



# SUPPORTING EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

through Implementation of an Innovative  
Assessment and Accountability System

December 2016



# Acknowledgements

Thanks to generous support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, KnowledgeWorks, and the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (Center for Assessment) have partnered to help states better understand and leverage the new Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority authorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The goal of this partnership is to help states identify and explore a set of readiness conditions that are critical to the development of a high quality application and implementation process under this new authority. While we share a history of advocacy for next generation assessments, our organizations each bring a unique perspective to this work. KnowledgeWorks focuses on policy development, partnering with states, districts, and educators to identify and remove policy barriers that inhibit the growth of personalized learning. The Center for Assessment specializes in the design of assessment and accountability systems, helping states, districts, and other entities improve the quality of these systems and maximize student success.

Thompson, J, Lyons, S., Marion, S.F., Pace, L. (2016). Supporting Educators and Students Through Implementation of an Innovative Assessment and Accountability System. [www.knowledgeworks.org](http://www.knowledgeworks.org) and [www.nciea.org](http://www.nciea.org).

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# Introduction

This is one in a series of policy and practice briefs produced by KnowledgeWorks and the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (Center for Assessment) designed to assist states in thinking through the opportunities and challenges associated with flexibility provided under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).<sup>1</sup> These briefs help define “Readiness Conditions” for states considering applying for and successfully implementing an innovative assessment and accountability system as defined by the Demonstration Authority opportunity under ESSA. In addition to those briefs that have already been published, the following briefs will be released over the next few months:



**Evaluating and Continuously Improving an Innovative Assessment and Accountability System**



**Establishing a Timeline and Budget for Design and Implementation of an Innovative Assessment and Accountability System**



**Building Capacity and Stakeholder Support for Scaling an Innovative Assessment and Accountability System**

<sup>1</sup>Brief Four in a series of policy and practice briefs designed to help states prepare for the ESSA Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority. We are grateful to the Nellie Mae Foundation for their generous support of this project.

# Overview

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an opportunity for states to develop an innovative assessment and accountability system to evaluate student and school performance. The Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority (herein known as the “Demonstration Authority” or “innovative pilot”) allows for states to have local districts pilot assessments that are different than the statewide, standardized assessments. The identified assessment system must be clearly aligned to the state’s vision<sup>2</sup> and theory of action.<sup>3</sup> Once the groundwork has been laid and a decision has been made to define the innovative assessment system, different models that may be considered could include instructionally embedded assessments, performance tasks, and a combination of classroom and common assessments, to name a few. No matter which model is selected, states will need to ensure that educators are supported in multiple ways. This support may include designing, implementing, or scoring assessments. Alternatively, support may be in the form of understanding the innovation within the assessments in order to revise instructional strategies (e.g., assessments of deeper learning require teaching to a higher depth of knowledge levels). A third possibility is that educators may need support in using the assessment information to make instructional decisions. Each of these professional learning opportunities would require not only a system for providing support for educators, but a system to ensure sustainability of professional learning, including provision for new teachers or teachers new to the innovative assessment system. Additionally, states will need to inform and engage parents and students as stakeholders in the implementation process of an innovative assessment system. This outreach will require a communication strategy tailored to parents, as well as ensuring that students are acclimated to the new system from its onset. An application for the Demonstration Authority will require the following expectations:

Supporting Educators to...	Supporting Parents and Students by...
Implement the innovative assessment system.	Informing parents about the innovative assessment system.
Develop and score assessments.	Acclimating students to the innovative assessment system.

The purpose of this brief is to support states in planning for a successful Demonstration Authority application by providing considerations related to the professional learning opportunities that state- and district-level educators will need when engaged in piloting an innovative assessment system. This brief will describe some principles and criteria for structuring professional learning for educators involved in the innovative pilot. Additionally, we provide an example of a successful model, as well as a case study, providing a detailed examination of professional learning in action. Lastly, we provide guidance for states and districts to ensure a seamless professional learning process.

<sup>2</sup>For detailed information regarding a state vision please refer to Brief #1 *Creating a State Vision to Support the Design and Implementation of an Innovative Assessment and Accountability System*.

<sup>3</sup>For detailed information regarding a theory of action please refer to *A Theory of Action to Guide the Design and Evaluation of State Innovative Assessment and Accountability Systems in A Visioning Toolkit for Better Assessments*.

## Alignment to a State’s Theory of Action

As stated above, the assessment system must be thoughtfully aligned to the state’s vision and goals related to teaching, learning and assessments. All theories of action articulated for an innovative assessment pilot should make clear that if teachers are to be knowledgeable about their role and expectations in the design and implementation of the innovative assessments, the state and districts must provide thoughtful professional learning opportunities. Whether the theory of action anticipates assessment development activities, assessment type, or the use of assessment results as mechanisms for change, district-level educators will require professional learning that is sustained over time.

For example, if educators are going to be participating in the assessment design process they will need literacy training in assessment development and deep understanding about what the standards or competencies really mean and also about what students know and can do in each grade level and content area. Through these content-focused discussions, educators will be able to come to common definitions about what proficiency or competency looks like in order to design assessment experiences that elicit the necessary evidence of student achievement. Lastly, educators may need additional support for adjusting their instruction and formative assessment practices to best support students and prepare them for the newly designed assessment system. Consequently, professional learning will be an integral aspect of the state’s theory of action about how the chosen innovative assessment system will bring about improvements in student learning.

A state’s theory of action should also plan to engage parents and students in understanding the new assessment system. Change—especially innovation—will potentially be difficult for parents to comprehend. Importantly, parents will need to understand how the changes will affect their child’s education, graduation, and opportunities for college and career. Considerations for engaging parents and the community through outreach opportunities, such as community forums, and including parents in advisory groups will help to strengthen a state’s communication plan. In addition, states will need to provide students agency within the theory of action to allow them to become co-creators of their assessment experience as they become familiar with the innovative assessment system.



# Professional Learning That Works

As states and districts consider professional development models that will positively influence educator practices and student achievement, the educational leaders and teachers will need to honestly evaluate whether the educational community is poised for a collaborative learning dialogue. In a professional learning community, individuals in various positions are prepared to have conversations with the intent of supporting each other and students in new learning situations. Inevitably, these conversations will bring to light values, assumptions, and beliefs which are not likely to be shared by all. The establishment of norms, clarity of goals, a commitment to the system, and accountability to each other will allow this dialogue to move the innovative assessment work forward. Supporting educators through the changes brought about by the innovative assessment system can be exciting, but may also cause cognitive dissonance among participants. For example, if performance assessments are incorporated into the assessment system, teachers may struggle with the notion that there are multiple correct responses to the prompt rather than one expected response. In addition, evaluating student work may occur through the use of a rubric, which will likely require calibration among the educators in order to come to agreement about scoring decisions. Without a collegial environment, the work will be extremely difficult and could even come to a halt. However, as educators work through these challenges, the conversations about the assessments and the deeper learning expected from their students will provide a pathway to a profound commitment to the new assessment system.

It will be critical for states and districts to bear in mind, especially in light of implementing a new assessment and accountability system, that all participating educators must be engaged in effective, high quality professional learning. What constitutes “effective, high-quality” professional learning and what are the implications for the selection of a professional development model? Professional development standards and research have identified principles necessary for professional development to yield changes in teacher practice and student achievement. These criteria are discussed below; whatever the professional learning model a state and districts select to support their new assessment system should clearly incorporate these criteria and should engage teachers in ongoing practices that focus on student achievement.

As stated in Brief #1, the purpose of the innovative assessment and accountability system is to provide “better information about student learning so stakeholders can make continuous improvements to the education system.” Consequently, educators must engage in professional learning clearly focused on student learning and embedded in teacher practice. A myriad of activities are necessary for implementing and analyzing new assessments. Educators should have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of how the assessments are directly connected to their curriculum and instruction. When student engagement and learning improves, teachers will also begin to change their underlying beliefs about their instruction. The new learning should be participatory and deeply connected to what is happening in the classroom and school.

Developing educator capacity and expertise requires mentoring and support by skillful leaders and experts, especially during the implementation phase. Developing capacity requires that educators have the opportunity to understand the concepts, apply the learning, and receive feedback and recommendations on the implementation process.

The changes may be drastic or frustrating for teachers, so it may be necessary to provide on-going learning and support that addresses the challenges of the changing system or practice.

The process of change is difficult. It is not productive when educators, schools, and districts work in silos. Structuring collaborative professional learning centered on this assessment work will provide opportunities for educators to gain a sense of working for a collective purpose and to share knowledge and strategies that lead to improved practice.

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### **Criteria for Effective, High-Quality Professional Learning:**

- *Focus on student learning and outcomes.*
- *Intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice.*
- *Active participation during exposure to a concept.*
- *Expert support for educators during the implementation stage that addresses the specific challenges of changing practice.*
- *Provide opportunities for collaboration and to build strong working relationships among educators.*

(Gulamhussein, A., 2013; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009)

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The criteria for professional development described above must be based on structures that allow for educators to grapple with new implementation and instructional strategies.<sup>4</sup> Joyce and Showers (2002) report that the transfer of new learning requires more substantial opportunities than what has typically been afforded teachers through traditional professional development. In fact, studies report that teacher mastery of a new skill takes an average of 20 separate instances of practice, or as many as 50 hours of instruction, practice, and coaching.<sup>5</sup>

One particular model for professional learning that encompasses the elements of high quality educator development and has been particularly effective in a variety of learning opportunities is Situated Learning. This model is described below through the lens of designing and implementing an innovative assessment system.

### **Situated Learning**

Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is drawn from the sociocultural theoretical of learning research. Situated Learning describes how novice members of a community of practice become fully participating, and eventually expert members of a community. The experts allow and support peripherally participating members (novices) to eventually develop the strategies and skills associated with expertise (Lave & Wagner, 1991). Novices, as noted here, does not refer to individuals who lack capability in education or teaching and learning, but rather to individuals that do not yet have the knowledge necessary to

<sup>4</sup> Gulamhussein, 2013; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, Orphanos, 2009

<sup>5</sup> ibid



support the proposed innovative assessment and accountability system. The learning is grounded in an authentic and concrete situation, rather than training in the abstract, where individuals are able to co-construct knowledge facilitating the transforming process of learning to occur.

Through this community of practice, educators from pilot districts collectively participate in a myriad of activities that are supported by a cadre of experts. As these novice educators gain understanding of assessment literacy, the specific assessments to be developed and/or administered as part of the innovative assessment plan, they also engage in the work of creating the assessment experiences and/or modifying instruction and curriculum. Consequently, these educators view the work as rather essential to what they need to do to support student learning. This strategy of learning occurs over an extended period of time, with opportunities to practice and adjust, as needed, until the novices become experts.

This community of practice and common understanding will allow for a transfer of learning to occur and subsequently will clearly support the state's vision and theory of action. If one of the major goals of professional learning is to build capacity for designing and developing assessments, it makes sense to engage educators over an extended period of time through this model.

### Situated Learning Model<sup>6</sup>



### Professional Learning Communities

Designing and implementing an innovative assessment and accountability system is complex and challenging due to the many shifts in the typical teaching-assessing process. Therefore, we propose that within any professional learning structure, state and pilot districts should plan for and encourage the nesting of professional learning communities (PLC) in schools and if possible, within and across districts. A professional learning community provides educators with an opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues on effective classroom practices in support of the innovative assessments, scoring student work based on identified standards and/or competencies assessed, analyzing student work to determine the appropriateness of the assessment, and analyzing student strengths/needs for instructional decision-making.

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.southalabama.edu/oll/mobile/theory\\_workbook/situated\\_learning\\_theory.htm](http://www.southalabama.edu/oll/mobile/theory_workbook/situated_learning_theory.htm)

PLCs have been described as a structure for continuous school improvement, building teachers' competence for learning and change, and positively influencing teacher practice and student achievement.<sup>7</sup> Incorporating a PLC for the work of implementing innovative assessments will require the professional learning model to adhere to a focus on supporting student learning. Why is this important and what does it mean in reference to an innovative pilot? The answer to these questions brings us full-circle to the need for a state vision and theory of action. As described in previous briefs, if a state's vision is based on the goal of having high school graduates demonstrate deeper learning of key knowledge and skills, the theory of action will describe **how** involving local educators in the design and implementation of the assessment system will influence teacher knowledge and students' deeper learning. A PLC nested in a learning model will provide the opportunity for the vision to come to life.

## Informing Parents and Acclimating Students

Engaging parents through a variety of outreach opportunities will help to ensure that they are knowledgeable about the innovative assessment and that they are committed to the changes being made. Multiple and varied communication strategies should be considered and may include Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), as well as invitations for parents to participate in a state or district advisory group, to be involved in the creation of score reports so that the information provided to parents is timely and in an easy-to-understand format, or to participate in focus groups to review these reports. Another consideration for engaging parents in the new system is for them to view their child's work. This may be in the form of an exhibition in which they are able to see tasks that mirror the innovative assessments and/or listen to their child explain the competencies or expectations found in these assessments.

Clearly, the assessments should not be the first time that students are exposed to the new assessment system. From the onset of implementing an innovative assessment system, students' educational experiences should be aligned to the assessment expectations. If students are to be assessed at deeper levels than previously expected, they will need to have classroom opportunities to practice and learn at these same levels. The learning experiences within the new system should allow students to develop the skills and strategies expected from the assessment system. These new skills may include opportunities for collecting evidence that demonstrates meeting standards or competencies, evaluating and determining which pieces of their work meets the expected criteria, communicating a rationale for this decision, and having the understanding and opportunity to make improvements. These metacognitive skills require multiple opportunities for practice and refinement. State and district leaders will need to work together to develop plans and opportunities for students to participate in these activities prior to engaging in the innovative assessment system.

<sup>7</sup>Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, Kyndt, 2016



## CASE STUDY: STATE EXAMPLE—SITUATED LEARNING IN ACTION

The New Hampshire Department of Education initially received a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education (USED) in March 2015 that allowed the use of a combination of local and common performance assessments in lieu of a statewide standardized assessment to make annual determinations of student proficiency. This pilot is called the Performance Assessment of Competency Education or PACE, which is designed to ensure that students have meaningful opportunities to achieve critical knowledge and skills. The assessment system includes common assessments designed by educators from each participating district administered to students in grades 3–10 in English language arts, math, and science. These statements summarize New Hampshire’s vision and theory of action for their innovative assessment system.

A situated learning model was utilized in which a cadre of content leads from across the PACE districts, representing each of the tested grades, came together to lead their peers in the development of common assessments. These content leads were not originally experts in designing high quality performance assessments.<sup>8</sup> Led by assessment and accountability experts, as well as state leaders, these educators engaged in professional learning on the critical aspects of the PACE system, including:

- developing a shared understanding of the meaning and intent of standards and competencies,
- shared decision-making on the standards and competencies that are best suited for being assessed through performance tasks,
- using evidence-centered design to lead the creation of high quality common performance tasks,
- training on group facilitation in order to effectively lead groups of teachers in assessment design, and
- understanding the role of the common performance assessments within the larger PACE assessment and accountability system.

The community of content leads meets with experts and state leaders in between development meetings to work through the preparation for the next task development meeting to ensure they are supported in taking a leadership role. This means that throughout the year, the content leads have direct access to assessment expertise to help guide them to lead and plan for performance assessment development with their teams of teachers. The professional learning incorporates additional discussions, including what instruction should look like in order to prepare students for the performance assessments, the appropriate scope of and sequence of the curriculum, the accurate placement of the assessments within the scope and sequence, as well as many other topics. This is not to say that there were no disagreements or occasional setbacks; however, through this situated learning model, the content leads have a venue for discussions and real opportunities to engage in the work with experts in order to make thoughtful and appropriate decisions.

Once the performance assessments are developed and piloted, the content leads come together to examine student work. Multiple meetings allow these teachers, who are beginning to become a cadre of experts, to develop greater understanding of:

- how the assessments provided rich feedback about student understanding, lesson and unit design, including opportunities to adjust instruction and pacing,
- how the assessments directly measured the targeted performance outcomes matched to the type of knowledge and skill intending to be measured,
- whether students were able to apply the knowledge and skills that had been taught in the unit to a novel context, and
- grounding the intent of the performance descriptors on the teacher-developed rubrics through the evidence found in student work.

The content leads provide a sense of continuity for welcoming new educators into the fold of this work. The content leads offer expertise to new teachers and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the professional learning effort associated with the innovative assessment and accountability system.

<sup>8</sup>For detailed information regarding high quality assessments please refer to Brief #2 Ensuring and Evaluating Assessment Quality for Innovative Assessment and Accountability Systems.

# State and District Roles

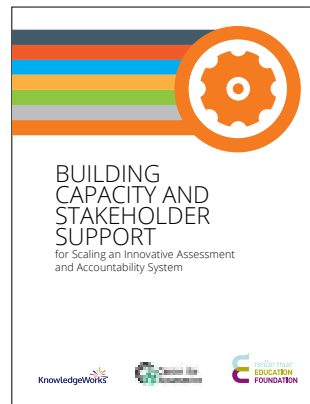
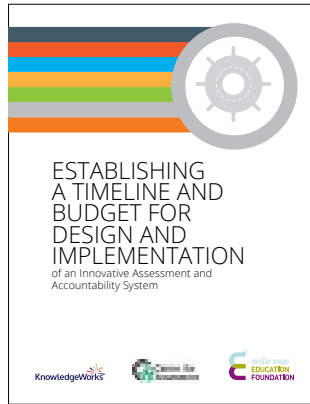
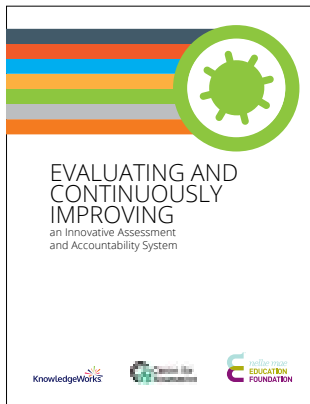
Engaging in an innovative assessment and accountability system will require shifts in thinking, about assessments and about the curricula, and how it is taught and monitored. Students need multiple opportunities to engage with the content in a fashion similar to how they will be assessed, and teachers will need to plan accordingly. A well-planned professional learning model will allow teachers to feel empowered and students to demonstrate greater achievement.

Before initiating an innovative assessment system, the state must provide a clear articulation of the professional learning model and its alignment to the state’s vision and theory of action. No matter which assessment system or professional learning model is identified, there are key decisions that both state and district leaders will need to make in order to ensure the work is developed and delivered with fidelity. Some key questions can be found in the following table.

State Considerations	District Considerations
How will the state support districts in selecting and training appropriate educators to be critical leaders in the development and implementation of the innovative assessments?	How will the district ensure that teacher leaders are released from school-based duties to participate in professional development opportunities related to the innovative assessment system?
How will the state support districts in the dissemination of information and materials related to the innovative assessment and accountability system?	What structures are needed to ensure the dissemination of information and materials for the innovative assessments?
In what ways will the state support the needs for curricular and instructional resources?	What structures are needed to allow educators to examine student work samples to make instructional and curricular decisions?
	What structures and financial resources are needed to allow educators to examine curricula and instructional resources and make changes based on student work samples?
To what extent will the state support districts in the evaluation of teacher, parent, and student understanding and satisfaction of the new innovative assessment system (e.g., providing surveys, other tools, and resources)?	How will the districts evaluate teacher satisfaction of the curricular changes and instructional resources?
	In what ways will the districts determine student understanding and agency within the new assessment system?
	How will the districts evaluate parent understanding and satisfaction of the new innovative assessment system?
How will the state evaluate district satisfaction and collect feedback to continuously improve implementation of the new innovative assessment and accountability system?	How will the district evaluate teacher and student satisfaction and collect feedback to continuously improve implementation of the new innovative assessment and accountability system?
What external support may be necessary at the state and local levels to support the professional learning about the assessment and accountability system, and its essential components?	

# Summary

This fourth brief in our series of State Readiness Conditions publications is designed to help state leaders recognize the need and opportunities for supporting educators associated with the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority afforded under the recently passed ESSA. We believe that schools and districts know the value of collaboration with a focus on learning, for both educators and students, and believe the information provided here presents support for these structures when planning for the development and implementation of assessments within an innovation pilot. This brief also supports the connection between a State’s vision, theory of action and models of professional learning needed under a Demonstration Authority. KnowledgeWorks and the Center for Assessment will continue to support states with additional briefs on topics related to fleshing out the design of a Demonstration Authority application, including:



## References

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## Additional Support

KnowledgeWorks and the Center for Assessment are available to help states as they explore, design, and implement next generation assessment systems. Contact information for our organizations is listed below.

**KnowledgeWorks** can help states, districts, and other interested stakeholders establish the policy environments to support personalized learning at scale. The organization's expertise spans the federal, state, and district levels, supporting states with strategies to leverage current policy opportunities, remove existing policy barriers, and develop new policies that will help states create an aligned policy environment to support personalized learning. To learn more, contact the following people:

***For State Policy and Alignment:***

Matt Williams  
Vice President of Policy and Advocacy  
Williamsm@knowledgeWorks.org

***For Federal Policy and Alignment:***

Lillian Pace  
Senior Director of National Policy  
pacel@knowledgeWorks.org

The **Center for Assessment** strives to increase student learning through more meaningful educational assessment and accountability practices. We engage in deep partnerships with state and district education leaders to design, implement, and evaluate assessment and accountability policies and programs. We strive to design technically sound policy solutions to support important educational goals. The Center for Assessment's professionals have deep expertise in educational measurement, assessment, and accountability and have applied this expertise to assessment challenges ranging from improving the quality of classroom assessments to ensuring the technical quality of state's large-scale achievement tests and ultimately to designing coherent assessment and accountability systems.

***For Assessment and Accountability System Design and Strategic Implementation:***

Scott Marion, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
smarion@nceia.org

***For Technical Quality and Comparability Design and Analyses:***

Susan Lyons, Ph.D.  
Associate  
slyons@nceia.org

***For Assessment Quality and Performance Assessment Development:***

Jeri Thompson, Ed.D.  
Senior Associate  
jthompson@nceia.org

## About Us



KnowledgeWorks is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing personalized learning that empowers every child to take ownership of their success. With nearly 20 years of experience exploring the future of learning, growing educator impact and working with state and federal policymakers, our passionate team partners with schools and communities to grow a system-wide approach to sustain student-centered practices so that every child graduates ready for what's next. [www.knowledgeworks.org](http://www.knowledgeworks.org)



The National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc. (Center for Assessment) is a Dover, NH based not-for-profit (501(c)(3)) corporation that seeks to improve the educational achievement of students by promoting enhanced practices in educational assessment and accountability. The Center for Assessment does this by providing services directly to states, school districts, and other organizations regarding the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment and accountability systems. As a non-profit organization committed to the improvement of student learning, the Center for Assessment maintains a strong "open-source" ethic in terms of distributing its many creations and inventions. For example, the Center has developed many tools related to alignment methodology, student growth analyses, student learning objectives, comparability methods for innovative assessment systems, and validity evaluation that it provides freely to its clients and other non-commercial entities. [www.nciea.org](http://www.nciea.org)



The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is the largest philanthropic organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. The Foundation supports the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches to learning at the middle and high school levels across New England—where learning is personalized; learning is competency-based; learning takes place anytime, anywhere; and students exert ownership over their own learning. To elevate student-centered approaches, the Foundation utilizes a four-part strategy that focuses on: building educator ownership, understanding and capacity; advancing quality and rigor of SCL practices; developing effective systems designs; and building public understanding and demand. Since 1998, the Foundation has distributed over \$180 million in grants. For more information about the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, visit [www.nmefoundation.org](http://www.nmefoundation.org).