

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the WestEd Regional Educational Laboratory Synthesis Report

Introduction

WestEd is one of ten Regional Educational Laboratories (REL's) funded by the United States Department of Education through its Office for Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). Funding is provided through a competitive process for a five-year period. The current funding period is from December 1995 to December 2000. During the third year of the current contract, all REL's are required to undergo a peer-review interim evaluation which incorporates procedures articulated in the *Standards for Conduct and Evaluation of Activities Carried Out by the Office of Educational Research Improvement (OERI) for Evaluation of Recipients of Grants, Cooperative Agreements, and Contracts*. This report synthesizes the assessments of peer review panelists for the interim evaluation of WestEd.

The panel selected to conduct the interim evaluation of WestEd consisted of Jamal Abedi (UCLA Graduate School of Education and the Center for the Study of Evaluation and Testing); Robert Donmoyer (The Ohio State University), panel chair; Betty Mace-Matluck (independent consultant); Jessie Pollack (Maryland State Department of Education); and Joyce Stern (independent consultant). These panelists reviewed the multiple operational documents specified in the *Standards* and a sampling of materials selected collaboratively by Decision Information Resources, Inc. and the OERI program officer assigned to WestEd. A list of the materials reviewed is attached.

Additionally, the panelists conducted on-site data collection activities from April 12-16, 1999 at the Laboratory's main headquarters in San Francisco, California. (The Laboratory also has offices elsewhere in the San Francisco bay area, as well as in Los Angeles and at other

locations in the four-state region it serves.) In addition to participating in the presentations and interviews listed on the attached agenda for the site visit, panel members almost daily posed formal questions to WestEd officials. These questions had emerged out of panel members' readings of written materials, their on-site data collection, and/or their group deliberations. WestEd officials, in turn, responded either orally or in writing to these questions. When appropriate, they also supplied additional documentation related to the questions posed.

I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory and the Region It Serves

WestEd's REL contract stipulates that it serve the states of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. The four-state region is one of the fastest growing regions in the country. The region has a population of 41 million; 11 million are under the age 18.

The region served by WestEd is diverse in a number of respects. One obvious indicator of diversity is the population of the region: While the region has 16 percent of the total United States under-18 population, it has 25 percent of the minority under-18 population. In some states, the percentage of minority students is even higher: A total of 25 percent of the students in the state of California, for instance, are classified as having limited English proficiency.

Implicit in the previous paragraph is another sort of diversity within the region WestEd serves: diversity between and among the region's four states. The child poverty rate in Utah, for instance, is 12 percent, yet in California the rate is 25 percent. The states also differ in terms of their political cultures. The chief state school officer from one state in the region assured us that it would have been impossible to implement recent state legislation requiring the development of standards and a statewide assessment system without WestEd's technical assistance since her state was too small and its department of education too lacking in technical expertise in the assessment area to have gotten the job done. The state of California, by contrast, is large and has

a large and technically sophisticated education department.

Despite the many differences among the four states in the region WestEd serves, the educational issues emerging from each state often seem surprisingly similar. All four states, for instance, are involved with the issue of standards and assessment, and most if not all are struggling with what to do with students with limited English proficiency. Sometimes the policy “solutions” and the political tactics employed to implement the “solutions” in each state are virtually identical. The recent move to eliminate bilingual education through referendum in California, for example, now has a counterpart referendum movement in the neighboring state of Arizona.

Not only are many policy issues consistent from state to state in WestEd’s four state region, the issues also are reflected in WestEd’s REL proposal to OERI. This congruence should not be surprising since WestEd has served the region--albeit in a somewhat different organizational form--since 1966. In essence, WestEd is both old and new: “Old” in that it has emerged out of two regional entities of long standing--Southwest Regional Laboratory and the Far West Laboratory, both of which were founded in 1966; “new” in that it was constituted from a 1995 merger of the two groups. The merger of these two organizations has resulted in a large, intellectually strong, and experienced organization whose potential to positively impact educational policy and practice in the region and beyond was well articulated in the technical proposal WestEd submitted to OERI to be named a Regional Educational Laboratory. WestEd was awarded the contract it sought; WestEd’s REL contract currently represents 16 percent of the WestEd budget.

The Department’s RFP for regional educational Laboratories required that Labs articulate broad-based comprehensive school improvement strategies; conduct programs of development and applied research; promote widespread access to information about educational research and

best practices; promote excellence and equity; enhance collaboration between schools and parents; involve practicing educators; provide access to services; and use enhanced technologies in their operations. Substantive priorities articulated in the RFP included asking Labs to help “put the pieces together” to enhance systematic reform and to “scale up” reform for wider impact. Other requirements were that (1) models be constructed in which technology is integral, (2) Labs partner with others to further a nationwide education information and assistance system, and (3) links be forged with the research community. Each Lab is also expected to provide national leadership in a designated specialization area. WestEd’s designated area is assessment and accountability. The status of WestEd’s attempt to address these charges is discussed in the remainder of this report.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what it was approved to do during the first three contract years?

1. Strengths

WestEd exceeds expectations for carrying out the scope of work for most projects and for producing the deliverables detailed in its contract, its 14 contract modifications and its annual updates. The most notable exception is within the Task 2 (Development and Applied Research) scope of work and relates to plans to adapt and implement the school transformation models, Success for All and Roots and Wings. These models were developed at The Johns Hopkins University and were attached to a federally funded center located there. The owner-developer of these models decided to remove the two programs from the federally funded center at Johns Hopkins after WestEd’s contract had been awarded and contract work had begun. He placed them in a nonprofit foundation he had created to do what WestEd proposed doing in its REL

proposal.

Because the decision to place Success for All and Roots and Wings in a private foundation was made unilaterally by those who owned the projects, WestEd can not be held responsible for this action. Furthermore, panel members are convinced that the funds which had been allocated to the above two projects had been reallocated appropriately to other Lab projects such as the Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC). More importantly, the OERI official charged with monitoring the Center's activities had been well briefed on this situation and approved WestEd's plans to regroup.

This program officer, in fact, has an in-depth knowledge of all the Lab's activities by virtue of her nearly daily long distance contact with WestEd staff and her attendance twice a year at WestEd board meetings. Because of this knowledge and the relationship which spawned it (One WestEd official described the relationship as follows: "She is our greatest advocate and our greatest critic."), federal oversight can be accomplished without unduly inhibiting organizational flexibility. Consequently, when the Success for All/Roots and Wings crisis appeared, WestEd was able to act expeditiously to regroup and reallocate its resources without submitting detailed paperwork and waiting for approval from individuals in Washington with less than adequate background knowledge.

This sort of flexibility is also important for meeting OERI's expectation that Labs be responsive to clients' concerns and to emerging needs in their regions. Because of WestEd's relationship with its OERI program officer and the opportunities for informal oversight that results from this relationship, WestEd could quickly respond when Nevada somewhat unexpectedly passed an omnibus educational reform bill in 1997 and when California recently passed a proposition banning bilingual education in that state. No bureaucratic hurdles had to be jumped before WestEd's program of work could take into account these significant state-level

policy shifts.

In addition to responding quickly to emerging needs and completing the program of work detailed in its initial proposal and subsequent modifications of that proposal, all Labs, as noted above, are expected to work to “put the pieces of the system together” and to attend to the matter of “scaling up.” WestEd’s Nevada State Strategy, which was designated as one of the Lab’s “signature programs” in this evaluation, is a good example of how a Lab can help clients “put the pieces together” in the area of standards-based education at the state level. The Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC), the Lab’s other signature program, is an initiative which attempts to create buy-in for standards-based reform--and the skills and knowledge needed to implement it--at two other levels of the system: the school building and the local school district.

While all panel members gave WestEd high marks for its work on systemic reform, panel members were a bit divided in their assessment of WestEd’s efforts in the area of “scaling up.” One panelist suggested that since the Success for All and Roots and Wings programs were no longer a part of WestEd’s “scaling up” strategy and the Talent Development Model work was getting off to a slower start than planned, there appears to be a substantial void in WestEd’s scaling up efforts. Other panel members—who were more skeptical about the utility of “scaling up” through the building and dissemination of models—were impressed by WestEd’s innovative responses to the “scaling up” expectation.

The panel members in this second group argued that traditional mechanistic approaches to scaling up no longer seem viable since the famous Rand report authored by Berman and McLaughlin¹ demonstrated that local buy-in and local adaptation are required to make

¹ Berman P., McLaughlin, M., et al. (1977). *Federal programs supporting educational change: Vol. VII, Factors affecting implementation and continuation*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

innovations last. WestEd personnel are aware of this study and the many subsequent studies which confirmed its major insights. As a result, they are trying to find ways to scale up that are consistent with what has been learned about innovation and change over the past thirty years. One of many examples of these efforts is the rethinking of the “training of trainers” strategy which WAC developers created when they were expected to use this approach to respond to an Arizona request to provide WAC-like experiences in all Arizona schools. In essence, the rethinking makes trainees co-constructors of the material they are asked to disseminate. The jury is still out--and systematic data have not yet been collected—on the effectiveness of this and other innovative strategies for scaling up; at this point, however, at least some members of the evaluation panel are impressed by the Lab’s efforts to move beyond simple-minded (and largely discredited) conceptions of the scaling up concept and want to encourage further experimentation in this area.

One final strength in the area of meeting expectations should be noted: WestEd also has been highly effective in leveraging external funds to support and extend the work of the REL. Two prime examples of this leveraging activity are the funds that WestEd has been able to secure from private foundations to enhance the work of WAC and its cost sharing arrangement with the State of Nevada to extend work done in the assessment area under the REL contract. The WestEd staff also assists clients in their efforts to write proposals for additional funding. An example of this particular type of leveraging is the technology grant applied for and received (with WestEd’s help) by the Northern Nevada Technology Consortium (NNTC).

Before arriving on site, some panel members were a bit concerned that REL goals might be dwarfed by the goals of the many other non-REL projects at WestEd. OERI funding, after all, represents only a fraction of the WestEd budget. At the very least, some of us feared that WestEd may have not “put the pieces together” in it’s own back yard, and that the organization was little more than a confederation of disjointed programs taken on more to generate dollars than

to accomplish a reasonably coherent mission. We pushed WestEd officials and WestEd board members hard on this issue and eventually became persuaded by what they said and the evidence they produced (The evidence included a set of guidelines prepared three years prior to the evaluation for use when deciding whether or not to respond to a particular RFP.) that efforts are, indeed, being made to “put the pieces together” at WestEd.

Furthermore, we began to see WestEd’s many other grants as assets rather than liabilities in achieving REL goals. Among other things, WestEd’s large resource base means that WestEd can have on staff a large number of experts in a great many areas. Many of these experts were called into play after Nevada passed its omnibus educational reform bill and state officials asked WestEd for assistance in everything from critiquing and eventually fixing problematic language arts standards, to developing a high stakes testing program mandated by the legislature, to responding to the legislature’s requirements related to technology.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

A number of panel members were concerned that WestEd did not quite fulfill expectations in the Language and Cultural Diversity area, a major component of its Task 2 work. One panel member, for instance, noted that the plan of work in this area was altered substantially at the end of year 1. Another panel member observed that personnel who work in the Language and Cultural Diversity program have interesting plans for research but, to date, little research about language and cultural diversity has been conducted.

To be fair, it should be noted that we did hear an impressive testimonial from a teacher who spelled out—in very specific and, consequently, convincing detail – how WestEd’s initiatives in the area of Language and Cultural Diversity impacted his teaching and his training of other recently hired teachers in his district. What wasn’t clear, however, was how widespread this

influence has been and whether WestEd has found ways to “scale up” in high-impact ways its diversity work with individual teachers.

We should also note the impressive efforts of personnel in the Language and Cultural Diversity area to facilitate meetings of key stakeholders—both from the State of California and within and across other states in its region—in the wake of the passage of the proposition banning bilingual education in California and efforts to put a similar proposition on the ballot in Arizona. WestEd personnel have consistently attempted to elevate the debate on how to educate students with limited English proficiency to a more sophisticated, data-based level.

Finally, it should be noted that the dollars allocated to work on Language and Cultural Diversity are limited; it should also be noted that the Lab recently hired a nationally known scholar to lead this initiative. When the initiative demonstrates success under its new leadership, the panel encourages WestEd to increase the percentage of REL funds allocated to its Language and Cultural Diversity program.

3. Recommendations

- WestEd should continue to work toward coherence and sensible integration of REL and non-REL components in its large, multi-faceted organization.
- WestEd should intensify its scope of work in the area of Language and Cultural Diversity to increase its presence in the field.
- OERI should provide more opportunities for direct contact between WestEd and its OERI program officer (for example, by providing funding so the program officer can attend all four board meetings each year rather than only two). If this is done, federal oversight can be even more informal; reliance on rules and regulations for oversight purposes interferes with creating a responsive, client-centered organization.

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

To a large extent, WestEd uses an informal, but highly effective approach to needs assessment. A key actor in the process is the state liaison who spends considerable time in his or her designated state attending meetings and talking with key stakeholders. The individual playing the liaison role also does more mundane policy scanning activities such as reading the daily newspapers from his or her state's major metropolitan area. We did not have an opportunity to gather evidence about the performance of all state liaisons, but evidence gathered about the effectiveness of the person playing the liaison role in one of the Lab's signature programs, the Nevada State Strategy, suggested that the state liaison in Nevada was exceedingly effective in scanning the environment for emergent and salient policy issues.

Board dialogue is used to validate information gathered informally. The WestEd board members we interviewed during the site visit were clearly committed to the Lab and its mission. The testimonials evidenced detailed knowledge of WestEd's work and included enough references to problematic aspects of this work to be quite convincing. We also saw evidence of structural arrangements which made it possible for committed board members to exercise meaningful oversight and have a significant impact on policies and practices within the WestEd organization. Significant structural arrangements include quarterly meetings which are well attended, an effective committee structure which permits board members to focus in depth on particular aspects of Lab operations, and a training program for new board members.

An example of the board's influence on Lab policy is its call for greater sustained Lab intervention in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah. This policy is significant because it resulted in the creation of the State Alliance Projects in which WestEd staff members work with state education

leaders to further their capacity for reform. WestEd, for instance, helped a Nevada alliance apply for (and receive) funding to carry out an extensive, long-term technology initiative in several rural districts within that state.

Within the organization, the board has pushed WestEd personnel to hire more minority employees. The board also has encouraged efforts to investigate the reasons why minority employees leave the organization as well as efforts to respond appropriately to the information gathered.

Board minutes and other documents also reveal the existence of more formal self-monitoring mechanisms including formal needs assessments. (See, for example, the minutes for the June, 1998 board meeting.) In addition, WestEd has established detailed procedures for Quality Assurance (QA) of products and services that involve input from both internal and external sources. An item on the March, 1998 board meeting agenda on quality assurance lists a number of different quality assurance mechanisms used by the Lab: formal advisory groups; sensitivity review panels; consent review panels; external reviews by partners, clients, and consultants; internal peer review; formal internal evaluations; field testing; and telephone interviews.

Panel members saw evidence of the actual use of QA procedures. Throughout the Nevada State Strategy project, for instance, there is clear evidence of the QA process at work: documents produced by that project appear to have been subjected to various internal and external reviews, for we saw numerous versions of documents produced as part of that project. Other prime examples of QA in action are: (1) the conceptualization and development of the “Focus: California *Class Size Reduction*” document (Here the full RD&D cycle is evident.), and (2) the feedback solicited during and incorporated into the development of *Assessment Toolkit’98*.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Since dialogue with and among board members is used to validate information gathered through informal needs assessment procedures as well as to pass judgment on the quality and appropriateness of the work done by the Lab, who is—and who is not—at the board table is a significant issue. The panel worried that teachers’ voices may not be adequately represented on the board. In some instances, board members also may not have the technical expertise required to assess proposed, in-progress, or already completed work.

Both board members and members of the staff dismissed these concerns somewhat cavalierly when peer reviewers raised them. We urge more careful consideration of these issues. We particularly encourage the staff and board to study whether teacher voices are able to be heard in the board context and to realize that token representation of teachers may not be adequate. The worlds of policy and practice are often, at best, parallel universes and, at worst, totally disconnected places. Educational issues frequently look different from the vantage point of the classroom than they do from the policy vantage point. Board dialogue about WestEd programs and priorities would undoubtedly be enriched if a number of articulate teachers participated.

Also, although all panel members agreed that the informal needs assessment procedures—which included board review—were highly effective, at least one panel member called for the use of more formal monitoring mechanisms as well. Other panel members simply wanted to see an upgrading of formal procedures already employed. Questions were raised, for instance, about the limited sample sizes and the procedures for identifying samples in some of the Lab’s more formal self-monitoring efforts.

Panel members also questioned whether the QA mechanisms were consistently implemented. They noted that the Lab recently had adopted a document, Product Quality

Assurance and Marketability Review, which prescribes a specific review process for products in three category levels. This seems like a step in the right direction. Continued work on this issue may be required.

3. Recommendations

- WestEd should continue to develop systematic policies and procedures in the QA area that incorporate and extend the positive efforts already underway in some of WestEd's work.
- Since Board dialogue is used to validate information gathered through informal needs assessment procedures as well as to review work done in the Lab, who is--and who is not--on the board are critical questions; WestEd should consider whether teachers are adequately represented and whether there is adequate technical expertise in all relevant areas.
- The technical quality of WestEd's formal evaluations should be improved by, among other things, improving sampling procedures and increasing response rates.

III. Quality

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

1. Strengths

Considerable evidence documents that WestEd produces high quality products and services. Customers who participated in the interviews about the Western Assessment Consortium and the Nevada State Strategy confirmed not only that WestEd professionals are regularly employed in planning, development, and implementation at the state, district and local levels, but also that clients often are willing to contract for services which go beyond the scope of the REL contract. One chief state school officer indicated that WestEd's assistance was critical to implementing an omnibus educational reform bill passed by the state legislature. We also heard compelling testimony about WestEd's impact at the school and school district levels. WestEd has also provided extensive assistance in its specialty area of assessment; outside the region, this work has been contracted work and, consequently, speaks to the contractors'

perceptions of quality.

The WestEd staff appears to be successful for a number of reasons including the following: (1) Most staff members have exceedingly good people skills and exceedingly high social intelligence and, consequently, staff members are effective in hearing what people want and responding to people's needs. (2) Most staff members are also quite competent in their particular areas of expertise. (3) Organizational norms and standard operating procedures support being responsive to clients. (4) Staff members have, at times, been able to respond to clients requests, even when those requests are a bit problematic, by being inventive and rethinking old and problematic ideas like "training the trainers." (5) Even when they are not asked to do the R and D equivalent of "leaping tall buildings in a single bound," WestEd staff members seldom take the easy way out, whether the decision is to work with the "bruised and battered" service organizations in the Marin City program rather than directly with clients, to respond in an extensive and coordinated way to a whole state's reform initiative as in the case of Nevada and Arizona state strategies, or to build understanding about standards-based reform in schools and communities as the WAC is attempting to do.

In short, although measures of impact on student learning are not available and measures of impact on the system are sometimes more informal than systematic, the evidence that does exist suggests that WestEd is making significant contributions in schools, school districts and state level policy making organizations. WestEd also seems to be developing valuable and at times strikingly novel insights about the reform process in education and how that process can be supported. Unfortunately, few of these insights about reform have been documented and disseminated to date.

The quality of the products that do exist is often--though not always--good. Problems are discussed below; here a major strength will be highlighted: To date, WestEd has made generous

use of the internet to develop and disseminate its products and services. The technology website (www.wested.org/tie/techplan) provides assistance with technology planning that is comprehensive and directly linked to student achievement standards. The policy website (www.wested.org/tie/policy) provides recent resources and research on critical and controversial topics. The comprehensive website on charter schools (www.uscharterschools.org) covers everything most people would want to know about a charter school. The Promising Practices in Assessment Database (www.assessment.wested.org/ppad) references the *Assessment Toolkit '98* and other publications likely to be helpful to practitioners.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

For some publications, the target audience is not clear. This is a problem since a publication designed to be read by every audience risks being effective with none. To its credit, the Lab seems to be addressing this matter. One indicator is the recent hiring of individuals to improve the look and consistency of the Lab's publications.

Some of the panelists are concerned about the quality of psychometrics in some of WestEd's research and assessment work. Particular attention must be paid to the soundness of performance indicators. Indicators that are not psychometrically sound may not produce valid results. Additional questions were raised about whether WestEd personnel had adequately surveyed the relevant literature before developing products and services.

Both of the concerns raised in the previous paragraph could be addressed by implementing another suggestion from panel members: WestEd should try to disseminate the results of its research through prestigious refereed journals. Review by and publication in prestigious refereed journals represents an important quality assurance check in the technical domain. The peer review process in research journals is the one quality control mechanism the research community provides for its members. WestEd researchers should take advantage of this

opportunity for review.

Increasing publication in refereed journals has another benefit as well: WestEd can increase the size of its consumer audience. The people who read research articles represent a particularly important group of consumers since many of them educate current and future practitioners and policy analysts. Many of these individuals even include research articles in their reading lists for courses.

The panel realizes, of course, that a Lab is not a university or even one of the federally-funded centers. Consequently, it does not expect the sort of research publication output which would be expected of those types of organizations. The panel, however, does expect more of an effort than the Lab was able to document to date, in part, because the peer review process in research journals represents an important quality check. To encourage such submissions, OERI might consider permitting Labs to substitute drafts of journal articles for technical reports which are seldom read.

3. Recommendations

- WestEd should continue to attend to issues of quality in publications. The targeted audience(s) for certain publications is not clear; this is problematic since a publication written to be read by every audience risks being effective with no audience.
- WestEd should use the peer review process in refereed journals as a quality control mechanism for its research and development work to a greater extent than it has done in the past. To encourage such activity, OERI might permit drafts of journal articles to substitute for technical reports.

IV. Utility

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

1. Strengths

As noted in the discussion of quality, the customers we interviewed certainly found

WestEd's services useful. Although this evidence was primarily in the form of testimonials, the testimonials normally included a great deal of specificity about what happened because of WestEd's interventions. Whether it was a chief state schools officer describing the assessment expertise which WestEd staff had and her staff lacked, a principal describing how WAC provided her school and community a common language to make sense of and communicate about standards and assessment, a classroom teacher describing how Bridging Cultures (a component of the Lab's Language and Cultural Diversity program) impacts day to day interactions in his building, or two former drug dependent mothers describing how Families First helped them get off drugs, get back to school, get good jobs, and become better parents, the specificity in the stories made the stories compelling and far more convincing than is often the case with testimonial data.

Also many staff members' descriptions of their own work and the evidence they provided (e.g. lists of presentations made to major decision making bodies) made a convincing case that WestEd's services were useful and used. The Language and Cultural Diversity group's efforts to respond to the passage of the proposition banning bilingual education in California, for instance, were extensive, highly appropriate, and quite sophisticated. The demand for these services clearly is increasing, not just in California but in neighboring states which want to learn from the California experience.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

One would hope that at this interim point, product development might be speeded up a bit, though the panel does understand the trade-offs that will have to be made to do this. Development of quality products takes time and energy away from the Lab's technical assistance and service work, and this may make clients who look to the Lab for help unhappy and make staff members who have been socialized to respond to clients needs uncomfortable. On the other hand,

one way to scale up is to create materials and disseminate ideas which will get played out in a broader arena.

There is also a need to document and disseminate information about how WestEd staff members play the support service role and to describe what the various strategies employed by WestEd reveal about supporting educational reform. To state this another way: the WestEd staff has developed a great deal of craft knowledge about supporting reform efforts; this information should be documented and shared. Some panel members questioned whether it was appropriate for WestEd staff to do this sort of work. Beyond the time issue, there are credibility problems when people write about their own work (even in an era in which action research has achieved a modicum of respectability). Furthermore, it may be politically difficult for the WestEd staff to attribute success in the policy process to itself even if such attribution is appropriate. For these and other reasons, research into the Lab's contributions to the policy process in general and educational reform in particular may have to be done by researchers/evaluators who come from outside the Lab structure. OERI should consider funding such efforts.

3. Recommendations

- There is a need for a greater emphasis on “getting the world out” about the results of WestEd’s REL work at this stage of the contract.
- There is a need to document and disseminate information about how WestEd staff members play the support service role; for a number of reasons, this may need to be done by a researcher/research team outside of the WestEd organization. OERI should consider funding such work.

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

WestEd revealed in its RFP an acute sensitivity to the needs of its region—in particular, the political focus on student assessment issues in all four states. Of course, the specifics of this focus differ somewhat from state to state and even from one period of time to another. Consequently, on-going needs assessment is important. What emerged from the panel’s reading

and visit was a sense of strong reliance by the Lab on the governing board. The Operations Briefing book documented in considerable detail the process of Board input into the needs assessment process in 1998, as well as WestEd responsiveness to that input.

The state liaison role also speaks to a desire to be responsive to customer needs at the state level. The updated plan for 1997 (p.15) noted that the creation of the liaison position represented an attempt to have “an institution-wide point of contact with every state in the region.” The responsibilities of those who play the liaison role include “contributing state-level data to WestEd’s overall assessment of regional needs.”

There was ample evidence that WestEd translated good intentions into meaningful action. WAC clients brought to the Lab office for the evaluation site visit, for instance, emphasized that they were continually helping to shape and refine the work of that cutting edge initiative. There also was convincing evidence that the Lab continually attempts to get feedback from customers of its other programs about how well its programs and strategies are working for customers. We also saw numerous examples of program changes as a result of such feedback. Here are three examples:

- In the Marin City Families First Project, the REL shifted from using paraprofessionals as family advocates to using professional caseworkers because higher skills were needed.
- In the Career Preparation Assessment project, the pilot resulted in program modification to obtain teacher buy-in. Now, most sites are using portfolio constructs altered to the site, rather than the original model. This has resulted in greater teacher commitment to the effort.
- This final example addresses a product prepared on request, rather than one in the original plan that had to be modified. The Lab, at the request of the state education officials in California, prepared a briefing document on class size in that state. This is a prime example of responsiveness to customer needs and reflects as well the depth of in-house expertise that can be readily drawn upon by the REL.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Innovative, nonmechanistic ways to scale up the work done in a small number of sites or with a small number of participants must continue to be sought. Clearly one way to scale up work done in particular sites is to disseminate ideas generated from such work. Traditional publication outlets--both research journals which are rated high in terms of impact by the Social Science Citation Index and widely distributed practitioner journals such as Phi Delta Kappan and Educational Leadership--seem to be underutilized at the moment. The annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association may be overutilized as a dissemination forum, since it is not an especially cost-effective dissemination mechanism.

3. Recommendations

- There is a need to continue to attend to the difficult scalability question for projects such as WAC, Bridging Cultures, and Families First, which, by design cannot be scaled up mechanistically without undermining significant programmatic features.
- Academic and practitioner journals should be used to a greater extent for disseminating ideas; dissemination of ideas represents one way of “scaling up” the Lab’s work in specific sites.

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

The leadership has made focusing on student success a virtual mantra in the WestEd organization. The issue of student success, for instance, undergirds the five framing questions which WestEd has begun to use throughout the organization to critique its work. These questions are:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do?

- What evidence will we use to establish that they know it and what data can we use to guide our improvement efforts?
- What opportunities to learn do students need to assure each student achieves?
- What professional and community capacities and systems supports are necessary to assure that all students achieve?
- How does the system align its policies and resources to assure achievement by all students?

Also, to the extent that standards based reform promotes student success, WestEd can be said to be contributing to student success. Much of WestEd's work involves helping policymakers and practitioners implement standards based reform. This is certainly the case with the two signature programs the panel reviewed for this evaluation.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

To date, standards based reform is largely an unproven reform strategy. To be sure, the idea has considerable appeal and support and there is a certain face validity to the argument that articulating standards to guide instruction will result in greater achievement. On the other hand, earlier reform movements with similar logics--e.g. competency based education and the behavioral objectives movement--had widespread appeal too but, in the end, they had very limited impact on improving student achievement. Clearly, empirical evidence is needed to validate the standards based strategy.

It is not clear that an organization which is expected to serve customers committed to standards based reform is in the best position to test the utility and effectiveness of this concept. A commitment to customer service, in other words, may be in conflict with the sort of openness researchers need to have, at least when customers feel strongly about an idea or strategy which is being investigated.

In fact, to date, for all of its talk of the importance of focusing on student success,

WestEd has collected little if any student achievement data, at least not in the intensive research sites used by the WAC signature program. In fairness, it should be noted that, given the WAC's laudatory commitment to tailoring its work to the idiosyncrasies of particular sites and the needs of particular customers, it would be foolhardy to search for simple cause-effect relationships between WAC interventions and student achievement in the WAC sites. By design the WAC "treatment" varies from site to site and particular sites are not so much intervening variables as significant developers of the "treatment" which influences--or fails to influence--student success. WAC, however, could still attempt to document systematically (1) the impact of its work on schools and school districts and (2) the impact that transformed districts have on student achievement. At the very least, such systematic documentation might reveal the circumstances under which WAC-like intervention are likely to produce positive results and when other, possibly less collaborative, strategies may have a greater chance for success.

To state this another way, it should be remembered that the work in the intensive sites is classified as applied research as well as development. In research, negative results are often more instructive than positive ones, especially when a recursive relationship between research and development is built into a project and lessons learned inform subsequent work. WAC should attempt to identify the characteristics of environments in which its philosophy and general strategies are likely to help practitioners improve student success, as well as the characteristics of environments in which students are unlikely to benefit from WAC-like interventions.

At a more general level, the panel recommends more systematic evaluation efforts as the Lab begins the final two years of its REL contract. Whenever possible, student achievement measures should be part of this evaluation work. When such measures are not appropriate, other convincing indicators of impact should be employed and a compelling case for using these indicators – rather than measures of student achievement – should be presented.

3. Recommendations

- There needs to be a more comprehensive evaluation plan for WestEd’s program as the end of the funding cycle nears.
- In evaluations and in WestEd’s research efforts, self report data should be supplemented with measures of direct impact on student achievement where appropriate. Even when it is not appropriate to search for simple cause/effect relationships, attempts should be made to trace the impact of WestEd’s work on students, identifying facilitating and inhibiting factors in the process.
- If one’s agenda is set to a large extent by clients, whether work is positive for students depends on whether clients’ strategies are appropriate; WestEd and OERI need to consider whether a commitment to serving clients needs to be balanced by other commitments in an R&D Lab.

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

1. Strengths

WestEd proposed a major core area of work in its technical proposal that focuses on whole school reform and has built this focus into many of its initiatives, including the two signature programs in this assessment. The Lab also recently received additional funds to help schools implement the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration legislation in its area. It held a conference for school personnel in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah designed to help them understand what was expected under and what opportunities were provided by the new law. WestEd also provided assistance in choosing among program options. Staff expertise on this issue makes WestEd uniquely positioned to provide assistance to practitioners and policymakers involved with the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program. The work in this area is a prime example of how the Lab meets the expectation related to “facilitating widespread access to information on best practices.”

Information on best practices related to reform is also available on WestEd’s various web sites (e.g. the Language and Cultural Diversity web site). Through these sites,

WestEd provides research-based information to practitioners and policymakers engaged in the reform process.

WestEd's state alliance projects and its state and local networks and partnerships also assist clients in engaging in various comprehensive school improvement efforts. WestEd creates materials (e.g., WAC tools, the assessment toolkit) and provides assistance through direct field-based R&D work (e.g., WAC) and field services, such as those offered through its various state strategies.

We found considerable evidence of the effectiveness of most of the efforts alluded to above. As noted above, the chief state school officer of one state in the four state region WestEd serves stated unequivocally that it would have been almost impossible to implement educational reform legislation without WestEd's help in the areas of (1) standards development; (2) developing assessment policies, strategies, and instruments; and (3) developing a mandated statewide plan in technology. A district level administrator in the same state told of the WestEd state liaison's invaluable assistance at the district level, as well as in developing a multidistrict technology consortium and in writing a proposal to support its operation.

Similarly the Lab's other signature program, WAC, involves extensive assistance at both the district and the individual school levels. This program also responded to a request to train trainers in each Arizona school as well as requests for training assistance from the California county offices. A similar commitment to assisting state and/or localities can be seen in Bridging Cultures, one of the initiatives included under the Language and Cultural Diversity programmatic umbrella, as well as a number of other programs we learned about by reading documents prior to the week on site and during the on-site visit.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Understandably, there is a tendency to situate much of the Lab's research and

development work in California because of cost and convenience. However, since it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between research and development work, on the one hand, and technical assistance, on the other, cost and convenience should not be the only factors taken into consideration in selecting research and development sites. There is a need to also consider equity questions when selecting sites for R and D work so that all states in the region are treated fairly.

Also, greater attention should be given to generating evidence which would speak to the issue of program impact. This is a difficult issue, of course, but it must be addressed as a prerequisite for having some audiences find the Lab's work on school reform credible and significant.

3. Recommendations

- WestEd should continue to be sensitive to the issue of equity across states, especially since it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between R&D work and service.
- WestEd should increase efforts to generate convincing evidence of program impact despite the difficulties associated with doing this.

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

1. Strengths

WestEd's specialty area of assessment and accountability is recognized nationally. Staff members have provided technical assistance to the National Skills Standards Board and to the Arizona Governor's Division of School to Work, assisted in the development of assessment materials in collaboration with a number of other organizations supporting reform including local school districts, and worked with various groups involved in activities related to assessment (e.g. the Kentucky Department of Education).

WestEd also serves as the lead REL in its specialty area for the Laboratory Network

Program; this leadership has, among other things, resulted in the creation of an updated version of the assessment toolkit. Staff members have conducted “training-of-trainer” institutes centering on this toolkit, both regionally and nationally. These institutes have been provided to nine other RELs and to various school district representatives. Evaluation data suggest this work has been well received by participants. In addition, staff members have presented workshops and presentations related to WestEd’s specialty area to national research and evaluation groups.

Particularly laudable is the work that the specialty area staff performs in conjunction with other programs within WestEd. Staff members work with programs within the REL on assessment issues and collaborate with other projects in the joint development of products. An example of this latter role is the joint development with WAC and LCD personnel of two guides that address assessment issues in areas related to each program.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

WestEd personnel with expertise in assessment and accountability tend not to publish very much in either practitioner/policymaker-oriented journals such as Educational Leadership or the Phi Delta Kappan or in influential research journals such as those published by the American Educational Research Association. The head of the assessment area at WestEd told us that WestEd expects employees to do such publication work on their own rather than on company time. Panel members believe this policy is a mistake, at least in terms of the REL contract. As noted elsewhere in this report, both kinds of journals represent viable dissemination vehicles. Also, as noted above, the review process used by prestigious journals represents an important quality assurance mechanism.

Two other “areas of needed improvement” are addressed to OERI: First, it is important to note that one reason the Lab was successful in its cross-Lab leadership effort is that the current work built on earlier work. Unfortunately there is no mechanism to attend to issues of continuity

in the development of future RFPs for RELs. Second, there are few if any incentives for OERI centers and other federally funded programs to use jointly developed items such as the assessment toolkit. Developing and implementing such incentives would be one way for the federal government to put the pieces of its efforts in the educational reform area together.

3. Recommendations

- WestEd should encourage WestEd staff with expertise in assessment and accountability to use traditional publication venues to a greater extent than has been done in the past; this would heighten the visibility of WestEd in its specialty area and also represent an important quality assurance process.
- No incentives exist to encourage other federally funded organizations (e.g. the various research centers) to integrate jointly developed products such as *Assessment Toolkit '98* into their program of work. OERI should consider using such incentives to maximize the impact of Lab-developed products such as *Assessment Toolkit '98*.
- One reason the Lab was successful in its cross-Lab development task was that the current work built on earlier work, yet there is no mechanism to attend to issues of continuity in the development of future RFPs for RELs. The panel encourages OERI to make sure continuity issues are considered as an REL RFP is developed for the next funding cycle.

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

The Laboratory is staffed with highly competent people in a diverse array of fields. Most of these people also have superb social skills. Consequently, their services are very much in demand. They have assisted states in significant ways as states have attempted to organize the system around the concept of standards based reform. They also have made significant contributions at the district and school levels.

Evidence also suggests that WestEd products are being used by policymakers and practitioners. More systematic analysis of this issue would be useful, however, and a greater emphasis on product development is encouraged at this point in the REL contract.

WestEd's work also has netted important insights and knowledge for the field. WestEd's

work is especially important because the WestEd staff has been exploring innovative ways of scaling up its work, ways which are not overly mechanistic and take into account thirty years of research on policy and program implementation. WestEd still needs to document more systemically the impact of some of this work and as well as the impact of many of its other initiatives. It should also put more emphasis on disseminating its work through traditional mechanisms such as practitioner and scholarly journals, in addition to using its own publications and the impressive technological forums it has developed for dissemination purposes. Publication in scholarly journals will also serve an important quality assurance function for research work. Work in the Language and Cultural Diversity area should be expanded.

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

1. Strengths

WestEd appears to be well-managed, and much work has been accomplished to date. One of its major strengths, in fact, lies in its management structure. This structure is supported by a knowledgeable and active board of directors and WestEd's close relationship with its OERI program officer. The latter factor allows for sufficient flexibility so WestEd can provide timely and responsive service to its clients and appropriately regroup when difficulties arise and well laid plans must be revised. In addition, the organization appears to have created a culture that fosters professionalism, dedication to the contracted work, and a spirit of cooperation and collaboration. The staff appears to be very knowledgeable, highly versatile, and cognizant of current trends and issues in American education. A further strength is apparent in WestEd's knowledge of its region and its region's needs. Extensive needs assessment procedures are in place, including a highly effective strategy of drawing upon first-hand knowledge of its board. Creativity is also a strength

of the organization in general and its leadership in particular. Recognizing that the limited funds provided by the REL contract were insufficient to address pressing needs in the region, WestEd has successfully sought and obtained external funds to extend its work. Its staff has also been creative in responding to OERI's "scaling up" expectation.

2. Areas in Need of Improvement

At mid-point in its current five-year contract, dissemination efforts require more attention. Not only what is to be disseminated, but how to most effectively reach the most relevant and broadest array of audiences should be a concern. Publication in major journals needs to be increased, not only as a way of validating WestEd's work, but also because such journals represent important forums for dissemination. Impact on student achievement--or an absence of such impact--needs to be documented whenever possible.

3. Strategies for Improvement

At mid-point in its current five-year contract, WestEd has the potential and opportunity to challenge prevailing perspectives regarding large-scale school reform and schools and schooling for a diverse population, including language minority students and the culture(s) they represent. WestEd has the unique opportunity to engage forcefully in the national debate on issues about assessment in education, including its role in school reform efforts. Thus, WestEd may need to intensify its efforts to engage in public discourse and to expand its efforts to reach a broader audience.

There should be an attempt to diversity dissemination efforts; different products and processes should be designed to reach different audiences. WestEd also should continue using technology for dissemination purposes but should not ignore traditional publication venues such as practitioner/policymaker-oriented journals and research journals.