

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

### I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory

The peer review panel assigned to the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) conducted a site visit at the Laboratory headquarters in Austin, Texas, from May 10-14, 1999. The review panel consisted of six professional educators, from five different states, which included two university professors, a developmental therapist, a public school superintendent, a research and evaluation specialist, and a private educational consultant. The review panel members examined a large sample of products, services, and activities developed and provided by SEDL's staff during the previous three fiscal years pursuant to the OERI contract. Additional information was obtained from interviews with SEDL chief administrative officers, staff members, board members, and clients and co-developers of products and services.

### 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

The management and staff at SEDL experienced major changes during the first two years of the contractual period. These changes included the resignation of the chief executive officer (CEO) and the hiring of a new one. SEDL then conducted a major programmatic review that led to a new organizational structure and modifications to the REL contract with OERI. Subsequently, a number of personnel changes occurred at the management level and many new positions were created to better carry out the new emphasis on being more client-centered rather than contract-driven. Of the current staff of 100 employees, approximately 53 are recent hires.

This series of internal events delayed the conduct of several projects and deliverables as outlined in the original approved contract. Most of the products examined by the review panel were completed during project year three of the contractual period, which is in accordance with the approved modifications.

The panel observed a number of strengths in the implementation and management of the REL. The comprehensive program review, although it disrupted the work schedule of the original contract, is an indicator of the visionary leadership of the organization. Two of the stated purposes of the review were (a) to assess SEDL's resources and strengths, and (b) to identify ways in which programs and services can be linked through a coherent conceptualization of SEDL's role and approaches. The results of such a focused review allowed management, staff, and the board the opportunity to take a critical look at its current role in the field of educational research and development, as well as its capacity to compete successfully in the new millennium.

Other strengths noted by the panel include the development of informal networks with other RELs, particularly as it relates to the current interim evaluation. Such alliances enabled SEDL staff to be better prepared to present relevant information to the review panel by being aware of what happened on earlier review panel site visits to RELs. The list of presentations, workshops, and publications submitted to the panel suggests that efforts have been made toward enhancing SEDL's reputation in the region in the field of educational development. As stated in the contract, SEDL has made a concerted effort to serve clients in the targeted areas of concentration within the five-state region. Also, the make-up of SEDL's Board of Directors is reflective of the geographical region that the REL serves.

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

SEDL's target population is limited to only a small segment of the five-state region that it serves (Native American Nations, the Delta, the border areas, rural areas, and urban areas). Even though this action is in accordance with their approved application, such a limited service area in a large geographical region may limit their capacity to generalize research findings to school settings that are different from the target school populations. Hence, the utility of their products and deliverables may be limited.

Little evidence was provided that supports the notion that SEDL has put forth a serious effort to recruit and hire a candidate for the manager of the Language and Diversity Program. This is especially disturbing for several reasons: (a) the REL's specialty area is language and cultural diversity (Goal 2/Task 7), (b) the position has been vacant for several years, and (c) nearly one fourth (24 percent) of the REL's budget appropriation is allocated to this area of work. The COTR assigned to SEDL expressed similar concerns. Equally disturbing, when the matter was posed to the Board of Directors during the scheduled interview, no indication was provided by the Board that they were aware of the designated specialty area or the vacancy. This, however, was contradicted by the Board minutes. Also, the manager of the Evaluation and Policy Studies Department (formerly the Office of Institutional Assessment and Evaluation) has been vacant for several years. SEDL's two executive officers are serving as interim managers of these areas. Lack of leadership in both departments can have a negative impact on the conduct of approved work and the quality of the work that is conducted.

SEDL's operational budget appears to be heavily dependent upon the federal government. Minutes for the Board of Directors' meetings reflect serious concern over this issue. Their recommendations directed SEDL's management to reduce the organization's dependence upon the federal government as a revenue source. In fact, in fiscal year 1997,

project year three, (December 1, 1997 to November 30, 1998) nearly all (99.2 percent) of the SEDL's entire budget was granted from the U.S. States Department of Education. The panel could not make a determination of the exact percentage of the budget generated from the Department of Education during the current year, fiscal year 1999. SEDL received the final appropriation from the U.S. Department of Education on Wednesday (May 12), during the week of the review panel's visit. Those funds were not submitted to the panel. Nevertheless, of the 1999 revenue sources reported, the Department of Education still provides the majority (85.6 percent) of the operational budget.

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

1. It is recommended that SEDL consider expanding its geographical service base within the five-state region. This would increase the number and demographic make-up of the schools that would be available for project development and refinement. Such a change may enhance the utility of its products and increase its reputation within the region.
2. SEDL should critically examine why two significant management positions remain vacant in the fourth year of the REL contractual period, especially the manager of its specialty area, language and cultural diversity. It is recommended that this review be conducted as soon as possible. A plan should be developed and executed immediately to fill the position. If their efforts fail, then SEDL's management council and board members should reconsider whether or not they can effectively carry out the work they were contracted to do in this goal area and if modifications should be made in this goal.
3. It is recommended that the Board of Directors, CEO, and Management Council at SEDL make a concerted effort to reduce the proportion of its operational budget that is appropriated by the federal government and other public sources, such as local and state education agencies. Failure to direct immediate attention to this issue may prove to be a major detriment to the organization in the future.

**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**

SEDL has a comprehensive quality assurance (QA) process that involves staff members throughout the entire organization. SEDL appoints a QA team consisting of staff from various departments and projects for each of the REL's goals. The QA team reviews all products and deliverables that are produced. The team focuses on the purpose, audience, and utility of the product. Leadership of each team rotates annually.

A review is required of all completed documents and products, however, the review can be held prior to completion. In either case, when problems and concerns surface during the QA review, suggestions and recommendations are provided to the staff that developed the product for refinement and improvement. The QA process has two other review levels before the product is sent to the COTR at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C. for final review.

The staff assigned to signature works reviewed by the panel uses surveys, questionnaires, and other ethnographic techniques to monitor its progress and collect information that enable them to improve products and services during the development of projects. Several of these instruments were designed to show change in attitudes as well as knowledge. Site visits were widely used in each project.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

Based upon the signature works reviewed and the description of the QA process presented, SEDL does an excellent job with assuring the quality of the products that it develops with respect to purpose and audience as set forth in its contract. However, the quality of its

products' utility can not be accurately determined since many of its works are in-progress. How to determine the utility of products that are in-progress and those that have not been developed is an area of concern.

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

1. Given that SEDL is in the fourth year of the five-year contract, management should place emphasis on completing the developmental process of several products and the dissemination of those products to new clients and interested RELs. This will ensure the capacity of those products to be scaled up and used in other educational and/or community settings.

## **III. Quality**

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

#### **1. Strengths**

Given the delayed start up of several projects as a result of the program review, SEDL has developed several good products. The literature reviews that provided the theoretical framework for the CAT and TAP projects were well written and present practical information for educational program managers and central staff personnel, especially those who are in the design stage of a technology program or a school-community partnership program. The newsletters, CAT guidebook, CAT self-assessment instrument, and webpages appear well designed and appropriate. Perhaps, a better indicator of the quality of the products and services that were provided are the client utilization statistical reports and the website hits reports. Both of these reports reveal very high use. The website report shows significant increases in the number of hits since its inception in 1995.

A major indicator of the quality of the CAT and TAP project services is the testimonies given during the client interviews. All educators selected for the two interviews gave glowing remarks about the quality and benefits of participating in the programs. All clients reported that

services should be extended and had a tremendous impact on the educational settings in which they worked.

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

Based upon the documents submitted to the panel and the interviews with project staff, SEDL had limited direct input from outside experts in developing a constructivist learning environments using technology and in building community based partnerships with schools. Their expert advice appears to be based mainly on the theoretical framework offered by the selected sources used in the literature reviews. Peers reviewers, other than in-house peers on the quality assurance teams, seem to be non-existent. A missed opportunity was utilizing the skills of experts employed at the leading schools of education and technology at universities in the five-state region, and other RELs who have done substantive work in these areas. The quality of these reviews and development of the models could have been improved immensely had such collaboration and consultation occurred. This type of collaboration occurred in the development of the Organizing for Diversity modules.

SEDL indicates that it wants to become a national leader in the contracted areas of work in the field of education. Several staff members in the technology program (Goal 5) stated that their work in building the constructivist learning environments would reform and improve teaching. However, SEDL made no claims that the technology program will increase student achievement. In fact, no research will be conducted to determine whether or not the technology program and products will have a direct impact upon increasing student achievement scores. This raises a major concern, i.e., how can an educational organization become a national leader in education if the products and programs that it develops specifically for schools who serve children from academically deprived and economically disadvantaged children can not be shown

to increase achievement scores.

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

1. SEDL should consider using outside reviewers in the targeted areas of product development in the quality assurance stage of product development. University professors in the five-state region and other RELs who have conducted work in those areas would be valuable resources.
2. It is recommended that SEDL reconsider the major questions in its research and evaluation designs. Despite the testimonies of the selected clients on the video tapes and the interview panels, the definition of success should include evidence of increased student achievement and learning. If national prominence is to be achieved by SEDL or any other educational development agency, a serious investigation of the merit and worth of an educational intervention in increasing achievement test scores, as well as improving teaching and the learning environment, must be conducted.

## **IV. Utility**

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

#### **1. Strengths**

The clients served in the targeted schools reported that the processes currently used in the TAP and the CAT programs are very useful. Both groups requested that the services be expanded within their districts and extended beyond the contractual period. Several teachers indicated that the TAP program has increased the academic growth of their students during the one year that it has been implemented. Participants in the CAT program feel that parents, students, and community participants have been empowered and shown how they can use their power to improve the services provided to their children in the school building and the community.

SEDL staff appears to have established very active and supportive relationships with staff, parents, and students who participant in the programs. These bonds appear real and lasting,

with mutual respect and positive regard for each other. Teachers in the TAP program stated that they have no problems contacting their staff person when needed. They indicated that SEDL staff can be contacted by regular mail, a toll free telephone number, and e-mail. In almost all instances, they have established contact immediately or within a reasonable amount of time.

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

Both the CAT and the TAP programs are process oriented services. However, clients in both groups indicated a desire for achievement data. One teacher in the TAP noted that she knows that her students in the current school year (1998-99) have learned much more than those she taught last year (1997-98), but she does not have the data to support that claim. Two teachers, a principal, and an assistant superintendent in the CAT program made similar testimonies and all stated that they wished that SEDL would conduct an evaluation of the programs' impact on achievement. This need area, evidence of achievement effectiveness, is lacking in both programmatic areas.

SEDL could receive more recognition for their REL work if more educators within the region, and in the nation, were aware of their work. Technology, community-school collaboration, and language and cultural diversity are areas of tremendous concern to educators and community agency staff in SEDL's entire service area, not just the five target "sub-regions". Of the members of the review panel, all are professional educators, only one was familiar with the work of SEDL. This is especially significant when considering that two of the panel members lived in SEDL's service region and are employed in the educational research and development field.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

1. SEDL should consider expanding both programs by linking both to academic achievement, then following up with the development sites to determine the

programs' impact. If time and resources become a concern for SEDL, then project staff should provide technical assistance to schools and districts to help them set up their own evaluation research studies. In either case, both SEDL and schools would benefit from the results.

2. SEDL must examine the area of agency and project recognition in their region. If school personnel and community educators in its services area are not familiar with the REL's work, or do not recognize it as a reputable educational development Laboratory in their state or region, then the utility of their products will be limited.

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

**1. Strengths**

SEDL's philosophy for programmatic work states that the REL's resources are focused on schools and agencies that serve high concentrations of students in at-risk situations in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas. Within these states are five specific "priority areas" that they target for service. These areas are the border, the Delta, the Native American Nations, rural areas, and urban areas. Much of the development process of SEDL's work takes place in these schools with educators in the field actively involved as co-developers. This development process allows the co-developers and service recipients in the development sites the opportunity to provide immediate feedback to SEDL staff. In turn, the services or products being developed can be changed or redesigned as needed. It appears that this approach to project development improves the final products, thus, enabling them to better meet the needs of teachers and students served in these areas.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

SEDL's approach to service delivery is very strong on development, training, and technical assistance. The agency use of research in product development is often limited to a review of related literature and lessons learned in the field. Although this process is sound, it may limit widespread use of their products because they have been tailored to meet the needs of

needs of only a segment of the students population in the entire region.

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

1. Based upon the interviews with the TAP and CAT clients, and the documents reviewed, SEDL appears to meet the needs of the clients involved in the development of the two major signature works. Hence, no recommendations for improving this goal can be made.

## **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**

Most of SEDL's programs have not been implemented long enough to determine the long-term impact of the products and services on student achievement or teaching practice, and no formal evaluation has been conducted to determine the short term impact. However, as stated previously in this report, SEDL's clients provided numerous testimonies about the positive effects that project services have had on student success.

SEDL staff members take extensive field notes during their classroom observation to record teacher practice and students behavior that may be linked to the training and technical assistance that they provide to the schools. These notes are taken throughout the development phase of a project. The data collection plan and identified student outcomes for the CAT program will allow SEDL and school staff the opportunity to analyze student success over time if needed.

Based upon the activities reviewed and especially the interviews with project staff, it seems as if several of SEDL's projects will provide some useful information that will increase understanding of several educational issues of regional interest. One example is the reading

project with Grades K-2 teachers in New Mexico and Texas. Although the focus of this project, as with most of SEDL's work, is on changing teaching practice, this research should generate some important findings about the cognitive dimensions of successful and unsuccessful early childhood readers.

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

SEDL's projects focus heavily on changing teacher practice and community partnering. Although it is expected that student learning should increase and a result of better teaching and increased collaboration between the school and community, the achievement of those outcomes can not be assumed. SEDL can improve the overall significance of all of its products if more effort was directed to evaluating the impact that its products have upon traditional student outcome variables.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

1. It is recommended that REL programs include program evaluation of all school-based products as a major function of the goal area. Evaluation data to such the sound developmental process that SEDL employs will only enhance the quality and utility of its products and deliverables.

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

#### **1. Strengths**

Many of SEDL's Laboratory programs are still under development, yet, some successes have been observed. Most of the observational data have been used to refine the development of their programs and products. Still, the developmental processes employed could serve as a model for, or strategies that can lead to comprehensive school improvement. The CAT, the TAP, and the reading programs are excellent examples of projects that could help educators improve teaching and learning through out an entire school building. Also, the Cultural

Diversity Training modules have great potential to provide strategies for comprehensive schoolwide improvement.

SEDL's programs and services mentioned above could be used as a model to build or create an excellent school at its inception. According to one principal, this was done at a new school in Austin, Texas, which opened its doors to students in the Fall 1998 semester. The school's technology plan was developed in concert with SEDL's TAP facilitators. The informal evaluation results of student achievement reported by the principal matches that of other more affluent students at her previous school.

SEDL's Goal 3 work activities provide opportunity for the Laboratory to analyze and influence policy in the five-state region. SEDL convenes a network of regional policy analysts that address existing legislation and policy development. The Regional Policy Analysts and Advisors Network meets annually and have written occasional papers on issues such as charter schools, accountability, and teacher training.

The work that is conducted by SEDL's Goal 6 staff is focused almost exclusively on issues that influence school reform and improvement. One of their programs, FIRST, focuses on school change and is being developed in one intensive site in each state in the service region. The project is designed not just to find out how to effect school change, but how to get the major players together in the first place to seriously look at the elements of the change process and understand that they are key elements. FIRST is still at the fact-finding stage and little has been conducted at this time on integrated change work within schools.

Goal 6 staff also participates in a school change collaborative, which is conducted by the Northwest Laboratory. They meet regularly with representatives of other Labs and their work is focused around models funded by the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR/D)

program. All of the work in Goal 6 is predicated on what works for children. Their overall goal is to determine what will happen in these schools that will affect learning outcomes for students. They plan to do this by examining the interaction between the teacher and the students in all of their projects.

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

The manager of Goal 6 stated that little work has been conducted beyond the fact-finding stage of project FIRST. This project shows great promise and is the only program reviewed where the linkage to student learning and achievement is readily apparent. Steps should be taken to ensure that adequate and timely progress is made. The focus on student achievement and teacher impact on achievement seen in Goal 6 is lacking in other goal areas.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

1. The manager of Goal 6 believes that all of the REL's work should be linked to student learning and achievement, yet, this important linkage is only implied through theory in other work. Based upon interviews with other staff, there appears to be little interaction outside of the QA teams in planning and designing work task. The manager and staff of Goal 6 should be used as facilitators to ensure Laboratory-wide collaboration to enhance the quality of all activities.

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

#### **1. Strengths**

SEDL's specialty area is language and cultural diversity. Nearly one-fourth (24 percent) of the REL's funded are allocated to this department. The specialty area has a number of excellent components that attempts to meet the needs of schools located in areas that have students with many academic, economic, and social needs. Some of these programs and services are the Organizing for Diversity training program, the Native American issues ethnographic study, and the Diversity in Communities study circles.

Another strength is the program staff. The Language and Diversity Department employs several individuals who appear to be very dedicated to and capable of working with individuals served by the program. SEDL management and staff must be commended for recognizing the need to discontinue the Educator Exchange program when they did. This is another indicator of the leadership skills of SEDL's management.

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

Several vacancies remain that impacts the conduct of significant contractual projects in the specialty area. SEDL's targeted priority areas consist mainly linguistically and culturally diverse students who live in conditions that place them at-risk of failure in schools. The failure to provide leadership in the Language and Diversity Department may have an impact on the overall success of the entire REL. The COTR indicated that SEDL is expected to integrate diversity principles for effectively serving student groups at-risk of failure in all of their work; yet, this has not occurred. This issue is a significant concern of all panel members as well. However, SEDL's board members and management do not appear to share the same level of concern.

The need for the presence of leadership in this area goes far beyond the completion of programmatic work. This department could have a wide spread impact upon all of SEDL's program staff. It was most disturbing when a male Anglo staff member stated that many Cherokee students in a predominantly Native American school located in Oklahoma "look white and many of them don't care about culture". This statement was made during the interview with the evaluation review panel. It is indicative of an attitude of a person who is indifferent, unconcerned, and uncaring about the population being served. Whether typical or an isolated case, the need for serious and immediate attention to cultural and diversity issues at SEDL is

evident.

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

1. An immediate review should be conducted to determine why the position is needed, why the position has not been filled, if the selection criteria for the position are realistic, and what must be done to fill this position. The members of the review panel should include a representative of the Management Council, a diversity trainer, a bilingual educator, and two members of the Language and Diversity staff. The make up of the review committee should include at least one African American, Hispanic American, and Native American.
2. SEDL's management should reconsider the reasons why language diversity and cultural diversity have been combined into one department. The two are completely different problem/need areas and are not necessarily related. The skills and knowledge for one may not suffice for the other. A Spanish bilingual educator may be knowledgeable of cultural diversity issues, while an English speaking Native American may not be knowledgeable of language diversity issues.

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

It is widely known that effecting change in an organization is a process that may take several years to achieve the desired results. This is especially true in educational institutions. One reason is that education institutions often have limited resources and public pressure demands that they spend dollars on programs that appear to have an immediate impact upon achievement. Another reason is that education is a developmental process in and of itself that is aimed at producing life-long learners over a minimum of 13 years.

SEDL's job, as specified in its contract, is to "find, share, and sustain effective solutions for the most urgent problems facing educational systems, practitioners, and decisionmakers...." Their primary strategies for fulfilling the spirit and letter of their contractual agreement are "development, dissemination, training, and technical assistance, supported by evaluation and applied research." SEDL made a number of major revisions to its contract, which delayed the implementation of much of the REL's work. Hence, most of the work reviewed in this

evaluation occurred during the last two years. Still, SEDL is accomplishing most of the work in all goal areas.

The Laboratory staff have developed a number of excellent products, created collaborative partnerships in schools and communities, and began the development of several major projects that show promise for educators, and students throughout the regions. Equally notable is the dedication and capabilities of its staff. Nevertheless, SEDL has much work that must be completed if it is to fulfill all of its contractual agreements.

This is the fourth of a five-year contract and two key management positions in two significant work areas remain vacant. Several projects are being conducted but without needed leadership and direction in the REL's specialty area, language and cultural diversity. The manager of the Evaluation and Policy Studies Department is the other vacant position. Sound product and outcome evaluation strategies are missing elements in many of the REL's projects. Very little evidence of attempts to link services to student outcomes was shown. These voids will, undoubtedly, impact product utility and dissemination of many products.

It is possible for SEDL to complete all product development and technical assistance activities. Although the completion of its project may fulfill the letter of the law, this panel member wonders whether the spirit of the law that established the REL's will be met. Ultimately, students must achieve at levels that empower them to make satisfactory adjustments to ever-changing conditions in a global society during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.