

Enclosure 3f
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Results From Informal Facilitated Focus Groups With Rhode Island Educators

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Introduction

At the request of the Ad Hoc Committee of Assessment and the Diploma System of the Rhode Island Board of Education, David Ruff, executive director of the Great Schools Partnership met with four focus groups of Rhode Island educators. The purpose was to gather feedback on interventions and supports employed by Rhode Island school districts to assist students in demonstrating achievement through passing the New England Comprehensive Assessment Program. This report outlines the major themes and findings from these focus groups.

This report is built upon the feedback from the participants, not upon a review of data supplied by the participants, RIDE, or from public websites. As such, participant comments represent the ideas as they understand them. This process—and consequently, the report—did not attempt to verify the factual basis of any comments.

While each group had a slightly different set of questions refined to address their specific roles (see Appendices B-E for all questions), the process in its entirety had two focus questions:

1. What has been the scope of remediation implementation across the LEAs since the release of the 11th grade NECAP scores?
2. What remediation supports/strategies have shown the most promise in helping students meet the state assessment graduation requirement?

Overall, the purpose of these focus groups was to provide feedback and information to the Rhode Island Board of Education for their future deliberations.

The four focus groups consisted of meetings with teachers (15 participants), building level principals and administrators (8

participants), district level superintendents and administrators (8 participants), and local school board members (3 participants). The teacher, principal, and superintendent groups were large enough to draw some ideas on the sense of implementation across the state; the thoughtful ideas shared in the school board session have largely been used to reinforce the ideas of the other groups rather than standing alone due to the very few participants. A fifth group with students was planned but not held due to low numbers of participants. No groups were scheduled or held with parents as the focus of this process was to determine the scope and success of efforts implemented by schools.

Recruitment of participants occurred through different means. Participants in the principal, school committee, and superintendent groups were recruited by RIDE. The RIDE liaison to the Board of Education emailed invitations to professional organizations inviting members to participate in the focus groups. Organizations included the Rhode Island School Committee Association, the Rhode Island Principals Association, and the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association. A variety of student organizations were also invited, including the Rhode Island Association of Student Councils, Young Voices, Youth in Action, Providence Student Union, Skills USA, the Rhode Island Urban Debate League, the MET, Future Business Leaders of America, Year Up, and Stepping Up. Teachers were recruited independently by members of the Ad Hoc Committee on Assessments and the Diploma System. Focus group participants included those responding to the request on a voluntary basis.

The teachers group met at the Rhode Island Foundation with teachers from urban, suburban, and rural districts. Participants were identified by both the RI AFT and the RI NEA organizations. None of these participants did or were expected to speak for their district or their

affiliated association; rather, they represented and shared their personal experiences and ideas. Participants were six males and nine females.

The principals group met at RIDE with participants from urban, suburban and rural school districts. Experience levels varied both in terms of total time as a principal and time in their current school. Participants were seven males and one female.

The superintendents group met at RIDE with participants from urban, suburban, and rural school districts. Experience levels varied both in terms of total time as a superintendent and time in their current district. Participants were five males and three females.

The school board group represented three districts with two suburban and one urban district. The two women and one man all had several years of experience on their current school board.

All focus groups were held in March, 2014 lasting approximately 90 minutes each. The first 45 minutes were a series of questions posed by the facilitator, David Ruff. During this time, members from the Ad Hoc Committee were observers of this process. In the final 45 minutes, Ad Hoc Committee members were invited into the conversation with the ability to pose specific questions. Members of the subcommittee can be found in Appendix C.

This report represents the ideas of David Ruff as gathered through this process. The ideas of this report should not be seen as singularly conclusive but as an initial take on the ideas shared in these four conversations with the intention of providing data and ideas to the RI Board of Education for their discussion and edification. In addition, while the participants in three of the four groups provided a strong

cross-section of RI educators, there are certainly additional and different opinions that exist across the state with educators who were not involved in this process.

Trends and Findings

The following represent the major trends and similarities across the four groups. As appropriate, differences between groups or within groups are noted. Quotes are intended to be indicative of particular points of emphasis made or agreed to by several members of the groups.

1. General Sense Across Each Group

The citizens of Rhode Island should be pleased at the significant efforts reported by everyone involved to create and implement interventions to support students. Clearly, RI educators have worked hard to create a myriad of intervention and support strategies for each student, and

Clearly, RI educators have worked hard to create a myriad of intervention and support strategies for each student, and it is quite evident that many of these strategies have worked to successfully transition students from not yet meeting the state assessment requirement to demonstrating achievement as measured by a variety of processes.

¹ I would suggest that RIDE collect and present specific data from RI LEAs regarding the actual numbers of students who did not meet the state assessment requirement through initial participation in NECAP and how these students eventually demonstrated achievement through various means. This analysis was beyond the scope of these focus groups but would be well worth understanding to better support decisions to be made by the RI Board of Education.

it is quite evident that many of these strategies have worked to successfully transition students from not yet meeting the state assessment requirement to demonstrating achievement as measured by a variety of processes. While every district had students who needed interventions and support, the urban districts reported significantly higher percentages of initially failing students far outweighing the differences in total numbers of impacted students that might be expected due to overall population size. RI urban districts appear to face a more difficult situation than suburban or rural districts. Overall, almost every LEA reported that math failures were greater than English/language arts failures.

In every educator group (teachers, principals, and superintendents), even as questions were posed regarding interventions, the responses quickly shifted to general perceptions of the NECAP requirement. Voiced most strongly by the teachers' focus group, many participants openly questioned the value of the current NECAP requirement arguing that students are not being helped by this expectation. Few teachers supported the requirement for students to demonstrate achievement through this measurement stating that it has overwhelmed other requirements (for example, senior demonstrations or portfolios). The principals group also quickly shifted their responses to question this policy, although the concern against the policy was not as uniform. Several participants questioned the current use of NECAP in this fashion, although several clearly acknowledged the need for some sort of similar test if not NECAP. The superintendents were more neutral in their comments, again raising concerns about this policy but in general agreeing to the intentions of the policy.

2. Extent of Intervention and Support Strategies

As noted above, the level of support strategies implemented is very laudatory. Every educator was able to note numerous strategies that had been created and implemented in RI LEAs. While these strategies varied somewhat from district to district, several patterns did emerge.

In almost all cases, schools have instituted both after-school and various summer school support programs—essentially additional learning options and learning time beyond the current school day. Educators were

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very creative in figuring out ways to fit these additional hours into student schedules, creating additional transportation needs and ensuring that learning opportunities were facilitated by certified teachers. In addition, schools implemented active recruitment programs to entice and enroll students in these options.

These programs were very helpful for some students, being the key strategy that improved their NECAP scores. Participants did report, however, that this “extra time” strategy failed to work for many students. Students living in poverty (who participants reported as being over represented in the group of students failing to demonstrate success on the NECAP), tended not to take advantage of these programs due to poor attendance in general, jobs outside of school, and numerous responsibilities at home. These students struggled to take advantage of learning

programs that added time outside of the normal school day for the reasons listed above.

Schools also implemented a variety of in-school extra support times ranging from double periods of math or English to specific guided support classes. These strategies were more successful in getting student participation (schools simply scheduled these into a student's schedule) and again demonstrated success in promoting increased student achievement. Unfortunately, many participants—in particular teachers—noted that these additional courses negatively impacted the ability of students to engage in elective courses that could prove exciting and engaging for them. A handful of teachers and principals also noted the potential problem that such courses create in that students are not able to fit in their other required courses during the normal four-year high school experience.

Every educator also reported that the interventions were addressed on a personalized—if not individualized—level. These personalized approaches were implemented within regular classes as well as through the additional programs noted above. Progress Plans were made for each student to take advantage of support structures, then student results were monitored to ascertain passage of this requirement using one of the numerous options outlined by RIDE.

The significant success that RI LEAs are seeing in getting students over this hurdle is largely due to having numerous support strategies—not a single best strategy.

Almost every school also reported longer-range plans, for instance, changes in the curriculum and expectations at the middle school level with the intention of lessening the percentage of students who fail to demonstrate success on the state test. It is hard to judge the impact

of these strategies as these are long-range improvements although the reasoning behind these strategies is quite sound. As one superintendent reported, “Intervention [after initial failure of demonstration] is not enough to overcome a flawed system that many kids have gone through.” Numerous secondary teachers were exasperated with being highlighted as failures while many concerns are the result of the K–12 system in its entirety.

No one strategy appears to be a silver bullet of success; rather, success appears to be coming through a relentless commitment to multiple opportunities and strategies. What might work for one student is inappropriate for another. The significant success that RI LEAs are seeing in getting students over this hurdle is largely due to having numerous support strategies—not a single best strategy.

3. Communication

All participants reported significant efforts—successful efforts—to apprise students and parents regarding this policy. Almost all LEAs made extensive use of school and district newsletters, announcements at various public gatherings, through parent-teacher conferences, and through direct sign-offs by guardians on information paperwork distributed by the LEAs. All participants also reported an in-depth communication strategy with students, meeting with them in whole groups, small groups, and even one-on-one. Several districts reported Herculean efforts to talk directly with the guardians of every student (and most undertaking this were able to do so with a very few exceptions). Due to these efforts, no one reported that parents or students had complained about not knowing that this requirement was coming. While a very limited sampling, the school board members interviewed stated that none of them had

received irate calls or emails from parents complaining that they were unaware of this requirement.

Furthermore, and beyond the actual policy requirements, the communication flow regarding suggested strategies and implementation of supports also appears quite strong. Teachers, principals, and superintendents appeared equally well informed about the strategies underway in the schools and the successes and failures

Student-population wise, participants reported that low socioeconomic status (SES), English Language Learners (ELL), and special education students have been disproportionately represented in the group of students failing to demonstrate success on the NECAP.

of these systems. In addition, participants reported significant collaboration between teachers, principals, and district office personnel to create intervention strategies that worked within the unique context of each community. While teachers, principals and district administrators certainly played different roles, there appears to be significant harmony across the devised systems. Overall, implementation efforts appear well communicated and coordinated.

4. Noted Areas of Student Difficulty

Content wise, participants report that many more students have failed to demonstrate success on the NECAP in math than in English/language arts. Participants did not have ready access within the focus group meetings to detail specific areas within these two

content areas, but reported that the various interventions were created based on specific and local needs of students.

Student-population wise, participants reported that low socioeconomic status (SES), English Language Learners (ELL), and special education students have been disproportionately represented in the group of students failing to demonstrate success on the NECAP.

The concerns with low SES students are important to note, as these are the same students who struggle most with the logistics of getting support outside of the school day. Simply put, employment and family obligations preclude participation in events outside of normal school hours for many of lower SES students. In addition, transportation issues loom larger. Consequently, many of these students are not able to take advantage of the interventions created and implemented by the LEAs.

Interestingly, several superintendents noted that efforts to increase parental engagement for many students may not be as strong a strategy as a direct appeal for responsibility to the students. In cases where parental support is largely absent for students, parental pressure is simply not a leverage point to impact students. A lack of parental support also creates difficulty in working one-on-one with families and students, a strategy noted as being successful when implementable.

The struggles of English Language Learners result both from potential shortcomings in learning and from difficulties with language acquisition. This created differences in the intervention strategies. Sometimes the ELL students could be engaged through the intervention strategies used for many other students; sometimes, these students needed additional support with language acquisition. In both cases, participants reported creating focused support within the various strategies outlined above.

Participants also noted strong efforts and struggles supporting special education students. Educators employed successful actions for many special education students by incorporating intervention strategies with provisions of special education regulations. In these cases, the additional class time, the support after school and during the summer, or simply working more closely one-on-one with students enabled them to succeed. However, participants also argued that some special education students did not have the academic capacity to meet the requirements of the policy despite engagement in a multitude of intervention strategies.

With the disproportionate representation of low SES students needing additional support, it should come as no surprise that the urban districts in RI reported significantly more students—and at a higher percentage—needing intervention. The number of students needing intervention in many suburban districts were small enough to allow direct interaction with both students and guardians largely within the current budgetary restrictions. The significantly larger numbers in the urban districts created a more significant issue with higher costs that created a higher hurdle for the urban districts to overcome.

5. Limited Common Use of Assessments

Few participants reported heavy and consistent use of additional assessments for diagnostic purposes. In general, participants reported using the NECAP scores to diagnose student needs and then used subsequent data from second and third NECAP tests to ascertain success. As students failed to demonstrate success on the second round of testing, LEAs made significant use of alternative methods to demonstrate achievement, including

other standardized tests approved by RIDE, improvement of NECAP scores while still below the initial cut score, and college acceptances for students.

6. Significant Differences in Support for the Policy

As noted above, while the interview questions focused on implementation success regarding support strategies, answers quickly raised concerns regarding the value of the policy itself. One principal argued that, “We need multiple pathways [for students] not multiple hoops,” while another noted, “Assessment has outpaced instruction.” Teachers, principals, and superintendents questioned the fairness of requiring students to demonstrate achievement on NECAP while schools are simultaneously implementing the Common Core, arguing that the standards encompassed in the Common Core do not align with the standards measured by NECAP—essentially establishing a technical validity problem. Concerns about using NECAP in this way were not uniform, but these concerns were expressed by a majority of participants. It should be noted, however, that for many these concerns were about NECAP, not the general idea of using a standardized test in this manner. If an alternative test aligned with the curriculum changes underway to implement the Common Core were to be used for this purpose (for example, PARCC), fewer principals and superintendents expressed the same levels of concern. Teachers remained pretty uniform in their expressions of concern about the use of testing in this manner, arguing that it narrows curriculum, increases the drop-out rate, and raises student anxiety. One teacher argued, “I don’t get deep thinkers—I get good test takers,” summing up the perceptions of many teachers. Several principals and superintendents leaning

favorably towards the use of testing in this manner argued for quicker implementation of PARCC, while simultaneously arguing for a moratorium on individual student accountability as schools transitioned to this test.

7. Commentary on Support from and Suggestions for RIDE

As might be expected, comments and suggestions regarding how RIDE has assisted schools and districts, and what else might be of assistance, varied pretty widely. Most participants noted and appreciated the steady stream of communication that has flowed from RIDE to the field, although they noted concerns about what they saw as changing information. Many noted feeling that the rules had changed as the process had developed, making specific note that NECAP was not intended originally to be a high-stakes test at the student level. Consequently, one superintendent noted, “The years of preparation are not really years due to the changes in standards and requirements.”

In particular, principals and superintendents were very clear that the waiver process was one of the key reasons the various support and intervention processes had been successful with so many students.

Participants noted and appreciated the meetings held by RIDE prior to the release of NECAP scores. These meetings enabled educators to understand the information to be distributed and prepare better public engagement surrounding these results.

Participants shared mixed reviews about the waiver process, in general being appreciative

of this option (school board members were not intimately aware of this process). In particular, principals and superintendents were very clear that the waiver process was one of the key reasons the various support and intervention processes had been successful with so many students. Still, several participants noted aggravation that enrollment in the Community College of Rhode Island was not accepted as a waiver route similarly to that offered for enrollment in four year programs. These participants noted that many academically capable Rhode Island students deliberately start at CCRI for cost savings means, not as a lower academic program.

While not uniform, many educators requested a moratorium on student-level accountability—but not on reporting testing results at the school or district levels. The requested moratorium was due largely to the shift to implement the Common Core and the upcoming shift to the PARCC assessments. Consequently, these participants argued that logically the curriculum shift and impending change in assessment makes holding students accountable to an unaligned test inherently unfair. Specific lengths of the moratorium request were not uniform ranging from a single year to a wait and see approach.

Conclusion

Overall, Rhode Island educators deserve significant praise for extensive communication with students and families to apprise them of the NECAP testing requirements for graduation. Furthermore, while some question the merits of this policy, they similarly have put in tremendous intervention efforts to support student success on the NECAP testing. Looking ahead, this commitment presents a solid foundation on which to build. RIDE needs to provide ongoing communication regarding

the upcoming implementation of the PARCC assessments as soon as possible. In addition, educators need to attend to and RIDE needs to support the various longer-term change efforts that have been started to support student learning. Interventions will always be needed but efforts to support students prior to actual testing holds promise to reduce the extensive remediation strategies currently under implementation.

Appendix A: Participants

Teachers:

- Joann Avedesian**, Coventry High School
- Amanda Boswell**, Portsmouth High School
- Julie Boyle**, Coventry High School
- Adelio Cabral**, Smithfield High School
- Maribeth Calabro**, Providence Teachers Union
- Sharon Campbell**, Exeter-West Greenwich High School
- George Currier**, East Providence High School
- Paul Dalpe**, Lincoln High School
- Marianne Davidson**, Hope High School, Providence
- Steve DeLeo**, Central Falls High School
- Christina DiPrete**, Pawtucket Teachers Alliance
- Jessica Perry**, West Warwick High School
- Karen Purtill**, Exeter-West Greenwich High School
- Michael Twohey**, Smithfield High School
- Daniel Wall**, Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex, Providence

Principals

- Benjamin Black**, North Providence High School (aspiring principal)
- Zack Farrell**, Johnston High School
- Joseph Goho**, North Providence High School
- Tom Kenworth**, North Kingstown High School
- Robert Mezzanotte**, North Smithfield High School
- Michael Podraza**, East Greenwich High School
- Janet Sheehan**, East Providence High School
- Phil Solomon**, West Warwick High School

Superintendents

- Michael Barnes**, Foster/Gloucester School District
- Bernie DiLullo**, Johnston School District
- Larry Fillipelli**, Scituate School District
- Colleen Jermain**, Newport School District
- Susan Lusi**, Providence School District

Bob O'Brien, Smithfield School District

Tim Ryan, Rhode Island School Superintendents Association

Kathy Sipala, Narragansett School District

Roy Seitsinger, Westerly School District

School Committee Members

Jean Harnois, Smithfield School District

Mary Ann Roll, Lincoln School District

Charles Shoemaker, Newport School District

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions—Teachers

Overarching Research Questions:

1. What has been the scope of remediation implementation across LEAs since the release of the 11th grade NECAP scores?
2. Which remediation supports/strategies have shown the most promise in helping students to meet the state assessment graduation requirement?

Preparation and Planning

- How did you communicate with your staff, students, and parents about the NECAP graduation requirement?
- How did you decide what remediation strategies your school would implement?

Implementation

- What support strategies did you implement in your school? (Who provides the support? How do you differentiate between supports? What is the intensity of support? How did you decide which students got which supports? etc.)
- Which strategies have seen the most success in changing learning for students?
- For which students or group of students do you think your intervention supports had the most value? Were you more successful with some sub-groups than others?
- Thinking back on the intervention(s), what were the greatest implementation challenges in your school? Which factors were most critical in supporting successful implementation of interventions? (Consider staff role, timing, program feature, etc.)
- If your schools implemented formative and summative assessments during interventions, how did you use the resulting information?
- If you could offer one piece of advice to other schools regarding implementing interventions, what would it be?

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions—Superintendents

Overarching Research Questions:

1. What has been the scope of remediation implementation across LEAs since the release of the 11th grade NECAP scores?
2. Which remediation supports/strategies have shown the most promise in helping students to meet the state assessment graduation requirement?

Preparation and Planning

- How did you communicate with your administrators and teachers, students, and parents about the NECAP graduation requirement?
- How did you decide what remediation strategies your district would implement?

Implementation

- What support strategies did you implement in your district? (Who provides the support? How do you differentiate between supports? What is the intensity of support? etc.)
- Which strategies have seen the most success in changing learning for students?
- For whom do you think your intervention supports had the most value? Were you more successful with some students or groups of students than others?
- For schools that did use pre- and post- testing during interventions, what was learned? How were results used?
- Thinking back on the intervention(s), what were the greatest implementation challenges in the high schools in your district?
- What support did you use from RIDE? In the future, what suggestions do you have for RIDE about what additional supports they could provide?
- If you could offer one piece of advice to other districts regarding implementing interventions, what would it be?

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions— School Committee Members

Overarching Research Questions:

1. What has been the scope of remediation implementation across LEAs since the release of the 11th grade NECAP scores?
2. Which remediation supports/strategies have shown the most promise in helping students to meet the state assessment graduation requirement?

Preparation and Planning

- How was information regarding the required supports and interventions shared with you?
- How did your school committee support implementation of these requirements?
- Did you have any role? If so, what was it?
- Are you monitoring implementation of these interventions and student results to determine if there are any local policy implications? If so, have you uncovered any?
- What feedback from parents, students, and community members have you heard regarding the interventions and supports your district has implemented? Does the system have face value for the community?
- What information and support did you receive from RIDE that was most helpful? In the future, what suggestions do you have for RIDE about what additional supports they could provide?

Appendix E: Focus Group Questions—Principals

Overarching Research Questions:

1. What has been the scope of remediation implementation across LEAs since the release of the 11th grade NECAP scores?
2. Which remediation supports/strategies have shown the most promise in helping students to meet the state assessment graduation requirement?

Preparation and Planning

- How did you communicate with your staff, students, and parents about the NECAP graduation requirement?
- How did you decide what remediation strategies your school would implement?

Implementation

- What support strategies did you implement in your school? (Who provides the support? How do you differentiate between supports? What is the intensity of support? How did you decide which students got which supports? etc.)
- Which strategies have seen the most success in increasing learning for students?
- For which students do you think your intervention supports had the most value? Were you more successful with some sub-groups than others?
- How was it decided whether or not your school would conduct formative and summative evaluations during interventions? How did teachers use results and what was your role in this process?
- Thinking back on the intervention(s), what were the greatest implementation challenges in your school? Which factors were most critical in supporting successful implementation of interventions? (Consider staff role, timing, program feature, etc.)
- What support did you receive from the district to implement this effort? : In the future, what suggestions do you have for RIDE and your district about what additional supports they could provide?
- If you could offer one piece of advice to other schools regarding implementing interventions, what would it be?

Appendix F: Subcommittee Members of the Rhode Island Board of Education

Colleen A. Callahan (in attendance for teacher focus group)

Karin Forbes (in attendance for teacher, principal, superintendent, and school board focus groups)

Patrick A. Guida, Esq. (in attendance for teacher, principal and superintendent groups)

Lawrence Purtill (in attendance for teacher, principal, superintendent, and school board focus groups)

Mathies Santos (in attendance for principal and superintendent groups)

Jo Eva Gaines