



New England Secondary School Consortium

Phase I Summary of Progress and Future Considerations

June 30, 2010



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 summary 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.

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 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.