

New England Secondary School Consortium June 2009 Evaluation Brief

Introduction

As evaluator of the New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESSC), the UMass Donahue Institute (the Institute) will be providing bi-monthly evaluation briefs to the NESSC Working Group members. Consistent with the Institute's collaborative approach to program evaluation, 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.

This first evaluation brief is based on data we have gathered since the beginning of March 2009. These data include reviews of past and current Working Group and planning meeting minutes, various drafts of NESSC grant proposals to foundations, and notes/recordings of interviews with educators from the Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont Departments of Education (including DOE Commissioners and Deputies, State Leads, NESSC State Liaisons, etc.), grant coordinators from the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), and staff from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF).

The Institute conducted these interviews with a clear understanding that informant feedback will be considered confidential and that no one outside of the Institute's research team will be able to match comments with specific individuals. As such, this and all future evaluation briefs are written to maintain confidentiality at all times.

Our analysis focuses on several emerging themes, some of which will likely continue to receive attention in future reports to the extent meaningful progress is being achieved, while others will be more short-lived. We have intentionally selected a limited number of themes to keep the report at reasonable length, with an understanding that we will be returning to topics every two months. The themes identified for this report include:

1. Working in a Multi-state Context
2. Roles, Responsibilities, and Commitment
3. Career and Technical Education Involvement

1. Working in a Multi-state Context

Virtually all informants expressed a view that working in a multi-state context has been one of the most positive aspects of NESSC and expect that the collaborative nature which has evolved within the Consortium will continue to help support their state education reform efforts. For some informants, working with colleagues in other states has been the most important benefit the Consortium has provided.

Several participants suggested that being part of a multi-state effort provides political cover and legitimacy for high school transformation. For example, two participants commented:

"The Consortium provides us with strategies, models, and the cover of multiple states."

"Working in a multi-state context means that we're not doing this alone, that there are other states where this effort is taking place. We're working as a group to take advantage of regional collaboration."

Pace and Nature of Progress

Members of the NESSC expressed slightly different notions of what constitutes progress in Phase I. Conceptions of progress include a variety of semi-empirical methods (e.g., agreement on new policies, measurement of policy impact, increased number of high performing schools) as well as those based on perception (e.g., movement toward regional cooperation, enhanced communication, sharing of best practice).

Some informants suggest that progress can be shown through a movement toward transformation, though informants seem to have differences over how transformation should occur. These opinions appear to be related to more overarching beliefs about whether transformation takes place “top-down” or “bottom-up,” that is, whether change is best initiated in policies aimed at transformation or in changed school practices. Views about the direction of transformation appear to be more consistent across DOE staff at some states than others.

Whether Consortium members believe that progress has been made on Phase I goals seems somewhat related to their broader view of the purpose of collaboration. For some members in the Consortium, the exchange of ideas around school transformation that takes place informally and in multi-state meetings is the most important product of collaboration. For some of these participants, scaling up for the goals in the Gates / Nellie Mae grant confused the transformation agenda that was underway at the state level:

“The grant extended the horizon and moved us away from the concrete work.”

“The million dollars will go away. This exchange and collaboration won’t.”

For others, the goal of collaboration reaches beyond state efforts at reform. These participants see the Consortium as more than individual state efforts but rather as a regional *movement* to collectively transform the high school experience. The vision connected to this second view seems broader, conceived as happening over a longer period of time, and dependent on the regional planning described in Phase I of the grant.

These divergent views have led to a difference of opinion about the focus and pace of the grant. It has been reported that in some cases the work of the Consortium moved back timelines for state reform agendas to accommodate the regional collaboration called for by the grant. Some members believe this is a necessary step to benefit from the combined wisdom and political leverage afforded by a multi-state effort. Others see the change in emphasis – from state efforts at transformation to regional collaboration – as a step backwards. These members do not appear convinced that the regional collaboration will provide as much value as state efforts so far:

“The policy projects that the Consortium are involved in will be useful at some point down the road. Right now they detract from the real work. My sense is that we’re in park until something happens.”

“Benchmarking and policy review will eventually be finished and then the real work can get done. These pieces will help us (eventually) but we don’t need them now to move forward. Work needs to be in the schools now. This could, at least, happen concurrently with policy work.”

There are numerous comments from informants about the pace of progress. These comments can be categorized using the dichotomy above: some members want change in the schools now, others are willing to work on collaboration and policy with the belief that this will lead to change in Phase II. **We make no judgments about which belief is best but report this dichotomy to help inform the field.**

In our judgment, this is one of the most prevalent challenges to creating and sustaining the “unified movement” the Consortium is seeking.

The Institute is working on a conceptual logic model for the reform effort outlined in the grant. This may help to clarify the path to the goals outlined in the grant proposal. Perhaps this big picture view will better articulate the purposes and value of Phase I activities.

2. Roles, Responsibilities, and Commitment

The process of pulling the states, GSP, and NMEF together seems to have happened slowly and organically. As the collaboration between members of the NESSC has developed and expanded, so have the scope and goals of the work. We find that this has resulted in varying views on the roles and responsibilities that come with more formalized and far-reaching agreements within the Consortium. Importantly, this seems to have influenced the commitment of participants to engaging in the NESSC change process, and in some cases has led to confusion and frustration about the work that belongs to participating members and the work that belongs to the support organizations, GSP and NMEF.

These varying opinions on the roles that each member organization plays in moving the Consortium mission forward appear to be related to the historical development of the collaboration of these groups and focus on (1) GSP's role as facilitator of the grant, and (2) members' commitment to the Consortium.

Grant Facilitation

Many informants expressed great appreciation for the facilitation the GSP has provided to coordinate the multi-state effort. Strong facilitation is seen by many as critical to success. Comments included:

“The connection with David and Duke has been positive for our state. They've come to know what we're trying to do and are supportive whenever they can be.”

“Leadership has been critical to the effort – David and Duke have supplied this safe, comfortable venue for the conversation.”

At the same time, some Consortium members perceive that GSP has assumed a greater role than facilitator by shaping the actual agenda for school reform (importantly, these opinions were mixed, that is, both appreciative and critical of GSP's perceived role beyond that of facilitator). Several informants question whether the work of reform belongs to the states or to GSP. Conversations with GSP suggest that they see themselves squarely in the role of facilitator. The GSP view of the facilitator role seems to be that the work of reform belongs to the states but can be informed and organized through their contributions. **Since this confusion over roles came up in several conversations, it may be useful to clarify the GSP role for all members of the Working Group and for state Commissioners.**

Some informants have also expressed confusion over the role of NMEF in the Consortium. Confusion here appears to come from the novelty of having a funder engaged in the conversation of reform. One of NMEF informants summarized the relationship:

“We are not just funding partners. We're idea partners.”

Several Working Group members reported that they have never worked with a funder in this capacity before. It may be prudent to reiterate this role.

Several informants, notably the Commissioners interviewed, expressed appreciation for the efforts of the

NMEF staff in supporting the ongoing work of high school transformation. Opinions about the role and value that NMEF brings to the Consortium is one area where differences exist between some Commissioners and their department staff. For example, some chiefs report that their work has benefitted from positive interactions with the NMEF leaders while DOE staff mention limited interaction with NMEF. As leadership in three of the four states' DOEs has recently changed, we will continue to explore whether other differences between Commissioners and their departments appear, as this relationship could be critical to transformation efforts.

GSP, in their role as facilitators of the change effort, and NMEF working as an engaged funder, have been involved in both organizing and championing transformation. **These roles are developing greater specificity over time and thus clarification of pragmatic matters related to the roles – decision-making for example – may provide greater cohesion for the Consortium efforts.**

Commitment

Differences over the pace and focus of Consortium activities appear to have led to varying levels of commitment among participants. One of the key areas where commitments are tested is in discussions about Race to the Top funds available from the federal government. Some state organizations seem clear that they are committed to putting forward a grant for this funding with the Consortium. Other state organizations are not as clear about the benefits of the Consortium as partners for such a large grant. Points of view on the value of collaborating with the Consortium for federal dollars seem to mirror the dichotomy that exists on measuring progress: Those members that feel regional transformation efforts will provide the best hope for sustainable change tend to support collaborating for Race to the Top funds. Members who believe that state efforts aimed at immediate school reform are more desirable may not feel that the Consortium best serves their needs for a Race to the Top grant.

A second area where commitment to Consortium goals seems unclear is in attendance at Working Group meetings. Schedules and other commitments are part of the lives of every member of the Consortium. **Several informants, however, question commitment levels when attendance is spotty. This may be a topic for the group to address.**

3. CTE Involvement

We believe the Consortium could benefit from a conversation about the role of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in both the Working Group and in school transformation. The GSP, and the state DOEs, have embraced the involvement of CTE in high school transformation. Some members of the Consortium see the CTE conversation as necessary at the Working Group level – something for the Consortium to incorporate in its work. Others believe it necessary to create opportunity for CTE directors to meet separately in order to contribute. There is also a concern that significant CTE people have not been involved thus far. Our feeling is that there is confusion about the role of CTE and about how and when CTE should be involved. **A conversation about the role and structure of CTE involvement would likely be well received and beneficial.**

Actions for Consideration

1. Some confusion exists over the roles of GSP and NMEF within the Consortium. The group may benefit from reiteration and/or clarification of these roles.
2. There is a divergence of views about the philosophy, direction, and pace of school transformation. For example, some members want change in the schools now, others are willing to work on collaboration and policy with the belief that this will lead to school change in Phase II.

Greater consensus might be reached if these beliefs are discussed with all stakeholders in a “big picture” framework. A Theory of Action – now being developed by the Institute and GSP – might help facilitate this discussion.

3. The Consortium appears fragmented on the issue of commitment. A frank discussion about meeting attendance and Race to the Top plans might be helpful.
4. Confusion exists over the role of CTE. Clarification of the role of CTE, and CTE facilitators at DOEs, might add to CTE commitment and involvement.