NEW HAMPSHIRE

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCY

EDUCATION:

AN ACCOUNTABILITY PILOT PROPOSAL

TO THE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

November 21, 2014
Introduction and Rationale

The New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) is pleased to provide the following information as a follow-up to questions raised by USED leadership regarding our proposed pilot accountability system, the Performance Assessment of Competency Education or PACE. This memo is our formal request to allow NH DOE to waive a limited amount of annual state-level achievement testing for four NH school districts and to base accountability determinations on a combination of local, common, and state-level assessments.

New Hampshire is committed to ensuring that all students graduate from its schools college and career-ready. Although New Hampshire is one of the highest performing states in the country and has been improving its performance over the last 15 years, the State is not satisfied with the current levels of school and student performance. A key factor contributing to this unease with the status quo stems from the unacceptably high level of remediation required by students entering post-secondary institutions. But another cause of our motivation to improve stems from knowing that we can do more to engage all students in meaningful learning opportunities. NH educational leaders argue that we are beginning to “top out” on the level of performance that can be expected in a top-down or externally-controlled accountability system. Rather than continue to operate within such a system, education leaders in New Hampshire want to shift to more internally-focused improvement system aligned with research on human and organizational learning and improvement. In collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders throughout the state, the New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) is developing an expanded view of assessment and accountability, grounded in research that it proposes to pilot in a small number of districts in the 2014-2015 school year. There are several key components to this approach that NH DOE believes will help them achieve better results for all students:

- Explicit involvement of local educational leaders in designing and implementing the accountability system,
- Intense and reciprocal support on behalf of the NHDOE for local districts involved in this initiative that will include technical, policy, and practical guidance,
- Use of a competency-based approach to instruction, learning, and assessment which can best support the goal of significant improvements in college and career readiness, and
- Use of authentic, instructionally-relevant, and validated performance-based assessments, alongside periodic administration of Smarter Balanced assessments of state standards in math and ELA, for the purpose of tracking and reporting the progress of students, schools, districts, and educators.

This new approach does not change the state’s firm commitment to accountability for the purposes of improving student learning and outcomes, especially for educationally disadvantaged student groups, as well as supporting high quality educator, leader, and school support and evaluation systems. However, the State argues that an improvement-focused approach improves how the state collects and uses information to better meet the needs of educators and students in New Hampshire. We present details of this request in this memo, organized in three main sections:

1. History of and rationale for the PACE option
2. Implementation plan
3. Technical issues
History of and Rationale for the PACE Option

In spring 2012, Commissioner Barry and Deputy Commissioner Leather met with Secretary Duncan and staff to discuss a new kind of school accountability system based on competency-based education. In July, 2012, a concept paper (NHDOE, 2012) describing a new theory of action for accountability based on an expanded definition of college and career readiness and competency education for students and educators was created, conceptualizing a new model of accountability (see Appendix A). However, upon examination, the NH Department of Education, in conjunction with NH stakeholders identified that the moving parts of such a new system had yet to be fully conceptualized, let alone constructed. For this reason, a first ESEA waiver request was submitted that was based on the current system of accountability, but with the provision that NH would start to build the new system. That same year, the NHDOE began a large scale professional development initiative with teams of NH educators from a first cohort of schools who had dedicated themselves to implementing competency education, K-12.

With the generous support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the NHDOE in 2013 constructed a performance assessment model of local accountability to support the implementation of competency education based on the tenets of a white paper completed by the Accountability 3.0 Taskforce of the Innovation Lab Network of the Council of Chief State School Officers, (CCSSO). This model, which laid the foundation for the PACE proposal (see Appendix B), conceptualized a scalable model of state and local accountability supported by common performance assessments juried at the state level and aligned to NH state level graduation competencies in English language arts, mathematics, science, and work study practices. In the spring of the 2014, with the continued support of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the NHDOE established a pilot of Performance Assessment of Competency Education, (PACE) comprised of four (4) implementing districts and four (4) planning districts dedicated to fully develop and implement a system that would satisfy the accountability expectations of a federal system for the 2014-2015 school year. Significant partners in this work included the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) and the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (Center for Assessment), charged with assuring a rigorous valid and reliable system of common system of complex performance assessments aligned with grade span summative Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Assessments. Working with support from CCSSO, NHDOE, key stakeholders, and project partners from the Center for Assessment and CCE began the detailed work of framing the specifics of the PACE proposal in early 2014. Since that time, a first draft of a PACE Guide for implementing districts has been completed, (see Appendix C), that outlines the parameters of the learning, assessment, and accountability systems.

Deputy Commissioner Leather joined a small planning taskforce supported by the Hewlett Foundation made up of national partners including the CCSSO, Carmel Martin of the Center for American Progress, and others, which resulted in a clear roadmap for an Accountability 3.0 model for a 51st State, resulting in a white paper by principal authors Gene Wilhoit, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Linda Pittenger, (see Appendix D). This model includes components such as multiple indicators for academics, skills, and dispositions, an integrated local and state system of assessments, an inspectorate model of quality performance reviews of schools and districts, intense professional development, and comprehensive support for schools that
demonstrate performance issues. The PACE model was being designed concurrently with the 51st State model work with ongoing interactions among the two sets of designers to benefit from the thinking of each group.

Most importantly, Commissioner Barry has met monthly with district and school leaders ever since she came into office, engaging in deep conversations about how school accountability can best be designed to support significant improvements in school and student learning. These conversations led to the initial proposal to the USED in July, 2014, including two pilots, one based on the PACE work, the other on a College Readiness System connected to the suite of College Board Assessments. The NH Legislature, the Governor’s Office, and other key stakeholders, such as the NH Institute of Higher Education Network, the School Administrators Association, the NH School Principals Association, the NH Chapters of both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are all in support of this new, more fully balanced system of reciprocal accountability based on the core principle of shared responsibility among state and local leaders.

Rationale for PACE

New Hampshire is committed to raising the bar for all students by defining college and career-readiness to encompass the knowledge, skills, and work-study practices that students need for post-secondary success including deeper learning skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, persistence, communication, collaboration, academic mindset, and learning to learn. However, NH’s educational leaders recognize that the level of improvement required cannot occur with the same type of externally-oriented accountability model that has been employed for the past 12 years. In fact, the state argues that the current system is likely an impediment for moving from good to great. The state intends to move to a model of an accountability system with significantly greater levels of local design and agency to facilitate transformational change in performance. As part of this shift in orientation, the state believes there are more effective ways to assess student learning for informing and improving students’ progress. The State argues that a competency-based approach to instruction, learning, and assessment is philosophically and conceptually related to this internally-oriented approach to accountability and can best support the goal of significant improvements in college and career readiness. The information learned through competency-based assessments would then be used to make better accountability determinations that would better inform school improvement.

A competency-based system relies on a well-articulated set of learning targets that helps connect content standards and critical skills leading to domain proficiency. Such a system requires careful tracking of student progress and ensures that students have mastered key content and skills before moving to the next logical set of knowledge and skills. Current systems that rely on compensatory systems (e.g. averaging) for grading and related record-keeping may allow students to slip through the cracks in terms of possessing necessary knowledge for building deep understandings in the focal disciplines. Participating pilot districts will develop organizational and student-based goals and have these approved by a committee of peers as well as the SEA to ensure appropriate levels of rigor and focus on the key sets of knowledge and skills in each domain. Their progress towards meeting these defined goals will be reported by each participating district to the NH DOE at least yearly.
In the PACE option, the NHDOE has created a route for districts and schools to demonstrate progress that is not solely or primarily dependent upon state standardized tests. The creation of the PACE accountability option reflects NHDOE’s belief that school accountability works best if the responsibility for design and implementation is shared by districts and the state, rather than top-down mandates. Known as “reciprocal accountability,” districts and schools are responsible for determining and reporting on local accountability measures, while the state is responsible for support and oversights in helping districts establish strong accountability systems.

The PACE system is designed to foster deeper learning on the parts of students than is capable under current systems. Further, while NHDOE is a strong supporter and governing member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, (SBAC), it argues that once/year assessments, as good as Smarter Balanced may turn out to be, is not enough to drive and support deeper learning. To do so requires timely assessments linked closely with curriculum and instruction. The PACE system is based on the belief that a rich system of local and common (across multiple districts) performance-based assessments is necessary for supporting deeper learning as well as allowing students to demonstrate their competency through multiple performance assessment measures in a variety of contexts. Thus, the accountability option was established to enable schools and districts to demonstrate student achievement and learning growth through means other than or in addition to standardized tests, with an emphasis on performance assessment.

Finally, New Hampshire is committed to implementing a philosophically coherent system. If the State is encouraging districts to embrace student agency in determining learning goals, then it only makes sense for the State to embrace “district agency” in establishing its own accountability goals.

**Implementation Plan**

NHDOE is engaged in a multi-faceted implementation plan to ensure the success of the PACE option that includes the following components:

- Requirements for participating districts
- Technical and professional learning support, including task development and scorer calibration activities
- Benchmarks for success
- Communication plan

Requirements for participating districts (“guardrails”)

Districts participating in the 2014-2015 pilot must have already adopted the State graduation competencies and developed a coherent and high quality set of K-12 course and grade competencies mapped to the State graduation competencies. These districts must have demonstrated the leadership and educator capacity to participate effectively in the pilot. In addition to having a well-articulated set of competencies, these districts must have developed or be close to completing the development of a comprehensive assessment system. Because districts need to have demonstrated strong levels of performance and capacity in order to effectively participate in the pilot, districts with priority schools are not eligible to participate at this time. Districts considered for the 2015-2016 pilot must have adopted graduation
In order to be selected for the pilot, districts must be willing to participate in a peer and expert review process where they submit their system of performance-based assessments for evaluation based on clear and rigorous criteria including alignment with state standards and competencies, consistency and accuracy of scoring, and fairness to all test takers. Further, PACE districts will be required to administer the state summative assessments (Smarter Balanced) in at least three grades, one at each level (e.g., 4, 8, and 11), which will serve as both an internal and external audit regarding school and district performance. Local districts will be expected to incorporate the results of the Smarter Balanced Assessments in their local accountability system.

All pilot districts are expected to fully participate in the development and implementation of the pilot accountability requirements such that all pilot districts will have the same general assessment requirements in the same courses and grades. These general requirements are outlined out below in Table 1. As can be seen, the Smarter Balanced summative assessment will be administered in select grades. The current plan involves staggering the Smarter Balanced subject areas according to when the results will be most useful for informing programs and auditing the local and common performance assessments. The current state science assessment (NECAP) will be phased out as these districts play a lead role in beginning to pilot “next generation” science assessment tasks. In fact, the National Research Council advocated in a recent report\(^1\) that moving to assessments of the Next Generation Science Standards must be led by classroom-based assessments rather than trying this extensive endeavor with large-scale assessments first. The PACE districts will be particularly suited to pilot this new approach, given their intensive efforts in implementing complex performance assessment both within and across disciplines.

Importantly, local performance assessment, used for competency determinations, will be administered in all subjects and grades. In certain grades and subjects, they will be “anchored” by Smarter Balanced assessment results, but in many others, they will be tied to the common performance assessments.

School districts participating in the PACE pilot will be required to report the number and percentage of students at each grade level who are meeting both locally defined, but state (and peer) approved definitions of proficiency and competency. Student growth for PACE districts will be reported according to locally determined and peer approved approaches for documenting student progress towards graduation competencies.

<table>
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Table 1. General assessment requirements for the PACE pilot accountability system.