

New England Secondary School Consortium May 2011 Evaluation Brief

Introduction

UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) is pleased to present the second evaluation brief for NESSC's Phase II initiative. The goal of this document is to provide timely, useful, and formative feedback that will facilitate productive discussion among NESSC members in relation to the Consortium's progress to date as well as recommendations for addressing potential challenges ahead.

The findings presented are based on evaluation activity between January 2011 and early May 2011. During this period, UMDI conducted formal interviews with: DOE Commissioners, DOE administrators, State Leads, NESSC Liaisons, NESSC Council members, and representatives from the Consortium's Data Strategic Action Team. UMDI also administered two surveys. The first survey was targeted to active NESSC members and aimed to capture perspectives on the Consortium's progress, the benefits of key initiatives, and level of commitment to continued participation. The second survey captured feedback from educators who attended the two-day annual High School Redesign Conference held in April. In addition to formal interviews and surveys, the evaluation team continued to participate in meetings of the NESSC Council, Strategic Action Teams, and Leads/Liaisons. Findings in this brief are reported to ensure that individual informants are not identifiable by their comments.

Findings emerged in relation to the following six themes:

1. Emerging League of Innovative Schools
2. Adjustments to NESSC Working Structure
3. Sustainability Through Political Transition
4. Future Commitment
5. Communications
6. Data Team

Context

In the January evaluation brief, UMDI reported on notable Phase II accomplishments as well as concerns. Many stakeholders had expressed the concern that the Consortium could lose both momentum and support from key stakeholders if the pace of change didn't accelerate. Areas of particularly high frustration were delays in implementing the League of Innovative Schools (LIS) and establishing effective campaigns to win political and public support for the proposed reforms.

During the past four months, the Consortium has moved decisively and effectively in response to these concerns. Both the development of LIS and activities related to Public and Political Will have accelerated and continue to show progress. The increased rate of activity in these, and other areas, has contributed to renewed momentum and commitment from key stakeholders within the states.

1. Emerging League of Innovative Schools

Progress towards defining the LIS and implementing preliminary action steps appear to have been a key lever for "turning the corner" in relation to states' commitment to NESSC. As noted, a significant portion of key stakeholders in the fall agreed that the LIS needed to be fleshed out and launched quickly to capitalize on and sustain the Consortium's momentum. NESSC was quick to respond to this area of concern. The LIS framework was finalized in early April after several drafts informed by feedback from

key stakeholders. The League was officially launched at the High School Redesign in Action conference on April 8 and simultaneously on the NESSC web site. Evidence from informal conversations as well as the conference survey suggests that educators who attended the conference came away interested in the LIS, impressed by its potential to improve student outcomes, and intending to support it.

Individual states vary in their progress on selecting LIS schools, with some still needing to specify a selection plan. During DOE visits, respondents reiterated their long-stated desire for models of innovative high schools that could be shared with other schools and constituencies. LIS schools will likely serve as models in the future, but more immediate examples would be well-received and likely put to good use by educators seeking to show constituents what they are striving to achieve.

Some states report that they are still seeking to allocate Fiscal Year 2012 funds to support secondary school transformation in general, and LIS specifically. Vermont has already accomplished this, creatively reallocating funds from several sources to support their process of selecting LIS schools. A similar commitment from all states would be strong evidence of regional commitment to the Consortium and a continued endorsement of 2016 goals.

2. Adjustments to NESSC Working Structure

In January, the Consortium made two major adjustments to its working structure. Interviews confirmed that the changes have been welcome and appreciated by the majority of members and show promise for strengthening work at the regional and state level.

Disbanding the Working Group and reorganizing members into State Implementation Teams.

Working Group members agreed to reorganization when it became clear that the development of strategic actions teams resulted in a significant amount of redundancy, while simultaneously noting the increased need to focus more singularly on state level work. As a result, the Working Group was disbanded in order to form State Implementation Teams. To date, the State Implementation Teams have varied in terms of membership and activity. It is too soon to know the impact of these Teams, but they provide a valuable new opportunity for states to implement their secondary school reform agendas.

Formal gatherings of Leads & Liaisons

Beginning in January, state Leads and Liaisons have gathered every two months for a series of five-hour evening meetings facilitated by GSP. Most meeting participants reported that this new structure has been critical for advancing key tasks beyond the discussion stage to achieve more timely decisions.

3. Sustainability Through Political Transition

Since the beginning of NESSC, political developments have influenced the Consortium's work and degree of regional collaboration. The November 2010 elections resulted in significant political transitions including five new Governors as well as changes in legislatures across the states. Two states have new DOE Commissioners, and state boards of education have many new members. Despite these political transitions at the highest levels, participants report that their states have continued to advance their secondary school reform agendas. This finding is markedly different from the shared perception last fall that states needed to "wait and see" with regard to the political landscape before moving forward.

For example, stakeholders from Connecticut and Vermont express optimism that their new Governors will be more far more supportive of public education than previous administrations. Maine's new DOE Commissioner shared that the Consortium's strong presence, clearly-stated objectives, and supporting materials were instrumental in his backing of the Consortium's policy agenda in the midst of many competing policy directions. In New Hampshire a publication called "Innovate" explains the state's

education progress and goals to new legislators, and mentions NESSC specifically as an integral partner in reaching the state's goals. And in Rhode Island, State Senator and NESSC Council member Louis DiPalma had a letter published in the May 3 edition of the Woonsocket Patch titled "Education – the Key to our Future ... the Future of our Economy." Senator DiPalma cites Rhode Island's involvement with the NESSC while making the case to his constituents that "the key to our future and the future of our economy hinges precipitously on the results that are produced by our educational system."

Transitions among political and education leaders will continue in the years ahead. Continuous planning and implementation of proactive steps to maintain and accelerate NESSC progress through these transitions will be essential to the Consortium's future success. As such, the NESSC may want to discuss whether the current structure of the Consortium, and specifically the responsibilities of the Council, are appropriate and sufficient for this task.

4. Future Commitment

Doubts about individual states' future commitment to the NESSC, reported in the fall, were not apparent during spring 2011 DOE visits. Four of the five Commissioners, as well as the fifth Commissioner's NESSC designee, expressed a strong commitment to the Consortium's future.

The spring survey of key NESSC stakeholders provides additional evidence of members' commitment, as 78% indicated that they are "very interested" (55%) or "interested" (23%) in the Consortium "continuing into the foreseeable future". Furthermore, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that they are committed to supporting their state's continued participation in the NESSC. These findings suggest that the Consortium's response to members' concerns has created renewed commitment to the NESSC. This bodes well for the future of the Consortium and speaks to the value of regional collaboration.

5. Communications

The January 2011 evaluation brief identified improvements to NESSC communication desired by members. GSP has been active in specifically addressing these concerns. During the past few months they have streamlined email communications, incorporated slideshow functionality into the NESSC website, started using Twitter to reach out to the larger education community, created and disseminated an NESSC organizational chart, and posted summaries of most meetings. Progress on two other communication strategies from the January brief – concise reports summarizing Consortium news/progress, and development of a generic set of NESSC promotional materials – have not been apparent but would be well-received and almost certainly put to good use.

The Consortium's messaging campaign to build broad public and political will for new models of student learning has also progressed. Most notably has been the work with Liberty Concepts, a marketing consultant group led by Rhoades Alderson, and the launching of a new series of online briefs for education leaders in New England. Beginning on March 15, these Leadership Briefs – described by NESSC as "accessible, jargon-free descriptions of/arguments for high-leverage policies and strategies for secondary improvement" – have been emailed every two weeks to all local and state school board members, state legislators, secondary school principals, and superintendents in the five states, as well as Directors of professional organizations, high school conference attendees, and new subscribers. As an extension of the existing NESSC website, a new webpage has been developed to archive all Leadership Briefings. Early tracking data compiled by GSP and analyzed by UMDI on the impact of these Briefs on attracting recipients to visit the NESSC website show promising results. A more complete analysis will be included in the final Phase II evaluation report in August 2011.

Looking ahead, we recommend that the Messaging Strategic Action Team explore ways of measuring the impact of the messaging campaign on individual states, the region, and, in time, how these impacts on public and political will relate to desirable NESSC outcomes.

6. Data Team

Individual members of the Data Strategic Action Team continue to report that they enjoy being part of the Team and cite a number of benefits to cross-state conversations. For example, they have been able to deepen their individual understanding of data variation at the micro level. Additionally, they have collaboratively developed and implemented data decision rules in order to enhance comparison of outcomes across states. Finally, Team members have shared innovative data practices in order to assist each other in solving state-specific data issues. As a result, one could conclude that the Team has transformed into a Professional Learning Community.

The attention to postsecondary education data, which has been new for some states, and the discussions with the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) have been beneficial, although at times answers to the Team's questions were not easily available and required NSC to follow up. Some states report making early progress toward aligning state reporting with NESSC common agreements. For example, New Hampshire reports dropout rates using both NESSCs common methods as well as the state's traditional approach.

Team members believe that the five-state Consortium provides greater clout and has, for example, increased their leverage with outside groups such as NSC. Finally, the Consortium has set in motion attempts to resolve long-standing data challenges, such as developing a college readiness measure, and through this effort they have engaged higher education partners in each of the five states as well as the Annenberg Institute from Brown University.

Data Team members recommended three specific sets of changes in order to enhance the Team's work and affiliation. First, they would like to be included in the Consortium's larger discussions around secondary school reform in their states, as well as attend regional meetings where they could contribute their expertise and connect their work to other specific NESSC efforts. Second, while the new data consultant has been helpful, members believe that more hands-on technical assistance consulting is needed. Specifically, they would like to have a consultant with both a significant amount of knowledge and experience related to secondary school data and systems from across multiple states, and, who will commit to attending all Data Team meetings. Finally, members reported that clarification of their Team's mission is necessary to ensure that they are pursuing the right goals and including the right team members moving forward.