

Contributions to the Study

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At the NGA Center, Bridget Curran was our contact for the study with additional oversight and guidance provided by Dane Linn, David Wakelyn, and Ilene Berman.

Scott Joftus and Eleanor Johnson designed and co-directed the study and co-authored the report. Kate Neville conducted most of the telephone interviews and wrote sections of the report. Site visits were conducted by Scott Joftus, Eleanor Johnson, Kate Neville, and Rob Muller.

Cross & Joftus, LLC
8610 Ridge Road
Bethesda, MD 20817
301-229-3049
www.edstrategies.net

Background

For years, governors have played a leading role in education reform. For example, the current standards movement was jumpstarted in 1989 when President George H.W. Bush invited America's governors and business leaders to a national summit. Until recently, however, the focus of the standards movement and education reform has been on elementary schools. But thanks to a growing recognition that America's high schools are failing to prepare too many students for work and higher education, there has been increasing attention on secondary school reform. In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) in conjunction with Achieve, Inc., held the National Education Summit on High Schools. The NGA Center for Best Practices Honor States Grant Program builds on the momentum created by the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools.

The Honor States Grant Program is a \$23.6 million, governor-led initiative to improve high school and college-ready graduation rates in 26 states. Phase I of the program provided ten states¹ with two-year grants of up to \$2 million to support comprehensive high school redesign. Phase II of the program—funded by the BellSouth Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the GE Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Prudential Foundation, and State Farm Insurance Companies—provides 17 states² with two-year grants of \$50,000-\$500,000 to implement targeted high school reform initiatives. State awardees for both phases were selected by an independent committee in a competitive process.

The Phase II Honor States Grants provided funds for seven programs: Increase Course Rigor, Enhance Advanced Placement Participation, Improve Teacher Knowledge and Skills and/or Recruitment and Retention, Use Virtual Learning to Advance High School Improvement, Turn Around Low-performing Schools, Streamline Education Governance, and Develop a K-16 Longitudinal Database. Within these broad program areas, states proposed activities that would meet their specific needs and fit in their high school redesign agenda, along with the “non-negotiable” required elements for each program.

This formative, process evaluation was conducted at approximately the half-way point of the two-year grant cycle. It is likely that states made significant progress after the data for this report were collected and will continue to progress in the future.

¹ Arkansas, Delaware, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Virginia.

² Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Summary of Findings

Overall, it appears that NGA Center and the Phase II funders received a significant “bang for the buck” from the Honor States grant as states implemented—to varying degrees—their funded strategies as well as related strategies intended to improve their high schools. Program implementation is on-track with planned timelines, with the exception of the longitudinal data systems programs. There is some variation in the extent of implementation of specific strategies within any one program.

Several important findings emerged from the evaluation that should help to inform state grantees, other states engaged in high school reform, Phase II funders, and the NGA Center and its partners:

- Although most states appear to be on track to fully implementing their Phase II strategies by the end of the grant period, sustainability and scalability of all programs will likely be an issue, especially after the grant ends and/or turnover in leadership (both political and administrative) occurs.
- The AP grant is being implemented most fully, and the K-16 data system grant is running into the most obstacles.
- Challenges to program implementation vary by state and program type, but certain themes have emerged:
 - One set of challenges concerns resources, coordination, and management at the state level. Specifically, states have struggled to identify funding to sustain programs beyond the grant cycle, offset fees for tests and virtual courses, and train all teachers and administrators; assign and/or retain enough staff dedicated to the project; integrate disparate data systems; break down bureaucratic silos and walls between preschool, K-12, and post-secondary education; and maintain progress during political campaigns and turnover in political leadership.
 - Another set of challenges arises at the local level. Specifically, districts and schools have struggled to create public support among parents, students, teachers and others for strategies that increase academic rigor, particularly in rural areas and areas where good jobs do not necessarily rely on a higher education and where staying close to family is a key value.
 - Districts and schools have also struggled to recruit highly qualified teachers in mathematics and science to teach advanced courses. Following up on and expanding access to professional development for teachers and administrators is another commonly cited challenge for districts and schools that has been validated by this evaluation. Finally, and related to this challenge, districts and schools in Phase II Honor States have, for the most part, failed to create

professional learning communities among educators that can sustain change regardless of external pressures or investment in more than a few schools.

- Completing the Blueprint for an Action Agenda and committing to “non-negotiables” for the application has clearly facilitated state planning for high school redesign. Although still early in the implementation stage, it appears as though requiring states to complete a great deal of work just to be eligible for a grant and allow them to apply for all seven grants with the expectation that they might receive grants for a subset (or none) of them, was a very successful leveraging strategy.
- Similarly, it appears that some states are already using the Phase II funded strategies to foster and support more systemic reforms.

Approach

The goal of the evaluation was to assess states’ progress in meeting the goals of these grants after the first year of implementation and to identify key lessons to inform the second year of the grant and ongoing sustainability. The evaluation was designed around six research questions:

- 1) To what extent are Honor States making progress toward meeting the outcome goals described in their applications?
- 2) To what extent are Honor States implementing the strategies or developing the policies described in their applications?
- 3) To what extent are Honor States using their Phase II grants to facilitate comprehensive high school redesign?
- 4) What lessons can be learned from the efforts of Phase II grants that will help all states improve their outcomes for students in high school and beyond?
- 5) How do Phase II states rate the support they receive from the NGA Center and NGA Center subcontractors?
- 6) In what ways can the support received by Phase II states be improved?

To address the research questions and meet the goals of the evaluation, Cross & Jofus analyzed extant data, conducted interviews with key state officials in the Phase II Honor States, and made site visits to five states—Connecticut Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Nevada. The study was conducted between May 2006 and April 2007.

Findings by Program

Overall, states' program implementation is on-track with planned timelines, with the exception of the longitudinal data systems programs. As of December 2006, there was some variation in the extent of implementation of specific strategies within any one program as described below.

Increasing Course Rigor. Three states—Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania—are working with the NGA Center and ACT on a pilot project promoting high-level college-oriented content in English, mathematics, and science (\$140,000 grant; \$40,000 match required). In all three states, the match between state high school standards, college placement standards and ACT's model course syllabi have been evaluated and curriculum improvement and assessment workshops are ongoing.

In the one state where there was no alignment between state standards and the ACT syllabus, implementation did not take place in that subject area. None of the states had yet developed an instructional resource bank because ACT has not completed designing the activities that would be included. Pennsylvania has hosted quarterly statewide meetings of gubernatorial and legislative staff and state-level and higher education leadership to discuss the state policy implications of the assessment of the match between standards; Mississippi and Oklahoma had not held these statewide meetings.

ACT provided technical assistance to the state grantees to implement the Increasing Course Rigor program. The quality and usefulness of this assistance received mixed reviews from states, particularly at the beginning of the grant when in two states ACT was perceived as not asking for state and local input before establishing unrealistic deadlines and expectations. States felt that on-site technical assistance would have been very useful.

Expanding Advanced Placement Participation. Six states—Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maine, Nevada, and Wisconsin—in partnership with the College Board and the NGA Center, have been working to improve disadvantaged students' access to, and success in, college-level Advanced Placement (AP) courses using a \$500,000 grant with a \$500,000 match required from each state. States were to provide resources to selected high schools and districts, implement sequential professional development events for each AP subject area, implement several programs and strategies in the middle grades and junior high levels that increase preparation for all students for success in AP courses, and participate in a learning laboratory for teams of policy makers and educators from the six states that were co-hosted by the NGA Center and the College Board. In addition, five of the six states proposed additional strategies.

The six states made substantial gains (43 percent) in enrolling students into AP courses, and, in pilot sites, AP classes became more diverse, as minority enrollment increased 51 percent. In addition, all six states substantially increased the number of AP courses and sections offered by a total of 26 percent. They also increased the number of teachers

trained. In summer 2006, teachers and administrators took part in intensive professional development, week-long workshops and institutes to improve content knowledge. All states except Kentucky participated in the learning laboratory. Middle school and high school teachers met and continue to meet as vertical teams to ensure that 7th-9th graders are prepared for success in AP courses. Teacher, administrator, and student enthusiasm for the Springboard program in middle and junior high schools was extremely positive in the schools we visited. Teachers and administrators expected to see a significant rise in test scores in spring 2007.

The College Board provided two types of technical assistance to the states to help implement their programs: (1) training for the Springboard and AP courses and (2) data (student test scores) that are used by teachers and administrators to manage and monitor the program. The training and technical assistance for course content was universally perceived to be very helpful. However, the College Board's ability to provide student data to the schools was perceived to be not helpful, since the College Board did not provide scores in a timely fashion or at all, due—according to one College Board official—to privacy concerns. This is an area that is being worked on by the NGA Center, the College Board, and the states participating in the program and needs to be resolved for the AP preparation program to succeed in meeting its goals.

Improve Teacher Knowledge and Skills and/or Recruitment and Retention. Four states—Connecticut, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Wyoming—received \$100,000 to improve teacher knowledge and skills and teacher recruitment and retention. The work in each state was planned to help ensure that teacher content knowledge is aligned with student standards and that instructional strategies help all students meet higher standards. In addition, these states planned to support all high schools in their efforts to recruit and retain qualified, effective teachers.

Connecticut planned to provide job-embedded professional development for up to 10 multi-disciplinary teams representing rural, suburban, and urban school districts; initiate and support classroom-based and school-based action research projects with each team; and identify, train, and support a cadre of candidates who are making mid-career transitions into education through the Alternative Route to Certification (ARC) and who are seeking positions in hard-to-staff schools. Connecticut made substantial progress in implementing all three of its identified strategies, although it faced criticism from participants in two of them (interdisciplinary teams and action research). Oklahoma focused on recruiting and retaining nationally board certified teachers in high-need schools and laid the groundwork necessary to implement its strategies for modifying state and local policies, including providing incentives to retain highly effective teachers in hard-to-staff, low-performing high schools. Wyoming had yet to take action on either the late-career teacher survey or the New Learning for Wyoming's Senior Teachers scholarship program. Iowa did not participate in this evaluation.

Turn Around Low-Performing Schools. Under this grant (\$200,000), Nevada and New Hampshire each funded quite different high school reform efforts. Nevada's program pairs high-performing schools with low-performing schools, uses the technical assistance

of the International Center for Leadership in Education (with which the state has been collaborating for some time in high school redesign efforts), and participates in the Nevada Successful Practices Network. To date, Nevada has shown moderate progress in implementation: only the high-performing schools have been identified, but development of the mentor schools' capacity to act as mentors appeared to be positive. Successful Practices Network participation varies by site. Pairing of these schools with low-performing schools will begin in the 2007-08 school year.

New Hampshire proposed to use its grant to help all schools by implementing a student identification system, establishing a grades 11-14 dual high school/college system, aligning high school exit standards and college expectations, providing high school redesign training to high school leaders and their teams, and identifying supports for schools wishing to address the needs of low-performing students through individualized learning plans. Overall, New Hampshire demonstrated a moderate degree of implementation. Specifically, the state fully implemented the student identification system and moderately implemented the redesign training and identification of supports for individualized learning plans. At the same time, New Hampshire had only some implementation of the dual high school/college system and aligning standards, where the state had difficulty getting high school and college representatives to write mutual competencies.

Streamline Education Governance. Six states—Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Wyoming—are using this grant (\$50,000) to streamline education governance. Overall, progress in implementing the strategies identified by states varied among the six states, but none of them had made changes resulting in actual streamlining. All of the actions taken to date can be characterized as laying the initial groundwork for such changes. Two of the states (Georgia and Arizona) made substantial progress, two (Connecticut and Oklahoma) recently began to make progress, Florida changed course in mid-stream, and Wyoming had not yet implemented any of its strategies.

Use Virtual Learning to Advance High School Improvement. Four states—Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee—are using the grant (\$100,000) to create or expand their statewide virtual high school as a means of increasing opportunities for more rigorous course offerings and/or advanced placement courses.

Overall, one of the four states—Georgia—had made great progress in implementing its virtual schools project. Indeed, the Georgia Virtual School (GAVS) is a national model for virtual learning. It is showing remarkable progress and appears to be maintaining a high standard of quality. GAVS arguably holds its teachers and courses more accountable than most school systems do by monitoring online interactions, evaluating teachers using a formal rubric, and surveying parents and students.

Another state—Tennessee—had made moderate progress. The state made great strides in developing course content, but its mid-course change of direction to focus on the professional development of teachers, allowed by the NGA Center, and concern about increasing demand before systems are fully functional prevented fuller implementation.

Two of the four states had made only some progress and were not on track to implement the grant fully. North Carolina had only one person staffing NCVirtual for nine months. The state began offering courses in January 2006 and received permission from the NGA Center to change significantly its strategies to focus on building capacity of the system. Kentucky's implementation of the grant was delayed six to eight months due to contracting problems and turnover in state leadership. There is, however, a great deal of student interest in the virtual school program due to the flexibility in scheduling it offers.

Develop a Statewide Longitudinal K-16 Data System. Two states—Kentucky and Nevada—are using their grants (\$150,000) in different ways to help develop this system. Both states have encountered significant implementation challenges. Overall, Kentucky had made moderate progress. It made great progress in the assignment of a unique student identifier and in the integration of local, institutional, and state data collection, including plans for requiring participation in the statewide data system and an electronic infrastructure to transfer larger data files. The state was on-track with the planned timeline in these areas. It had made only some progress and is not on-track, however, to develop the enterprise architecture and procedures for protecting the security, confidentiality, and integrity of data. Kentucky is knowledgeable and clear about its goals for the data system, but progress was impeded by contracting issues, vacancies in key positions, and funding of the higher education portion of the project. After significant delays, the project was progressing again, and the outlook for a P-20 system is excellent.

Nevada had made some progress in its plans to study what Florida and other states are doing to provide longitudinal student-level data analysis across the P-16 spectrum but was not on-track with the planned timeline, due to difficulty in scheduling state visits, staff limitations, and data security concerns. Because it depends on completion of the state study, Nevada had not implemented the strategy of building the capacity of teachers, principals, counselors, and district personnel to use the data system.

Conclusion

To date, Phase II of the Honor States program can be considered a success, both in terms of the strategies being implemented and the amount of leverage, or potential leverage, for systemic high school reform. This evaluation, however, took place after only one year of the program. Hopefully, the findings and lessons presented in this report will be helpful to the NGA Center, its funders, and the states during the second year of implementation. At the completion of the second year, the NGA Center and its funders should strongly consider another evaluation to determine the ultimate influence of the Phase II grants on high school improvement and student outcomes.