

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

GUEST COLUMN

Improving local education with innovation

10/27/10 01:57pm Updated: 10/27/10 02:00 pm

Brian Langley

The Hudsons, Billy, Ann and Johnny, grew up in Grapevine, Ark. Raised in poverty, the three labored by their parents' sides on the farm. Billy was on the verge of dropping out of high school when a teacher and coach enrolled him in classes at a nearby college. Out of a seeming miracle, Billy received his bachelor's degree and continued from there. Today, Billy and Johnny are prominent professors at Vanderbilt University and Ann runs the gifted and talented program in Little Rock.

Motivated by their childhood circumstances, the three, together with Billy's wife, Professor Julie Hudson, have created the Aspirnaut Initiative through Vanderbilt University. They proclaim the initiative as "a pilot educational initiative to elevate the mathematics and science achievements of rural community K-12 students who commute on long bus rides to school."

When I learned of the professors' interest in rural education, along with the great need for progress in our schools here in Maine, I contacted Professor Hudson and her coworkers while they were here in Maine. Not long after, I invited Cathy Lewis, principal of Beech Hill School, to meet with Billy, Julie and Ann. For nearly three hours we discussed school consolidation and other issues facing rural education today.

Thankfully, all were very interested in implementing the Aspirnaut Initiative in the Beech Hill School. Today, with great help from Vanderbilt University, we are in the final stages of implementing much of this program in the Beech Hill School. As early as this week, local 6th, 7th, and 8th graders will take part in live-streamed video conference chemistry classes with real scientists in one of America's major universities.

This is only the first step of a program aimed at increasing students' understanding of science and math; ultimately making college within reach of our motivated youth. We are all aware that, on the international scale, the United States has fallen behind many countries when it comes to in regards to student performance in math and science. The same issues face Maine schools. Day after day the state pours money into a complex problem without a real understanding of where to find a definite solution.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 30 percent of 8th grade students in Maine are "proficient" in mathematics, and more than one-quarter of 8th graders in the state have an understanding of math that is "basic" or below. Clearly much needs to be done to rectify Maine's educational difficulties.

The Aspirnaut program aims to do just that. Designed by professors at Vanderbilt, and endorsed by professors and physicians at MIT, Cornell, and Harvard, Aspirnaut provides rural students with otherwise out-of-reach STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) opportunities. Rural schools have many disadvantages that this program aims to rectify. As Vanderbilt states, Aspirnaut "Nurtures and develops the talents of high ability students, promotes math and science achievements for all students ... revitalizes community involvement in education, and promotes the professional development of teachers."

The program provides private, non-taxpayer-based financing to offer incentives to teachers, provide staff with ongoing education, design unique curriculum based on ability and age, and encourage and provide excelling students with a curriculum that will keep them motivated and challenged. Additionally, scholarships are available for students to pursue higher education, and some gifted students will be given the opportunity to attend a one-week science camp at Vanderbilt University free of charge where they will have the opportunity to use university research facilities, conduct experiments, and possibly even observe a brain surgery and conduct medical research in biochemistry.

Across the state, we are seeing our children leave to accept better jobs elsewhere. It has become clear that Maine's industry is collapsing and businesses are packing their bags. In order to rectify this, Maine clearly needs to change course and adopt long-term solutions.

As a teacher for nearly three decades, I appreciate the needs of our children and our schools. I can tell you that we need to do everything in our power to offer our children as bright of a future as was offered to us. All too often, I have seen Augusta throw dollars at a problem only to have little effect. Here, passionate people were able to connect with a solution without exposing our schools to the bureaucracy that state government tends to bring.

It is all about rigor and relevance with today's students; this partnership with Vanderbilt provides just that, it brings about an excitement of the real world. As a legislator, I see it as my job to facilitate connections such as this one. I do not wish to dictate the end result, only to monitor the progress and offer legislative assistance if required. In the near future, we hope to offer this opportunity to a total of five rural schools in the region and make the future brighter for all Maine children.

Brian Langley represents District 38 in the Maine House of Representatives. He is the Republican candidate for Senate District 28, which includes much of Hancock County.