



# New England Secondary School Consortium

## Four-Year Evaluation Report

October 2012



## Acknowledgements

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### New England Secondary School Consortium

## Four-Year Evaluation Report

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#### Report Information

This study was conducted under contract with the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

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#### About the Donahue Institute

As the public service and outreach unit of the University President's office for more than 40 years, the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute links the resources of public higher education with the needs of its clients by providing a variety of services and technical assistance to federal, state, and local government agencies, K-16 schools, non-profit organizations, and businesses. Social science research and evaluation are major components of UMDI's diverse service offerings and are delivered by our Applied Research and Program Evaluation Group. This group designs and implements innovative evaluation plans for clients in a range of sectors, with a focus on comprehensive evaluation of educational initiatives, including major education reform programs implemented throughout New England.

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## Introduction

The New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESSC) is an innovative partnership of five New England states—Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont—to promote forward-thinking reforms in the design and delivery of secondary education. Founded on the premise that regional collaboration would enable states to make more significant and rapid progress as it relates to high school transformation, the Consortium seeks to ensure that every adolescent in the region graduates from a new generation of high-performing, internationally competitive high schools prepared for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of our interconnected global society.

The Consortium started informally, with the earliest conversations about launching such an initiative evolving from conversations at a national Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) conference in 2007 focused on high school redesign. Over the next year, representatives from state departments of education from Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont—with facilitation from the Great Schools Partnership—engaged in regular meetings to explore the potential benefits of collaboration around a shared high school reform agenda, particularly given what was viewed as the common nature of their agenda and the similarity of the challenges faced across the region in the pursuit of that agenda. In fall 2008, the states received funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support the formal launch of the Consortium as a regional organization. The joint investment and subsequent funding renewals supported the Consortium, which later expanded to include Connecticut, through three phases of planning, development, and early implementation during which it:

- established new structures to support collaboration and networking among education leaders from across the region
- adopted a multi-faceted theory of action outlining simultaneous pursuit of changes in policy, practice, and public and political will to promote secondary school reform
- developed a focused agenda related to proficiency-based graduation, multiple and flexible pathways, and learner-centered systems of accountability to guide its efforts
- prepared tools, research, and other resources to support states' collective pursuit of reform
- supported states in the pursuit of changes consistent with the NESSC objectives, particularly as it relates to state policy and the establishment of a network of schools experimenting with these practices

The Consortium's vision and reform framework has been endorsed by education leaders from across the region, including the commissioner of education and the chair of the state board of education from each of the five participating states. Those involved with the Consortium reflect a committed group of leaders, including education leaders, policy-makers, higher education representatives, educators, an engaged funder in the NMEF, and other partners prepared to advance secondary reform in their respective states in collaboration with colleagues from across the region. Many of these leaders viewed the Consortium as contributing significant value to their states' secondary reform efforts and expressed their belief that the Consortium is in position to continue to support and accelerate secondary reform across the region.

### Regional Progress towards Increasing Student Attainment

The Consortium has established ambitious performance goals to be achieved in each of the five states in order to (1) increase five-year graduation rates; (2) decrease annual dropout rates; (3) increase the percentage of students enrolling in two- and four-year college-degree programs or pursuing industry-certified accredited postsecondary

certificates; and (4) increase the percentage of students who graduate from high school college ready.<sup>1</sup> Early data trends are very positive. As shown in Table 1, over the past two years all states have been making gains in increasing graduation rates and decreasing dropout rates. Four of the five states show an increase in post-secondary enrollment and the fifth state was practically level. Although too early to attribute these differences to specific activity of the Consortium, positive student attainment trends in the five states demonstrates emphasis on, and commitment to, increased student attainment.

**Table 1: State Progress towards NESSC 2016 Performance Goals**

	Connecticut	Maine	New Hampshire	Rhode Island	Vermont
<b>4-Year Cohort Graduation Rates</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Class of 2009	79.3	80.4	81.0	75.5	85.5
Class of 2010	81.6	82.8	85.9	75.9	87.1
Class of 2011	82.5	83.4	86.6	77.3	87.5
<b>4-Year Cohort Dropout Rates</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Class of 2009	13.8	15.0	11.9	18.8	-
Class of 2010	11.9	10.9	6.3	17.4	-
Class of 2011	11.0	11.1	5.6	15.5	-
<b>Post-Secondary Matriculation Rates</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Class of 2009	74.1	63.3	63.7	69.5	60.4
Class of 2010	75.3	64.2	68.6	72.4	60.1

Data Notes:

- Calculations based on common methods decided by the NESSC data team. Additional data, including 5-year cohort rates and subgroup comparisons are included in annual data technical reports available at [www.newenglandssc.org](http://www.newenglandssc.org).
- All Class of 2009 data in New Hampshire was estimated.
- 4-year dropout rates not available for Vermont.
- GEDs grouped with dropouts.
- Post-secondary data in Maine attained in a manner not comparable to other states

**Purpose of this Report**

The Consortium provides a tremendous opportunity to learn about the nature and challenges of multi-state collaboration in education. Under the direction of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI or the Institute) conducted a multi-year evaluation study of the NESSC and its progress. The three-and-a-half-year study, from March 2009 through September 2012, followed the Consortium through its planning, development, and early implementation phases. During this time, UMDI provided the Consortium with ongoing and timely formative feedback in the form of utilization-focused evaluation briefings and technical reports as well as annual progress reports.

This final evaluation report presents high-level findings from the study for a broad range of audiences interested in the Consortium and its progress. These findings were informed by data collection efforts undertaken in all years of the study including: biannual interviews with Consortium participants from member states, surveys of those involved with the Consortium in various capacities, observation and participation in Consortium meetings and conferences, and extensive review of Consortium documents such as work plans and meeting minutes. The report is organized into four sections:

- A description of the Consortium, its operational structures, and commitment of member states, including a discussion of how these evolved over the course of the Consortium’s growth and development

<sup>1</sup>To measure progress across the region, the Consortium established common indicators that have been developed to measure the first three goals, as described later in this report and in significant detail in an evaluation technical report available at [www.newenglandssc.org](http://www.newenglandssc.org). The development of a college readiness indicator remains of great interest to the Consortium.

- A summary of key areas of progress within the five participating states in the areas of policy, practice, and the building of public and political will, as well as the development of common measurements of progress toward the Consortium's student attainment goals
- Reflections on the contributions of the Consortium to states' reform efforts
- A summary of key lessons learned regarding multi-state collaboration, as gathered from the experience of the Consortium and its participants

For an expanded view of evaluation findings, including annual progress reports, technical reports of survey findings, technical reports related to progress on key indicators, and other selected evaluation deliverables, please consult the evaluation section of the NESSC website available at <http://www.newenglandssc.org>.

## The Consortium and its Development

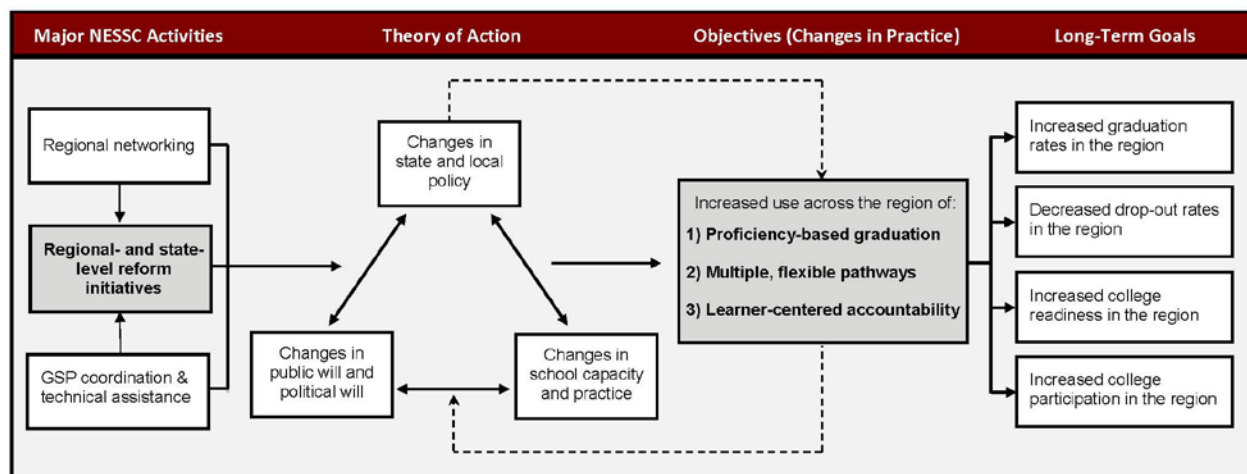
As described by its members, the Consortium is “of the states, but sits outside the states,” with participants from member states collaborating and accessing resources, support, and assistance as needed in order to accelerate and advance secondary school reform consistent with the Consortium’s broad vision in their local contexts. As it exists today, the Consortium involves two primary facets: (1) a strong and ongoing network of education leaders and advocates across the region and (2) technical assistance, resources, and other support provided to states by the NESSC regional organization. The NESSC regional organization is staffed by the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), a non-profit educational support organization committed to redesigning public education and improving the quality of learning for all students, and in-state liaisons hired and managed by GSP.

The multi-state collaboration that characterizes the Consortium is supported by a focused agenda for secondary transformation, a robust and responsive organizational and meeting infrastructure, and the ongoing commitment of a broad array of education leaders in the five member states. These features, which are described in the section that follows, were shaped substantially by emerging needs and challenges of member states, including political and leadership transitions. As it evolved, the Consortium did not follow a prescribed model for collaboration, in part because of a perception that examples of successful efforts of similar scope and scale were scarce, but also as a result of participants’ desire to not operate or be confined to any specific programmatic structure. In fact, tactical flexibility was viewed as a particularly important aspect of the Consortium’s strategy, and has become a core element of their efforts to change state policy and high school practices.

### Consortium Goals, Objectives, and Theory of Action

Since its establishment, the Consortium has articulated what participants describe as a compelling vision for reform and a “clear and growing” theory of action to achieve that vision. The organization’s goals, objectives, theory of action, and major activities, as outlined in its most recent strategic plan, are depicted in Figure 1. The Consortium’s primary focus involves helping states improve student attainment, as reflected in their long-term goals of increasing student graduation rates, decreasing drop-out rates, and increasing college readiness and participation. To accomplish these goals, the Consortium promotes implementation of proficiency-based graduation, multiple and flexible pathways, and learner-centered systems of accountability (objectives) across the region through simultaneous pursuit of changes in the areas of policy, practice, and public will and understanding (theory of action).

Figure 1: Consortium Goals, Objectives, Theory of Action, and Major Activities



Source: UMDI Analysis of the NESSC Strategic Plan. April 2012.

As a goal-oriented initiative, the Consortium “is not confined to any specific programmatic structure,” but rather provides networking and customized technical assistance, resources, and support that states can access and adapt as appropriate. Through these two core activities (regional networking and technical assistance), the Consortium has supported regional initiatives such as the League of Innovative Schools and the regional high school redesign in action conference, as well as various state-level initiatives in support of the three objectives.

The clear articulation of those three objectives as the focus of Consortium efforts reflects a more recent addition to the Consortium change agenda that came as the result of extensive conversation and collaboration among states through the Consortium. These objectives were initially identified as the focus of the Consortium’s policy agenda, but over time gradually took on increasing significance as the focus of future work in all aspects of its theory of action: policy, practice, and the building of public and political will.<sup>2</sup> As with other aspects of the Consortium, objectives were defined in such a way to provide sufficient flexibility for states to enact them in ways that take into account their particular needs and contexts (Table 1).

**Table 1: NESSC Objectives, Definitions**

Objective	NESSC Definition
<b>Proficiency-Based Graduation</b>	Graduation from secondary schools will be based on the explicit demonstration that students have acquired the expected knowledge and skills outlined in each of the content area and cross-school standards identified by their states and school districts. Students may demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways, but proficiency is assessed using clear expectations of proficiency levels.
<b>Multiple and Flexible Pathways</b>	Schools and states will create learning options that provide a sequence of learning experiences provided to, and often designed by, every student that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodates individual student needs, learning styles, interests, and aspirations</li> <li>• Includes both in-school and out-of-school learning opportunities</li> <li>• Is aligned with and culminates in all students demonstrating proficiency in expected state and local learning standards</li> </ul>
<b>Learner-centered Accountability Systems</b>	States will create accountability processes that ensure integrity across the learning system—measuring, understanding, and improving both student learning and school, district, and state instructional and organizational systems that support this learning. State policy will ensure student attainment of 21st century skills and knowledge for every student, require accountability for this accomplishment, and provide diagnostic support to promote a cycle of continuous learning.

Source: NESSC Strategic Plan. April 2012.

### Organizational Structures

The Consortium established a foundation for interstate collaboration through the creation of robust organizational and meeting infrastructure with diverse representation from each of the five participating states. As noted in Consortium materials (quoted below), the NESSC is a collaborative venture that promotes sharing across states and not a political entity with authority over states:

*At its core, the NESSC exists to support states in realizing their intentions concerning the redesign of secondary schools. Each state comes to this effort willingly with the intention to contribute to the success of other states and deepen understanding and student learning collaboratively. The NESSC is not a political entity and has no authority over the states. Similarly, no state has authority over another state.*

The Consortium’s leadership and operational structure, depicted in Figure 2, reflects this emphasis on collaboration. A central and critical component of this cross-state infrastructure involves representatives from state departments of education to the Consortium, referred to as state education agency (SEA) leads.<sup>3</sup> Leads are assigned by education commissioners and have typically been high-level administrators who report either directly

<sup>2</sup> These three objectives were initially developed in August 2010 as the focus of work in the policy arena for the (then) 18-month old Consortium.

<sup>3</sup> SEA refers to state education agency, a formal governmental label for the state-level government agencies “responsible for providing information, resources, and technical assistance on educational matters to schools and residents.” In many states, including the five NESSC states, the SEA is the state department of education.



to the commissioner (such as a deputy or associate commissioner) or to a deputy or associate commissioner (such as a manager of a program office). The leads, along with NESSC liaisons—staff members who are funded by the Consortium but who work within each state—comprise the SEA Leads Team, which provides day-to-day leadership and coordination of NESSC-related activities. The group has evolved to constitute a strong network of education leaders from across the region, with several leads indicating that they have begun to reach out to one another outside of formal Consortium venues for advice and support.

Figure 2: Consortium Leadership Structure and Organizational Chart



Source: NESSC Strategic Plan. April 2012.

The Great Schools Partnership (GSP) oversees coordination and planning of Consortium-level activities and communications, including the planning and facilitation of Consortium-related meetings, implementation of regional League of Innovative Schools activities, planning the regional high school redesign conference, and other cross-state activities. The coordination and implementation of Consortium-aligned activities in individual member states is the responsibility of state departments of education, under the direction of SEA leads and commissioners, who may also receive support from state liaisons and GSP. In many cases, implementation efforts occurred through ad hoc groups of SEA staff brought together by state leads to accomplish specific goals (as opposed to formal implementation teams).

Additionally, the Consortium supports strategic action teams whose purpose is to articulate and support plans related to each of the three facets of its theory of action: policy, practice, and building of public and political will. A fourth, known as the Data Team, collaborates around the development and use of common metrics to measure

states' progress.<sup>4</sup> These four action teams were established as the Consortium moved from planning to development to focus more intensely on particular tasks such as the high-leverage policy framework, and a framework (including expectations and tools) for the League of Innovative Schools. These teams also allowed the Consortium to involve additional supporters from its member states and reduced growing demands on the SEA Leads Team as the Consortium moved from initial planning to development.

Finally, overseeing the Consortium is a five-state Council with diverse representation from across the region, including education commissioners, SEA staff, policy-makers, higher education representatives, and members of the business community, although the specific roles represented and level of participation from each state varies. The Council sets the overall direction and priorities for the NESSC, provides a forum for sharing ideas and support across state lines, and encourages participants to champion the NESSC mission and vision. Those participating on the Council also described how membership encouraged them to advocate within their respective spheres of influence:

*There's probably been no education group that I've been involved with that has been this committed and this consistent, has provided you many, many opportunities to stay involved, keep you involved...It's just so unlike anything else I've been involved with, and I've been asked, and I've joined many different educational groups, but you go to a meeting, everyone gets excited, but there's no follow-through, there's no consistency of meetings or just communication, and that's just not the case with the Consortium.*

As the Consortium has evolved, some suggested a need to revisit the role of the Council and its membership. For example, one deputy commissioner described how the Council has been “largely focused on conceptualization of what could happen,” but may need to shift its focus towards “implementation and actualization of what can happen” as this becomes an increasing focus of the Consortium overall. Maintaining active engagement of Council members, or reengaging or replacing some members or member groups with limited participation, was also viewed as an emerging need. For example, representation from business leaders was viewed as somewhat limited.

Beginning in 2011, commissioners of education from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont began to take a more active role in the Consortium and its Council. This increased involvement coincided with both establishment of dedicated commissioners' meetings scheduled prior to in-person Council meetings, as well as an announcement by the U.S. Department of Education in September 2011 that states would be able to request flexibility regarding specific requirements of the Education and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Some interviewees described how the confluence of these two events—the creation of a specific venue for direct collaboration among commissioners and a specific and timely focus for that collaboration—contributed to increased involvement:

*That whole thing, the waiver and the Consortium work on the waiver, kind of came out of nowhere in some ways... Until Secretary Duncan came out with the waiver possibility, that wasn't really something that was completely on people's minds...so that's been kind of an opportunity for working together.*

Several interviewees suggested that having commissioners more actively involved in setting the direction for the Consortium work lent credibility and direction to NESSC priorities in their respective states. It is also notable, however, that this expanded role of commissioners in NESSC decision-making has led to questions about the role of the broader Council, including partner organizations and funders, in the establishment of priorities for and oversight of the Consortium.

### **Commitment of Member States**

Another important component of the Consortium involves the commitment of member states, particularly state departments of education. The specific nature of the commitment, as it exists today, comprises states' commitment to continuing in the collaborative process, as well as to the pursuit of the Consortium's vision and objectives within their respective states. This emphasis on pursuit of the NESSC objectives (proficiency-based

<sup>4</sup> The strategic action team devoted to practice is referred to as the League of Innovative Schools team, reflecting the fact that the League comprises the Consortium's principal strategy to directly support changes in practice through the provision of networking and targeted support and resources. The action team devoted to building public and political will is referred to as the messaging team.

graduation, multiple and flexible pathways, and learner-centered accountability) within their respective states is reflected by a pledge signed by each state’s commissioner of education and board of education chair (Figure 3).

Figure 3: States’ Resolution in Support of the Consortium, January 2012

CONNECTICUT • MAINE • NEW HAMPSHIRE • RHODE ISLAND • VERMONT

**RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF THE  
NEW ENGLAND SECONDARY SCHOOL CONSORTIUM  
POLICY FRAMEWORK**

**WHEREAS**, the states of Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont have forged a regional partnership to strengthen and redesign their secondary schools; and

**WHEREAS**, the five states have embarked on a comprehensive examination of high-leverage state and local policies aimed at redesigning and dramatically improving student achievement and attainment; and

**WHEREAS**, the analysis of more than twenty-five candidates policies resulted in unanimous agreement on three critical high-leverage policies; and

**WHEREAS**, the three policies focus on proficiency-based high school graduation, flexible and personalized learning pathways for students, and a new student-centered accountability system; it is, therefore

**OUR COLLECTIVE WILL** to support and pursue the adoption and implementation of the New England Secondary School Consortium Policy Framework and its three policies as attached and enumerated.

**SO RESOLVED**, by the Commissioners of Education and Chairs of the State Boards of Education and Regents of the states of Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

*Agreed on This Day  
January 31, 2012*



Stefan Pryor  
Connecticut Commissioner of Education



Stephen Bowen  
Maine Commissioner of Education



Virginia Barry  
New Hampshire Commissioner of Education



Deborah Gist  
Rhode Island Commissioner of Education



Armando Vilaseca  
Vermont Commissioner of Education



*Read and Adopted  
In Concurrence*



Allan Taylor  
Chair, Connecticut State Board of Education



James Banks  
Chair, Maine State Board of Education



John Lyons  
Chair, New Hampshire State Board of Education



George Caruolo  
Chair, Rhode Island Board of Regents



Fayneese Miller  
Chair, Vermont State Board of Education

It is notable that states' commitment to the Consortium does not imply commitment to any one particular set of implementation strategies or the relinquishing of decision-making authority with regard to any facet of their reform agenda. Instead, states participate in the Consortium to the extent that they derive value from participation and see the Consortium as meaningfully contributing to their own reform initiatives.

Since the establishment, member states have continued in their commitment to the NESSC, even as they experienced substantial changes in political and educational leadership including changes in governors and education commissioners and NESSC state-level leadership in all states. The Consortium's ability to maintain and reestablish states' commitment following transitions was generally attributed to the compelling nature of the NESSC's overarching vision, the value that member states derive from participation, and the organization's flexibility and adaptability to meet states' differing needs and contexts:

*I think that ... the thing that has helped the Consortium endure all of those, the welter of changes has been David Ruff [the Consortium's coordinating director] who's been unfailingly proactive in reaching out, keeping people engaged, trying to find the points of relevance, and trying to grow the points of relevance.*

The existence of diverse networks of committed Consortium advocates within states, often from the Council or strategic action teams, was also cited as important to maintaining states' commitment through transitions.

### Evolution of the Consortium

As alluded to in the preceding sections, the development and articulation of the Consortium's goals, objectives, and theory of action; its organizational structure; and the commitment of member states was a progressive endeavor that ultimately comprised a significant focus of activity during the new organization's early phases. To a large extent, changes in each of these occurred as the Consortium progressed through various stages of planning and development and emphases shifted. For example, several members described how the Consortium moved from an initial emphasis on a vague notion that 'working together was good' and would accelerate progress, to its current state where it has real focus and sense of direction.

As the Consortium's goals, objectives, and theory of action evolved, so too did its organizational structures and commitments. For example, as the Consortium was forming and its mission was relatively loose (emphasizing cross-state collaboration vis-à-vis secondary school reform, but still in the process of defining the specific form and focus of that collaboration) the NESSC structure was relatively informal, and commitment of states was primarily to the process of meeting for the purposes of collaboration. As new participants and partners were brought in to support and sustain the emerging organization, the Consortium required more formal structures. Further, as the Consortium's agenda was more clearly defined, state commitments to the agenda became increasingly important.

As Consortium work grew more complex, the roles of these groups and those involved, including SEA leads and liaisons and GSP as the Consortium's intermediary, were more clearly delineated and, in some cases, changed in response to needs. Additionally, new teams were added to support new facets of Consortium work. A specific example of this evolution involves the development of strategic actions teams. The focus of teams continues to shift, as the Consortium moves progressively from development to implementation, and teams have demonstrated differing levels of progress in their transition. Some have suggested a need to reconfigure the teams and/or their purpose in the future to reflect this continued progress, in part because these teams had more of a specific purpose that had a potential end point, namely the design of core strategies and resources. It has also been suggested that as the Consortium moves further into implementation, because the specific ways in which the objectives will be realized in states is likely to differ, individual state plans and state-level teams devoted to the implementation of those plans will become increasingly important.

Reflecting on the Consortium's development and evolution of its agenda, structures, and common understanding of state commitments over time, many members underscored the importance of relationships among key Consortium participants and high-quality facilitation throughout the process, which was provided by GSP. The need to pursue and secure funding also appeared to help accelerate progress toward increasing focus and clearly understood state commitments. For example, early in the Consortium's development, it became clear that in order to appeal to large funders the Consortium's proposals for high school reform needed to be both ambitious and

specific enough to convey what they hoped to accomplish. It is notable, however, that while external funding was vital and the process of having external organizations asking questions and pushing for further explication was largely described as valuable, some members perceived a sense of pressure to adapt the Consortium's agenda to potential funders' priorities. In their view, this concern related to the challenge inherent in coming to consensus on a common agenda which they felt needed to arise from existing state reform efforts and priorities.

## Key Areas of Progress

As described in the previous section, early in its development the Consortium articulated a three-pronged theory of action that sustainable change necessitates simultaneous action in the arenas of policy, practice, and public will and understanding, while acknowledging the need to measure progress using common regional indicators of student attainment. In its planning, development, and early implementation phases, the Consortium made progress in each of these areas, as described briefly in the sections that follow.

As progress is considered, it is notable that the identification of proficiency-based graduation, multiple and flexible pathways, and learner-centered systems of accountability as the object of its effort in all domains will likely result in greater integration of activities across the three theory of action components. As such, any future evaluation and progress monitoring efforts will likely emphasize these objectives.

### Key Areas of Progress Related to Policy

In August 2010, the NESSC identified three areas as the focus of their work in the policy arena: proficiency-based graduation, multiple and flexible pathways, and learner-centered systems of accountability. The selection of these three areas reflected the culmination of multiple conversations involving the Consortium's working group and subsequently its policy strategic action team, as well as its Council. Described as an important milestone in the Consortium's development, the establishment of this policy agenda provided critical direction and focus to the (then) 18-month old Consortium.

To inform the development of its policy agenda, the Consortium contracted with the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut to develop a "step-by-step process for analyzing and developing education policy." The resulting framework, referred to as its high leverage policy framework, introduced the concept of policy leverage, or a policy's potential to not only improve student outcomes, but also generate positive change throughout the educational system. The three areas constituting the focus of the NESSC policy agenda were selected based on the Consortium and the Council's determination that they were high-leverage and their belief that regional pursuit of policies would benefit states' individual efforts.

#### *Changes in State Policy Consistent with NESSC Objectives*

Since the establishment of the Consortium's policy agenda, several participating states successfully pursued new policy or modified existing policy consistent with the agenda. Reflecting differences in political and educational contexts and the status of states' existing policies prior to entry into the Consortium, the extent of progress and avenues for these changes varied.<sup>5</sup> For example, Maine was able to take advantage of what was described as a "perfect storm" to promote new policy requiring proficiency-based graduation, whereas New Hampshire, where the environment was less favorable, focused its efforts on retaining existing policy in support of proficiency-based approaches. In a third state, Connecticut, discussion of policy change occurred within the context of a wide-ranging comprehensive education reform law put forth by the state's new governor.

Notable changes in policy resulting from these efforts include:

- Two states made changes to state policy to support or encourage proficiency-based graduation, Maine by requiring the use of a fully proficiency-based system, and Rhode Island by modifying its secondary regulations to deemphasize credits (or Carnegie units) in favor of "courses" to remove what is often cited as a barrier to the implementation of a fully proficiency-based system.
- Two states established or are working to establish pilot programs to inform the ways in which state policy can support or encourage innovative practice, including proficiency-based graduation. In both Vermont and Connecticut, these efforts involve schools participating in the Consortium's League of Innovative Schools.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed description of policy progress and interview findings regarding Consortium contributions to policy progress and other critical considerations related to policy, please see the UMDI NESSC August 2012 Policy Brief available at: [www.newenglandssc.org/](http://www.newenglandssc.org/).

- Two states, Maine and Rhode Island, made modifications to state policy to strengthen existing pathways for students, including career and technical education and virtual learning opportunities for students.
- One state, Vermont, put forth new legislation to build a comprehensive system of flexible pathways. Although unsuccessful—and generally attributed to specific concerns regarding the proposed funding mechanism—leaders believe that by pushing the agenda they have built awareness of the need for reform and intend to revisit the issue in the future.
- Commissioners from three states—Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont—have participated in ongoing cross-state discussions regarding their long-term reform visions and how accountability systems could support these visions. These conversations were initially spurred by an announcement by the U.S. Department of Education in September 2011 that states would be able to request flexibility regarding specific requirements of the ESEA. These three states are beginning to consider issues related to the development of learner-centered accountability systems and how those systems could be designed and implemented in the future.

Given the complex nature of the policy-making process, it is impossible to determine whether any one factor, organization, or initiative was definitive in promoting or securing the changes. In fact, in many cases, progress appeared to occur as a result of a confluence of factors and the collaboration among multiple consistencies. However, interviews and other data collected through the evaluation indicate that the Consortium was a significant contributor to policy progress in at least four of the five states and is positioned to support progress in the fifth (Connecticut) by helping to establish a pilot initiative related to innovative practice.

In light of differences in the changes pursued and the avenues through which those changes needed to be made, the specific ways in which the Consortium contributed to the process differed across states. For example, in some states, the establishment of the Consortium's high leverage policy agenda provided focus for state-level secondary school reform efforts. For others, the multi-state and collaborative networking appeared to contribute to states' development and promotion of policy change, particularly at the early stages of the process. Having access to research and advocacy and technical assistance, coordination and facilitation through the Great Schools Partnership also appeared to contribute to these changes by helping states respond to short-term opportunities and/or plan strategies to pursue policy change.

### **Key Areas of Progress Related to Practice**

With regard to supporting practice, the Consortium's initial emphasis was on the development of international benchmarking and the launch of a regional conference focused on secondary school reform. Over time, these efforts grew to encompass more direct and sustained involvement with schools through the establishment of the League of Innovative Schools, a network of reform-minded educators. Progress related to these strategies is described below.

It should be noted that as states have begun to pass and support new policy, many department of education interviewees felt as though the Consortium was likely to play an increasing role in helping states more effectively promote implementation of those practices in the field. In addition, the articulation of the Consortium's three objectives appears to have led to increasing integration of efforts across the policy and practice domains, which may lead to changes in the Consortium's support of practice.

#### *League of Innovative Schools*

In fall 2011, the Consortium launched the League of Innovative Schools with the intent to promote and support changes in practice in alignment with the NESSC vision. Designed to accelerate high school reform, the League encourages peer collaboration, exchange of professional learning, and reflection within and across schools. Now in its second year, the League comprises 48 schools in two cohorts. The schools reflect a diverse range of settings including urban, suburban, and rural settings, and have a range of school sizes, achievement profiles, and student populations. An analysis of the League's first cohort conducted in spring 2012 shows that those schools involved more than 2,100 educators and 26,500 students, or approximately 7% of all secondary school students in the region—figures that have grown as new schools have been brought into the initiative.

Schools in the League have access to NESSC-sponsored cross-state networking meetings as well as to NESSC resources and tools, such as the Global Best Practices self-assessment and action planning resources. In some cases, schools also received implementation support in the form of in-state networking and/or facilitation and coaching from state liaisons and/or state department of education staff. As one example, Vermont reallocated funds from existing state and federal sources to fund and support its League schools and assigned and trained department staff to work with those schools as they pursued innovative practices. Some states added additional requirements for League schools: Rhode Island, for example, emphasized the use of iWalkthroughs, a GSP-sponsored system for collecting and analyzing data on school-wide instructional practice.

Although still in its early stages, initial response from participating school leaders regarding the League suggests that the new initiative is contributing to schools' ability to make progress on their own innovative reform agendas. In a June 2012 survey, more than three-quarters of principals described the League as at least somewhat valuable to their school's overall improvement efforts, including 36% who described the League as "extremely valuable" in this regard. Additionally, the vast majority of responding principals described the League as contributing to their school's ambitions related to innovative school reform (88%), collegial conversations within their school (86%), their understanding of their own school improvement needs (82%), their awareness of strategies that have been effective in other schools (81%), the way they communicate about their reform work to local constituencies (81%), and to their focus on local policy development (78%). One principal explains the value of the League:

*The presentations and materials provided by NESSC are excellent—they help reinforce and solidify your own thinking, and help you craft descriptions of these activities in words that are much better than your own. The LIS also provides encouragement and motivation to believe that we can accomplish these goals.*

#### *International Benchmarking through the Global Best Practices Self-Assessment*

An early milestone for the Consortium in its development of strategies to promote changes in school practice involved the creation of the Global Best Practices self-assessment tool. The tool, which was designed to be a practical product that could be easily used by schools to assess themselves against a set of international standards, was developed jointly by representatives from all five states and described as "a first step toward defining, in detail, the characteristics of effective 21st century education and applying them to the creation of new models of teaching, learning, and leading in today's high schools."<sup>6</sup>

Global Best Practices covers three main areas of school practice: teaching and learning, organization systems and structures, and school leadership—each of which includes multiple dimensions and performance descriptions against which schools can assess themselves on a scale of one to five (ranging from initiating to performing) using evidence collected at the school-level.

To date, the self-assessment has primarily been used by schools participating in the League. In June 2012, two-thirds of surveyed League principals indicated that their schools had used the tool in some form. Nearly all of those who did described the tool as valuable to their school improvement efforts, including 65% who described it as "very valuable." In open-ended responses, principals explained that the existence of a research-based tool helped lend a sense of credibility to their schools' reform efforts:

*It is a great tool for self-assessment. It not only helps us see where we are, it helps us see where we might want to go. Additionally, it lends credibility to the school's efforts. It allows us to communicate to stakeholders that our improvement plans have a solid rationale.*

Several also described the tool as providing a common vocabulary to help guide school-based discussions in a non-judgmental, non-evaluative manner, which they felt helped to further focus their schools' reform efforts. Reflecting this view, several state departments of education interviewees have begun to consider ways in which the tool could be used more broadly or as part of their own engagement with schools.

<sup>6</sup> As a supplement to the toolkit, the Consortium published the *Global Best Practices Research Summary*, which summarizes selected scholarship, including, as described in the document: (1) meta-analyses and comprehensive projects that distill useful findings from a wide range of existing research, and (2) focused investigations conducted by individuals or organizations that represent a coherent body of research in a particular area. This and other Consortium publications can be found at: <http://www.newenglandssc.org>.



### *High School Redesign in Action Conference*

To catalyze and support a regional movement of innovation and change, the NESSC sponsors a regional high school redesign conference. The event, held annually for the past three years, has grown to involve more than 450 participants from across New England including mostly school-based administrators and teachers, and state department of education staff. The conference, it was noted, provides a forum in which secondary educators can “share success stories, exchange innovative solutions, connect with colleagues, and build momentum for secondary transformation in our schools, communities, and states.”

In feedback surveys participants have been overwhelmingly positive about the conference. Following the 2012 conference, nearly all participants (97%) indicated that the conference would be beneficial to their work. In addition, 85% of respondents said they planned to change the way they worked in their educational setting, including nearly a third who strongly agreed that they would do so:

*What I learned at this conference has been of significant help in getting to my goals. I learned a great deal about the pluses and minuses of implementation. You really need to be ready for the backlash most of the high schools experienced in terms of community and especially parent reaction to proficiency-based graduation.*

To build upon the initial success of the conference and further increase its impact, several of those involved suggested bringing in new partners to expand the reach of the conference and, ultimately to make the event “the hub of an NESSC movement” in New England.

### **Key Areas of Progress Related to Building Public and Political Will**

Consortium members have consistently emphasized the need to build public and political will in support of NESSC goals and strategies if the Consortium is to be successful in its secondary reform efforts over the long term. One interviewee explains the importance of public will, particularly as it relates to transformative change:

*In changing some things like a diploma or grading or something like that, the key is not necessarily the technical parts, but building the public will in the community to support these ideas and give them sustainability.*

To make progress toward the building of public and political will, the NESSC messaging team targeted two primary groups: political leaders and education leaders. Key messaging strategies for these groups included:

- The development of an NESSC website as a repository for research and other messaging-related materials such as tools, handbooks, and guides, and the use of social networking to create a forum for promoting and disseminating NESSC-related activity and progress throughout the region.
- Extensive outreach on the part of state leads, liaisons, and other Consortium advocates to build in-state coalitions of individuals and groups who could advocate for and/or support the Consortium’s work. This included efforts to build new partnerships with business, higher education, and education and professional organizations in states and keep these individuals apprised of ongoing Consortium efforts. These types of partnerships, it was noted, have the potential to extend the Consortium’s reach, increase the level of advocacy within states for the Consortium’s agenda, and offer vehicles by which to provide much needed capacity building and support to schools in the implementation of policies aligned with the Consortium.
- The development of a series of nine *Leadership in Action* briefings each focusing on a different secondary school reform topic. The briefings, which were disseminated via e-mail to the Consortium’s extensive database of education policymakers, school board members, district superintendents, and those involved in the NESSC through its Council and strategic action teams, were generally described as high-quality publications that were easy to understand and could be used by NESSC advocates, including state departments of education and local superintendents, to explain and build support for concepts among stakeholders. For those wanting more in-depth information regarding topics covered in a *Leadership in Action* briefing, the Consortium website also made available additional information and resources.
- A series of focus groups with members of key stakeholder groups—local school board members and business professionals—from each state to understand their perceptions of secondary schools and secondary

reform and help to shape and spread the core messages of the Consortium. Using the findings from its focus groups with school board members, the Consortium published a series of eight findings with implications for future messaging vis-à-vis the NESSC agenda and plans to release a similar report of findings from business leader focus groups, which were conducted in late spring 2012.

- The provision of technical assistance and training to state departments of education and local education leaders in the development of messaging in support of their own local Consortium-aligned reform efforts. An example of this involves trainings provided to department of education staff in Maine and the infusion of messaging-related presentations into League network meetings and the regional conference. This reflects a relatively new approach on the part of the Consortium to use its resources and capacities around messaging to reach new audiences by impacting local messaging efforts, one that many involved felt had particular promise for the Consortium moving forward.

The Consortium's messaging strategies reflect a more nuanced approach to what were initially ambitious goals for regional messaging, including the development of a large-scale regional campaign to change the public perception of secondary schooling. However, resource limitations and concerns that public messaging campaigns conducted by other groups had failed to measurably alter public opinion resulted in the Consortium's scaling back these initial plans in favor of more targeted strategies.<sup>7</sup> In addition, differences in states' specific approaches to reform—particularly at a time when the Consortium was still in the process of developing its own broader agenda—also likely complicated the prospects of developing a single campaign that could meet the needs of all participating states. Reflecting this, clarification of messaging goals and strategies and reaching agreement among key constituencies may reflect an important future emphasis for the Consortium.

### Key Areas of Progress Related to Data and Measurement of Regional Progress

The Consortium also made significant progress toward measurement of regional progress with respect to the NESSC goals. Through the data team, representatives from each state's department of education collaborated to develop common definitions and means of measuring graduation rates, dropout rates, and college matriculation—three of the Consortium's four student attainment goals. The agreements, which comprise a set of common decision rules and annual reporting templates, allow for ongoing measurement of regional progress as well as comparisons across states. One department of education leader explained the importance of common reporting metrics across the region:

*For data to be useful for any number of consumers—public to policy-makers—having comparable business rules around how the data is collected and how it is presented, and what the meaning therefore is of the data that we publish seems actually to me very useful. Right now virtually everyone knows it's very hard to go into states and accurately compare things unless those business rules have been applied either accidentally because the same ones have been adopted or because a research organization has taken the time to do that...*

The ongoing use of these common indicators to monitor and inform states' progress is featured prominently in the Consortium's strategic action plan; the Consortium has encouraged states to use these data, both in aggregate and at the subgroup level, in developing state specific plans related to NESSC involvement. More detailed data regarding regional trends on these indicators are available in NESSC data technical reports.<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting the Consortium's emphasis on long-term student attainment and preparing students for success after high school, a significant focus of the data team's work has involved discussion of measuring student outcomes after they leave states' elementary and secondary education systems. Each of the five states now contracts with the National Student Clearinghouse, allowing them to track enrollment and degree progress of their students following high school. These data sets, which cover approximately 96% of all students in public and private U.S.

<sup>7</sup> The NESSC contracted with the marketing and communications agency New Harbor Group to advise the messaging team and support the development of a messaging plan. The team was advised to identify an explicit target audience and focused objectives and strategies to reach each.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed description of indicators, including subgroup analyses, please see the UMDI 2012 NESSC Key Indicators: Phase III Technical Report (August 2012), available at: [www.newenglandssc.org/](http://www.newenglandssc.org/).

institutions of higher education, provide data that support or will support tracking students' college matriculation and success rates across the five states, using commonly-agreed upon measures.<sup>9</sup>

In collaboration with partner institutions such as the Annenberg Institute, the University of Southern Maine, and the College Board, the data team has also begun work on the development of an indicator to measure progress toward its fourth goal: college readiness. Although the team had initially planned to track college remediation rates, differences in institutions' remediation policies and concerns about the availability of data rendered this approach impractical. At present the group has defined what, in their view, comprises a successful transition to college, namely the completion of 24 college credit hours and a GPA of 2.5 or enrollment in a third semester of college (2- or 4-year), although they have not begun to report this at the regional level. The team hopes to use this definition, in collaboration with research partners, to quantitatively identify measures that signify college readiness. This work is still in progress, and it has been suggested that successful development of a robust indicator will likely require additional clarity regarding intended use of the metric (i.e., an indicator of school or state progress, or an early warning student indicator), expanded coordination between the work of data team members and their respective DOE leaders, a timeline for completion, and potentially a significant infusion of resources.

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<sup>9</sup> National Student Clearinghouse: [www.studentclearinghouse.org/about/](http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/about/)

## Consortium Contributions to States' Secondary Reform

The initial impetus for the development of the Consortium was a belief that states would achieve more rapid and substantial progress on secondary reform working together than they would individually. Many of those involved in the creation of the Consortium described their view that the pursuit of transformational change at the secondary level had been more challenging than reform at other levels, and that collaboration with colleagues dealing with similar challenges would help them more effectively meet these challenges.

As the Consortium enters its fourth year, representatives from Consortium states expressed the view that this vision is being realized, with the Consortium contributing to states' ability to make progress on secondary reform. As it was described, NESSC infrastructure, ongoing networking opportunities, and flexible support from GSP had created a context where those involved felt more supported in their local reform efforts. One deputy commissioner explained: "I do think that the original theory that we are stronger being in this together than we are individually has happened." Similarly, one commissioner mentioned that "the Consortium is stronger than the individual parts," whereas another noted that he knew "from speaking with other states that are outside of New England—the Consortium that we have...they're envious of that."

Given the voluntary nature of participation in the Consortium, many of those involved cite the specific value their states had derived as their rationale for continuing to participate in the multi-state effort. Reflecting differences in local contexts and emphases, the particular ways in which the Consortium contributed to state reform varied but often included: increased focus on secondary reform, a greater sense of momentum and a broader context for their reform efforts, cross-agency sharing of practices, increased capacity as a result of technical assistance and research capabilities, and ability to develop and access higher quality tools and resources than might otherwise be available. Each of these is described briefly below.

### Increased Focus on Secondary Reform

Many of those involved with the Consortium felt as though the NESSC helped to maintain and/or increase the focus on secondary reform within their states by providing a context to consider secondary reform and the challenges therein. As it was described, this helped to promote ongoing dialogue and (ultimately) progress related to these issues. Similarly, Consortium-related deadlines and regular meeting schedules were seen as contributing to members' focus on secondary reform. This was viewed as particularly important given day-to-day pressures and changes in state contexts that might have otherwise led to a diminished focus over time. "It would [have] be[en] difficult to maintain the focus on secondary," in light of changes in that state's context had it not been for the Consortium, commented one interviewee.

In addition to maintaining and sharpening states' emphasis on secondary reform, the Consortium also appeared to help bring increasing focus to those efforts. That is, as states collaborated on the development of objectives and frameworks for action for the regional organization, in several cases, these frameworks also provided "critical focus" and direction for states' own efforts. One state department of education official describes how the NESSC policy framework helped inform the development of his state's policy agenda:

*We had the policy meeting in Portsmouth—that was a huge point, in my mind, where we got the five states to agree on—I think we started with 22 policies, and then whittled it down to five or six and we settled on three, and that was huge. I mean, that's still with us today in terms of the directions we're going, and the conversations we have...I think it drove our policy and the legislative work this year...*

The multi-faceted theory of action of simultaneous change in the areas of policy, practice, and public and political will also helped shape reform work in some instances. "The theory of action that NESSC developed gave us a model for the work that we're doing," one individual involved with promoting innovative practice explained. A commissioner of education described how the Consortium "has allowed for us to have the policy level and the application level come together" in a way that might not have been possible for all states individually. In this way,

the identification of an increasingly focused reform agenda was viewed not only as a critical milestone in the development of the Consortium as a regional organization, but also as a means of value the organization added to individual states' reform efforts.

### Momentum and a Broader Context for Reform

The NESSC was also viewed as providing a broader context for states' reform efforts, which in turn helped to create a sense of a regional movement that transcended states' individual efforts and changes. For some, this contributed to a growing sense of momentum and a belief that as progress was made in one state, progress in other states was possible. For others, this helped to maintain a conversation about the ideas and ideals of the Consortium, even as political and leadership transitions occur and contexts change. A department of education official in a state that experienced significant change described it as follows:

*The Consortium structure is bigger than any one of the states alone. For a single state working by itself, one agency or one constituent group can often sidetrack key objectives. The beauty of this collaboration is that, if one state falls back or has to focus on something else, the work keeps going and you just jump right back in.*

It is notable that all states experienced significant leadership transitions during their time in the Consortium, including at the gubernatorial and commissioner level. In each case, the Consortium reached out to re-establish relationships, identify ways in which the Consortium could align with and support leaders' priorities and reform visions, and generate a renewed enthusiasm for the Consortium. The Consortium's strength of voice around a specific set of reform priorities and the inclusion of a diverse group of champions was seen as helping to contribute to maintaining emphasis on innovative and student-centered reform:

*These ideas are creative and innovative, but there's agreement amongst many of our colleagues that this is the path we should take, and that led us to a strength of voice, a strength of voice that was helpful in continuing, even through changes in leadership, that kind of allowed us to sustain the work... we were able to sustain that effort, mostly because we had unified our voice and our voice was cogent enough and intelligent enough to convince the changing leadership that we needed to sustain our work.*

Having a broader context for reform, it was noted, also contributed to increasing the profile of secondary reform at the legislative level. For example, some state legislators described the Consortium as providing a sense of "political cover" and the ability to point to other states that were pursuing a similar reform agenda. The ability to cite that five New England education leaders had endorsed the Consortium and its change agenda was "a valuable statement" to make when promoting policy change on the floor of state legislatures, as one legislator explained:

*The regional collaboration gives our state a long-term goal, working towards what some of our New England neighbors have already met. And I think it's very beneficial for policy-makers in our state to know that other New England states are either pushing with us, or pushing ahead of us, on reforms around secondary schools.*

### Cross-State Sharing of Practice through Networking

The multi-state and collaborative networking aspect of the Consortium also appeared to play a significant role in increasing states' capacity to develop and promote new reform initiatives. As it was described, the Consortium provided a venue by which states could build upon one another's strengths and create synergies that would improve and accelerate secondary reform. A commissioner of education from one state described how the regional nature of the Consortium supported "intellectual depth" and relevance, distinguishing the Consortium from other multi-state initiatives in which they might be involved:

*The value is the intellectual depth of the discussions that go on. While we're comparing our states, we're also listening to each other, about, well, how did you do that?...So, while we're all different, we're learning from each other. Like I said, CCSSO is great, I love it, it's big talk...but when you get right down to it, in regions you have certain needs, and, this organization meets those needs and keeps us moving in the right direction.*

Interviewees from state departments of education cited numerous examples of ways in which the experiences of colleagues had contributed to secondary reform initiatives and/or operations in their own states. This included specific policy proposals put forward, but also ideas about how to pursue policy change and/or build champions

within their states. In particular, commissioners from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont underscored the value of collaborating with one another in the early stages of the development of accountability systems that are learner-centered and otherwise supportive of proficiency-based education and multiple and flexible pathways.

In each case, interviewees emphasized not only the intellectual and emotional support inherent in working with a group of colleagues, but also the practical benefits of leveraging one another's strengths and previous experiences:

*The value that the [state department of education] gets out of it is the opportunity to share agency practice and to connect with partners who are doing work that is similar enough that we can benefit from one another's experience along a developmental trajectory.*

It should be noted that some interviewees appeared to view the cross-state sharing as most relevant for the three most northern New England states whose commissioners had begun to meet regularly, spurred by initial conversations regarding ESEA flexibility waivers. However, others noted that even states whose leaders did not participate in those conversations were able to both derive benefit from and contribute to the Consortium:

*That is the magic of the Consortium, of being able to network around even though you are doing different things, having the same common interest and having the opportunity to do a compare-and-contrast and discussion with one another; respecting each other's differences, but playing off it.*

### **Increased Capacity through Access to Technical Assistance and Research Capabilities**

The Consortium was described as an important "think tank" that could contribute high quality research and practical know-how to conversations about reform. The ability to request and receive timely assistance from Consortium staff, it was noted, helped state-level education leaders respond more quickly and effectively to short-term opportunities. As an example, Vermont education officials found they were able to act quickly in response to their governor's interest in dual enrollment by immediately seeking ways of coupling dual enrollment with policy change related to multiple and flexible pathways:

*As soon as the governor talked about dual enrollment, we put together a working group and David [executive director of the Great Schools Partnership] came over and facilitated. That was incredibly helpful. So, I think knowing that the Consortium is there in the form of GSP and in the form of the other member states, and we can call on that whole big thing for help, that is really useful.*

Another example of an opportunity states were able to take advantage of as a result of technical assistance and research support through the Consortium involved conversations occurring in states regarding learner-centered accountability systems. One commissioner explained how, without Consortium staff, it would be unlikely that the states could initiate, sustain, or support this level of cross-state collaboration despite the significant potential value states could receive from those efforts:

*If they [the Great Schools Partnership] weren't there, we'd have to build something that could [coordinate cross-state collaboration], and I don't know that we would quite frankly, because it runs into a capacity issue, so it's huge. I don't think it would be happening if it wasn't for the Consortium.*

The ability of Consortium staff to gather research, develop draft documents, and conduct and coordinate other support activities both within and across states also appeared to contribute to the value states received from the Consortium.

### **High Quality Tools and Resources with Increased Credibility**

Finally, those involved with the Consortium expressed their view that multi-state collaboration on tools, resources, and other products yielded higher quality outputs than individual states would have achieved individually. Examples included the Global Best Practices tool, the High-Leverage Policy Framework, and other resources developed by or on behalf of the Consortium. One state commissioner described the importance of having access to high quality, professionally produced tools and resources supporting the NESSC agenda for in-state efforts:

*[Having access to resources] signals to others that I have some folks on the ground behind me on this, that I'm not out in left field, that these aren't radical notions that I'm promoting. There's actually an institutional base there, work has been done on it, and it's a resource to draw on.*

As described, given limited research and development capabilities, states would be unlikely to develop the resources in isolation. That the resources were developed for and endorsed by a Consortium representing educators from across the five states was viewed as lending greater credibility than if they had been developed by any particular state's department of education.

## Lessons Learned

The experience of the Consortium as it evolved through its initial planning, development, and early implementation phases provides a tremendous opportunity to learn about the nature and value of multi-state collaboration, particularly around issues of national interest: ensuring students graduate from high school prepared for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of our interconnected global society.

A number of factors appear to have had a significant influence on the progress and persistence of NESSC through challenges across participating states. Those involved reflected on suggestions and considerations that they would offer to those undertaking similar endeavors. These and other lessons learned emerging over the course of the evaluation are described below.

### **An Effective Intermediary was of Utmost Importance to the Functioning of the Consortium**

*“[The Great Schools Partnership] are the sole entity that is coordinating the work that we are doing around the waiver and around a broader move to a proficiency-based, student-centered system...if they weren’t there, I don’t know how we’d go about doing this.”*

Members of the Consortium consistently emphasized the vital functions carried out by their intermediary, the Great Schools Partnership (GSP). The services provided by GSP in managing day-to-day operations—including grant administration, logistical coordination, and group facilitation—were viewed as crucial to maintaining operations of the regional entity. GSP was also credited with guiding key Consortium activities, leading the Consortium through short- and long-term strategic planning, and offering timely support and assistance to member states. As one interviewee explained, the Consortium “won’t go if you don’t operate it,” as state education agencies lacked the resources and infrastructure to coordinate the cross-state activities.

It was also noted that having an entity outside of the states contributed a level of stability to the Consortium over time. As a result, GSP was described as “the glue that held the Consortium together.” Specifically, as an external organization, they were able to facilitate conversations among states through phases of development and at critical junctures. Additionally, GSP and liaisons hired and managed by GSP were credited by some as helping to “keep the plate spinning during [leadership] transitions” within member states.

### **Effective Collaboration Required the Development of a Compelling Vision for Long-Term Change and a Focused Agenda to Inform Action in Pursuit of That Vision**

*“Keep the number small, but pick those things that are long-lasting, deep, and require a lot of infrastructure ...structures, policies, and processes in place in order to make them happen.”*

Whereas the initial impetus for the Consortium was the notion that collaboration around secondary reform could accelerate states’ individual work, the development of a more focused agenda was necessary to inform those collaborative efforts. “That’s when those moving parts really come together,” one state department of education interviewee explained. One deputy commissioner explained how the development of that agenda helped accelerate the Consortium’s progress:

*[Initially] we didn’t have a clear agenda, we had these vague, very high-level thoughts about what you needed to move this work forward, and it was very difficult, because it wasn’t a common focus or common understanding, that’s where we really started...And I think once we made the very clear switch over to a policy framework, that it really was about choosing a very focused area of policy, that it became, it just all of the sudden cleared up...we all had this focus that we all could agree on, and I think that was huge.*

While reflecting on the Consortium’s agenda, the deep and compelling nature of the three objectives was often highlighted, including the notion that they encompassed large, complex challenges that could benefit from collaborative efforts.



## Reaching Consensus Takes a Considerable but Worthwhile Effort to Achieve

*“To see different states come to the table, and hear policy-makers and educators talking for a long time seemed endless in the beginning, but it’s the kind of groundwork that if you don’t fertilize the field well, you’re not going to have a great crop.”*

As described, the Consortium’s agenda reflects the shared interests and priorities of member states, which was viewed almost universally by members as vital to states’ on-going commitment. Developing this level of consensus, however, proved to be a time-consuming venture that was not always easy or straightforward. One department of education leader involved during that time explained:

*I don’t know, to the outside world, that people appreciate sometimes how challenging it is—five different bureaucratic structures, with their own internal agendas and personalities, with different leadership styles, different leadership structures, different leadership changes, trying to come to a place of mutual agreement around big ideas and then some very specific ideas, is really substantial, it really matters, it takes a lot of work to do that.*

The ability of member states to effectively collaborate and reach consensus, it was noted, required the development of relationships and mutual trust among participants: “Number one, the most important thing, is [to] build that level of trust and understanding amongst the members.” Participants suggested that “face-to-face meetings are key...absolutely essential.” In this light, the Consortium appears to have benefitted from the geography of the New England states:

*People come together because they’re asked to or because they think they have an initial affinity, they talk, they play nice, they’re cordial, and they realize, ‘oh, that means something different than I thought it might mean, that means something different for us.’ And people go away they come back, but they keep coming back, so ultimately, over time, as trust gets established and people begin to realize, ‘hmm, this could actually work, and I actually could benefit from my involvement and my state could benefit from my involvement.’*

## A Balanced Emphasis on Process and Action is Critical for Maintaining Momentum

*“Proving you can move quickly is vital to the way an organization is perceived—it’s a ‘proof point’ of the organization’s viability.”*

The development of a collective agenda and the underlying relationships that form the basis for collaboration are process-oriented, requiring extensive patience on behalf of members in the initial phases. During this time, many members expressed concern that the Consortium could lose momentum and support from key stakeholders if the pace of change did not accelerate. Their view was that the Consortium had built the groundwork and important relationships across states to speed up the pace of the work. The launch of the League of Innovative Schools helped to reenergize the Consortium by effectively responding to members’ desire to “get into” the schools, and appeared to “turn the corner” in states’ commitment to the NESSC.

## While There was a Need for Commonality in the Agenda, Significant Flexibility was Required

*“If you are trying to drive the same change in every state done the same way you could really run up against a big wall.”*

Whereas nearly all of those involved with the Consortium expressed the view that differing state context required flexibility, many also noted that striking an appropriate balance between flexibility and commonality was important. As described by one state department of education official, the NESSC agenda needed to be “focused so it keeps the Consortium together...but it’s got to be flexible enough so that it works in the context of the state.” Flexibility was viewed as particularly important in the Consortium’s policy focus, and that flexibility (at least in the short term) contributed to the Consortium’s ability to effectively promote policy change. Flexibility is also a fundamental component of the LIS framework, which states that: “While every member school will make the same commitment to improve, the League recognizes and embraces the fact that schools progress in different ways and at different rates.”

## **Diverse Representation From Participating States Contributed Significantly to the Consortium's Ability to Create, Sustain, and Take Advantage of Opportunities**

*"One of the key strengths [of the Consortium] is it provides opportunities at key moments, and key opportunities that really keep what I believe is the core of secondary education alive."*

The Consortium brought in representatives from diverse backgrounds to help inform the development of its vision and support initial implementation of its strategies. These included SEA leaders and staff, state liaisons, GSP staff, district leaders, League principals, legislators, higher education and business representatives, and others. As the Consortium's work progressed, these individuals formed what some describe as "a cadre of champions" who advocated for changes within their respective spheres of influence, including in the halls of the legislatures, state board meetings, and districts and school buildings. One legislator noted, "I just think because of the people that you have around the table, and because of the size of it, the opportunities are going to be more numerous." Diverse representation also appeared to be particularly important in the policy sphere, as in nearly all cases in which new policy was passed, the importance of collaboration of multiple constituencies was cited as crucial to securing passage.

Broad representation of state-based support for the Consortium also appeared to help the Consortium persist through leadership transitions in states. In other words, those involved with the Consortium were able to serve as strong advocates who could 'carry the mantle' of the Consortium during important leadership transitions by keeping relevant conversations alive in their respective states.

## **Attracting Interest from Funders was a Challenging but Significant Achievement**

*"...many foundations aren't interested in throwing money your way for an unproven program."*

At a practical level, launching the new organization required attracting funders willing to support the Consortium through an initial period of planning and development. This posed a unique set of challenges in light of the nature of the Consortium, including the need to develop infrastructure in the early stages; a complex theory of action that needed to be developed and articulated; challenges in documenting and measuring impact inherent in collaborative network models; and, the need for differentiation of efforts across states such that the Consortium and its activities do not conform to a standard program model. As such, their success in attracting interest from two funding partners, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, was a significant accomplishment.

As the Consortium has evolved, so too have its funding needs. Whereas in its early stages funding needs involved securing resources for development of infrastructure and core operations of the regional entity, at this point, the identification of resources for state- and regional-level activities and programs has become an increasing need and desire among member states. Multiple potential models for funding activities exist, such as the reallocation of existing state resources, the use of fee-for-service models, the pursuit of foundation and targeted program support, and mixed models, the relative merits and challenges of which will need to be considered. Further, ensuring long-term sustainability of organizational funding, including diversification of funding sources, reflects a critical future need. Reflecting this, the Consortium's strategic plan emphasizes decreasing foundational support from 80% to 50% by 2016 through a variety of strategies, including securing financial commitments from member states and generating revenue from its services and operations.