

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northeast and Islands Laboratory at Brown University

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) is one of 10 regional laboratories. It was established in December 1995 under a five-year contract between the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and Brown University. The LAB serves a large and complex region encompassing New England, New York, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, with a highly diverse population including both urbanized and rural areas. Partners for the LAB include the following: Abt Associates, Center for Applied Linguistics, Center for Resource Management, Jobs for the Future, RMC Research Corporation, Superintendents' Leadership Council, and TERC.

May 1999 marked the end of more than two-thirds of the five-year contract period. The focus of the interim review was upon the work completed in the first three years of the contract. Conforming with Section 941(h) of Part D of the Educational Research, Development, Dissemination and Improvement Act of 1994 (Title IX of Public Law 103-227) the LAB was required to undergo an interim evaluation. OERI has developed standards to evaluate and assess the performance of the contract, which utilizes a system of peer review and is consistent with Part VII of the Department of Education 34 Part 702 "Standards for conduct and evaluation of activities carried out by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement-OERI--evaluation of the performance of recipients of grants, cooperative agreements, and contracts (10/27/98.)" Decision Information Resources Incorporated (DIR) contracted with OERI to execute the evaluation.

The purpose of the review as presented in the Statement of Work document provided to all panel members is to provide feedback to contractor to improve the quality of approved and funded activities and to provide information to OERI as it determines if the contractor is fulfilling the requirements of the contract.

The primary mission of the LAB is: Increasing students' learning through improving instruction and systemic school change. The mission is addressed in three ways: Building capacity for reform, supporting collaborative inquiry, and sustaining strategic alliances. The particular specialty area for the LAB is: Language and Cultural Diversity, with the specialty area mission of assisting schools to serve effectively, culturally and linguistically diverse students, families, and communities. The LAB has noted that the Northeast and islands regional context is characterized by the following key elements: (1) educational and cultural resources in place; (2) professional organizations involved in educational reform; (3) increasing cultural and ethnic diversity; and (4) the need for collaborative approaches. The educational context is characterized by four challenges: (1) standards, assessment, and accountability; (2) urban education; (3) secondary school restructuring; and (4) inclusion of all students and families.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the LAB doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

1. Strengths

(a) The LAB has executed the program of work as outlined in the contract and its modifications. The program appears to be on time; in general the required reports have been submitted to OERI by deadlines. (b) The LAB has benefited from the utilization of Brown's

management systems (e.g. budgeting, personnel, grants-management, and legal services) as well as some of the communications services. Efforts have been made to leverage Brown's considerable intellectual resources in support of LAB activities and programs, such as the Pell Seminar on education policy and the Dean's Forum---a new network dedicated to the sustained improvement of pre-K-16 education in the region. In 1999, Brown University allocated \$100,000 in support of core operating expenses for the LAB. (c) The LAB has placed a priority on forming, sustaining, and extending strategic alliances and partnerships with other RELs (e.g. LSS) and national centers (e.g. CREDE,) education agencies such as the Chief State School Officers in the region, associations of school administrators, school districts, teachers professional organizations, and other networks. Vigorous efforts have met with success to form extensive alliances and partnerships with various education and other public constituencies. For example, the formal partners of LAB have linked their networks with LAB, thus extending the benefits of collaboration for school improvement. The extensive network of 700 public schools accredited by New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Public Secondary Schools' review process has been changed to a focus on the quality of teaching and learning in schools, as a direct result of the technical assistance provided by the LAB's Secondary Restructuring Signature Work #2. (d) The Executive Director and the staff are highly knowledgeable, dedicated, and capable; the governing Board is a strong, guiding force, constituted by leaders in education and the public sector.

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) There is a concern regarding the efficient and effective application of technologies (such as the Internet and videoteleconferencing) that can be applied throughout the programmatic and management elements of the LAB. (b) Documentation and assessment of the effectiveness of

programs and activities of applied research and development, products and services, and management can be more comprehensive.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) Incorporate use of the new interactive technologies effectively to support programs and activities, both programmatic (development and applied research) and management. (b) Evaluate the effectiveness of management, administration, and communications systems, and improve systems as a result. (3) Increase leveraging from Brown and other partners and constituents.

B. To what extent is the LAB using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

(a) The LAB has designed and implemented several mechanisms that provide feedback and form the basis for continuous quality improvement. The LAB has modified the programs, activities, and planning process as a result of the feedback. Examples are as follows: The LAB Board of Directors provide on-going feedback, reflecting the diverse constituencies of the region and have an interest in educational improvement. The LAB Partners meet quarterly to review and discuss progress on the work plan, and to make indicated modifications. Other needs assessment mechanisms include the State Liaison System, visits from Chief State School Officers of the region, and general feedback from the network of RELs and alliances with constituencies. Quarterly reports and annual reports to OERI provide specific information on actions taken in response to problems identified, such as the termination of three projects originally contracted. (b) New procedures and management activities (such as product review and database of projects and workplans) have been established as a result of the 1998 review by

Abt Associates.

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) The effective use of and collection of additional information for self-monitoring can be enhanced. For example, inclusion of more diverse members of the staff and governing Board. The extension of the formal data collection (e.g. the Abt survey) to all projects could benefit planning for scale-up and general strategic planning.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) Expand the representation of diverse groups on the staff and governing Board. (b) Improve the methods for self-monitoring, which can include but not be limited to the design and implementation of formal quality improvement assessment and document both quantitatively and qualitatively the baseline and the results of changes. This can include, for example, frequently collected data on client satisfaction, and regular self-reflection activities among staff. The Abt telephone interview for the Lowell project (Signature Work #1) of 15 educators is an example of the kind of assessment that could be applied to all projects. (c) Communicate with constituents and other RELs the results of the process and seek recommendations for increasing effectiveness of the self-monitoring process that will lead to continuous improvement in programs, activities, services, products and administration. The dissemination of the Abt study to the Lowell district personnel and the effect of that dissemination can be determined.

III. Quality

To what extent is the LAB developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

(a) Several LAB projects that have already been completed are significant, well-designed,

informed by state-of-the-art research, and competently executed. For example, the Implementing Standards with English Language Learners - the Lowell middle school professional development project - is an example of a school improvement effort that has been well-designed, informed by current theory and research from relevant areas, and has been conducted with a high degree of competence. A second example of a major project that is based on well-founded research and has informed the development of an educational improvement tool is the NEASC revised accreditation review process. (b) Planned projects reflect significant R&D ideas whose anticipated results will be useful to the field.

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) Bridging the gaps in the pre/K-16 education system need to receive dedicated, creative, and sustained attention by the LAB. The beginnings of leveraging the considerable intellectual resources of Brown University are apparent and can be expanded substantially. Efforts to reach out to other pre/K-16 educational institutions, particularly higher education institutions and leverage the impressive intellectual and leadership resources of the region can be encouraged. (b) Selection of the development and applied research agenda can be better informed by systematic needs assessment that is conducted throughout the region and informed by multiple levels of the education and public sectors.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) Design and implement collaborative programs and activities that will support educational improvement throughout the region that include contributions and active participation from all pre/K-16 education sectors, including higher education. (b) Conduct systematic, region-wide needs assessment, which can inform the choice of development and applied research agenda.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the LAB useful to and used by customers?

1. Strengths

Educators use the products/reports disseminated by the LAB and have altered their teaching and assessment processes as a direct result of LAB projects, specifically tailored to client's expressed needs. For example, the teachers in the Lowell Project provided anecdotal evidence that they changed their practices of teaching, the curriculum materials, and their assessment of English Language Learners as a result of participating in the professional development project. The Abt telephone study documents the level of satisfaction with the LAB project. The Lowell school teachers who participated in the project, as well as the principal of the Wang School, plan to scale-up one element of the professional development work to other teachers throughout the school; plans are being discussed to take the project district-wide. These teachers plan to be teacher-leaders, both in terms of actual methods as well as motivating other teachers. The entire NEASC accreditation review process has been revised as a direct result of the Secondary School Restructuring project. The new NEASC has not been fully implemented as yet, so that summative evaluation data is not available. However, the Director of this NEASC project expressed her strong satisfaction with both the process and outcome of the LAB's technical assistance in informing and guiding the revision.

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) Well-conceptualized and extensive documentation, assessment, and evaluation of the effects of the utility of programs such as the Lowell professional development project, and materials/products such as the v-LAB can be improved. Evaluation of the effects of services and

products can include measurement of client satisfaction. This kind of data can be supplemented with measures of student outcomes, and quantitative and qualitative measures of teacher outcomes that directly improve student learning of the core curriculum as specified by their states. (b) Plans to scale-up successful pilot projects can be developed and revised throughout the developmental period of a project. (c) The effective use of technologies to achieve impact and economies of scale can be built into scale-up plans.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) Expand the measures of utility to include teacher outcomes directly related to students' learning/achievement and a wide set of student outcomes that include multiple measures of students' learning/achievement of the core curriculum specified by their states. (b) Develop specific plans for scale-up of successful (e.g. through evaluation) pilot projects to impact targeted populations. (c) versions of the work tailored specifically for educators can be produced and disseminated both "really" and virtually.

B. To what extent is the LAB focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

(a) The LAB is sensitive to and attempts to be responsive to the needs of its clients. Most of the input from the clients the Panel met during the on-site visit and from the materials reviewed, was highly positive, even laudatory. The State Liaison system effectively informs the LAB's work. For example, the LAB support and guidance of the Lowell Signature Work #1 and the NEASC Signature Work #2 appeared to be invaluable. These projects, as well as the New York City Parents Advisory Council would not have been conducted without the dedicated and effective support of the LAB. (b) The Dissemination Plan that was submitted in draft form to the Panel is ambitious and targets clients throughout the region and at all levels of the education and

public sectors.

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) The LAB is challenged to develop a comprehensive needs assessment plan and guide for meeting customer needs in the future. (b) The Dissemination Plan can be specified to determine how it addresses the mission and goals of the LAB.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) Develop a comprehensive needs assessment plan and timely method for implementation. This plan can include multiple measures including, but not limited to, client satisfaction. (b) Elaborate and evaluate the Dissemination Plan to inform strategic planning for the LAB. (c) Design and implement a plan for the adequate documentation, assessment, and evaluation of all programs with regard to the degree of utility by key customers. Continuously improve the evaluation plan, so that the results continue to inform the practices and choice of programs and products developed by the LAB.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the LAB work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

The priority for the LAB projects reviewed by the Panel was not directly targeted on student achievement.

1. Strengths

(a) The LAB recognizes that student achievement and other valued student outcomes are an important focus for programs of educational development and applied research. (b) Some teachers provided evidence that the two LAB projects (Lowell, Jobs for the Future) did affect

student's positively (e.g., increased grades, better writing skills).

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) The measurement of student outcomes needs to have a high priority in the design and implementation of development and applied research projects. (b) Replication and follow-up of pilot projects needs to have a top priority for funding.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) Design and implement a comprehensive plan for the assessment, documentation, and evaluation of significant student outcomes---such as student achievement, and include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Expand the measures of quality to include: (1) teacher outcomes directly related to students' learning/achievement, and (2) a wide set of student outcomes that include multiple measures of students' learning/achievement of the core curriculum specified by their states. The plan should include assessment of curricular, instructional, and other contextual factors that affect student learning outcomes. (b) Continuously monitor and modify, as indicated, this plan, so that the results for student outcomes inform both the policy and practices of education within the region. (c) Replicate and extend the pilot projects for validation and impact.

B. To what extent does the LAB assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

(a) The LAB has conducted dissemination services, such as forums on comprehensive school reform that have been presented throughout the region.

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) Plans to scale-up small projects to demonstrate systemic change for school reform

need to be a high priority.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) In combination with the dissemination plan, develop and execute plans for the infusion of technologies to support the scale-up of demonstrated successful programs and projects in the specialty area. (b) Comprehensively evaluate and document the small pilot projects to establish the basis for the scale-up and development into a comprehensive school reform initiative. (c) Expand collaborative activities to support scale-up and actively pursue regional and national visibility.

C. To what extent has the LAB made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

(a) The specialty area for the LAB is: Language and Cultural Diversity, to promote assisting schools to serve effectively, culturally and linguistically diverse students, families, and communities. (b) Several LAB projects that have already been completed are significant, well-designed, informed by state-of-the-art research, and competently executed. For example, the Implementing Standards with English Language Learners---the Lowell middle school professional development project is an example of school improvement effort that has been well-designed, informed by current theory and research from relevant areas, and has been conducted with a high degree of competence. The dissemination of this research study nationally, and its potential scale-up throughout the Lowell district and beyond has the potential to contribute to the LAB's national reputation in the specialty area. (c) The collaborative relationship with NABE in the "Portraits of Success" and Nanduti Web site are additional examples of well-designed nationally recognized efforts to improve the education of English Language Learners. (d) The

LAB has achieved regional recognition as demonstrated by the Maine project, and the New York City Parent Advisory Council project, which has informed policy-making in the state.

2. Areas of needed improvement

(a) The application of technologies to support the expansion of the programs; (b) comprehensive documentation and assessment of the “success stories,” using both qualitative and quantitative methods; (c) need for greater visibility on national venues, such as professional and research meetings.

3. Recommendations for improvement

(a) In combination with the dissemination plan, develop and execute plans for the infusion of technologies to support the scale-up of demonstrated successful programs and projects in the specialty area. (b) Comprehensively evaluate and document the small pilot projects to establish the basis for the scale-up. (c) Increase the presentations and publications of specialty work at regional and national research and development forums. (d) Expand collaboration with RELs who share common focus, with CREDE, whose central commitment is effective schooling with at-risk students, and with institutions of higher education whose research and development agenda is shared with the LAB. (e) Actively pursue venues to present the LAB’s work at national and regional meetings and national and internationally-recognized publication outlets (e.g. journals, monographs.)

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total LAB Programs, Products and Services

It was apparent to the Peer Review Panel that the work of the LAB is significant for American education in two ways: (1) Development of services and products that promote the improvement of K-12 education, particularly for a diverse student body, that is: (a) standards-

based, and is (b) oriented to increasing students' learning, teachers' professional development, and leaders' effective management of schools; (2) applied research and evaluation on the formulation and implementation of effective educational programs for all students and, in particular, for those who are English Language-Learners.

Overall, the LAB's work is significant and addresses a major policy issue in American education, the educational success of all students, in particular those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. The agenda focuses on increasing students' learning, through improving instruction and continuous school improvement. The LAB has developed services, products, and an applied research agenda that encompasses building capacity for that improvement, by supporting collaborative inquiry and sustaining strategic alliances. One example of significant specialty area work is: Signature Work #1 which has focused on the implementation of a standards-based curriculum and assessment program with English Language Learners.

This orientation and focus of the LAB's work is consistent with education research and development for students who are at-risk for educational failure in American schools. Because of factors associated with English proficiency, ethnicity, poverty status, and geographical location, a growing number of American students are at-risk for educational failure. From research conducted over the past three decades, much has been learned about what constitutes effective schooling for all students and those who are at-risk, in particular. As yet, there has not been the large-scale implementation of school reform that results in high achievement for all students. We have not seen the wide-spread implementation of school reform that sustains effective educational programs and instructional strategies that support these programs. The work of the LAB is directly relevant to this significant policy issue in the country. It is anticipated that the LAB's work will ameliorate, to some significant degree, at-risk factors

related to the English Language Learners' school achievement, ultimately resulting in improved student learning.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas of Needed Improvement, and Recommendations for Improvement

The work of LAB is well-founded and off to a good start, having attained some initial success such as the Signature Works #1 and #2, with the expectation to extend, expand, and scale-up these projects to render significant school reform resulting in high achievement for all students, and in particular English Language Learners and other cultural minority students. The array of strategic alliances and partnerships is a strength that should be sustained and expanded, both regionally and nationally among other RELs and relevant national centers. Continued efforts to develop a comprehensive vision that integrates the disparate successful R&D projects can be encouraged. The effective use of technologies to support and extend the impact of successful projects is an essential element for widespread scale-up and effective management. Comprehensive evaluation, documentation, and assessment of all research and development projects is an essential element for the continued expansion of LAB work and large-scale impact. A sustained focus on improving students' learning can be encouraged. The LAB is in a strong position to build on the firm foundation already established, and to expand the vision and execution of programs, activities, services and products thus maximizing impact on improving students' learning.