

## New England Secondary School Consortium August 2009 Evaluation Brief

### Introduction

Several notable events have taken place since the Donahue Institute's first evaluation brief issued in June 2009. As the summer began, teams from throughout New England (including the four Consortium states as well as Connecticut and Massachusetts) gathered for a full-day conversation on assessment with John Tanner, Director for Innovative Measures at the Council of Chief State Schools Officers. At the June 19<sup>th</sup> working group meeting, Mark Tucker, President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Center on Education and the Economy, spoke to the group about strategies for raising state education performance to international benchmarks. June also saw the first of two summer meetings with data coordinators from each state, the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), and the Donahue Institute, to begin their work on capturing NESSC baseline data.

On July 16<sup>th</sup> the NESSC summer conference brought together district teams of educators and Working Group members from each state to learn about the NESSC mission and goals, to share their own experiences with transformation, and to provide feedback on the developing policy and global benchmarking tools. The following week, the two-day New Hampshire Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) Summer Institute attracted attendees from two Consortium states (New Hampshire and Rhode Island). The conference provided participants with the opportunity to deepen their understanding of ELO and gave teams time to meet.

The inaugural meeting of the NESSC Council was held in early August. Facilitated by GSP, this meeting brought together approximately 60 participants including leaders from business, education, and government within each Consortium state. The goal of the meeting was to build support for the Consortium mission and goals, and to work toward agreement on a *Declaration of Commitment*.

In addition to these gatherings, significant work has occurred on the development of an NESSC theory of action/logic model. Early drafts of the model were first shared in the spring and subsequently revised after numerous consultations with GSP, Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) staff, and, most recently, with state leads. The current version was disseminated and shared with attendees at the NESSC Council meeting.

The following sections report on recent progress made by the Consortium in three specific areas:

1. Findings from the preliminary survey of DOE staff
2. Common measurements for reporting on NESSC progress
3. Evidence of progress

### 1. Findings From Preliminary Survey of DOE Staff

Last spring, the Donahue Institute administered a pre-survey to 22 individuals, most of whom are state DOE officials or NESSC state liaisons. (A post-survey will be administered toward the end of Phase 1). The goal of this survey is to assess any changes which may occur in any of the following areas: participants' understanding of the six major NESSC strategies; views toward progress in implementing these strategies; beliefs on whether the Consortium will accomplish these strategies; and the extent to which the Consortium adds value beyond individual state efforts.

Pre-survey data were analyzed in a variety of ways, which provided an opportunity to examine patterns of response and to identify trends for comparison to post-survey data.<sup>1</sup> The most consistent positive finding is that respondents indicate they understand what the six major NESSC strategies are meant to accomplish, and that they believe the Consortium adds value beyond their own state efforts towards accomplishing these strategies. Interestingly, data suggest that respondents feel less strongly about whether there is common understanding across the four states on what these strategies are meant to accomplish. And, as can be expected on any pre-survey, there was far less agreement on whether adequate progress had been made to date regarding implementation of Consortium strategies.

**GSP has crafted a NESSC workplan which details the six major Consortium strategies and progress related to each. Pre-survey findings suggest that the general components of this plan, and the specific progress made within each strategy, be updated and reviewed frequently with Working Group members (as they've done in the past), DOE staff, and other Consortium stakeholders.**

## 2. Common Measurements for Reporting on NESSC Progress

Over the summer, GSP convened two meetings with data coordinators from each state, along with John Tapper from the Donahue Institute, to prepare recommendations for reporting key measurements of progress identified in the NESSC grant. The work of this group represents substantial advancement toward the Phase 1 goal of calibrating measures of grant indicators across all Consortium states. As a reminder, the goals by the end of Phase 1 are to:

1. Implement a cross-state agreement on methods to measure a four-year cohort graduation rate.
2. Develop a process to measure student enrollment in two- and four-year college degree programs.
3. Establish common criteria to determine how students will be identified as dropouts.
4. Establish a process to measure and gather data on enrollment in college developmental/remedial courses.

Decisions related to the above apply strictly to measuring progress for grant purposes, not for state policy. **However, states may find this work useful as an entre into conversations at the state level around implementing new policies and/or practices concerning these measures.**

The group reached consensus on ways to meet the above goals. Conversations around the methods for collecting and reporting these data for the NESSC baseline report have started and will continue in subsequent meetings. The following table summarizes key decisions reached for reporting on these measures, along with notes on how these decisions were arrived at.

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion of pre-survey data analysis in this brief is purposely limited so as to prevent any potential bias inadvertently introduced to post-survey responses.

**NESSC Data Table**

Goal to be Reported	Key Decision Points	Method for Reporting	Comments
High School Dropout Rate	States currently use a variety of methods to calculate and report their dropout rates. The data group recommended using a similar methodology supported by the National Governor’s Association (NGA) when calculating graduation rates (see below). The advantage of using this method is that graduation and dropout rates will now be related in logical ways; when the graduation rate goes up, the dropout rate will go down. This has not always been the case with dropout calculations.	(# of students in adjusted freshman cohort ) - (graduates + students still enrolled + other completers) = dropouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Similar cohort rate to graduation rate</li> <li>▪ Requires completion based on state standards</li> </ul>
High School Graduation Rate	All states in the Consortium report calculating graduation rates according to NGA recommendations. However, there were differences in whether certain students were excluded or reassigned in the calculation. The group agreed to use a common set of criteria for calculating this rate.	(# of graduating seniors) / (# of first-time freshman +/- transfers in or out)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No exemptions will be made for SpEd or ELL students</li> <li>▪ Same calculations will be used for reporting five-year and six-year rates</li> </ul>
College Matriculation Rate	Discussion about how to gather data on college matriculation centered around use of the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data. Two of the states are current members, and the other two have plans to join in the near future. The group decided to test the quality of NSC data with a small pilot study. John Tapper was tasked with exploring other potential sources of data, such as the census.	Students who are reported as matriculated at a two- or four-year college using NSC data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There is some concern over capturing students who take a year off</li> <li>▪ Concerns were expressed about the cost and possible quality of NSC data</li> </ul>
College Readiness	The most difficult of the measures to capture is college readiness. The group recommended using a variety of measures, including: (1) college remedial class membership, (2) scores on college placements tests like Accuplacer, (3) freshman success/failure rates, and (4) SAT scores. The composite of these data may provide a picture of college readiness throughout the region.	Composite of the following data: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Attendance in remedial classes</li> <li>2. Scores on placement tests</li> <li>3. Freshman success/failure rates</li> <li>4. SAT scores</li> </ol>	
College Success Rate	See College Matriculation Rate above regarding issues and plans with using NSC data.	(# of students graduating within 6 years) / (# of students entering college in the year in which they graduated high school)	

### 3. Evidence of Progress

The Consortium has experienced some early success toward meeting Phase 1 goals. The following section highlights evidence of progress on four specific strategies. These examples are meant to draw attention to recent activity and do not represent a complete list of Consortium achievements.

#### Strategy

**Refine and build consensus and commitment concerning what high school graduates need to know, be able to do, and hold as habits of mind.**

- By bringing together leaders from education, business, and government, the NESSC Council meeting presented a significant opportunity to establish a group of recognized and respected state leaders who could become a “cadre of champions” for NESSC success. Evidence of the meeting’s success could be seen in the many Council members who expressed their enthusiasm for moving the Consortium agenda forward in their states and asked for specific tasks to begin the process of doing so.
- During the Council meeting, state chiefs (or in Rhode Island’s case, her proxy) affirmed the mission of the Consortium to build multi-state and cross-state agreements and understandings. New Hampshire’s commissioner used the term “bold” to describe the kinds of reform to which states must apply themselves. Several participants at that meeting articulated the advantages that working in a multi-state context provides, including the sharing of resources and the validation that comes from the political cover of other states involved in similar efforts.

#### Strategy

**Shape and align state and local policies to support this new consensus and commitment.**

- The ongoing work of scholars from the Center for Educational Policy Analysis (CEPA) to identify state high-leverage education policies promises to be very beneficial. CEPA’s work offers the Consortium a concrete High Leverage Policy (HLP) tool that has the potential to (1) help state DOEs and schools evaluate policies aimed at transformation, and (2) map progress on practices – at the state and local levels – that promote high student achievement.

#### Strategy

**Participate in international benchmarking exercises to assess standards, instruction, professional development, and assessment within a world-class comparative cohort.**

- The GSP developed and facilitated a process for Working Group members to engage in an extensive effort to review research related to international benchmarking. Thought not finalized yet, the resulting Global Benchmarking tools offer promise to initiate dialogue about where a school and/or district might fall along a range of dimensions that have been determined to be associated with high student performance.
- Trial use of the Global Benchmarking tools at July and August meetings solicited positive response on both their substance and utility. Members of the Working Group and state chiefs publicly expressed their support for the utility of both the Global Benchmarking and High Leverage Policy tools and for the work that produced it.

## Strategy

### **Develop strategic partnerships and undertake systemic planning in order to sustain this (Consortium) effort in an era of decreasing resources.**

- There were several instances at the August NESSC Council meeting where chiefs and members of the state legislatures expressed a desire for *common* (not just similar) language and strategies as reform efforts move forward. Commissioners from all four states are also engaged in conversations about application for Race to the Top funds and have stated that the Consortium is the major impetus for their collaboration on high school reform. Finally, Council members identified continued planning as part of their agenda for its October meeting.
- A NESSC theory of action/logic model was disseminated at the Council meeting which describes the initial conditions, timeline, substantive activities, and ultimate goals of the Consortium. Since March, drafts of the plan have been reworked and edited with the goal of capturing the work of the NESSC in a visual model. The creation and continued refinement of this tool provides further evidence of progress towards strengthening cross-state understanding and systemic planning.

## **Actions for Consideration**

1. GSP has crafted a NESSC workplan that details the six major Consortium strategies and progress related to each. Pre-survey findings suggest that the general components of this plan, and the specific progress made within each strategy, be updated and reviewed frequently with working group members (as they've done in the past), DOE staff, and other Consortium stakeholders.
2. The data coordinators' recommendations for measuring NESSC progress should be shared and discussed within each state Working Group (and with other respective DOE officials if deemed appropriate). In addition, early conversations indicate that the work of this team may serve as an entre into conversations at the state level around implementing new polices and/or practices concerning these measures.
3. The NESSC theory of action/logic model might prove an effective tool for promoting the Consortium's vision, mission, goals, and strategies. As planning begins for Phase 2, this model may help to tie together the various components of the project while ensuring the proper indicators of progress are collected.