# RREV School Snapshot – Brewer

## Background

In June 2020, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) was awarded a $16.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K–12 Education Models program to implement the Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program. The overarching purpose of RREV is to support Maine educators to create, implement, and disseminate responsive and innovative educational models that help all students learn and thrive.

## Pilot Description

In August 2021, Brewer Public Schools received an award from RREV to implement its *Nu Program*. This pilot is in the Online Education category. The goals of this pilot are to:

- Provide more options to students and families to learn from home full-time while also having opportunities for in-person engagement, including field trips and participation in school-based activities.
- Provide highly personalized online education for students who opt-in for remote learning, especially those who have social anxiety, mental or physical health concerns, prefer to learn at their own pace, and/or who thrived in an online environment during the pandemic.

Key activities of this pilot include:

- Hiring two full-time Remote Learning Specialists (RLS) who are responsible for developing and implementing personalized education programs for each participating student.
  - The RLS monitors and supports students' progress through courses taken online through Apex Learning, access to which is provided to students via the *Nu* program.
  - Each RLS also teaches synchronous online courses in their area of specialty.
  - Each RLS also convenes academic and social-emotional check-ins with each student at least once per week.
- Students are eligible to participate in in-person activities at Brewer Community School and Brewer High School, such as band, art, JROTC, and sports.
- Students attend in-person activities with their peers, including field trips and job-shadowing opportunities.

In May 2022, Brewer received an accelerator award to expand the work being done through *Nu*. The accelerator grant builds on the goals of Brewer's round 1 award, and has allowed *Nu* to expand their program into three avenues of learning:

- 1) a completely virtual option,
- 2) a hybrid option; both are currently in place right now and
- 3) an Extended Learning Opportunity, under Alternative Education, which will be expanded in the next year.

The accelerator grant helps Brewer meet the changing needs of their students by allowing for even more flexibility in how their students reach their educational goals.

## Exhibit: RREV Award Summary

Budget – Original Grant

| Category | Year 1 | Year 2 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personal Services – Salaries and Stipend | $45,500 | $101,000 | $146,500 |
| Employee Benefits | $16,018.80 | $56,373.60 | $72,392.40 |
| Purchased Professional Services | $4,000 | $4,000 | $8,000 |
| Employee travel for Professional Development | $500 | $500 | $1,000 |
| Instructional Supplies | $3,500 | $3,500 | $7,000 |
| Technology related hardware (fixed asset) | $2,000 | $2,000 | $4,000 |
| Total | $82,518.80 | $167,373.60 | $250,892 |

Budget - Accelerator Grant

| Category | Year 1/Total |
|---|---|
| Personal Services – Salaries and Stipend | $72,500 |
| Employee Benefits | $12,500 |
| Property | $15,000 |
| **Total** | **$100,000.00** |

- 42 students served during 2022-23.
- Grade levels 6-12 participate.
- Two teachers (RLS) directly involved, plus coordination from the district Director of Instruction and Technology and the Principals and Guidance Counselors at Brewer Community School and Brewer High School. *Nu* is currently in the process of recruiting for an additional RLS member to help support the current enrollment. This makes up the Student Success Team at *Nu*.

## Responsiveness of the pilot

Brewer's pilot is responsive to local needs and/or assets because:

- **Students and families opt-in to virtual learning.** Students and families did not have a choice about virtual learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but as schools re-opened for the 2021–22 school year, Brewer administrators decided to offer the option of attending in person or continuing to take virtual classes. As one administrator observed, some students realized during the pandemic that they thrived in an online environment and did not want to be forced back to in-person classes—just as all students had been forced into virtual learning the previous year. Importantly, Brewer administrators wanted students and families to make a considered decision, which is why they require an application and interview process in which students describe why they prefer virtual learning and how they plan to stay engaged during school.
- **The Accelerator seeks to expand on lessons learned from the first year of implementation, by expanding the reach of the program.** The accelerator grant was developed to help encourage and recruit other districts in the Penquis area to start a collaboration. In Year 2, three other school districts in the area have been awarded accelerator grants and hope to partner with

Brewer to regionalize the program. Plans are still being finalized, giving these new schools an opportunity to build their programs under the accelerator grant, with the example of Brewer. This regionalization of the programs started at Brewer and replicated by other local districts will allow Brewer to build capacity and collaborate, expanding the programs.

## Innovativeness of the pilot

Brewer's pilot is innovative because:

- **Students receive individually tailored support for their academic, social, and emotional needs**. When developing the pilot, Brewer educators specifically sought to be "qualitatively different" than "broad online programs" where students take classes online but have limited interactions with teachers or peers. Brewer therefore built in structures and systems to engage students as individuals, including weekly check-ins with the RLS, a mix of synchronous and asynchronous classes, and in-person group activities, such as field trips and service projects. The program point of contact characterized the *Nu* program as "the most personalized educational program" she was aware of due to the level of individual attention paid to participating students. This person explained that the individual support provided to students is intended to help them become more confident in themselves, which in turn helped them take more risks exploring classes and activities they otherwise might not have tried. Educators and students both said that the individual student support helped unlock the possibilities of virtual education because it empowers students to choose from a wider array of courses, including some they might consider too challenging were it not for the individual support they receive through the program.

- **Students can choose from a broad array of courses and can take them at their own pace.** During a focus group, students said the individual attention—paired with the greater array of courses available online—empowered them to pursue courses that interested and challenged them. By contrast, if they were attending only in-person classes, they would not have access to the Apex course catalog, which has more options. If they were only taking online courses without the broader support of *Nu*, they would not have the confidence to explore more challenging or interesting courses. A parent also said *Nu* "is so much better for [my child's] style of learning because she has more control over when she does the schoolwork and what subject she's going to work on. I think it really helped with her anxiety because if she's feeling overwhelmed, she can take a break."

- **Students have opportunities to join certain in-person classes and activities at their home school, such as art, theater, or sports.** Brewer administrators pointed out there are many reasons why some students may prefer virtual learning, and in some cases their preference for virtual academic work may be in tension with their enjoyment of activities or clubs that involve in-person engagement. For example, a student may prefer virtual learning in core subjects because she likes to set her own pace, but also wants to participate in art or theater with her peers. In the absence of Brewer's *Nu* program, such a student could choose to attend in-person school but sacrifice her opportunity to learn at her own pace or enroll in a virtual school that does not offer in-person activities. Brewer's pilot program resolves this tension by allowing students opportunities for both virtual and in-person activities, and thus can reach more students who could benefit from virtual learning.

## Sustainability of the pilot

Brewer's pilot model's strategy for sustainability includes greater outreach to expand enrollment. Between its first and second year, the *Nu* program increased the *Nu*mber of participating students from 29 to 40 and hired a second RLS. Leaders observed that the lessons learned during their first year have sharpened their understanding of who makes for a successful *Nu* student. Going forward, they will use this information to communicate with school leaders in sending districts and with homeschool families to boost enrollment from these sources. They also plan to supplement this outreach by placing a notice on their website about the program and working with the guidance counselors at Brewer Community School and Brewer High School to attract more in-district students.

The expansion of the *Nu* program, with help from the Accelerator grant, provides for even more flexibility for students in their learning. The Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) option is planned to be rolled out in the next school year, which will include the hiring of additional staff, the plan to create a classroom for *Nu* students who wish to be in person and the establishment of more policies and protocols that will allow for expansion. These ELOs will include connections with training in trades and dual enrollment opportunities, just to name a few.

Monthly meetings are held with four other districts to share knowledge with others in the community looking to mirror what Brewer has initiated. This collaboration with other districts will improve the learning experience for students across the state and allow for a broader sharing of ideas and improvements to help with the sustainability of the pilot program, and the longer-term goal is to provide a remote academy.