

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

From April 5 – 9, 1999, I served as a member of a six-person peer review panel on-site at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's (NWREL) headquarters in Portland, Oregon. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to determine the Lab's compliance with its OERI contract during the first three years of a five-year contract (1995 – 2000). In preparation for the evaluation on-site I reviewed all materials assigned to the team prior to arrival in Oregon. During the visit, in addition to the listed agenda items, I had the opportunity to visit the Equity Center and to discuss, briefly, the work of the Center with its Director. NWREL, one of the original ten Regional Educational Labs established in 1966, serves five states: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

II. Implementation and Management

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

1. Strengths

NWREL has met, and in some cases exceeded its contractual obligations to OERI for the past three years. The quality of the work is high and well planned and executed. The Lab's intent to extend OERI Tasks as well as new or related work has succeeded with support from other grants and contracts. This ability to leverage funds is complemented by NWREL's ability to leverage other resources, especially "people resources" to increase program impact.

Onward to Excellence I and II (OTE) show a number of ways that leveraging funds and other resources have strengthened the Lab and a specific program: (1) several funding sources

over time have enabled OTE to build strategic alliances that include, for example, corporate foundations, state departments of education, school districts and schools; (2) OTE encourages and assists school systems to use grants and other funding sources for, for example, professional development, implementation and evaluation of OTE; and, (3) all NWREL program staff are housed in the same building making it physically possible to share information, strategies and other “intellectual” resources.

Establishing and maintaining relationships with appropriate agencies and individuals is important to the success of NWREL. Capability in this area is almost a “given” because of their long history with partnerships and other collaborative arrangements. The effectiveness of their work depends on such strategic alliances. The Lab plays a variety of roles in alliances, partnerships or networks depending on short and/or longer term goals, for example, convenor, information provider, moderator, technical assistance provider.

Certain components of NWREL are clearly strengths and central to their excellent performance during this contract period. The three most important are discussed briefly: (1) the Lab’s staff at all levels is highly qualified; (2) governance of the NWREL is carried out by strong involvement of the Board of Directors; and (3) the management systems, including planning processes are well developed and monitored by staff and the Board of Directors.

Highly Qualified Staff

I have both admiration and respect for all program staff that presented to us and/or engaged in discussion with us on-site. I include the Director of the Equity Center because I had the opportunity to meet with her in the Center.

At the beginning of this contract period significant changes in leadership occurred that have positively impacted NWREL operations. The new Executive Director exerted leadership in

assisting the Board of Directors as they reconfigured the governance structure. More recently an Associate Executive Director was hired from outside of NWREL through a national search. With the Executive Director, she has been instrumental in the management and operational changes that have taken place within the Lab and with its Board. Members of the leadership team with long tenure at the Lab provide continuity in ideas and in efficient management of programs and services.

Governance

Early in this contract period the NWREL Board of Directors was restructured and the Bylaws modified. The changes appear to have enabled Board members to be more deeply involved in institutional strategic planning and more seriously involved because of the new committee structure. The restructuring of the Board of Directors resulted in a move from a Board that operated in a highly ritualistic and uninvolved manner to an active, working Board. This paraphrases comments from a member of the Board during the panel's discussion with Board members on-site. Board members also stated to us that they are more proactive since the Board has been reconstituted.

Planning Processes and Management Systems

NWREL has a history and well-earned reputation of strength in these areas. Written material, presentations and discussions with NWREL staff and the OERI program officer, and an evaluation from the federal contract office provide information about several areas that are performing well. These include contract management, needs assessments, financial and program development, asset management and institutional evaluation.

Two categories of planning that have evolved or been improved during the past three years are program planning and NWREL's strategic planning to set institutional priorities.

In regard to program planning, a process is in place that increases communication across programs and centers, develops the leadership and management skills of directors and increases tracking procedures for program accomplishments and budgets. Some management structures that underpin this planning piece include: monthly program planning Council meetings; the development and use of comprehensive program plans; programmatic R&D work strands; cross program coordination; and program portfolios.

In regard to the Lab's Strategic Plan, I believe strongly that it is critical to the current and future success of NWREL that the Lab's Institutional Strategic Plan is dynamic, not static; it is a working plan. The Board of Directors and Lab staff review priorities and trends as well as accomplishments. There is a follow-up Action Plan to the Board's self-assessment and annually, input from the Board of Directors is used to prepare the next/coming year's Strategic Plan. A member of the Board told the panel in an on-site discussion that the Executive Director of NWREL has been supportive of the changes in Board operations, including the Strategic Plan.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

The broad area of staff development, for staff and for Board members, could be improved without additional cost. The Board of Directors has changed to an extent that changes in Board orientation and procedures should be reviewed. The Board of Directors, or the Board with Lab staff might develop a formal process for the orientation of new Board members. Written materials developed for this purpose could be shared with all Board members and serve as a "reorientation" means.

Increased attention might be directed at building an in-house "community of learners". Institutional staff development for professional staff might expand to include additional in-house study groups that address aspects of educational improvement using the literature or literature

reviews to prime the discussions. Some broad topics that come to mind are: the process of R&D, implementation assistance strategies (and dilemmas), infusing equity into the culture and curriculum of schools, and site based program evaluation. There is no “curriculum” for professionals engaged in R&D and outreach assistance activities. NWREL might take the lead in this needed area of development and review/synthesize the literature and other information, for themselves, other Labs, and other “role-alike” organizations.

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

1. Strengths

Two important means of self-monitoring were briefly described in the response to the previous question: program planning, monitoring and review, and developing, using and tracking an annual Strategic Plan. NWREL has a broad and well-developed set of institutional management systems that are central to ensuring high performance. Examples include: executive cabinet monthly meetings; analysis of business and operating results; new contracts and grants reports; and quarterly and annual plans and reports. These are a few examples of internal mechanisms that contribute to determining assessments of their work.

Two external assessments are of particular importance: needs assessment reports and institutional evaluation reports. "Northwest Trends Shaping Evaluation: the 1997 Regional Education Needs Assessment" is a particularly good example. This document provides information about the total region and breaks out information by the five states served. The process was enriched by state Forums and a household telephone survey. Together, they helped determine the level of need as well as awareness and use of NWREL's products and services. Reports from the Professional Activity Reporting System (PARS), contribute to the needs

sensing activities. PARS tracks NWREL's client contacts and services provided. In addition, programs and centers have needs assessment information of their own.

The institutional evaluation report uses the goals of the Strategic Plan as an organizational framework. This approach connects the evaluation to Board adopted strategic initiatives. The two reports I reviewed were straightforward, clear, informative, and provocative. These reports, although not required by contract, appear to have considerable value for staff, Board members and constituents.

The Lab has a well developed three level standardized system in place to assure the quality of products and services. "All NWREL products and services are subject to Quality Assurance reviews. Quality Assurance is an integral part of the development process and the resulting products and services." (NWREL document). The levels are:

- Level I: Formal research and development-based products and services
- Level II: Client-specific products and service development
- Level III: Informal products and service delivery

I find the process to be well-developed, understood by staff and used. It includes review of development plans and external as well as internal review of products and services.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

Perhaps a review of certain of the various means for self-monitoring would improve the system. For example, ways could be determined to try and improve response rates on instruments where they are low and to ensure representative client samples.

I find the tracking in regard to Strategic Planning to be well done. It is not always clear to me whether or how issues from commissioned studies are addressed or tracked.

III. Quality

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

1. Strengths

As described, NWREL's management and implementation processes are well-developed, proven, modified as needed, and consistently used. A number of these processes contribute to the development of high quality products and services at this Lab. Examples are the following.

Context Sensing

It seems to me that work carried out in this component of NWREL's work forms an important foundation for the procedures of the Lab's Quality Control component. In addition to formal needs assessments the Lab incorporates in to Context Sensing: "(1) identification of current trends and issues; (2) state general and leadership forums; Advisory committee reports/surveys; requests for assistance; Board of Directors input; and client follow-up through the use of PARS." Such planning processes, in combination with specific procedures of the Quality Assurance Plan and activities, shape the resulting products and services. It is noted that the responsibility for product and service quality review is delineated and that the procedures encourage the use of information from multiple reviews: for example, staff (Executive Director or designee); Advisory and Policy panels. The Board of Directors receives progress reports on a quarterly basis; their function is to insure that Lab staff follow the policy established by the Board for insuring quality. NWREL also uses literature reviews and field-based experiences to inform development.

The panel had the opportunity to learn about two signature works of NWREL's in depth, through advance and on-site materials and through presentations and discussions on-site with Lab staff and educators using the programs. For the purpose of this evaluation a signature work

is "a significant illustrative work of a Laboratory. The work must meet the following criteria:

- Be central to the major strands of work described in the REL contract, modifications, or annual updates;
- Represent a significant percentage of REL allocated resources (in \$ and/or staff);
- Be primarily funded by REL monies and/or represent a significant portion of the funding within a particular REL task;
- Have the potential for "scaling-up" and expansion;
- Be work accomplished in this contract period (December 1995 - December 1998);
- Be supported by sufficient data sources to facilitate a thorough review of the work." (DIR document)

I use here NWREL's recent descriptions of purpose and audience of the signature programs.

Classroom Assessment of Reading

The focus of this work is the identification of traits of effective readers and the development of assessment strategies to assess reading performance in relationship to the traits. This work is targeted to assist classroom teachers improve the assessment of pre-reading and reading skills in grades K-12.

Onward to Excellence II (OTE II)

Onward to Excellence II (OTE II) is a systemic improvement process focused on school/district/community systems. This is a flexible training and technical assistance program in which all stakeholders are engaged in improvement efforts to increase student learning related to community valued goals, including state standards.

Quality Assurance

Both signature works have well-developed Quality Assurance procedures for the R&D and pilot and field-testing stages of their programs. Both programs have developed the program and its "tools", products, training events and strategies based on a comprehensive and on-going

review of appropriate literature. Each program is using action research strategies in "real-world" applied settings to strengthen products and services. Although there is always some room for improvement, I find it a strength that many (most) of the Lab's products and services are interrelated. They build on one another and they are consistent with the Lab's mission. The two signature works also build on themselves; OTE II "grew" out of OTE I, a program with 15 years of experience, and the Reading Assessment program benefited from the processes and clientele of the Writing Assessment program which also has a 15 year history. Both programs have been productive during the first three years of the OERI contract.

Lead staff of both programs are invited to address national, regional and staff conferences and they are viewed as sources of expert information.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

Consider expanding products and services to engage broader audiences, for example, community members, teachers, non-English speakers. Given an increased focus on teaching and learning, Lab staff and the Board might be inclined to initiate an R&D effort that varies in its theory from behaviorism, the theory behind the effective schools movement (and OTE and Trait Based Assessment programs). For example, if some of the Lab's instructional or systemic change programs were grounded in constructivist theory, that might diversify and increase the Lab's clientele. It would also send a signal to educators in the region and the nation that NWREL can start something significant and "brand new" in addition to sustaining and "growing" its excellent well developed programs.

Although there are procedures for the Board of Directors to approve and monitor the Lab's programs and services "respondents continue to be concerned with knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each major program. One in three respondents is not satisfied with this aspect

of responsibility." (NWREL Board Post Self-Assessment, 1988, Summary of Findings)
NWREL has taken action to improve communication with the Board about program strengths and weaknesses; satisfaction regarding the monitoring and approval of services and programs may improve and will be tracked.

IV. Utility

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

1. Strengths

The data sources for this and the next question are nineteen documents that include, for example, planning, needs assessment, reporting system agendas, reports and surveys that relate to customer use and NWREL's response to customer needs. The first six documents speak to the use of products and services, and data from these reports run throughout this evaluation. Before offering a few examples of how the Lab's products and services of the two signature works are used, a few broad statements that apply Lab-wide.

NWREL's scope of sales and service is often impressive. The numbers are large for several items (10,000 - 1000,000 sales or distributions) and serve as one indicator of use. It matters to present and future planning that the Lab tracks and measures the use and usefulness of its products and services. Length of time that a Lab product has been in the market is also tracked.

For the two signature works it is possible to speak more directly to issues of utility.

- For both programs, the Lab provides an appropriate level of interaction with clients in regard to tracing opportunities and a range of program materials to support learning and implementation.

- Lab staff have a high degree of rapport with trainers and users of both programs: communication with trainers and users that we met is impressive.
- Products and services developed by the Lab are practical as well as "intellectual". They are designed to be user-friendly and are available in several modes, for example, print, websites, videos, cd roms, and in-person workshops.
- Approximately half of NWREL's clients are repeat users.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

NWREL has a number of types of connections with Institutes of Higher Education in the region it serves. Their use of products and services, however, is not high. Consideration and effort might be given to helping colleges and universities integrate Lab products and information about program and Center initiatives into their undergraduate and graduate teacher training programs. Although certain federally funded improvement programs have done this, perhaps most successfully the National Diffusion Network, this effort would require time, staff and financial support. I say this because use of the Lab's services and products will probably lead to other IHE interactions.

Some teachers reported to the panel that they are looking forward to using materials for teaching, from the Trait Based Reading Assessment program, that are more student-friendly. The program is attentive to this request and responding to it.

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

1. Strengths

Attention to customer needs, broadly defined, is at the heart of the Lab's work. That is, although it has special interests (especially "historical" interests) and advocacy positions, it strives to also be a responsive organization. If this were not the case, NWREL would not have lasted from 1966 to the present.

Eleven documents (data sources) inform the response to this question. They cluster in

these categories: documentation of NWREL's assessments; documentation of the Lab's customer feedback; and, institutional mechanisms to incorporate customer needs and feedback into planning. I mention this because I feel strongly that planning policies and procedures are key to the success of this Lab and that the purpose of the planning processes is to assure a high degree of quality and utility. What may appear to be only generalized statements on my part are backed up by documentation and data that connect to the quality and use of products and services.

Many specific examples could be offered to show that NWREL is focused on customer needs to a high degree throughout the many levels and stages of their work. Along with other panel members, I was impressed with the extent that the Lab uses feedback from customers overall and in particular cases. Members of the Focus Groups for the Trait Based Reading Assessment program and for OTE II reported the use of feedback and of processes and products by the Lab. For the Trait-based program, Focus Group members talked about the development and testing of processes and products and the subsequent use of field based information. For OTE II, Focus Group members reported that modifications occurred in response to user feedback.

Other examples, briefly noted here, indicated the range of processes the Lab employs to focus on customer needs.

- As mentioned earlier in this report, a Lab-wide system, PARS, is one method used to elicit customer feedback.
- NWREL has several mechanisms in place that connect with states in their region. In terms of on-going feedback, it seems that the State Liaisons play a critical role in establishing a feedback loop.
- The External Relations Committee on the Board of Directors is taking a proactive role in increasing communication and creating awareness about NWREL's services and products.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

Although NWREL often "tailors products and services to the intended audience", products and services might be improved by expanding the present effort to make some products and services culturally and linguistically appropriate to various intended audiences.

V. Outcomes and Impact

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

1. Strengths

NWREL has a system for working in partnership with schools. The system focuses on seven functions; six of these functions can directly contribute to student success. They are: (1) action research; (2) collaborative research; (3) co-development of programs; (4) validation/demonstration; (5) development of sustaining strategies; and (6) professional development. It seems to me that it is reasonable at intensive implementation sites, for example, for Trait Based Reading and OTE II, to expect to be able to determine a connection between program use and student success, if the degree and quality of implementation has been determined. Even in such sites, attribution is difficult if a school or school system is engaged in systemic improvement or "whole school" improvement.

In regard to the two signature works, there is rationale from the research literature that the work undertaken by these programs is likely to have an impact on student success. There is also evidence that these programs can contribute to increased student achievement.

The issue of the relationship of external assistance to student success is "old" and unresolved. On the one hand, all of NWREL's products and services are focused on this goal.

On the other hand, the Lab does not provide direct services to students, nor does it assist in all stages of an improvement effort, with the exception of work with Partner Schools.

A key issue for all RELs might be: What should be accepted as evidence of an REL's success? It seems to me that agreement across the system on this issue is important to RELs' future.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

In some cases, for example, in OTE, the Lab assists and encourages users of products and services to collect, analyze, and use student achievement information. This seems to me to be a good plan for users and for NWREL: it builds local "ownership" and capacity, and it is cost-effective. Perhaps the Lab could increase this type of collaboration with other programs and sites.

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

1. Strengths

Staff, Directors of the governing board, and a well operating infrastructure make it possible for NWREL to provide comprehensive reform work that is extensive, accessible and well regard regionally and nationally.

Certain initiatives are comprehensive in process and programs, for example, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRSD) program and OTE I and II. All Lab programs contribute to comprehensive improvement; they help to "put the pieces together".

Also, all other Lab initiatives can contribute to the success of implementation of comprehensive improvement strategies, from forums to publications.

One of NWREL's planning charts lists six indicators for field-based development and

applied research: "Develop, adapt and assess comprehensive education reform strategies in schools, districts, and states." The Lab's record is particularly strong in several areas: (1) number of partnerships with practitioners, policymakers and service providers; (2) quality of work at sites; (3) moving reform to scale; and (4) the utility of partnerships.

As one reflects on the array of development, service and dissemination efforts of NWREL in regard to this question, a number of broad statements come to mind. They include:

- The Lab serves as an important information resource for states and LEAs;
- Major findings from research based literature are distilled and made available;
- The Lab works with educators to tailor models to meet their needs;
- Technical assistance is provided during several stages of an improvement process, e.g., planning, professional development, implementation;
- The Lab's website includes useful information about comprehensive school improvement strategies;
- Staff of the Lab work to build capacity at partner sites. They work "with" rather than "for" partners;
- Policymakers call on the Lab for information.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

NWREL uses the term "scaling up" as defined in the RFP in most of its documents. In presentations and discussions the definition is sometimes used as "doing more" rather than as a specific process of sites/Lab assisting other sites. I believe this term from business can be redefined; it is useful however to have the term used consistently. Perhaps a short-term "scaling-up" study group could be established at the Lab, using literature from business and educational dissemination as a means of beginning the discussion. The definition of this term and strategies for carrying out the definition could be discussed system/REL-wide. Without clarification and agreement on the use of this term it will continue to confuse educators, the public, and the media.

Although the Lab has a broad array of materials on different school improvement strategies, they tend to have a similar theoretical or pedagogical base. The Lab might consider expanding the repertoire of improvement strategies.

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

1. Strengths

School Change Processes is NWREL's national specialty area, a natural progression given its work in this area over the past fifteen years and its excellent reputation in this area.

The Lab offers three components of work in the specialty area: "(1) consolidating and disseminating knowledge; (2) promoting and facilitating collaborative action; and (3) facilitating comprehensive school reform under the Obey-Porter legislation."

During the first three years of the current contract the Lab has been productive as it reached out to educators nationwide. A primary effort has been "showcasing" OTE II for CSRD sites and other school districts.

Collaborative arrangements with other institutions and agencies have included the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (Brown), the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), ASCD, and the Laboratory Network Program (LNP).

The level of product dissemination is high, by print and website as is involvement in regional and national conferences on School Change.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

The collaborative work underway and planned with seven members of the LNP might be increased over the next two years. The topics selected are important: learning communities and school self-study. Work to-date provides a good foundation for intensifying these efforts

of the School Change Collaborative of the LNP.

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

NWREL is an excellent Lab that works successfully to "stay ahead of the wave", to take a leadership role in a time of rapidly shifting educational priorities, alliances and financial arrangements. Its management and its operating practices are exemplary. Major strengths are its capable executive leadership team, its dedicated staff and its strong Board of Directors. NWREL has a fine reputation for its products and services, for me, reinforced by this evaluation. NWREL is contributing to school improvement regionally and nationally, particularly in its specialty area, School Change Processes. NWREL is meeting, and in several instances, exceeding expectations in accomplishing the Tasks of its OERI contract.

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

1. Strengths

NWREL has many strengths; some are elaborated in response to the previous eight questions. Rather than summarize or repeat in total, prior strengths described, this brief section is quite impressionistic. Those characteristics that stand out for me, without notes or reviewing this text, are included for strengths, areas of improvement, and recommendations.

A major impression that will stay with me is the Executive Director saying to us: "Will the work we do benefit children in the classroom?" I believe that this perspective came to ascendance at NWREL with this Executive Director and that the message percolates throughout the organization, including the Board of Directors.

Certain planning processes are extremely well done, particularly the annual Strategic Plan and the Lab's Quality Assurance process.

The many procedures used to develop and manage the Trait Based Reading project are impressive. They are essentially a case-study of collaborative action research with an intelligent, caring leader. This needed program should have continued support. That new users are discovering OTE II is informative. That is, given my experience, I have long familiarity with programs like OTE. That young principals in the Focus-Group on-site were considering the use of OTE II, convinces me that "age" of program should not be a negative factor.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement and Strategies for Improvement

It's interesting, but even with five days on-site, I could not get a good handle on the corporate culture, the corporate environment of NWREL. To some extent, it seems to me that improved internal staff development might not only increase the knowledge and skills of professional staff, it might provide a means of organizational understanding and communication.

The Lab's level of collaboration with institutes of higher education was a concern to all panelists. It seems to me that study of this concern would be helpful. Perhaps a Task Force of staff, Board members, others in and outside of the region could brainstorm this issue.

I do think that NWREL should make its repertoire of school improvement R & D programs wider, in terms of pedagogical and ideological foundations. This would be less critical if the National Diffusion Network or other means of accessing a diverse pool of proven practices were in operation under federal support. I support the extension of NWREL's programs that have done good work for fifteen years, however, it seems crucial now to include a broader audience.