

Archived Information

Response
to the Interim Evaluation Panel Report
from McREL
The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory
June 21, 1999

The leadership and staff of McREL wish to express thanks to the members of the interim panel for their thoughtful review and feedback and to DIR for the careful design and implementation of the interim review process. We welcomed and appreciate this opportunity to gain input from a peer panel of 'critical friends' and we have already incorporated much that we learned from the observations and recommendations of the panel into our planning and evaluation process.

Following the introduction, we have organized our response around four areas we identified in the synthesis report: McREL's standards work, technical expertise and applied research, evaluation, and management and organization.

Introduction

It is important for readers of the REL interim evaluation panels' reports and the Laboratories responses to understand two aspects of the evaluation process. First, given a finite amount of time, the design for the evaluation shaped the amount and focus of the material the panel received, the data they were able to gather, and the findings they reached. Secondly, the process was new to us and in retrospect we would organize and present our work differently.

One example is in the use of the Signature Work concept. Two Signature Works were selected by DIR in consultation with OERI from five proposed by McREL. Signature Work #1, *Moving Standards into Practice*, was offered as an example of how work in the REL contract can also leverage other funds in order to accomplish wide dissemination. Signature Work #2, *Partnerships as a Field*

**EVALUATION
DESIGN**

Service Strategy, focused entirely within the REL contract. We de-emphasized the standards work that is done in Signature Work #2 to better represent the full scope of work at McREL. We now see we did not include in the panel's purview a full detailed picture of McREL's standards work in the REL program. And, by featuring two areas, with all other work condensed into a brief presentation at the end of a long day; we were not able to fully present the scope of McREL's work.

The design of the interim evaluation visit also called for the creation of an *Inventory of Products and Services* and the subsequent reduction of the Inventory to a set of materials for the visit (based on the signature works plus a short list of other materials). Rather than a comprehensive review of the Lab's work the shortened inventory of extant printed materials provided limited data for the panel. Had time and foresight permitted, the development of a self-evaluation document as done for accreditation visits would have been far more useful in presenting the data the panel needed to make judgments.

Finally, panel members received several days of careful orientation by DIR. Nonetheless, panel members were not always clear as to the role of regional laboratories. Labs balance their resources to "serve their regions" across six roles, only one of which is to "conduct development and applied research" (Introduction to the Regional Laboratory Program – OERI 1996, page 1). Panel members struggled most with the research mission of the Lab. McREL also struggles with balancing funding for applied research with its other roles as well as selecting and carrying out appropriate research initiatives given limited resources. Panelists sought to find a middle ground in their recommendations but some suggestions would consume far more resource than warranted given the array of contract obligations. Reiterating the overall Laboratory scope of work might have provided a broader context for the panel.

McREL's Work with Standards

PANEL FINDINGS

The panel noted that McREL “is recognized at the local, state, and national levels as a leading expert on standards and on comprehensive school reform.” , and , “is of tremendous assistance to the field.” Correspondingly, the panel expressed concern that McREL needs to give far more attention to rigor in its rollout of the work that supports standards-based approaches in states and districts. Much of our planned response to the need to increase rigor is contained in the two sections that follow on research and evaluation. In addition, the panel members’ recommendations suggest maintaining closer connections between our work in the field and our R & D perspective that ensures quality through rigorous reviews and impact and utility studies. We endorse the panel’s suggestion that we form a long-term technical review panel as a way to substitute for the more traditional, but less expeditious, expert review through publishing in refereed journals.

CLARIFICATIONS

The panel praised McREL for the extent of its standards work – reaching 33 states and several foreign countries. McREL delivers training and technical assistance in standards under the REL contract within the region as part of its comprehensive support to states and districts. In cases where the standards work extends beyond the scope of the REL contract, it is conducted under a variety of state and district grants and contracts. We emphasized this latter work as an important part of taking our work to scale. We would like to emphasize that we do not see standards-based work in schools as a replacement for the implementation of comprehensive school reform strategies. It may well be the backbone, since nearly all states require a standards approach to reform. We acknowledge that research on the impact of a standards approach on student achievement is still emerging. Nevertheless, the large number of states using such an approach requires us to support our region with tools and products that guide implementation and to disseminate these widely.

ACTIONS

We appreciate the panel’s suggestions for ways to expand McREL’s standards work. Much work is already underway in the areas suggested – it simply did not fit in a one-day overview. The studies on issues related to time and leadership role in a standards-based environment are ongoing. And an in-house ‘study group’ existed even before we received the panel suggestion to look at what we now know, and where McREL should be headed in supporting new forms of schooling. We are less certain that research on the effectiveness of a standards approach fits within the applied research agenda of a Laboratory. Such a study is certainly warranted and should be sufficiently funded to provide the information the nation needs about the efficacy of what has become a nationwide mandate.

Technical Expertise and Applied Research at McREL

PANEL FINDINGS

The panel noted that “McREL has a detailed, standardized Quality Assurance (QA) system in place for the development of products and deliverables.” And “The Panel saw evidence that the QA procedures were indeed widely used by McREL.” Nonetheless, the panel called for better use of internal and external technical expertise across all areas of McREL’s work. While we are proud of the Quality Assurance process that is in place, we recognize that it can be expanded to cover other kinds of work and strengthened to better use external reviewer critiques of the work under review. We appreciate the panel’s recognition that a Laboratory’s work is different than a University’s and there is a place for a variety of levels of review. The QA process at McREL is designed to match the level of review to the intended use and scope of dissemination. We concur that there needs to be closer attention to how products are presented to the public. Included with each product must be materials that enable constituents to understand the limitations in interpretation and use.

CLARIFICATIONS

We would expand even further the panel’s acknowledgement that research in Laboratories is different than in organizations whose sole mission is research.

Yet at times the panel seemed to feel any related research question should be on McREL's research agenda. A regional laboratory has a unique opportunity to conduct applied research building on basic research conducted in centers and universities. It has access to the field and long-standing relationships with schools and districts that can serve as applied research sites. We have designed our research agenda to take advantage of this uniqueness.

ACTIONS

We appreciate the panel's suggestion that McREL establish a long-term technical advisory group. Such a group would promise a far more appropriate review process for the kinds of tools and products produced for use in schools than the traditional route of the refereed journal.

Evaluation at McREL

**PANEL
FINDINGS**

The panel noted, "Although not required by the OERI contract, McREL has produced annual evaluation reports that examine all aspects of the Laboratory's operations and management." The panel recommended improving response rates, sampling designs in evaluation studies, and developing impact studies to gather intermediate indicator data related to student achievement. Somewhat obscure in the McREL evaluation plan which the panelists reviewed are the impact studies planned and underway in contract years 04 and 05.

CLARIFICATIONS

McREL's voluntary development and use of annual evaluation reports indicates that evaluation has become a way of doing business at McREL. The evaluation unit is now ready to raise the bar, to assist work groups in identifying evaluation studies of effectiveness that offer guidance for improving their work. Another related area that panelists were sensitive to, but constrained from taking into account, is the scheduling of the site visit in the five-year timeline for the REL contract. The original conception was that the visit would be formative in nature. Coming in the fourth year it becomes more summative. Thus, panelists' calls for

increased impact and outcomes studies are justified; such studies are being implemented. Unfortunately none has yet resulted in a findings document

ACTIONS

We appreciate the panel’s acknowledgement that using indicators intermediate to student achievement is a necessity given the lengthy timeframes for student outcomes and the fact that McREL’s work is not directly with students. We shared with the panel logic models that identify such intermediate indicators. As recommended, we will now include formal impact studies to supplement informal self-monitoring when staff review their work. For example, findings from studies such as capacity development in long-term sites will enable critical reflections on program effectiveness.

Management and Organization

PANEL FINDINGS

The panel report notes, “All panelists agreed that the Laboratory has met its contractual obligations” and “McREL excels in using internal resources such as staff and technology to positively enhance the work being carried out under the REL contract.” The panel recommended improvements in Board diversity, timeliness of deliverables, and staff turnover. Future use of the Gallup Organization for regional surveys was questioned.

CLARIFICATIONS

Increasing Board diversity has been and is a continuing strategic mandate for McREL. Implementing that mandate is of course difficult, with seven states nominating members and membership specified by position held. However, reelection of Board members has continued three women and one ethnic minority on the Board out of five reelections. Among newly elected members, fewer gains have been realized. McREL recognizes a higher than customary rate of staff turnover in 1998 not all of which was under its control. It should be noted that a portion of the turnover was directly related to increasing expectations and accountability for meeting deadlines and client satisfaction.

The panel disagreed with our view that a national survey organization such as Gallup could play a valuable role in McREL's work. While survey methods used by large national survey firms are somewhat different than the methods used by university researchers, we believe they have a place in the national policy discussions about education's future. McREL acknowledges that the survey findings the panel reviewed should have included a more explicit explanation for the public about how to interpret such survey findings.

ACTIONS

McREL will continue to place high priority on timeliness of deliverables and will continue to seek solutions to any roadblocks that occur - similar to the solutions the panel found commendable. Measures to aggressively recruit new senior staff are paying off and new salary scales have been adopted for research positions. As to the use of Gallup, McREL intends to use such survey methodologies only where they are appropriate and will include more explicit explanations of their limitations in published reports. Two future major surveys are presently under design in-house, and it is possible that Gallup-like methods will not be the best choice for either one. We do not believe, however, that Gallup should be excluded from the list of possible providers if such survey methods are indicated.

Concluding Comments

- McREL welcomed the interim evaluation process and has gained insights from it that are already in use in planning and ongoing work.
- McREL continues to have concerns that the limitations of the interim evaluation process be acknowledged as reports go forward for public review.

- McREL again thanks the DIR staff and the panel members for their careful dedicated work under difficult time lines and within the confines of a new process.