staffed incubator businesses operating streetside.

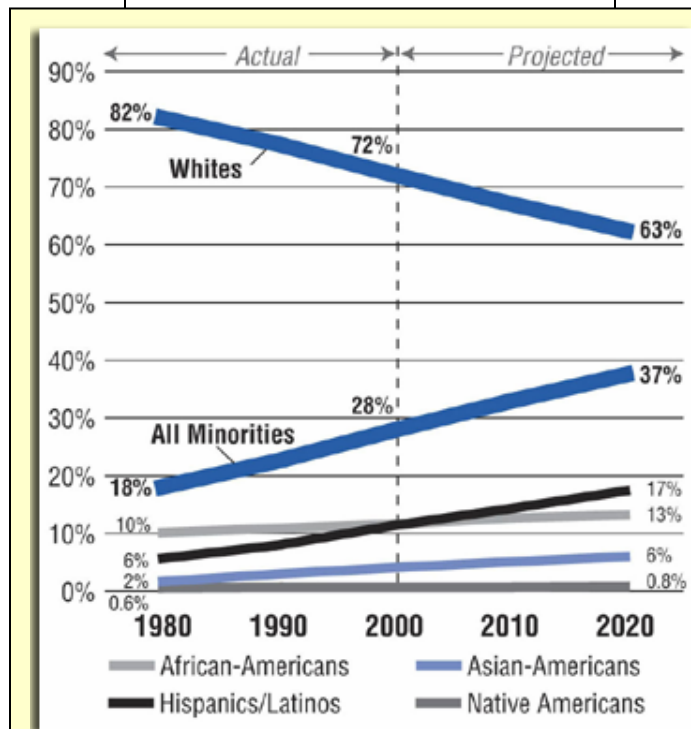
Dorsey Kendrick, the dynamic African-American who heads Gateway Community College in New Haven, is another believer in using these institutions as a primary portal for young people otherwise not headed to college. Community colleges can be flexible about when and where and how people learn. "We should be able to make our institutions No-Excuses zones," she says.

The quandary is that New England's community colleges, a handful of truly bright exceptions notwithstanding, have rarely been planned out as a strategically placed system to support students and promote local economies. Nor have they gotten the state funding and resources received by their counterparts in other American regions.

There's a facile explanation -- that New England, with its many private institutions, doesn't put a priority on public higher education at any level. Compared to other states, New England's per capita support for higher education scrapes the bottom of the barrel (even though on expenditures for students actually enrolled, its ranking is closer to average).

New England's support for public education dropped dramatically in the economic downturn of the early 2000's. UMass Amherst Chancellor John Lombardi quips -- not altogether in jest -- that public universities have gone from being "state-supported to state-assisted to state-affiliated, sliding toward state-located." If trends continue, he might add "state-impeded."

But there's no joking about the bottom line. If New Englanders fail to provide strong support for public higher education, from training programs in the community colleges to building bases of support for strong, cutting-edge sciences in the state universities, they'll play a price: a regional economy headed downhill.



Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

The white portion of the working age population in the U.S. is declining, while the minority portion is increasing. This demographic shift is projected to contribute to a drop in the average level of education of the U.S. workforce over the next two decades unless states do a better job at educating all of their residents.

the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, insists there's no choice: "We must make knowledge workers of immigrants." And, he adds, give a hand to today's large numbers of native New Englanders with low literacy skills.

The remedial effort can't start too soon, he suggests, by giving guidance and hope to kids in school so they don't end up hating math and technology, get past 8th grade algebra (the bedrock of future math and science competence), and learn about the bright career chances that await them if they'll make the effort in the school years.

But assume low-income kids do finish high school -- what then? Across America, community colleges are the critical stepping stone for many young people whose families (immigrant or not) were not college-goers.

## College for ME – and all New England?

By Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson

Why does Maine have an imaginative new Compact for Higher Education, also known as College for ME? Why has the New England Board of Higher Education recently launched a College Ready New England initiative? And why has the Boston region, since the 1970s, had a Higher Education Partnership, aimed at connecting colleges and universities with young people before they make that fateful decision about going to college -- or not?

The answers, in each case, are pretty clear: to save people from lives of drift and frustration, and to strengthen their states, regions and cities.

There are other promising examples, too. A Higher Education Alliance sprung into being in Bridgeport, made of up eight colleges and universities, bent on penetrating the high schools. Business and civic leaders set up a Berkshire Compact for Higher Education, 40 members from healthcare to manufacturing to schools and colleges trying to remove the big barrier so many kids (and adults) see.

Maine's College for ME effort takes a different approach -- direct aim at the inadequate preparation of people already at work in New England's lowest-income state. Henry Bourgeois, the highly respected public affairs executive who runs the program, points out that 80 percent of the people who'll be working in Maine a decade from now are already on the job. But only 37 percent of them have a college degree.

"I run into skeptics," says Bourgeois, "who say we should just focus on generating jobs. I tell them that without the trained workers you can forget about attracting the knowledge industries here." College for Me has a goal of getting Maine's college-educated adult population up to



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at least New England average (currently 45 percent) within the next 10-15 years. The program's start-up costs have been funded by a number of Maine's 1,000 companies with 10 or more employees, firms with a big stake in having a supply of better- and better-prepared workers.

Maine's effort extends also to improving college-going rates among high schoolers. There are fewer students, year after year, in Maine's high schools. John Fitzsimmons, president of the

community college system, says money is the main reason why so many who graduate don't go on to college. So Maine's community colleges are reaching down into the schools, offering students a chance to try a couple of college courses, using the bait of a starter scholarship for any student that completes two courses. "Tasting how different college is beats wasting that last year in high school," says Fitzsimmons.

The big first goal is to make sure youth and mid-career workers aim for at least an Associate degree. And not just in cities. Today the word's going out that even in rural areas, 60 percent of jobs will require higher skills. And that at least a third of all the jobs in today's management, business, financial, science, engineering, computer and healthcare fields are open to people with the Associate degree.

Rhode Island, with the fresh enthusiasm of CEO-turned-governor Donald Carcieri, points to its Career Academies, specializing in guiding immigrants through the process. Vermont's into its third decade of personally tracking intentions and follow-through of every high schooler.

What of the historic New England tug to complacency, citizens and legislators wondering if all the folderol surrounding these new efforts is worth the candle? Well, it's a different world. Take China. It has set a goal of literally doubling its rate of college-going every six years. And so far, it's meeting it.

## WHY COLLEGE?

Anyone who doubts the payoff of college degrees should check out the economic evidence. Researchers Christopher Berry of Harvard University and Robert Weissbourd of RL Associates did a national study showing that of all measures, the percentage of bachelor's degree holders in a region was the only consistent predictor of prosperity. Ed Glaeser of Harvard's Rappaport Institute found just about the same thing -- that from 1980 to 2000, the economies in regions with fewer than 10 percent college-degree holders grew only 13 percent. But where over 25 percent had degrees, the growth rate was a startling 45 percent.

## Engaging Kids: Going Back to the Future?

By Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson

High schools with thousands of students. Yellow buses zipping kids away from town, out to new regional schools. "Professionalism" in teaching, delivered by schools of education in state colleges.

Today all these ideas, hailed as progress at their inception, are under attack. The mega high schools breed impersonalism, alienation in kids no longer known by name, just numbers in a big institution. Long rides to a sprawling campus replace what was once a school within a community. The state teacher colleges catch

much of the criticism for a teacher corps not up to par.

Can there be a uniquely New England answer?

There ought to be. New England gave birth to America's first public schools. It's the place where generations of small rural schools, often with a single classroom for all grades, led by immensely dedicated teachers, laid the groundwork of America's best-educated region.

Today most education debates swirl around standards, including the sometimes hotly

disputed federal Leave No Child Behind program. And who's to question the basic motive: getting students to master English, math and other subjects so critical now to their success.

But New England could excel by working to recapture: its historic legacy of education centered in town life, the region's treasured smallness, intimacy. Can't the whole town become the school? -- offering back-up for teachers, after-school activities, the engagement of many townspeople and organizations? Libraries, local businesses, nearby colleges all

lending a hand? Perhaps tapping New England's expanding ranks of seniors for mentoring, coaching, new activities?

Such an agenda suggests moving back, when possible, to school locations in communities -- not miles out-of-town. It means breaking down schools' isolation -- closing at 3 p.m. when the staff heads home. Dividing monster schools into smaller units with online courses for those who need them. Welcoming charter and other experimental schools. Encouraging kids to walk or bike to school. Fostering daily physical activity and less obesity. And drawing teachers into the fullness of community life, with the engagement and accountability that suggests.

Typically, community schools are open afternoons and evenings and involve partnerships -- with Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, social service agencies, local police.

New England could lead the burgeoning national community school movement. Growing evidence proves, says Marty Blank, director of the National Coalition of community schools, that "after-school programs help improve academic performance, provide kids with safe places, help parents find work, and help youth with whole sets of competencies."

And they work to heal social division. Providence's Mayor David Cicilline, an outspoken advocate, asserts that without the community partnerships such schools introduce,

"it won't be possible to unite the two Providences -- the one that celebrates diversity, a revitalized downtown and a remarkable concentration of higher education, the other with 40 percent of children living in poverty, an underserved and growing immigrant community, and unacceptably low student performance."



Providence's Mayor David Cicilline, an outspoken advocate for the burgeoning national community school movement, ran as a candidate for mayor of Providence in part on a campaign to bring community schools to the capital city.

Indeed, schools today poorly serve about half the kids. Some are savvy, fast minds that find the rigid regimes too boring. Others just do not learn this way; they struggle, disappear and join the ranks of young people going nowhere.

Connecticut is using the courts to resist the rigidity of the federal standards law. Rhode Island changed its graduation law to make standardized tests only 10 percent of the requirement. New England states have always been different. They rate quite high in national comparisons valuing smaller classes, strong attendance and comparative graduation rates. So why not go a step farther by becoming the

nation's laboratory for new and different schools -- with enough variety to fit all kinds of students? Last winter, Bill Gates bluntly told the nation's governors how lousy American high schools had become. Gates has called The Met -- a Providence high school in a tough neighborhood which focuses intensive attention on individual kids and gets virtually all into college -- the nation's most exciting high school.

Another plus of community-focused schools are the opportunities they present for young people to become engaged in service learning -- projects protecting streams and wetlands, lending a hand to social service agencies, or even learning to discuss thorny issues like: "Why does our neighborhood have so many liquor stores and abandoned lots and what can be done?"

Should formal requirements of youth service be considered? Terry Williams, publisher of the Nashua Telegraph, told us yes -- that a stint of community service could be a graduation prerequisite. Kids would discover more of their community. Public projects would get a real assist. Students could see firsthand challenges in other towns or even across state borders. Colleges could place a priority on community service in considering applicants.

Williams' bet is that students with community service experience will be much likelier to forge loyalty and awareness, returning to make their careers in or close to their New England home towns "even if they first venture out to check some other part of the country."

## About the Writers and the Project

Journalists Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson have reported for newspapers on the unique strategic issues facing two dozen metropolitan regions nationwide. Peirce is a syndicated columnist (Washington Post Writers Group) who has also written two books on New England. Johnson is a public policy analyst and a former community college president and Minnesota government official. They co-authored the book *Citistates*.

These articles are the kickoff of a New England Futures Project aimed at identifying key 21st century challenges facing the six-state region. Citizen reaction and participation, leading to a shared regional agenda, are key to the project. Your input is welcome at [www.newenglandfutures.org](http://www.newenglandfutures.org).

The sponsoring Partnership for New England includes the Vermont-based Institute for Sustainable Communities (which will coordinate follow-up public debates across the region), the New England Council, the New England Initiative at UMass Lowell, Mt. Auburn Associates, the New England Association of Regional Councils, and the Orton Family Foundation. Financial backing comes from community foundations in all six states, the Bank of America Foundation and others (full list at the web site).



Journalists Curtis Johnson (left) and Neal Peirce, are co-authors of the "New England: New Century, New Game" series.