



New England Secondary School Consortium

Phase I Evaluation Report

June 30, 2010



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New England Secondary School Consortium

Phase I 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 39 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 I Progress and Future Considerations

Overview of the New England Secondary School Consortium

Encompassing Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC, or the 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 – to support 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 and Melinda Gates Foundation for the initial 18-month planning phase of their work. Findings in this Phase I evaluation report were generated by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) through the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources of evidence. What follows is a summary of Phase I progress and several future considerations to NESSC participants and their partners. The full report that follows includes some additional sections including a history of the project, a review of the Consortium’s operational structure and effective practices, and more.

Summary of Progress

At its core, the Consortium has had success in establishing a foundation for regional, multi-state collaboration, and evidence points to a strong interest and commitment from a wide variety of stakeholders to continue these efforts. The vast majority of Consortium participants who were interviewed and/or completed the spring 2010 survey – including all four of the Commissioners who spoke with UMDI – saw value in participating in the NESSC and expressed their desire for it to continue. Survey respondents also agreed that other active NESSC participants are committed to continuing the Consortium.

Despite the changing federal context, severe constraints on state education budgets, and increasing demands placed on DOE personnel, Consortium participants reported strong support for the NESSC’s vision and mission. In fact, several participants cited the NESSC as being instrumental in sustaining a consistent and clear vision during the turbulent educational environment of the past 18 months. The majority of Consortium participants also agreed that their work together has resulted in a culture that promotes communication and trust between the five states, and that participants respect and value contributions made by each other, thus allowing them to build on each other’s strengths to promote NESSC goals. There is also particularly high agreement that the Consortium adds value beyond states’ own efforts toward implementing Phase I strategies. As a whole, these data represent critical and positive developments that speak well for the future of the Consortium.

Benefits Arising as a Result of the Multi-state Collaboration

Throughout Phase I, NESSC participants consistently identified the political and professional benefits arising from the multi-state context. These include the “political support and cover” that is afforded when neighboring states take on reform policies or initiatives, and the advantages of sharing ideas and knowledge between states.

1. Regional Collaboration Provided Political Cover and Enhanced Credibility

What Consortium participants mean by “political support and cover” is the advantage gained by being able to tell others that another state has already adopted, or is considering adopting, a new idea or policy. One Commissioner suggested that working with other states provides a sense of “movement” and an “engine” to move forward. Respondents also reported that situating innovative ideas in a larger regional initiative gave them greater credibility and that this ability to point to successful innovation in other states was important for moving efforts forward in their own states. As an example of this, Connecticut DOE officials indicated that they modeled their Capstone proposal – a key component of their high school graduation plan – on the success achieved in Rhode Island’s High School Capstone Project.

2. Exchange of Ideas and Knowledge

A number of Consortium participants spoke in positive terms about the team-like benefits of the multi-state context. One individual offered the example of how some state DOE employees had tried previously to work across state lines; these efforts usually began well, but after an exchange of emails, the endeavor would eventually “get dropped.” The Consortium, according to this person, provides a good formal frame for sustained collaboration. It was also suggested that the Consortium has been beneficial in that it provides a greater context of understanding in which education stakeholders and legislators can work together, and that this in turn allows for easier communication between the two groups, especially over issues like funding, statutes, and policies.

Challenges to Working in a Multi-state Context

The Consortium faced several challenges to its work during Phase I, most notably the shifting educational priorities arising from the federal DOE, the economic crisis sweeping the region, and the turnover of several significant “founding” members of the NESSC.

1. Impact of Race to the Top Competition

The competitive nature of RTTT proposals became more of a distraction than an advantage (as was originally hoped) to regional collaboration. The RTTT grant competition created a drain on human resources at state DOEs and pushed states to grapple with their policies about charter schools, evaluating teachers based on student performance, and relationships between state DOEs and teacher unions.

2. Budget Cuts and Competing Work Demands

The national economic crisis precipitated numerous reductions at state DOEs, making regional collaboration challenging. Restricted travel budgets and moratoria on out-of-state travel made participation at Consortium events difficult for many. Furthermore, these cuts reportedly led to DOE staff being asked to take on additional responsibilities for their departments, resulting in less time to devote to NESSC work.

3. Changeover in NESSC Leadership Presented Challenges to Continuity

Changes in Working Group membership and in Commissioners reportedly made consistency and continuity of effort challenging. Sustaining conversations around policy, standards, and practices was difficult when some members of the group were less informed or when time needed to be taken to bring new members up to speed.

Extent to Which Phase I has Established a Foundation for Success in Phase II

Phase I activity was, for the most part, aimed at setting the stage for innovative schools and practices that appear in Phase II, which in turn ultimately lead to the Consortium’s long-term goals. To varying degrees, Phase I did create a sturdy foundation for Phase II:

- The Consortium made strides toward its policy goals by incorporating its High Leverage Policy Framework, and the Phase II plan details strategies to expand its use.

- The League of Innovative Schools represents the next iteration of the previously named “Hot House Schools.” The plan includes a group of newly named “Implementing Schools,” which are those that “make a commitment to the goals and actions of the Consortium and commit to redesigning their schools in alignment with NESSC efforts.”
- The Consortium spent considerable time in Phase I discussing the expansion and revision of high school assessment in the region. The focus of these discussions was the creation of performance-based assessments to augment the standardized tests currently used.
- The ability to reach a common five-state agreement on data-reporting measures is one of the major NESSC accomplishments to date. The work of the Data Group also led to the creation of key annual goals which are outlined in the Phase II proposal.
- Several participants were encouraged by the possibility of the Working Group being composed differently in order to ensure a wider range of participants from each DOE and to create the possibility for individuals with similar roles to work together. The Phase II proposal reflects this thinking through the creation of Strategic Action Teams (SATs) whose purpose will be to strengthen the Consortium’s work in the areas of policy, school improvement, standards, data collection and analysis, and communication.

While evidence suggests that GSP led the development of Phase II through a collaborative process – involving multiple meetings with state DOE officials, the Working Group, and with the Council – nonetheless, survey responses captured from NESSC participants suggest that as many as 40% lack a clear understanding of Phase II activities and strategies. And, slightly more than one-third indicated that the potential Phase II activities and strategies being determined may not help their state accomplish their high school reform goals. As the planning and design of Phase II continues, the Consortium stands to benefit from ensuring all participants have a sufficient understanding of the proposed activities and strategies. Strategically, the Consortium may find it advantageous to step back and take stock of how closely aligned the current Phase II plan is with each of the NESSC states’ high school reform efforts.

Phase I Strategies and Accomplishments

The NESSC Phase I work plan presented six strategies for accomplishing the Consortium’s goals; progress was made, to varying degrees, on each of them.

Strategy 1

Redefine and build consensus and commitment – a movement – concerning what high school graduates need to know, are able to do, and hold as habits of mind.

Work on building consensus around 21st century standards – “what high school graduates need to know, are able to do, and hold as habits of mind” – was not a major focus of the Consortium during Phase I. Respondents offered several reasons as to why this strategy received less attention than others. The most common of these was that the national effort with similar goals, the Common Core State Standards Initiative, became a much larger initiative which stalled planned NESSC work on this strategy. GSP did, however, create a draft “crosswalk” document connecting current state standards with 21st century standards. Several respondents reported that this was an important step as they are not convinced that the Common Core will explicitly address 21st century standards, particularly those that are difficult to measure with standardized tests.

Strategy 2

Shape and align state and local policies to support a new consensus and commitment for 21st century standards, support new educational learning opportunities, and challenge schools to remove inadequate practices in favor of successful learning strategies.

The Consortium contracted with the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut to create the High Leverage Policy Framework, a conceptual tool for assessing the impact, or potential impact, of

policies on high school. The tool was rolled out at the summer 2009 Council meeting and has reportedly been used by several state DOEs and other education policy groups within the Consortium. It was also introduced and disseminated to all attendees at the High School Redesign in Action Conference, attended by just over 300 educators from throughout New England in April 2010.

Strategy 3

Provide assistance and direction for state education agencies (DOEs) to collaboratively build cross-state support systems focused on secondary reform leadership, instruction, and assessment at the local level for the purposes of dramatically changing the way students are engaged for learning.

Many of the activities that GSP contributed to state DOEs were reported as helpful for moving the agenda of high school reform forward. For example, GSP met regularly with Leads from each state, attended and/or facilitated meetings of principal and superintendent organizations to help familiarize these leaders with the Consortium, made presentations to state boards of higher education and state boards of education, and planned meetings for state data directors to create regional metrics for measuring long-term NESSC goals.

Almost all state DOE personnel interviewed pointed to the presence of Liaisons as evidence that the Consortium was providing support to state DOEs. While the exact roles of the Liaisons varied from state to state, Leads were complimentary about the helpfulness and value that Liaisons added to high school reform efforts.

Strategy 4

Expand student assessment instruments and protocols to broaden the vehicles used to measure student progress toward revised student learning standards.

The Consortium's work on assessment has been part of an ongoing process of adaptation and revision. The Consortium spent considerable time and resources in this area, especially considering the variety of groups involved in the conversations around assessment, the future goals of the NESSC, and the assessment goals embedded in the RTTT grants. Beginning to emerge from this effort are broad ideas about what a revised assessment system might look like, specifically one that would provide an improved understanding of student learning and achievement in the 21st century. As part of its effort to re-envision high school assessment, the Consortium reached out to national experts in the field and organized presentations with them (e.g., John Tanner and Marc Tucker). According to attendees, these conversations have added greater understanding of innovative assessments, as well as of the broader, national perspective in this area.

Strategy 5

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

When the NESSC set out to do the necessary research required for establishing a context of international benchmarks, they ultimately discovered not only a lack of consensus on what "international benchmarking" exactly entails, but also that the published literature in this field does not always explain in sufficient detail how the most successful schools have gone about achieving their success. The Working Group moved to start the process of authoring their own benchmarking/best-practices tool, which they named the Global Best Practices tool. The purpose of this tool, which NESSC leadership noted they view as a "practical product," is to help schools self-evaluate and then establish adequate plans of action for achieving high standards. To date, the Global Best Practices tool has been used in Rhode Island in a limited number of schools, and it remains a key element of the NESSC's plan for Phase II implementation.

Strategy 6

Develop strategic partnerships and undertake systemic planning in order to sustain this effort in an era of decreasing resources.

The Consortium has reportedly established many strategic relationships with state leaders in business, policy, and education, that are well positioned to help advance the cause of high school redesign in New England. An

example is the Consortium's relationship with the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). In addition to being able to help advance the Consortium's agenda at the organizational level, NEBHE's board is comprised of people who themselves have extensive experience with educational and political concerns in New England; the board includes not only college presidents, but also legislators and former Governors, some of whom are counted as at-large members of the Consortium.

Additionally, higher education organizations in some of the Consortium states have expressed a greater interest in working with the NESSC than was originally envisioned. Relationships with higher education have come as the result of outreach by GSP, Commissioners, and by Liaisons. The development of this partnership is in its early stages, but it holds the potential to yield important agreements to support the goals of the Consortium.

Strategic Considerations

This section presents several strategic considerations to NESSC participants and their partners. The intent is to identify possible priorities and opportunities for Phase II, and to illuminate key supports or obstacles to keep in mind in the pursuit of long-term goals.

A. Phase II Strategic Planning

1. Enhance Participants' Understanding of the Activities and Strategies Planned for Phase II and How They Align With Long-Term NESSC Goals.

As the planning and design of Phase II continues, the Consortium stands to benefit from ensuring all participants have a sufficient understanding of the proposed activities and strategies of Phase II and the specific ways in which they are linked to the achievement of long-term NESSC goals.

2. Carefully Consider the Proper Balance Between Prescriptive and Customized Models of Reform

While acknowledging that flexibility is important for any effort of this size, there may be a benefit to reconsidering the proper "balance" between a prescribed vision and a more open-ended approach to this work. This includes greater specificity about the "commonality" and "mutual benefits" of a regional approach to high school transformation.

3. Align NESSC Activities with Federal Initiatives

Phase II offers the NESSC an opportunity to leverage existing and new human and programmatic resources with the end goal of leading the way toward a new era of secondary schooling. In doing so, the Consortium should be constantly aware of opportunities to align their strategies with federal priorities in order to maximize efficiencies in both effort and resources at the state level.

4. Describe Models for High School Transformation

The Consortium may find advantages to engaging in further dialogue with the goal of creating a clearer model of what a transformed high school looks like. This process could help ensure that the participants share a common vision for what they are working to achieve.

5. Acquire Funding, as Soon as Possible, to Support School Transformation

Various participants from each of the states agreed that the Consortium needs to speed up the pace of their work, most particularly around acquiring necessary resources to support the actual transformation of high schools. A well-communicated plan for approaching potential funders, along with a strategy to share the status of these efforts in a timely manner, will likely be very well received.

B. Measuring Progress in Phase II

1. Focus on the Number of Schools that Meet NESSC Goals

Strategically, the NESSC may benefit from focusing and reporting high school transformation efforts as proportions of high schools meeting long-term goals, in addition to, or in place of, percentages of students. This new reporting component may strengthen the ability of the Consortium to attribute their work on transformed schools and more directly link these data with the mission of the NESSC.

2. Accelerate Work on Publically Reporting Common NESSC Measures

Interviewees suggested that the work done by the Data Group could form the basis of a Consortium policy agreement for publicly reporting NESSC long-term measures. The Consortium may want to accelerate their pursuit of a regional data reporting policy for reporting graduation rates, dropout rates, postsecondary matriculation, and ultimately, college readiness and postsecondary success.

3. Improve the Procedures for Collecting and Reporting Data to be used for Measuring NESSC Progress

A considerable amount of other data, particularly those related to postsecondary matriculation and college readiness, were either unavailable or could not be forwarded to UMDI to be included in the baseline data report. Since the timely collection and reporting of data related to NESSC goals is necessary for measuring future progress, the Consortium may have to consider developing more effective procedures for compiling these data.

C. Establishing and Supporting the NESSC as a High Priority

1. Participation from Commissioners at NESSC Events

Throughout Phase I, the participation of Commissioners has been somewhat inconsistent at key NESSC events, including Council meetings. More consistent participation on the part of Commissioners would send a clearer message as to the relative importance of the Consortium and its activities, particularly as it moves into Phase II.

2. Prioritize NESSC within State DOEs

Regular opportunities for State Leads to meet with their Commissioners seem to be highly valuable and strongly desired by those who are not afforded these opportunities. The Consortium should encourage states to formalize a process whereby Commissioners are kept informed by their Leads (and other NESSC representatives, as appropriate) on a regular basis.

3. Expand Opportunities for Commissioners to Meet

Reestablishing opportunities for Consortium leaders to communicate on a regular basis (evidence suggests that these opportunities have become more sporadic) may be well received by Commissioners and highly valuable during Phase II.

D. Expanding Communication

1. Implement a Communication Strategy Targeted to both Internal and External Audiences

The Consortium stands to benefit from the broader support that could develop as a result of greater public exposure, both inside and outside education circles. Rapid growth in the desire for information about the NESSC and its activities may necessitate expanding communication capacity both at GSP and the state level (included in the Phase II proposal). 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 put to good use.

2. Define What Constitutes an NESSC Event/Accomplishment

Many noteworthy events with connections to high school reform took place during the course of Phase I. Yet, there were instances where some participants viewed a specific occurrence as a Consortium event, while others

did not. This can confuse Consortium work with other efforts at education reform and potentially obscure or dilute the real progress of the NESSC. The NESSC stands to benefit from greater clarity of policies, practices, and standards that are the direct result of Consortium action, and the criteria for such.

3. Involve Education Leadership Organizations

Several respondents expressed a concern about the lack of involvement to date from education leadership organizations, especially teachers unions, principal organizations, and superintendent groups. The Consortium may need to find ways to reach out to these groups to help ensure support for its goals and missions. This could include seats on the Council (State or Consortium) and/or participation in the Working Group.

E. NESSC Management and Coordination

1. Formalizing the Consortium Leadership Structure

The Consortium Council, state Commissioners, and the Working Group make up the bulk of the organizational power within the Consortium. Thus far, these groups have worked relatively well together. However, the organizational structure – and the relationships and decision-making authority that go with it – are fairly undefined. Creating a Phase II organizational chart could help define leadership roles and decision-making authority.

2. Revisit Role/Responsibilities of State Liaisons to Maximize Their Value

Based on the experiences of Liaisons over the last 18 months, it could be advantageous to review and update their major roles and responsibilities. In addition to the feedback from Liaisons themselves, there are opportunities for input into this process from GSP, Commissioners, and State Leads, who are likely to have the keenest insights for ways to maximize the value of Liaisons to their respective states.

II. Introduction to NESSC and Phase I Evaluation

Overview of the New England Secondary School Consortium

Encompassing Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC, or the 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 Consortium has set four ambitious performance goals: (1) increase four-year on-time graduation rates across the five states to 90% or higher; (2) decrease drop-out rates to less than 1%; (3) increase the percentage of students enrolling in two- or four-year college-degree programs or pursuing accredited postsecondary credentials 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.¹

In Phase I of its work, the Consortium engaged in a wide variety of activities meant to lay the foundation for meeting these performance objectives through implementation of the following six key strategies:

1. Redefine and build consensus and commitment – a movement – concerning what high school graduates need to know, are able to do, and hold as habits of mind.
2. Shape and align state and local policies to support a new consensus and commitment for 21st century standards, support new educational learning opportunities, and challenge schools to remove inadequate practices in favor of successful learning strategies.
3. Provide assistance and direction for state departments of education (DOEs) to collaboratively build cross-state support systems focused on secondary reform leadership, instruction, and assessment at the local level for the purposes of dramatically changing the way students are engaged for learning.
4. Expand student assessment instruments and protocols to broaden the vehicles used to measure student progress toward revised student learning standards.
5. Participate in international benchmarking exercises to assess standards, instruction, professional development, and assessment within a world-class comparative cohort.
6. Develop strategic partnerships and undertaking systemic planning in order to sustain this effort in an era of decreasing resources.

The transformative system – to support 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. To create a cohesive regional group, the Consortium functioned through representative, interactive councils/groups. These included the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), the NESSC Council, individual State Councils, the Working Group, State Leads, State Liaisons, the Data Group, the Communication Directors group, and the Evaluation Steering Committee.

¹ These NESSC goals are taken from the Phase II Proposal dated May 5, 2010. These goals are stated slightly differently than those in the original Phase I proposal (September 2008).

Scope of the Evaluation

In March 2009, the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) was awarded a contract to serve as the evaluator for Phase I of the NESSC under a separately funded arrangement with the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF). The NESSC identified the following goals for Phase I of the evaluation:

1. Document the Consortium's work.
2. Track progress achieved within each of their six strategies.
3. Actively participate in the identification, collection, organization, and reporting of common baseline data for measurement of progress toward the initiative's desired outcomes.
4. Develop an evaluation design for Phase II of the initiative.

Findings in this Phase I evaluation report were generated through the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources. Several major data collection and analysis milestones were achieved through the evaluation, including:

- In-depth interviews with over 100 NESSC participants – consisting of three sets of full-day site visits to each state DOE in spring 2009, fall 2009, and spring 2010 – including DOE Commissioners and other administrators, State Leads, State Liaisons, Working Group members, and various members of Consortium and State Councils, including state legislators, business leaders, and members of the higher education community (e.g., NHBHE, NEASC).
- Attendance and active participation at most Working Group and Council meetings, which provided first-hand opportunities to observe the planning process and allowed UMDI to regularly update stakeholders on evaluation progress.
- Two full-day interviews with GSP's Executive Director and Senior Policy Advisor, and interviews separately with the NMEF President/CEO, Vice President of Programs, Director of Policy, and Director of Research & Evaluation.
- Publication of four NESSC evaluation briefs (June, August, December 2009, January 2010) that provided timely summaries of evaluation findings and progress-to-date to NESSC participants.
- Development of an NESSC logic model that provided a graphical depiction of overarching processes and strategies of the project and how those elements related to the project's long-term outcomes.
- Publication of the NESSC Baseline Data Technical Report, which included documentation of indicators and key variables to be collected and used to commonly measure outcomes of the project, along with an initial run of baseline data with descriptive statistics by state and important student subgroups of interest.
- A pre- and post-opinion survey that gathered the perspectives of 50 participants. Post-survey responses (used throughout this report) obtained from 87.5% of invitees across the five states (six each from four of the states, three from the fifth, and one from other).
- A presentation of mid-Phase I evaluation findings to NMEF in January 2010.
- A thorough review of all pertinent documents related to the Phase I planning and implementation, including the NESSC Phase I and II funding proposals, state-level documentation formalizing commitment to the initiative, relevant studies/reports pertaining to past and current collaborations between the partnering states, and minutes from NESSC Working Group and Council meetings.
- Monthly evaluation phone meetings with GSP and NMEF to discuss updates and modifications to the evaluation plan, and ways to respond to program changes or developments.
- Attendance at the High School Redesign in Action conference, the Consortium's first regional conference, held in April 2010, with over 300 educators from throughout New England.

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 I, including the history of the project, process used for structuring and implementing the work, the benefits and challenges which arose from working in a multi-state, regional context, and the development of the next Phase of the work, including the extent to which Phase I established a foundation for success in Phase II.
2. Strategies and accomplishments of Phase I, including a discussion of contextual factors that affected the work of the Consortium, and evidence for how and to what extent progress was achieved for each of the six Phase I strategies.
3. Conclusions and strategic considerations intended to provoke reflection and discussion among NESSC participants and partners as they move into Phase II.

III. The Work of the Consortium During Phase I

This section focuses on the first objective of the NESSC evaluation: to document the work of the Consortium during Phase I. The key areas and questions to be addressed include the following:

- a. History of the project, starting with the informal pre-funding conversations and moving into the funded Phase I component of the initiative. How did the Consortium develop? Who was involved? How did it evolve from the earliest planning discussions to the development of the final Phase I work plan?
- b. Processes used for structuring, managing, and conducting the work. How did the Consortium operate? Which practices/strategies were effective in carrying out the work?
- c. Working in a multi-state context. What benefits arose as a result of the multi-state context? What challenges/barriers were faced?
- d. Establishing the Phase II proposal and its connection to Phase I. How was the Phase II plan developed? To what extent has Phase I established a foundation for success in Phase II?

IIIA. History

The NESSC began as a collaborative effort on the part of four New England states (Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont – Connecticut would join later) to not only improve the quality of high school education but to fundamentally transform public high schools. What follows is a brief sketch of the early days of this project, based on the good-faith recollections of stakeholders (as told to UMDI in interviews), and a review of minutes from the early regional meetings. This sketch is intended to capture the essential elements of a complicated context and process that included ongoing revision, clarification, and dialogue on the part of all involved parties.

While several common events, themes, and timelines do emerge from these data, not all stakeholders agree about the exact motivations or sequence of events that led to the NESSC as it presently exists. It is clear that many, if not all, were drawn to the Consortium by the idea that their states could benefit from regional collaboration in the service of transformed public high schools.

An Informal Beginning

The Consortium started informally, with the earliest conversations about launching such an initiative happening at national meetings of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). These CCSSO conferences, which featured the topic of high school redesign, were a natural place to discuss the possibility of regional collaboration. Nothing binding was decided during these informal conversations that occurred “around a conference table” or “over dinner” and absent of any formal agendas or structure. However, they constituted, as one interviewee described it, an “enthusiasm-building stage” that highlighted the potential benefits of adjacent states working together on shared goals related to high school redesign.

Some interviewees recalled that the project started from collegial phone conversations among various members of the states’ departments of education (DOEs). These stakeholders credit Rhode Island’s Commissioner of Education at that time, along with Vermont’s DOE, as having played a leadership role in terms of solidifying the group and gathering the early participants around the same table.

Initial Vision and Expectations

During the earliest days (fall 2007) there was a lack of consensus regarding the Consortium's agenda. Some participants envisioned that the NESSC would function as a resource for high school change. In this model, states would share expertise and resources, and maybe even some personnel, in order to accomplish change at the classroom and whole-school levels. Some thought that this type of regional collaboration could begin immediately and continue briskly. This approach was referred to as "practice-oriented" and "bottom-up," because it focused on change that principally originated in the schools.

Other interviewees recalled that they were in search of something broader and perhaps more transformative. They conceived of the NESSC as pursuing additional funding to adequately plan and execute broad policy changes to catalyze school transformation. They wanted to collaborate on systems-level policy; the concepts of "leverage and cover" provided by the multi-state collaboration were appealing to this group. This approach was referred to as "policy-oriented" or "top-down" to indicate change originating from policy decisions and strategies driven by state DOEs.

Movement Towards More Organized Gatherings

Several meetings took place among Rhode Island, Vermont, and New Hampshire as follow-ups to the CCSSO conversations. The Great Schools Partnership (GSP) – well known by several parties from their work in Maine and other New England states – was also invited to participate. During these gatherings, GSP offered to compile notes, offered their insights on school change and their experience with private foundations, and began (with the consent of the group) the process of becoming facilitators. Maine was also invited to join the collaboration and decided to do so.

With GSP facilitation in place, meetings soon became more structured gatherings. Five meetings took place between February and November 2008 in Concord, New Hampshire, with 12–18 participants attending each time, including representatives from each state, GSP, and at times the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF). The title "Working Group" was informally adopted (and later became official when formal NESSC membership and associated roles and responsibilities were defined).

The Role of GSP as Intermediaries

GSP's role was the source of some initial confusion. Some Working Group members recall being unsure whether GSP was representing Maine or were present as a separate entity. Others thought GSP was participating because of their previous relationships with potential Consortium funders like the Gates Foundation. GSP themselves, while acknowledging that their previous relationship with funders might have made them attractive to the Consortium, described their early role as filling a void around facilitation, coordination, and reporting.

Despite the confusion, this latter arrangement worked well and appears to owe more to opportunity than to design. That is, rather than creating a plan for collaboration between states facilitated by an education organization with skill and experience in high school reform, states came together and capitalized on an available partner organization. Since Consortium participants now recognize the value of GSP's outside facilitation, future consortia of this kind may benefit from explicitly designing this function for facilitation from the beginning.

Quest for Funding and its Impact on Direction

It soon became clear to the Working Group that in order to appeal to large funders, their objectives for high school reform had to be ambitious. GSP took the lead on securing funding and approached the director of NMEF to propose the idea of partnering with Gates to fund the collaboration. During summer 2008, several conversations take place between GSP, NMEF, the Gates Foundation, and the four Commissioners. GSP drafted a proposal to share with the Working Group, taking into account the varying degrees of interests and aspirations for high school redesign emerging from these conversations.

Some respondents suggested that the original proposal might not have gone far enough in re-conceiving high school design and needed to be “edgier” – this was of particular importance to both NMEF and the Gates Foundation. This agenda eventually came to include a multi-state effort to effect change in high-level policy, with the goal that the Consortium states would eventually adopt a similar set of standards that would shape the high school redesign effort in their respective states.

While this type of long-term commitment to policy change was what some Consortium participants were expecting from the beginning, others described the prospect of the planning phase necessitated by the more ambitious agenda as slowing down the pace they preferred to work at. These participants did not object to the content of the proposed agenda, but rather to the fact that it would take longer when they were ready to begin working. Respondents who felt “stalled” by regrouping for a regional effort were generally those who placed greater emphasis on reform starting from the schools, rather than starting with policy work.

After much revision, GSP prepared a second proposal edited by a committee that included at least one Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner from each state.

Final Details

The final NESSC Phase I proposal was submitted to the Gates Foundation at the end of September 2008. The proposal outlined five years of work, to be carried out in three phases, and requested a shared investment from NMEF and the Gates Foundation for the initial 18-month phase. After funding was secured, the relationship between GSP, the Working Group, the Commissioners, and the funders was sorted out and refined. Several key elements of the NESSC were decided in this process including: (1) The position of “State Liaison” was conceived, and it was decided that Liaisons would be chosen by the states but become employees of GSP; (2) The idea for the “NESSC Council” (originally the “Steering Committee”) took shape as its function, membership, and roles/responsibilities were identified, and; (3) New Hampshire suggested the NESSC should announce itself at a public “signing on” event, which occurred in December 2008 in three of the four states.

In March 2009, UMDI was awarded a contract to serve as the evaluator for Phase I of the NESSC under a separately funded arrangement with NMEF.

IIIB. Processes for Structuring, Managing, and Conducting the Work

NESSC Operational Structure

To create a cohesive regional body, the Consortium functioned through representative, interactive councils/groups. These included GSP, the NESSC Council, individual State Councils, the Working Group, State Leads, State Liaisons, the Data Group, the Communication Directors group, and the Evaluation Steering Committee (see Table 1 below).²

Table 1	
NESSC Operational Structure	
Group	Description
Great Schools Partnership	Provided overall coordination of the NESSC, including facilitation of NESSC Council and Working Group meetings, review of financial expenditures, and program planning and implementation.
Consortium Council	Consisted of a team from each state DOE, including the Commissioner, State Lead, secondary school director/manager, a prominent business leader, and representatives from the Governor’s office, State Legislature, and State Board of Education. At-large members included the Executive Directors of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and the New England Board of Higher Education, and the President of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Beginning in August 2009, the Council held three full-day in-person gatherings and one afternoon videoconference.
Working Group	Consisted of staff from each state DOE. One member from each state was identified as the Lead for that state. Membership was somewhat fluid as state teams chose to bring different staff depending on the agenda. Attendees typically included Leads, Deputy Commissioners, professional development staff, Career and Technical Education Directors, school improvement coordinators, and State Liaisons. NMEF and UMDI representatives also usually attended. The Working Group met approximately 20 times during Phase I, utilizing full-day in-person gatherings and two-hour morning videoconferences, each coordinated and facilitated through GSP.
NESSC State Liaisons	Each state had a Liaison to coordinate meetings and events, work with GSP, and build state capacity. Liaisons communicated with each other at least weekly by phone and email, and in person for a two-day period once every few months.
Data Group	Each state assigned one or more data specialists who collaboratively identified common indicators and methods to calculate progress toward meeting the NESSC goals. The Data Group had five in-person, full-day meetings beginning in June 2009.
Communications Directors	Under the coordination of the GSP Director of Communications, state DOE Communication Directors engaged in regular contact including one full-day meeting and five conference calls.
Evaluation Steering Committee	Throughout Phase I, representatives from UMDI, GSP, and NMEF had scheduled discussions approximately once per month to review evaluation progress and findings.

The NESSC organizational chart further extends the Consortium operational structure and includes a collection of groups representing states, leadership organizations, universities, and funders. These include: the five participating states and their Governors and Commissioners, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the NESSC Council, the NESSC Working Group, NESSC State Liaisons, the University of Connecticut’s Center for Policy Analysis, and the UMass Donahue Institute. Additional partners identified on the organizational chart include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). All

² Respondents from each state reported that individual State Councils have been established and have met periodically since summer 2009. UMDI did not have the opportunity to attend or review minutes of any of these State Council meetings. Anecdotal evidence suggests they were well attended and received positive feedback from participants.

of these groups except the Gates Foundation were present at several NESSC events, with coordination and facilitation usually provided by GSP.

The Great Schools Partnership

GSP was a critical intermediary throughout Phase I. Their role was to maintain conversations within groups and to facilitate conversations between groups, with an eye toward moving forward on grant strategies. Their official job description, according to the “Roles and Responsibilities” identified by NESSC at the outset of the grant (as of February 2009), is as follows:

The Great Schools Partnership is responsible for overall coordination of the NESSC including:

- *Program planning and implementation;*
- *Facilitation of the NESSC Council;*
- *Facilitation of the NESSC Working Group;*
- *On-the-ground support for state efforts aligned with NESSC goals and actions;*
- *Review of and accounting for financial expenditures;*
- *Contracting with state Liaisons;*
- *Connecting with various national efforts that align with NESSC goals and actions;*
- *Coordinating with the Nellie Mae Education Foundation;*
- *Contracting with third party organizations as needed including for the policy review; and*
- *Tasks as assigned by the NESSC Council and/or NESSC Working Group.*

GSP staff assigned to this project included the Executive Director, Senior Policy Advisor, Director of Communications, Senior Associates, Business Manager, and support staff.

The NESSC Council

The NESSC Council serves as a nonbinding oversight group for the entire NESSC grant. The Council includes members of individual State Councils – Commissioners, DOE staff, legislators, business leaders, and members of higher education – and representatives from GSP and NMEF. Interviewees reported that Council meetings at both the state and NESSC level have been productive places to engage in important conversations about high school transformation and to set agendas for action and reform. Many stakeholders cited the NESSC Council and its meetings as a major success of Phase I. The Council, as defined in the Consortium’s “Roles and Responsibilities” is:

“...the body that advocates for and supports the transformation of secondary education in the four-state [five-state] region. The members are prominent policy makers and leaders who will monitor, endorse, and maintain the NESSC work plan and associated actions. These individuals serve as the champions in each state and in the region who advocate on behalf of the NESSC to ensure that these efforts are sustained in a way that continues to enhance the development of our youth. Council members forge connections between the work of the NESSC and that of various other groups, organizations, and individuals with whom Council members interact.”

At its first two meetings (August and October 2009) the Council developed “Articles of Agreement” to articulate the Consortium vision and mission and guide future work. The Council also reviewed two important Consortium products, the High Leverage Policy Framework and the Global Best Practices tool. In its spring 2010 meeting, the Council reviewed progress made during Phase I and discussed activities and direction for Phase II. Council

meetings were characterized by a spirit of engagement and enthusiasm, and NESSC participants appeared to share a common perception of the Council as an integral part of the working process.

The Working Group

The Working Group was the center of most Consortium activity and its most active committee by far. Their job description, according to the NESSC “Roles and Responsibilities,” reads as follows:

The NESSC Working Group is responsible for coordinating, undertaking, developing, and finalizing actions as guided by the NESSC work plan and the NESSC Council. In addition, Working Group members will:

- *Coordinate state-specific actions aligned with state-specific needs and NESSC goals and actions;*
- *As appropriate, open participation in state efforts to colleagues from the other NESSC states;*
- *Consciously create ties between state efforts and NESSC goals and actions;*
- *Participate as necessary in the NESSC policy review;*
- *Participate as necessary in the NESSC evaluation;*
- *Coordinate with their with state Liaison;*
- *Coordinating participation of state education agency staff members in various NESSC activities as needed and agreed upon by the Working Group and/or Council;*
- *Participate in various national efforts that align with NESSC goals and actions;*
- *Assist with facilitation and participate in meetings of the NESSC Council; and*
- *Serve as ambassadors for the goals and actions of the NESSC.*

The Working Group met approximately every three weeks, sometimes in person and sometimes through videoconferencing. At these meetings, members discussed ways to advance the Consortium's work and gave feedback on tangible products such as the organization of Consortium events and the tools on policy and practices created for the Consortium. A review of state Working Group membership shows that its composition varied from state to state. Members included Leads, Deputy Commissioners, professional development staff, Career and Technical Education (CTE) Directors, and school improvement coordinators.

- State Leads

All state Working Groups had a single person, the Lead, who was responsible for organizing their state's group and carrying out Consortium tasks. The Leads remained the same throughout Phase I in every state but Vermont. Leads organized Consortium activities at the state level, including convening State Councils, updating the Commissioner and legislators about Consortium goals and activities, and reaching out to the whole Consortium whenever high school reform activities took place in their states. For example, groups were invited to attend conferences held by neighboring DOEs, and presentations by neighboring states (e.g., the Virtual High School in New Hampshire and High School Capstone Projects in Rhode Island) brought new ideas to state DOEs. The Consortium Leads were responsible for most of these efforts. The outreach that occurred between State Leads was something that many respondents reported as a concrete example of a favorable impact the Consortium had on their state.

- State Liaisons

State Liaisons were assigned to each of the five state DOEs and played an important role in making the Consortium function. Their official job description was as follows:

The State Liaison works on behalf of the NESSC to coordinate and support on-the-ground activities in each state. The State Liaison serves as the state-based contact to coordinate various meetings and events, and helps build internal capacity in each of the states. The State Liaison works directly with the DOE and operates as part of the state's secondary school team. Responsibilities include, but may not be limited to, the following:

- *Coordinate and collaborate with DOE staff and ongoing activities;*
- *Establish and maintain contact with key educational and business leaders and organizations;*
- *Stay abreast of educational activities and opportunities for advancing NESSC goals throughout the state;*
- *Convene and facilitate small group gatherings of leaders from various organizations (e.g., principals, teachers, superintendents, school boards, business roundtables) and DOE staff (e.g., data coordinators);*
- *Convene state-wide events; co-plan and co-facilitate with GSP staff;*
- *Work closely with GSP communications director and NMEF personnel to create and disseminate press releases and to coordinate state-wide communications;*
- *Conduct site-visits to schools as needed;*
- *Coordinate the development of action plans defining state-specific international benchmarking activities;*
- *Communicate regularly with GSP Co-Executive Directors.*

Liaisons worked closely with State Leads and GSP to improve communication and facilitate work on grant objectives. As was originally hoped, most Liaisons helped to organize meetings, review and revise Consortium documents, and update DOE staff on NESSC initiatives. All Liaisons described “communicating” as one of their primary responsibilities and typically described themselves as “ambassadors” of and “educators” about the Consortium. They believed that a major part of their work was informing key stakeholders (in education and in business) about the Consortium’s mission. They also believed an important part of their work was building connections among these organizations within their states.³ The Liaisons were hired by and reported to GSP, but were generally housed at each state’s DOE.

The Data Group

Data specialists from each state discussed ways to create common metrics for measuring grant goals. This task was directly aligned with the NESSC grant proposal, which suggests that success in Phase I could be recognized by the Consortium’s progress toward:

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

GSP convened a series of meetings to accomplish these tasks beginning in June 2009. The initial purpose of these meetings was to inform UMDI of data-gathering and data-reporting practices for a required technical report on baseline data. The rich discussions held in this group led to the creation of common formulas for reporting on grant goals, a template for reproducing these data in the future, and an ongoing conversation on the fairest, most accurate method for reporting on key metrics. Data Group members deliberated on the quality and intent of proposed metrics and made recommendations that have the potential to inform cross-state agreements on common data collection and reporting methods. These agreements await action by authorizing bodies from Consortium states.

³ In interviews Liaisons were asked to describe their *major* roles/responsibilities, which means they might not have mentioned some of the roles they did fulfill but did not consider *major*.

The Communication Directors Group

Throughout Phase I, the Communications Directors from Consortium states were in contact with GSP's Director of Communications in order to strategize about communications within the Consortium and with the wider public. Improved and increased communication and media presence were a key area of need that respondents identified during Phase I. Initial feedback indicated that Communications Directors valued the help and support of this group. As Consortium needs increased, directors identified the need to increase and improve communication. GSP's response – which included improved communications tools such as regular briefs and a new website. Those interviewed suggested that this group is important to helping them understand and spread the Consortium message.

The Evaluation Steering Committee

The Evaluation Steering Committee was created to facilitate and make use of formative evaluation. The group included members of the UMDI team conducting the evaluation of Phase I, GSP, and NMEF. Meetings of the group took place about once each month and focused on emerging issues in the Consortium work and on a review of upcoming evaluation briefs. Committee members reported that this was an important and essential group for enabling the Consortium's productive use of formative data.

Effective Practices in Conducting the Work

Over the course of Phase I, the NESSC developed or refined several practices that aided progress on grant initiatives. Some interviewees believed that these new or adapted practices demonstrated a flexibility that permitted the Consortium to continue moving forward. Others suggested that the use of this kind of fluid approach allowed the Consortium to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities, such as the development of a closer collaboration with representatives of higher education. As an example, to paraphrase one respondent, the work that has been done to connect with higher education has proven to be a “value-added piece,” and in their view the chancellor of the New Hampshire university system “really got excited by the Consortium's overall goals” and has pushed to have them adopted as the state's goals.

Three key examples stand out as being indicative of the Consortium's ability to develop and/or modify practices that allowed for continued development:

1. The Working Group process and GSP's Role as facilitator;
2. improving communication methods and strategies; and
3. facilitating the development and support of “champions” to promote the Consortium agenda.

The Working Group Process and GSP's Role as Facilitator

The process employed by the Working Group to create Consortium products (e.g., NESSC work plan, practical “tools” like the Global Best Practices tool) evolved over the course of Phase I. Early in the Consortium's history, some members of the Working Group expressed a desire to be more intimately involved in the creation and editing of Consortium products. During the first round of spring 2009 interviews, for example, respondents sometimes voiced the opinion that they were a “rubber stamp” group and that GSP was making all the important decisions. However, this perception had changed considerably by the time UMDI conducted interviews in spring 2010, as both GSP and the majority of Consortium participants agreed that a clearer and more effective working process had indeed developed.

Part of this change in Working Group members' perception of GSP is directly attributable to GSP's willingness to modify their operating procedure based on feedback they received. For example, the schedule of Working Group meetings was changed to allow for more full-day, in-person gatherings. This adjustment was made specifically after GSP received input from the Working Group that videoconferences did not always leave enough time for quality discussion. GSP also switched responsibility for facilitation of these meetings from their Executive

Director to one of their senior associates, thus allowing the Executive Director to participate in discussions without the dual (and sometimes conflicting) roles of representing a point of view while also facilitating the group discussion.

Another key development in the improved perception of GSP's role and value to the Consortium can be traced to the time when GSP presented both the Working Group and representatives from select schools in each state with drafts of the High Leverage Policy Framework and the Global Best Practices tool. GSP, along with the Center for Educational Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut, spent considerable time developing these tools for use in evaluating school practices and education policies. That GSP was able to devote the necessary time and resources to create these tools came as a boon to state DOEs who were facing increasing shortages in personnel who could focus on high school reform work, prompting several interviewees to note how valuable GSP's capacity was to the Consortium's continued productivity. One interviewee suggested that "if GSP was not doing the work, it would not get done." The development of these tools seemed to reinforce this conclusion. In addition to the creation of the tools, the work of revising Consortium documents, organizing meetings, sending out communication, and maintaining the work plan gave GSP the ability to move the Consortium agenda forward without further draining resources from state DOEs.

As Phase I came to an end, an effective and well-received model for conducting Consortium work had been set. In general, this process involved the Working Group – following protocols established by GSP – discussing key topic areas and reaching agreement on a general direction. GSP would then follow up on specific tasks and bring draft products or agendas to the following Working Group meeting where members could provide input and feedback, leading to more modification and/or fine-tuning, and ultimately a finished product (e.g., High Leverage Policy Framework, Global Best Practices tool, High School Redesign in Action regional conference agenda, Phase II proposal). During this process there were usually several opportunities for Working Group members to voice their opinions or contribute to the work. Those interviewed in spring 2010 reported near universal satisfaction with the process, they see it as a useful way for a large group to accomplish its work, and they support this model continuing in the future.

Improving Communication Methods and Strategies

During fall 2009 interviews, a number of Working Group members suggested that internal communications were not as efficient or thorough as they could be. They expressed interest in expanding communication strategies within the Consortium, with K–12 educators, and with the general public. In addition, DOE Communications Directors said that they felt the Consortium needed a more visible presence outside of education circles. Some respondents pointed out that communications had been inadequately funded in the original grant proposal – a particular area of concern as Consortium participants reported feeling overwhelmed by workloads while their need to be kept updated and informed about NESSC activity grew. Specifically, members reported their desire for the following:

- Summary information of Working Group and Council meetings
- Regular, timely updates highlighting news and progress from the Consortium
- Production of a brochure to promote the Consortium
- Timeline of upcoming Consortium events
- More frequent review of the NESSC work plan
- Creation of a new, more multipurpose NESSC website

Evidence indicates that GSP effectively responded to several of these communications needs. They began issuing internal two- or three-page NESSC briefs to update Consortium participants on accomplishments in Consortium states and on Consortium progress on regional efforts. These briefs were produced so that they could be distributed by State Leads to interested parties throughout DOEs, which has reportedly helped to close some of

the internal communications gaps between Working Group members and their DOE colleagues. GSP also disseminated a series of communication norms for use by Working Group members at their meetings, began producing and sending out summary meeting notes, and updated the NESSC work plan.

In spring 2010, GSP hired Liberty Concepts to generate a new website with enhanced functionality. Along with the website GSP launched a new logo – which received a great deal of feedback from Working Group members – to improve NESSC visibility and expand the Consortium identity to a wider audience. While these improved communication methods were not specifically mentioned as high points per se, numerous comments at subsequent Working Group and Council meetings suggest that Consortium participants appreciated the way they have helped to move the Consortium work forward.

Facilitating the Development and Support of NESSC “Champions”

The NESSC Theory of Action articulates the notion that the key strategy that feeds and supports all others is the “creation of champions” to drive forward the Consortium work. “Champions” are leader-advocates from the fields of education, business, and government who have the ability to influence education policies or practices, and who have a stake in improving high school success. The NESSC cultivated the “creation of champions” mainly through the development of the State and Consortium Councils.

Council meetings, both at the state and Consortium level, have deliberately focused on generating strong support for the vision and mission of the NESSC. In interviews, Council members from business, education, and government conveyed enthusiasm for the activities of the Consortium and for the opportunity to meet with others in the region who share an interest in high school reform. One Council member reported, “The meetings are very productive, very interesting. I leave energized.” Another commented that “The Council has been helpful in articulating the vision of the Consortium and in agreeing on strategies for how to implement that vision.”

Council members also reported discussing the Consortium within their constituent groups – a defining activity for project champions. These conversations are said to have taken place at state Board of Education meetings, business roundtables, legislative committees, and gatherings of higher education officials (e.g., NEBHE).

A key Consortium accomplishment, and a strong indicator of the importance of champions, took place in April 2010, when legislators in Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont unanimously passed joint resolutions of support for the NESSC. The resolution was a direct action taken on behalf of the Consortium by a Council member / state legislator from Rhode Island. With the help of GSP, the resolution was edited and distributed to other Council members who were legislators in their home states. A press release issued by GSP stated that “The passage of formal joint resolutions in four different states during the same legislative session sends a powerful message of endorsement for the Consortium’s overarching goal: ensuring that every public high school student receives an education that prepares them for them for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of the 21st century.” In addition, the Connecticut State Board of Education also voted unanimously to endorse the same resolution of support, declaring “that we, the Members of the Connecticut State Board of Education, on behalf of the children we have been entrusted to represent, express our strong support and endorsement of the New England Secondary School Consortium and its goals, strategies and partnerships.” NESSC participants, particularly Commissioners and legislators interviewed during spring 2010, said they hope that the resolution will enable future legislative and/or policy action on behalf of the Consortium to occur more easily. The overwhelming success of the legislative resolution in Consortium states, along with reports of Council members discussing the NESSC in the context of their work outside the Consortium, represent evidence of early success in the creation of champions.

IIIC. Benefits and Challenges to Working in a Multi-state Context

Regional collaboration is the fundamental principle guiding the Consortium. While all five participating states do have their own ongoing programs for high school innovation, the NESSC was created from a belief that regional collaboration allows states to:

“Share resources, talents, and expertise while exploring cost-saving efficiencies in pursuit of a common mission.”

Benefits Arising as a Result of the Multi-state Collaboration

Throughout Phase I, NESSC participants consistently identified the political and professional benefits arising from the multi-state context. These include the “political support and cover” that is afforded when neighboring states take on reform policies or initiatives, and the advantages of sharing ideas and knowledge between states.

“The support, the professional development, the expertise that comes from being in the Consortium...coming from Great Schools or the support from Nellie Mae...helps us improve instruction for all kids.”

“It’s helped knowing that there are people who want to do the work with you and that there are people who are interested in this kind of collaboration.”

Regional Collaboration Provided Political Cover and Enhanced Credibility

What Consortium participants mean by “political support and cover” is the advantage gained by being able to tell others that another state has already adopted, or is considering adopting, a new idea or policy. One Commissioner suggested that working with other states provides a sense of “movement” and an “engine” to move forward. For example, this Commissioner can say, “Vermont is doing this – we need to keep up.” Several examples of states capitalizing on this leverage gained by Consortium membership emerged during Phase I:

- New Hampshire adopted a statute that requires students to attend school until the age of 18. This policy was shared and discussed with Consortium participants, and some states’ legislators report they are now considering a similar bill.
- In 2010 the Maine Legislature passed a bill that made 90% graduation rate their state’s goal. When asked about the connection of this goal to the same NESSC goal, a prominent Council member said that “There’s absolutely a connection, especially as it relates to being aware of what other states have as goals and not wanting to fall behind your neighbors.”
- One Council member told the story of how the Virtual Learning Academy in his/her state came under attack because of budget constraints. Through the Consortium and because of relationships developed there, this individual requested and received a letter from a fellow colleague in another Consortium state that “gave voice to how important virtual learning would be to New England public education.”
- For over a year the Vermont State Board of Education and the Department of Education have been working on a new plan to transform their educational system. One Vermont Council member reported that not only are the goals of this plan very similar to Consortium goals, but also suggested “It will be very powerful for folks to hear that these ideas are not ‘pie in the sky,’ but rather based on research and practice in the field in neighboring states.”

Respondents also reported that situating innovative ideas in a larger regional initiative gave them greater credibility and that this ability to point to successful innovation in other states was important for moving efforts forward in their own states. “The multi-state context affirms what we’re trying to do as a small state,” offered one Council member. “The other states can provide support and knowledge. The states don’t all have to reinvent the wheel for themselves. There’s a commonality of where we want to go, which gives us credibility to move forward

as a larger group.” As an example of this, Connecticut DOE officials indicated that they modeled their Capstone proposal – a key component of their high school graduation plan – on the success achieved in Rhode Island’s High School Capstone Project.

Exchange of Ideas and Knowledge

Consortium participants also cited experiences where the exchange of ideas and knowledge formed a highly beneficial component of multi-state collaboration.

“The Consortium has accelerated the work of reform. Without the Consortium, it would be a lot tougher fight. The Consortium provides great support.”

“The ability to call someone (from a different state) that I now know personally has been invaluable.”

A number of other Consortium participants also spoke, at greater length, in similarly positive terms about the team-like benefits of the multi-state context. What follows are four examples from participants – whose roles cover a broad range of the Consortium’s organizational structure (i.e., Liaisons, Leads, etc.) – who noted the desirable effects of collaboration.

- One interviewee observed that there is “a lot going on with states working together across different programs,” and added that the Consortium can bring people together in a way that just trying to work together informally sometimes cannot. This individual offered the example of how some state DOE employees had tried previously to work across state lines; these efforts usually began well, but after an exchange of emails, the endeavor would eventually “get dropped.” The Consortium, according to this person, provides a good formal frame for sustained collaboration.
- Another interviewee suggested that a unified system simply makes more sense, especially when it comes to something like data collection. In this person’s view, given that the region essentially shares a population of college students, for example, the ability to track students from pre-K to college graduation across the region would be a huge benefit.
- One participant said that, at a very basic level, states simply would not have come together to discuss important redesign issues if not for the Consortium and its ability to make such collaboration possible.
- A fourth informant asserted that the Consortium has been beneficial in that it provides a greater context of understanding in which education stakeholders and legislators can work together, and that this in turn allows for easier communication between the two groups, especially over issues like funding, statutes, and policies. This individual went on to say that the Consortium has laid the groundwork for a “unity of perspective from the legislative leadership.”

Challenges to Working in a Multi-state Context

The Consortium faced several challenges to its work during Phase I, most notably the shifting educational priorities arising from the federal DOE, the economic crisis sweeping the region, the turnover of several significant “founding” members of the NESSC (including all four original Commissioners), and the impact regional work had on the pace of individual state education reform efforts.

Impact of Race to the Top Competition

Initial drafts of the Race to the Top (RTTT) grant competition suggested that only state consortia would be eligible for federal funding. Under such circumstances the NESSC participants felt they would be well positioned for federal support since they were already engaged in establishing the foundation for cross-state collaboration, and given their previously successful work with the New England Common Assessment Program. By the summer of 2009, however, it was clear that applications from consortia would not be allowed and therefore states would

be competing, rather than collaborating, for federal money. The competitive nature of RTTT proposals thus became more of a distraction than an advantage to regional collaboration.

The federal RTTT grant competition also created a drain on human resources at state DOEs and pushed states to grapple with their policies about charter schools, evaluating teachers based on student performance, and relationships between state DOEs and teacher unions. Under these conditions, state DOE personnel had to not only create the RTTT application, they were also involved in legislative efforts and union negotiations to try to bring together elements for a successful proposal.

Budget Cuts and Competing Work Demands

The national economic crisis precipitated numerous reductions at state DOEs, making regional collaboration challenging. In several states, resources became quite limited. Restricted travel budgets, moratoria on out-of-state travel, and (in some cases) not allowing DOE employees to attend NESSC meetings on state time made participation at Consortium events difficult for many. (It is of note that several Working Group members continued to demonstrate commitment by using their own resources to attend meetings). Furthermore, these cuts reportedly led to DOE staff being asked to take on additional responsibilities for their departments, resulting in less time to devote to NESSC work.

Collaboration between New England states was also made more complex by the number of other national consortia (RTTT Assessment, National Governors Association, CCSSO, etc.) demanding time and commitment from DOEs. The dwindling resources of time and money that departments had for regional work needed to be shared across numerous initiatives.

Concerns About Commitment to the Multi-state Context

Most respondents reported strong commitment to the goals and mission of the Consortium, despite the challenging political and economic context. There is evidence of this commitment in the active participation that continued despite shrinking resources in state DOEs. Evidence of commitment, though, must be tempered somewhat by the inconsistent participation of some of the NESSC Commissioners at important Consortium functions like Council meetings. This lack of participation has not gone unnoticed by other Consortium participants and evidently has become a concern to some respondents who reported that the inconsistency of Commissioner attendance at Consortium events signals a lack of priority for the NESSC.

Reform Efforts Delayed Within Individual States

While all participants acknowledged that working in a multi-state context has numerous advantages, interviewees also identified some struggles that arose from this approach. Some respondents reported that attention to regional issues delayed efforts and/or diverted focus from state initiatives. These interviewees said they felt they had to put their own high school transformation work on hold in order to adequately engage in regional collaboration. Various participants from each of the states have commented that the Consortium needs to speed up the pace of their work, especially around acquiring the necessary resources to support the actual transformation of schools.

Changeover in NESSC Leadership Presented Challenges to Continuity

Changes in Working Group membership and in Commissioners reportedly made consistency and continuity of effort challenging. Sustaining conversations around policy, standards, and practices was difficult when some members of the group were less informed or when time needed to be taken to bring new members up to speed.

Inconsistent Communication Between state Commissioners and Leads

The number of opportunities for State Leads to meet with their Commissioners on a regular basis to keep them abreast of NESSC activity differed greatly from state to state. While some Leads were provided frequent scheduled opportunities to meet with their Commissioners to discuss NESSC matters, others reported that these occasions were few and far between.

IIID. Establishing Phase II Proposal and its Connection to Phase I

Discussions around the work to be implemented over Phase II of the NESSC began in earnest at the Working Group meeting held in November 2009. Participants at this meeting agreed to move forward with five key strategies for Phase II. These were: (1) the use of the High Leverage Policy tool to inform policy decisions; (2) the development of Hot House Schools; (3) a focus on 21st century skills drawn from existing state standards; (4) continued work toward international benchmarking; and (5) the building of political will to support high school transformation. Following this meeting, GSP formulated a strategic outline that included a range of possibilities for what could be included in a Phase II proposal to potential funders. This outline became the focus of a special NESSC Council videoconference in January 2010 during which the five key dimensions of the Phase II outline were discussed both within and between state groups. Council members reached consensus that, moving ahead, the states should work together to adopt common policies, consider ways for middle schools to become connected to high school reform efforts, work on standards and assessments in a regional manner, and possibly adjust the size and composition of the Consortium Council.

Based on this consensus, GSP prepared a draft of the Phase II proposal, which was then sent to Working Group members and discussed at their February 2010 meeting. A key objective of this meeting was to review the draft and recommend ways to prepare a revised version in time for a formal presentation to the NESSC Council at their meeting scheduled for the following month. GSP incorporated members' feedback into the proposal and then distributed it to all Working Group and Council members in preparation for the upcoming Council meeting.

The March Council meeting took up the proposal draft for discussion in a variety of formats – by interest, by role, and by state. The purpose of these varied forums for discussion was to give Council members the chance to engage with ideas from the proposal in a variety of small groups before coming together for a larger discussion. The Council considered several changes to the Phase II proposal. Some members objected, for example, to the term “Hot House Schools.” There were also suggestions made to expand the proposed Phase II activities to include teacher preparation, greater involvement with higher education, and a larger presence in the business community. The group also felt the communication strategy used by the NESSC needed to be strengthened and expanded to make the Consortium better known in both education circles and to the general public. The meeting ended with a discussion about how to prioritize Phase II activities. It was agreed that, while nothing should be stripped from the work plan, GSP should help the Consortium focus on particular activities as the need arises. In other words, while none of the important strategies should be lost, the group requested a “staging” of events, as they realized that all the planned activities could not occur simultaneously.

By early May 2010, following a series of meetings with DOE leadership in each state, GSP composed a final Phase II proposal. Importantly, the proposal recognizes that the resources necessary to cover the full costs of the Phase II plan – most notably in the arena of support to schools – has not been secured. Furthermore, the proposal suggests that a lack of funding to address each component of the Consortium plan simultaneously will diminish the Consortium's ability to attain its goals. NMEF expressed interest in supporting some areas of the plan, and GSP reports that they have started to identify other potential foundations that align with the Consortium and, in collaboration with the states, expect to approach funders in fall 2010.

Extent to Which Phase I has Established a Foundation for Success in Phase II

This evaluation does not attempt to assess the quality of the Consortium's Phase II proposal, per se. However, it is helpful to highlight the ways in which key Phase I activities connect to Phase II, and the degree in which participants understand the activities and strategies proposed and how they align with long-term NESSC goals.

It is also important to keep in mind that, even from the start, a number of key stakeholders suggested that the goals of the Consortium, and in particular the goals related to Phase I strategies, were extremely ambitious. Several experienced leaders suggested that not only does change of such magnitude take a long time to take hold, but the available resources and full commitment from necessary stakeholders (e.g., Governors, legislators,

Commissioners, and the public at large) first need to be secured. Of note is that some of these same individuals said they believe Phase II is equally ambitious (although the six-year timeframe seems more realistic to them compared with the plan for year-one of Phase II in and of itself), especially considering the national political and economic context, the amount of funding secured to date, and the unknown level of resources required for the plan to be successful.

Connecting Activities in Phase I to Phase II, and to Consortium Goals

Phase I activity was, for the most part, aimed at setting the stage for innovative schools and practices that appear in Phase II, which in turn ultimately lead to the Consortium's long-term goals. As such, Phase I was not meant to directly address the Consortium's 2016 goals of increasing high school graduation, reducing dropout rates, and increasing college matriculation and readiness. This conceptualization of the relationship between Phases I and II raises the question: To what extent did Phase I activities create a foundation for the innovative practices and transformation of high schools in Phase II to occur?

The Phase II plan groups activities into four key areas:

1. Regional, state, and local policy
2. The development of the League of Innovative Schools
3. Standards and assessments
4. Public and political will

The Phase I work on international benchmarking was integrated into the League of Innovative Schools, while the work on data was integrated into Public and Political Will.

- Regional, State, and Local Policy

Policy work begun in Phase I has laid some of the groundwork for Phase II. NESSC participants most often cite the Consortium's High Leverage Policy Framework as a valuable tool in framing the discussion around local and state education policy. The Phase II plan details strategies to use this tool in supporting states to create their own policy commitment plan that will "outline and define the major strategies, procedural steps, and common messaging that will be employed to shape policy development and adoption within each state and across the region."

The policy work done to raise the mandatory school attendance age to 18 – first taken up in New Hampshire and now generating strong interest in the Maine legislature – is one example of a policy that has already had an impact in the region, as Working Group members from other states have shown interest in adopting this policy in their own states. In addition, the NESSC resolution that had its genesis at a Consortium Council meeting was unanimously passed by four state legislatures within the Consortium (the Connecticut legislature doesn't use resolutions, but it was passed by the Connecticut Board of Education). This resolution is a public statement of support for the goals and mission of the NESSC, and the passage of such a resolution creates awareness of the Consortium and possible momentum for further legislative action.

- The League of Innovative Schools

While the strategy for reaching schools in Phase II changed somewhat during the planning phase, the Phase II proposal is built directly on the work aimed at high school transformation begun in Phase I. The League of Innovative Schools represents the next iteration of the previously named "Hot House Schools." The plan includes a group of newly named "Implementing Schools," which are those that "make a commitment to the goals and actions of the Consortium and commit to redesigning their schools in alignment with NESSC efforts." The League of Innovative Schools also includes the identification and support of "Network Schools," which are schools that would benefit from more limited participation in the League.

The Phase II plan now includes working with chronically underperforming schools as part of a tiered approach to implementing high school reform at the school level, and it incorporates a timeline for impacting a widening circle of participating schools. Models of “transformed” high schools, however, have not been specified within the Consortium, though there are general categories for these schools outlined in the Global Best Practices tool. As such, one might ask, “When is a high school *transformed*?” Heading into Phase II, clearer examples of transformation may help create a more common vision and clearer picture of innovative high schools in the 21st century.

- Standards and Assessment

The Consortium spent considerable time in Phase I discussing the expansion and revision of high school assessment in the region. The focus of these discussions was the creation of performance-based assessments to augment the standardized tests currently used. The Consortium also began identifying the essential components of such an assessment system. While these discussions have generated great interest, thus far there are no concrete agreements to demonstrate progress in this area (and individual Consortium states have pursued several avenues of assessment on their own – not all in concert with NESSC goals). Consensus on how to move forward with a revised assessment program, especially in light of larger national efforts related to this, would help position the Consortium for success as Phase II progresses.

- Public and Political Will (Data)

An important aspect of the Consortium’s ability to determine progress on its long-term goals is the collection of data – from across the region – that speaks to such measures. To date, some data related to these goals, particularly those related to postsecondary matriculation and college readiness, were either unavailable or could not be forwarded to UMDI to be included in the baseline data report (though there are understandable reasons for this). For example, all Consortium states joined the National Student Clearinghouse in order to obtain data on postsecondary enrollment. However, technical difficulties and overwhelming work schedules reportedly prevented all but one state from returning this data.

It also bears pointing out that evaluating the Consortium’s disposition to address college readiness is more complex than other NESSC goals. When this goal was first articulated in the Phase I proposal, it was described as reducing, “*the percentage of students requiring college developmental/remedial courses to 5%.*” Since the proposal for Phase I was written, however, much more information has come to light about the difficulty of using remedial course attendance to evaluate this measure. Specifically, the data are difficult to collect and do not accurately represent a metric for college readiness. While in some of the Consortium states agreements with higher education bodies make collecting some of the data possible (usually at public colleges and universities), unfortunately, all states have multiple administrative systems for higher education (Rhode Island, for example, has three). Gaining access to developmental course attendance that can be linked to high school students in the region is difficult. An even greater difficulty is the inconsistency with which students are placed in remedial classes. There is no common standard, even within an individual state, for determining when a student’s skills warrant remediation. For philosophical and/or programmatic reasons, a high number of universities do not offer *any* remediation classes.

Because of these challenges, the Data Group made an effort to redefine college readiness using a suite of measures including some remedial course data, SAT scores, and other measures. The collection of metrics proposed by the Data Group offered an alternative that would provide – potentially – more information about college readiness.

The ability to reach a common five-state *agreement* on data-reporting measures is one of the major NESSC accomplishments to date. The work of the Data Group also led to the creation of key annual goals which are outlined in the Phase II proposal. These include overall yearly goals for graduation and dropout rates, as well as benchmarks for disaggregated groups, such as students receiving free and reduced lunch. However, the Consortium is not yet well positioned to collect, measure, and report on data related to all four long-term goals,

most notably college matriculation and readiness. This deficiency will need to be addressed in Phase II in order for the Consortium to appropriately measure progress toward 2016 goals.

- **Implementing the Work**

Several participants were encouraged by the possibility of the Working Group being composed differently in order to ensure a wider range of participants from each DOE and to create the possibility for individuals with similar roles to work together. The Phase II proposal reflects this thinking through the creation of Strategic Action Teams (SATs). The purpose of SATs is to strengthen the Consortium's work in the areas of policy, school improvement, standards, data collection and analysis, and communication. The following SATs are planned:

1. Regional, State, and Local Policy Strategic Action Team: NESSC Council members; Commissioners; Deputy Commissioners; State Leads; state board members; selected state policy makers; and legislators.
2. League of Innovative Schools Strategic Action Team: DOE staff overseeing school-improvement programs; Working Group members; educators from the field.
3. Standards and Assessment Strategic Action Team: 21st century standards development (appropriate DOE staff and leaders; the New England Association of Schools and Colleges; relevant experts and organizations); large-scale performance-assessment development (DOE assessment coordinators/teams; relevant experts and organizations).
4. Data Systems Strategic Action Team: DOE data coordinators; university data-system coordinators; regional assessment experts and organizations (as needed or when strategically advisable).
5. Communications Strategic Action Team: DOE Communication Directors; others as needed.

The Data SAT and the Communications SAT can be seen as continuations of previous groups (with expanded membership), while SATs devoted entirely to policy, school improvement, and standards are new and reflect an expansion of the structure from Phase I.

The expansion and refinement of the organizational structure of the Consortium may create greater opportunities for further progress on Consortium goals and suggest movement from planning to action. However, resources to support an expanded structure of purpose-specific teams may be crucial to NESSC viability. Since current resources already make participation in NESSC events challenging, it is unclear how state DOEs will cope with a greater number of committees, let alone continue to remain fully engaged in existing NESSC activities.

Members' Understanding of the Activities and Strategies Planned for Phase II and How They Align With Long-Term NESSC Goals

Evidence suggests that GSP led the development of Phase II through a collaborative process, involving multiple meetings with state DOE officials, the Working Group, and with the Council. Nonetheless, survey responses captured from NESSC participants in April and May 2010 suggest that as many as 40% lack a clear understanding of Phase II activities and strategies. And, slightly more than one-third of respondents indicated that the potential Phase II activities and strategies being determined may not help their state accomplish their high school reform goals. See Table 2.

Table 2				
Opinions on the Development and Value of Phase II Plan				
		Strongly Agree/ Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Neutral/ Somewhat Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
	N	%	%	%
You have a clear understanding of Phase II activities and strategies.	25	60.0%	32.0%	8.0%
The potential Phase II activities and strategies now being determined will help your state accomplish their high school reform goals.	25	64.0%	36.0%	0.0%

As the planning and design of Phase II continues, the Consortium stands to benefit from ensuring all participants have a sufficient understanding of the proposed activities and strategies. Strategically, the Consortium may find it advantageous to step back and take stock of how closely aligned the current Phase II plan is with each of the NESSC states’ high school reform efforts.

IV. Phase I Strategies and Accomplishments

This section focuses on the second objective of the NESSC evaluation: To understand the extent to which the Consortium has made progress with regard to each of the six strategies. The key questions to be addressed include the following:

- a. What conditions (contextual factors) help explain NESSC progress for implementing its six Phase I strategies?
- b. How was each strategy implemented? What progress was achieved? What challenges were faced and what solutions were developed?

IVA. Implementing Grant Strategies: An Evolving Process

The NESSC Phase I work plan presented six strategies for accomplishing the Consortium's ambitious goals over six years. These were:

1. Redefine and build consensus and commitment – a movement – concerning what high school graduates need to know, are able to do, and hold as habits of mind.
2. Shape and align state and local policies to support a new consensus and commitment for 21st century standards, support new educational learning opportunities, and challenge schools to remove inadequate practices in favor of successful learning strategies.
3. Provide assistance and direction for state education agencies to collaboratively build cross-state support systems focused on secondary reform leadership, instruction, and assessment at the local level for the purposes of dramatically changing the way students are engaged for learning.
4. Expand student assessment instruments and protocols to broaden the vehicles used to measure student progress toward revised student learning standards.
5. Participate in international benchmarking exercises to assess standards, instruction, professional development, and assessment within a world-class comparative cohort.
6. Develop strategic partnerships and undertake systemic planning in order to sustain this effort in an era of decreasing resources.

Earlier sections of this report discuss how the national, regional, and individual statewide political and economic conditions/context affected the work of the Consortium (see page 15). The Consortium's progress toward accomplishing the goals laid out in the six strategies must also be measured in light of the unpredictable nature of multi-state collaboration. Strategy 1 is one example. While technically unaccomplished in Phase I, it was essentially superseded by the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which all NESSC states have signed on to and continue to meet to discuss. Strategy 2 remains an active and viable Consortium priority on which progress is being made. Yet it also underwent a conceptual softening that accommodated the complexities involved in establishing policies across states. One interviewee suggested, for example, that smaller agreements on the policy front were probably more realistic, and that

“The origins of the policy need not happen at the state level and push down to the local level. The origins of policy can be born in local practice, consummated in local policy – to be sustained there – and then picked up as a great idea to then be adopted as state policy.”

This ability to counter unpredictability with flexibility and patience has become crucial to the Consortium’s ability to move forward. One interviewee acknowledged that being able to react to change is almost as important as being able to plan effectively in the first place:

“I, quite frankly, looking ahead, don’t see how we’re not sitting here in this room a year from now talking about Year 1 of Phase II, and not have the same issues come up: ‘We thought we’d get this done and we got that done instead.’ ... We planned some if it proactively and some of it reactively.”

Other interviewees concurred that this adaptability has become a necessary trait:

“It’s important to recognize that getting derailed is something that will happen—it’s a function of different groups working together.”

While adaptation reportedly led to frustration at times for those who wished to quicken the pace of accomplishing set goals, progress on the six strategies is nevertheless being made, and as one interviewee optimistically suggested, the Consortium is indeed starting to see *“the fruits of our patient labor.”*

IVB. NESSC Strategies with Evidence and Challenges Toward Making Progress

To help understand participant perceptions of NESSC progress and its value to member states, a survey was administered in the spring of 2010. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement (along a seven-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) with the following statements for each of the six Phase I strategies: “Adequate progress has been made to date regarding the implementation of this strategy,” and “The Consortium adds value beyond my state’s own efforts toward accomplishing this strategy.” See Table 3.

Table 3				
Opinions on Progress Made and Value Gained from Phase I Strategies				
		Strongly Agree/ Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Neutral/ Somewhat Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
	N	%	%	%
Adequate progress has been made to date regarding the implementation of this strategy.				
Strategy 1	28	50.0%	39.3%	10.7%
Strategy 2	26	50.0%	38.5%	11.5%
Strategy 3	26	42.3%	50.0%	7.7%
Strategy 4	26	38.5%	42.3%	19.2%
Strategy 5	26	38.5%	50.0%	11.5%
Strategy 6	25	56.0%	44.0%	0.0%
The Consortium adds value beyond my state’s own efforts toward accomplishing this strategy.				
	N	%	%	%
Strategy 1	28	82.1%	17.9%	0.0%
Strategy 2	27	81.5%	18.5%	0.0%
Strategy 3	26	76.9%	23.1%	0.0%
Strategy 4	26	65.4%	30.8%	3.8%
Strategy 5	25	68.0%	32.0%	0.0%
Strategy 6	25	76.0%	24.0%	0.0%

In general, perceptions of progress on implementing individual strategies were mixed, with only one (strategy 6) gaining greater than 50% agreement that adequate progress had been made to date. Evidence suggests that the ambitious agenda, changes in national context, and what many viewed as a somewhat idealistic timeline, may have contributed to unrealistic expectations for implementing these strategies. At the same time, some respondents suggested that progress should be measured by the extent to which a foundation for change to occur in Phase II was achieved.

While respondents were mixed in their judgment of implementation progress, there was more consensus on the value of the Consortium for states' high school reform efforts. This may suggest that while some survey respondents would have liked for more progress to have been made, participants still believed the strategies were worthwhile and that the multi-state effort to implement them adds value.

What follows is a discussion that attempts to answer the following questions: How, and how well, was each strategy implemented? To what extent was progress was achieved for these strategies? What challenges were faced and what solutions were developed?

Strategy 1

Redefine and build consensus and commitment – a movement – concerning what high school graduates need to know, are able to do, and hold as habits of mind.

Implementation of this Strategy

Work on building consensus around 21st century standards – “what high school graduates need to know, are able to do, and hold as habits of mind” – was not a major focus of the Consortium during Phase I. Respondents offered several reasons as to why this strategy received less attention than others. The most common of these was that the national effort with similar goals, the Common Core State Standards Initiative, became a much larger initiative which stalled planned NESSC work on this strategy.

Progress of Implementation Efforts

Interestingly, 50% of survey respondents indicated they believed adequate progress had been made regarding this strategy (See Table 3), perhaps due to varying expectations about what “adequate progress” looks like. That is, to the extent that goals around common standards were achieved through the Common Core adopted by all five NESSC states, the strategy could be considered rather successful.

In addition to the work states did on the Common Core, GSP created a draft “crosswalk” document connecting current state standards with 21st century standards. Several respondents reported that this was an important step as they are not convinced that the Common Core will explicitly address 21st century standards, particularly those that are difficult to measure with standardized tests.

Challenges Faced and Solutions Developed

In their assessment of progress on Strategy 1, GSP asserted that the creation of the Council has set the stage for creating public will to initiate a more comprehensive standards discussion with the general public. They believe that while the Common Core initiative has garnered much attention in the press, an effort to demonstrate commitment to standards that match to, or go beyond the Common Core, could be helpful in building public support for high school transformation. The continuation of work on standards remains a high priority in Phase II.

Strategy 2

Shape and align state and local policies to support a new consensus and commitment for 21st century standards, support new educational learning opportunities, and challenge schools to remove inadequate practices in favor of successful learning strategies.

Implementation of this Strategy

Conversations about policy took place at almost every level of the NESSC organization. The Consortium Council was the venue for several in-depth discussions of policies that might lead to innovation in high schools in the region. At its March meeting, Council members reiterated the importance of continuing work on policies to support high school transformation and success. They also expressed the need to remove policies which might be barriers to this kind of progress.

The Consortium contracted with the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Connecticut to create the High Leverage Policy Framework, a conceptual tool for assessing the impact, or potential impact, of policies on high school. The tool was rolled out at the summer 2009 Council meeting and has reportedly been used by several state DOEs and other education policy groups within the Consortium. The authors of this tool suggest 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 High Leverage Policy 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.” The High Leverage Policy Framework was also introduced and disseminated to all attendees at the High School Redesign in Action Conference, attended by just over 300 educators from throughout New England in April 2010.

Progress of Implementation Efforts

The degree to which spring 2010 interviewees considered the creation and use of the High Leverage Policy Framework helpful tended to reflect whether they felt the Consortium had made progress on its policy strategy. In some states where the High Leverage Policy Framework was reportedly used at both the state and local levels, respondents were more likely to indicate that adequate progress had been made by the Consortium related to policy. By contrast, respondents from other states that had not made as much use of the tool tended to have more questions, and less agreement, on progress.

When questioned about policy work, most interviewees commented on policy work in general, and not on how it specifically related to 21st century standards. This seems reasonable given that much of the Consortium’s focus on standards was tied to the Common Core.

What challenges were faced and what solutions were developed?

One of the challenges that the NESSC faced was that decisions about policy are typically made by people outside of the Consortium. For example, the Council discussed several important policy initiatives that would require legislative approval. While there are legislators from every state on the Council, the Council has no authorizing power and must depend on representatives to plead the case for support in their home states. This approach was very successful when applied to the legislative resolution mentioned earlier in this report, and it may prove successful in the future. Still, the Consortium will likely continue facing challenges to establish state and local support for their bold policy initiatives.

Strategy 3

Provide assistance and direction for state education agencies (DOEs) to collaboratively build cross-state support systems focused on secondary reform leadership, instruction, and assessment at the local level for the purposes of dramatically changing the way students are engaged for learning.

Implementation of this Strategy

Many of the activities that GSP contributed to state DOEs were reported as helpful for moving the agenda of high school reform forward. A sampling of these activities, as documented in GSP reports, includes:

- Regular meetings with Leads from each state.
- Attending and/or facilitating meetings of principal and superintendent organizations, and teachers' unions, to help familiarize leaders with the Consortium.
- Making presentations to state boards of higher education and state boards of education on behalf of the Consortium.
- Testifying at legislative hearings.
- Meeting with building principal/team to help with high school redesign efforts.
- Facilitating a cross-state meeting on New Hampshire's Virtual Learning Academy.
- Helping procure additional funds for high school transformation work.
- Planning and coordinating seminars on the Global Best Practices tool and High Leverage Policy Framework.
- Assisting a state Communications Director with a high school transformation blog.
- Organizing meetings for state data directors to create regional metrics for measuring long-term NESSC goals.

Progress of Implementation Efforts

Interviewees reported great effort on the part of GSP to participate in state events that were connected to high school transformation and were generally appreciative of the work GSP did to support or enhance their efforts. An example of "creating cross-state support systems," is evident in GSP's work to create agreements among state data analysts on how to report graduation and dropout rates. The methodological agreements arrived at by these analysts (from each state) are examples of consensus that may provide direction on reporting in the future.

Almost all state DOE personnel interviewed pointed to the presence of Liaisons as evidence that the Consortium was providing support to state DOEs. While the exact roles of the Liaisons varied from state to state, Leads were complimentary about the helpfulness and value that Liaisons added to high school reform efforts. Several respondents reported that there might be benefits to expanding and/or clarifying the roles of the Liaisons as the Consortium moves into Phase II.

Challenges Faced and Solutions Developed

Implementation of this strategy is somewhat difficult to evaluate because at times the actions of GSP and the actions of the Consortium were not always seen by participants as one and the same (i.e., it was sometimes unclear to informants whether GSP was performing "official" Consortium work, or if they were doing something related to high school reform but not necessarily directly on behalf of the Consortium). The issue of what to attribute to the NESSC is not trivial. There are numerous instances where some participants view a specific occurrence as a Consortium event, while others do not. This can confuse Consortium work with other efforts at education reform and potentially obscure or dilute the real progress of the NESSC.

Finally, while there was great agreement on the method for reporting graduation and dropout rates, a considerable amount of other data, particularly those related to postsecondary matriculation and college readiness, were either unavailable or could not be forwarded to UMDI to be included in the baseline data report.

Strategy 4

Expand student assessment instruments and protocols to broaden the vehicles used to measure student progress toward revised student learning standards.

Implementation of this Strategy

The Consortium's work on assessment has been part of an ongoing process of adaptation and revision. Beginning to emerge from this effort are broad ideas about what a revised assessment system might look like, specifically one that would provide an improved understanding of student learning and achievement in the 21st century. Working Group members suggested that new assessments might be formative in nature and demonstrate learning through a body of evidence such as student portfolios, exhibitions, or capstone projects – rather than, or in addition to, the more summative standardized tests currently in use.

As part of its effort to re-envision high school assessment, the Consortium reached out to national experts in the field and organized either conferences or presentations with them. For example, John Tanner and Marc Tucker presented to NESSC states about their visions for the future of high school assessment in the region. According to attendees, these conversations have added greater understanding of innovative assessments, as well as of the broader, national perspective in this area.

The NESSC has also had to consider where it and its member states are going to fit in the national picture of RTTT assessment goals. As the national conversations about assessment take shape, Consortium participants have suggested they may need to take a “wait and see” approach to first determine how closely the national agenda will align with their own interests before moving forward with specific plans to implement this strategy.

Progress of Implementation Efforts

Implementation of this strategy remains a goal of Phase II. Considering all the terrain that needed to be navigated, the variety of groups involved in the conversations around assessment, the future goals of the NESSC, and the assessment goals embedded in the RTTT matrix – the Consortium spent considerable time and resources in this area. During spring 2010 interviews, respondents' perceptions of how much progress was made on this strategy tended to vary based on their specific expectations or definitions of “progress.” Some interviewees considered the extensive conversations about assessment as adequate progress. Others were looking for more evident achievement.

All of the states are involved in at least one of the two consortia RTTT assessment grants – the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, which consists of 31 states (including Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont) and/or the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which consists of 26 states (including New Hampshire and Rhode Island). All of the Consortium states also have part of a separate RTTT assessment grant – the State Consortium on Board Examination Systems managed by the National Center on Education and the Economy, led by Marc Tucker – earmarked by the U.S. Department of Education to support specific exams aligned to high school grades or courses. Some interviewees considered these agreements connected to the Consortium effort, while others did not.

Challenges Faced and Solutions Developed

While the Consortium discussed many of its goals for assessment across the region and has hopes for successful implementation in Phase II, the conversation on assessment has been complex. Aside from the process of trying to meet state, regional, and federal assessment needs, the actual process of involving the right personnel from DOEs was an initial challenge. The main concern was that state assessment directors/coordinators were not officially

invited to join early conversations about the NESSC's assessment plans. While this omission was remedied, it resulted in some confusion about what, exactly, the Consortium's assessment goals should be and how they should be achieved.

Strategy 5

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

Implementation of this Strategy

When the NESSC set out to do the necessary research required for establishing a context of international benchmarks, they ultimately discovered not only a lack of consensus on what "international benchmarking" exactly entails, but also that the published literature in this field does not always explain in sufficient detail how the most successful schools and educational initiatives have gone about achieving their success. The Working Group moved to start the process of authoring their own benchmarking/best-practices tool, *Global Best Practices in Context: An Internationally Benchmarked Self-Assessment Tool for Secondary Learning*. The purpose of this tool, which NESSC leadership noted they view as a "practical product," is to help schools self-evaluate and then establish adequate plans of action for achieving high standards.

An early draft of Global Best Practices tool was shared in July 2009 at a leadership conference in Concord, NH where NESSC participants sought feedback from attendees, including superintendents and principals. A draft of the tool was then shared with the NESSC Council in August 2009, and it has since undergone further revision and an extensive drafting process.

Progress of Implementation Efforts

The Global Best Practices tool has been used in Rhode Island in a limited number of schools. It was also introduced and presented by two State Liaisons at the High School Redesign in Action Conference. Working Group members interviewed in the spring of 2010 reported that the tool is potentially valuable as a resource for helping to redesign and/or assess current schools. It remains a key element of the NESSC's plan for Phase II implementation.

Challenges Faced and Solutions Developed

As is mentioned above, the Consortium's major challenge with this strategy was research-based; it was difficult for them to access information that would result in practical, tangible benchmarking standards. They responded by developing their own best-practices tool. Although use of this tool has been minimal to date, feedback from respondents who used this tool in Rhode Island was positive.

Strategy 6

Develop strategic partnerships and undertake systemic planning in order to sustain this effort in an era of decreasing resources.

Implementation of this Strategy

The Consortium has reportedly established many strategic relationships with state leaders in business, policy, and education, as well as with organizations that are well positioned to help advance the cause of high school redesign in New England. These relationships exist between the Consortium and organizations within individual states, and between the Consortium and organizations that operate at a broader, regional level. An example of the latter is the Consortium's relationship with the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote "greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England."⁴ In addition to being able to help advance the Consortium's agenda at the organizational level, NEBHE's board is

⁴ <http://www.nebhe.org/about-nebhe/our-mission/>

comprised of people who themselves have extensive experience with educational and political concerns in New England; the board includes not only college presidents, but also legislators and former Governors, some of whom are counted as at-large members of the Consortium. NESSC leaders have been invited to attend NEBHE events, and NEBHE, in turn, volunteered to host a meeting of the NESSC Council. This relationship with NEBHE will, ideally, help the Consortium progress toward its goal of aligning high school graduation standards with postsecondary entrance and success standards.

The NESSC is also focused on developing similar strategic relationships at the state level. Indicators of success in this area include that Maine recently adopted a bill – submitted by a Maine state senator who is also a Consortium Council member – that mandates a 90% graduation rate and that also calls for raising the compulsory attendance age from 17 to 18, a measure that mimics a practice recently set in motion in New Hampshire. Also in Maine, the NESSC has forged a partnership with the Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education, a business roundtable whose primary concern is the reformation of the state’s public school system.

Another promising development has taken place in New Hampshire, where the NESSC appears to be developing a burgeoning relationship with their higher education system. In interviews, the chancellor of the New Hampshire university system indicated that the time is right in his state to bridge the gap between high school reform and higher education. To that end, the chancellor would like to see the UNH system establish the Consortium’s metrics for all pre-K–16 students and schools. The provosts from three of the UNH schools are now reportedly involved with this project, and New Hampshire is positioning itself to be a leader for the Consortium and its higher education goals and initiatives.

Progress of Implementation Efforts

The NESSC has made significant progress toward developing key relationships with influential regional and state organizations. Much of this effort came from the creation of the Consortium Council. Since each state is represented on the Council by its business community, state education department, and state legislators, Council members are well-placed to help communicate and develop the Consortium’s mission and strategies.

Higher education organizations, in some of the Consortium states, have expressed a greater interest in working with the NESSC than was originally envisioned. Relationships with higher education have come as the result of outreach by GSP, Commissioners, and by Liaisons. The development of this partnership is in its early stages, but it holds the potential to yield important agreements to support the goals of the Consortium.

Challenges Faced and Solutions Developed

Outreach to and involvement with education leadership organizations was originally part of the work plan but received somewhat limited attention during Phase I. Several respondents expressed a concern about the lack of involvement to date from these organizations, especially teachers unions, principal organizations, and superintendent groups. The Consortium may need to find ways to reach out to education leadership groups to help ensure support for its goals and missions.

V. Conclusions and Strategic Considerations

The preceding sections of this report reflect the Consortium’s interest in documenting its work and monitoring its progress in order to help guide future planning and decision making related to meeting the goals of this effort. While much work remains, much has been accomplished through Phase I, and many NESSC participants indicated they are proud of their many achievements to date.

At its core, the Consortium has had success in establishing a foundation for regional, multi-state collaboration, and evidence points to a strong interest and commitment from a wide variety of stakeholders to continue these efforts. The vast majority of Consortium participants who were interviewed and/or completed the spring 2010 survey – including all four of the Commissioners who spoke with UMDI – saw value in participating in the NESSC and expressed their desire for it to continue. In fact, 96% of respondents agreed that the Consortium should continue into the foreseeable future (70% strongly agreed). Survey respondents also agreed that other active NESSC participants are committed to continuing the Consortium. See Table 4 below.

		Strongly Agree/ Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Neutral/ Somewhat Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
	N	%	%	%
You want the NESSC Consortium to continue into the foreseeable future.	23	95.7	4.3	0.0
Active members of the NESSC (Working Group, advisory group, others) are committed to continuing the Consortium into the foreseeable future.	24	83.3	16.7	0.0

This commitment bodes well for the future of the NESSC, especially given that it has weathered changes in Commissioners, Governors, and Working Group members. None of the five Commissioners who were chief education officers in their states when the Consortium began are still there. While this group included the original visionaries of regional collaboration in pursuit of high school transformation, the chiefs who have replaced them have, for the most part, continued to support moving forward with NESSC goals.

Indeed, an unforeseen benefit of the NESSC has been that the Consortium Council seems to have played an important role in providing steadiness during leadership changes; virtually all respondents reported that the Council has been critical to maintaining commitment and direction. Despite the changing federal context, severe constraints on state education budgets, and increasing demands placed on DOE staff, Consortium participants reported strong support for the NESSC’s vision and mission. In fact, several participants cited the NESSC as being instrumental in sustaining a consistent and clear vision during the turbulent educational environment of the past 18 months.

The majority of Consortium participants also agreed (at least 80% strongly agreed or agreed) that their work together has resulted in a culture that promotes communication and trust between the five states, and that participants respect and value contributions made by each other, thus allowing them to build on each other’s strengths to promote NESSC goals. See Table 5.

Table 5 Opinions on the Culture Established by the Consortium				
		Strongly Agree/ Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Neutral/ Somewhat Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
	N	%	%	%
The Consortium has developed a culture that promotes communication & trust between the states.	25	80.0	20.0	0.0
Consortium members respect and value contributions made by each member, and build on each other’s strengths to promote NESSC goals.	25	84.0	16.0	0.0

Other survey data shared earlier in this report indicate that there is particularly high agreement that the Consortium adds value beyond states’ own efforts toward implementing Phase I strategies. As a whole, these data represent critical and positive developments that speak well to the long-term success of the Consortium.

Strategic Considerations

Throughout UMDI’s evaluation, Consortium participants demonstrated their interest in gaining objective, formative feedback and in using those data to make important adjustments when necessary. Participants have also offered carefully considered suggestions and concerns related to Phase I progress and to planning for Phase II implementation. This section presents several strategic considerations to NESSC participants and their partners. The intent is to identify possible priorities and opportunities for Phase II, and to illuminate key supports or obstacles to keep in mind in the pursuit of long-term goals.

It is important to note that these considerations are not intended as recommendations per se. Rather, by presenting plausible options for continued success based on the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities identified through the evaluation process, they are intended to provoke discussion and productive debate among NESSC participants and their partners as they move into the next phase of their work.

These considerations are organized into five major areas, as follows:

1. Phase II Strategic Planning
2. Measuring Progress in Phase II
3. Establishing and Supporting the NESSC as a High Priority
4. Expanding Communication
5. NESSC Management and Coordination

1. Phase II Strategic Planning

Enhance Participants’ Understanding of the Activities and Strategies Planned for Phase II and How They Align With Long-Term NESSC Goals.

Plans for Phase II were created collaboratively, involving multiple meetings with state DOE officials, the Working Group, and with the Council (referenced earlier in this report). Nonetheless, survey responses suggest that as many as 40% of Consortium participants lack a clear understanding of Phase II activities and strategies. Likewise, more than one-third of respondents indicated they are unclear as to how Phase II activities align with long-term NESSC goals. These results support data gathered from interviews in spring 2010. A considerable number of interviewees (slightly less than half) reported some confusion about how proposed Phase II strategies

would lead to increased long-term NESSC goals (e.g., increased high school graduation and college attendance rates).

One respondent suggested that some of the Consortium goals are “more rhetorical and aspirational than they are real,” and also pointed out that the Consortium doesn’t have the resources yet to “get there.” Another individual felt that the goals of the Consortium continue to be very ambitious – lofty and perhaps a little bit out of reach. This person was not sure the steps are “staged” enough, and thought that more “interim” steps might be helpful.

As the planning and design of Phase II continues, the Consortium stands to benefit from ensuring all participants have a sufficient understanding of the proposed activities and strategies of Phase II and the specific ways in which they are linked to the achievement of long-term NESSC goals.

Carefully Consider the Proper Balance Between Prescriptive and Customized Models of Reform

The Phases II proposal makes a persuasive case that high school reform should look different from state to state. The Phase II proposal states:

“Although the five member states employ similar reform strategies, each state has been developing, and will continue to develop, a comprehensive secondary-school improvement plan that is customized to meet the specific needs and contexts within each state. The NESSC not only supports these aligned yet programmatically divergent models, but it is one of the initiative’s central foundational strategies. A more rigid or prescriptive model would be unable to adapt to shifting contexts, whether at the state or the federal level, and it would find state engagement much more difficult given both existing and evolving political and DOE priorities across the region.”

At the same time, some respondents suggested that since the current Phase II proposal is situated strongly on the side of being very flexible and responsive to the changing education and economic landscape, this lack of specificity may lead to marginalizing the benefits of working together. One respondent suggested there needs to be “more of a sense of a common agenda within the Consortium,” and added, “If we’re all approaching these things differently, what’s to be gained by working together?”

While acknowledging that flexibility is important for any effort of this size, there may be a benefit to reconsidering the proper “balance” between a prescribed vision and a more open-ended approach to this work. This includes greater specificity about the “commonality” and “mutual benefits” of a regional approach to high school transformation.

Align NESSC Activities with Federal Initiatives

NESSC Commissioners were clear that much of the work in their states will be aligned with federal priorities. Federal funding and support depend on states emphasizing key priorities laid out for the RTTT competition. These priorities include standards and assessments that prepare students for college or the workplace; data systems to measure growth and inform instruction; strategies to turn around low-achieving schools; and programs for recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining teachers.

Discussions around regional approaches to high school reform and the “official” start of the NESSC occurred before the Obama administration made clear their priorities. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that NESSC participants see the Consortium as an approach explicitly linked to all four federal priority areas. Still, it is noteworthy that the Consortium appears to be solidly positioned to address the first two of these goals. For instance, discussions about 21st century standards, their relationship to the Common Core, and potential formative assessments have been part of NESSC dialogue from the beginning. The Consortium has also made substantial progress on the common collection of data to measure progress. This process is ongoing and will be refined in Phase II. Consortium alignment on teacher quality and chronically underperforming schools is less clear. While

professional development seems an obvious component of overall reform, the approach to developing teacher quality is, as yet, unspecified. Similarly, it may be inferred from the Phase II proposal that turning around low-achieving schools must be part of raising the regional graduation rate. However, at this time no specific plans for doing this have been articulated.

Perhaps most importantly, Commissioners strongly expressed that the more the NESSC is aligned with federal priorities, the greater the value they see in their state's participation. When asked about the importance of Phase II initiatives being aligned with RTTT and other federal initiatives, one Commissioner stated "It is important because the more integrated these things are (i.e., Consortium goals and federal goals), the more powerful the reform effort can be – integrating these two things are very important to people in the states." Another Commissioner suggested that alignment between federal priorities and the work of the Consortium could be mutually beneficial and added "The work with NESSC could even feed into a larger policy agenda at the federal level."

Phase II offers the NESSC an opportunity to leverage existing and new human and programmatic resources with the end goal of leading the way toward a new era of secondary schooling. In doing so, the Consortium should be constantly aware of opportunities to align their strategies with federal priorities in order to maximize efficiencies in both effort and resources at the state level.

Describe Models for High School Transformation

Initial descriptions of models of transformed high schools reflected a vision that helped to build enthusiasm for the Consortium. These descriptions included a list of characteristics that, while not entirely defined, presented an image of the goal toward which the NESSC was working. Early characterizations of transformed high schools noted, among other things, that

"...versatile community learning centers 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."

The Phase II proposal offers a vision of transformed schools based on the Global Best Practices tool developed during Phase I. This document identifies 20 dimensions of "best practices across the globe" and includes categories for: Teaching and Learning (Personalization and Relevance); Organizational Design (Time and Space); and School Leadership (Moral Courage). While this tool does present some parameters for identifying innovative schools, it appears to fall short of articulating a view of transformed high schools that several Consortium participants expressed they would like to see.

One Commissioner reported being interested in seeing more "user friendly" descriptions of 21st century transformed high schools and was prepared to share these examples with key constituents. This Commissioner then went on to give an example of what this "user friendly" description might sound like: "A kid starts school at eight o'clock in the morning and takes an English class. Then walks down the street to the local vet and does a six-month internship, two hours a day. Then they come back to the high school, go to the library and get online and take a distance-learning course. After that they walk down to the community college and take another course there. Then they come back for soccer practice before going home. And then they come back at night for music or art or English or something else. We need to out it in plain English so that the average person on the street says, 'I understand this and this makes sense.'"

Another prominent participant also reported looking forward to "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."

The Consortium may find advantages to engaging in further dialogue with the goal of creating a clearer model of what a transformed high school looks like. This process could help ensure that the participants share a common vision for what they are working to achieve. One strategy to consider might be for Commissioners and/or designees to gather for a retreat with the goal of creating models of transformed schools while simultaneously “capturing the energy” that might come as a result of this exercise.

Acquire Funding, as Soon as Possible, to Support School Transformation

Various participants from each of the states agreed that the Consortium needs to speed up the pace of their work, most particularly around acquiring necessary resources to support the actual transformation of high schools. One informant believed that the ability to move quickly is vital to the way an organization is perceived – it is a “proof point” of the organization’s viability. “Quality is important,” this individual suggested, “but they need to move much more quickly.”

One prominent participant said that the work of the Consortium thus far has been focused around using policy to drive change. This person suggested that, in and of itself, policy won’t be enough to drive change, and added that his/her state “has a lot of goals and policies that are consistent with the Consortium, but nothing is really happening with them.” This individual also noted a preference for a “feet on the street” approach and was excited about the possibility in Phase II of starting the tangible work and getting people involved in it.

Related to this, one Commissioner expressed that “It’s time to get more concrete with the work,” and added that “although the context is slightly different in each state, public schools are ‘confused’ right now, and if the Consortium moves forward it could provide the direction for states to start moving in.”

Another participant thought “acceleration” was important, especially if the Consortium can get some “product” or “results” that will help “codify the relationships between the states.” This person noted that his/her Commissioner is product/results oriented, and suggested that being able to show the Commissioner concrete results would make the Consortium more viable.

There is a strong desire across the states to make the work of the Consortium less “visionary” and more “concrete and practical.” For many, acquisition of funding to support high school transformation is central to the future of the Consortium. A well-communicated plan for approaching potential funders, along with a strategy to share the status of these efforts in a timely manner, will likely be very well received.

2. Measuring Progress in Phase II

Focus on the Number of Schools that Meet NESSC Goals

At present, progress towards meeting the long-term goals of the Consortium are to be measured using annual aggregate rates based on total student population. For example, during school year 2009, the composite NESSC graduation rate was 78.4%, or 11.6 percentage points short of the 2016 goal of 90%. The Phase II proposal identifies annual indicators of progress for increasing graduation rates, along with three other long-term goals. While this approach is conceptually simple (it gives a single figure upon which to judge Consortium progress), it may not adequately describe the relationship and causality between transformed high schools and NESSC goals.

The Consortium might consider changing the way it now plans to measure and report progress to include counting the actual number of schools that meet NESSC goals (e.g., 90% graduates, less than 1% dropouts, 80% who go on to postsecondary education) by using the common calculation measures agreed on during Phase I. This approach would highlight the impact of the initiative in a manner that stakeholders would be more likely to understand and recognize as coming directly from their efforts.

Strategically, the NESSC may benefit from focusing and reporting high school transformation efforts as proportions of high schools meeting long-term goals, in addition to, or in place of, percentages of students.

This new reporting component may strengthen the ability of the Consortium to attribute their work on transformed schools and more directly link these data with the mission of NESSC.

Accelerate Work on Publically Reporting Common NESSC Measures

Interviewees suggested that the work done by the Data Group (i.e., advising UMDI on the creation of common measures and methods for reporting graduation rates, dropout rates, postsecondary matriculation and success, and college readiness) could form the basis of a Consortium policy agreement for publicly reporting these same measures. Such an agreement would create comparable measures for reporting and comparing data across each of the five states. Several respondents, including some Commissioners, said they believe that formalizing such a policy would be a welcome and important step, and that the timing for doing so may be ideal. Likewise, they suggested that such an agreement would be a significant Consortium accomplishment.

The Consortium may want to accelerate their pursuit of a regional data reporting policy for reporting graduation rates, dropout rates, postsecondary matriculation, and ultimately, college readiness and postsecondary success.

Improve the Procedures for Collecting and Reporting Data to be used for Measuring NESSC Progress

Meetings and discussions among data specialists, GSP, and UMDI were very productive. As an example, the baseline data technical report produced by UMDI includes nearly complete data related to graduation rates and dropout rates for each state and for important subgroups of students. However, a considerable amount of other data, particularly those related to postsecondary matriculation and college readiness, were either unavailable or could not be forwarded to UMDI to be included in the baseline data report.

Since the timely collection and reporting of data related to NESSC goals is necessary for measuring future progress, the Consortium may have to consider developing more effective procedures for compiling these data during Phase II.

3. Establishing and Supporting the NESSC as a High Priority

Participation from Commissioners at NESSC Events

Throughout Phase I, the participation of Commissioners has been somewhat inconsistent at key NESSC events, including Council meetings. This has not gone unnoticed by other Consortium participants. One individual expressed quite clearly that “There absolutely needs to be a recommitment on the part of all the Commissioners. Maybe there could be a retreat with them (if and when funding arrives). Maybe some don’t want to be part of it anymore?” Some respondents reported a concern that the inconsistency of Commissioner attendance at Consortium events may signal a lack of priority for NESSC activities.

More consistent participation on the part of Commissioners would send a clearer message as to the relative importance of the Consortium and its activities, particularly as it moves into Phase II. The Declaration of Agreement might serve as a critical document/tool for formalizing the commitment of NESSC Commissioners.

Prioritize NESSC within State DOEs

There are enormous demands on the time of DOE employees, and the Consortium work is one of many worthy initiatives in which states are engaged. As Working Group members assume many responsibilities within states, some expressed concern as to whether the Consortium is being given high enough priority or whether it is seen as simply one of many high school reform activities. For example, most state DOEs focused quite heavily on RTTT applications over the past year. Commissioners were clear that RTTT applications were a major priority and asked DOE employees to act accordingly. None of the respondents reported similar admonishments about NESSC. This

may point to ambivalence on the part of some Commissioners about Consortium goals. More likely, though, internal communications have not facilitated clear priorities where the Consortium is concerned.

Improving communication within DOEs regarding NESSC activities might help to clarify the message that the Consortium is a top priority.

Furthermore, the number of opportunities for State Leads to meet with their Commissioners on a regular and timely basis to keep them abreast of NESSC activity differs greatly between the states. While some Leads are provided frequent scheduled opportunities to meet with their Commissioners to discuss NESSC matters, others reported that these occasions are few and far between for them. It is not surprising then that these Leads also noted feeling the Consortium needs to become more of a central “driver” and “focus” of their department’s mission and planning around high school reform.

Regular opportunities for State Leads to meet with their Commissioners seem to be highly valuable and strongly desired by those who are not afforded these opportunities. The Consortium should encourage states to formalize a process whereby Commissioners are kept informed by their Leads (and other NESSC representatives, as appropriate) on a regular basis.

Expand Opportunities for Commissioners to Meet

In summer 2009, Commissioners began meeting through a conference call every month – an event that at least one Commissioner says would not have occurred without NESSC. They described 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. Evidence suggests that these conference calls have recently become more sporadic.

Reestablishing opportunities for Consortium leaders to communicate on a regular basis may be well received by Commissioners and highly valuable during Phase II.

4. Expanding Communication

Implement a Communication Strategy Targeted to both Internal and External Audiences

Several respondents reported 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 a clear communications strategy to ensure that both internal (DOE) and external stakeholders are well informed about the practices and outcomes associated with the Consortium. In particular, the NESSC stands to benefit from sharing its strategies, tools, resources, and achievements with school superintendents such that they increase their knowledge of the Consortium’s mission and plan for supporting the transformation of high schools.

The Consortium stands to benefit from the broader support that could develop as a result of greater public exposure, both inside and outside education circles. Rapid growth in the desire for information about the NESSC and its activities may necessitate expanding communication capacity both at GSP and the state level (included in the Phase II proposal). 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 appreciated and put to good use.

Define What Constitutes an NESSC Event/Accomplishment

Many noteworthy events with connections to high school reform took place during the course of Phase I. Some of these could be seen as having been influenced directly by Consortium activities (the legislative resolution, for example). Others might have been influenced indirectly by the NESSC (experimenting with the NCEE model for high school board examinations). In order to properly evaluate the effect of Consortium activity, it is necessary to answer the question: What constitutes an NESSC event or accomplishment?

The issue of what to attribute to NESSC influence is not trivial. There were numerous instances where some participants viewed a specific occurrence as a Consortium event, while others did not. This can confuse Consortium work with other efforts at education reform and potentially obscure or dilute the real progress of the NESSC.

As the work in Phase II becomes further defined, it's likely that what constitutes progress may be more easily identified. But until then, the NESSC stands to benefit from greater clarity of policies, practices, and standards that are the direct result of Consortium action, and the criteria for such.

Involve Education Leadership Organizations

Several respondents expressed a concern about the lack of involvement to date from important education organizations, especially teachers unions, principal organizations, and superintendent groups. Outreach and involvement to leadership organizations was originally part of the work plan but has received somewhat limited attention. This appears to be a particularly sensitive area for several respondents who reported that their state DOEs have had conflicts with education organizations/groups over a variety of issues, including compliance with federal requirements for RTTT funding and for work on policies related to high school reform championed by the Consortium.

Given the importance and influence that education leadership organizations have had in creating success or barriers to large-scale reform, this area should get attention. The Consortium may need to find ways to reach out to education leadership groups to help ensure support for its goals and missions. This could include seats on the Council (State or Consortium) and/or participation in the Working Group.

5. NESSC Management and Coordination

Formalizing the Consortium Leadership Structure

The Consortium Council, state Commissioners, and the Working Group make up the bulk of the organizational power within the Consortium. Thus far, these groups have worked relatively well together. Some progress has been made on policies (the High Leverage Policy Framework, and raising the mandatory attendance age), legislation (the Consortium resolution), and practices (the Global Best Practices tool, Extended Learning Opportunities, and the Virtual High School). However, the organizational structure – and the relationships and decision-making authority that go with it – are fairly undefined. For example, it does not appear to be clear who the Council speaks for. How is decision-making authority determined between the Council, the Commissioners, the boards of education, and the legislators?

Creating a Phase II organizational chart could help define leadership roles and decision-making authority. Through this process, the NESSC would likely realize a more efficient (and necessary) decision-making system and focus attention on specific issues at the appropriate level.

Clarify the Role and Responsibilities of GSP for Phase II

As the NESSC advanced through Phase I, participants reported greater personal clarity regarding the role of GSP in the Consortium; however, there remains some discrepancy in Consortium participants' understanding of what that role is. For example, some said they view GSP as enabling the work of the Consortium by providing facilitation and advice and by generating tools and resources. Other respondents suggested 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 pointed to the creation of products by GSP, like the Global Best Practices tool, as clear evidence of Consortium progress. Others asserted that the

creation of such a tool represents work done on behalf of the Consortium but is itself not evidence of Consortium collaboration or cross-region use and, therefore, would define identifying 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 toward 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.

Revisit Role/Responsibilities of State Liaisons to Maximize Their Value

Liaisons were asked to identify the ways in which they see their roles evolving as the Consortium moves into Phase II. While there was not unanimous agreement, some themes did emerge. The most frequently mentioned change was that Liaisons would like to see more specificity in their job descriptions—they'd like to know precisely what their tasks should be as the project moves ahead. One Liaison suggested this could be something as simple as a "plan of action," the idea being that since their roles are so far-reaching, a precise plan would help to ensure that their limited time is well spent. Along these lines, other Liaisons have identified specific tasks in the states where they work and areas where they see an opportunity for progress "in the field"; one Liaison spoke of a desire to spend more time working with higher education, and one suggested that working with "innovative" schools, whether with communications or quality control, would be a good use of Liaisons' time. Another suggestion was that Liaisons could be more involved with communicating about policy, especially between policy makers and those who work in the field and will eventually be charged with enacting it.

Liaisons said that if the above suggestions were put into practice in Phase II, then some of the challenges they faced in Phase I might be alleviated. For example, Liaisons reported feeling that their resources, especially time, are quite limited, and a more narrowly defined "Roles and Responsibilities" would enable them to focus on the most high-priority tasks. This would help, too, with another area of concern. As state DOEs experience leadership turnover, and legislators are bound by the legislative schedule—it can be difficult, Liaisons suggested, to gain access to the right, informed people in a timely manner. It seems logical that a more focused agenda would help them to more quickly bring new leaders and those with a limited schedule up to date on Consortium business.

Based on the experiences of Liaisons over the last 18 months, it could be advantageous to review and update their major roles and responsibilities before entering Phase II. In addition to the feedback from Liaisons themselves, there are opportunities for input into this process from GSP, Commissioners, and State Leads, who are likely to have the keenest insights for ways to maximize the value of Liaisons to their respective states.