

New England Secondary Schools Consortium December 2009 Evaluation Brief

Introduction

Consistent with the UMass Donahue Institute's (UMDI) collaborative approach to program evaluation, we are pleased to present to the members of NESSC our third evaluation brief. As in the past, our aim is to make these briefings timely, meaningful, and useful to all key stakeholders. In addition, the formative feedback provided is intended to inform stakeholders of emerging evidence of progress and potential challenges ahead.

The findings summarized in this brief are based on data collected by UMDI from March through mid-December 2009, with a particular emphasis on the time period since our last brief was issued, in August 2009. **The Consortium has been very active since then, and actions taken by the Consortium, or on its behalf, have been numerous and multifaceted.**

UMDI has been engaged in a variety of information-gathering activities which form the basis of this brief. These have included attendance at Working Group meetings, the review of draft documents created for the Consortium (e.g., High Leverage Policy, Taking Performance Assessment to Scale, Global Best Practices in Context), and notes/recordings of interviews with educators from four states' departments of education (we plan to conduct interviews with the fifth, Connecticut, in January), grant coordinators from the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), and staff from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF).

This report returns to two themes discussed in previous briefs (commitment, and roles and responsibilities) and explores three new ones. The brief is organized into the following parts:

1. Changing Context
2. Commitment
3. Communication
4. Roles and Responsibilities
5. Role of NESSC Involvement in Assessment
6. Actions for Consideration

The questions of what respondents reported as critical remaining work in Phase I, and how to position the Consortium for Phase II, are important and deserving of special attention. These will be explored in a shorter brief to be issued in January.

1. Changing Context

Developments within both the political and economic arenas have had noteworthy impacts on the Consortium's work, creating potential stresses upon continued motivation, and changes in the future direction of regional collaboration.

Political Context

Over the last six months, some of the anticipated benefits of regional collaboration have changed as a result of decisions made at the federal level. Foremost has been the decision that major incentives will not be offered to consortium applicants for general Race to the Top (RTTT) funding, as many NESSC members had hoped. Several states have indicated that they plan to submit individual applications for RTTT. Some states have already discussed reorganizing their departments around the four major RTTT priorities. How well aligned state's proposals/practices are with Consortium goals and objectives may have significant impact on the future of the Consortium. **In the weeks and months ahead, it will be important for NESSC members to consider what effect, if any, RTTT and other federal initiatives have on NESSC membership and attention.**

Though interest in acquiring additional funding to carry out the work of Phase II remains high, respondents across states reported that the loss of opportunity to apply for RTTT funds as a consortium was not a deterrent to their participation in NESSC. And, respondents report being determined to continue the work they've started, even if federal/political pressures make things more complicated or if funding for Phase II does not materialize. Several members stated that the highest value from the Consortium comes from sharing ideas and resources. One person expressed that a significant sign of progress in the midst of the changing context is that, "We're still meeting. We're still talking."

Another change in context for the Consortium has been the Common Core Standards Initiative. The collaboration of the NGA, CCSSO, Achieve, ACT, and the College Board is an effort to create national standards for college and career readiness. These standards strive to be research-based and benchmarked to international standards. All Consortium states have signed on to this initiative through their governors. Members of the Consortium report that, while the Common Core Standards Initiative is important, the standards it identifies do not adequately address the 21st century skills and dispositions that are a focus of the NESSC grant. They have concerns that key dispositions that are important to transformation may not be included in final Common Core standards. **Several members said they would like the Consortium to move ahead with its work on standards (there was a draft of these standards presented at the November Working Group meeting) while continuing to infuse these conversations with information related to the Common Core Standards Initiative.**

Economic Context

Respondents report that the national economic crisis has had significant impacts on their respective states' departments of education (DOE). Evidence of these impacts can be seen in reduction of staff, increase in workloads, changes in job descriptions and departmental missions, limits on travel, and scheduling challenges resulting from furlough days.

Loss of personnel has caused some DOEs to restructure and rethink their work in order to meet the needs of their constituents. Diminishing human resources have reportedly made transformation work more complex. Although a few respondents reported that the pressure to meet demands with fewer staff has created some positive reinvention of department organization and processes, more have said that economic difficulties have had a negative impact on NESSC participation by restricting travel and limiting participation in regional events. **Interviewees suggest that fallout from the economic crisis has**

increased the need to expand NESSC communication channels to fill some of the information gaps which have resulted. In addition, diminishing resources have made attendance at NESSC meetings an added challenge. (More on NESSC commitment and communications follow in sections two and three of this report).

Connecticut's Impact on NESSC

In ways that have not yet been fully explored, the addition of Connecticut to NESSC will likely impact the Consortium context. For example, Connecticut is not part of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), and it has a larger and more diverse student population than other member states. So far Connecticut's participation in Consortium events has been limited. UMDI will be scheduling a site visit to the Connecticut DOE in the near future to explore the ways that these new Consortium members see themselves participating in regional collaboration and the added value they will bring.

2. Commitment

Despite changes in leadership, context, and resources, commitment to the Consortium and its mission for high school reform remains high.

Virtually every interviewee this fall expressed the opinion that NESSC is an important initiative worthy of their time and effort. Evidence of commitment was found in several areas, including: enthusiasm and action by new Council members; continuity of effort despite changes in commissioners; and Working Group members working around travel restrictions.

Action by NESSC Council Members

Respondents cited the October 16th Council meeting as a pivotal NESSC event. During this meeting several Council members demonstrated their desire to champion NESSC initiatives. For example, one member, a Rhode Island state legislator, promised to lead an effort to pass legislative resolutions, based on the NESSC Declaration of Agreement, in all Consortium states. He also plans to work with GSP to write an op-ed piece on the Consortium and its mission and to distribute it to major newspapers in New England. Another Council member, who serves on her Vermont State Board of Education, has scheduled a presentation to the Board this winter to inform them of NESSC's work and how the Consortium's mission, goals, and activities link with the upcoming long-term strategic education plan for Vermont. **All Council members interviewed this fall were enthusiastic in their support of the Consortium and in their belief in the importance of its work.**

Continuity of Effort Despite Changes in Commissioners

Despite changes in commissioners, those who were interviewed by UMDI appear committed to continuing the work of NESSC. Commissioners meet through a conference call every month – an event which at least one commissioner thinks would not have occurred without NESSC. They describe this time as an essential place for them to engage in high-level conversations related to school reform in general, and to specific NESSC related issues when necessary. At the same time, **the participation of commissioners has been somewhat inconsistent at NESSC events, Council meetings, and for evaluation interviews. The participation of commissioners in upcoming events could be an important measure of states' commitment to NESSC, particularly in discussions around Phase II.** To date, UMDI has not concluded its interviews with commissioners but hopes to conduct these in January and to report again on emerging leadership matters in the next evaluation brief.

Restrictions on Travel

One of the more striking displays of commitment has been the efforts of several Working Group members to attend NESSC events, especially in light of policies that make travel outside DOE offices problematic. Due to budgetary constraints, some states do not pay for time spent at Consortium events, nor can they reimburse their staff for travel expenses. Despite this deterrent, some Working Group members continue to attend events on their own time and money – a convincing expression of commitment. Still, **spotty attendance at meetings remains an ongoing issue and concern to several respondents. Given the rapid increase in Phase I activity and now Phase II planning, enhanced meeting participation is more important than ever and is a topic the Consortium may want to address.**

3. Communication

As Consortium members report feeling overwhelmed by workloads, their need to be kept updated and informed about NESSC activity appears greater than ever.

This fall there was greater interest in expanding communication strategies within the Consortium, and with K-12 educators and the general public, than during previous periods. A desire by members to stay informed through a wide range of communication updates has rapidly increased information needs. Respondents reported their interest and desire for the following:

- Increased summary information of meetings – Members would like summary notes from NESSC meetings made more readily available. GSP has recently begun doing this.
- Regular, timely updates highlighting news and progress from the Consortium – Several members suggested that they could make good use of regular updates, perhaps weekly, to assist them in informing DOE colleagues and educators across their states about the Consortium and its work.
- Brochure to promote the Consortium – Similarly, a number of members said that they could make good use of a promotional brochure and/or one-page summary. If available, they would distribute these in a variety of settings, including superintendent meetings, conferences, and as part of press releases to the general public.
- Timeline of Consortium events – Communication directors suggested that a timeline of key Consortium events would benefit them in planning ways to incorporate important information into their existing communication structures.
- Frequent review of the NESSC work plan – Several members indicated that the NESSC work plan offers participants an opportunity to more formally recognize progress and helps to clarify the connections between activities in Phases I and II. They suggest updating and reviewing the work plan with Consortium members more frequently.
- Up-to-date NESSC website – Respondents rarely mentioned accessing the NESSC website. This lack of attention may be telling, as the website does not yet appear to be commonly thought of as the central location for accessing key NESSC information, such as meeting dates, agendas, minutes, contact information, and more.

GSP has recently responded to some of these communication needs. Over the last few weeks they have: produced the first NESSC Briefing; started the process of designing a new website that will integrate online communications strategies and tools; created internal briefings to communications directors at DOEs and NMEF, NEBHE, and NEASC; disseminated a series of communication norms for consideration by Working Group members; begun producing and sending out summary meeting notes; and updated the NESSC work plan.

Though GSP has started to deliver much of what Consortium members have requested to strengthen communications, **rapid growth in the desire for information about NESSC and its activities may necessitate expanding communication capacity both at GSP and the state level, something the original configuration of the grant may not have fully taken into account. Further, the creation of a strategic communications plan – one which provides a timeline and description of communication tools/strategies, targeted audiences, and uses – would likely be well received and put to good use.**

4. Roles and Responsibilities

In the June evaluation brief, UMDI noted that the roles of GSP and NMEF were still evolving and somewhat unclear to many NESSC members. UMDI revisited this topic during fall interviews.

Disagreement on the Role and Responsibility of GSP

Respondents reported greater personal clarity regarding the role of GSP in the Consortium, though there continues to be some discrepancy among Consortium members' understanding of what that role is. For example, some view GSP as enabling the work of the Consortium by providing facilitation and advice and by generating tools/resources. Conversely, other respondents feel that GSP has assumed more of a leadership role in the Consortium – a notion with which these respondents are uncomfortable.

The absence of a clearer definition of what constitutes Consortium progress may be contributing to this disagreement over roles and responsibilities. For example, some respondents point to the creation of products by GSP, like the Global Best Practices Tool, as clear evidence of Consortium progress. Others assert that the creation of such a tool represents work done on behalf of the Consortium but is not evidence of Consortium collaboration or cross-region use and, therefore, would define progress in this regard as premature. **There may be value in clarifying the distinctions between progress made on behalf of the Consortium by its intermediary, and progress made by the Consortium for regional policies and practices. It should also be kept in mind that some respondents believe this distinction is irrelevant, as the actions taken on behalf of, or in collaboration with, the Consortium are perceived as one and the same.**

Importantly, commissioners have not conveyed any concern about GSP taking on too much of a leadership role. Each expressed a similar view that if GSP were to overstep their role as they understand it, they would let their feelings be known immediately.

Recent Success May Help to Define Role/Responsibility of GSP to the Consortium

Over the last few weeks it appears that GSP has found success by instituting a new – or perhaps more transparent – strategy of moving the work of the Consortium forward. Three examples are relevant. First, several respondents mentioned the development of the Global Best Practices and High Leverage Policy tools as major accomplishments of Phase I to date. The management and oversight provided by GSP throughout the process, while keeping Leads and other NESSC members “in the loop,” was acknowledged by many as critical to the development of these tools. Second, one outcome of the October 16 NESSC Council meeting was a proposal, offered by a Rhode Island state Senator, to submit a joint legislative resolution adopted by each state in support of the Consortium's work. This Senator has credited GSP with working with him to draft language for his resolution. In turn, the NESSC Working Group is now scheduled to discuss the extent to which passage of this resolution is possible in other states. Finally, GSP has begun to set up times for in-depth state meetings to discuss goals and activities for Phase II. They expect to bring these ideas back to the full group for discussion at the January 8th Working Group meeting. **In each case, GSP has filled a similar role: to help with decision making and follow-through by moving the process forward between meetings and sharing updates/progress**

with various NESSC teams. Although direct feedback on GSP's role in these events has not been fully captured, it does appear to have been successful.

Role and Responsibility of Intermediary for Phase II

Finally, with respect to roles and responsibilities, several respondents wondered whether the existing Consortium model would be adequate for Phase II. Some expressed apprehension that a single intermediary would have the skills and capacity of guiding change in policies, assessment, and transformative school practices, as well as facilitating meetings and coordinating communication across five states. Further, some expressed concern that a major policy role for GSP in Phase II could dilute their efforts to use their widely acknowledged skills and experience with promoting change at the school level.

Role of Nellie Mae Education Foundation

The role of NMEF with the Consortium appears to have become less confusing than it was in the spring. By and large, respondents expressed that they "have gotten used to NMEF presence" and are not concerned by it. Rather, they see NMEF as mostly interested in monitoring progress, encouraging at appropriate times, and engaging to a limited extent when necessary. It is of note that several interviewees highlighted the positive and valuable role of the NMEF president/CEO at the October Council meeting. These respondents mentioned his encouragement, insights into school transformation, and full endorsement of Connecticut into the Consortium as memorable and appreciated.

5. NESSC Involvement in Assessment

Assessment represents an area where the multi-state collaboration could position the region well for federal funds as the U.S. Secretary of Education has set aside up to \$350 million of RTTT funds for the purpose of supporting states in the development of a next generation of assessments. Several respondents reported that a RTTT assessment proposal would represent significant progress toward regional collaboration and cited how the success of the NECAP has already demonstrated the benefits of a regional effort in assessment.

Discussions on assessment have taken place at a variety of Consortium meetings, including those with John Tanner, and have focused on the creation of assessments that differ in approach and method from current large-scale tests like NECAP. As a result, some respondents report concerns that DOE representatives to New England assessment meetings may have differing priorities than the Consortium.

In response to this concern, some state assessment team members were invited to, and have participated in, the most recent Working Group meetings. At the same time, GSP met individually with assessment directors and other appropriate DOE staff, in an attempt to expand their understandings of NESSC and to bridge differences, whether real or perceived, between the groups. This approach – consistent with the GSP model described in the previous section – appears to have paid off. Following a recent discussion, NESSC commissioners have agreed to meet within the next few weeks, along with their assessment directions and Leads, to discuss the Consortium work on assessments, existing state assessments, and the promise of RTTT assessment funding. This gathering may be a critical point in the work of the Consortium around assessment, and the fact that the five Consortium states (Massachusetts is also planning on attending) will be participating is somewhat attributable to the collegiality that has developed between the states. Of course, **if the Consortium proceeds with plans to submit or be part of a RTTT grant for assessment, the issues of roles and responsibilities should be resolved between Consortium members and the New England assessment directors. Even without a grant application, efficient use of resources would suggest that these groups work together to support assessment in the region.**

Actions for Consideration

1. In the weeks and months ahead, it will be important for NESSC members to consider what effect, if any, Race to the Top and other federal initiatives have on NESSC membership and attention.
2. Several members expressed that they would like the Consortium to move ahead with its work on standards while simultaneously considering important information related to the Common Core Standards Initiative.
3. Participation at NESSC meetings and gatherings has been inconsistent. Attendance of commissioners at key events, Council meetings, and for evaluation interviews has been unreliable. Their attendance at upcoming events could be an important measure of commitment to NESSC, particularly as discussions around Phase II are now occurring. Spotty attendance by Working Group members at their regular meetings remains a concern to several respondents. Given the rapid increase in Phase I activity and now Phase II planning, enhanced meeting participation may be more important than ever and a topic the Consortium may want to address.
4. Rapid growth in the desire for information about NESSC and its activities may necessitate expanding communication capacity both at GSP and the state level, something the original configuration of the grant may not have fully taken into account. Further, the creation of a strategic communications plan – one which provides a timeline and description of communication tools/strategies, targeted audiences, and uses – would likely be well received and put to good use.
5. The absence of a clearer definition of what constitutes Consortium progress may be contributing to disagreement over the roles and responsibilities of GSP. There may be value in clarifying distinctions between progress made on behalf of the Consortium by its intermediary, and progress made by the Consortium for regional policies and practices. It should also be kept in mind that some respondents believe this distinction is irrelevant, as they see actions taken on behalf of, or in collaboration with, the Consortium as one and the same.
6. Several members reported that a RTTT assessment proposal would represent significant progress toward regional collaboration and cited how the success of the NECAP has already demonstrated the benefits of a regional effort in assessment.
7. Over the past several weeks, a number of opportunities have arisen that promise to move forward the NESSC goal of “creating champions” and “building public will for change.” These include the proposed regional legislative resolution, Vermont’s consideration of the connections between NESSC goals/objectives and their strategic plan for education, and the promise of states adopting similar methods of collecting and reporting key data indicators (as detailed in the August evaluation brief). In addition, very recently, NESSC commissioners have agreed to meet, along with their assessment directors and Leads, to discuss the connections between the Consortium’s work on assessments, their own state assessments, and the potential for Race to the Top assessment funding. Together, these and other “high profile” NESSC activities are likely to attract interest from important constituents and stakeholders in the region.