

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

### I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

#### What is the Regional Laboratory system?

The Regional Education Laboratory (REL) Program is the U.S. Department of Education's largest research and development investment designed to conduct educational research and development. Each Regional Lab conducts research on effective ways to implement educational reforms. There are ten Regional Labs in the REL program.

#### NCREL Overview and Goals

The North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) applies research, development and technology to support systemic change and improvement in learning. They provide highly customized interventions and follow-up research to a select group of sites or organizations (primarily focus: K-12 public education). These interventions, and the subsequent applied research on the intervention effectiveness, are co-developed with their "clients" by partnering with the target group in determining the R&D issues. Based upon the research on these interventions, NCREL "pulls out" generalized core processes from each project. Over time, this increasing set of generalized processes define a theory and knowledge base on "what works," with special emphasis on how technology plays a role in delivery of projects and in the increased learning of students. NCREL has six published goals:

1. Provide design consultation to schools and communities
2. Identify exemplary programs and resources in critical content areas
3. Contribute to and study strategies for moving educational innovation to scale
4. Provide national leadership in promoting the use of technologies to improve learning

5. Establish NCREL as a leading regional resource for network and policy
6. Establish NCREL as a leading regional resource for professional development

NCREL serves a region of seven Midwest states that comprises 20% of the country's population and approximately 25% of the nation's public schools. NCREL's strategy is to deploy "smaller" initiatives and then reiterate the process prior to moving the projects to an in-house "scaling-up" center (called the Center for Scaling Up) for wide dissemination and hand-off. NCREL had a \$16M budget for FY 1998, 78% of which is provided by Congress. 22% is from state, local, and foundation/private funding. The Lab operates all their projects within four separate, but interconnected, centers:

- Center for Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum
- Center for School and Community Development
- Center for Scaling Up
- Evaluation and Policy Information Center

## **II. Implementation and Management**

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

NCREL is fulfilling the mandate set forth in their contract. The Lab has conducted the activities as described in their contract, and has reported modifications and provided updates to OERI on changes during the contract. When changes have been made, care has been taken to provide justification, as demonstrated through the filing of updates (such as the FY99 Scope of Work Update to the Amendment to NCREL's Technical Proposal). In cases where deliverables or tasks and activities have been dropped from NCREL's scope of work, justification is provided.

NCREL has been able to utilize other funds within the institution to supplement the work done under the REL contract. 46% of NCREL's funding as of 11/30/98 has come from sources outside the REL contract. This includes funding for the NCRTEC, the Math and Science Grant, Chicago Public Schools, Ameritech Parentech Project, and the Illinois Department of Human Services Project Success.

The Lab has established partnerships and collaborative agreements with many agencies and organizations to maximize the value of its activities and products. By default, NCREL is explicitly linked to the CSSO offices of the states in its region (the original Lab RFP response was developed by the region's seven CSSOs). This link to the respective state education agencies is augmented by partnerships with LEAs and other agencies with which NCREL has contracts, over 100 intermediate educational agencies, approximately twenty policy networks, and approximately forty advisory networks. These networks, strategic alliances, and partnerships seem to increase the efficiency of NCREL's work.

### **1. Strengths**

NCREL has a robust organizational structure supported by strong, capable, energetic staff. The Lab attempts to use its mission as a rubric for steering its work.

### **2. Areas of needed improvement**

As an outsider it was difficult to understand the overarching framework of the Centers and how they work together as one organization, i.e., "The Lab." There may be a deficit in the Lab's collective knowledge of itself and I question whether or not the Lab is a learning community. Clearly the Lab has mechanisms in place to maintain a QA process (next section), but on an interpersonal level I wonder how much all the staff know about the work of others, and how it contributes to the whole.

### **3. Recommendations for improvement**

I would suggest that the Lab revisit the Centers concept with special focus on explicitly defining each Center's role in contributing to project, and Lab success.

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

NCREL has placed considerable thought and energy into a process which provides self monitoring data to the organization for the purpose of improvement. This process manifests itself in both theory and practice. A QA framework has been developed as a unifying theory to drive the self-monitoring process. This framework is a customized TQM cycle. This cycle contains four major parts:

- Assessing Needs and Setting Goals
- Designing Plan and Evaluating Alternatives
- Implementing Plan
- Evaluating Plan and Renewing Efforts

NCREL uses this framework to drive the collection of data and the refinement of activities across the spectrum of work.

Further, mechanisms are in place to obtain feedback from internal and external parties to improve performance. A key activity related to NCREL's monitoring process is its Annual Portfolio Review. In addition to documenting the review process for individual projects, NCREL undertakes a portfolio review with its Board of Directors. This review allows the Board members to review NCREL's entire portfolio of products and services, organized by the four centers. The Board evaluates the work of NCREL, focusing on three overarching evaluation questions:

- Is NCREL doing the right work?
- Is NCREL doing the work it said it would do?
- Is NCREL doing its work well?

### **1. Strengths**

This appears to me to be one of NCREL's strongest areas. The Lab is very cognizant of the need to continually improve its work and be sensitive to its customers' needs.

### **2. Areas of needed improvement**

None suggested.

### **3. Recommendations for improvement**

None suggested.

## **III. Quality**

### **A. To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?**

There is little doubt that the products created within NCREL are of high quality. NCREL has gone to great lengths to create products in a wide array of media which provide the broadest dissemination possible. The audiences for their products depend on the nature of the document, but generally include teachers, school technology teams, principals, superintendents, policy makers and the research community. Some of the products created are more focused than others, as in the case of work developed for the Iowa State Department of Education, where the target audience is the Iowa Department of Education staff, intermediate unit staff, professional developers and teachers.

The Lab utilizes a peer review process for products and services where appropriate. Two forms of this process have been made aware to the visiting panel:

1. Academic review process for development

Nationally recognized leaders are solicited to review materials created by the Lab, usually in an iterative process of development-review-refinement-review-refinement-deployment.

2. Field co-development process

Stakeholders from organizations targeted for field projects are brought to the table for a collaborative discussion on project direction, purpose and activities.

The products created within NCREL fall within three major areas:

- Print materials
- Online and electronic materials
- Field services

In the area of print materials, NCREL has an impressive library of works. NCREL's print library runs the gamut from draft academic papers to bound training materials, to glossy, magazine style reports. The overall quality of these materials, as reviewed by this panelist, appears to be very high. In cases where I was able to obtain background information on the development process for certain materials, such as the leadership training modules for technology, developed in conjunction with the Chicago Academy for School Leadership (CASL), the Lab appears to have gone to great lengths to solicit key stakeholder input in the development process. In the project with CASL, input came in the form of repeated focus group interviews with potential training groups.

The Lab appears to minimize duplication with similar efforts in its product development process. The collaboration with CASL provides an example, in that the training materials are a compilation of best available theory and practice, not a re-invention of what is available. What makes the training package for leadership in technology unique is not the tools (most presented are available from sources outside NCREL), but rather the fact that the tools have been brought together in one document/training unit for the first time.

The Lab's online and electronic materials are evidence of NCREL's commitment to deliver information as widely as possible. The Captured Wisdom and the Planning for Learning Through the Use of Technology CD-ROMs provide engaging delivery of the Lab's adaptation of the engaged learning models that seem to form the core of NCREL's learning agenda. The Pathways website is very popular in spite of being somewhat dated.

**1. Strengths**

High quality, engaging materials that constituents enjoy receiving and/or accessing.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

None suggested.

**3. Recommendations for improvement**

None suggested.

**IV. Utility**

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

It seems evident, particularly through the panel's interaction with the signature works, that NCREL conducts ongoing interaction with users of its products and services. In the case of Brentwood Elementary School, this ongoing interaction comes in the form of a dedicated staff member working with the teachers, helping them reflect on their own practice. Further, data from the Panel's focus group interviews suggest that the services provided by the Lab are useful and used by customers:

- NCREL is helping to develop a learning framework at Brentwood around which technology provides support, and is not merely an end in itself
- NCREL's presence in the school has fostered an attitude of learning and exploration with technology among the staff and students

- The Lab has established a rapport with its users that facilitates open and ongoing communication
- The Lab offers follow-up services when appropriate (also noted at Cardenas Elementary, the other signature work site)
- Services are designed and delivered in a user-friendly way given the constraints of the organizations. At Brentwood, email is used as a questioning method in lieu of classroom visitations, due to time constraints teachers have. Evidence suggests this is an effective way to dialogue with teachers regarding their practice.

In general, the Lab makes work available through a variety of modes, including CD-ROM, audio, video, print, Website, and in-person. In doing this the Lab provides its customer base with the option of selecting the one that best fits their needs.

### **1. Strengths**

NCREL is extremely flexible in its ability to create meaningful reform experiences for schools.

### **2. Areas of needed improvement**

An area of concern arises in the sustainability of NCREL's impact after it pulls out of a project.

### **3. Recommendations for improvement**

Outline with greater specificity how change will be sustained after field projects are over.

## **B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?**

The Lab makes an effort to identify customers and potential customers. The NCREL Resource Center handles all incoming field requests for information. As a special library within the DuPage Library System, the Resource Center is equipped to direct callers to appropriate materials, either developed by the Lab or by others. The Resource Center currently contains over 9,000 holdings.

Further, the Lab uses a variety of methods to assess customer needs. Of note is the Lab's collaboration with the Gallup Poll organization. NCREL (annually?) contracts with Gallup to conduct a random survey of 250 superintendents, 250 principals, and 250 teachers. This survey is designed to capture data on (a) Lab recognition, (b) Lab product quality, and (c) issues important to the Lab's customer base.

In terms of setting priorities in accordance with customer needs, NCREL is adept at this, particularly in the development and delivery of custom, field-based interventions. At Cardenas Elementary, the principal noted that consultants from NCREL work hard with the school and are considered more "coaches" than "consultants." Further, NCREL worked with Cardenas to determine the best program to address their reading and math deficiencies. Surveying the field, the school looked at the "Success for All" model, among others. Through their dialogue with NCREL, however, the teachers at Cardenas determined that the materials they had in place were fine. They decided that perhaps they weren't using the materials properly. It was around this decision that NCREL began the process of crafting an intervention.

The school worked with NCREL to identify incentives to change and a professional development survey to assess needs at the campus. In time, the principals noted, there was encouragement for the teachers to be leaders in their own professional development and growth, as well as encouragement to share knowledge peer to peer. This, I believe, is a demonstration of how NCREL is able to incorporate customer needs into its project planning process.

### **1. Strengths**

NCREL is explicit in its mandate to co-develop projects with field sites. Given what is known about the glacial pace at which organizations change, early buy-in from stakeholders in the field is crucial. Some may argue that the co-development process dilutes the impact that a

“purer” research based, clinical model may bring. However, any intervention that is merely “layered” upon existing organizational structures is likely to fail without some level of co-development.

## **2. Areas of needed improvement**

None suggested.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

None suggested.

## **V. Outcomes and Impact**

### **A. To what extent is the REL’s work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?**

In terms of outcomes and impact, NCREL states that they have:

- Helped schools to see how educational reform is systemic
- Influenced the way states, districts, and schools think about, plan, and use *technology*
- Influenced the way states, districts, and schools think about, plan, and use *professional development*
- Wider acceptance and use in the field of the concept of Engaged Learning
- Expanded policy sites and how information is disseminated to key stakeholders
- Empowered educators to make more informed, data-driven decisions
- Raised the level of teachers’ practice and student learning

Only in the last bullet does the issue of student learning become explicit. The first six bullets suggest that the model for improving student success is a correlational one, in that the bulk of the products and services created by the Lab are designed for consumption by trainers, or by teachers. These services and products, in the form of training, technical assistance, and print

products (including websites and CD-ROMs) are often deployed in a setting that is rich with complementary (and sometimes competitive) reform efforts. This makes assessing impact more difficult, let alone understanding the relationship of NCREL products to increased student learning.

### **1. Strengths**

This is a tricky area for the Lab to address. In order to assess student learning on a broad scale, the Lab will no doubt be forced to analyze state-wide standardized test scores. The types of teaching and learning that the Lab promotes may indeed raise scores, but the direct link is nebulous, and literature suggests that standardized tests are a poor measure of the kind of learning occurring in engaged learning environments.

### **2. Areas of needed improvement**

Broad education effort on the part of the Lab and sister institutions to demonstrate the failings of state-wide testing as a measure of REL success.

### **3. Recommendations for improvement**

Lobby state legislatures and Congress.

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

NCREL assists states and localities to implement school improvement strategies in several ways. In terms of bringing important projects to scale, the Center for Scaling Up is charged with:

- Contributing to the science of scaling up: building knowledge and documenting results
- Moving research-based school improvement information to the field

- Developing, disseminating, and providing training and professional development products and services for educators, with emphasis on establishing national leadership in technology applications for teaching and learning
- Building regional, state and local networks to facilitate the scaling up of educational innovation, including NCREL products and services

Through this Center, many products and services are delivered in ways that make them accessible to a wide audience.

Other items of note in this area:

- The Lab serves as an information resource for states and localities through it's Resource Center and through it's policy documents
- The Lab's Pathways website includes very useful information about comprehensive school improvement strategies
- The Lab demonstrates a tendency to work "with" partners rather than "for" partners as evidenced by its wide network of partnerships across its seven state region
- The Lab, through the EPIC, provides data to inform policy decisions, even to the local level with it's initiatives to drive data enhanced decision making in schools

### **1. Strengths**

The Center for Scaling Up provides an explicit avenue for bringing successful projects to scale.

### **2. Areas of needed improvement**

Critical analysis of what happens to the effectiveness of project work once it is brought to scale and training is conducted by other agencies.

### **3. Recommendations for improvement**

Follow-up studies (perhaps several case studies) on the "life" of a product once it is brought to scale and "set free" in the educational marketplace.

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

A review of a document listing selected presentations and publications of NCREL staff suggests that the Lab has published in relevant journals within the field (Journal of Research in Rural Education, Educational Technology Research and Development), as well as presented at salient academic proceedings (SITE, AERA, AEA), although most of the cited work has been delivered to regional applied conferences or internal proceedings. This is not a deficit, per se, but rather suggests that the applied, customer focus of NCREL is reflected in the staffs' research delivery. Where material has been developed that might not lend itself to journal publications, the Lab has disseminated its work through chapters and monographs.

In terms of requests for services both inside and outside the region, the Lab leadership noted that shifts in governance of public education have been reflected in the constituencies they now provide information to. An example included a renewed interest in education issues on the part of state governors' offices. NCREL now regularly provides information to legislative and executive aides from the state capitols in the region.

**1. Strengths**

As stated in the narrative

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

None suggested.

**3. Recommendations for improvement**

None suggested.

**VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services**

In my opinion, NCREL is doing a laudable job of serving its region and fulfilling its mission. Certainly any organization has room for improvement, but when one examines the scale at which NCREL must operate, the quality of work seems to shine even brighter. NCREL, with a staff of 120, serves a region of seven Midwest states that comprises 20% of the country's population (approximately 50,000,000 people) and approximately 25% of the nation's public schools (nearly 4,000 school districts). NCREL's impact is reaching beyond its region, particularly with its focus on technology as a delivery device. In general, NCREL's programs are well designed, its products are professional, and the services useful and contributing to sustained change in public schools.

## **VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement**

### **Strengths**

- The process of co-development works.
- Partnerships suggest great promise for scale up.
- NCREL's willingness to "get into the trenches" speaks volumes to its commitment to understand and improve schools.
- Intensive work in field sites provide a real-life context for research on practice.
- NCREL produces many high quality publications and products.
- The EPIC plays a crucial role in the success of the Lab. The QA cycles in place are paramount and clearly evident.
- The organizational structure tends to foster increased knowledge potential and may lead to sharing in the Lab.

### **Challenges**

- NCREL needs clear vision for strategies for taking something to scale.

- The organizational structure, while flexible may lead to stress within the organization as staff begin to have too many masters; potentially wear too many hats.
- Diffusion of treatment is an issue. Perhaps a new center devoted to training and delivery could increase fidelity of transfer, but this would be very expensive.