

## New England Secondary Schools Consortium January 2011 Evaluation Brief

### Introduction

This first evaluation brief of NESSC Phase II is intended to provide timely and useful formative feedback in order to facilitate productive discussion and debate among NESSC members. The findings are based on data collected by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) from July 2010 through early January 2011. UMDI was engaged in a variety of information-gathering activities during this time including attendance at all NESSC meetings (Working Group, Council, Strategic Action Teams, etc.), speaking with council members from each state to create state-level logic models, and interviewing more than 40 key informants from state departments of education (including four of the five Commissioners and all deputy/associate Commissioners), boards of education, and legislatures, as well as staff from the Great Schools Partnership (GSP). Findings are reported to ensure that individual informants are not identifiable by their comments.

### Context

Almost all respondents valued their state's NESSC participation and wanted it to continue. Many cited the Consortium's track record of making effective regional plans and supporting them through collective decisions. They noted major Consortium achievements that included bringing five states together around common secondary school transformation goals, high-leverage policies, data metrics, the legislative resolution, funding proposals to the Nellie Mae Education and Gates Foundations, and more. Moreover, they affirmed that the Consortium's work helped them increase state focus and productivity on secondary school reform efforts, as well as establishing trust and sharing of ideas with regional colleagues.

To sustain the momentum of these important accomplishments, the majority of interviewees asserted that it's now time to move quickly and decisively toward establishing a League of Innovative Schools (LIS) that provides strong exemplars of the Consortium's high-leverage policies and other best practices, as well as effective campaigns to win political and public support for the proposed reforms. Many felt that if the pace of change doesn't increase, the Consortium could lose both its momentum and interest from key stakeholders who need to see unequivocal and ongoing value from their participation.

The balance of responsibilities and initiative between GSP and the states also remains pivotal. GSP plays a key role in leadership and facilitation, but their lack of formal authority within individual state departments of education suggests that states will need to be the primary movers of Consortium initiatives at the implementation level. Within each initiative, it will become increasingly important to define who will take responsibility for required actions.

The primary findings emerging from data collected over the past six months are categorized within the following five sections:

1. Consortium Priorities
2. Sustainability Through Transition
3. Communications
4. Policy
5. League of Innovative Schools

While these five domains are separated for rhetorical purposes, each is deeply interconnected, and their ordering is not intended to imply relative importance.

## 1. Consortium Priorities

### Create a Long-Term Strategic Plan

Many respondents expressed confusion or uncertainty about the long-term trajectory of various Consortium initiatives, as well as their interconnections. Contributing to this confusion may be NESSC's lack of a detailed, long-term strategic plan that would help participants understand the Consortium's year-to-year goals. Additionally, a strategic plan could help the Consortium and individual states plan specific short- and long-term activities in service of those goals. A long-term strategic plan would also facilitate the process of formulating yearly benchmarks toward the 2016 goals (e.g., what is the target graduation rate by 2014?) and the strategies used to reach those goals (e.g., how many LIS schools by 2014?). Presumably it would also be requested by some potential funders. Creating such a plan would of course require determining a process for who makes these weighty decisions, and how.

### Align NESSC Activities with Federal Initiatives

Some respondents noted that aligning NESSC initiatives with U.S. Department of Education priorities would help facilitate current and future participation in the Consortium by some states. The Common Core State Standards and assessments were cited as specific areas where the NESSC could find opportunities to align its strategies with federal mandates in order to maximize efficiencies in both effort and resources at the state level.

### Revisit Phase I Considerations

During Phase I, participants offered concerns and suggestions related to planning and implementation. Included in the Phase I evaluation report were several strategic considerations for NESSC participants, such as describing models for high school transformation, acquiring funding as soon as possible to support school transformation, prioritizing NESSC within state DOEs, and implementing a communication strategy targeted to both internal and external audiences. Analysis of data for this report suggests that several of these issues remain timely, and therefore the Consortium may find value in considering them again.

## 2. Sustainability Through Transition

### Respond to 2010 Elections Proactively

The November 2010 elections resulted in significant transitions of Governors and legislators across the five states, which will bring about changes of Commissioners, state board of education members, and education committees in the legislatures. When asked how these changes would impact the Consortium, answers ranged from positive to negative to unknown, depending on the respondent and state. However, many indicated that while these changes are significant, the Consortium must move ahead in its efforts or risk spending valuable time waiting “for the right moment.” Planning and implementing proactive steps to maintain and accelerate progress through these transitions, such as meeting with new Governors, legislators, and education committee chairs, could be beneficial.

### Restart Commissioner Meetings

Beginning in summer 2009, education Commissioners of the Consortium states held group meetings (two by phone, one in person) which they described as beneficial for discussing school reform in general and NESSC-specific issues as needed. Some Commissioners expressed a desire to restart these meetings, which could facilitate progress on NESSC initiatives and help acquaint new Commissioners with the Consortium's work.

### Repurpose and/or Restart State Council Meetings

State Council meetings are not happening consistently, if at all, in most states. Feedback suggested that in some cases the state Council might not be necessary because a similar group is already in place and might be able to serve the same function. Additionally, some respondents believed this group needs to be repurposed and therefore membership may need to change. The Consortium may need to reflect on the importance and impact of these state Councils. Furthermore, to the extent that these meetings were expected to support state implementation of Consortium activities, structural changes should be made clear and in consultation with the NESSC Council.

## **3. Communications**

Timely and effective communication continues to be an area of high interest and concern within the Consortium. Some informants expressed frustration for what they perceive as inadequate follow through on earlier requests for specific communication methods. To different extents across respondents, the following strategies were mentioned as areas that could be improved upon.

### Update the NESSC Website

Respondents reported minimal use of the NESSC website and did not see it as an easily accessible central location for acquiring key information such as meeting dates, agendas, minutes, and contact information. This is at odds with earlier visions of the website's purpose. It was suggested that individuals would use the website more, and encourage it as a resource to others, if it were better organized and updated in a more timely fashion.

### Provide Meeting Summaries in a Timely Manner

In addition to the general critique of the website, many stated they would like minutes from NESSC meetings made more readily available. A review of the NESSC website shows that meeting minutes have not been updated for several months.

### Clarify Organizational Structure and Its Relation to Consortium Meetings and Events

Several respondents expressed confusion related to meeting dates, times, agendas, materials, and expected participants, in part due to website materials being difficult to access or not updated. Related to this, there exists some confusion among some members about specific team membership, for what purpose each team serves, and which meetings they should be attending. To address this confusion, a simple chart which clarifies the organizational structure and the relationships and decision-making authority that go with it would be very helpful.

### Resume Briefs Summarizing Consortium News and Progress

During Phase I, GSP responded to requests for more timely information of news and progress by issuing two NESSC briefs (December 2009 and February 2010). Continuation of these briefs would likely be well received, particularly by state Communication Directors who in the past suggested that these updates would help them incorporate Consortium accomplishments into their regular communications.

### Develop a Generic Set of NESSC Promotional Materials

As of December 2010, NESSC lacked a collection of easily accessible promotional materials beyond information related to the April 2011 *High School Redesign in Action* Conference. Several respondents stated that they would like to have access to a selection of NESSC promotional materials (e.g., brochure, one-page summary, key points) to share with audiences at various events in their states.

### Formalize Role of Liaisons as Facilitators of Communication

In some states, respondents said that their Liaisons have served a pivotal role in facilitating timely, clear, and inclusive communication across key NESSC and community members in their state. It may be useful to formalize and/or strengthen the Liaison role during Phase II to include acting as communications hubs and facilitators across the five states.

## **4. Policy**

The regional policy framework was cited by many respondents as NESSC's most significant Phase II accomplishment to date. Now that three high-leverage primary policies have been selected, their implementation across the five states is of great importance. Some Consortium states already have laws that allow or mandate implementation of one or more of the policies, and for them the question becomes how to increase the frequency and depth of implementation. Other states are attempting to create new legislation or to increase implementation in the absence of legislation. Across the states, departments of education are discussing what combination of incentives and mandates would be most effective. Notably, in the most recent NESSC Proposed Policies for Regional Adoption, the word “required” was used in reference to adopting flexible pathways and competency-based graduation (two of the three NESSC high-leverage policies).

### Facilitate Implementation

Respondents offered suggestions and raised questions about how the Consortium could facilitate implementation by helping states identify and remove barriers as well as specifying what the HLPs look like in practice. This was seen as an area where states could support each other by sharing challenges and solutions, as well as overcoming resistance and providing political “cover” by being regional exemplars. It was also suggested that the Consortium could provide the leverage needed to advocate for waivers from federal mandates. As has been the case with other substantial reforms, deep implementation of the HLPs could involve initial declines in student performance on existing standardized measures. Without waivers, they believed, such declines would likely result in political and public pressure to abandon the reforms before their potential had been fully tested.

### Revisit Supporting Policies

Some respondents questioned what happened to the five “supporting policies” of the NESSC Proposed Policies for Regional Adoption framework. They wondered if these supporting policies are a priority and, if not, what purpose they serve. They also believe that opportunities may exist for one or more of these policies to be regionally adopted sooner than later. For example, there was mention of reaching agreement on supporting policy B, which states, “Report, as an extension of state policy, high school graduation rates using a four-, five-, and six-year cohort model in recognition that time spent in school is variable, while learning standards and high expectations are constant, fixed, and common across all five states.” Given the considerable progress made by the NESSC data team in this area, and with the U.S. Department of Education encouraging a similar method of reporting these data, reaching regional agreement on this policy could be a timely and impressive accomplishment for the Consortium.

### Create Opportunity for Regional Dialogue Among State Legislators

One state legislator mentioned the NESSC Resolution as a noteworthy contribution that legislators made to the Consortium, and wanted to see additional structured opportunities for regional dialogue among state legislators. This idea has been discussed before, and recent political changes may have created a favorable context for such action.

## 5. League of Innovative Schools

### Clarify Approach: Big Tent, Model Schools, or Both?

When asked to describe the LIS, members' visions took two main forms: the "Big Tent" approach or the "Model Schools" approach. The "Big Tent" approach stresses offering membership to all interested schools, with value emerging from sharing best practices, networking, and peer evaluation and accountability. The "Model Schools" approach emphasizes supporting a limited number of highly innovative schools that implement competency-based graduation, flexible pathways, and other best practices at deep levels. These schools – some that already exist and some to be created – would then serve as models for policymakers, practitioners, administrators, parents, and the larger community in future efforts toward scaling the innovations.

One state favored the Big Tent approach, describing their state as participatory in nature and likely to embrace an approach that offers all schools the opportunity to belong. The other four states favored the Model Schools approach, believing that the big tent concept would: "lack adequate impact;" was too "watered down;" and/or might be "too little too late." There was some discontent regarding the perception that GSP has come to favor the Big Tent approach, which seemed inconsistent with Phase I discussions related to "Hot House" schools. GSP staff, however, envision the LIS as a two-pronged strategy that would satisfy and incorporate both approaches.

It is important to acknowledge that this lack of clarity is an area of high frustration to several respondents and potentially divisive to regional collaboration. As the Consortium grapples with and resolves these multiple (although not necessarily competing) visions of LIS, it is critical that decisions are reached soon and are widely embraced by NESSC members.

### Focus on Speed, Clarity, and Support

Virtually everyone agreed that, regardless of what the outcome of the structural discussion is, the LIS needs to be fleshed out and launched quickly to capitalize on the Consortium's momentum and a political and economic context that could embrace significant policy change.

To facilitate LIS implementation (and broader policy change), many respondents asked for clarity of what a transformed high school would actually look like. Several expressed that they would like to see models of innovative high schools and be able share these with schools and other constituencies. Related to this, some questioned whether these transformed high schools actually exist today. There was high interest in further clarifying what the Consortium means by "flexible pathways" and "competency-based graduation," pointing out that schools, districts, and states currently use these terms to describe practices that span a substantial range of policy and practice, as well as depth and rigor. Rather than asserting that practice needs to look identical across contexts, respondents felt that clarity would facilitate policy change, improve efficiency in discussions, and enhance depth and rigor of implementation.

Respondents also felt that, at the practitioner level, meaningful change could best be achieved by providing solutions for how to implement these innovations in the school building, as opposed to emphasizing the policy issues which tend to dominate discussion at the state and district levels. Some expressed the importance of greater practitioner involvement in the work of LIS development and implementation.

### Secure LIS Funding

Members discussed the need to raise funds to implement LIS, the challenge of doing so in the current economic climate, and concerns about the extent to which school transformation can occur in the absence of adequate funding. Several respondents believed that states and districts will need to contribute, in order

to raise adequate funds and show commitment, which was referred to as “having some skin in the game.” Some respondents also emphasized that states and districts will need to have a clear sense of how such funds will help them achieve their school improvement goals, or they will not be able to justify their use.

At the Consortium level, fundraising plans appear to be at an early stage. GSP explained that to a large extent this is because Phase II resources are focused more heavily on the Consortium's policy and messaging work. As key stakeholders increasingly emphasize the importance of LIS for achieving NESSC goals, funding clearly needs to become a higher priority. Of note, at least two states reported that they had allocated funds in their Fiscal Year 2012 education budgets to support secondary school transformation. A commitment from all states would be strong evidence of regional commitment to Consortium goals and attractive to potential funders. NESSC currently plans to hold a full-day meeting with state Leads in January to focus on funding, which could include a discussion of needed/desirable funding levels, sources, targets, expected results, and timeframe.