



Reaching Students in the Gaps

Lessons Learned

New England Compact's Enhanced
Assessment Instruments Grant

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Why is it that some students perform well and demonstrate academic proficiency in the classroom, but then do not score well on state assessments? Alternatively, for some students who may never achieve academic standards on assessments, do state tests successfully measure what they know and what they have learned in the classroom? These questions are commonly asked by educators, policy makers, and test developers as they seek to develop assessments that will effectively measure all students' academic achievement. Such questions are particularly salient as states strive to successfully measure student achievement as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and were investigated in a recent series of studies conducted on behalf of the New England Compact (NEC).

The NEC is a consortium founded by the education commissioners of the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont to provide a cross-state forum to address issues arising from NCLB. To date, the NEC has focused on the development of grade level expectations (GLEs) and state assessments based on those expectations. However, during the course of test development, concerns arose regarding students who may not be served by traditional state assessments; students who do not meet GLEs, but for whom classroom evidence suggests they do meet academic standards. How can states successfully measure the achievement of students who are not served by traditional assessments, students who fall into assessment gaps?

NEC Policy makers and assessment experts sought to develop a new testing instrument to successfully measure the achievement of students who fall into assessment gaps. The NEC submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of Education entitled, "Reaching 'Students in the Gap' through Web-based Task Module Assessments." Funded in February, 2005, the goal of the proposal was to develop an online assessment instrument that would accurately measure achievement of all students, including 'students in the gap.'

Representatives and policy makers from the four NEC states and researchers from five independent education research organizations came together to comprise the working group for the project, and collectively, the group represents a unique model for other states and state organizations who are interested in conducting similar collaborative work. The purpose of the present guide is to share information and recommendations gleaned from this pioneering work with researchers, policy makers, and educators who have an interest in developing assessments that reach students in testing gaps. Lessons learned from the process demonstrate that cross-state and cross-professional role collaboration can be a powerful and positive experience that stimulates researchers and policy makers to do the best work they can on behalf of all students.



Lesson #1

“The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple.”
- Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde probably was not thinking about students who fall into assessment gaps when he made this statement, but his wisdom certainly applies. The NEC began the project with one definition of students in assessment gaps that was outlined in the original proposal: students who perform well and demonstrate academic proficiency in the classroom, but then do not score well on state assessments. However, each state representative came to the table with preconceived notions of the definition that were based on their individual professional experience in the field. Some participants agreed with the definition in the proposal, while others suggested additional definitions, most commonly a definition that included students who may never achieve standards on assessments, but for whom current state tests do not adequately measure what they have learned and can do.

The group recognized the great variability in its members’ opinions and determined that questions of definition needed to be resolved before any assessment development could take place. The group consensus was that greater understanding based on good research was needed to better understand students in assessment gaps.

There wasn’t enough research out there to help us defend our positions about which profile of kids needed more research. It finally came down to a lot of work, a lot of reading, and decisions were made based on what’s out there, what can we develop.
- MS, state assessment director

Under the direction of the NEC working group, researchers conducted exploratory interviews with regular and special education teachers in the field to better understand students who do not meet assessment standards. From these interviews, general profiles of students in the gaps were developed and brought back to the working group.

The issues are very complex. And we needed to look at the data and struggle with the issues, go back to the data, and see what we could learn each time.
- SB, NEC research partner

Based on the research data, the group came to agreement with respect to *two* definitions of students in assessment gaps:

Gap One: Of the students who take the regular large-scale state assessment and do not demonstrate proficiency, there are some whose performance on the assessment even with approved accommodations is lower than would be expected given the knowledge and skills they regularly exhibit in the classroom.

Gap Two: Of the students whose performance in the classroom indicates that they do not qualify for the alternate assessment but they are not performing at a proficient level, there are some for whom the assessment is not effectively measuring what they know and have learned.

The project's goals were subsequently revised to reflect these new definitions and new studies were designed to test and explore them. Also, given limited remaining time and resources, instead of fully developing, testing, and implementing an assessment module as initially proposed, the group determined that only pilot testing of new assessment prototypes would be conducted.

In sum, the NEC working group recognized that its subject was far more complex than initially conceived, and together, the group revised goals and objectives accordingly to better understand the research issue at hand.



Lesson #2

Obtain knowledge from experts at all levels.

The NEC working group recognized that to understand assessment issues related to students in the gaps, they needed information from authorities who work at different levels within the field of education. For example, the group relied not only on its own state representatives and policy makers, but also upon nationally recognized experts in the field who were contracted to serve as advisors to the project. Test developers from the research partners relied on state content specialists to help them write items for the pilot task assessment module. As a whole, the group greatly valued the range of knowledge that was contributed to the project by its various members:

....the test developers, measurement people, content people, special education people, researchers, experts, bringing together different areas of expertise; what's come out has been really useful, and exploring the issues from different perspectives has been incredibly useful and I'd like to see that continue.

- GF, state bureau of accountability representative

The group also relied heavily upon interviews with regular and special education teachers who were respected for their closeness to the issue, expertise, and contact with students in the gaps:

I think we learned some important things about using all of the available data that you have and the importance of talking to teachers and their understanding about what a student is doing. I don't think you can make these kinds of decisions without getting significant feedback from teachers.

- SB, NEC research partner

From teachers on the front line, to state policy makers and content specialists at the state level, to researchers, test developers, and directors of national research centers in education, the NEC working group routinely sought out a broad spectrum of expertise to best understand and describe students in assessment gaps, and to lay a strong foundation for future work in this area of assessment.



Lesson #3

“Put a lot of effort into upfront planning. Try not to invent the plane while you are flying it.”

- KG, NEC research partner

The “Reaching ‘Students in the Gap’ through Web-based Task Module Assessments” project was ultimately successful, albeit not in ways that the NEC anticipated at the outset. The project began with specific assumptions about students in assessment gaps which were to serve as the underpinnings for assessment development. However, the working group quickly determined that those assumptions were limited, and exploratory research was needed to broaden understanding of students in the gaps before any new assessments could be developed. Moreover, the new definitions of students in the gaps that the researchers decided to test represented pioneering research in an area that heretofore had not been explored. Thus, on numerous levels, from the structure of grant implementation to the actual conducting of research, NEC partners were devising new structures and methods as they were simultaneously implementing those structures and methods.

For others who are interested in conducting research in this area of assessment, NEC working group members have particular recommendations for project planning to better accommodate different contingencies that may arise. For example, when writing grant proposals for work in a new area of research, allow for some flexibility:

What we set out to do is very different from what we ended up doing. It might be wise to write projects that are specific enough to get funded and leave wiggle room to modify as needed.

- MH, state assessment director

Another suggestion is for the working group to come to consensus with respect to the population being studied *prior* to beginning work:

I think if we had begun with clearer agreement about which population we were hoping to serve, the assessment piece of this work – more could have been done – but we had to spend time paying attention to who these kids are.

- MS, state assessment director

Finally, conduct exploratory research that is necessary to better understand your population of interest:

The questions of definitions span the spectrum. We really need fundamental descriptive research done to identify characteristics of the kids that we’re talking about... we need that description in order to know what to study, in order to change anything.

- GF, state bureau of accountability representative



Lesson #4

Collaboration across states and professional levels is a key element to developing and broadening understanding of students in assessment gaps.

I love my work. It constantly amazes me that 3-4 states can work together; not just that we can do it, that it ends up being so beneficial and rewarding. When we started, people were predicting that states couldn't do it. It's been quite the opposite.

- MH, state assessment director

The experience of the NEC confirms what research tells us; namely, that good collaboration among members is important for a group's success (Mattessich, 2003). The NEC partners came together from different states and professional roles to work towards a common goal that could not be accomplished individually, understanding students in assessment gaps. Each stakeholder reported that the group was stronger and the research results deeper due to the respectful working process the group underwent as a whole. How did group collaboration successfully influence the work? Here are some specifics.

a. The sum is greater than the parts

The NEC working group was comprised of policy makers and assessment specialists from four states who met regularly with test developers, and biannually with a panel of nationally recognized experts in the field of assessment. Collectively, the group felt that the sum of everyone's expertise was greater than its parts.

It's really important to have a lot of content expertise working with testing people – test directors, researchers – all of us.

- MS, state assessment director

I love the big meetings. The intelligence in the collective was greater than the individual. That was the most thrilling, seeing what happens when all the minds come together.

- KG, NEC research partner

Every member of the group was a valued contributor to the work, and every partner respected and welcomed alternative perspectives. It was unanimously perceived that a multi-faceted approach would provide the best product for the target audience, students not currently served by state assessments.

b. Allow flexibility to fit the needs of the project

The group did not initially experience the working process as a smooth or pleasant one; rather, the process to come to consensus was arduous and at times almost palpably painful during the first six months of the project due to disagreements among participants regarding the underpinnings of the group's proposed research. Each state representative came to the table with his or her own ideas regarding who students in the gaps were, and participants were initially not able to come to agreement with respect to a single basic definition. Initially perceived as an impasse preventing the group from moving forward with assessment development, the lack of agreement actually was a critical step in the process of reaching consensus.

As we talked and allowed all that chaos to come out, the patterns that came out led us to realize that we have fundamental questions about who those kids are. Questions of definition emerged that needed to be answered before we could go forward productively.
- GF, state bureau of accountability representative

It became apparent that more groundwork was required in order to define and understand students in the gaps before any test development could take place. In retrospect, group members felt that the difficult process they underwent with respect to defining who these students are was a necessary and useful one, for it led them to the important realization that exploratory research was necessitated prior to any full-blown test development.

Throughout the project, all partners had a common goal which unified them and facilitated flexibility to put the needs of the work ahead of individual views. Due to this common flexibility, the project's goals were subsequently revised to reflect an exploratory approach to defining students in assessment gaps, and research and test development was then able to commence.

c. Good group facilitation enhances and improves the process for all

The members of the NEC working group and its research partners unanimously expressed satisfaction and appreciation for the coordination efforts of the NEC project director.

Carrie is always very supportive and tries to make sure when we are at meetings or on conference calls that we get what we need...She has good suggestions for alternative contacts at the states. She always offers to get involved if we need her to.
- LF, NEC research partner

The coordination conducted by the project director facilitated the work of the research partners, and smoothed their way with respect to conducting research at the state level. For example, by providing alternative state contacts, researchers were able to more quickly obtain answers and approvals upon which the implementation of the research was contingent.

Moreover, the project director's overall organization of the project, including coordination and management of group meetings and conference calls, made the work of the NEC easier to accomplish because group members did not have to spend time on organizational details. Instead, they could focus on the tasks at hand, resulting in efficient meetings in which a great deal of work was accomplished.

d. Networking is invaluable to broadening knowledge and expertise

Every member of the working group stated that collaboration in the project enriched their knowledge and professional practice. Policy makers and researchers all expressed excitement and personal growth as an added benefit of their participation in the project and hoped that the collaboration could continue.

I hope we can find a way to continue these discussions across the four states. The long-term gain is substantial. It helps to make our search for answers more efficient. We see patterns across the populations, across states more clearly. It's a clarifying process, too. We help to clarify each others thinking, challenge each other. It's a healthy process.
- GF, state bureau of accountability representative

Not only did the NEC collaboration broaden understanding of the topic at hand, the unique collaboration among states provided opportunities to which states typically do not avail themselves:

We're all working on the same stuff, and in small states like ours, we couldn't do the same types of research without our working together.

- LP, state alternate assessment representative

Networking was an integral part of the project as participants came together at project meetings, learned from one another, and collectively propelled the work forward. Participation in the project laid a foundation for ongoing professional collaboration among the working group members across the four NEC states that will likely continue in the years to come.

Resources

New England Compact, <http://www.necomcompact.org/>

NEC state partners

Maine Department of Education, <http://www.maine.gov/education/>

New Hampshire Department of Education, <http://www.ed.state.nh.us/education/>

Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <http://www.ridoe.net/>

Vermont Department of Education, <http://education.vermont.gov/>

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), <http://www.ccsso.org/>

NEC research partners

CAST, Universal Design for Learning, <http://www.cast.org/index.html>

Education Alliance at Brown University, <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/>

Education Development Center, Inc., <http://www.edc.org/>

Measured Progress, <http://www.measuredprogress.org/>

Technology Assessment Study Collaborative (inTASC), <http://www.bc.edu/research/intasc/about.shtml>

NEC advisors

National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST),
<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/index.htm>

Center for Assessment: National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc. (NCIEA),
<http://www.nciea.org/>

National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/>

Northeast Regional Resource Center (NERRC), <http://www.rrfcnetwork.org/nerrc>

Additional resources

Mattessich, P. (2003, May). Can This Collaboration Be Saved? Twenty factors that can make or break any group effort. Shelterforce Online, 129. Retrieved from
<http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/129/savecollab.html>

Samuels, C.A. (2006). Regulations on '2 percent' testing awaited: Some states go forward with assessments for students with disabilities [Electronic Version]. Education Week, 26(03), 31-32. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2006/09/13/03assess.h26.html>

U.S. Department of Education, Grants for Enhanced Assessment Instruments:
<http://www.ed.gov/programs/eag/index.html>

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