REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

A Vision for Schools and Programs for Off-Track Students in New England

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About the Barr Foundation

The Barr Foundation, with assets of $1.6 billion, is among the largest private foundations in New England. Investment areas focus on elevating arts and creativity, advancing solutions for climate change, and expanding educational opportunities, with a regional focus and selective national engagements. Barr works in partnership with nonprofits, foundations, the public sector, and civic and business leaders to advance its mission to invest in human, natural, and creative potential, serving as thoughtful stewards and catalysts. The Barr Foundation has contributed more than $710 million to charitable causes since 1999.

Under new leadership since 2014, the foundation defined an ambitious new Education Program strategy in 2016 that seeks to increase the number of New England youth who connect to success, both in and beyond high school. Barr believes that all students can graduate from high school, successfully transition to post-secondary education, and engage in meaningful career opportunities.

Specifically, the Barr Foundation believes that all students can be:

- Exceptionally well prepared for next steps in life
- Informed of opportunities to connect to success in high school, college, and career
- Empowered to make choices that prepare them for success

A significant opportunity exists to support this vision by helping more students connect to success in secondary and post-secondary endeavors, arguably one of the most crucial junctures in young people’s lives. To this end, Barr is excited to join a growing national movement to rethink secondary education and definitions of student success.
Introduction

In March 2016, the Barr Foundation announced a new Education Program strategy that seeks to increase the number of New England youth who connect to success, both in and beyond high school. As part of its new strategy, the Barr Foundation is planning to launch an initiative focused explicitly on off-track high school students, one of New England’s most underserved student populations.

In the Request for Information (RFI) outlined hereafter, the Barr Foundation seeks to identify and hear from organizations and/or individuals that are committed to improving and/or creating a new generation of schools and programs to ensure higher levels of success for all students.

For purposes of this RFI, off-track students are defined as high school-aged/eligible students who are:

- Enrolled in high school but off-track relative to graduation requirements
- Disconnected or not enrolled in high school

The Barr Foundation believes that there is room to support both existing and new schools and programs, both of which will need investments in resources, research, and a shared community in order to help develop, elevate, and improve high-quality secondary options for off-track students in New England.

We encourage all organizations and/or individuals that are committed to improving school and program options for New England’s off-track high school populations to respond to the following RFI (outlined below and at www.barrfoundation.org/education/rfi). We value the experience of New England’s practitioners and look forward to learning more about your visions of success for the region’s off-track populations.

Our hope is that the information gathered via the RFI process will inform a subsequent and broader Request for Proposals (RFP) that will serve as the basis for the launch of a multi-year initiative to bring critical resources, awareness, solutions, and opportunities to off-track youth in New England.

Please note the following timeline (estimated) for both the RFI and RFP processes:

- October 21, 2016: Request for Information (RFI) Submissions Due
- November 14, 2016: RFP Released
- February 15, 2017: RFP Proposals Due
- Summer 2017: RFP Awards Announced
Context and Need

As shifts in the global economy continue to raise the stakes for young people, it becomes increasingly essential that a meaningful high school education, college completion, and successful entrance into the workforce are possible for all of our nation’s citizens. For far too many young people, however, these experiences are out of reach, as a substantial number of students find frustration and failure in high school, fall off track, and see their chances of graduating diminish. Across the United States, approximately 2.6 million young people ages 16-24 are off track to graduate from high school. Those who fail to earn a high school diploma are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed and live in poverty. A disproportionate number of these students are low-income and minority youth.

Off-track youth have long been marginalized by our education system: when students fall off track, schools and districts often lack the capacity to help them progress. Efforts to do so are typically diffuse, operated outside of school districts’ strategic priorities, and therefore under-resourced. Additionally, schools and programs rarely operate within a national or even local network of comparable providers and, as a result, work in significant isolation in their efforts to make a difference in the lives of off-track students.

A growing national movement to rethink secondary education is underway in the United States, focused on efforts to connect more students to success in high school, college, and career and Barr is fully supportive of this movement. We seek to contribute to its efforts by ensuring that off-track students – and intentional schools, programs, and research to support them – are included in both regional and national endeavors to re-imagine secondary education.

Research has shown that students who fall off track in high school can achieve graduation and post-secondary success through enrollment in schools and programs with intentional designs and learning models that are flexible and responsive to specific needs and intentionally designed to support all young people. For example:

- The June 2016 “Massachusetts High School Graduation Initiative (MassGrad) Final Evaluation Report” found that the Commonwealth’s alternative pathways strategy, which offered “programs or schools that create smaller, more tailored environments to address the specific needs of certain populations of students and provide alternative pathways to a high school diploma,” had the statistically strongest positive outcomes from among seven strategies implemented. Massachusetts students participating in alternative pathways were most likely to graduate from high school and least likely to drop out of school (as compared to students in all other MassGrad initiative strategies).

- During a 10-year period spanning 2005 to 2015, New York City’s Department of Education (NYC DOE) pursued deliberate strategies focused on re-engaging students aged 16-21 who had fallen off track toward graduation. A range of schools and programs designed explicitly to support off-track students and managed through the NYC DOE’s Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation contributed to an
increase in the average graduation rate of off-track students from 19% to 56%. Graduation rates among the top performing schools reached as high as 69%.

Effective model elements identified in the 2016 MassGrad report include the provision of socio-emotional supports, building relationships and community, offering flexible schedules, pursuing students’ interests, and enabling career exploration. Importantly, many of these factors are aligned with explicit strategies and distinct elements that the Barr Foundation has defined as being essential to the re-visioning of secondary school and program models. More information about Barr’s Education strategy can be found on our website at www.barrfoundation.org/education.

Finally, it is also important to note that while many schools and programs that currently serve off-track students fall into the category of “alternative education,” Barr hopes to influence a change in the narrative around off-track youth whereby negative or deficit-defined labels (e.g., alternative education, off-track, etc.) will be replaced by a growing focus on the positive characteristics and successful outcomes of schools and programs that meet the needs of specific student populations.
About the Initiative

The proposed initiative seeks to catalyze a more deliberate, coordinated, and outcomes-driven movement to provide a critical mass of high-quality schools and programs for New England’s off-track students, and to provide these students with the necessary supports to succeed in secondary and post-secondary endeavors and to thrive as adults.

We believe in the potential of these students and have high expectations for all of them. We also feel an obligation to ensure that they have equitable access to high-quality schools and programs that are designed to help them reach that potential. Our goal is to define, provide, and promote more deliberate school models and programs that provide New England’s off-track youth with the academic and life skills, as well as youth development supports, required to thrive as adults. Our efforts will focus on improving secondary outcomes for New England’s off-track youth by supporting, incubating, growing, and promoting promising high school models and programs that address the specific needs of a clearly defined student population. We believe the success of these students in college, careers, and life will have a positive societal and economic impact on their lives, the lives of their families, and the region as a whole.

Our hope is that the proposed initiative will catalyze a collective regional approach to supporting New England’s off-track youth, while simultaneously building upon – and contributing to – a broader national effort to re-imagine secondary education in the U.S.

This RFI seeks to identify, learn from, and engage existing and new providers of schools and programs that support off-track high school students in New England. It is an opportunity for current practitioners, thought leaders, and visionaries – all potential grantees – to convey their current and aspirational interests in designing a new or improving an existing school or program that focuses on off-track student populations and their specific needs. This RFI process will also help provide a baseline assessment of both interest and capacity within New England, and establish a critical foundation from which Barr can catalyze and support a broader and more formal regional initiative. RFI respondents should be organizations or individuals committed to the following beliefs:

- All off-track students can and must achieve at high levels in order to fully realize their individual potential and have a positive societal and economic impact on our nation.
- Off-track students have the right to connect to secondary and post-secondary success. It is our collective responsibility to invest in the design and development of new learning models that are diploma-granting, flexible, and responsive to the needs of students.
- New models can be trajectory-changing for off-track students and set them on a path to success by ensuring (1) achievement of a high school diploma, as well as (2) the skills and connections necessary for the successful transition to meaningful post-secondary options.
- Students thrive in schools and programs that embrace a student-centered youth development approach to both design and implementation.
Core Values

Barr hopes that the RFI process will help us learn about secondary school and program models that prioritize positive youth development theory and see it as essential to secondary schools. We believe schools and programs should be grounded in a youth development theory that meets the evolving needs of young people, and provides them with opportunities to form identities, and build skills, values, and relationships that will enable them to succeed on their own terms. Young people are key actors in their own development, and will thrive in settings that provide the appropriate balance of supports and student autonomy and agency. We seek RFI respondents that share this vision of a student-centered youth development approach to secondary education – or are at least interested in learning more about this essential mindset.

Barr’s new Education Program strategy has also defined elements of innovative secondary schools and models that are central to our vision for the future of secondary schools and the integration of youth development theory therein. These elements include:

- Teaching and learning systems that enable personalized learning
- Prioritization of student agency and engagement
- Network participation and/or strategic partnerships that increase student access to supports and expand opportunities for anytime-anywhere learning aligned to student competency development
- Strong student linkages to post-secondary institutions and career development opportunities.

We hope to learn how different schools and programs currently include – or endeavor to include – these elements in innovative models designed to intentionally support off-track youth.
Request for Information

Connecting more students to success is a long-term vision that builds on existing strengths in our region, but also challenges us to think differently. We have an urgent need to act in support of New England’s off-track youth. We ask that you share with us your vision for helping our region’s off-track youth graduate from high school and connect to meaningful postsecondary opportunities.

The Barr Foundation encourages all interested parties (e.g., organizations, individuals, thought leaders, and visionaries) to participate in the RFI by completing a short questionnaire and outlining your vision for a school or program that intentionally supports off-track secondary students in New England. This information will be used to inform the Barr Foundation’s forthcoming Request for Proposals, which will be designed to catalyze a regional initiative to support New England’s off-track youth. Please note that the RFI process does not represent an application for funding.

You may access the RFI questionnaire at the following website:

www.surveymonkey.com/r/barreducationrfi

Respondents are asked to provide basic information about their organization (if applicable), and basic information about their vision (e.g., whether the vision is regarding an existing and/or new school or program, location of program/school). Respondents are asked to briefly describe their vision for a school or program that targets off-track students through the following questions; please limit responses to no more than 200 words per question:

- How do you define the off-track population that you currently serve or envision serving?
- If applicable, what is your current model for serving off-track high school youth?
- What is your vision for serving off-track high school youth?
- How do you imagine implementing your vision?
- What supports would you need to ensure successful implementation of your vision?
- How might you define and measure success of the implementation of your vision?
- Is there anything else you would like us know about your vision for off-track students?

RFI submissions are due by 4pm ET on Friday, October 21, 2016.