

New England Secondary Schools Consortium January 2010 Evaluation Brief

Introduction

As the NESSC grant enters its final months, discussions have focused on the transition from planning activities detailed in Phase I to the more active transformation envisioned in Phase II. During fall interviews, the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) asked interviewees their opinions on the upcoming changes from Phase I to Phase II. This evaluation brief provides a synthesis of opinions/comments from respondents including: three state commissioners of education; Consortium Leads; Council members; Working Group members; and directors of the Great Schools Partnership (GSP).

This brief was constructed from answers UMDI received to two questions that were asked at every interview:

- What would you like to see happen over the remainder Phase I?
- What do you think needs to happen to maximize chances for NESSC receiving funding to implement Phase II?

Answers to these questions overlap significantly. Few of the answers interviewees gave were related solely to the completion of Phase I or to positioning the Consortium to receive funding for Phase II. As a result, the themes that were identified from respondent comments have been unified to reflect a transition between phases. Respondents reported that the Consortium would benefit from:

1. Consolidating and Coming to Agreement on Assessment
2. Clarifying Efforts and Formalizing Commitments
3. Expanding the Consortium Message to a Wider Audience
4. Adopting a Common Method for Reporting Data
5. Formalizing Relationships with Higher Education

1. Consolidating and Coming to Agreement on Assessment

“Implementing the John Tanner network project (on assessment) or some similar structure, before the end of Phase I, is important to show our intent to coordinate our practices.”

Interviewees suggested that coming to agreement on an assessment initiative would be a major step for both completing Phase I and being well positioned for Phase II funding. The nature of proposed new assessments and/or a regional assessment program has been described as different from the paper-and-pencil tests that are commonly used to assess student learning. Respondents used terms like “formative assessment,” “demonstration of learning,” and “capstone” to describe potential approaches to a new regional assessment program.

A number of respondents suggested that it was imperative for state assessment directors and Consortium representatives to work together on any assessment initiative. Consortium members pointed to the NECAP as a potential model for collaboration on the creation of high school assessments. These respondents reported that NECAP has captured attention nationally for the success of both regional cooperation and the quality of results. **Creating a formal Consortium agreement on assessment could demonstrate coordinated regional action and a commitment to actualize plans for assessment made in Phase I.**

“Participants will need to come together for a Race to the Top assessment grant.”

Though not a unanimous sentiment, several respondents reported a desire for the Consortium to submit a Race to the Top (RTTT) assessment grant. Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education on submission requirements for assessment grants has not been finalized. There is no definitive answer, yet, as to whether a “smaller” consortium like the NESSC will be able to apply for one of these grants.

There was some difference of opinion among respondents about the potential organizational structure of a Consortium RTTT assessment grant. Commissioners, state assessment directors, Working Group members, and the Great Schools Partnership could all potentially be involved in such a grant. Before a regional assessment grant could go forward, interviewees suggested that the roles of these players would need to be more clearly defined. **Applying for a RTTT assessment grant with a clear collaborative organizational model might consolidate assessment planning in Phase I and could better position the Consortium for significant funding in Phase II.**

2. Clarifying Efforts and Formalizing Commitments

There is a desire among Consortium members to formalize, to “make concrete,” some of the actions and agreements discussed by the Consortium to this point. These include formal commitments of attention and resources from commissioners, a detailed reworking and adoption of the Workplan, the creation of interim benchmarks for gauging progress on key Consortium goals, and strengthening collaboration with higher education organizations.

“There isn’t a clear directive from all commissioners.”

Commissioners have repeatedly expressed their support for the Consortium, typically in general terms. Several interviewees, including some of the commissioners themselves, indicated they are interested in further clarifying specific areas of that commitment. **The Declaration of Agreement might serve as a critical document/tool for specifying the commitment of NESSC commissioners.**

“I think there has to be clear agreement on the Workplan and how we move that forward.”

Several respondents expressed interest in having a focused discussion on the specifics of the NESSC Workplan. **These Consortium members believe that reviewing and, if necessary, revising the specific activities detailed in the plan will give the movement clearer direction during this transition from Phase I into Phase II.**

“What needs to be done? Create metrics for results (work backwards). Create benchmarks to see progress over the years of Phase II.”

Some Consortium members see the creation of interim benchmarks – yearly targets for progress on key goals – as a useful strategy for clarifying Consortium goals and for providing formative feedback on the efficacy of the movement during Phase II. **Consortium agreement on interim benchmarks for major grant goals may help to solidify expectations for annual progress and demonstrate how the planning and activities in Phase I leads to school transformation in Phase II.**

Efforts are underway to link higher education organizations with the goals and mission of NESSC. Respondents cited several areas in which collaboration with higher education would benefit the Consortium, such as the development of regional agreements related to college admission and/or data sharing. Such agreements hold the potential for facilitating college attendance, a key goal of the

Consortium. **Formalizing the support and resources of higher education could be a major step for moving the Consortium into Phase II.**

3. Expanding the Consortium Message to a Wider Audience

(We need) ... “some real concrete examples that we can then take back to schools that say, ‘You are not sure how to redesign your high school? Here is how we start.’ ... it is simple and in plain English and common sense, because what we are talking about is really common sense.”

(There)... “needs to be more communication about the Consortium and its mission. What's the general public know about graduation rates? And other Consortium roles? We need to evangelize this.”

Several respondents report that, in order to move to Phase II effectively, the Consortium has to get its message out to a much wider audience (and cited a number of benefits which may result from doing so). This includes creating easily understood examples of the goals and mission of NESSC and propagating them throughout the education community and the public at large. **The Consortium might benefit from the broader support that could develop as a result of greater public exposure, particularly outside education circles.**

Several respondents expressed a concern about the lack of involvement of education leadership organizations – teachers unions, principal organizations, superintendent groups. Outreach and involvement to leadership organizations was originally part of the Workplan but has received limited attention. **The Consortium may need to find ways to reach out to education leadership groups to help support alignment between organizational goals and missions.**

4. Adopting a Common Method for Reporting Data

Many interviewees suggested that the work done by the data representatives (i.e., advising UMDI on the creation of measures and methods for reporting graduation rates, dropout rates, post-secondary matriculation and success, and college readiness) could form the basis of a Consortium agreement for publicly reporting these same measures. Such an agreement would create comparable measures for reported data throughout the region. **Several respondents, including some commissioners, believe that formalizing an agreement to commonly report key Consortium measures of progress would be a welcome and important step. Likewise, they suggested that an agreement would be a significant Consortium accomplishment.**

Actions for Consideration

1. Creating a formal Consortium agreement on assessment could demonstrate coordinated regional action and a commitment to actualize plans for assessment made in Phase I.
2. Applying for a Race to the Top assessment grant with a clear collaborative organizational model might consolidate assessment planning in Phase I and could better position the Consortium for significant funding in Phase II.
3. The Declaration of Agreement might serve as a critical document/tool for specifying the commitment of NESSC commissioners.
4. Reviewing and, if necessary, revising the specific activities detailed in the NESSC Workplan will give the movement clearer direction during this transition from Phase I into Phase II.
5. Consortium agreement on interim benchmarks for major grant goals may help to solidify expectations for annual progress and demonstrate how the planning and activities in Phase I leads to school transformation in Phase II
6. Formalizing the support and resources of higher education could be a major step for moving the Consortium into Phase II.
7. The Consortium might benefit from the broader support that could develop as a result of greater public exposure, particularly outside education circles.
8. The Consortium may need to find ways to reach out to education leadership groups – teachers unions, principal organizations, superintendent groups – to help support alignment between organizational goals and missions.
9. Formalizing an agreement to commonly report key Consortium measures of progress might be a welcome and important step. Likewise, such an agreement could be a significant Consortium accomplishment.