ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF NWEA'S OFFER TO SUPPORT THE OREGON WAIVER PROPOSAL TO THE UNITED STATES EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

December 5, 2011

NWEA is a global not-for-profit educational services organization based in Portland, Oregon. We partner with educational organizations worldwide to provide computer-adaptive assessments, professional development, and research services. We are passionate about our mission: Partnering to Help All Kids Learn.

Visit www.nwea.org

NWEA™
Northwest Evaluation Association
Partnering to help all kids learn

FEDERAL FLEXIBILITY – AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT

The United States Education Department (USED) waiver process has established an unprecedented opportunity for the State of Oregon to implement its new Common Core Standards, to strengthen instructional practices among district teaching staff, and to design an accountability system that will serve the individual student effectively and still meet federal requirements. NWEA urges the Oregon Department of Education to take advantage of this opportunity to go beyond simply waiving the punitive aspects of NCLB to making innovative and dramatic changes in the way Oregon drives school improvement, accountability, and most importantly, increased student learning.

Specifically, NWEA recommends, and is ready to support the following proposals for inclusion in Oregon's application for a waiver from NCLB requirements:

- **Revise the accountability assessment system, at least for schools and districts that are performing well, from annual testing to a four year cycle.** The purpose of accountability testing is to take a snapshot of achievement at a single point in time – to determine *post hoc* whether educational goals have been achieved. It does not provide information that is helpful to teachers in planning instruction and does not support increased growth in learning for every student. At the institutional level (schools and districts), substantive change, for better or worse, is not likely to occur in a single year. The current annual assessment cycle diverts precious education dollars, and more precious instructional hours, from effective instruction into preparing for and administering limited use tests that primarily document insignificant changes in school performance trends.

- **Use the savings from the change to support assessment practice and assessments that serve formative purposes** – *i.e.*, foster assessment practice that will prepare teachers to measure student understanding minute-to-minute and adjust instruction in the moment, and assessments that help teachers understand individual student progress, identify individual student learning needs, and measure individual student growth over time. The state does not need to bear the high cost of developing such assessments. They exist in the marketplace, and costs are tempered by competition among multiple providers. The state's role may be to approve assessment systems that support state goals and to provide local districts with financial and technical support to select an appropriate system.

- **Build Oregon's assessment system on existing tools, not promises.** USED is supporting the development of new assessments, with a federal focus on accountability, through two national consortia. NWEA urges Oregon not to make crucial decisions affecting the future of our students based on a shifting and uncertain promise. Oregon can build its system on existing, effective assessments, and then adjust periodically through the RFP process as new assessments are developed, validated, and shown to be useful and valuable.

NWEA OFFER TO SUPPORT THE OREGON WAIVER PROPOSAL TO THE UNITED STATES EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

November 21, 2011

NWEA™
Northwest Evaluation Association
Partnering to help all kids learn

FLEXIBILITY IN ACCOUNTABILITY – A NEW FEDERAL DIRECTION

The United States Education Department waiver process has established an unprecedented opportunity for the State of Oregon to implement its new Common Core Curriculum, to strengthen instructional practices among district teaching staff, and to design an accountability system that will serve the individual student effectively and still meet federal requirements. This can be driven by the needs and desires of the State in partnership with Oregon school districts as part of the achievement compact process, consistent with evidence-based practices, focused on increasing student learning, and responsive to the needs of the individual student. Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), an Oregon non-profit organization with expertise in student assessment, research, and professional development, is available and willing to support our home state in its application and implementation of a new era for Oregon education.

This approach can be done on a statewide basis, but NWEA recognizes that this would represent a challenge for implementation within the desired timeframe of focusing upon the 2012-2013 academic year. Therefore, we recommend that this opportunity for innovation be incorporated into a template for an achievement compact that could open the door for new ideas to be adopted by those districts that wish to do so. Thus, it would be one option for an accountability and education system among several from which districts could choose. NWEA recognizes the reality that district readiness is different throughout the state, especially with respect to issues involving accountability measures as compared to formative assessment, and respects the right of districts to make their own choices whenever possible rather than having them dictated from Salem.

NWEA offers to work with the State of Oregon in this endeavor by providing information, advice, and services to assist in realizing the State's vision for educating students. In light of our relationships with nearly 4,000 school district and educational reform organizations nationwide (such as Teach for America, KIPP, and districts of every size, geography, and performance level), and since our organization is research based, we believe we have a unique perspective to offer that is ultimately informed and driven by the 5.8 million children we serve.

THE WAIVER FOCUS

USED flexibility is specifically designed to address the problems encountered by schools in meeting the unreasonable and counterproductive accountability goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). We believe it is essential to recognize that one of the counterproductive aspects of the pre-waiver rules is that accountability is confined to assessments, which in turn are confined to grade level. Thus, while Oregon was a pioneer in using computer adaptive tests when it created the OAKS assessment based on its version of the NWEA RIT scale, that assessment was required to be confined to grade level content. This is fine for students at grade level, but any information on students above or below grade level is obtained only by mathematical inferences, not by actually testing the student at the level the student is performing. It is our understanding, based on a brief conversation with Secretary Duncan, the USED is explicitly willing (and in his terms,

anxious) to endorse "pure growth" measures that adapt to find the student, giving useful information for ALL students and not ignoring those who are struggling or highly achieving. NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment is unique in its ability to do that, measuring performance against our longitudinally stable RIT scale (unlike other scales, including Oregon's adaption of NWEA's scale, the NWEA RIT scale has been maintained so that it does not "drift" from year to year), using rigorously calibrated items (questions) to measure where the child is on the scale no matter what level of performance the child has at that time. Thus, we are getting actual data, not presumed data, and we can measure and predict growth with unique accuracy. This includes an ability to predict with high confidence whether a student is on track to be college and career ready later in his or her K-12 career, and, if not, what level of added growth is needed. Instead of a status test like OAKS, MAP is a growth assessment that can be used to inform instruction and provide realistic goals and areas of curriculum focus. We believe Oregon should provide an option for school districts to use this approach – a pure growth measure – as part of the accountability system for K-8. Other measures that are focused on summative assessment (Did the student meet the required course standards?) are more appropriate as students enter high school, and can be met with Oregon's existing end of course tests or with college and career readiness tests such as ACT.

NWEA could deliver an assessment system designed to meet Oregon needs, aligned with Oregon's Common Core State Standards, which will meet federal requirements for validity, reliability, and accuracy. Further, NWEA could work with the State of Oregon to gain federal approval of the accountability aspects of its assessment system through the Peer Review process. NWEA has recently, successfully, completed peer review with the State of Utah and has received federal approval to use a version of NWEA's MAP assessment as a local option alternative to the Utah state NCLB assessment. This is a potential alternative to use of our standard MAP assessment, as it starts out at grade level (to meet the pre-waiver requirement of ascertaining grade level status) and then fully adapts to gain helpful information for students, teachers, and parents about the individual student's actual performance. If it turns out that USED is not in fact ready to allow a fully adaptive assessment such as regular MAP, this would provide an alternative that meets federal standards while still focusing ultimately on each individual learner, and an approach they have already approved. Neither the OAKS test, nor those planned by SBAC to replace OAKS (to the extent of information available on SBAC), have those capabilities, and we submit that this should be an option for Oregon school districts that wish to gain more comprehensive information on the performance of their K-8 students in order to make the information instructionally useful.

NWEA's major strengths are in grades K-8 as we do not presently have a full battery of end-of-course and other high school assessments focused on college and career readiness. Accordingly, we propose to work with the State of Oregon to identify which of the State's existing high school tests meet those needs and to identify and create a complementary partnership with a company having great expertise in this arena to further strengthen Oregon progress toward college and career readiness for our high school students.

At the other end of the spectrum, NWEA provides a group-administered primary grades assessment, on the same vertical scale as other NWEA assessments, which uniquely generates valid, reliable, and useful information on student growth and achievement without requiring extensive teacher time conducting individual assessments. While primary grade testing is not required under NCLB, we recognize these early grades as essential in putting a student on track for success and believe the information provided to teachers can assist at this crucial early stage of schooling. Further, we believe creation of an accountability system that provides information useful to inform instruction K-8, as done by the NWEA MAP system, would be enthusiastically welcomed at USED.

While we believe our initial contribution would be in the form of an option for districts that would create assessments that actually inform instruction as well as provide an element of an accountability system, we recognize that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility looks beyond assessment and accountability. To be approved for a waiver, the application will need to address

1. College- and career-ready expectations for all students
2. State-developed differentiated recognition, accountability, and support
3. Supporting effective instruction and leadership
4. Reducing duplication and unnecessary burden

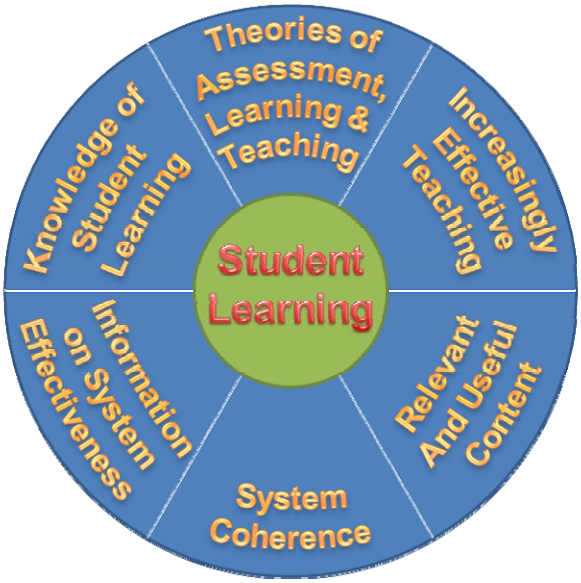
We are confident that Oregon is well on the way to having a high quality proposal for USED that addresses these components, and we are willing to assist in all aspects of the proposal, both in preparing it for submission and in its implementation after approval. We applaud Oregon's use of compacts to encourage and support flexibility and innovation at the school and district level, accompanied by accountability measures to identify levels of effectiveness associated with the innovations and with overall performance. The balance of this paper reflects our concepts on how to achieve an overall system that combines innovation with the other elements needed to produce academic achievement. An overall approach consistent with the new flexibility on the assessment aspect will, we believe, play a major role in reversing Oregon's slide in achievement during the last decade.

BEYOND ASSESSMENT – COMPONENTS OF A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT MODEL DESIGNED TO STRENGTHEN TEACHING AND INCREASE LEARNING

For the past decade, states and the federal government have focused primarily on testing for accountability. NWEA believes this narrow focus is neither effective nor desirable for achieving high educational aspirations. Further, from our perspective as an Oregon-based organization, we believe the State's interest is in serving each student and giving all Oregon children the best possible opportunity for a productive and high quality life after high school. This is not accomplished by adhering to a narrow view of education and accountability.

NWEA's vision of effective education looks beyond summative assessment and punishment-based accountability to include active support of instructional improvement, evidence-based educational leadership, parent and community involvement, and effective research to monitor progress and identify the most effective practices in the school system. We have identified six components we believe to be essential in providing high quality learning opportunities for students. In this proposal we will describe all six, but are focused primarily on increasing the effectiveness of teachers through ongoing professional development and creating a new assessment system that emphasizes formative purposes that will serve the individual student and assist the teacher, while providing sufficient summative information to determine and track school and district effectiveness.

Essential Components of a High Quality Education System



THEORIES OF LEARNING, TEACHING, AND ASSESSMENT

There are many ways to teach and assess student learning, some effective and some not so effective. NWEA does not subscribe to the theory that a single route to learning is inherently better than all others in all situations, but does believe it is important to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of several, settle on the ones to be permitted within the state based on choices at the school district level, and monitor progress along that route, making adjustments as needed. We believe the Oregon plan for achievement compacts does exactly this, and should apply to the accountability system as well.

To illustrate these points, we can examine beginning instruction on musical instruments. The predominant theory of teaching and learning for years was that students will learn music by being presented with the discrete elements of music and putting them together over time – that is, teach about music notation, pitch, duration, and volume, then help the students combine and

transfer those elements to the instrument. A Japanese musician, Shinichi Suzuki, realized that children around the world learn their native languages through listening and repetition, with support from and interaction with their parents (theory of learning). These principles became the basis of the Suzuki method for instructing children on musical instruments (theory of teaching). Many great musicians have been trained using each of these two methods, but asking the child to move from one to the other and back from year to year may cause confusion and confound learning.

NWEA already has a solid theory of assessment that has served children for more than 35 years, starting in the research department of Portland Public Schools, which is based on the notion of measuring individual growth over time and providing teachers with resources to help identify an appropriate learning path for each student.

KNOWLEDGE OF STUDENT LEARNING

Once we have identified the learning paths, student by student, monitoring student progress along that path becomes essential. This is where assessment contributes to the overall effectiveness of an educational system. NWEA recommends an assessment system with several components:

- In-the-moment, teacher-created formative assessment practice that helps the teacher with pacing and identifies principles and processes that may need to be revised and re-taught, usually through a different instructional strategy so those principles and processes can be understood by every child in the class.
- Interim growth measures that can track the progress of every student on a vertically articulated scale, and that can provide teachers and administrators with information about individual and aggregate student progress and what portions of the curriculum may have been missed systematically throughout the district.
- Summative assessment that answers the accountability questions in as few questions as can provide valid and reliable information, then moves into a more formative arena to provide useful information to teachers that will assist them in adjusting instruction and planning the learning paths for individual students.
- Assessments for a targeted subset of students that can provide academically diagnostic information related to learning progressions and skill sequences to help the teacher identify the exact component skills that are preventing a student from understanding more complex, higher level skills and processes.
- Assessments that, in the short-term and longer-term, can monitor, skill by skill and process by process, the student's progress along a specific learning path, whether that path is defined by a curriculum sequence, a learning progression, an Individual Education Plan, or a standards set.

INCREASINGLY EFFECTIVE TEACHING

There is a great deal of research suggesting that high quality teaching is the most important factor in the amount, depth, and pace of learning for students, and that a highly effective principal is the predominant factor in creating a school climate that nurtures high quality teaching and enhances student learning. There already are many highly effective teachers and administrators in our nation's schools. Effective teaching and leadership strategies can be learned and implemented by most educators. NWEA believes that one of the most effective ways to improve our schools is to provide all teachers and school leaders with ongoing, high quality, professional development that focuses on evidence-based instructional and leadership strategies that are implemented and monitored until they become second-nature and fully entrenched in educational practice at the local school. In this scenario, good educators can become great, weak educators can become good, and unsatisfactory educators who are unable to improve their performance can understand for themselves why a career change may be needed.

RELEVANT, CHALLENGING, AND USEFUL CURRICULUM

American policy-makers have focused in recent years on content standards and expectations. We recognize that, while standards create the framework and define expectations, it is the availability of a strong curriculum and the content associated with that curriculum that will provide teachers with what they need to engage students in productive exploration and learning. Many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Oregon has the extensive experience and knowledge required to unpack those standards, create curriculum frameworks, and assist local districts in transforming them into relevant curriculum that can be used by classroom teachers.

SYSTEM COHERENCE

We believe it is important for the learning system to have internal consistency throughout and to develop complementary functioning of all its components. To serve students well, we assert there is a need both for internal coherence (among the components) and longitudinal coherence (from year to year). This coherence can be accomplished through application of systems thinking and careful consideration of all aspects of the education system together, rather than addressing each aspect of teaching, learning, and organization in isolation from the other components.

INFORMATION ON SYSTEM EFFECTIVENESS

In addition to tracking student growth, status, and understanding of specific learning objectives, there must be a monitoring of system effectiveness to determine whether the strategies and plans are producing desired results. One effective way to do this is through the use of a longitudinal data system. State longitudinal data systems are proliferating throughout the United States. We are aware of the excellent work being done by Oregon in designing and deploying its own longitudinal data system, and the exemplary training program offered to local schools and

districts around data use. We are also aware that states often design these systems and grant access to local educators with the thought that providing teachers with access to the state data will provide useful information for increasing student learning. We think this approach, if it restricts the system to aggregate state administrative data, is misguided. Teachers and principals need different kinds of data, different reports, and different understandings of the data to plan for the individual student or a class full of students. Aggregate data needed by the state to monitor overall health of the statewide system provide little benefit to local educators. NWEA urges Oregon to carefully study the data needs of the State and those of teachers and principals, then to implement separate data systems at the two levels, each designed to serve the needs of its users.

FOCUS ON ASSESSMENT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

NWEA proposes that Oregon and USED consider a new accountability system that would require fewer checkpoints for schools and districts that can demonstrate a consistent, ongoing record of high student growth and achievement, but would involve more frequent formal state scrutiny and ongoing support to those that show poor or inconsistent results.

It would not be typical for a school or district that has been performing well for multiple years to slide to a level warranting concern in a single year. Accordingly, NWEA suggests that the time currently devoted to annual accountability testing is an unnecessary diversion from teaching and learning in consistently high performing districts. This testing regimen could be reduced significantly, perhaps to every fourth year, recognizing that this would involve a complete cycle of students in a four year high school. It is highly likely that these schools have internal accountability in place, that they are tracking student growth and achievement for their own purposes, and that they are adept at making course changes as they see data supporting such changes.

In addition to Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and MAP for Primary Grades (MPG), proposed for the accountability waiver above, NWEA offers other assessments, including a new product called Skills Pointer that is moving toward validation as a diagnostic and progress monitoring tool. NWEA would be pleased to assist the State of Oregon and participating districts in identifying the assessments that will best serve the needs of children in Oregon schools, with the goal that districts will best understand their own needs and select only those assessments that will be beneficial.

With regard to formative assessment practice, NWEA supports the proposition that the only kind of assessment currently having strong evidence of direct impact on learning is embedded, in-the-moment, teacher created formative assessment designed to inform teacher decisions during instruction. This kind of assessment is not sold as a testing product, but rather, is introduced into teaching practice through professional development.

DATA AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Monitoring the performance of the policies and processes adopted by Oregon will be essential to continuous improvement. NWEA offers its assistance in identifying a longitudinal data tool for local school districts that will generate data most useful to teachers, will incorporate performance tracking on responsibilities for students, teachers, administrators, and parents at the individual student level, and will be affordable.

Further, NWEA is willing to work with Oregon to design and deliver professional development offerings in the effective use of data to increase student learning. Additionally, NWEA can assist districts in designing action research that will support their program evaluation efforts and provide valid data on which they can rely for making important decisions that have an impact on the lives of children.

SUMMARY

Recognizing that Oregon has a great deal of expertise and is moving in a positive direction toward creating a strong and effective education system, NWEA has research, professional development, and assessment resources that could be useful to Oregon in evaluating its current system, identifying what changes might be beneficial, and moving toward implementation of those changes.

NWEA stands ready and willing to strengthen its partnership with Oregon to serve Oregon children and to help them learn that which will benefit them throughout their lives. After all, these are our children too.