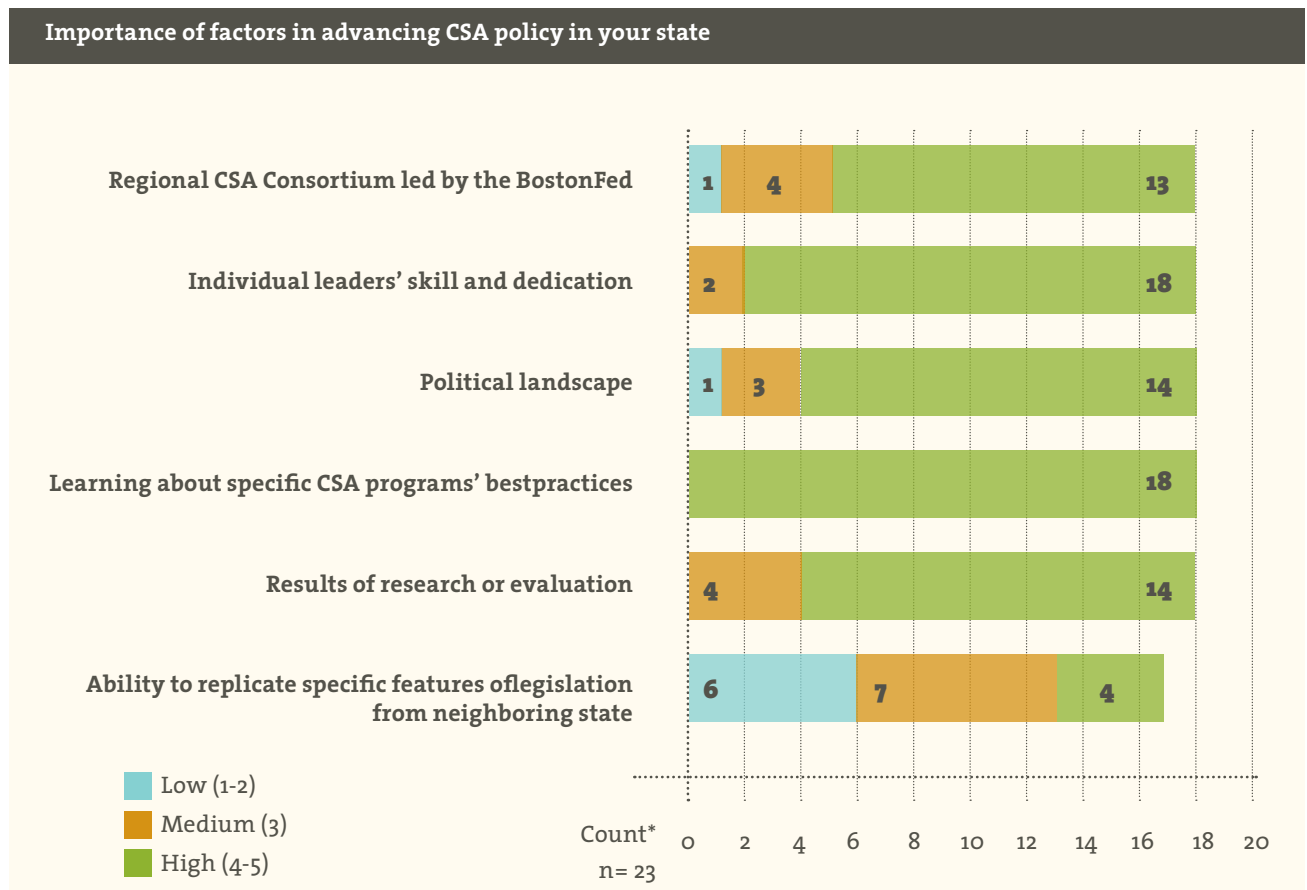


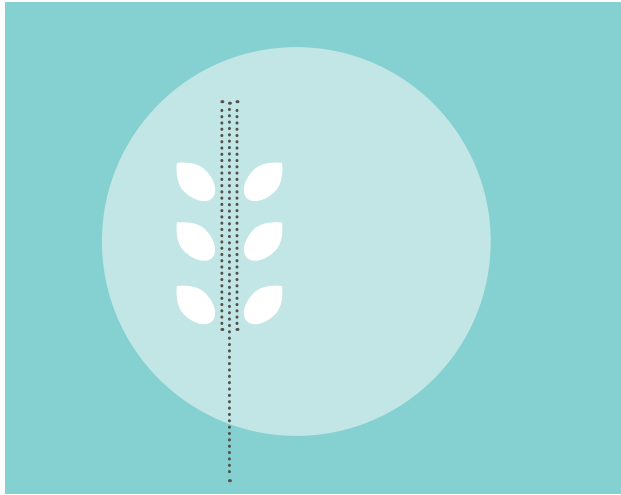
VII. ADVANCING CSA POLICY AND PRACTICE IN NEW ENGLAND

The variation in features and structures among the CSAs in New England illustrates that, indeed, this is not a case of simple policy imitation. This is reinforced by Figure 4 below in which most of our survey respondents rated “ability to replicate specific features of policy from a neighboring state” as having low or medium importance in advancing CSA policy – the lowest scoring factor on the list. Instead, representatives from the region’s cities and states have been actively engaged in learning from one another, both informally and through the Consortium convened by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. States are all working to incrementally move forward in their policy process, so “small victories,” or incremental successes that push a state forward, matter (Interview 22). This section begins to synthesize our understanding of the “seeds,” the “climate,” and the “cultivators” that have led to these small, but shared, victories.

FIGURE 4: SURVEY RESPONSES ON FACTORS THAT ADVANCED CSA POLICY IN NEW ENGLAND



*Respondents were asked to rate each factor on a scale of 1 to 5



SHARE SEEDS: SHARE IDEAS, LESSONS, AND PROMISING PRACTICES IN REAL TIME

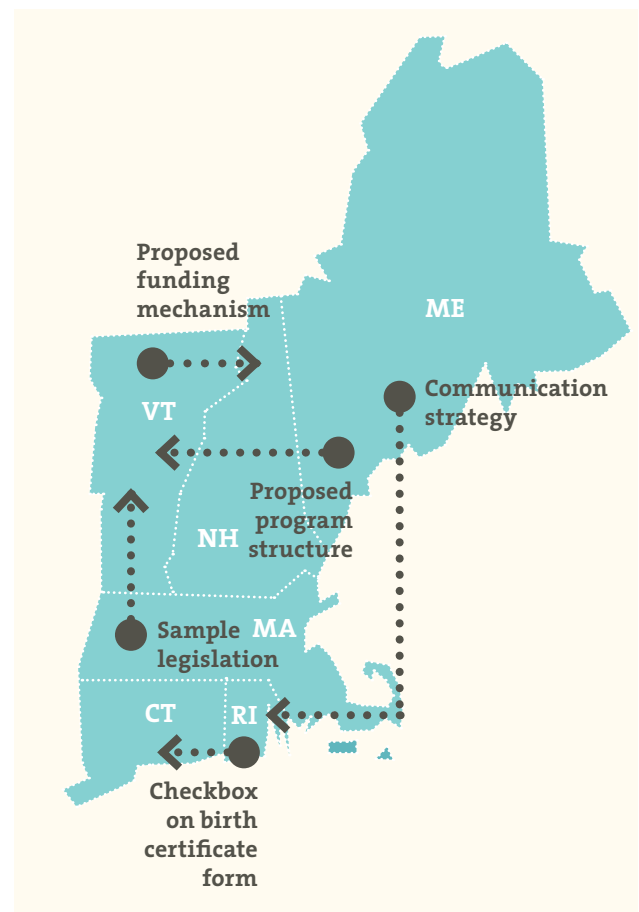
The strongest factor that contributed to the growth of CSAs in New England, or the “seeds” required for growth, were the concrete ideas and tidbits of knowledge about CSA practices that were exchanged among members of the Consortium. These ideas were not shared as cookie-cutter policies or models to be replicated as-is, but rather as decisions and trade-offs to be considered and weighed at certain stages of the policy development process. Several respondents explained that this sharing of information allowed each program to build upon the ones that came before. Many respondents expressed the sentiment that, “In New England, we’ve avoided the re-creation of the wheel” (Interview 18). For instance, a respondent from Vermont, stated:

I don't think that we would have gotten as far as we have if we hadn't been in touch with other people who were pushing similar programs regionally that we could meet and know face to face as well as just easily pick up the phone and talk to them about it. (Interview 15)

Respondents provided several concrete examples of information or ideas that programs learned from one another. For instance, New Hampshire's proposed funding mechanism was learned from Vermont (Interview 11). Connecticut introduced a checkbox on the state's birth certificate application

form (by which new parents can sign up to receive information about the CHET Baby Scholars program) based on Rhode Island's checkbox opt-in procedure (Interview 5; Interview 7). Vermont modeled their CSA legislation on a proposed bill from Massachusetts, and they also closely modeled their program on Maine's HACC (Interview 18). Rhode Island drew upon Maine's experience in developing their communication plan (Interview 21). Massachusetts drew lessons from several states, including hiring a dedicated community engagement manager to work on the ground in the city of Worcester, putting all materials online, and hiring a full-time researcher (Interview 14). Figure 5 illustrates some of the program features and strategies that have been shared among the states.

FIGURE 5: SELECT PROGRAM FEATURES AND STRATEGIES SHARED AMONG NEW ENGLAND STATES



“I’m on a learning curve where my knuckles are white every day, which is exactly where I want to be, and I think it’s where the program deserves to be.”

Even with all the direct sharing of information, resources, and best practices, several respondents expressed enthusiasm about being innovators, making it clear that they are constantly learning and improving the programs. For instance, a respondent from Connecticut described their CSA as “extraordinarily cutting edge,” saying, “I’m on a learning curve where my knuckles are white every day, which is exactly where I want to be, and I think it’s where the program deserves to be” (Interview 7).

CLIMATE: OPEN COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Just as a temperate climate helps seeds to grow, CSA programs flourish in part due to contextual factors. An important aspect of the “climate” in New England that directly facilitated the spread of knowledge across state lines was open communication among programs. Respondents widely agreed that the Consortium facilitated their communication with other programs, through both formal channels (i.e., at Consortium meetings and email list) and informally (i.e., through phone calls and one-on-one meetings). One way that open communication was fostered was by creating a trusting environment in which people felt comfortable sharing their missteps as well as their victories. Many of our respondents described learning from others’ mistakes as one of the most valuable aspects of the Consortium. For instance, a respondent from Rhode Island explained that they learned a great deal from Maine, saying, “We were probably six to eight months ahead of ourselves because we were able to learn from their mistakes” (Interview 21). A respondent from Connecticut echoed these sentiments, stating,

Being able to know my peers and pick up the phone and know that I’m not alone when I hit some of those road blocks that all of us hit. And being able to bounce ideas off of other people and have them say to me, you know, ‘Don’t try that. That’s stupid. We already tried it, and it fell flat on its face,’ or, ‘Yes, try this, it’s a much better way.’ That is totally invaluable to me. There is no way for me to replace that, and that checkbox is only one example, and I could give you more, of ways in which sitting through those New England Consortium meetings...were totally invaluable. (Interview 7)

CLIMATE: SHARED REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND IDENTITY

Another aspect of the “climate” that facilitated the free sharing of information was identifying and developing shared regional aspirations and, to an extent, even a shared identity. One respondent stated, “We come back from those Consortium meetings and everyone is abuzz, ‘Oh my gosh, Rhode Island is doing this... did you hear, Vermont is making headway?’...It creates a lot of buzz” (Interview 6). This sharing of information across city and state lines fostered a regional perspective. A respondent stated,

Without the ability to look at that from a regional perspective...the worldview would be too small. We really benefit from being able to think of things from a much broader perspective and to learn from people who are dealing with the unique challenges of each of their states or their areas. (Interview 9)

This regional identity, and the knowledge that they are part of something larger that is shared, gives some Consortium participants considerable energy and a sense of empowerment. A respondent from New Hampshire explained,

To be able to be in the room with the like-minded individuals that have accomplished so much, and those that haven’t accomplished but have the same goals and same drive to move the needle, it’s empowering. (Interview 4)

Shared aspirations can also arise from shared challenges. The New England states have a common concern about their aging populations

and the need to produce an educated workforce for the future. A respondent from New Hampshire explained, “It’s the fact that there’s recognition by elected officials that we, all of us in New England, have a serious, looming workforce dilemma and challenge going forward” (Interview 11). S/he elaborated on the nature of the problem:

This challenge is not going away. If you look longer term at our demographics in New Hampshire, and this is true throughout New England, they’re similar. We have a growing proportion of that K through 12 population eligible for free and reduced lunch. And in most states, if not every state in New England, there’s a decline, at least for the foreseeable future, in the number of kids or students in that K through 12 pipeline. So it’s a combination of a shrinking pipeline and a socioeconomic profile in that pipeline that are individuals less likely to pursue postsecondary education. (Interview 11)

A respondent from Vermont had a similar take on the workforce problem facing her/his state:

You look at the jobs of the future, and they’re going to require some sort of postsecondary education. We’re already operating with a really small population, and then only 43% of our population does succeed in getting a degree. We’ve got to change that mindset at an early age. (Interview 15)

CSAs are one way in which the states are beginning to address these issues.

“There’s recognition by elected officials that we, all of us in New England, have a serious, looming workforce dilemma and challenge going forward.”



CULTIVATORS: INDIVIDUAL LEADERS AND CHAMPIONS

For seeds to grow and flourish, even in an ideal climate, individual cultivators must care for them, providing water, fertilizer, and other nourishment. Similarly, in the case of CSAs, the leadership and vision of specific individuals were crucial to moving programs forward. In several states, the Treasurer or Governor provided crucial leadership. For instance, in Connecticut, Governor Dan Malloy championed CSAs, highlighting them in a State of the State Address. A respondent described CHET Baby Scholars as the “Governor’s baby” and stated that the program wouldn’t have happened without the Governor as a champion (Interview 7). Another respondent from Connecticut echoed this sentiment but called it a “joint program” between the Governor and the Treasurer (Interview 6). Similar stories arose about governors, treasurers, and legislators in several other states.

Leaders also emerge from the private sector. For instance, a respondent explained that in Rhode Island, an individual within the state’s 529 servicer originally came up with the idea for CollegeBound Baby. This individual first pitched the idea to the leadership at her/his own institution and then approached the State Treasurer and higher

education authority. A respondent noted that all three of these entities share the desire to see more families invest in college and to get “to and through higher education,” in addition to having their own specific reasons for supporting a CSA (Interview 8).

A third important individual leader to note is Anthony Poore of the Boston Fed. Numerous respondents reported that Poore’s individual leadership was critical to the success of both the New England CSA Consortium and the diffusion of CSAs in the region. For instance, a respondent described Poore as “the driving force” behind the CSA effort in Connecticut (Interview 6). Leadership at the Boston Fed recognized the intrinsic value of the CSA project and its alignment with the Fed’s regional development goals, and provided Poore with the institutional support and flexibility he needed to bring the project to fruition. New England’s experience illustrates the importance of having stable, dedicated, and adept leaders at the convening organization and at the technical assistance provider. Although in New England, the Boston Fed played both of these roles, the two need not be the same.



THE PERFECT STORM: SYNERGY

Sometimes crops flourish not because of a single influence but because several factors come into alignment at the right moment – the perfect storm. Noting that CSA policy efforts in other regions of the United States have moved more slowly, a respondent from a national organization explained New England’s rapid progress as the result of “a perfect storm in a positive sense, of interest, enthusiasm, leadership that was...listening, a good local example that you could draw on early for early effects “ (Interview 25).

Several respondents also described the “synergy” that occurs when multiple stakeholders become ready to support CSAs within the same time window. A respondent from Rhode Island stated, “timing is everything,” noting that just when her/his agency was interested in adding a checkbox on the birth certificate form allowing families to opt-in to the CSA, the Health Department happened to be updating their birth certificate form. The Rhode Island Higher Education Assistance Authority (now defunct), the Health Department, and Secretary of Health worked together to make this change quickly (Interview 21). Similar factors were at play in Connecticut; when the state was updating its birth certificate form, a CHET staff member “happened to be sitting across the table” from governor’s staffers who had worked on original CHET Baby Scholars application. They “picked up the phone, and it was almost instantaneous”: Even though the birth certificate form was almost

complete, the page with a checkbox to opt into receiving information about CHET Baby Scholars was “immediately” added. As a result, our respondent estimated that enrollment increased from about 8% to 35% “over night” (Interview 7). This synergy was made possible by strong existing relationships among the Treasurer’s Office, the 529 provider, and the Department of Public Health.

Other respondents highlighted the importance of timing as a component of synergy. For instance, a respondent from Massachusetts described several pieces aligning to enable a CSA pilot to develop quickly (in less than 6 months): overlapping interest, a new administration, and timing.

[The mayor] came in with a brand-new staff and was ready to put a stake in the ground on certain initiatives and goals that he had, and this [CSA] fit some of those goals in terms of education and long-term economic mobility...The superintendent of Boston Public Schools was also new. So, I just feel like having new leadership was really, really critical and helpful to bringing new people but also leaving people open to a new way of doing things, I guess, or trying something new. (Interview 19)

The idea of synergy is in keeping with the concept of “policy windows” in the study of public policy, which suggests that three different “streams” - the problem, proposal, and politics - must all align at the right moment in order for a policy idea to make progress (Kingdon, 1984, 1995). To a large extent, synergy arises organically, and thus it cannot be created out of sheer effort. However, CSA advocates can recognize when synergy is happening and take advantage of it by implementing strategies to seed and cultivate change.

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VII.

CAN THE NEW ENGLAND EXPERIENCE BE REPLICATED?

UNIQUE FEATURES OF NEW ENGLAND

Like a temperate climate that facilitates the healthy growth of plants, New England has several distinctive features that helped CSAs flourish. According to our respondents, these include New England's compact geography and the high concentration of colleges and universities.

COMPACT GEOGRAPHY

First, as other researchers have noted, the relatively small size of the New England states makes it easier to bring CSA leaders together. Lewis & Elliott (2015) write, "The relatively small populations in most of these states allows for 'scaling', even to universal, automatic account opening, while still limiting programs to fairly manageable sizes, in terms of data tracking, account management, and overall fiscal outlay" (p. 6). Many of our respondents also remarked on the small size of New England, but they primarily noted that the compact geography is an important facilitator of in-person meetings and coalition building. For instance, a respondent from Massachusetts explained that, in stark contrast to other states' representatives for whom it takes "2 hours just to drive across their own state," s/he can get to two neighboring states in under an hour (Interview 14). A respondent from Connecticut shared a similar sentiment, stating, "We can easily get together [six] New England states and no one is driving more than about six hours. That would not be true in any other part of the country" (Interview 7).

Some respondents also reported that the close clustering of states allowed for coalition building. A Rhode Island respondent noted that despite the small population of New England, "if we get together, we are more powerful." (Interview 21). A respondent from a national organization drew attention to another way that geography matters to the spread of CSAs in New England. S/he noted that the Boston Fed is different from other Federal Reserve Banks in that the area it serves has greater density and more homogeneity. For this reason,

s/he stated, "It's not something that I think that we can just cookbook it and say, 'Okay, let's do the same thing here [in other regions]'" (Interview 25).

CONCENTRATION OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

A second unique feature of New England is the concentration of colleges and universities, which has the dual effects of exposing the population to the concept of higher education and contributing to a more educated populace. These in turn create more support for CSAs and other policies designed to boost educational access and affordability. For instance, noting the numerous colleges and universities in her/his state, a participant from Massachusetts remarked, "regardless of income level, we're surrounded by the college concept" (Interview 20). A respondent from Connecticut described her/his state population as small, "very well plugged in," financially savvy, and one that "puts a high premium on higher ed" (Interview 7). The respondent noted that this collective value of education contrasts sharply with other regions, where the CSA administrators must start by making the case that college is a good investment in the first place. A respondent from New Hampshire also made the connection between an educated populace and their likelihood to value CSAs:

New England as a generality is progressive...A high proportion of the population is well-educated. They understand the value of savings for college. They're well aware of student debt issues...The brand, if you will, of New England is its intellectual capital. It's a hub for higher education, innovation, and entrepreneurship...I think there's greater

understanding and appreciation for the potential good to come from starting early to save and invest. (Interview 11)

This speaker describes New England as progressive, which raises the idea of partisan politics, another aspect of the climate that is worth noting even though most participants did not speak of it directly. Although from a national perspective, New England is commonly viewed as progressive, the individual states' politics vary. CSAs and other asset-building policies have historically enjoyed bipartisan support because they serve the dual functions of providing economic resources to lower-income families while also encouraging individual savings. However, partisan politics certainly play a role in determining the legislative priorities of a state, particularly funding for social programs.

THE VALUE OF REGIONALISM & NATIONAL CONNECTIONS

Although many respondents endorsed the idea of New England's uniqueness, some respondents expressed mixed feelings about the importance of a cohesive New England identity. For instance, a respondent from New Hampshire stated, that the "concerted approach across the New England states" makes CSA work "more compelling." However, s/he expressed doubt as to whether progress in the region would be sufficient to motivate policy change in New Hampshire, posing the questions, "Will that actually move the dial in New Hampshire? Or will New Hampshire be more motivated, frankly, by just, you know, it [CSA success] happening in New Hampshire?" (Interview 17). A respondent from Connecticut similarly agreed that there is value in the region's current collaboration but predicted that such collaboration may fade over time as the programs reach maturity:

I think regionalism makes sense for us right now because so many of our New England states are in the same position. But I think over time...if we get sort of Maine and Rhode Island and Connecticut and some of these other states sort of up on their own and running really strong statewide

initiatives, I wouldn't be opposed to breaking down some of that regionalism and moving expertise around the country. (Interview 7)

This points to an interesting proposition, that some states or programs might find more affinity with other states or organizations across the country that are implementing CSAs in similar ways or that are at different stages of the policy process. A respondent said that s/he did not see much difference between participating in a national learning community versus a regional one. S/he stated, "I don't know that there is like a huge advantage to us understanding the regional context," explaining that her program has more to learn from national peers than their regional neighbors (Interview 1). Another respondent, from Massachusetts, named several programs nationwide from which they learned when designing their own pilot, including San Francisco's Kindergarten to College and Promise Indiana (Interview 19).

Regionalism has value, and so, too, does the dissemination of best practices and knowledge nationally. Indeed, the New England CSA Consortium has done both, building a regional effort while drawing upon expertise from around the nation. Respondents also noted that some states cluster neatly into a region, while other states may comprise their own regions. For instance, one respondent suggested that a large state like California or Texas might have its own consortium made up of members from throughout the state.

It is clear that because of New England's unique geography and other distinctive features, aspects of New England's experience may not generalize. Each region is unique in its geography, population, and particular needs and strengths. New England planted seeds in a temperate climate with strong cultivators, during a perfect storm. Although some aspects of "climate" cannot easily be controlled, other regions can plant seeds, foster an environment of openness and shared identity, support cultivators, and recognize policy windows or perfect storms when they occur.