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June 15, 2010

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Education Study Committee

FR: Ally Hudson

**RE: STAFF REPORT: NEW MEXICO PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL REFORM
INITIATIVES: BOARD EXAMINATION SYSTEMS PROGRAM
(TOUGH CHOICES OR TOUGH TIMES)**

INTRODUCTION

In 2006 the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce and the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) issued a report entitled *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. The basic premise of the report is that, in the global environment, corporations around the world can find highly skilled professionals who are willing to work for low wages. Therefore, the report argues that, in order to assure competitiveness in the world labor market, the American work force should seek to offer advanced skills coupled with creativity and innovation. Moreover, achieving this goal will require a higher level and distinct type of K-12 education system in the United States that includes:

- education that starts earlier for disadvantaged students;
- education that is competency-based, not time-based, allowing students to move on when ready;
- teachers who are recruited from the top third of their graduating class;
- teachers who earn salaries that are competitive with other professions; and
- school environments where teachers are treated as professionals.

Included in the *Tough Choices or Tough Times* recommendations is a proposal for a voluntary state board examination system that seeks to create college-ready students by age 16 and that ascribes to a move-on-when-ready model that is flexible to individual student needs.

Central components of a board examination system include:

- a core program of courses defining what it means to be “an educated person”;
- constructed course designs captured in a syllabus;
- teacher training matched to the course syllabi;
- exams derived from the curriculum using multiple assessment methods; and
- general costs associated with program implementation, training, and materials.

Because this system provides students with both programmatic and instructional support, it is designed “to get all high school students ready to succeed in credit-bearing courses in open-admission two-year and four-year colleges before they leave high school.”

On February 17, 2010 New Mexico became one of eight states to join with NCEE and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the Board Examination Program (BEP) initiative. The other seven participating states are Connecticut, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont. All participating states are using school year 2010-2011 as a planning year. By school year 2011-2012, each state will be prepared to introduce the BEP initiative to a select number of pilot high schools.

This staff report includes an overview of:

- the components of the BEP initiative;
- program implementation in New Mexico; and
- potential issues.

COMPONENTS OF THE BOARD EXAMINATION PROGRAM INITIATIVE

Concepts

The BEP initiative is structured around a move-on-when-ready model (see Attachment, *The System: A Closeup*). In this model, students who have demonstrated competence—defined by NCEE as “able to succeed in credit-bearing courses at open admissions institutions” — have three options available to them:

- stay in high school and enroll in upper division courses to prepare for selective colleges and universities;
- move into career and technical education programs at the high school, if available; or
- leave high school and enroll in a community college or four-year open admissions institution to pursue a postsecondary education.

Based upon the student’s interests, academic performance, and social maturity, this decision will be made on an individual basis by the student, his or her parents, and school personnel.

Students who demonstrate competence in the lower division examinations in grades 9 or 10 and who choose to enroll in an eligible postsecondary institution will receive an alternate state high school diploma (see “*Statutory Concerns*” below).

Students in the BEP program who do not demonstrate competence at the end of grade 10 will stay in high school and pursue a program to develop those areas of weakness and retake the board exams. This academic development may take one semester or up to two years. Regardless, the goal of the program remains to prepare all high school students for success in credit-bearing college courses before leaving the high school environment.

Curriculum Options

The Race to the Top (RttT) Assessment Program grant, which will partially fund the BEP initiative, requires the alignment of secondary school curricula with the Common Core State Standards¹. According to the PED, these standards should be ready for adoption in either late summer or early fall of 2010. Moreover, an NCEE representative has indicated that all of the BEP curriculum providers have committed to aligning their coursework and examinations to the Common Core State Standards prior to implementation in fall 2011.

With the option of using different curricula at different schools depending upon student need, school districts participating in the BEP pilot can select among five curricula:

- ACT QualityCore;
- Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) Exams;
- College Board Advanced Placement;
- Edexcel International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) Exams; and
- International Baccalaureate.

The curricula options for the BEP pilot can be broken down into two categories: (1) lower division and (2) upper division.

(1) Lower Division

In general, the lower division curricula will be implemented in grades 9 and 10. NCEE notes that the “pass point [for] lower division exams is set to what it really takes to be successful in the initial credit-bearing courses in two-year and four-year open-admissions institutions.”

The lower division curriculum options include:

- ACT QualityCore;
- Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE); and

¹ Authorized under the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA), the Race to the Top Assessment Program provides funding to consortia of States to develop assessments that are valid, support and inform instruction, provide accurate information about what students know and can do, and measure student achievement against standards designed to ensure that all students gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace. (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-assessment/index.html>)

- Edexcel International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Qualification: Level 2 Diploma;
 - includes a vocational component (BTEC).

According to NCEE, these are not considered elite programs, but are designed to prepare all students for college coursework by age 16. The BEP curriculum remains flexible. Students who are not prepared to move on to upper division coursework by age 16 will be offered a personalized program to help them succeed in their next examination attempt.

(2) Upper Division

Upon demonstrating competence on the lower division board exams, students may choose to continue with the upper division curriculum options, which include the options available for lower division courses with the addition of the:

- College Board Advanced Placement Diploma Program;
- Edexcel General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-Levels) and/or BTEC Qualification: Level 3 National Award, Certificate or Diploma; and
- International Baccalaureate Diploma Program.

Cost

As the program manager for the State Board Examination Systems Consortium, and in hopes of fully funding all schools participating in the pilot project, NCEE is developing grant proposals on behalf of the consortium not only for the RtT Assessment Program, which has already been mentioned, but also for another competitive grant called the i3 Innovation Program.

- The i3 Innovation Program is a four-year grant that includes school year 2010-2011 as a planning year.
 - According to the US Department of Education (USDE) website, “the purpose of this program is to provide competitive grants to applicants with a record of improving student achievement and attainment in order to expand the implementation of, and investment in, innovative practices that are demonstrated to have an impact on improving student achievement or student growth, closing achievement gaps, decreasing dropout rates, increasing high school graduation rates, or increasing college enrollment and completion rates.”
 - The grant is \$30.0 million with a 20 percent match, resulting in a possible \$36.0 million total award.
 - The grant application has already been submitted, and NCEE anticipates an award announcement in September 2010.
- The Race to the Top (RtT) Assessment Program is a four-year grant that includes school year 2010-2011 as a planning year.

- The grant is \$30.0 million.
- The grant application is due June 23, 2010, and NCEE anticipates an award announcement in September 2010.

According to an NCEE representative, “if the i3 grant is not funded, but the RTTT Assessment Program grant is, the grant will fund fewer schools per state, but all states will have schools funded. If neither grant is funded, the consortium will continue to seek funding from the philanthropic community and the [federal] government through the [*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*] reauthorization.”

NCEE has also recommended that the New Mexico Legislature provide for continued funding in the K-12 school budget for those students who move on to open-admission two-year and four-year colleges prior to grade 12. The center suggests that “these funds would pay for expansion of the program. The Legislature could decide to use part of that student-based funding to assist in funding the students’ enrollment in the [postsecondary institution].” Also noteworthy, if the BEP program is successful in reaching its goal of preparing students for credit-bearing coursework at the postsecondary level prior to high school graduation, BEP graduates could qualify for the Legislative Lottery Scholarship.

In a May 6, 2010 meeting hosted by PED, NCEE has delineated these anticipated costs for the BEP pilot:

- Content Area Examinations
 - \$50 per student for five courses
 - \$250 total per student
- Course Materials
 - \$35 per student for five courses
 - \$175 total per student
- Teacher Training
 - \$500-\$850 per teacher
- Total Cost Per School: (assuming 30 percent of students in grades 9 and 11 in year one and 5.0 percent growth each year thereafter)
 - Year 1 - \$53,890
 - Year 2 - \$115,345
 - Year 3 - \$122,568
 - Year 4 - \$118,937

Commitment to the Program

As participants in the BEP pilot, each of the eight states has committed to “implementation with fidelity.” According to NCEE, this commitment means that each participating school will:

- offer the program to its students;
- recruit students and teachers for participation;
- use the syllabus for each course;
- ensure that teachers are trained by the board exam provider; and
- use the instructional resources recommended by the provider.

According to PED, if after three years the BEP initiative proves successful, the state could choose to make the program available on a voluntary basis throughout the state. In this situation, PED emphasized that recurring funds would need to be appropriated by the state legislature. If, however, the initiative proves unsuccessful, New Mexico could elect to remove itself from the program.

IMPLEMENTATION IN NEW MEXICO

In planning the implementation of the BEP program, the PED has indicated that New Mexico has joined several teleconferences with NCEE and the other participating states. NCEE reports that teleconferences are regularly scheduled so that effective collaboration can occur during the implementation phase.

District and School Selection

As previously mentioned, NCEE anticipates notification of its receipt of a federal grant to support the Board Education Program in fall 2010. At that time, NCEE and New Mexico will determine how many schools can be adequately funded from grant funds. Currently, 15 districts have applied to participate in the BEP pilot program². If more schools apply than the funding will support, NCEE will coordinate with PED to select schools representing the following categories through a lottery format:

- rural;
- urban;
- suburban; and
- high-need; or
- non-high-need.

In terms of the aforementioned categories, NCEE has recommended a selection of:

² These districts are Alamogordo Public Schools, Albuquerque Public Schools, Bernalillo Public Schools, Bloomfield Schools, Cimarron Municipal Schools, Dexter Consolidated Schools, Espanola Public Schools, Farmington Municipal Schools, Fort Sumner Municipal Schools, Gadsden Independent Schools, Hondo Valley Schools, Jemez Valley Public Schools, Roswell Independent Schools, Wagon Mound Public Schools, and Zuni Public Schools.

- four high-need schools in each district that meet the USDE criteria of serving large numbers of:
 - students on free or reduced price lunch;
 - minority students; and
 - rural schools; and
- six non-high-need schools in each district otherwise representative of New Mexico's student population, geography, and location (i.e. urban, rural, and suburban).

For districts with small student populations that volunteer to participate in the BEP pilot, NCEE has suggested that “[they] may choose to include the whole 9th and 11th grade cohorts in their participation or they may allow some of the students to participate through distance learning with another school.” Furthermore, NCEE recommends that participating schools be representative of all the schools in the state so that “other schools in [New Mexico] could look at those schools that are in similar locations to their own as models for their own involvement as the pilot expands.” The center has also stated that it may be important to include schools from both the northern and southern portions of the state due to the diversity of these regions.

Upon notification of grant awards, NCEE will meet with school districts to discuss the BEP initiative with the school board, parents, and students. A district will notify NCEE of its decision to proceed by November 2010. NCEE has also stated that schools that “reprioritize their funding or have School Improvement Grants or foundation grants...could be included in addition to the schools [they are] funding.”

Teacher Selection

NCEE expects that the current instructional staff in New Mexico will be sufficient to implement the BEP program, whether through a school's own staff or through the use of distance learning technology. In addition, NCEE has worked with the participating states to identify the criteria for teachers who wish to participate in the BEP initiative:

- a record of effective practice in a specific content area (i.e. English, mathematics, science, history, or the arts);
- a designation as a Nationally Board Certified Teacher;
- an expressed interest in teaching the course(s); and
- a good attendance record.

In relation to the first criterion, NCEE will work with the local education administration to identify mechanisms currently in practice to determine “effective practice in a specific content area.”

NCEE has indicated that if more teachers meeting the criteria apply than there are available positions, teachers will be selected at random.

Institutional Involvement

As previously mentioned, BEP students who demonstrate competence by passing board exams at the end of grade 10 can choose to enroll in any of the 18 open-admission two- or four-year colleges in New Mexico:

- Central New Mexico Community College;
- Clovis Community College;
- Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell;
- Eastern New Mexico University-Ruidoso;
- Luna Community College;
- Mesalands Community College;
- New Mexico Junior College;
- New Mexico State University-Alamogordo;
- New Mexico State University-Carlsbad;
- New Mexico State University-Doña Ana;
- New Mexico State University-Grants;
- Northern New Mexico College;
- San Juan College;
- Santa Fe Community College;
- University of New Mexico-Gallup;
- University of New Mexico-Los Alamos;
- University of New Mexico-Valencia; or
- University of New Mexico-Taos.

According to the Secretary of Public Education, in May 2010 PED discussed the basic premise of the BEP pilot in an informal meeting with the Chief Academic Officers of New Mexico's postsecondary institutions. The institutions expressed interest in collaborating with the department on program implementation. The department also indicated that discussions with postsecondary institutions will continue throughout the 2010-2011 implementation year.

POTENTIAL ISSUES

Graduation Requirements

One issue that may arise is a potential conflict between the BEP demonstrations of competence and the statutory requirements for high school graduation. Currently, successful completion of at least 23 units altogether is required for graduation, including such specific requirements as one-half unit in New Mexico history. Also required is a passing score on a state graduation examination that includes, among other components, a section on the Constitution of New Mexico. In addition, for students entering grade 9 beginning in school year 2009-2010, a minimum of 24 units is required for the Diploma of Excellence; and at least one of those 24 units must be earned as an AP or honors course, a dual credit course, or a distance learning course.

For students who demonstrate competence in the lower division examinations in grades 9 and 10 and who choose to remain in high school and enroll in upper division courses to prepare

for selective colleges and universities, these graduation requirements are unlikely to become an issue. However, those students who demonstrate competence in the lower division exams and who choose to enroll in an eligible postsecondary institution will be unable to fulfill those requirements. To address this issue, PED has indicated that these students will receive an alternate high school diploma, as suggested earlier in this report.

The Secretary of Public Education has indicated that legislative changes may need to be made to address this issue. Regardless, the Secretary emphasized that the department does not have an official position on this issue, and further discussions will need to take place before any decisions are made.

Accountability and Assessment

According to PED, participation in BEP pilot notwithstanding, New Mexico must continue to meet the requirement that all students participate in the accountability assessment process outlined in federal law. Consequently, New Mexico must submit a new accountability plan to the USDE to include BEP students in a school's adequate yearly progress (AYP) calculation. This plan will be of particular importance for those students who do not exit high school to immediately enroll in a postsecondary institution by grade 11. Once the new accountability plan is submitted for peer review and approved by the USDE, students who demonstrate competency on the grade 10 exams will be considered to have met NCLB testing requirements.

Although procedures have not yet been defined for including non-qualifying board examination scores in AYP, PED is aware of several options available to students, including:

- retesting for a higher score;
- taking the Standards Based Assessment (SBA) in grade 11; or
- equating SBA scores to the board examinations in order to define proficient and non-proficient for accountability purposes.

The PED Assessment and Accountability Division has explained that the aforementioned options are neither a plan nor a recommendation, but rather a mere listing of possible solutions. The department suggests that “much discussion and consideration will be needed in order to implement a plan that works for accountability purposes, is approved by the USDE, and is fair for students, schools, and school districts.”

Cost

Finally, the cost of the BEP program may affect the state's participation in the pilot. If the grant funds are not obtained and if the NCEE is unable to secure funding from other sources, fewer, if any, districts will be able to afford the costs of the exams, the course materials, and the teacher training that NCEE has identified. Furthermore, it seems unlikely, especially in the current fiscal climate, that the Legislature would amend the public school funding formula to allow continued funding of those students who exit high school in grade 9 or 10, as NCEE has recommended.

The System: A Closeup

