

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

### I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The North West Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) was one of the original (1966) RELs. In the thirty-three years of its existence, the NWREL has had three Executive Directors – Dr. Fish, Dr. Raths and Dr. Simon-McWilliams. The NWREL also has had three Board Chairs, whose terms have corresponded roughly with those of Executive Directors. A recent change in the structure and operating procedures of the Board of Directors has disconnected the Executive Director and Board Chair terms.

The NWREL includes five states – Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. It covers twenty-seven percent of the land mass of the United State but has only four percent of the people – approximately 11,000,000. Thus, although the region has a few major cities, much of it has only limited numbers of people and large areas are largely unoccupied.

The substantive work of the Laboratory is divided into (a) Training and Technical Assistance and (b) Research and Development. The Training and Technical Assistance work is further subdivided among seven centers – Equity, Mathematics and Science Education, National Mentoring, National School Safety, Technology, Community and Education Volunteer Services, and Comprehensive. Each center has its own operating budget and from five to ten professional staff members.

The Laboratory's research and development work is subdivided among five programs: Assessment and Evaluation, Rural Education Program, Education and Work, School Improvement, and Child and Family. Both the seven Centers and the five Programs report to the Laboratory Associate Director, Dr. Carol Thomas.

The administrative functions of the NWREL, including Finance, Human Resources, Development and Communications, and Planning and Program Development report directly to the Executive Director/CEO, Dr. Ethel Simon-McWilliams.

In order to coordinate and track the work of the seven centers and five programs, Dr. Thomas holds monthly half-day meetings of the twelve leaders of the centers and programs. The meeting agendas are organized primarily around cross-cutting issues, thus providing opportunity for resource sharing and coordination. Opportunity also is given for each center/program leader to keep others current on activities and achievements.

In addition to the monthly meetings, each center/program leader submits a monthly report of activities and future plans. To each five to eight page monthly report are attached important publications and other documents. Dr. Thomas provides informal written comments and feedback on each report.

A review of the March 1999 child and family program report showed that it includes personnel/staffing, budgets, proposals and contracts, deliverables and upcoming deliverables, program implementation activities, dissemination, future plans, and programs and activities. Each of these sub-reports contains useful and appropriately detailed information, including, for example, account numbers and both due dates for deliverables and the dates they were actually delivered.

Through the combination of monthly meetings and reports, as well as informal meetings and contacts, Dr. Thomas is able to provide leadership and coordination to the twelve very active centers and programs.

According to figures provided to the Panel, funds for the NWREL operations during

fiscal years 1996, 1997 and 1998 came from the OERI Regional Laboratories fund (\$14.8 M --34 % of the total), other Department of Education sources (\$15.5 M – 36% of the total; Corporation for National Service (\$2.3M – 5 % of the total), and state and local sources (\$10.7 M – 25% of the total.) (When the figures were broken down by program, the total was somewhat different.)

## **II. Implementation and Management**

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

The NWREL is doing very well what it was approved to do during its first three contract years. The work was carefully planned and it is being conducted in a thoughtful and constructive manner. Additional work also is being completed by the Laboratory as an institution under other grants and contracts, some of them being supplementary to the OERI Laboratory funding for the same general tasks and others being for new and, usually, related work.

#### **1. Strengths**

As indicated above, the monthly reports now being provided to the Associate Executive Director and then discussed with the respective center and program heads, permits tracking the performance of both the Centers and the Programs. The tracking process enables both the NWREL administration and the staff to be confident that the Laboratory is accomplishing what it was approved to complete during the first three contract years. These reports also permit anticipating future expectations and budgetary needs. In addition the reports provide a strong basis for discussions and for thinking that move across centers and programs.

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

As the work of the progresses, changes and improvements will be made in various

processes for being sure that work is planned and conducted in a timely and efficient manner, but I don't see any specific areas of needed improvement at the present time.

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

None noted.

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

NWREL conducts a biennial regional educational needs assessment, the most recent one being completed in 1997. Another needs assessment is scheduled for later this year. Each needs assessment has two major strands (a) a telephone survey that is contracted to an independent agency, and (b) one or more focus groups in each of the five states in the Region. The Board and staff use the results of these needs assessments in planning future Laboratory programs and directions.

In addition to this major needs assessment, the Laboratory regularly conducts follow up studies of workshops and all major training activities. It also keeps track of the sales of books and other publications and conducts surveys of current and developing needs for a variety of services and publications.

### **1. Strengths**

The biennial survey is an especially important effort and leads to a quite useful publication -- Northwest Trends Shaping Education: The 1997 Regional Education Needs Assessment. This publication contains basic information about schools in the region. It also reports trends that were revealed in the telephone survey and focus groups as well as information from various documents published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the Bureau of the Census, the Anne E. Casey Foundation and others. Besides information about the

region as a unit, the volume has a major section for each of the Region's five states. In addition to a wealth of information, the volume has a section that presents and discusses a set of implications of this information for the work of the Laboratory (pp. 47-48 of the report).

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

Additional written and audiovisual information about the excitement of school people with the Laboratory's programs and publications might be helpful. This comment is based on experiences in the visit that this panel made to the Laboratory in which the importance of NWREL programs to school people was made clear in the various focus group discussions. It is one thing when people are invited to present prepared testimonials; it is quite another thing when they are invited to "speak" to a panel and then are presented with a set of questions for their responses, as our panel did. In each instance the persons in the focus group represented the Laboratory extraordinarily effectively.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

Laboratory staff persons and those "users" who participated in the focus groups made extremely powerful statements to our panel, but our panel was composed of six persons who likely will have relatively little opportunity to speak with potential users about what they have seen and heard. For future reference, possible some videotapes or transcriptions of panel discussions such as the ones we experienced would be valuable for discussions with potential clients of the Laboratory.

## **III. Quality**

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

Overall, the NWREL appears to be producing high quality products and services. This is

judged by the demand for both their products and services, by examination of products and by discussions with teachers, administrators, and others familiar with their services.

### **1. Strengths**

Examples of strengths in the NWREL program are the Trait-Based Assessment for Writing, Trait-based Assessment for Reading, and the anticipated Trait-Based Assessment for Mathematics. Trait-Based Assessment for Writing was developed in the early 1980s and was immediately popular with elementary and secondary teachers. With the recently developing interest in “all children learning to read” the preparation of a Trait-Based Assessment Reading program was a natural follow up to Trait-Based Assessment in Writing. NWREL recognized the potential and quickly moved to conduct thorough literature searches followed by discussions with teachers and others. This preparatory work led to the identification of six traits of a good reader, traits that appear to parallel Bloom’s taxonomy, and that teachers can be taught to use in identifying ways in which children have progressed or not progressed in learning to read.

The NWREL work with Trait-Based Assessment in Writing anticipated a need. The later Trait-Based Assessment work has responded quickly and effectively to more recent needs.

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

The development and distribution processes being used by NWREL are quite effective. School and community requirements change over time. The needs sensing work that the NWREL is conducting will assist it in anticipating future demands. I do not see any great needs for improvement.

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

None.

#### **IV. Utility**

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

###### **1. Strengths**

As noted above the NWREL has in place a strong needs sensing process. When a need is identified, potential users are involved in the development process. A good example of this process is the one used in the development work with Trait-Based Assessment in Written and Oral Communication. Dr. Lesley Thompson described this process to our panel.

After conducting a thorough review of the literature and finding characteristics of effective readers that were mentioned with high frequency in the scholarly literature, Dr. Thompson interviewed a number of reading content specialists and then observed and talked with many classroom teachers. This process permitted her to combine the research information with the practical experience of those working regularly with students learning to read. As she and her colleagues worked with the approximately thirty skills of good readers that were mentioned, they found that the skills tended to “collect” in groups. Ultimately, the NWREL group identified six traits that good readers demonstrate.

The skills that good readers demonstrate then became the Six Traits that are the foundation for the NWREL publications and training in Reading Assessment. Their experience with NWREL Trait-Based Reading Assessment was discussed with our panel by teachers and reading specialists from Everett, Washington to Nevada to Iowa. In each instance, the visitors mentioned the importance of the “common language” that the Traits provide for teachers, teacher trainers, and classroom students. The visitors also indicated that the students made better progress when working with the Traits. (No one presented data to support these observations.)

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

More data are needed on teacher preparation and competence in using Trait-Based Assessment in the teaching of reading. The testimonials are useful, but more data also are needed on child progress in reading using this approach.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

NWREL should devote some of its own resources or obtain additional funding for the issues noted above. The Trait-Based Assessment approach to teaching reading is so promising that serious validation work is critical.

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

See Responses to Question IV.A.

## **V. Outcomes and Impact**

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

Student success is difficult to measure and the contribution of a given aspect of the student's life, including specific portions of the school experience, to greater academic success is especially difficult to assess. Nevertheless, the NWREL does have some evidence that both the Six Trait Writing Program and the School Improvement Program do have a positive impact on students, including academic progress. A great deal more work needs to be done in this entire area – by everyone, not just NWREL -- including the development and testing of instruments to use in place of or in addition to multiple choice achievement tests.

### **1. Strengths**

As suggested above, NWREL has some limited information about student success with

the Six-Trait Assessment Writing program. One teacher\leader reported that use of the Six-Trait Assessment of Reading program has changed her classroom and she told of third grade students who now voluntarily read from an hour to an hour and a half each night.

## **2. Areas of needed improvement and Recommendations for Improvement**

Each education program should collect information about program use as well as well as child success in the program. NWREL is no exception. Stating a rule is easy; living with it is much more difficult. Nevertheless, Laboratories are in a better position than are schools and individual teachers to design and conduct data collection and analysis efforts and NWREL should devote more resources to doing so.

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

Onward toward Excellence is NWREL's contribution to comprehensive school improvement. Many schools in the Northwest Region are using this model, but even more schools outside of the region also have begun to adopt it. One facilitating reason has been that Weyerhaeuser Education Foundation asked NWREL to make its "model" available in Mississippi. When Weyerhaeuser began lumbering operations in Mississippi, they recognized the need for better educated workers than was typical in Mississippi. When they learned of NWREL's success with its Onward to Excellence program, they made their request and then supported it with funding.

#### **1. Strengths**

In Onward to Excellence, the student is always at the center. This keeps the focus on the student. Schools that use the approach appear to be successful if they implement it seriously. Of the 33 Mississippi schools (with an average of about 50 to 70 percent of the children eligible

for free or reduced price lunches) using the approach, about seven were said to implement the model rather completely. In those seven schools, improvement is beginning to appear. One of the problems is a high turnover rate in leadership even in these schools. Mississippi state officials noted that the poorest schools were the ones making the greatest gains.

## **2. Areas of Needed Improvement**

Onward to Excellence appears to be moving forward well. One suggestion was that some other Regional Laboratories might have cooperated more fully NWREL in their regions in training and building the capacity to training on their own.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

None.

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

In the school renewal area, the NWREL has established a good reputation both in the region and nationally. This is demonstrated by the number of schools in both the five state area and in other states outside of the region that have adopted the On to Excellence approach.

## **1. Strengths**

Model is believed to work and has been widely adopted.

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

More evaluation work.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

No specific recommendations.

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

Overall, the NWREL has excellent programs, products and services. In fact, separating programs, products and services from each other is essentially impossible. A program usually is made up of a combination of products and services, and though not as clearly inseparable from each other as programs are from the other two, products and services also often are closely related. An example of a very strong combination of program, product and service would be the six trait writing and reading programs. Though developmental work led to the development of first the six trait writing and then the six trait reading programs with their related materials – but without the service component, the materials would not have been programs.

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

The NWREL is a strong Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratories came into being in a turbulent time, and, along with the other structures conceived under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, they represented a major experiment. Many of the original Laboratories disappeared within a few years. NWREL has operated effectively and continuously since 1966. By continuing formal and informal needs assessing and responding with strong programs to the needs of schools in the region, the Laboratory has experienced continuing success.

My primary concerns are with the recognition that teachers and administrators now being prepared in our colleges and universities do not have either enough information about Laboratories and Laboratory programs or close enough ties to Laboratories to make good use of this resource. I would urge that both the individual Laboratories and the OERI make greater

provision for inclusion of colleges and universities in Laboratory planning, program development, and dissemination.