



New England Secondary School Consortium

Phase II Evaluation Report

September 2011



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New England Secondary School Consortium

Phase II Evaluation Report

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Report Information

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

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. Applied social science research and program evaluation are major components of UMDI's diverse service offerings and are delivered by our Research and 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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I. Summary of Phase II Progress and Future Considerations

With funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESSC) is a pioneering partnership committed to fostering forward-thinking innovations in the design and delivery of secondary education across its five member states: Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. During Phase II, the NESSC focused on three major objectives: developing high-leverage policies; structuring and beginning to implement the League of Innovative Schools (LIS); and developing broad public and political will to support new models of student-centered learning. They also focused on creating a set of cross-state common metrics, as well as a reporting framework for student achievement.

This section contains a summary of Phase II progress and future considerations. The full report contains additional sections, including a review of the Consortium's operational structure, state-by-state progress, and strategic considerations presented in greater detail than in this summary. It also provides more in-depth evidence of the Consortium's progress, challenges, and success, and includes review of project benchmarks that are beyond the scope of this summary.

Phase II Progress

Refined Organizational and Working Processes

December 2010 was a critical juncture for the Consortium. Evaluation findings from fall 2010 suggested that progress had stalled and members believed that, in order to sustain the momentum of Phase I accomplishments, the Consortium needed to move quickly and decisively toward establishing a League of Innovative Schools (LIS) and effective campaigns to win political and public support for the proposed reforms.

NESSC responded to these concerns in several ways, including two major adjustments to its working structure. First, the Working Group was disbanded to reduce redundancy with the Strategic Action Teams (SATs). Second, a forum for state leads and liaisons was established in January. This bi-monthly forum enabled leads and liaisons to discuss issues and reach decisions with facilitation by the Great Schools Partnership (GSP). A majority of leads and liaisons reported that the new structure was very productive for advancing key tasks in a timely manner. NESSC also revamped its internal communication processes and addressed the widely-perceived need for improved communication tools. The NESSC website was updated and became the central repository for shared materials and resources. Information on past meeting materials and summaries, upcoming meetings, and other resources was added and/or updated more frequently. Feedback suggests that these changes have saved members time and increased their access to needed materials.

Key levers for turning the corner also included major progress toward defining the LIS and implementing its preliminary action steps, as well as creating and beginning to implement a messaging plan intended to target the most influential educational leaders.

Benefits of the Multi-State Context

Evidence strongly suggests that the presence of the multi-state Consortium – with its prominent objectives, frequent meetings, useful materials, and recognized members – strengthens states' momentum and focus on secondary school reform. The predominant view among NESSC members was that the multi-state nature of the Consortium provided political cover and enhanced credibility for advancing reform. Many informants reported that the refined NESSC structure and work processes have strengthened the states' mutual respect, leading to a shared sense of ownership and obligation, and that the group has evolved into a system of beneficial peer accountability. Findings from a survey of key stakeholders support these conclusions, as a majority of respondents

reported that membership in the Consortium allowed states to accomplish more than they would have accomplished on their own. Finally, NESSC products, such as the Global Best Practices tool and the High-Leverage Policy Framework, were thought to be of higher-quality, due to the input of a consortium of states, than what could have been developed by the states working independently.

Consortium Commitment and Sustainability

Despite potentially disruptive changes in political leadership resulting from the November 2010 elections, the NESSC was able to make continued progress on agendas that preceded the leadership changes. Demonstration of commitment to the Consortium's sustainability was apparent through each state's strategic responses to their changing political landscapes. GSP also provided support and resources that contributed to the Consortium's continuity. One concern with regard to commitment is the infrequent participation of state commissioners of education at important Consortium functions, such as Council meetings. To address this issue, the NESSC has proposed three dinner meetings for commissioners before each of the three in-person Council meetings scheduled for Phase III.

Phase II Accomplishments, Challenges, and Strategic Considerations

Objective 1: Development of High-Leverage Policies

The Policy Strategic Action Team made significant progress early in Phase II, leading to co-adoption of NESSC policies by Council members from each state. This was applauded by members as a decisive milestone in their work to date, and the process has been praised as a prototype for regional collaborative effort. By all accounts, key decisions were reached in a high-energy environment, facilitated by broad support and engagement from commissioners and major state stakeholders, and marked by a determined willingness on the part of all parties to reach mutual commitments.

States have made varying levels of progress on adopting or refining secondary school policies consistent with the NESSC Policy Framework. Maine and Rhode Island achieved important and significant progress, with Maine appearing to benefit directly from their association with NESSC. Vermont has planned an approach – based on lessons learned in the past – to pursue specific policies during the 2011-12 school year, as soon as they have determined what steps are necessary to achieve widespread implementation. Policy work in Connecticut and New Hampshire focused primarily on maintaining existing policies, rather than creating new ones, that are in close alignment with the NESSC policy agenda. Policy milestones during Phase II included establishing a Policy SAT, co-adoption of the NESSC policies by Council members from each state, development of the HLP Framework, drafting an HLP framing paper, strengthening interest and involvement from state legislators, and developing state implementation plans for each of the three HLPs.

Strategic considerations related to policy include:

- Establish a shared understanding and usage of typical education terminology.
- Periodically re-examine and update state policy implementation plans.
- Revisit the five supporting policies and determine the extent to which they will be pursued.
- Reflect on the HLP forum strategy to determine its efficacy to date and its future use.
- Consider ways to make better use of documents that may not be reaching full potential as resources.

Objective 2: League of Innovative Schools

The League of Innovative Schools is the Consortium's largest effort to bring its secondary reform principles into practice in schools. During Phase II, the LIS evolved substantially, yielding a clear framework that has catalyzed a process for school selection and an initial cohort to be launched during Phase III. The multi-state context has been instrumental in the League's evolution, as progress on the LIS Framework document – which sets out a series of benefits and obligations of membership – relied heavily on the work of GSP, the NESSC Council, and the LIS

SAT, all of which are multi-state collaborations. The framework in its current form also relies on and assumes a multi-state context, such as the peer-to-peer accountability and professional development opportunities that span not only schools and districts but also states. The Consortium is also envisioning the annual High School Redesign in Action conference increasingly as a vehicle for mutual support and professional learning across LIS schools.

All states made progress related to the LIS objective and all demonstrated at least a moderate commitment of state funding for LIS schools. State-specific development and implementation of the LIS was slated to occur during the summer of 2011, so final data were not available for this report. However, as of early June, four out of five states had identified potential Cohort I schools and had developed and/or launched a process for recruiting them. LIS progress was also made in relation to distribution and initial use of the Global Best Practices tool. NESSC mailed the self-assessment tool to 98% of public schools (N=608) in the five Consortium states. The Consortium also began a systematic attempt – spearheaded by GSP, in collaboration with NESSC leads and liaisons in each state – to identify public and private LIS funding opportunities at the state and regional levels.

Strategic considerations related to the League of Innovative Schools include:

- Consider grouping LIS schools by innovation, policy, or other common characteristics.
- Provide models of innovation that are flexible but reflect NESSC's vision.
- Create and implement a detailed, transparent plan for securing LIS funding.
- Begin securing the sustainability of LIS from the beginning.
- Create opportunities to capture and share emerging knowledge, including a funded evaluation plan.
- Establish a clear niche for LIS within each state department of education.
- Probe the possible impacts and trade-offs of mandatory LIS membership.
- Continue aligning LIS membership requirements with existing school and district obligations.
- Explore waivers or other mechanisms to reduce conflicts between innovation and accountability.

Objective 3: Building Public and Political Will

The Messaging Strategic Action Team had created and disseminated its new messaging plan by late January of 2011. The plan was intended to target the most influential educational leaders and to differentiate the message, delivery mechanisms, and engagement strategies. A major deliverable of the Messaging SAT was production of eight leadership briefs for dissemination to all education legislators, school board members, and superintendents in the five states. The briefs were disseminated as a series of emails entitled “Leadership in Action,” with the dual goals of providing a practical resource to recipients and increasing awareness of the NESSC and its message. A highlight of the Messaging Team’s work was its development of an extensive database of education leader email addresses in the region, including 99% of the 1,100 state legislators, 88% of the 49 state board of education members, 70% of the 3,650 local school board members, and almost 100% of the 414 district superintendents across the five states.

The Consortium succeeded in attracting visitors to the NESSC website and further establishing the site as a hub for NESSC communications. The homepage was redesigned and the Consortium began to utilize Twitter for social networking. Website traffic showed a significant increase between March 1st and July 31st of 2011, which appears to be largely attributable to the Leadership in Action briefs, as well as visits related to the High School Redesign in Action conference. GSP took the lead in designing and marketing the conference and the Consortium met its attendance target, with almost 400 people attending. Feedback collected from school- and district-based educators on the post-conference survey indicated that most attendees believed the conference would be beneficial to their work, that the conference sessions provided them with useful information, that they had plans to share what they learned with their colleagues, and that they believed that the conference was well-organized and

facilitated. Finally, toward the end of Phase II, the Consortium conducted eight focus groups with local school board members in each state to understand their perceptions and opinions of school reform and the core messages and initiatives of the Consortium. This research culminated with a report containing eight findings with potential implications for the Consortium's future messaging work.

Strategic considerations related to messaging include:

- Revisit the definition and evidence of success for public and political will.
- Highlight the NESSC's belief in customizable approaches to improvement.
- Develop communication materials that are accessible to a variety of stakeholder groups.
- Engage the business community more deeply and consistently.

Objective 4: Consortium Data Measures and Reporting

During Phase II, Data SAT members focused on the degree to which data collected and reported across the states was similar in structure, the identification of state-specific differences, and the identification of potential measures for inclusion in the "college readiness" indicator. Team members cited a number of benefits to cross-state collaboration, such as being able to deepen their understanding of data variation at detailed levels within and across states, which has led to collaborative development and implementation of data decision rules to enhance cross-state comparisons of student outcomes. Team members have also shared innovative practices to assist each other in solving state-specific data issues, and have found that collectively they have greater influence with external organizations such as the National Student Clearinghouse.

Significant progress was made toward developing a framework and a set of measures for "college readiness." The work performed thus far has benefited from the inclusion of higher education data representatives from each state, who have bridged important conversations while building relationships with public higher education leadership across the region. Other key relationships have included the work with the Annenberg Institute around college readiness, and with the College Board and its top leadership. These organizations have reportedly expressed a desire to collaborate with NESSC to help inform efforts to define college readiness nationally.

States provided enough state-level graduation and dropout data to establish initial progress towards two of the 2016 NESSC goals. Initial analysis indicates that all states have increased graduation rates and decreased dropout rates. The extent to which these gains can be attributed to the work of NESSC is limited by NESSC's brief existence and the current level of field activity within the states. The ongoing issue of incomplete data submission could hinder the Consortium's ability to measure its progress towards 2016 goals.

Strategic considerations related to data include:

- Renew commitment from each state to submit all required data by team-determined deadlines.
- Consider the impact of current data reporting schedules on the ability to draw timely conclusions about the Consortium's effects.
- Identify and hire a data manager.
- Specify the Data SAT's level of decision-making authority.
- Address Team concerns regarding a perceived lack of connection to the NESSC Council.

Conclusions

The Consortium has established a solid foundation for multi-state collaboration in the New England region. The vast majority of Consortium members see value in their participation and have expressed their desire for it to continue. This continued interest and commitment is impressive, particularly in light of the significant transitions in state and legislative leadership during Phase II and the constraints on education budgets across the region.

The Consortium achieved several noteworthy accomplishments during Phase II. Among the highlights, they secured continued and new funding support from national and regional foundations, received national recognition by winning the Frank Newman Award for State Innovation from the Education Commission of the States, designed a new regional League of Innovative Schools network that is ready to launch in September 2011, achieved a major policy change in one state with key support from the NESSC, and increased awareness of the NESSC across the region. The momentum and satisfaction associated with these and other accomplishments should provide continued strength and a positive focus as NESSC moves into Phase III.

The following strategic considerations are intended to support the overall work of NESSC as it moves into Phase III and beyond:

- Engage in a strategic planning process to support the implementation phase of secondary school reform.
- Revisit the 2016 goals and determine whether they should be sustained or revised.
- Carefully consider the roles that GSP and states will each play in the overall success of NESSC.
- Revisit the roles and responsibilities of the NESSC Council.

II. Introduction to NESSC and Phase II Evaluation

Overview of the New England Secondary School Consortium

Encompassing Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, the New England Secondary School Consortium is a pioneering partnership committed to fostering forward-thinking innovations in the design and delivery of secondary education across the New England region. The five partner states believe that a bold vision, shared goals, and innovative strategies will empower them to close persistent achievement gaps, promote greater educational equity and opportunity for all students, and lead their educators into a new era of secondary schooling. The transformative system – which supports the development of a new generation of high-performing, internationally competitive schools that prepare students for college, careers, and civic responsibility – relies on the interaction among changed educational policies, school practices, and increased engagement from educators and the public.

The Consortium received support through a shared investment from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for the initial 18-month planning phase of its work (Phase I), and for a second 12-month development period (Phase II) beginning on July 1, 2010.

NESSC has set four ambitious performance objectives to be achieved by 2016: (1) increase four-year, on-time graduation rates across the five states to 90% or higher; (2) decrease annual dropout rates to less than 1%; (3) increase the percentage of students enrolling in two- or four-year college-degree programs or pursuing industry-certified accredited postsecondary certificates to 80% or higher; and (4) reduce the number of students required to take remedial courses during their first year of college to 5% or less. During Phase II, the Consortium identified three broad objectives to support these goals during the next five years:

1. Develop high-leverage regional, state, and local policy that enhances and supports on-the-ground actions in districts and schools aimed at achieving the NESSC goals.
2. Create and implement an integrated League of Innovative Schools (LIS) program that demonstrates new models of learning, provides the support for school improvement across the region, targets high-impact areas focused on achievement of the NESSC goals, and generates momentum and political will for change in the educational communities of New England.
3. Develop broad public and political will to support new models of student-centered learning.

NESSC Evaluation

In March 2009, the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) was awarded a contract to serve as the evaluator for Phase I of NESSC under a separately funded arrangement with NMEF. UMDI continued to serve as the project evaluator during Phase II. Findings in this Phase II evaluation report were generated through the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources.

Data Collected and Analyzed

- Formal interviews with more than 100 NESSC participants, including DOE commissioners and other administrators, NESSC state leads and liaisons, various members of Consortium and state councils – including state legislators, business leaders, and members of the higher education community – and Consortium leadership from NMEF and the Great Schools Partnership (GSP).
- An online survey of top-level stakeholders on key Consortium issues, administered in March 2011. The response rate was 84% (62 out of 74). Respondents included two commissioners, three deputy

commissioners, seven NESSC state leads, and five state legislators, as well as representatives from business, higher education, state boards of education, and K-12 education. Responses from the six state liaisons were considered separately, leaving 56 respondents in the final sample – 10 in the Leadership category (DOE commissioners, deputy commissioners, and NESSC state leads) and 46 in the Members category (other core NESSC members).

- A paper survey administered at the two-day High School Redesign in Action conference. The objective of this survey was to gain perspectives from school- and district-based educators on the conference in general, and more specifically on the NESSC, the League of Innovative Schools, and their individual state's secondary school reform efforts. For this reason, surveys completed by students in attendance, or staff from state DOEs, GSP, NMEF, or representatives from higher education and professional associations, were considered separately in the analysis of survey data. Respondents used in the primary analysis (165 of 250, or 66% of total eligible candidates) included 87 teachers, 48 school administrators, 16 district administrators, and 14 guidance counselors.
- Participation in most NESSC meetings and videoconferences, including Council, Strategic Action Teams (LIS, Policy, Data, and Messaging), Leads/Liaisons, and In-State Council. This provided opportunities to directly observe the development process, and enabled UMDI to update stakeholders on evaluation progress frequently.
- Review of all documents related to Phase II and Phase III planning, development, and implementation.
- Collection of messaging data pertaining to NESSC website visits and page views, Twitter exchanges, and activity related to the NESSC Leadership in Action briefing series.

Report Contents

The primary audience for this evaluation report is the participants of the NESSC. The report is organized into three main sections that contain findings and progress related to each of the following areas:

1. The work of the Consortium during Phase II, including the process used for structuring, managing, and conducting the work; the benefits and challenges which arose from working in a multi-state context; the impact of changing educational and political leadership at the state level on the Consortium; and the extent to which states are committed to sustaining the Consortium as they move into Phase III.
2. Phase II accomplishments, challenges, and future opportunities, including evidence for how and to what extent progress was achieved for each of the Consortium's three broad objectives: policy, League of Innovative Schools, and public and political will (messaging), as well as cross-state data reporting on key indicators.
3. Conclusions and strategic considerations intended to facilitate reflection and discussion among NESSC participants and partners as they move into Phase III.

III. The Work of the Consortium During Phase II

This section focuses on the work of the Consortium during Phase II, and addresses on the following key areas and questions:

1. Working processes of the Consortium. How did the Consortium operate and which practices/strategies were effective in carrying out the work?
2. Working in a multi-state context. What benefits and challenges arose as a result of the multi-state context?
3. The impact of changing educational and political leadership at the state level on the Consortium. How did the NESSC respond to educational and political leadership changes?
4. Extent to which states are committed to sustaining the Consortium. What evidence is there that states are invested in and committed to continued participation?

1. Working Processes of the Consortium

“The Consortium’s forward-thinking efforts to ensure their students can make seamless transitions into the workforce or higher education, while maximizing limited resources, are commendable.”

– Roger Sampson, President, Education Commission of the States

1a. NESSC organizational structure and Phase II changes

The Consortium received support through a shared investment from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for the initial 18-month planning phase of its work (Phase I), and for a second 12-month development period (Phase II) beginning on July 1, 2010. Steady progress was accomplished through Phase I, as the Consortium succeeded in establishing a foundation for regional, multi-state collaboration. While NESSC members all agreed that a great deal of work remained, many indicated that they were proud of their achievements, and expressed their desire to continue working together into Phase II to achieve long-term goals.

The Leadership Structure chart [Figure 1, page 4], created by the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), provides a graphical depiction of the NESSC's structure, members, and responsibilities. To foster a cohesive regional body, the Consortium continued in Phase II to function through representative, interactive councils and action teams. These included the NESSC Council, which set the overall direction and priorities for the NESSC, sharing ideas and support across state lines, and spreading the mission and intentions of the NESSC within its spheres of influence. GSP provided broad support to the NESSC and its member states, including grant administration, logistical coordination, strategic planning, and group facilitation. State leads and liaisons provided day-to-day leadership and coordination of NESSC-related activities within their states, and members of state implementation teams met throughout the year to provide feedback and begin designing implementation plans. These participants and others also served on the Policy, League of Innovative Schools, Messaging, and Data Strategic Action Teams (SATs). Established early in Phase II, the SATs were charged with developing and implementing plans for meeting the project objectives aligned with their respective domains.

Figure 1: NESSC Leadership Structure



Several states experienced changes to their NESSC team membership during Phase II, including new DOE commissioners (Maine and Connecticut), NESSC state leads (Maine and Vermont), a state co-lead (New Hampshire), a NESSC liaison (Vermont), and two co-liaisons (Rhode Island). The project’s intermediary, GSP, allocated more staff time for meeting facilitation and project support. Additional resources were also allocated to communication/messaging efforts, including contracting with Liberty Concepts for web design, and the New Harbor Group for general messaging support. In addition, major political changes took place throughout New England, including turnover of governors, legislators, and state boards of education.

1b. NESSC experienced a major turning point mid-Phase II

During interviews with key NESSC members in the five Consortium states in November and December of 2010, almost all informants said that they valued their state’s NESSC participation and wanted it to continue. Many cited the Consortium’s track record of making effective regional plans and supporting them through collective decisions. They noted major Consortium achievements, which included bringing five states together in support of common secondary school transformation goals, high-leverage policies, data metrics, the legislative resolution, funding proposals to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Gates Foundation, and more. They also affirmed that the Consortium’s work had helped them increase state focus and productivity on secondary school reform efforts, as well as establishing trust and sharing of ideas with regional colleagues.

These informants also expressed some concerns. The majority expressed that to sustain the momentum of Phase I accomplishments, the Consortium needed to move quickly and decisively toward establishing a League of

Innovative Schools (LIS) that provided strong exemplars of the Consortium's high-leverage policies and other best practices, and effective campaigns to win political and public support for the proposed reforms. Many felt that if the pace of change didn't increase, the Consortium could lose both its momentum and its interest from some key stakeholders, who needed to see unequivocal and ongoing value from their participation.

Timely and effective communication was also highlighted as an area of high interest and concern. Some informants expressed frustration with what they perceived as inadequate follow-through on their requests for specific communication changes. These included updating the NESSC website and making it a centralized hub for information, as well as providing NESSC meeting summaries in a timelier manner. Several respondents wanted specific communication tools, such as a brochure, one-page summary, and FAQs, that could be used to increase public awareness of the NESSC with diverse audiences at meetings, presentations, and conferences. Lastly, some informants expressed confusion regarding how the Consortium was organized, who belonged to each team, and whether the existing structure needed to be rethought.

NESSC responded to these concerns in several ways, and evidence suggests that the responses were effective and appreciated. The Consortium made two major adjustments to its working structure. First, the NESSC Working Group was disbanded, because it was substantially redundant with the Strategic Action Teams that had been initiated during Phase II, and the focused SAT structure was judged to be more productive. This also left a gap, however, which was filled by the formation of implementation teams in each state. These teams have varied in terms of membership and level of activity, and it is too soon to understand their impacts, but they hold promise for advancement of state secondary reform agendas.

Second, beginning in January, state leads and liaisons gathered every two months for a five-hour evening meeting facilitated by GSP. The group met three times, with close to 100% attendance. During spring interviews with state leads and liaisons, a majority reported that the new structure was very productive for advancing key tasks in a timely manner. As one interviewee said, "The new leads/liaisons meetings were a watershed. The conversations have pre-empted huge discussions and rhetoric that might otherwise have dominated Council meetings unnecessarily. We don't need to be guarded about our conversation because of who's in the room. It was 'just put everything on the table, and let's get this thing moving'. It knocked down walls and pushed the process forward quickly."

Key levers for turning the corner also included major progress toward defining the LIS and implementing its preliminary action steps, as well as creating and beginning to implement a messaging plan intended to target the most influential educational leaders. These processes are discussed in depth in Section Four.

1c. In response to member feedback, the Consortium streamlined communication methods

In addition to reorganization, NESSC revamped its internal communication processes and addressed the need for communication tools. As requested by several NESSC members, GSP updated the NESSC website to become the central depository for meeting materials and resources, which allowed emails from GSP to become briefer, less frequent, and more focused. In the early spring they added web pages dedicated to each Strategic Action Team, state leads, and Consortium milestones. Each page includes information on upcoming meetings, past meeting materials and summaries, and other resources. Members report that these changes have saved them time and increased their access to needed materials.

NESSC also reformulated and communicated existing group and member responsibilities through its organizational chart, shared in late January 2011 [Figure 1]. Leads and liaisons have used the chart during DOE meetings and external presentations. With assistance from Rhoades Alderson of the New Harbor Group, the Consortium also developed a master PowerPoint template, for use when making presentations about the NESSC to diverse groups across multiple contexts.

1d. The Consortium’s refined work processes have had a positive impact

In March, NESSC stakeholders were surveyed to capture their perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the Consortium to date. Responses to the survey indicated that more than 70% agreed or strongly agreed that the Consortium has developed a culture that promotes communication and trust among the five states, and that their contributions are valued when they participate in Consortium activities. See Table 1 below for survey results.

Table 1		
Survey Items Related to NESSC’s Working Culture		
How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements related to the NESSC?	% Agree or Strongly Agree	
Item	Leadership	Members
The Consortium has developed a culture that promotes communication and trust among the 5 states.	70	75
I feel that my contributions are valued when I participate in cross-state Consortium activities.	78	77
I feel that my contributions are valued when I participate in in-state Consortium activities.	100	80

Note: For UMDI analysis of stakeholder survey responses, the six state liaisons were considered separately, leaving 56 respondents in the final sample – 10 in the Leadership category (DOE commissioners, deputy commissioners, and NESSC state leads) and 46 in the Members category (other core NESSC members).

Many informants reported that the refined NESSC structure and work processes have strengthened the states’ mutual respect, leading to a shared sense of ownership and obligation. For example, some respondents said that having Consortium-related deadlines and meetings has made them and their state feel and act more accountable to colleagues in other states. They described this mutual accountability as creating “positive peer pressure,” whereby they knew they would be held accountable by their peers in other states, and therefore placed higher priority on advancing Consortium objectives.

National Recognition for Collaboration

In the spring of 2011, the NESSC was awarded the “Frank Newman Award for State Innovation” by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Described on their website as “the only nationwide, nonpartisan interstate compact devoted to education,” ECS helps governors, legislators, state education officials, and others to identify, develop, and implement public policies to improve student learning at all levels. The ECS Frank Newman Award for State Innovation recognizes states and U.S. territories “for enacting innovative education reforms or implementing innovative programs that go beyond incremental changes to improve student outcomes on a large scale; that are replicable and hold valuable lessons for other states; that are bold, courageous, and include new approaches designed for large-scale impact; and that have bipartisan, broad-based support to ensure sustainability.”¹ An ECS press release said that the Consortium was selected because it serves as a “bold example of state leadership, collaboration, expertise exchange, and resource sharing across states, as well as [for] its commitment to promoting 21st-century skills, supporting high school innovation, reducing persistent achievement gaps, and graduating every student prepared for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of our global society.”²

¹ Education Commission of the States. (n.d.). ECS Awards, *Education Commission of the States*. Retrieved on August 15, 2011. From <http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/aboutECS/Awards.htm>.

² Education Commission of the States. (2011). New England Secondary School Consortium receives ECS Frank Newman Award [Press release]. Retrieved on August 15, 2011, from <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/94/07/9407.pdf>.

2. Working as a Consortium: Reported Benefits and Challenges

“Being part of a multi-state initiative ... lends this enterprise an aura of inevitability.”

– A state commissioner of education

A major reason for creating a multi-state consortium was for states to build on each other’s strengths and create synergies that would improve and accelerate secondary reform, both regionally and within individual states. A wide range of stakeholders report numerous benefits of belonging to the Consortium and working in a multi-state context. These benefits, discussed below, include increasing state focus and momentum on secondary reform, providing political cover and enhanced credibility for proposed reforms, providing supportive organizational partners, and developing reform tools and resources that influence reform efforts at the district and school levels.

2a. The Consortium strengthens states' momentum and focus on secondary school reform

When asked about major accomplishments that have advanced their state’s secondary reform progress, one of the most common responses was that belonging to the Consortium increased states’ focus on secondary school reform and increased their momentum toward important changes. Informants emphasized the competing priorities which stretch the resources of state departments of education and the leadership changes which can be obstacles to continuity. They observed that the presence of the multi-state Consortium, with its prominent objectives, frequent meetings, beneficial materials, and recognized members, helped sustain and increase their focus on secondary reform in the face of these challenges.

One commissioner said “Given all the issues we’re having in the state – budgets and cutbacks and other things – without the Consortium I don’t think we would have been confident that the momentum was likely to be sustained or catapulted as much as it has been. So I think that that has been really very beneficial.” A deputy commissioner said that the Consortium “really helped us reframe and crystallize what we meant by secondary transformation in our state, what our focus is for secondary transformation, and to think about how we would make that a reality in the department and in the field.”

Another benefit of the Consortium is its continued presence and consistent focus, even when potentially distracting events occur in individual states. One deputy commissioner said, “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.”

Specific tasks that the Consortium requests of member states can advance the reform agenda. Multiple states mentioned the benefit of being asked to create the state logic models and the state policy implementation plans. One informant said, “we had many of the necessary laws on the books, but we were not making progress in an organized way in putting those policies into practice. By requiring each state to form a logic model and policy implementation plan, the Consortium helped clarify how the NESSC work fits into and promotes other fledgling efforts of the Department.” Also regarding the logic models, a deputy commissioner said, “It’s been helpful to have the Consortium there to say, ‘OK, here’s a way to organize some thinking.’ Because I think we’re so overstretched in terms of resources, that having somebody make you do this kind of helps our work.” Finally, another informant said, “The Consortium is always going to be focused on some of these larger strategic objectives, while our state department of education is focused on next year’s budget, so it’s really helpful to have the Consortium kind of force us to keep our eyes on the prize.”

Findings from the key stakeholder survey support these conclusions on the perceived benefits of Consortium participation. In response to the question, “Beyond what your state could have accomplished on its own, to what extent has the Consortium added value to increasing your state DOE focus on transformation of secondary education?,” 80% of leadership and 62% of members perceived moderate to significant value added. In response to the question, “Beyond what your state could have accomplished on its own, to what extent has the Consortium

added value to establishing momentum for transformation of secondary education?,” 75% of both leadership and members perceived moderate to significant value added. In relation to the specific value added to each state’s efforts, a majority of survey respondents also perceived that they had received moderate to significant value from the NESSC in the areas of sharing effective school practices, gaining the interest and increasing the involvement of state legislators, and gaining the interest and increasing the involvement of the higher education community. See Table 2 below for full survey results.

Table 2 NESSC Value Added to State’s Secondary School Reform Efforts		
Beyond what your state could have accomplished on its own, to what extent has being part of the Consortium added value to your state’s secondary school reform efforts?	% Moderate or Significant Value Added	
Survey Item	Leadership	Members
Increasing focus within my state DOE on the transformation of secondary education.	80	62
Establishing momentum for transformation of secondary education.	75	75
Sharing of effective school practices as defined by the Global Best Practices Tool.	90	91
Gaining interest from state legislators in the transformation of secondary education.	100	64
Increasing involvement from state legislators in the transformation of secondary education.	100	66
Gaining interest from the higher education community in the transformation of secondary education.	80	57
Increasing involvement from higher education in the transformation of secondary education.	67	51

Finally, selected informants cited the Consortium’s contribution to fostering a wide range of opportunities for regional learning and collaboration, such as organizing videoconferences, in-person meetings, the High School Redesign in Action conference, and commissioner meetings. These were described as opportunities to help states and schools learn from each other, avoid reinventing the wheel, and envision next steps with regard to specific innovations. One DOE administrator said, “Although it’s a long drive to Concord, it’s worth it to hear what my counterparts in other states are doing, problems they’re encountering, or successes they’ve achieved. Because we tend to be somewhat isolated from what’s going on at a more global level, the Consortium provides opportunities to think about where we want to go, and to hear how other states are envisioning and operationalizing getting some of the work done.”

2b. The Consortium provides political cover and enhanced credibility for advancing reform

“The presence of the Consortium means that you’re not out on the end of the diving board by yourself here.”
 – A state commissioner of education

The predominant view among NESSC members was that the multi-state nature of the Consortium provided political cover and enhanced credibility for advancing reform. One state legislator on the NESSC Council said:

“Only because of the work of the Consortium have I had the ammunition at my disposal to make the case for sustaining our legislative commitment to reform implementation. And only because of the Consortium do I have the language I need to articulate the connection between this work and our ongoing economic recovery, which is at the forefront of legislators’ minds. And only because of the Consortium do I have the ability to say, ‘Look folks, every other New England state has done this, and we’re in catch-up mode. If you want us to continue to grow economically, we can’t be satisfied with the status quo’. And then I can point quite substantively to what other states are doing, and what impact that’s having. So instead of just speaking the rhetoric, it’s giving me really substantive ammunition to help make the case.”

Another state legislator on the NESSC Council said, “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.” One state commissioner pointed out that, in the context of the current economic downturn, he has been able to leverage the “cost effectiveness” of regionalization to his advantage.

Findings from the key stakeholder survey support these conclusions. In response to the question, “Beyond what your state could have accomplished on its own, to what extent has the Consortium added value in terms of leverage gained by promoting policies that have already been adopted or are being considered by other Consortium states?,” 78% of leadership and 68% of members perceived moderate to significant value added.

2c. The Consortium’s organizational partners provide essential support

Several informants cited NMEF, GSP, and UMDI as important resources and levers for accountability. The importance of NMEF was underscored by comments such as, “NMEF has expectations and we need to work towards meeting them.” A state lead said:

“It’s huge to have someone like [GSP Director] David or a Nellie Mae representative to ask the questions that we can’t ask internally, or that we don’t even know the question’s out there. But the times when David would say, ‘Think about that. Think about what you’re saying. Is that really where you feel the department’s mission ends?’ Or, Nellie Mae pushing back and saying, ‘You know, for us to invest in this, we have to see something better than that’. So I think that’s huge. It’s easier for us to just put something up there and say ‘mission accomplished’, but it takes the real work to step out there and say, ‘You know, that isn’t good enough anymore for a DOE. You’ve really got to put some time and money and sweat equity into this’.”

Further affirming GSP’s work, in the stakeholder survey, 87% of survey respondents reported that GSP’s organization and facilitation of NESSC gatherings has been beneficial or very beneficial. Comments about the Donahue Institute included, “What you’re doing brings a level of accountability that I think has only served us well,” and “Hearing from the Donahue Institute what other people think about the Consortium and what they gain from it keeps us on track and thinking about quality.”

2d. The Consortium’s development and publication of tools and resources have influenced reform efforts

There was substantial agreement among informants that multi-state collaboration on products such as the Global Best Practices tool and on common initiatives such as the High-Leverage Policy Framework was challenging, but yielded higher-quality outputs than individual states would have achieved if working alone. The multi-state process, while frustrating and too slow for some, was also seen as lending the resulting products and decisions more credibility.

The presence of these materials had the added effect of catalyzing other progress on state-level reform initiatives. One informant noted that the Consortium’s documents were instrumental to Senator Justin Alford’s active involvement in pushing the educational legislation that was passed in Maine, and in that legislation’s close alignment with Consortium goals. A state commissioner said that the presence of the Consortium’s materials “is huge, because it 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.”

3. The Impact of Changing Educational and Political Leadership on the Consortium

"The Consortium has been the glue that's held it all together, really for the past year."

– A state deputy commissioner of education

3a. The Consortium weathered a wave of change in state leadership

As discussed in Section 1, December 2010 represented a critical point for the Consortium. Some members had expressed reservations about the NESSC's efficacy, and each state was facing significant changes in political and educational leadership. The November 2010 elections had resulted in four new governors, changes in state board of education members and education committee legislators, and soon after, two new DOE commissioners. During the fall DOE visits, many informants expressed concern about the impacts of these high-level political changes on state secondary school reform agendas. However, spring 2011 DOE visits revealed that states had substantially continued to advance their secondary school reform agendas. As described below, the Consortium appears to have provided some of the support, resources, and infrastructure that made this continuity possible, even as key stakeholders have come and gone.

3b. Despite changing state leadership, the Consortium continued to progress

Each state implemented strategies to address their changing political landscapes. Maine's new commissioner shared that the Consortium's strong presence, clearly-stated objectives, and supporting materials were instrumental in his backing of the Consortium's policy agenda in the midst of many competing policy directions. In Rhode Island, State Senator and NESSC Council member Louis DiPalma publically expressed his support for the NESSC and its mission in an open letter, published in a local newspaper, titled: "Education – the Key to our Future ... the Future of our Economy." Throughout the letter, Senator DiPalma implored Rhode Islanders and incoming education leaders and legislators to support his belief that "the key to our future and the future of our economy hinges precipitously on the results that are produced by our educational system." In a New Hampshire publication targeted to legislators and state school board members, the DOE commissioner cited NESSC as an integral partner in reaching the state's goals. Finally, the three commissioners who were not replaced after the 2010 elections each attempted to speed up the appointment of new education representatives by requesting meetings with their new governors to identify candidates.

Bolstered by states' efforts to maintain and expand support for the NESSC during transitions in educational and political leadership, the Consortium continued to make progress towards its objectives during the second half of Phase II (see Section 4 for detailed discussion of Phase II accomplishments). This, in turn, strengthened commitment to the Consortium from the five states.

4. Strong Commitment to Sustaining the Consortium

"I think there's a pretty good feeling among the states that when we sit at a table with five states, we're committing to the collaboration, and it's a promise to stick with those commitments."

– A state NESSC lead

The Consortium's success depends on each state's participation and commitment. Early doubts about some states' future commitment, raised by high-level members in fall 2010, were no longer apparent by spring 2011. Four commissioners and the fifth commissioner's designee had by then all expressed a firm commitment to the Consortium's future. By the end of Phase II, evidence pointed to broad dedication from a wide variety of stakeholders in cooperatively sustaining the future of the multi-state Consortium.

4a. There is evidence of state investment and commitment to continued participation

When asked to share specific evidence of past and anticipated future commitment to the Consortium, respondents consistently identified the allocation of time and travel resources for members to participate in meetings, the sharing and promoting of NESSC's work with diverse constituents, the allocation of state education funding for NESSC activities such as the LIS, and the structuring of DOE roles and responsibilities to support school transformation consistent with NESSC goals. One DOE administrator said, "We've invested resources for staff to attend a variety of meetings and activities. We've participated in both [High School Redesign in Action] conferences. Then there's office space devoted to Consortium staff (NESSC liaison), and the use of secretarial support, graphic arts, and website personnel. So the Consortium has been given access to the time and talents of DOE staff members."

Many respondents cited the continued participation of DOE staff and other key state stakeholders in NESSC meetings and functions as perhaps the clearest evidence of their commitment. Interestingly, one respondent attributed "commitment" to the multi-state nature of these gatherings, rather than simply the mere fact of attendance: "I think there's a pretty good feeling among the states that when we sit at a table with five states, we're committing to the collaboration, and it's a promise to stick with those commitments. And when we're having those discussions back in the state, I think there are a number of folks involved there that use that as a barometer. Am I staying true to what I said I would with that five-state commitment?"

The March survey of key NESSC stakeholders provided additional evidence of commitment, as nearly all respondents indicated at least some interest in the Consortium "continuing into the foreseeable future," including 55% who were 'very interested' and 23% who were 'interested'. Furthermore, almost all respondents were committed to supporting their state's continued participation in the NESSC (35% strongly agreed, 51% agreed).

One challenge to this commitment has been declining DOE travel budgets and moratoria on out-of-state travel, linked to the current economy, which have made participation at Consortium events difficult for many members. Budget cuts have also led to increased workloads for DOE staff, resulting in less time to devote to NESSC. Despite severe budget constraints, one commissioner affirmed that the state's commitment to the Consortium would continue. "Our state is looking forward to contributing financially to the Consortium at whatever level required for us to do the work, whether putting up the money directly or complementing the funds that we might get from other sources. We're really committed to maintaining these relationships and our status within the organization. We would see it as a part of our obligation and would prioritize whatever's necessary in order to support those goals."

A conference call held in June by the commissioners of four states provided additional, recent evidence of state commitment to the Consortium. The call was to discuss and ultimately endorse the NESSC Phase III proposal to NMEF. Meeting attendees reported that each commissioner committed \$40,000-\$50,000 from their budgets to support LIS implementation during the upcoming school year in the event that other funding prospects fell short. The same commitment was reportedly made subsequently by a designee of the fifth commissioner. This was a major milestone in terms of commitment, as it represented the states "putting their skin in the game," long believed by certain members to be a needed step in the Consortium's development.

4b. Commissioners' attendance at NESSC events remains inconsistent

Evidence of commitment is tempered somewhat by the inconsistent participation of NESSC commissioners at important Consortium functions, such as Council meetings. Only two state commissioners participated in any of the six Phase II Council meetings, and even their attendance was very minimal (one and two meetings, respectively). Deputy and/or associate commissioners were far more likely to attend. Some Consortium participants believe that this attendance record signals that the NESSC is a low priority for commissioners.

Responding to this issue, one commissioner offered an alternative perspective: “We have to recognize that not everybody’s going to be invested at the same level. And I think that sensitivity is really important for the Consortium to sustain. I think the Consortium needs to recognize that’s going to be OK.”

A high-level administrator from another state provided a more practical view: “It’s just impossible to free up time. NESSC’s time expectations are hard to carve out, because it tends to be travel, it tends to be all day, and it tends to be commissioner, deputy commissioner, other administrators that have very tight schedules. Freeing up whole days feels next to impossible.”

According to the Phase III proposal, four of the five NESSC commissioners have agreed to attend dinner gatherings before each of the three in-person Council meetings. Their presence would send a different message to those concerned, and could also signal great promise for advancing the Consortium’s secondary school agenda in the region.

IV. Phase II Accomplishments, Challenges, and Future Opportunities

This section focuses on the extent to which the Consortium and its five member states made progress on each of their three broad objectives (policy, League of Innovative Schools, and messaging) during Phase II. This section also reports on the progress of the Data Strategic Action Team. The key questions to be addressed include the following:

- a. To what extent did the Consortium progress toward desired short- and long-term outcomes as identified in their Phase II proposal, logic model, and summer 2011 benchmarks? What factors influenced the extent and/or success of implementation?
- b. What were the advantages and disadvantages of working in a multi-state effort, and to what extent did individual states make progress in aligning their efforts with agreed-upon NESSC goals?
- c. What contextual factors help explain NESSC progress toward implementing its major strategies?
- d. How much annual progress (from baseline 2009-10 data) was accomplished toward reaching the Consortium's 2016 performance objectives?
- e. What factors will help NESSC participants realize their long-term goals/outcomes?

At the end of each sub-section are several strategic considerations to NESSC participants and their partners. The intent of these considerations is to identify possible priorities and opportunities to pursue in Phase III, and to illuminate key supports or obstacles to keep in mind in the pursuit of the Consortiums long-term goals.

Consortium Goals and Objectives

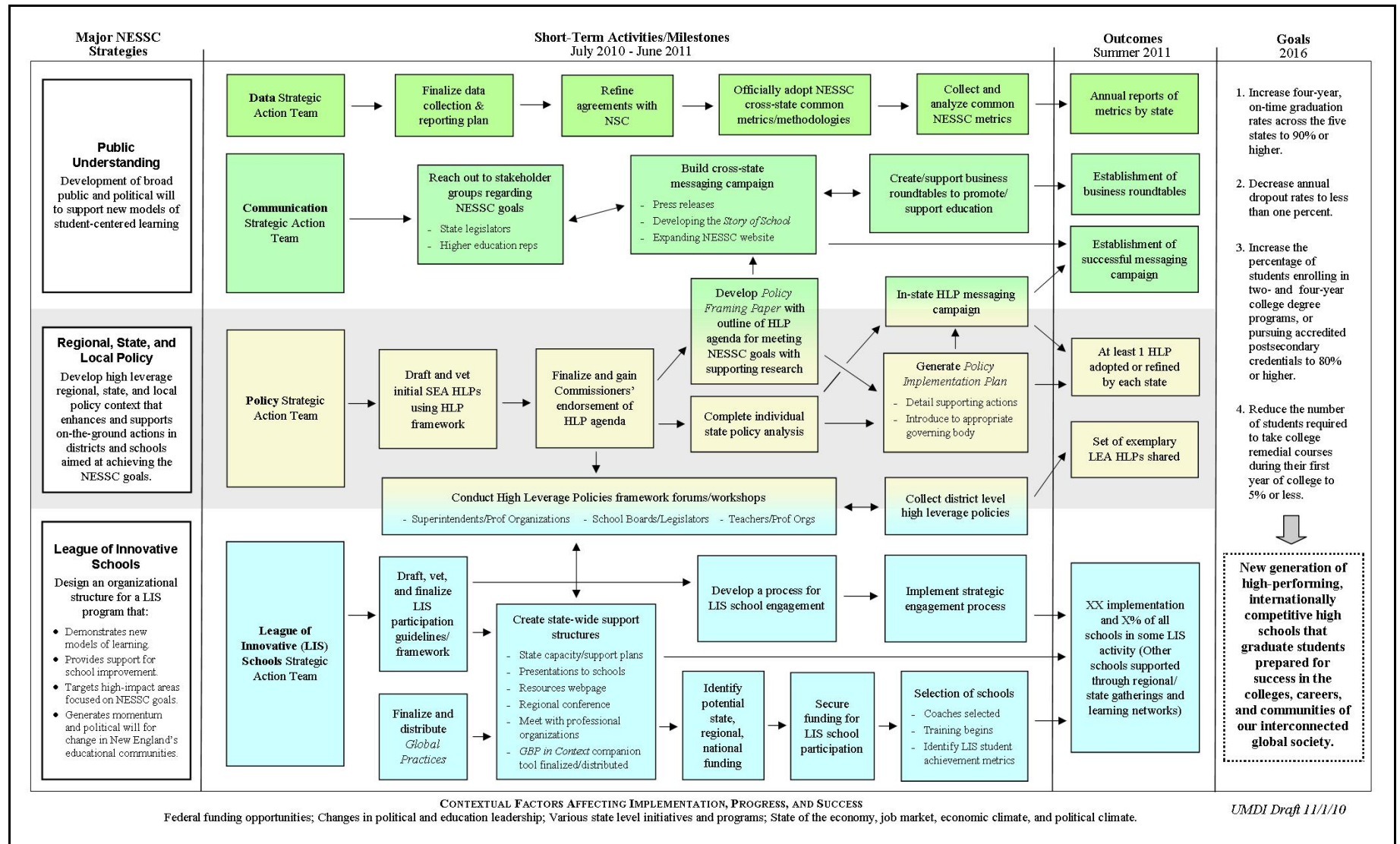
The Consortium has set four ambitious performance objectives to be achieved by 2016: (1) increase four-year, on-time graduation rates across the five states to 90% or higher; (2) decrease annual dropout rates to less than 1%; (3) increase the percentage of students enrolling in two- or four-year college-degree programs or pursuing industry-certified accredited postsecondary certificates to 80% or higher; and (4) reduce the number of students required to take remedial courses during their first year of college to 5% or less.

The NESSC's theory of action is based on the belief that a transformative system – which supports the development of a new generation of high-performing, internationally competitive schools that prepare students for college, careers, and civic responsibility – must purposefully rely on the interaction among changed educational policies, school practices, and increased public and political will. During Phase II, the Consortium identified three broad objectives to support these goals during the next five years:

1. Develop high-leverage regional, state, and local policy that enhances and supports on-the-ground actions in districts and schools aimed at achieving the NESSC goals;
2. Create and implement an integrated League of Innovative Schools (LIS) program that demonstrates new models of learning, provides the support for school improvement across the region, targets high-impact areas focused on achievement of the NESSC goals, and generates momentum and political will for change in the educational communities of New England; and
3. Develop broad public and political will to support new models of student-centered learning.

The Consortium's Phase II approach is shown in the NESSC Logic Model [Figure 2, page 14] which provides a graphical depiction of intended project strategies and their relationship to short- and long-term objectives.

Figure 2: NESSC Logic Model (Last updated 11/1/10)



Objective 1: Development of High-Leverage Policies

1a. Introduction

During Phase I conversations around policy were conducted at almost every level of the NESSC organization, while a running list of policies for possible regional co-adoption were compiled on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The Consortium contracted with the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut to create the High-Leverage Policy (HLP) Framework, a conceptual tool for assessing the potential impact of targeted policies on high schools. The authors suggested that, “Using a common definition of high-leverage policy – i.e., policies that not only increase educational equity, aspirations, achievement, and attainment for all students, but that also generate positive change throughout the educational system – the Consortium’s HLP Framework is a first step toward a more holistic view of education policy, leading the way for more thoughtful and sustainable guidelines for learning in the 21st century.” NESSC participants frequently cited the HLP Framework during Phase I as a valuable tool for framing the discussion around local and state education policy.

This section describes the Phase II policy goals, progress made at the Consortium and state level, implications of the multi-state context, conclusions, and strategic considerations, as they relate to work on state education policy.

1b. Policy goals for Phase II

The overarching goal of the policy work in Phase II was to align existing and emerging policies with the NESSC 2016 goals, and with research-based strategies that would help to achieve them. As framed in the Consortium Logic Model [Figure 2], the first step in this process was to create a Policy Strategic Action Team (SAT) to guide the development and refinement of secondary school reform policy across state legislatures, SEAs, LEAs, and the NESSC. Then the Consortium, with support from the SAT, would identify state-level high-leverage policies, vet those policies with external experts, identify the current status of each policy, and create a plan outlining the major strategies and procedural steps that would be employed to shape policy adoption.

By the end of Phase II these activities were to result in the adoption or refinement of one HLP in each Consortium state, and the selection and dissemination of a set of exemplary LEA HLPs across the five states. Recognizing the generality of these activities and their associated outcomes, at NMEF’s request, in January 2011 NESSC submitted the following two benchmarks to indicate progress towards the larger policy goals:

- Benchmark 1.1 - At least one HLP adopted or refined by each state that aligns with the NESSC Policy Framework. Such refinement could be through rule making as appropriate. Information demonstrating how each state will support implementation at the school level will be detailed either in the policy or in subsequent rule making, including how the state intends to incentivize or mandate implementation.
- Benchmark 1.2 - Identification of board policy in at least five school districts in each state that align with and support the NESSC Policy Framework.

Progress toward these benchmarks, as well as other goals set out in the Phase II proposal and logic model, are discussed in the next section.

1c. Policy progress at the Consortium level

The Policy SAT, which includes commissioners, deputy commissioners, legislators, department of education personnel, and NESSC leaders and partners, met four times, twice in person and twice by video conference, starting in July 2010. Members were charged with a series of tasks, beginning with the identification of a draft set of state-level, high-leverage educational policies for consideration by the NESSC Council. This was intended to lead to the creation of a policy commitment plan, endorsed by the five NESSC commissioners of education, which would shape policy development and adoption within each state and across the region.

At their July 2010 meeting, GSP used a process outlined in the HLP Framework to lead Policy SAT members in prioritizing a set of 20 potential state-level policies identified during Phase I. Each state team also reviewed the 20 policies, to determine the impacts of regional co-adoption and the likelihood of each policy's adoption by their state legislatures and/or boards of education. By the end of the day the team had reached consensus on six policies that were considered high-leverage and could be enhanced by co-adoption. The group also identified a set of other policies that they believed warranted further discussion. They purposely did not attempt to rank the level of importance of these policies, but rather recognized that they had met their first objective of narrowing down the original list. They left it to the Council to determine final policies for co-adoption.

The Council met in August 2010, and after an active and lively discussion, agreed to pursue three interrelated core policies. They also agreed to retain five additional policies as a supporting policy agenda. The three core policies and five supporting policies are as follows:

Core Policy 1

Modify state policy to require that high school graduation decisions be based on the achievement of learning standards using a body of evidence and multiple measures, including both student-designed and on-demand performance assessments. States would make individual decisions on specific requirements, but all would agree that schools use (a) standards-based assessments and (b) the demonstration of proficiency through interest-based projects selected and designed by the student.

Core Policy 2

Develop or refine state policy to require middle and high school programs to offer multiple learning pathways that all lead to a college-ready diploma. The state policy would hold all programs to the same baseline academic expectations, but incorporate a degree of latitude to support local adoption and implementation.

Core Policy 3

Create school, district, and state accountability systems that measure, demand, and support the attainment of 21st-century skills and knowledge by every student.

NESSC Supporting Policies

1. Create a new alternative certification process for educators and school leaders/administrators that incorporates and prioritizes research-based school-reform and instructional strategies.
2. Report, as an extension of state policy, high school graduation rates using a four-, five-, and six-year cohort model.
3. Establish – in state statute or in rule – the requirement that high schools have a comprehensive early warning system in place for struggling students.
4. Develop and implement a “New England secondary credential” that would be a locally awarded but regionally recognized high school diploma. Such a credential would be considered sufficient evidence for admission to public and participating private institutions of higher education within the five states.
5. Redesign the school calendar to explicitly incorporate ongoing professional development for teachers and research on student learning and time.

The significant early Phase II progress by the Policy SAT, leading to co-adoption of the NESSC policies by Council members from each state, was hailed by NESSC members as a decisive milestone in their work to date. The fact that five states had lined up in support of the HLPs was affirmed by many to be a “win” and a “major feat.” Various informants expressed frankly that this accomplishment had exceeded their expectations, particularly in terms of the speed and efficiency of consensus building. The entire process has been highly praised as a prototype for regional collaborative effort. By all accounts, key decisions were reached in a high-energy environment, facilitated by broad support and engagement from commissioners and major state stakeholders, and

marked by a determined willingness on the part of all parties to reach mutual commitments. Of special significance was the role of the Consortium's intermediary (GSP) in developing and leading successful processes, both in meetings and in the interim, as evidenced by the framing of protocols for attaining consensus, the creation of templates, and the drafting and refining of rapid updates to the policy agenda.

The spring survey of key NESSC stakeholders provides additional evidence of members' positive view of the three HLPs endorsed by the NESSC Council and the work of the Policy SAT. The majority of respondents reported these two components as either 'beneficial' or 'very beneficial', including 90% of commissioners, deputy commissioners, and state leads.

1d. Policy progress at the state level

Having selected and affirmed its three core high-leverage policies, the Policy SAT now shifted focus towards supporting policy implementation and/or refinement across the five states. States entered into this agreement with somewhat different expectations and with varying starting points in terms of existing legislation, which resulted in varying levels of progress toward, and attainment of, policy benchmarks. Some Consortium states already had laws that permitted or mandated implementation of one or more of the core HLPs, and for them the question became how to increase the frequency and depth of implementation. Other states lacked this policy foundation, and needed first to explore the creation of new legislation or how to enhance implementation in the absence of legislation. States also discussed what combination of incentives and mandates would be most effective for their individual situations.

Maine

Maine is presented first due to the exemplary policy progress they made during Phase II. As a member of the Council, State Senator Justin Alford recognized that the HLPs were well aligned with his policy interests and goals for Maine. He wanted to pursue state legislation consistent with the Consortium's HLP agenda and obtained vital assistance from NESSC. For example, the Maine NESSC liaison provided substantial support in crafting proposed legislation to require high schools to implement a proficiency-based diploma system.

At the February NESSC Council meeting, Senator Alford discussed his proposed bill and received feedback from each state. According to meeting minutes, Senator Alford found the feedback very helpful, and expressed to the group that he recognized the need for conducting more outreach with local districts, business leaders, and local communities. In addition, he understood that he needed to convey certainty to educators and school boards with respect to the DOE's interest and capacity to accomplish these policy goals, and the seriousness of the proposed measures.

During the subsequent two months, with continued assistance, Senator Alford crafted Legislative Draft (LD) 949. This legislation was aimed at strengthening Maine's existing proficiency-based graduation guidelines, largely by shifting state policy from students "may" to students "must" achieve proficiency-based standards in order to receive a high school diploma. In May 2011 the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee of the Maine legislature considered LD 949 with supporting testimony from several NESSC members. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the content of these statements, and the reputation of the presenters, had a constructive impact on the legislature's ultimate support. By a 13-0 vote, committee members endorsed the plan to require high schools to implement a standards-based diploma system. However, rather than adopting LD 949 as written, the legislature requested a comprehensive plan outlining how it would be implemented and supported in the field. As a result, LD 949 became Resolve Chapter 83, "To Require the Department of Education To Submit a Plan for the Implementation of Standards-based Education." Governor LePage signed the Resolve in June, and the implementation plan will be submitted in December.

There had been several attempts in recent years to update and revise Maine's graduation requirements, but none were endorsed by the state legislature. A convergence of factors facilitated the success of LD 949, some of which

can be attributed to Maine's involvement with the Consortium. In addition to those mentioned previously – support in crafting legislation, feedback from Council members, testimony to state legislature – having the NESSC Policy Framework in place influenced new DOE leadership to prioritize this policy change among many competing agendas. As the Maine DOE commissioner commented: “There’s no question that the presence of the Consortium working on those issues specifically has meant that we have been able to move that up the ladder of priorities from where it otherwise would have been, had those resources not been there.”

With the goal of providing clear and explicit models of HLPs to early implementers, the commissioner hired a full-time, retired superintendent (now Maine NESSC co-lead) from a district whose high school was fully competency-based, and gave him a specific mandate, based on the new legislation, to reach 50% implementation by a targeted deadline: a clear message to educators of his commitment to implementation and support.

Connecticut

In 2008, Connecticut embarked on a major statewide effort to reform its middle and high schools, known as the Connecticut Plan for Secondary School Reform. It was the alignment between this plan and the Consortium objectives that inspired Connecticut's initial interest in joining the Consortium. During Phase II, sustaining commitment to the Connecticut Plan remained the centerpiece of the Connecticut NESSC team's policy work, in the face of many challenges. The state economy was in a budgetary crisis, and a new governor and several new state legislators had entered office in November. This was followed by an almost total turnover of state board of education members. The DOE commissioner, a strong and vocal supporter of the NESSC, resigned office in January 2011. As DOE officials have since related, it was widely believed at that time that the Connecticut Plan could fall out of favor, and in the early part of the legislative session most progress on policy was placed on hold.

Despite these challenges, as the end of Phase II approached, some positive accomplishments were realized. First, although the governor's initial budget did not allocate any funding for Connecticut Plan implementation at the DOE, by the time the budget had been finalized in the legislature it contained \$250,000 in both FY12 and FY13 (respectively) for secondary school reform. A Connecticut NESSC Council member and State Senator championed these provisions, and credits Connecticut's membership in the Consortium as a pivotal factor in securing the funds. Second, in spring 2011, the new board of education unanimously endorsed the Connecticut Plan. As one DOE official explained, “There was some legislation out there indicating to repeal the Plan or to push it back, and the board fully endorsed keeping the Plan as is. To have that support, at a time when the governor needed to cut so much money out of the budget or increase taxes, to do whatever he had to do, I think that was certainly critical, because it would have set us back.”

New Hampshire

As was the case with some other states, New Hampshire had policy related to NESSC's HLP agenda already in place. However, changes in both the Senate and the House majorities in 2011 threatened the state's solid education policy foundation. As a result, New Hampshire NESSC members spent considerable time lobbying to protect policies such as mandatory school attendance until 18 years of age from being expunged. Stemming from this process, several New Hampshire NESSC members shared that they discovered new value in being a part of the Consortium, and identified their ability to cite policy and progress from other Consortium states as influential when promoting the importance of maintaining current policy. Although most of the year was spent working to preserve existing legislation, rather than introducing reform legislation, interviewees did express hope for future policy development and implementation. For example, an interviewee shared that they intend to introduce a proficiency-based graduation bill in the future, and anticipate utilizing language from Maine's recently passed legislation on proficiency-based graduation.

Rhode Island

Rhode Island has made significant strides in policy adoption during the past few years. While not all of its current efforts in the policy arena are explicitly linked to the NESSC Policy Framework, they do align with the NESSC

objectives. In a discussion regarding the HLP Framework, one informant confirmed, “Rhode Island has adopted certain principles described within the High-Leverage Policy Framework. It’s not something we teach, and it’s not something we think of ourselves as using on a day-to-day basis, but I do think it draws on the same theories of change that we also draw on.” As an example, in relation to NESSC’s policy for graduation decisions, Rhode Island passed and implemented a proficiency-based graduation policy beginning with the class of 2008.

With respect to the NESSC’s policy of multiple pathways to graduation, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) includes multiple pathways as one of the agencies primary strategic goals. Rhode Island’s “Race to the Top” award includes creating and/or refining secondary regulations to mandate multiple pathways, and provides financial support to their virtual learning project. As of the spring of 2011, career and technical school regulations have been revised to accommodate this policy direction. RIDE has further demonstrated its commitment to multiple pathways by creating an Office of Multiple Pathways, led by the state’s NESSC lead.

Rhode Island has also advanced toward the NESSC’s supporting policies, most notably in their ongoing redesign of the state’s educator certification process. As part of the process, RIDE assembled a cross-office team to develop and present recommendations to the board of regents for consideration. In July of 2011, the team presented four major areas of certification redesign, based on its review of best practices and models of certification from across the country. The team is currently developing draft regulations for certification redesign and soliciting feedback from the education community.

Vermont

For several years now, Vermont has had policies in place that allow schools to implement innovative practices, including a state waiver process, flexible graduation requirements, and other similar provisions. However, DOE officials agree that these policies have not significantly changed day-to-day practice in Vermont schools, because they remain optional. As a result, considerable interest exists in moving policy language from “you may” to “you must.” To ensure that this shift is well received by local educators, the DOE plans to run regional education focus groups beginning in the fall of 2011, to explore why existing reform options are not more widely utilized. They also aim to promote awareness of exemplary models – generated through the LIS – of Vermont schools that have implemented one or more of the HLPs. These actions are intended to build enthusiasm on every level of state education, so that calls for reform will not be simply top-down. Identifying models will also be essential for the success of legislative changes. One DOE official said:

“I think that by next legislative session we’ll be prepared to say that good models do exist. I think we’ll be prepared to say which challenges and solutions have been identified by stakeholders and which of those solutions warrant legislative action. But right now, I wouldn’t feel comfortable going to the House or Senate and saying, ‘We must put this language into law’, because they will immediately ask ‘Can you do that? Can you support that? What’s the expense to a district?’ And we haven’t even asked those questions yet. But I think that the process we have planned will get us there.”

DOE staff anticipate finding partners in their state legislature and board of education to advance reform legislation. Vermont’s board has a 5-Year Strategic Plan that aligns well with NESSC objectives; a Vermont NESSC Council representative says that this is no accident, but rather evidence of the influence of NESSC in the state. In addition to the alignment of the board’s Strategic Plan, Vermont’s DOE commissioner further cited the alignment of the Vermont PreK-16 Council with the Consortium as a second concrete example of how NESSC’s regional work is making its presence felt in Vermont. He asked, “Would this have happened without the New England Consortium? Probably, but it may have taken five years longer, and maybe we wouldn’t have had some of the information ... and we wouldn’t have made the connections we’ve made – now, it’s not just us.”

Another DOE official commented that the Consortium has already played a decisive role in shifting the DOE’s policy approach in Vermont: “The department is moving away from our past practices, when we thought that by publishing a new policy, we just needed to proclaim it and it should be so. And now [NESSC involvement] has

made us reflect and say, ‘What did that really accomplish?’ ... So I think that the Consortium’s policy work has influenced us to move from a passive to an active implementation strategy, and to figure out what steps are necessary to enable widespread implementation and how the DOE, through policy and other means, needs to support this work.”

The state-by-state sections above have focused on the first policy benchmark, because it showed the greatest progress during Phase II. Minimal progress was made on the second benchmark during Phase II, although there are a few noteworthy examples. First, as part of the selection process for presenters at the High School Redesign in Action conference, schools were asked to identify at least one policy of their LEA that was aligned with the NESSC Policy Framework. Second, interviewees in Rhode Island spoke of the review and discussion of school board policy during meetings with the state’s superintendents’ network, as well as with both the Rhode Island Association of School Principals and the Rhode Island Middle Level Educators associations. Third, Rhode Island state liaisons forwarded materials from numerous presentations around the state focused on the HLP Framework and LEA policy. Despite these examples, the original intent was for states to conduct broader statewide analyses of extant LEA policies, and this benchmark has not yet been accomplished.

1e. Benefits of multi-state context

States cited both common and state-specific ways that their involvement with NESSC has been beneficial. Benefits cited above include Maine submitting their proposed reform legislation to Consortium members for feedback, the influence of the High-Leverage Policy Framework on Maine’s successful passage of reform legislation, a Connecticut state senator crediting membership in the Consortium as a pivotal factor in securing funds for reform efforts, and the general influence of the NESSC Policy Framework, along with states using the Consortium as leverage for maintaining current policy (e.g., raising dropout age to 18, Connecticut Plan). In addition, several other benefits of the multi-state Consortium have emerged:

- NESSC members interviewed during the spring DOE visits cited the increased interest, understanding, and involvement from state legislators as one of the major benefits of the Consortium. In fact, 100% of DOE commissioners, deputy commissioners, and NESSC state leads who responded to the stakeholder survey felt that gaining both interest and involvement from state legislators in the transformation of secondary education added “moderate or significant value” to their state’s secondary reform school efforts, compared to what their state could have accomplished on its own.
- As in Phase I, members continue to recognize the value gained by promoting policies within their states that have already been adopted or are being considered by other Consortium states. On the NESSC stakeholder survey, 78% of DOE commissioners, deputy commissioners, and state leads indicated that the “leverage gained by promoting policies that have already been adopted or are being considered by other Consortium states” added “moderate or significant value” to their state’s secondary reform efforts, compared to what their state could have accomplished on its own. One example of this is Connecticut’s recent effort to raise the minimum dropout age to 18, in which they used New Hampshire’s previous success with this policy issue to their advantage.
- In March 2011, each state completed an implementation plan for each of the three HLPs. This process was reported by some informants as critical to focusing their discussions of implementation progress and barriers, thereby accelerating their work toward adopting policies consistent with the HLPs. They also reported that working in a multi-state context raised the priority of this work to a higher level than would have been the case if their state was doing the work alone.
- A few legislatures expressed a desire to meet regionally about secondary school issues, and the NESSC Phase III proposal includes plans for chairs of each state’s legislative education committee to gather in November 2011.

1f. Conclusions and strategic considerations

Conclusions

States have made varying levels of progress on secondary school policies consistent with Policy Benchmark 1. Maine and Rhode Island achieved important and significant progress, with Maine appearing to benefit directly from their association with NESSC. Vermont has purposely planned an approach – based on lessons learned in the past – to pursue policies beginning this coming year, after they have figured out what steps are necessary to encourage and incentivize widespread implementation. Policy work in Connecticut and New Hampshire was mostly concentrated on maintaining existing policies, including those in close alignment with the NESSC policy agenda. As already discussed, states made only minimal progress toward achieving Policy Benchmark 2.

Beyond progress on benchmarks, policy milestones during Phase II included establishing a Policy Strategic Action Team, co-adoption of the NESSC policies by Council members from each state, development of the HLP Framework, drafting an HLP framing paper, strengthening interest and involvement from state legislators, and developing state implementation plans for each of the three HLPs.

Strategic Considerations

Establish a shared understanding and use of typical education terminology.

To facilitate changes in policy and practice, several respondents shared a strong interest in further clarifying educational jargon, and providing guidelines for what the Consortium means by phrases such as *flexible pathways* vs. *multiple pathways*, *competency-based* vs. *proficiency-based* vs. *standards-based* graduation, *innovative* vs. *transformative* high schools and practices, and so on. It is important to define these terms, as schools, districts, and states currently use them to describe policies and initiatives that span a substantial range of practices. Clarifying these and other key terms could facilitate policy change, improve efficiency in discussions, and enhance implementation. The definitions of terms in the NESSC Policy Framing Paper may serve as a useful starting point for a more complete glossary.

Periodically re-examine/revisit state policy implementation plans.

States may benefit from periodically updating their responses to the Policy Implementation Plan Template, first used in March 2011, because the template has targeted areas that advance the Consortium’s policy agenda (e.g., current status, leverage points, approach, and anticipated/desired outcomes). The process itself was reported by some as constructive for focusing state NESSC team discussions around policy plans. One informant commented that the implementation plan was an important factor in Maine’s review of their legislation relevant to Consortium goals, and that it informed their recently passed reform legislation.

Revisit the five supporting policies and determine the extent to which they will be pursued.

Some respondents questioned what happened to the five “supporting policies” of the NESSC Policy Framework. They wondered if these supporting policies are a priority and, if not, what purpose they serve. They also believe that opportunities may exist for one or more of these policies to be regionally adopted soon. For example, supporting policy #2 states, “Report, as an extension of state policy, high school graduation rates using a four-, five-, and six-year cohort model.” This work is already well underway as a goal of the Data Strategic Action Team. If states agree to report these data as an extension of state policy, it would simultaneously be recognized as a major policy accomplishment that had been significantly advanced by Consortium work. With regard to supporting policy #4, the Phase III proposal includes exploring and determining the feasibility of a “New England secondary learning credential.”

Reflect on the HLP forum strategy to determine its efficacy to date and its future use.

The Phase II plan called for conducting forums with key constituents within each state to explain and advocate for the HLPs. This has happened in some states, but in a more sporadic and less systematized way than was originally planned. If this activity is to be part of Phase III, the Consortium could benefit from changes to the process including:

- Determine and make clear the goal of these forums.
- Develop strategies to motivate the audience to “take the message” out to their constituents.
- Support facilitation of these forums with well-developed tools/resources and discussion points to share during presentations and discussions.
- Provide a template that states can adapt locally as needed.
- Document attendance and collect minutes, including any next steps determined during the forum.

Consider ways to make better use of documents that may not be reaching full potential as tools/resources.

The Consortium has produced documents/papers that contain useful information, yet have been underutilized.

Examples include:

- a. *A Review of Policies on Graduation Requirements, Multiple Pathways, and System Accountability*, created for the Consortium by the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut (2010), which makes suggestions related to the three core policies. Some of these may be valuable during Phase III as they remain timely. For example:
 - *It would help to articulate how the installment of new graduation criteria would serve as a lever to fundamentally alter teaching and learning; is this an expected outcome? If so, how will the policy authentically change the way high schools operate?*
 - *How will NESSC-endorsed flexible learning pathways prevent tracking or ability grouping of students, if that in fact is not a desired end? How are rigor and equity of rigor across students and their pathways ensured?*
- b. The *NESSC Policy Framing Paper*, which provides a concise summary of the three Consortium HLPs and illustrates how the policies, when implemented, will transform secondary schools and result in achievement of NESSC’s 2016 goals. The document is full of rich information that is, at times, missing in current conversations. Updating it and producing versions tailored to select audiences (e.g., legislators, educators, higher education officials) would enhance the value and utility of this paper.

Objective 2: League of Innovative Schools

2a. Introduction

The League of Innovative Schools is the Consortium's largest effort to bring its secondary reform principles into practice in schools. When the Consortium began, the vision was to create “versatile community learning centers [that] prioritize individual learning needs above other concerns, blend secondary and postsecondary experiences, provide engaging educational opportunities both inside and outside the classroom, and offer a variety of student-designed pathways to graduation.” In Phase I these were called “hothouse schools,” which developed into the League of Innovative Schools in Phase II.

During Phase II, the LIS has evolved substantially, yielding a clear framework that has catalyzed a process for school selection and an initial cohort to be launched during Phase III. This section of the Phase II report describes the Phase II LIS goals, progress made at the Consortium and state levels, implications of the multi-state context, conclusions, and strategic considerations.

2b. LIS goals for Phase II

The Phase II proposal offers a vision of transformed schools based on the Global Best Practices (GBP) tool developed during Phase I. The GBP tool identified 20 dimensions of “best practices across the globe,” including the categories Teaching and Learning (Personalization and Relevance); Organizational Design (Time and Space);

and School Leadership (Moral Courage). The plan for Phase II was to develop two groups of schools – a group of “Implementing Schools” that were to “make a commitment to the goals and actions of the Consortium and commit to redesigning their schools in alignment with NESSC efforts,” and a second group of “Network Schools” that would benefit from more limited participation in the League. This tiered approach incorporated a timeline for impacting a widening circle of participating schools.

The steps in this proposed process are framed in the Consortium Logic Model [Figure 2]. The first step was to create the LIS Strategic Action Team (SAT) to advance the development of the LIS agenda and its implementation. One strand of the logic model was then to draft and finalize a framework for LIS participation, create statewide support structures (e.g., school presentations, online materials, regional conference), and then develop and implement a process for school engagement. The other strand was to finalize and distribute the GBP, again make use of statewide support structures (e.g., *GBP in Context* companion tool), identify and secure funding, select schools, hire coaches and begin training, and identify LIS student achievement metrics. All of this was to lead to schools participating in the LIS at the Implementing and Network levels.

The logic model did not specify a target for the number or percentage of participating schools during Phase II, but the NESSC Council established benchmarks in mid-year to put concrete targets on the plans outlined in the model. The three benchmarks for LIS were:

- Benchmark 2.1 - Each state secures and/or allocates local, state, and/or federal funds that support participation of six schools in the League beginning in fall 2011-12 school year.
- Benchmark 2.2 - At least six schools in each state demonstrate the intention to be actively involved in the League by submission of involvement materials.
- Benchmark 2.3 - Each state has articulated the alignment between state activities and personnel and the League of Innovative Schools.

Progress on these benchmarks, as well as other goals set out in the Phase II proposal and logic model, are discussed in the next section.

2c. LIS progress at the Consortium level

The LIS Strategic Action Team was formed at the beginning of Phase II, bringing together representatives from each state including DOE, district, and school personnel as well as legislators in some states. The LIS SAT met twice in person (October 2010 and June 2011) and twice by videoconference (February and March 2011), each time with a written agenda targeted to advancing LIS development and implementation. Between meetings, GSP used Team input to inform and advance the series of six drafts of an LIS Framework that they created. The fifth version was shared publicly at the High School Redesign in Action conference in April 2011, and a sixth version was completed in June 2011.

The framework sets out a series of benefits and obligations of LIS membership. Benefits of membership named in the framework include access to a professional learning community, site visits to other innovative schools, scheduled professional dialogue and support sessions with other member schools, professional development opportunities, data monitoring and analysis for school improvement, and, when funding and capacity are available, personnel and resources for facilitating implementation of the Global Best Practices.

Obligations named in the framework include embracing a set of NESSC core beliefs via a district- and school-level letter of commitment, a report of findings from the school's GBP self-assessment, and a brief statement of commitment from school faculty, staff, parents, and community members. Schools are also required to engage in a series of strategic actions, including examining state and local policies for leverage points, developing an LIS action plan, communicating with other LIS schools through a series of networking and peer accountability activities and visits, participating in LIS professional development opportunities, establishing a system of data

collection and analysis, annual reporting using common metrics, and contributing to action research. A protocol has been written to facilitate regularly scheduled phone calls among principals of partner schools.

LIS progress was also made in relation to distribution and initial use of the Global Best Practices tool. NESSC mailed the self-assessment tool to 98% of public schools (N=608) in the five Consortium states. NESSC Council members interviewed during the spring DOE visits and update phone calls reported many anecdotes of districts that were pleased with the tool's utility and breadth, and 91% of respondents to the stakeholder survey felt that "sharing of effective school practices as defined by the Global Best Practices tool" added "moderate or significant value" to their state's secondary reform efforts, compared to what their state could have accomplished on its own. Details of its actual usage in the field are still minimal, although the requirement for LIS members to complete the GBP self-assessment should permit richer data collection on this topic during Phase III.

The development of the LIS Framework and the distribution of the GBP tool represent substantial progress on the Phase II plan. Additional Consortium-level achievements in relation to the Phase II plan include launching the LIS at the High School Redesign in Action conference, and beginning a systematic attempt – spearheaded by GSP, in collaboration with NESSC Council members in each state – to identify public and private LIS funding opportunities at the state and regional levels. Other Phase II goals did not progress as far as initially planned, including securing funding, creating a process for school engagement, selecting schools, hiring coaches, beginning training, identifying LIS student achievement metrics, and creating statewide support structures, such as the GBP in Context companion tool.

Understanding Phase II progress requires going beyond the benchmarks and logic model, to acknowledge the clear increase in satisfaction by the states regarding the Consortium's movement toward implementing the LIS. Supporting this observation, one commissioner said during the spring DOE visit, "We feel that this aspect of the work has now turned a corner, and that's been exciting because now we're directly engaging schools around aspects of the work. That keeps our people more motivated at the state department of education, and I think it develops greater amounts of confidence in the field, because people now know that they have an asset that's working for them around problems that they're trying to solve, and that there are schools who have solved these problems."

2d. LIS progress at the state level

Each state's approach to LIS implementation is dependent on local personnel, policies, resources, and political context. State progress toward the three LIS benchmarks is discussed below, along with factors that influenced progress toward implementation. With regard to the first benchmark, during a conference call with the commissioners of four Consortium states, the commissioners acknowledged severe budget limitations due to current economic conditions, but each reportedly committed \$40,000-\$50,000 to LIS implementation in the event that other funding prospects fell short. The commissioner's designee from the fifth state reportedly also made this commitment later that week.

Vermont

Vermont is discussed first because of its exemplary progress toward securing funding to support LIS implementation. In late spring they issued two RFPs to all Vermont high schools. One RFP was based on the High School Innovations Program, which would award up to \$200,000 across four schools (\$50,000 each) that committed to becoming LIS members and complying with all membership requirements. The second RFP will be funded by up to \$340,000 in Career and Technical Education funds. Both funding processes will be completed during the summer, so that schools can launch their LIS participation by the beginning of the 2011-12 school year. Through this process the state hopes to attract not only the six schools for LIS Cohort I, but also six schools that will start in January 2012, as part of LIS Cohort II. Vermont also created a backup plan in case the CTE funding doesn't come through, because the CTE funds are federally based and often vulnerable to decreases.

With regard to the third LIS benchmark – articulating the alignment between state activities and personnel and the LIS – Vermont has done this in two ways. First, they integrated the work of the NESSC and the LIS into job descriptions for new positions within the state DOE. Second, they have expanded the commitments required of LIS members to include bringing in a higher education partner and a business partner, which advances other aspects of the state’s reform agenda. Vermont’s new high school adult division also incorporates the LIS and integrates it with other secondary reform activities.

Connecticut

In addition to the \$40,000-\$50,000 committed by the commissioner to support LIS schools, the governor’s final budgets for fiscal years 2012 and 2013 each contained \$250,000 for secondary school reform. As already described in the “Policy progress at the state level” section of this report, the governor’s initial budget had no money allocated for supporting implementation of the Connecticut Plan. Connecticut NESSC Council member and State Senator credits the state’s association with the Consortium as pivotal in securing these funds, which may be used in part for support of LIS implementation.

With regard to Benchmark 2, Connecticut has reached out to eight schools that are strong implementers of one or more Consortium-relevant aspects of the Connecticut Plan and/or have attended one or both of the NESSC High School Redesign in Action conferences. Selection of the eight schools was also based on diversity in terms of geography, urban vs. non-urban, and area of innovation (e.g., capstone projects, student success plans, personalization). From these eight schools they hope to select six for the first LIS cohort. They do not want to engage in a competitive process, because they feel it would become a negative for the Connecticut LIS schools. In June the first school committed to participation, and initial LIS activities are scheduled for August.

Maine

Maine reports developing a list of their top five potential private funders, whom they now need to approach for funding. In addition, knowing that new public funds are unlikely to be allocated for LIS, Maine has identified three possibilities for public funding based on existing revenue streams. All three are in exploratory phases, rather than current implementation. The first is to require high schools that don’t make AYP to join LIS, in order to receive a portion of federal Title I funds that are allocated by the state. The second involves a stream of Title II professional development funds that are allocated by the state using a competitive grant process, and awarding competitive preference points to districts who pledge to become active LIS members. The third is to submit a regional, rural STEM proposal for a federal grant that would require LIS participation for applicant schools. While some concerns have been raised about making LIS participation required rather than voluntary, one Maine informant’s counterargument was that it makes sense for the state to make adherence to the state’s reform agenda a condition of receiving discretionary state funds.

As of June, Maine had not yet engaged in substantial outreach to potential LIS schools. They planned to do so at upcoming superintendent meetings, with schools that have been involved with NESSC activities, and also with a group of Maine schools that are implementing standards-based assessment practices. Maine specifically intends to reach out to schools who presented at the High School Redesign in Action conference, because each of those schools was selected based on strong implementation of one or more of the Global Best Practices.

With regard to Benchmark 3, the primary alignment between state personnel and the LIS that has happened so far is the hiring of a retired superintendent from a district whose high school deeply implements standards-based assessment. His job description includes a primary deliverable of having 50% of Maine districts committed to a standards-based system by June of 2012, which supports the LIS agenda.

New Hampshire

New Hampshire committed \$40,000-\$50,000 along with the other commissioners, but hopes to raise this from private sources and use the funds to support strong innovations in schools that are exemplars of practice in

alignment with NESSC's High-Leverage Policies. The state has identified eleven potential LIS schools, some of whom approached NESSC members at the High School Redesign conference or at NESSC presentations around the state. These high schools are already innovators in areas such as competency-based assessment and instructional design. Informants expressed confidence that LIS school selection would happen by the end of August.

Rhode Island

Rhode Island committed \$40,000-\$50,000 along with the other commissioners, which would come from the repurposing of existing funding, and has received \$33,000 from the Wallace Foundation to start the League, specifically targeting leadership and supporting use of the HLP Framework and the Global Best Practices tool. Rhode Island has also targeted \$1 million from their "Race to the Top" award to be used statewide for virtual learning, which the state anticipates will support the League by advancing flexible learning pathways. The state also sees its funding from the Rhode Island Foundation for iWalkthrough (an instructional improvement strategy based on a classroom observation protocol) as supporting the League, because they anticipate that LIS schools will be required to participate in iWalkthrough.

The state has encouraged seven high schools, one CTE center, and one middle school, to apply for LIS Cohort I, primarily based on the schools' involvement over the past two years with iWalkthrough. Rhode Island held a dinner in late June for teams (e.g., school personnel, superintendents, school board presidents) from prospective LIS schools, and is engaged in developing an MOU process that would outline what it means for a school to be an LIS member.

With regard to Benchmark 3, the RIDE has not yet clearly articulated the alignment between state activities and personnel and the League of Innovative Schools, but feels that to succeed it must (1) be a collaborative and interactive process between the state and the schools and districts, and (2) include clear alignment with LIS goals and RI state initiatives.

2e. Benefits of multi-state context

The multi-state context has been instrumental in the League's evolution during Phase II. The progress on the LIS Framework document through six drafts relied heavily on the work of GSP, the NESSC Council, and the LIS Strategic Action Team, all of which are multi-state collaborations. The framework in its current form also relies on and assumes a multi-state context, such as the peer-to-peer accountability and professional development opportunities that span not only schools and districts but also states. The Consortium is further envisioning the annual High School Redesign in Action conference increasingly as a vehicle for mutual support and professional learning across LIS schools. There is little doubt that the Consortium's multi-state context was a catalyst for the commissioners of all five states to commit \$40,000-\$50,000 for LIS support. Finally, as discussed throughout this report, the Consortium has been credited with contributing to advancements in secondary reform on multiple fronts, and clearly creating a networked group of innovative secondary schools has been one of those achievements.

2f. Conclusions and strategic considerations

Conclusions

All states made progress on LIS Benchmark 1, with at least a moderate commitment of state funding for LIS schools. Beyond that level of funding, states differed widely in terms of the extent of additional funds secured and the certainty with which possibly available funds might indeed be applied to LIS support. Much of the final work on Benchmark 2 was slated to occur during the summer of 2011, and hence final data were not available for this report, but during the benchmark interviews in the first week of June, four out of five states had identified potential Cohort I schools and had developed and/or launched a process for recruiting them. Three or four states appeared confident that they would have six confirmed schools by September 2011, and the remaining states appeared less confident but were working toward that goal. On Benchmark 3, two states were able to articulate

clear progress on creating alignments between the LIS and state activities and personnel; there was also some lack of clarity about the meaning of this benchmark.

Beyond progress on benchmarks, LIS milestones during Phase II included development of a clear LIS Framework through many drafts in the context of a newly created LIS Strategic Action Team, as well as turning a corner in terms of satisfaction and commitment on the part of key state stakeholders toward implementing the LIS, which is expected to provide long-awaited models of transformative school practice.

Strategic Considerations

Consider grouping LIS schools by innovation, policy, or other common characteristics.

Recognizing that the LIS is intended to begin with 30 schools and grow quickly, it might be advantageous to group schools by innovation or policy, perhaps in addition to or instead of cohort groups. This may lead to group-driven conference breakout sessions, school visits, and literature or other resources, and would be a strategy for using time and resources efficiently.

Provide models of innovation that are flexible but reflect NESSC's vision.

Many respondents have asked for clarity regarding what a transformed high school would look like, and for examples of models to share with schools and other constituencies. Some questioned whether such high schools actually exist today. Examples of transformed schools and practices would be helpful to identify and share. Although LIS appears to be finding a balance between prescriptiveness and flexibility, schools' transformation efforts may be influenced in a manner consistent with NESSC's vision if some fundamental questions were addressed: 'How does a transformative school differ from today's schools? How will we know if graduates are learning the right things? Will they be able to get into college?' A user-friendly FAQ sheet for multiple audiences might be valuable.

Create and implement a detailed, transparent plan for securing LIS funding.

There is broad agreement that securing more substantial funding for LIS is a critical next step. During the spring DOE interviews, two NESSC Council members expressed frustration about having done their part in the proposed process for securing private funding for LIS, but feeling that follow-up with potential funders had been inadequate. A greater level of transparency may be needed, so that Council members and other key stakeholders are aware of relevant actions and progress. A plan for approaching potential funders, including targets, timeline, and persons responsible, would help address these concerns and advance the process.

Begin securing the sustainability of LIS from the beginning.

While philanthropic funding might be available for funding the early stages of LIS, over time states and districts will likely need to devote public resources to sustain the League's activities. Taking steps toward sustainability is often postponed until too late in an initiative's life cycle, and Phase III would be a time to consider beginning the process of institutionalizing the LIS. Doing this could also create a virtuous cycle in which the commitment of public resources could attract additional private funding.

Create opportunities to capture and share emerging knowledge, including a funded evaluation plan.

The first year of LIS implementation will create a great deal of useful knowledge that can be shared across states, both at the policy level (e.g., funding, recruitment) and the school level (e.g., implementation of Global Best Practices, fostering parent buy-in of innovative practices). Providing opportunities to capture and share this knowledge should be prioritized. In addition, understanding the League's development, making midcourse corrections, and facilitating positive growth will require a level of program monitoring and evaluation that is not currently funded. Securing funding for this purpose, in addition to the implementation support funds already discussed, is a critical next step.

Establish a clear niche for LIS within each state department of education.

Having the LIS formally located within each state DOE's organizational structure would clarify how it is managed and possibly how it is eventually funded. LIS Benchmark 3 – articulating the alignment between state activities and personnel and the League of Innovative Schools – touched on this issue, and not all states were able to clearly articulate this alignment. A step in this direction would be to elaborate the benchmark and share current practices, to provide examples of how the LIS might be integrated and located within existing DOE structures.

Probe the possible impacts and trade-offs of mandatory LIS membership.

State ideas for LIS funding include requiring schools to join LIS in exchange for a share of state funding. The Consortium may wish to discuss possible effects on the LIS as a result of this de facto compulsory participation, both positive (e.g., increased membership) and negative (e.g., decreased buy-in), and the trade-off among these possible impacts, given the current economic environment and the League's need for funding in order to thrive.

Continue aligning LIS membership requirements with existing school and district obligations.

The LIS Strategic Action Team has recognized that aspects of LIS membership risk being viewed as an additional burden, or just another initiative or unfunded mandate. To the extent possible, LIS membership requirements and reporting should continue to be aligned with other state, regional, and federal initiatives, such as NEASC, teacher evaluations, and commissioner's review.

Explore waivers or other mechanisms to reduce conflicts between innovation and accountability.

Several LIS SAT members have noted that LIS member schools might justifiably worry that their innovations will be in conflict with existing accountability structures. They have proposed exploring mechanisms such as waivers that would provide schools fair assessments of their innovations. The LIS would benefit from formally exploring or developing state, federal, or possibly regional strategies in this regard.

Objective 3: Building Public and Political Will**3a. Introduction**

Developing broad public and political will to support new models of student-centered learning across New England is one of the Consortium's three strategic areas of focus. During Phase I a group of communication stakeholders, coordinated by the director of communications from GSP, met to begin discussing messaging strategies. As it evolved in Phase II, the group became known as the Messaging Strategic Action Team, with membership including state DOE directors of communication, NESSC leads and liaisons. This section describes Phase II messaging goals, progress made at the consortium level and benefits of multi-state context, conclusions, and strategic considerations.

3b. Messaging goals for Phase II

The strategic goal for messaging during Phase II was to develop and implement a communications plan that would "create a new public 'mental model' of schooling that removes the notion of a school building as the foundation of learning and replaces it with a commitment to equitable, personalized, and academically rigorous learning provided through a variety of student-designed pathways" (Great Schools Partnership, Phase II proposal, August 2010). The steps in achieving this goal are framed in the NESSC Logic Model [Figure 2]. The first step was to create the Messaging Strategic Action Team (SAT), whose members were responsible for developing the NESSC messaging plan, proposing the design of messaging tools, and supporting implementation of in-state and regional communication and messaging activities.

The Messaging SAT was also responsible for advancing three major activities: (1) engaging the Council members as champions of state efforts, including reaching out to stakeholder groups (e.g., state legislators, higher education representatives) regarding NESSC goals; (2) creating a media messaging campaign that demonstrates examples of

student-centered learning opportunities, to be distributed using various forms of free media (e.g., press releases, expanding the function and use of the NESSC website, utilizing the *Story of School* video that highlights the history of the American education system and the imperative for transformation at the secondary level); and (3) creating or enhancing a vibrant, sustainable community/business roundtable focused exclusively on education to support state and NESSC efforts. By the end of Phase II, these activities were to result in the establishment of business roundtables and successful messaging campaigns within each state.

NESSC established benchmarks in mid-year to put concrete targets on the plans outlined in the logic model. The three benchmarks for messaging were:

- Benchmark 3.1 - Engage the Council as champions of their state efforts. Engagement demonstrated through either policy adoption, direct involvement with League schools, or business roundtable endorsement of the NESSC Policy Framework.
- Benchmark 3.2 - Community/business roundtables are involved in secondary school reform as evidenced by any/all of the following:
 - Representatives from secondary school and/or higher education are members of the roundtables.
 - Business leaders participate on education task forces or committees.
 - Minutes from roundtable meetings indicate an understanding of and support for the NESSC Policy Framework
- Benchmark 3.3 - Ten percent of all district-level school board members receiving email notifications from NESSC complete an online survey concerning the NESSC Policy Framework. Fifty percent of those taking the survey indicate support for the NESSC messaging ideas and Policy Framework.

3c. Messaging progress at the consortium level, and benefits of multi-state context

During the fall of 2010, the Messaging SAT worked together to reformulate its plan for the remainder of Phase II. To support their work, NESSC contracted with Rhoades Alderson of the New Harbor Group in Rhode Island. Alderson soon became a key partner, lending expertise in the area of messaging and communication and carrying out several activities in support of the Messaging SAT.

As a result of Alderson's assistance and the NESSC's desire to leverage its limited resources to gain the greatest impact, the SAT decided to limit the scope of its intended audience and focus explicitly on political and educational leaders. While this focus removed parents and the general public from its audience, members believed that the new plan would allow for a larger impact on legislators and education leaders through the utilization of a few targeted strategies. By late January, the Messaging SAT had created and disseminated its new messaging plan. The plan was intended to target the most influential educational leaders and differentiate the message, delivery mechanisms, and engagement strategies as follows:

Messaging Plan: Target – Superintendents, Principals, and Teachers								
Goals	Objectives	Strategies						
Engagement Participation Change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Networking + connecting 2. Profiling + sharing 3. Developing resources 4. Hosting events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Messaging strategy: the network is the campaign; the educators are the message; the actions are the argument. - Targeting the school leaders who already get it, who are already doing it, and who need help to get it done – the goal: engage and enlist 100 principals, superintendents, or schools who can act as advocates, champions, spokespersons, and exemplars. - Multiplying and broadcasting the voices, enthusiasm, and successes of early adopters. - Connecting schools and educators in need of assistance with proven models of success. - Developing a network of support and resources. - Helping schools deliver the message to support change and innovation: materials, events, website, etc. 						
Messaging Plan: Target – School Board Members, Policy Makers, and Business Leaders								
Goals	Objectives	Strategies						
Permission Support Advocacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Raising awareness 2. Increasing understanding 3. Building support 4. Advocating NESSC policies 	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>School Board Members</td> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Train-the-trainer presentation strategy - Local engagement/presentations - Targeted messaging/email blasts </td> </tr> <tr> <td>Policy Makers</td> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify and cultivate champions - Person-to-person advocacy of policies - Coordination and monitoring - Targeted messaging/email blasts </td> </tr> <tr> <td>Business Leaders</td> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Business-driven advocacy groups - Chambers of commerce - In-state business publications - Targeted messaging/email blasts </td> </tr> </table>	School Board Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Train-the-trainer presentation strategy - Local engagement/presentations - Targeted messaging/email blasts 	Policy Makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify and cultivate champions - Person-to-person advocacy of policies - Coordination and monitoring - Targeted messaging/email blasts 	Business Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Business-driven advocacy groups - Chambers of commerce - In-state business publications - Targeted messaging/email blasts
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The Messaging SAT identified three approaches to communicate their message: (1) by email to a targeted audience; (2) online through the NESSC website and Twitter; and (3) in-person through presentations in the states and the NESSC’s second annual High School Redesign in Action conference for regional educators.

Email Communication: Leadership in Action Briefs

A major deliverable of the Messaging SAT was production of eight leadership briefs for dissemination to all education legislators, school board members, and superintendents in the five states. The briefs were disseminated as a series of emails entitled “Leadership in Action,” with the dual goals of providing a practical resource to recipients and increasing awareness of the NESSC and its message. A highlight of the Messaging Team’s work was its development of an extensive database of education leader email addresses in the region, including 99% of the 1,100 state legislators, 88% of the 49 state board of education members, 70% of the 3,650 local school board members, and almost 100% of the 414 district superintendents across the five states.

The Leadership in Action briefs were distributed bi-weekly from March to June 2011. Table 3 presents the details of each brief.

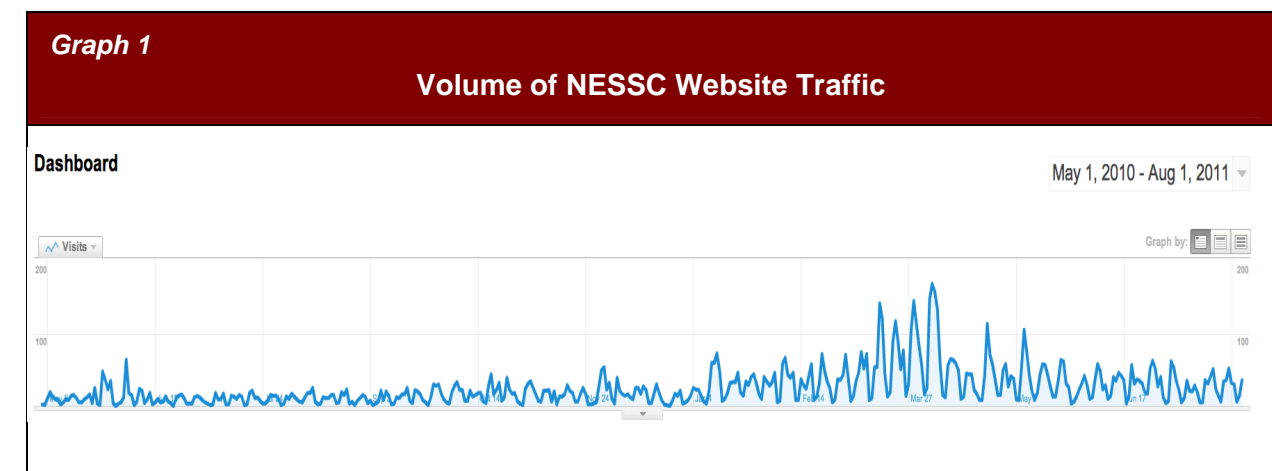
Table 3
Email Distribution of Leadership in Action Briefs

Date	Title	# Delivered	# Opened	% Opened
3/15/11	What do Today's Students Need?	4,084	762	18.7
3/29/11	How do Today's Students Learn?	4,355	473	10.9
4/12/11	What Does the Research on Effective Schools Tell Us?	4,957	439	8.9
4/26/11	What Should Our Schools Look Like in the 21 st Century?	4,957	577	11.6
5/10/11	Education: The Engine of Innovation, Prosperity, and Economic Competitiveness.	4,974	497	10.0
5/24/11	What is a Proficiency-based Diploma?	4,986	453	9.1
6/7/11	What are Flexible Pathways?	4,984	427	8.6
6/28/11	What are 21 st Century Skills and How Can We Measure Them?	4,986	359	7.2

According to MailerMailer, an email and newsletter marketing firm that tracks trends for the industry, the average unsolicited email-blast open rate is 11.5% for the education industry.³ As shown in Table 3 above, the Leadership in Action series emails had open rates between 19% and 7%, with an average rate of 11%, close to the average rate identified by MailerMailer. Not surprisingly, the initial blast was opened the most, as recipients may have been curious about the sender and originating organization. As NESSC delivered subsequent blasts, the open rate fluctuated between April and May and then decreased in June.

Online Communications: NESSC Website and Twitter

The Consortium succeeded in drawing people to the NESSC website and further establishing the site as a hub for NESSC communications. The homepage was redesigned by Liberty Concepts, a web design and new media consulting firm, and the Consortium also began to utilize Twitter for social networking. Website traffic, as tracked by Google Analytics, showed a significant increase between March 1st and July 31st of 2011, as shown Graph 1 below. This appears to be largely attributable to the Leadership in Action briefs as well as visits related to the High School Redesign in Action conference. From May 1, 2010 to February 28, 2011 (ten months), the website received 4,769 visits and 14,739 page views. Between March 1, 2011 and August 1, 2011 (five months), the website received 6,405 visits and 17,365 page views. This represents a 168% increase in monthly visits and a 136% increase in page views during this time period.



³ MailerMailer. (2011). Annual Email Marketing Metrics Report. MailerMailer. Retrieved on August 15, 2011, from <http://www.mailermailer.com/resources/metrics/index.rwp>.

In January 2011, NESSC launched six Twitter accounts: a NESSC general account and five state-specific accounts managed by the liaisons. As of August 12, 2011, these accounts have sent out over 500 tweets about NESSC and education news to their growing list of followers. In total, NESSC’s accounts are subscribed to by over 200 Twitter users, notably by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, and the Association of American Educators. Utilization of social networking sites such as Twitter provides NESSC with a free vehicle for communicating its message and connecting with other education organizations and individuals, as well as demonstrating its desire to embrace new technologies to reach target audiences.

Face-to-Face: Presentations in States and the Second Annual Conference

To facilitate consistency of messaging, in consultation with Rhoades Alderson, the Team developed master PowerPoint slides and content for use during in-state presentations, and the state liaisons were trained to deliver the NESSC’s message utilizing the presentation. Evidence suggests that the PowerPoint slides were used by some liaisons, as needed. However, records on the number of presentations made, by whom, and the primary audiences were not consistently documented and unavailable.

Finally, GSP took the lead in designing and marketing the second annual High School Redesign in Action conference held in April. The Consortium met their attendance target, with almost 400 people attending. Feedback collected from school- and district-based educators on the post-conference survey, as summarized in Table 4 below, indicated that most attendees believed the conference would be beneficial to their work, that the concurrent sessions provided them with useful information, that they had plans to share what they learned with their colleagues, and that they believed that the conference was well-organized and facilitated.

Table 4						
Conference Survey Results: Attendees’ Satisfaction						
Survey Item		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
	N	%	%	%	%	%
Overall, I think this conference will be beneficial to my work	155	0	0	3	57	39
Attending the concurrent sessions provided me with information that will be beneficial to my work	153	0	1	3	56	41
I plan to share with colleagues what I learned	151	0	0	2	50	48
The conference was well-organized and well-facilitated	152	0	1	3	46	51

3d. Conclusions and strategic considerations

Conclusions

Benchmarks related to the Consortium’s messaging objective were somewhat misaligned with the Messaging SAT’s refined action plan, implemented in January. Responsibility for achieving two of the three benchmarks appeared to move outside of the scope of the Messaging Team’s work. Some progress related to Benchmark 1 (to engage the Council members as champions of their state efforts) did occur, and the NESSC Council began discussing its evolving role and membership at its final Phase II meeting. However, it’s unclear what the role of the Messaging Team was, or will be in the future, as this benchmark remains of interest to Consortium members. Evidence regarding the establishment of community/business roundtables (Benchmark 2) indicated that states have mostly come up short on this target, although many members seem interested in growing these partnerships in Phase III, particularly with business leaders in their respective states. Finally, the Consortium did not implement work related to Benchmark 3, which was to be an online survey of district-level school board members.

While the Consortium did not meet the stated messaging benchmarks, several milestones were achieved during Phase II. These included writing and disseminating eight Leadership in Action briefs to nearly 5,000 legislators, state and local school board members, and superintendents, successfully marketing the second annual High School Redesign in Action conference as evidenced by meeting its attendance target, and drawing people to the NESSC website and further establishing the site as a hub for NESSC communications. Towards the end of Phase II, the Consortium conducted eight separate focus groups with local school board members in each state to collect their perceptions about, and opinions of, school reform and the core messages and initiatives of the Consortium. This research culminated with a report, authored by Rhoades Alderson in collaboration with the director of communications at GSP, containing eight major findings with potential implications for the future messaging work of the Consortium.

Strategic Considerations

Revisit the definition and evidence of success for public and political will.

It is difficult to measure change in public opinion, particularly with modest resources, but the Messaging SAT should continue to decide which stakeholder groups it will target and how it will know if their efforts have succeeded. Current measures focus on the NESSC's *reach*, such as the number of emails opened and the number of website visitors, but not on the *results* of opening an email or visiting the website. An important question to address is how the NESSC will know if it has influenced the groups it has targeted.

Highlight the NESSC's belief in customizable approaches to improvement.

Findings from the spring focus groups with school board members suggest that the NESSC should clearly communicate its conviction that improvement can take various forms and can therefore be flexible and customizable to the needs of a given school. This belief contrasts with other reform efforts that have more of a one-size-fits-all format. The Consortium stands to benefit from highlighting their position in communications with stakeholders in order to distinguish itself from other efforts and/or models.

Develop communication materials that are accessible to a variety of stakeholder groups.

Many NESSC members shared a desire to have communication materials that could be used in various contexts and with various groups. Some believed that a prepared "elevator speech" would be useful for members to raise awareness of the NESSC while feeling confident that members in other states were delivering the same messages.

Engage the business community more deeply and consistently.

Business leaders represent a key resource that has not yet been fully enlisted. Some states are in the process of developing and/or strengthening a business advocacy group or roundtable, and support from the messaging team could help clarify the alignment between the Consortium's goals and economic interests to members of the business community.

Objective 4: Consortium Data Measures and Reporting

4a. Introduction

To measure progress towards the 2016 goals (see page 13) the Consortium brought together data representatives from each state to form the "Data Team" during Phase I. Initially this Team was charged with discussing existing data collection and management methods across the states and reaching a common five-state agreement on reporting progress towards the Consortium's long-term goals. This section describes Phase II data goals, progress, challenges, and outcomes made at the Consortium level, benefits of multi-state context, conclusions, and strategic considerations.

4b. Data goals for Phase II

The Data Team's primary role for Phase II was to create a set of cross-state common metrics on student achievement. The steps in this proposed process are framed in the Consortium Logic Model. The first step was to create the Data Strategic Action Team (SAT), whose members would work toward advancing three major activities: (1) develop common measures of postsecondary readiness, enrollment, and degree/certification completion by March 2011; (2) create a document describing NESSC metrics and disseminate by June 2011; and (3) arrange for the commissioners of each state to make formal announcements about the NESSC common data. By the end of Phase II, these activities were to result in the states collecting and reporting data to UMDI for analysis, and in the updating of the common NESSC baseline data contained in the NESSC Data Technical Report. NESSC established benchmarks in mid-year to put concrete targets on the plans outlined in the logic model. The three benchmarks related to data were:

- Benchmark 4.1 - States endorse a common set of data (that includes the NESSC goals) to use for distribution.
- Benchmark 4.2 - Annual reports of metrics serve as baseline for future measures of growth and contain annual targets for targeted populations (e.g., statewide, types of schools, subgroups of students, etc.)
- Benchmark 4.3 - Develop an NESSC index of metrics to measure college readiness.

4c. Phase II progress, challenges, and outcomes

During Phase II, the “Data Team” became known as the “Data Strategic Action Team,” in order to align it with the three other SATs. The Team met six times between August 2010 and June 2011. All meetings were held in Concord, New Hampshire and were facilitated by GSP. During these meetings the Team focused on the degree to which data collected and reported across the states was similar in structure, the identification of state-specific differences, and the identification of potential measures for inclusion in the “college readiness” indicator. Most Data SAT members attended all meetings, and representatives from GSP and NMEF were often present as well.

Progress

During Phase II the Team achieved its baseline reporting benchmark, while it made progress toward the remaining two benchmarks related to state adoption of reporting guidelines and development of the college readiness index. The following provides additional information related to the Team’s progress during Phase II.

Additional Specification of Common Reporting Guidelines

Having data representatives from five states in one room allowed the Team to examine the data collectively and share state-developed practices with their colleagues. As a result, the Team was able to acknowledge state differences, while agreeing to implement the common decision rules in cases where differences could have a substantial impact on cross-state comparisons. The decision rules served as documentation of the level of data specificity that each state would adhere to for NESSC reporting purposes.

Collective Influence and Emerging Team Clout

It appears that growing awareness of the NESSC and Data SAT has motivated external organizations to respond quickly and positively to requests or questions posed by the Team. For example, the Team facilitator was able to schedule a representative from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to attend a meeting in response to states’ concerns regarding varying levels of access to, and accuracy of, NSC-provided postsecondary data. In addition, when the first NSC representative was not able to answer the Team’s questions related to data access and cost, NSC sent a second representative with that specific knowledge to address the Team’s concerns in person.

Initial Definition of College Readiness and Budding National Attention

During the second half of Phase II, the Team focused on developing a framework and a set of measures to specify the college readiness indicator. Team members worked in conjunction with representatives from outside partners,

including Research in Action, the Annenberg Institute, and the University of Southern Maine, and regularly consulted with the representatives from the Chief Council of State School Officers (CCSSO). The Team met on May 26 and June 28. At the first meeting, they drafted an initial list of measures to be considered for inclusion in the college readiness indicator. Between meetings, members collected and reviewed research related to college readiness, vetted the drafted list with external partners, and developed a revised list for review at their next meeting. Much of this work was overseen by a consultant from Research in Action. The draft college readiness indicator comprised 25 measures categorized into four dimensions: Performance, Preparatory, Behavioral, and Attitudinal. The group supported the original design, but the inclusion of 25 measures was subsequently viewed as potentially too challenging to expect full compliance. The team therefore reduced the number of measures from 25 to 9, and the nine measures are presented below in relation to the four dimensions.

Preparatory Dimension	Performance Dimension
1. Completion of four years of mathematics 2. Completion of Algebra II 3. SAT/ACT Participation Rates	5. Course Completion & Scores from Dual Enrollment/Early College, AP, and/or International Baccalaureate 6. PSAT/SAT/SAT Scores 7. State Assessment Results 8. High School GPA
Behavioral Dimension	Attitudinal Dimension
4. High School Attendance Rate	9. Completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

During Phase III, the Team plans to test the validity of these measures against a general definition of college persistence/success. This definition was agreed upon after considerable deliberation from members, and was designed to identify successful college students whose histories could be back-mapped against the indicators to reveal correlations. The process will include identifying and selecting a sample of college students who have completed 24 credits, have a GPA of at least 2.5, and are enrolled in their third semester. The Team will then collect and analyze the sample students’ high school data related to the proposed measures. Utilizing correlational statistics, these proposed measures will be tested against real students and schools to determine the extent to which they are related. The final college readiness index of measures and process will be based on the results of this analysis.

The Data SAT’s work on defining “college readiness” has contributed to the growing national awareness of NESSC, as evidenced by calls for additional information from the College Board, CCSSO, and others. Furthermore, these organizations have expressed a desire to collaborate with NESSC, to help inform efforts to define college readiness nationally.

Challenges

Issues remain that could affect the Consortium’s ability to measure its progress towards 2016 goals, including incomplete data submissions and limitations as a result of data level submitted.

Incomplete Data Submissions Continue to Impact Data Analysis

Similar to the process used during Phase I, states were required to submit data for calculation of the 2016 indicators and development of the Technical Report to the UMDI evaluation liaison. Based upon data availability and the time that could be devoted to the task, two deadlines were established. During April and May, three states met the agreed-upon timeline, and submitted all data required for NESSC reporting. Between late May and late July, the Team facilitator and evaluation liaison continued to follow up with representatives from the other two states to request complete data submission. Finalization and publication of the Phase II Technical Report was

postponed in an effort to collect the missing data from these states, and even then data submission remained incomplete.

Limitations of Data Submission Format

Data is currently submitted at the state level rather than at the district, school, or student level. Without student-level data, it is impossible to analyze data by student subgroups (e.g., those with IEPs or who receive free/reduced price lunch). The Data SAT acknowledges that this is a limitation, but they are constrained by laws regarding the sharing of individually identifiable data across state lines. To compensate for this limitation, all states have agreed to analyze data at the student level within their home states when requested by NESSC leadership.

Outcomes

States provided enough state-level graduation and dropout data to establish initial progress towards these two 2016 goals. Initial analysis of two years of data indicates that all states are making steady gains in increasing graduation rates and decreasing the number of students dropping out. New Hampshire reported the greatest gains, with their graduation rate for all students rising by 4.9 percentage points, and their overall dropout rate decreasing by 9.4 percentage points. Some decreases were found for student subgroups, although some of these groups had small numbers of students, which can lead to rapidly changing averages that might not reflect trends in a larger population. Therefore, subpopulation analyses presented in the Technical Report should be interpreted with caution.

As published in the NESSC Phase II Data Technical Report, the following charts show graduation and dropout rates for each NESSC state for students from the classes of 2009 (baseline) and 2010.

Chart 1
NESSC Graduation Rates: Classes of 2009 (Baseline) and 2010

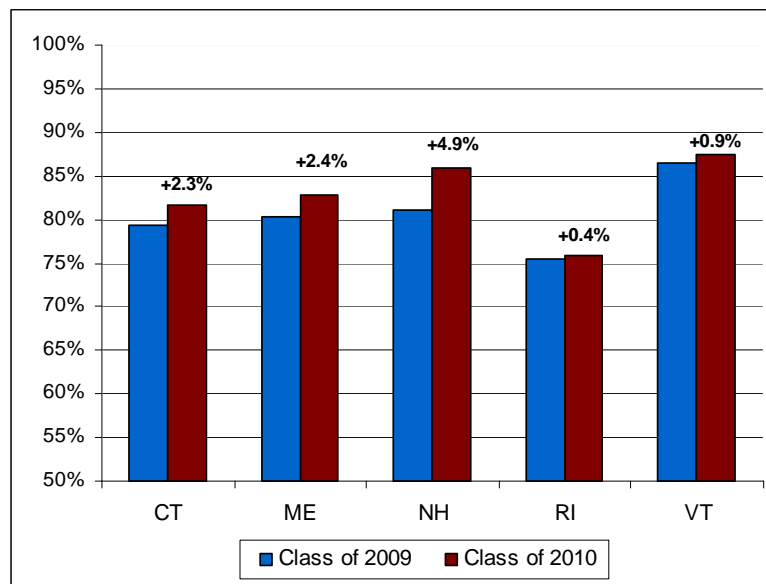
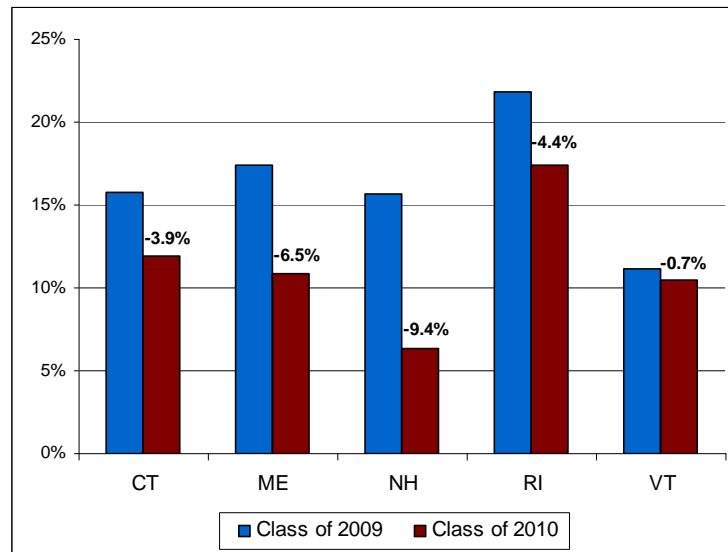


Chart 2
 NESSC Dropout Rates: Classes of 2009 (Baseline) and 2010



The extent to which these gains can be attributed specifically to the work of NESSC is limited by NESSC’s brief existence and the current level of field activity within the states. The Consortium’s work to date has focused on education policy development and implementation at the state level, so it is unlikely that current graduation rates have been substantially influenced by NESSC’s work. In addition, there are many other direct interventions underway at the district and school levels in each of the states that may have more of a direct bearing on current student success.

4d. Benefits of multi-state context

During DOE spring interviews, Data SAT members reported that they enjoy being part of the Team and cited a number of benefits to cross-state collaboration. For example, they have been able to deepen their individual understanding of data variation at the most micro levels within and across states, leading to collaborative development and implementation of data decision rules to enhance comparison of outcomes across states. Team members have also shared innovative data practices to assist each other in solving state-specific data issues, operating as a professional learning community.

Some states report making early progress toward aligning their state reporting with NESSC common agreements. For example, Connecticut reports high school graduation rates using the same methodology as NESSC, Vermont reports that they have begun for the first time to calculate dropout rates using the Consortium’s cohort method, and New Hampshire has begun to report dropout rates on their DOE website using both NESSC’s common methods and the state’s traditional approach. Finally, the attention being paid to postsecondary education data, which is new for some states, as well as the discussions with the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), have also benefitted from the multi-state context.

4e. Conclusions and strategic considerations

Conclusions

Progress varied by state on Data Benchmark 1. However, the Consortium overall was unable to meet the benchmark of having states agree on using common NESSC methods for statewide reporting above and beyond what is required to measure progress on the NESSC grant. The Phase II Data Technical Report is evidence of the Consortium’s accomplishment around Benchmark 2. This report presents an initial look at progress related to

graduation and dropout rates, the two areas in which all states were able to submit data. Results from the next year of data collection will be essential, as inclusion of the class of 2011 data will permit provisional estimations of future gains within each state, and inform the likelihood of attaining the 2016 goals. On Benchmark 3, the Consortium made significant progress toward developing a framework and a set of measures for “college readiness,” although the measure is not complete. The work performed thus far has benefited from the inclusion of higher education data representatives from each state, who have bridged important conversations while building relationships with public higher education leadership across the region. Other key relationships have included the work with the Annenberg Institute around college readiness, and with the College Board and its top leadership.

Strategic Considerations

Renew commitment from each state to submit all required data by team-determined deadlines.

At the end of Phase II, data reporting requirements remained unmet by some states. To track the Consortium’s progress, each state must be able to submit common student data by agreed-upon deadlines. If states are unable to do so, the Consortium may need to revise its plan for demonstrating progress and success.

Consider the current practice of data timing on evidence of Consortium impact.

By the time data is submitted by states, and used to update annual progress towards 2016 NESSC indicators, these data are one year old. As an example, the most recent data report was issued in July 2011, but showed progress only through the class of 2010. This lag in data availability may limit the Consortium’s ability to make timely data-based decisions, and to determine and disseminate information about its progress. The Consortium should re-examine the availability of data in each state to find out if this issue can be resolved. One possible solution would be for states to provide data in two stages, if feasible.

Identify and hire a data manager.

Data SAT members requested that a data manager be hired. Responsibilities would include working with the Team on issues of data comparison and alignment across the states, following up with documentation, and attending all SAT meetings to stay informed about the Team’s discussions and document all decisions made. The data manager would also communicate with individual states as needed to advance the Data SAT’s agenda. Team members believed that these responsibilities exceeded what could be considered a voluntary role. Desired qualifications included knowledge of state data systems, student data, and federal regulations.

Specify the Data SAT’s level of decision-making authority.

Many Team members said that there was confusion about the decision-making role of the Team in relation to the Consortium in general, and that some decisions they had been asked to make were beyond their scope of influence within their home states. Specifying the extent to which the Team may make decisions regarding data rules and metric specification would enable the members to focus on what is within its sphere of influence, and move forward with confidence. Articulating clearly the role of the Data SAT in the Consortium as a whole would reduce confusion and ensure that the Team included the most appropriate people from each state.

Address Team concerns regarding a perceived lack of connection to the NESSC Council.

Many Team members said that they felt disconnected from other areas of the Consortium’s work and from issues discussed, and decisions made, by the Council. A stronger connection between the Data SAT and the rest of the NESSC would be mutually beneficial. Data Team members would have a clearer understanding of how their work is connected to larger goals, and the Council would benefit from the Team’s input regarding issues related to data collection, analysis, and reporting.

V. Conclusions and Strategic Considerations

The Consortium has established a solid foundation for multi-state collaboration in the New England region, and evidence points to a strong interest and commitment from a wide variety of stakeholders from across the member states to continue these efforts. The vast majority of Consortium participants who were interviewed during spring 2011 DOE visits – including the four interviewed commissioners – saw value in their participation in the NESSC and expressed their desire for it to continue. On the spring survey of key NESSC stakeholders, 78% indicated that they were very interested (55%) or interested (23%) in the Consortium “continuing into the foreseeable future.” Furthermore, 86% agreed or strongly agreed that they are committed to supporting their state’s continued participation. The majority of Consortium participants also agreed or strongly agreed that their work together has resulted in a culture that promotes communication and trust among the five states (73%) and that individuals’ contributions are valued by other Consortium members (77%). This continued interest and commitment to the Consortium is impressive, particularly when considering the significant transitions in state and legislative leadership, and the constraints placed on education budgets that occurred across the region.

The Consortium achieved several noteworthy accomplishments during Phase II. Among the highlights, they secured continued and new funding support from national and regional foundations, received national recognition by winning the Frank Newman Award for State Innovation from the Education Commission of the States, designed a new regional League of Innovative Schools network that is ready to launch in September 2011, achieved a major policy change in one state with key support from the NESSC, and increased awareness of the NESSC across the region. The momentum and satisfaction associated with these and other accomplishments should provide continued strength and a positive focus as NESSC moves into Phase III.

The following strategic considerations are intended to support the overall work of NESSC as it moves into Phase III and beyond.

Strategic Considerations

Engage in a strategic planning process to support the implementation phase of secondary school reform.

Several respondents continue to express confusion or uncertainty about the long-term trajectory of various Consortium initiatives, as well as their interconnections. As was discussed in the Phase I evaluation report, contributing to this confusion may be NESSC's lack of a detailed, long-term strategic plan that would help participants better understand the Consortium's year-to-year activities and related benchmarks. Commitment to long-range strategic planning of a thoughtful, well defined, and well communicated plan of action that maps out what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done could help the Consortium and individual states plan specific short- and long-term activities in service of NESSC goals. The NESSC theory of action is in place, and initial annual benchmarks for the next three years have been drafted. These are steps in the right direction. However, there is no document that provides a straightforward and common way of describing how the three broad objectives and their associated activities will lead to the 2016 goals. A strategic plan would also help to limit the scope of new initiatives in order to maintain clear focus and avoid overload. It is also likely to be requested and viewed favorably by potential funders.

Revisit the 2016 goals and determine whether they should be sustained or revised.

Discussions about the purpose and appropriateness of the 2016 goals have arisen repeatedly across many categories of NESSC stakeholders. These discussions often include the perspective that the goals are too ambitious, but needed to be set high for political reasons. While all informants believe that progress can be made, Consortium members should also consider that hard-won successes may be overshadowed or undermined by failing to fully reach the current targets. Parallels have been drawn to current federal machinations to dismiss NCLB goals as the 2014 deadline approaches. Moreover, bringing reforms to full implementation can take

multiple years, and students might need years of exposure to the fully implemented reforms before attaining the intended outcomes. This could delay full impacts beyond the 2016 timeframe. An open discussion of this issue, especially before moving too far into the upcoming implementation phase, could yield perspectives on the current path and possible alternatives.

Carefully consider the roles that GSP and states will each play in the overall success of NESSC.

A review of the Phase III proposal indicates that GSP and/or state liaisons are responsible for ensuring completion of a majority of Consortium activities and the achievement of milestones. On the one hand this seems appropriate, because most of the foundation funding is given to GSP, who in turn hires liaisons. On a broader level, however, GSP's lack of formal authority within individual state departments of education suggests that states will need to be the primary movers of Consortium initiatives at the implementation level. As a result, GSP is in the difficult position of appearing responsible for outcomes that may be beyond their control. Clear delineation of where GSP's roles and influence stop, and where state actions are the primary determinants of progress, would be worthwhile. The creation of state-level implementation plans, described in the NESSC Phase III proposal, is timely and appropriate in this regard. Ensuring that these plans clearly define state's responsibilities and expected outcomes may help sustain and perhaps increase their level of commitment. Related to this strategic consideration, the current practice of GSP periodically reporting progress to NMEF on behalf of the Consortium may benefit from state and/or NESSC Council representation, which could expand inputs, perspectives, examples of progress, and explanation of barriers/challenges, while also extending accountability more broadly.

Revisit the roles and responsibilities of the NESSC Council.

Even as the Council membership and mission are being rethought, one deputy commissioner suggested reconstituting the Council to a more action-oriented focus: "I think that the work has evolved, and the Council needs to evolve as well. Our existing Council has been largely focused on conceptualization of what could happen, but I think we need a group now, including some new members, that can focus on the implementation and actualization of what can happen." One option to modify the Council for Phase III would be for members to commit to carrying out specific actions to promote Phase III milestones before the next meeting, and for those actions to be on the agenda for the next meeting.