Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
NextGen Systems Initiative Proposal

New England Secondary School Consortium
Personalizing Learning on a Regional Scale

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Submitted by
Great Schools Partnership

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Executive Summary

Working in collaboration with state education agencies, the Great Schools Partnership (GSP) created the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC) in 2008 to change the educational systems in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The NESSC is a unique state and non-profit regional partnership that works to close persistent achievement gaps, strengthen college and career readiness, and promote greater educational equity and opportunity for all students. Funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will be used to ensure all learning is personalized and to deepen and expand the work of schools involved in the NESSC’s League of Innovative Schools.

The objectives of the NESSC align closely with the intentions of the Gates Foundation to personalize education. We believe that personalizing education rests on three key strategies: (1) proficiency-based graduation, (2) multiple and flexible pathways, and (3) the development of learner-centered accountability that measures results both in terms of students and implementation. The simultaneous implementation of these three strategies ensures that student learning will be academically challenging and equitable and results in preparing all students for college, careers, and thoughtful citizenship.

The NESSC rests on the systemic theory of action that ambitious educational goals will only be met if policy, practice, and public will are addressed simultaneously. Historically, reform efforts have focused on either changing policy or practice. Few have focused on changing public perceptions. Very few efforts have actively worked on all three areas. When only the lever of policy is used to promote systemic change, without buy-in from educators and the public, schools are extremely adept at sidestepping a policy’s intent; they may comply, but only temporarily and with no intention of implementing systemic change. At the same time, districts and schools that have embraced personalization and innovation, and that may even have made significant progress in changing their systems, find themselves as outliers, often operating outside of existing policies. Only by engaging parents, community members, and business leaders, can we develop the political and public will required to stimulate, drive, and sustain innovative change over the multiple years required to produce measureable, observable results.

By bringing together the priorities of policy makers, the hopes of the public, and the beliefs, goals, and strategies of practitioners, the NESSC has created the conditions for resources, incentives, and state pressure to complement the work of New England’s educators.

Organizationally, the NESSC has gathered chief state school officers, governors’ staff, legislators, state board members, higher education faculty, K-12 educators, and business leaders from each state to create the NESSC’s Council and influence actions across the region. The NESSC has had significant policy success. Four states have state graduation policies that require students to demonstrate achievement of college and career-ready standards in order to graduate. The fifth has passed legislation that provides schools with that option. Time is no longer the determinant; rather, it is a variable to the requirement of
demonstrated learning. In addition, every state has policy that promotes the development of multiple pathways including the recognition of learning acquired outside of school.

While these bold state policies are an important first step, parallel changes in daily practice have lagged. To address this, the NESSC started the League of Innovative Schools, a growing coalition of 75 secondary schools throughout New England that has chosen to come together as a regional professional learning community. These schools have committed to deepening personalization for all students through the implementation of proficiency-based graduation while providing students with multiple, personalized pathways to high school graduation.

The League is a true coalition of the willing. Each school joined voluntarily, none have received grant funding through the NESSC to support their work, and all members have made an ambitious commitment to personalized learning and systemic improvement, documented by a formal agreement signed by the superintendent, school-board chair, principal, teacher-leaders, and student and parent representatives.

Investment from the NextGen Systems Initiative will enable GSP to provide technical assistance to each League school using three strategies: (1) for a smaller subset of 10-15 League schools, intensive, on-site school coaching provided by an experienced professional to facilitate planning, implementation, evaluation, and self-accountability; (2) for all League schools, a comprehensive system of specialized resources regarding personalized-learning systems and expanding learning pathways; and (3) again for all League schools, online and person-to-person professional development through conferences, webinars, training sessions, and school visits. When necessary and strategically advantageous, the subset of grantee schools with free-and-reduced-lunch rates of 40 percent or higher will receive targeted, but limited, funding to subsidize high-need, high-leverage investments.

We will select the subset of schools through a multistep process outlining a rigorous set of development standards and a mandatory series of self-assessment and early implementation activities. Similar to the personalized learning strategies schools will implement for students, schools will work toward the demonstration of activities that meet a set of standards rather than compete against one another.

While we anticipate that full League membership will continue to grow and will enable us to influence all 480 secondary schools in our five states, our scale-up and sustainability strategy returns to our theory of action. The initial subset of schools will begin sharing their efforts with other League schools immediately—not as an emulation model, but as a collaborative learning model. Simultaneously, we will be disseminating this work to influence further state and district policy development as well as the understanding of the general public. Again, only by working concurrently on these three levers of our work can we expect to expand and sustain these efforts.

Personalizing learning is not a new concept; we could argue John Dewey initiated this line of thinking. We could also argue that examples of schools that do this well exist in various pockets of innovation across the country. And yet, scaling up this promising work has remained elusive even as it has been one of the most sought-after goals identified by policy makers, education reformers, and major philanthropies in the United States. We believe that the NESSC and League of Innovative Schools represent a breakthrough in this quest, achieving a level of technical assistance, political will, and public support that has established an unparalleled foundation for the systemic personalization of public education on a regional scale.