

PACT



The
Super School
Project

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Maine Bi-Coastal High School a Semi-Finalist for \$10m XQ Super School Prize

Delight and surprise greeted the news last week that Shead High School of the small island city of Eastport, Maine's had advanced to the semi-final round of consideration for one of only 5 coveted "XQ Super School Prizes", each worth \$10m over five years. Working collaboratively last February with innovative learning experts from Silicon Valley, CA, Shead administrators, teachers, students, and parents proposed a bi-coastal Pacific Atlantic Community Technology (PACT) school. It would prioritize experiential learning and student-designed curricula.

From thousands of initial project concepts, the field has now been narrowed to just 348 teams from 41 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico that will now move forward to the detailed project development phase of the contest.

This puts the Eastport proposal in direct competition with many of the most progressive and well-funded charter schools in the country, along with many large urban school districts able to draw on full-time fundraising personnel and community experts. Expert reviewers will score semi-finalist applications against a detailed rubric. So, is the PACT school team worried?

"We're not at all worried — we have insights and resources within our learning community that many cities cannot dream of. But we are energized by this incentive to think larger," said Paul Theriault, Eastport School System's Principal and convener of the current XQ super schools working group. "Whether or not we arrive at the winners' circle in August, Eastport schools will be strengthened by this kind of full sprint, no-holds-barred exploration."

For now, the bi-coastal team of volunteers must roll up its sleeves. It has just over a month in which to draft a detailed implementation plan for how it would spend \$10m in order to realize its proposal, and it must produce rigorous blueprints for every component of its "school within a school": teacher recruitment, performance assessment, financial oversight, professional capacity-building, architecture, technology, and governance. For a community of 1,293 and a high school study body of about 103, this is no small task.

If this bid were successful, Eastport students would gain a chance to opt into the PACT school and begin a educational journey on two widely separated campuses. The courses will be anchored in community partnerships in Silicon Valley and Maine, allowing participating students to benefit from rigorous experiential learning on both coasts. All participants will graduate with their classes at home, but the paths to a diploma will cross much challenging and uncharted terrain.

The Eastport / Silicon Valley collaborative PACT school team will submit its detailed plan by 23 May, and from the semi-finalists 50 finalists will be announced by 20 July. Five final contest winners will be announced nationally on 4 August 2016.

The “XQ: The Super School Project” launched in September 2015 as “an open call to rethink and redesign the American high school.” Core funding comes from the Board of the XQ Institute, chaired by Laurene Powell Jobs. The CEO and founder is Russlynn Ali, former Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education, and Managing Director of Education at the Emerson Collective.

Ali notes that “Everyone involved in the XQ movement believes that high school education is fundamental to a vital nation. We are awed by the enthusiasm, optimism and renewed respect for public education reflected in so many of the applications. No prize, no matter how large, can create that kind of authentic renewal of faith and hope. XQ didn’t make that, this challenge is only a vehicle for teams and communities to do it themselves.”

In reply to the XQ call to “re-think high school”, teams self-assembled in communities across America, with volunteer members representing 59 different occupations, including educators, artists, engineers, service workers, parents and students.

The XQ organizers point out that the breadth of ideas they have received is enormous, but a few patterns emerged leading up to the semi-final round currently underway. They note that many teams want schools to be the center of the community again for shared skill building, to embrace learning styles that focus on mastery and collaboration, to build curricula around student engagement and input, and to offer a deeper world readiness and dynamic thinking skills.