

This briefing, the first of the NESSC Phase III evaluation, presents emerging formative feedback informed by in-depth interviews with Consortium participants conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute in December 2011. Emerging findings, which are preliminary in nature, are intended to provide timely and relevant feedback to the Consortium and promote discussion among its members.

In total, the interview process engaged 38 individuals from across the five NESSC states, including commissioners of education from three of the five states and a commissioner's designee from a fourth; state leads and co-leads from all five states; liaisons from all five states; and, to the extent appropriate to the state context, legislative, state board, higher education, and SEA and LEA participants. Interviews were conducted with those most highly engaged with the Consortium in order to build an understanding of state progress and challenges, as well to inform subsequent evaluation data collection involving a broader range of stakeholders and focusing increasingly on outcomes and summative evaluation data.

The briefing presents its findings and related discussion in four primary sections, as identified below:

1. Background and Context
2. Key Strengths and/or Areas of Progress
3. Key Opportunities and Areas for Consideration
4. Discussion and Potential Implications for Strategic Planning

## **I. Background and Context**

The NESSC was established in the fall of 2008 when a group of New England states came together to collectively pursue an ambitious agenda for secondary school reform. The Great Schools Partnership (GSP) serves as an intermediary for the Consortium.

### **Organizational Development and Consortium Evolution**

Over the course of its evolution and development, the Consortium has identified participants from each of the states; established structures for coordination and shared decision-making; articulated a theory of action that underscores the mutual interdependence of policy, practice, and the building of public and political will; and developed plans and frameworks for work in each of these areas. In many ways, this evolution may be understood in light of group development models, which identify multiple steps towards effective collective action, including periods of team formation (forming), discussion and dialog (storming), objective-setting and plan development (norming), and collective action (performing).<sup>1</sup> Several interviewees reflected on the Consortium's evolution over time, including one who invoked group development theory to describe where he saw the Consortium as it moved into Phase III.

*I think I look at it from an organizational perspective. It's morphing...every organization goes through [stages] with regards to forming the team, the team storms, figuring the who's who, who's not who, norming, and then performing. I'm not certain we're at the performing stage. I think we're in the norming-performing stage.*

Of course, given the complexity of collective action and group dynamics, the group development process may not always be linear, particularly as challenges emerge and contexts change. This may be especially important to acknowledge as the Consortium moves towards the performing phase, where research suggests differences in individual perspectives and, in this case, state approaches may become more evident.

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<sup>1</sup> Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63(6), 384-399.

## Changing Political and Economic Contexts and Ongoing Influence on the Consortium

As described in previous evaluation briefs, partnering states have experienced significant changes in their political leadership, SEA leadership and staff, and political and budgetary context since the beginning of NESSC. Political and educational leadership transitions appear to have contributed to rapid advancement of secondary reform efforts in one state (Maine), but have resulted in a need to delay aggressive pursuit of new policies in others. Even in the best of circumstances, transitions necessitated extensive outreach on the part of the Consortium, as political and education leaders transitioned and solidified reform agendas and plans. Connecticut perhaps best exemplifies the impact transitions can have on Consortium operations, at least in the short term. A new permanent commissioner was not appointed until the fall of 2011, and outreach efforts—generally viewed as critical to maintaining the state’s membership in the Consortium—were ongoing at the time of interviews. Most were optimistic that, ultimately, Consortium efforts could be aligned with the state’s new reform agenda.

Moving into Phase III, it was also reported that strained fiscal climates in several of the states were posing significant challenges for the Consortium, as well as for states’ reform efforts more broadly. In particular, many SEA leaders were wrestling with concerns about how to support policy implementation with limited resources. In addition, reduced staffing levels at SEAs appeared to limit the number of SEA staff available to support Consortium work in several states, as well, in some cases, the extent to which key staff were able to participate in Consortium activities.

Reflecting on these challenges, many interviewees conveyed a growing sense that ambitious secondary reform will not be achieved quickly or easily. Several, including some who were initially eager for rapid advancement and progress, described an appreciation for greater patience with regard to the Consortium’s long-term goals, provided the Consortium can demonstrate progress in the short-term.

Despite these external pressures, most participants described their state’s membership as fully committed to the Consortium and prepared to advance their work. To some extent, this was attributed to the strong appeal of the Consortium’s goals and approaches, as one interviewee explains:

*So we’ve had a tremendous turnover and changeover politically for political affiliations. And what’s interesting is, over sort of the long view of the last three and a half years that we’ve been doing this work, the support for the general goals and the approach that we’re deploying as a Consortium continues to grow, and actually grows stronger every year.*

In fact, several interviewees highlighted the importance of the Consortium in light of these challenges, noting the role it can play as a “unifying element” through transitions and emphasizing the value of networking and support from GSP as a way to continue to make progress with limited resources.

## ESEA Flexibility Waiver Opportunities and Challenges

In September, the U.S. Department of Education announced that states would be able to request flexibility with regard to specific requirements of the Education and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The possibility of a waiver application became a significant focus within SEAs, presenting both opportunities and challenges. As explained in the section that follows, waiver discussions were described as spurring conversation around 21<sup>st</sup>-century-aligned accountability systems—the third prong of the Consortium’s policy agenda. However, these conversations, which were broader in scope than secondary reform, further added to the Consortium’s already significant workload and, to some extent, limited the time and resources that could be allocated towards other aspects of the Consortium secondary reform agenda.

## II. Key Strengths and/or Areas of Progress

As the Consortium moves into Phase III, the vast majority of interviewees expressed substantial enthusiasm for the NESSC and its work. These individuals, who represent a highly engaged core of its membership, highlighted a number of key strengths and/or areas of progress they felt positioned the Consortium to advance its agenda or reflected the value it was adding to their state’s reform efforts.

## Consortium Meetings and Networking Opportunities

The opportunity for cross-state sharing and collective problem-solving afforded by the Consortium was emphasized as one of the most valuable contributions of the NESSC. This appeared to be particular true for SEA participants, who often expressed a deep appreciation for the chance to engage in collaborative conversations with colleagues facing similar challenges.

*I think [the Consortium] is going phenomenally well. I think our last session just demonstrated to me in a very direct way the synergistic energy that is available to us when we meet as a group and share ideas...when we come together and share ideas and difficulties and issues, it sparks thinking that individually we might not have come to.*

The value of these exchanges to individual state secondary reform efforts was highlighted on a number of different levels, although mutual consultation on implementation-planning challenges was viewed as especially beneficial. For example, one SEA participant underscored:

*... the real value of people like us in our positions is being able to talk with our counterparts in other states and find out what's happening from a policy and legislative standpoint in these areas, across the region...from the 'how are you making this happen' standpoint.*

While this type of mutual collaboration and sharing could take place absent the Consortium, several interviewees noted that the existence of a predefined structure for collaboration greatly increased the likelihood that these valuable exchanges would occur.

*Even though really I could do that without the Consortium—I could e-mail the deputy Commissioner [in another state] and say, 'what are you doing about this'—it's different to have sort of time set aside when those leaders...from other states are sitting in one place.*

## Commissioner Meetings and an Increased Profile of the NESSC

As the Consortium entered its third phase, GSP facilitated two dinner gatherings for education commissioners to coincide with its in-person Council meetings. Several interviewees noted that these meetings, which were attended by commissioners from three of the five states, provided new vigor to Consortium conversations, which generated increased enthusiasm within those states. Interviewees suggested that commissioners' greater involvement in the Consortium through these meetings could ultimately lend increasing credibility and direction to the NESSC.

*I have seen the commissioners move their agendas closer and closer together because of these meetings. So I get kind of pumped when you get three chiefs in the room, and they're all talking the same game...it's probably one of the most valuable, because if the chiefs set a direction, then it's up to the leads to figure out how to get there.*

Commissioners who regularly attended these meetings spoke at length about their value to their own reform efforts. Specifically, they highlighted how the meetings provided a rare opportunity to discuss concerns with colleagues who shared common issues, and indicated that the specific New England focus was a particular benefit. They reflected on what they saw as a relatively consistent vision for reform, at least among the three participating commissioners, and expressed their hope that, through their collective efforts, they could ultimately influence the national reform agenda.

*We've had several meetings where we have been together four or five hours and really got into some very deep conversations and started to talk about the perception of the power of the New England states and what impact we could have on the country.*

The enthusiasm generated by these gatherings was somewhat tempered by the absence of commissioners from two of the five states. For one state, a high-level administrator attended the first meeting on behalf of the commissioner, whereas in the other, the commissioner was appointed in the fall of 2011 and was not

yet engaged with the Consortium's work. Although both states were represented by their leads, it was acknowledged that these individuals, while valuable participants, do not carry the same level of authority as a commissioner.

### **Discussions of the NESSC Policy Agenda as a Result of ESEA Flexibility Waivers**

The prospect of ESEA flexibility waivers appeared to lend a new sense of urgency to Consortium conversations, while the newly established commissioner meetings provided a forum by which these salient discussions could occur. Although waiver discussions extended beyond the Consortium's focus on secondary reform, several interviewees were excited by their potential impact on the Consortium's major strategies.

*Obviously the waiver isn't high school-focused, but through the discussions about the waiver, we've been able to bring our relationships and our experience in working on the high-leverage policy areas for high school transformation to that discussion, and transfer it in terms of thinking about education in general in our state. So that's been really powerful, I think.*

Another interviewee described how the waiver could potentially set the stage for a multi-state effort towards the creation of proficiency-based education systems:

*I think [the waiver discussions] is a great example of the alignment, at least between Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, about the waiver process pointing towards a proficiency basis—removing time as a determinant; that's huge. And let's assume we get the waiver passed. Man, then the work's going to begin to actually design what that system looks like and how you get it accepted.*

It is notable, however, that these discussions have surfaced differences in the accountability systems states envision building, which may influence the way participating states collaborate around this aspect of the policy agenda in the future.

### **Enthusiasm and Energy for Introduction of the League of Innovative Schools**

In the fall of 2011, the Consortium welcomed 31 secondary schools from across the five states into its first cohort of the League of Innovative Schools—its principal effort to bridge its reform agenda with innovative school practice. The introduction of the League was cited by many of the core NESSC participants as one of the Consortium's primarily accomplishments thus far.

At the time of this briefing, the Consortium had hosted two New England-wide meetings of its League schools. Although attendance data were not immediately available, registration records indicate that nearly 100 educators from 24 schools committed to attend each event. The meetings, which were organized and facilitated by GSP, focused on reviewing core expectations for League schools; sharing common challenges, strategies, and best practices; and discussing effective messaging strategies. Overall, it was believed that the League provided a significant opportunity to recognize schools committed to innovation and provide a framework for networking support as they pursued significant change.

*[Those in the League schools] liked the idea that they were recognized and picked, and they were the first cohort, and communicating with other New England peers. But as well, they liked the idea that [there were] six of them from [the same state]...they saw it as a huge opportunity that they've never had before to collaborate and discuss among themselves.*

It was also reported that the schools have begun to engage in the *Global Best Practices* self-assessment, a key practice identified for League schools, although difficulties were noted in terms of varying capacity to conduct the self-assessments according to the originally proposed timeline. In addition, in several states, League schools were reportedly being brought together for intrastate networking, while cross-state networking was supported in the form of principal triads. Additionally, several schools were planning

presentations for the Consortium's March High School Redesign in Action conference, its third annual secondary redesign conference for educators from across the region.

### **Increasing Outreach to Cultivate New Champions and Partners**

Interviews also suggested an increased emphasis on engaging new stakeholders that could advocate for or support the Consortium's work. While acknowledging that these efforts are still in their early phases, several interviewees described concrete actions that they had taken to forge new partnerships within their states, including with business, higher education, and educational and professional organizations. SEA interviewees expressed a high degree of enthusiasm regarding the value that these partnerships would add to their reform efforts. One interviewee described what an emerging partnership with the business community could ultimately contribute:

*We're looking at the business round-table...not as an ask for resources, but really to help us with the messaging—to be advocates for secondary redesign and be advocates for pathways and be advocates for the college and career readiness stuff.*

Similarly, another high-level SEA interviewee described that state's efforts to convene a business group, noting the challenges, but emphasizing a sense that the work was starting to bear fruit.

*We started building this business group. The initial reaction from high-level business people in the state was, 'why would we do this?'...so we had to build a culture of key people, of four or five of them that were willing to come together and look at the economy and the importance of education. And we've done it, we've really accomplished it...they're willing to now get out there in front and use the workforce development issue with education.*

Another motive for stakeholder outreach and engagement appeared to involve partnerships with organizations that could aid schools in building capacity for these types of reforms.

*There's a natural inclination to use some of the programs that [partner programs] run, some of the personnel they have, to further the work of the Consortium and continue to support League principals in their efforts to bring about school change.*

One example of this type of partnership is the formal relationship the Consortium has established with the Connecticut Association of Schools, Connecticut's school principals' association. Through this partnership, the state hopes to provide workshops and other support for the Connecticut League schools and, given the organization's reach, potentially schools in the state more broadly.

### **GSP Support and Facilitation**

As interviewees described the Consortium's progress, many underscored the importance of the resources and support provided by GSP to the ongoing progress of the Consortium and, in many cases, individual states. For example, one SEA leader described the value of having GSP as a "partner" in their reform:

*It's been great to have [GSP's] support on some of these initiatives—the League of Innovative Schools stuff and what we're trying to do with proficiency-based systems and supporting districts that are interested in reform and some help with the communication around that because there's a lot of lessons to be learned there...they're a tremendous resource.*

Interviewees emphasized GSP's role in planning and facilitating Consortium meetings and networking opportunities, as well as their ability to serve as advocates for reform within their respective states. For example, in response to the question, "what are you most satisfied with [about the Consortium]," one interviewee indicated the following:

*I'm most satisfied with their advocacy, their presence, their visibility—I find their advocacy extremely important to moving initiatives forward. The department can have a perspective on legal matters, on legal protocol, on ideas that help in the classroom, but then we need somebody*

*to put the big picture together, and the Consortium has been very valuable in making contacts for us, clarifying positions in the hallways—just helping us move an agenda forward.*

Some of the resources prepared by GSP on behalf of the Consortium were also described as valuable in the field, including the *Leadership in Action* briefings and the *Global Best Practices* tools and resources. Access to common resources was viewed as particularly important in light of limited staffing and capacity with some SEAs. “We don’t have a research and development capacity here,” remarked one SEA leader.

### III. Key Opportunities and Areas for Consideration

Overall, interviewees were generally positive about the Consortium’s progress and emphasized the value that cross-state collaboration and GSP support had contributed to their states’ secondary reform efforts. However, in discussing the Consortium and its ongoing evolution, several areas emerged which may warrant consideration by the Consortium and its members. For the most part, these tended to relate to states’ increasing focus on policy implementation; opportunities to clarify aspects of the Consortium and the roles of its various stakeholders; and an increasing need to consider or create structures for cross-team communication and integration of efforts.

#### Increasing Emphasis on Policy Implementation and Emerging Need for Implementation Support

As described previously, ESEA flexibility waivers catalyzed increased collaboration among three of the five states around the potential development of new policy for standards-based-aligned accountability systems. With regard to the other two policy areas—proficiency-based graduation and multiple pathways—SEA interviewees appeared to be shifting their focus away from the passage of new policy and towards the development of capacity to support implementation of existing and recently-passed policy. “We’re at policy burnout right now,” one interviewee explained, whereas others noted that focusing on the creation of new policy without simultaneously developing systems and structures to support the implementation of those policies in districts was unlikely to yield the desired results.

*I think we can move pretty quickly...towards policy change. The bigger issue that I think I see the staff here moving towards is the implementation of that is going to take significant staff time, and focus...policy work is great, but it’s not going to go anywhere unless somebody focuses on the implementation.*

It should also be noted here that although most states were pursuing policies and policy implementation that they felt were “very much in keeping—at least philosophically—with what the Consortium has been working on,” the specific policies states were pursuing, and what implementation would ultimately look like in schools, differed substantially. As one interviewee explained:

*I think that probably every state is reporting that a generalized and mutually-accepted description of a certain piece of the Consortium work more or less describes the state’s work, but doesn’t do it with the level of nuance or sophistication that each state would be endeavoring to build into their system.*

For example, in some states, multiple pathways and proficiency-based graduation were being pursued as part of a restructuring of the educational system, so that students “move at their own pace and advance when they have mastered learning outcomes.” Other states were pursuing proficiency-based graduation through the inclusion of one or more demonstrations of learning as a part of graduation requirements, with multiple pathways construed as the development of “a much more narrow set [of pathways] that get organized within industry sectors or occupational areas.” This diversity may need to be considered, as it could potentially influence the nature of multi-state collaboration and the types of benefits that may be derived from collaboration.

### **Lack of a Clear and Consistent Understanding of the Relationship of Policy, Practice, and Will**

Whereas the Consortium's theory of action highlights the interrelated nature of policy, practice, and public and political will, interviewees did not reflect a clear and common understanding of what this means in practice. For example, although most were able to describe progress with regard to one or more of these areas, few were able to reflect on how and to what extent this work was integrated with or reinforced by work in other areas (either across the Consortium broadly or within their individual states). That is, work with regard to policy, practice, and public and political will was generally described as being pursued simultaneously, not necessarily jointly.

Even among those who did articulate a vision for how the three aspects could support and reinforce one another, the particular understanding of that relationship and its implications for sequencing the work, or staging, differed substantially. For some, the passage of policy was emphasized as the critical first step, with work in regard to practice and public and political will construed primarily as a means to support and encourage implementation at the school level. This approach, which is reflective of that being used in Maine, is exemplified by the following description of the nature of the relationship:

*The messaging, so that you convince people that they want to do it, the practice piece so you show them how to do it, and then the policy piece, number one, either gets out of the way or provides some kind of incentive to do it.*

However, others emphasized the need to focus on practice in the short term as a means to (a) understand the specific policies that need to be addressed, (b) construct a message to develop the public and political will to pass that policy, and (c) establish an evidence base demonstrating the effectiveness of these approaches. This sequencing is more reflective of Vermont's approach, which emphasizes the League of Innovative Schools in the short-term.

To some degree, these differences may reflect the varied context in which the states are operating and the potentially iterative nature of policy, practice, and public and political will. However, the lack of a common understanding of the specific role that each of these aspects will ultimately play in the pursuit of the Consortium's long-term objectives may confound collective planning and focus. As an example, under the sequencing apparent in Vermont's approach, the role and focus of messaging over the period of the strategic plan would need to relate directly to generating the will to pass policy. Conversely, under the approach taken by Maine, messaging during that timeframe would likely need to be focused on generating the will to implement policy among principals, teachers, and school boards. The different purposes and target audiences for messaging apparent in the two approaches could present a challenge as the Consortium seeks to identify a strategy that can meet the needs of all the states.

### **Need for Clarity Around Roles, Purpose, and Expectations for Messaging and Communication**

Increased clarity may also be important with regard to the Consortium's messaging team and strategies. When asked about progress in this area, interviewees often reflected on the fundamental necessity of building public and political will in support of reform within their states. At the same time, however, many were unable to express a clear understanding regarding the extent to which progress had been made, the overall plan for implementing the messaging agenda, or the role of the SEA in furthering that overall messaging strategy. "I frankly don't know where we're at with [messaging]," noted one interviewee.

To understand this finding, it may be important to note that as interviewees discussed messaging, they often referenced different audiences (internal to the Consortium or external) and alluded to different focuses for the message itself: most notably, whether its primary focus was on the Consortium and its activity, or on promoting its secondary agenda more broadly. This diversity of opinion about what constitutes messaging is shown in Figure 1, which highlights four potential views of messaging, each of which may be important to the Consortium.

Figure 1: Matrix Highlighting Four Potential Views of Messaging

		Primary Focus or Content of the Message	
		The Consortium and its Activity	Secondary Reform Agenda
Primary Audience	Internal NESSC Members (Communication)	<p><u>Coordination</u></p> <p>Sharing of progress across states and teams through the NESSC website, emails, in-person and videoconference, and other methods.</p>	<p><u>Consistency</u></p> <p>Establishment of a clear and consistent understanding of the NESSC theory of action, reform agenda, and common use of key terms with the Consortium.</p>
	External (Messaging)	<p><u>Reach</u></p> <p>Building awareness of the Consortium and its activities among key potential champions and partners; promoting accomplishments.</p>	<p><u>Public Will</u></p> <p>Cultivation of broad public and political will to support new models of student-centered learning.</p>

As the figure illustrates, messaging within the NESSC may focus on sharing Consortium activities and progress (Coordination) or center more explicitly on the reform agenda to help build a common understanding among membership (Consistency). Similarly, messaging to external audiences could take the form of direct outreach to potential partners to generate awareness and support of the Consortium (Reach) or could reflect a broader campaign to engage and inform one or more specific “publics” about the types of secondary reform the NESSC promotes (Public Will).

**Questions Regarding the League and its Role in the Achieving Change at Scale**

Another important aspect of the Consortium that would appear to benefit from increased clarity and a common understanding involves the League of Innovative Schools. As described earlier, members reflected a high degree of satisfaction and enthusiasm with regard to the League. Yet, as progress was made in this area, some individuals raised questions about the League’s role in bringing about secondary school transformation at scale—something seen as critical to achieving the Consortium’s ambitious 2016 student targets. As one interviewee explains:

*I understand [the League] in theory, but practically speaking, I don’t understand what it’s supposed to do, and in particular...the League is comprised of a lot of dissimilar schools, so I don’t know what our scaling goals are relative to them.*

Lacking this clear articulation of a vision for how the League would contribute to the Consortium’s long-term goals, some interviewees described the League as a gradually expanding network of schools that would, over time, encompass an increasing number of schools in each state. However, a more prevalent view of the League was as a set of demonstration or “laboratory” schools that could serve as exemplars or models and/or inform policy development and messaging related to the Consortium and its goals.

It is notable that using the League as a way to construct a body of models and exemplars would, ultimately, necessitate a clear articulation of strategies to capture and disseminate the knowledge gained to other schools within and across states. This would be similar to what Maine is trying to accomplish through its Center for Best Practices, which endeavors to capitalize on schools pursuing a standards-based educational program as a way to inform and build capacity in schools more broadly.

**Different Perspectives on the Nature of the Consortium and State Commitments to the Consortium**

Interview data suggest that there are two lenses through which participants may be viewing the Consortium. The first appears to relate to the initial idea of multiple states coming together to work jointly towards collective goals or outcomes, such as when several states collaborated in the development of the NECAP assessment. Others, however, described the Consortium as a collective resource that their states could access for networking and resources in support of their own student-centered reform goals.

*[Leaders in this state are] very keenly aware of the Consortium—not so much achieving the goals of the Consortium, but the Consortium helping to achieve goals of the DOE.*

In part, the prevalence of this latter viewpoint may reflect the changes in state context and political leadership described previously, and the need for the Consortium to adapt in response. However, some interviewees described it as an evolution over time, driven in part by the Consortium's funding mechanism, although a few also attributed to what they felt was the growing influence of GSP on the Consortium's direction.

Of course, both models—shared pursuit of pre-planned common goals, or networking and support for individual goals with a certain degree of alignment and flexibility—reflect valid approaches to multistate collaboration, each with its own relative strengths and challenges. However, it may be important for the Consortium to acknowledge and discuss these varied perspectives, each of which may have different implications for their future work, including Consortium governance, organization, activities, and the benefits and obligations of participating state SEAs.

### **Need for Increased Cross-Team Sharing and Integration**

Consistent with some of the previous findings, interviews suggest a need for increased avenues for cross-team communication and sharing. For example, many interviewees highlighted Consortium work on messaging and data as something that could potentially contribute significant value to their own states' reform efforts, but acknowledged limited understanding of the specific work of teams in these areas. Several expressed a desire for increased communication and coordination between teams about their work and progress, noting that although information may be readily available on the NESSC member website, it is difficult to remain up-to-date with all of the material on the site.

To some extent, these concerns may be reflections of Consortium structures for coordination and collaboration. For example, there appears to be an emerging suggestion that strategic action teams—initially introduced to accelerate focused planning and development—may need to be augmented or modified to reflect a need for increased integration as states move progressively toward implementation in Phase III.

It should also be acknowledged that in-state implementation teams—initially envisioned as an important vehicle through which SEA representatives from across Consortium teams could discuss, share, and coordinate efforts within their states—were not consistently convened within SEAs in the early part of Phase III. Further, even in those states where these SEA teams were meeting regularly, communication directors (i.e., messaging team representatives) and data team participants did not appear to be directly involved in those teams. To a large extent, this was attributed to staffing reductions and increasing workloads described previously, although it could also reflect the different conceptions of whether the work of the Consortium is that of the states or their intermediary.

### **Different Expectations Regarding the College Readiness Indicator**

With regard to the data team, many interviewees were aware of and enthusiastic about the team's work on a college readiness indicator, but few expressed a clear understanding of where the team was with regard to the indicator, the form that the eventual readiness indicator would take, and the timeline for completion. For example, some viewed the indicator as a way to measure and track state—and potentially school—progress in preparing students for college at an aggregate level, while others anticipated something that could serve as an early warning indicator for individual students by identifying those not on-track to be college-ready by graduation. The former reflects a summative indicator, constructed after students have graduated; the latter, a real-time indicator that is constructed while the student is pursuing his or her high school credential.

#### IV. Discussion and Potential Implications for Strategic Planning

The NESSC is in the process of developing a multi-year strategic plan that articulates a long-term vision for the Consortium and the core strategies needed to achieve those goals. Some interviewees saw this as a unique opportunity to reflect on the Consortium's progress and direction in light of changes over time.

*...I think you almost need someone to come in and have a wipe-the-slate clean...exercise. You know, what's the current state, what's the desired state? And I don't think we've had that type of discussion. And then, what are the key elements that we would need to put in place for that?*

It is also notable that the long-term planning process may be particularly timely given the increased involvement of some commissioners, whose endorsement of the Consortium's goals and objectives was described as particularly critical to the impact and sustainability of the Consortium. In this context, the recent appointment of new commissioners to SEA leadership serves to further increase the relevance of conversations about the purpose and organization of the Consortium, and to what extent those are reflective of and aligned with participating states' needs and reform agenda.

#### Considerations for Future Action Based on Interview Findings

The preliminary findings described in this brief may help to inform the strategic planning process. Some of the specific actions for consideration by the Consortium based on these findings include the following:

- 1) Discuss the varied perspectives about the nature of the Consortium—i.e. shared pursuit of a collective and predefined region-wide goal or pursuit of individual goals with access to networking support and shared resources—with SEA leaders to determine which model is most desirable. Ultimately, decisions in this area will have implications for aspects of the strategic plan, including Consortium goals, organizational structures, and the roles of both the states and GSP.
- 2) Acknowledge the diversity among states' specific approaches with regard to the high-leverage policy areas and consider the potential influence of these differences on the nature of multi-state collaboration on these areas and the types of benefits that may be derived from collaboration. For example, economies of scale (high alignment) versus networking and shared problem-solving (moderate alignment).
- 3) Consider overall Consortium governance and leadership in light of increased participation of several commissioners in the NESSC, particularly as it relates to the role of the commissioners relative to the Council and other decision-making and/or advisory structures in setting priorities and strategic direction for the NESSC.
- 4) Engage in a cross-state conversation about the nature of the relationship between policy, practice, and public and political will and the potential implications for how Consortium efforts are organized and sequenced within states. To some extent, this exercise may be made easier by identifying the specific changes in school practice being pursued and backwards-mapping the role each thread will play in helping to achieve these changes. One possible approach would be to consider policy, practice, and public and political will as it relates to each of the Consortium's high-leverage policy areas.
- 5) Recognizing states' need for support in policy implementation, consider whether these efforts can be improved or leveraged through a multi-state collaborative approach. The feasibility of incorporating this into Consortium work would likely benefit from development of a viable funding model. One potential avenue for this may involve identifying particular focus areas within Consortium work, or Consortium "projects," and identify how those aspects can be aligned with specific funding streams.
- 6) Capitalize on the enthusiasm generated by the introduction of League by clarifying how the League will contribute to school transformation at scale over the long-term. In doing so, ensure that schools understand that role and any responsibilities that may imply, such as conducting action research,

sharing best practices, mentoring, and supporting further dissemination of knowledge about successful practice within and across their states.

- 7) Identify the different types of Consortium messaging—internal versus external, Consortium-focused versus agenda-focused (as highlighted in Figure 1 on page 8). Clarify within each the specific audiences, messages, and strategies to be employed, making sure that various participants are aware of their role in carrying out these strategies.
- 8) Continue to pursue and accelerate recent efforts to build champions and engage new partners, including business organizations, higher education institutions, professional organizations, and others involved in similar work. These types of partnerships have the potential to extend the Consortium's reach, increase the level of advocacy within states for the Consortium's agenda, and offer vehicles by which to provide much-needed capacity building and support to schools in the implementation of Consortium-aligned policies.
- 9) Promote cross-team collaboration and sharing through enhanced internal communication, but also, potentially, the development of new structures for collaboration and coordination. Building off the success of the leads in previously reconfiguring collaborative structures through the development of strategic action teams, these individuals may comprise the most appropriate group to consider whether a possible reorganization is warranted.
- 10) Provide regular updates about the progress of the data team regarding the college readiness indicator, which was of high interest to Consortium membership, and clarify the intended use of the metric (i.e., as indicator of school or state progress or an early warning student indicator).