What happens when the effectiveness of a program on which your college was built gets called into question? How do you respond when you realize what worked so well for so many years may no longer be as strong as you thought?

That was the situation facing Rhode Island College’s (RIC) Feinstein School of Education and Human Development just one year ago. A comprehensive review and subsequent report by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) required changes to ensure all academic offerings met newly established standards while preparing graduates for current classroom demands.

Once a flagship program of Rhode Island College (originally founded as a Normal School), the School of Education plays a significant role statewide as the largest provider of teaching certifications. While education majors now account for just 17 percent of RIC students, we knew that preparing our students to teach K-12 students across Rhode Island was not a task for which we could adopt a “check the box” mentality.

It was time for visionary change and a coordinated response.

For those of you undergoing a similar effort on your campus, I offer these words of advice:

✦ Assess the needs of the current environment: The needs of K-12 schools across our country are shifting rapidly, and Rhode Island is no exception. From English Language Learners to students requiring special education, our state’s changing demographics demand aptly prepared teachers.

✦ Avoid doing only what’s necessary: Sure, we could have gotten by with a few programmatic adjustments, but our mission was clear: Go beyond the checklist to completely reimagine our approach. How could we develop a teacher preparation model that harmonizes with a broader Rhode Island strategy?

We leveraged the RIDE review as an opportunity to rally our faculty, advance our teaching techniques and personalize our curriculum to meet a changing educational landscape.

✦ Promote evolution instead of “change”: As president, my support of this transformation was critical. We needed to give our school’s leadership and our faculty the tools and resources to lead the conversation about where we were headed.

Instead of saying, “We need to change,” we asked our faculty how they thought classrooms needed to evolve. Guess what? We couldn’t find anyone who thought classrooms wouldn’t change at all over the next 10 years.

Then the conversation became more about how we could get there than about barriers to change. Some of the ideas—that emerged include the use of technology for adaptive teaching and learning, video analysis for reflection and feedback, and assessments to measure proficiency.

✦ Expand your orbit of thought leaders: Like many state schools, we are fortunate to have a vast pool of engaged alumni right here in our state. To develop our plan, we sought the invaluable advice of Rhode Island teachers, principals and administrators who told us what they needed in their classrooms and how teacher candidates could prepare.

While it is essential to engage locally, we also wanted a national perspective to help shape our transformation. We have benefited immensely through meetings with leading programs at Arizona State University, Rowan University (N.J.), Hunter College (N.Y.), the University of Virginia, and Butler University (Ind.). We also partnered with Blue Seats Consulting, a national firm with expertise in achieving educational goals.

✦ Have clear deliverables: The most effective programs are developed in collaboration with K-12 partners based on identified needs. Thanks to input from our partners, our newly redesigned programming will prepare all graduates with the following:

               › A focus on social justice and equity
               › Deep content knowledge
               › Extensive clinical practice
               › Endorsements in special education or English as a second language

Where do we go from here?

The energy surrounding our new approach is substantial, further fueled by recent legislative support for a $25 million bond to modernize our current space into a top learning environment for teacher candidates. Currently, all of our school’s departments are revising curriculum and forming new partnerships locally. We will officially introduce this new curriculum in Fall 2019, and reclaim our position of regional prominence in all aspects of educator preparation.

Dr. Frank D. Sánchez is the 10th president of Rhode Island College.