

Archived Information

AEL RESPONSE

The review panel's overall summary of AEL's strengths is most gratifying:

There is integrity within AEL, and this integrity pervades the laboratory, its activities, and its products. The outstanding strengths of AEL are its clear vision, focus, and unwavering attention to its mission.... AEL has attained an enviable reputation and a position of respect and trust among its constituents in the region and nationally.

AEL's response is a resounding "thank you" to the review panel members. In addition, we want to commend the review panel members and the staff of Decision Information Resources (DIR) who worked with them on this mid-term evaluation. The review team members arrived energized; asked insightful questions; and conducted the review in a highly professional manner, assuming an informal, friendly, and approachable manner. The DIR staff who designed the review and assisted the panel members throughout distinguished themselves as competent and decisive professionals whose clear objective was to see that the review was thorough, even-handed, and consistent with agreed-upon guidelines—at the same time, they were sensitive to local conditions.

We are also deeply gratified that so many AEL clients would invest considerable time in interactions with these reviewers. We believe this is a strong endorsement and ratification of AEL's work. We can, in fact, only conclude that this mid-course, formative evaluation of AEL's performance in carrying out its regional laboratory contract was a wonderful growth experience for all of us at AEL and hope that our reviewers share that assessment for themselves. It is in the spirit of mutual respect that we note aspects of the process that may lead to our and the review process' continued improvement.

The Two "Signature Works" Approach

The design of this review process called for the identification and in-depth examination of two "signature works" selected by DIR from a larger number of potential such works nominated by AEL. On its face, such an in-depth sampling seems an appropriate, possibly the most effective, mechanism for ensuring that the necessarily brief time for evaluation of a large and complex organization got beyond a broad but superficial examination. The "signature works" were, by DIR's definition, to be a project much narrower than the regional laboratory's "specialty area."

This sampling procedure may have proven itself highly effective but for the fact that one of the eight questions that guided the entire review was, "To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?" A careful look at the development of a regional laboratory's specialty area seems especially appropriate since the specialty area concept was introduced for the first time by OERI in the current (FY 1996-2000) contract. The Request for Proposal described the specialty area development task as allowing "...each Laboratory to concentrate sufficient effort in its area of proficiency so that it

can provide leadership and act as an expert resource both within its region and to the Laboratory network. The Laboratory shall also work toward achieving national prominence within its specialty area.” The sampling method used in this interim review appears not to have served well in eliciting information about AEL’s leadership and involvement nationally in the specialty area of rural education.

In the review panel’s actual in-depth examination of AEL’s work, only one project among the many included in the rural specialty—the policy-implementation research project known as the KERA study—was examined. This long-term (initiated in 1990) ethnographic study of Kentucky’s landmark school reform policy as actually implemented in four rural school districts is a major research endeavor that truly fits the “signature work” definition. And, as cited by the review panel report, the periodic *Notes from the Field* interim reports of findings have been particularly helpful to Kentucky policymakers. Reports based on a thorough analysis of the entire KERA study database are just now getting underway—as planned—so that AEL will be able to share with policymakers and researchers across the nation the Kentucky experience of how a landmark education reform policy has affected local schools—including rural schools—over a full decade of implementation.

The reviewers’ knowledge of the extent to which AEL has shaped and influenced thinking in its specialty area may have been a casualty of the “signature works” sampling procedure. The few examples that follow demonstrate a range of efforts undertaken by rural specialty staff in establishing regional and national prominence in rural education.

AEL rural education specialty staff identified and reviewed doctoral dissertations conducted in rural education during a five-year period. The 196 dissertation abstracts were then analyzed to determine their match with the Rural Education Research and Development Menu. The menu was developed in 1992 by AEL using a modified Delphi approach with rural scholars across the country to examine priorities for rural education research. It identified gaps in rural research and development and was specifically intended to guide researchers seeking to add to the rural education knowledge base. To focus attention on the menu and on research underway, an article describing the results of the study was published in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 68-75, 1996.

During this contract, rural specialty staff have provided the leadership to co-plan and conduct, in collaboration with the chair of the association’s research committee, the Research Forum Symposium at the National Rural Education Association (NREA) annual meeting. Products that result from these nationally significant research symposiums are to be disseminated through NREA and cooperating labs:

- In 1996, participants in the symposium critiqued the five themes of AEL’s rural education specialty in the context of rural education in America.
- In 1997, directors of four National Science Foundation Rural Systemic Initiatives and four Annenberg Rural Challenge sites participated in a panel discussion of their approaches to rural school improvement. Rural specialty staff are using a videotape of the session

to develop materials for sharing with others and to produce a special issue of NREA's *The Rural Educator* journal.

- In 1998, the Research Forum Symposium focused on "The Standards Movement and the Future of Rural Schools." AEL is in the process of producing a videotape and accompanying materials from this session.

A member of the rural education specialty staff joined with a prominent rural scholar to conduct a national study of selected state networks of educational service agencies to compare services provided and related cost-savings issues. One state in the AEL region was included in the study. An article titled "Cost-Analysis Studies of Programs and Services of State Networks of ESAs" was published in *Perspectives: The Journal For and About Educational Service Agencies*, Vol. 22, pp. 7-21, 1997. Moreover, this effort led to publication of an AEL monograph titled "Expanding the Vision: New Roles for Educational Service Agencies in Rural School District Improvement." This 1998 product was produced in cooperation with the American Association of Educational Service Agencies and is distributed by both organizations.

AEL rural education specialty staff contribute to and acquire a unique and in-depth perspective of education in rural America today through publication of the newsletter for the Rural Education Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, collection and review of articles on achievement of students in rural schools for a special issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, collecting and editing articles on approaches to rural school improvement for a special issue of *The Rural Educator*, creation of a special "Rural Education Digest," and staff participation on the editorial boards of the two leading rural education journals.

The few examples offered here provide but a glimpse of AEL's work in the national arena. While information about these activities and more were among those provided in advance of the site visit, other examples of national leadership are included in Appendix A; examples of presentations and articles appear in Appendix B. Many of these activities have far-reaching implications for rural education in general, as well as rural educators in AEL's region.

One reviewer rightly noted that OERI had taken a "minimalist approach" in setting expectations with regard to the regional laboratory's development of national leadership in its specialty area:

On the . . . RFP, OERI takes a minimalist approach in its delineation of what "national leadership" means: The specialty area lab will "keep abreast of developments in the designated field of specialty by attending meetings and conferences where work in the field is presented and discussed, by following the literature, and by participating in or sponsoring networking activities in the field. In addition, the lab shall engage in activities that help promote, inform, and shape debate within the specialty area." (Section V.C of individual reviewer's report; these reports are not separately identifiable)

This reviewer's use of "minimalist approach" to describe OERI's expectations for a lab's development of national leadership in its specialty, along with his/her commendation of AEL's work in articulating five themes to guide this effort, finds its way into the synthesis report in a curious manner. The synthesis report seems to attribute the "minimalist" concept to AEL's work in the rural specialty, not to the requirement established by OERI for satisfactory performance:

While AEL can clearly satisfy a minimalist interpretation of "establishing a regional and national reputation," the review panel agrees that a more aggressive and focused interpretation of "national leadership" is both possible and necessary (Section V.C, Synthesis Report).

Here, the synthesis report appears to attribute to AEL the idea of "minimalist interpretation" regarding what is required—while the original author's intended interpretation referred to the "minimalist" terminology in describing accurately OERI's requirement for national leadership in the specialty area.

Findings Relevant to Internal and Cross-Project Communication

While acknowledging that AEL has established many formal and informal mechanisms for facilitating communications between and among staff of its many projects and programs and commending staff for steps taken through several recent strategies, the review panel calls for further improvement in this area. We appreciate the review panel's recognition of AEL's own efforts at continuous improvement. We agree that any organization, and especially one that has grown nearly five-fold over the past 10 years, can benefit from sharing lessons learned and strategies tried. Nonetheless, AEL staff apparently do enjoy sufficient communication to ensure no unnecessary duplication of effort in testing the same ideas and strategies in more than one project.

Findings Relevant to Standards-Based Reform and Student Performance

Another curious anomaly of the review panel synthesis report is the juxtaposition of a statement that

states within the region are remarkably interested in and committed to school reform.... In 1990, Kentucky enacted the nation's most comprehensive school legislation, and today, Kentucky's program is still the most far-reaching reform plan of any state in the nation

with statements that seem to imply that AEL is only lately beginning to recognize issues related to standards-based reform and the importance of student performance assessment such as

AEL is also becoming more attuned to working within the context of the standards-based and "systemic" reform initiatives that are driving school improvement efforts throughout the region—and the nation (Section II.A, Synthesis Report).

We do not know how the review panel arrived at this latter conclusion. However, we do know that AEL’s proposal for operation of the regional lab for 1996-2000 was explicitly built upon the AEL mission

to link the knowledge from research with the wisdom from practice to improve *teaching and learning*,

and upon the AEL goals of

- (1)providing the people of the region R&D-based information about places, products, and processes that have demonstrated success in improving education
- (2)assisting *states* to effect the changes needed to *achieve state and national goals*
- (3)assisting *schools/districts* to effect the changes needed for them to *achieve local, state, and national goals*

How could AEL’s projects and project staff possibly be as attuned as they are to this region (confirmed by the review panel’s synthesis report)—a region whose states are recognized by the review panel as being at the forefront of standards-based reform and accountability for student academic performance—and still be so slow in coming to a knowledge and acceptance of the importance of these factors to their work? We think that this is not the case. Instead, we offer the hypothesis that AEL’s conception of operating an effective regional laboratory is to listen closely to the people of the region and design work—with them, that we carry out together—that helps move education in these states in the direction the states (not the laboratory) choose to go. AEL’s regional laboratory proposal clearly expressed the intent to concentrate regionally controlled laboratory efforts on locally expressed needs of the states it serves.

In this context, we also find it curious that the review panel could acknowledge the QUEST project’s focus on helping “...their school clients to build local capacity to ‘continuously improve’... (Section IV.A, Synthesis Report) and that “Each Quest school, in every state, is clearly being held accountable for making improvements in traditional measures of academic achievement” (Section III, Synthesis Report), but still assert “...QUEST is not directly focused within its project schools on student achievement” (Section IV.A, Synthesis Report).

Findings Relevant to National Audience

A recurrent theme throughout the summary is the panel’s desire that AEL increase “its national visibility in general...and its national leadership role in its specialty area of rural education.” (Section VI, Synthesis Report)

We appreciate the panel recommendations for improvement in this area and view these comments as confirmation of the importance of our work.

In Summary

We introduced the foregoing critique of the review process and the resulting review panel synthesis report by expressing our gratitude for the unequivocally positive assessment of AEL’s

performance, the high quality of the review panel members and their work, and the professional performance of DIR's personnel who designed and managed the review at AEL. At the same time, we did take issue with some aspects of the synthesis report and we provided additional information as seemed appropriate to the critique. In conclusion, we would hasten to say that for the most part the "areas of needed improvement" articulated by the reviewers are areas in which we concur that additional work on the part of AEL is warranted. In fact, as the reviewers note—especially in their individual reports—AEL has already identified most of these same areas and initiated efforts to further enhance our performance. We are gratified that the review panel members generally have concurred with our own judgments about "areas of needed improvement" and that they have done so after establishing a context for their judgments "...that AEL is an outstanding organization that values people and produces high quality and useful products and services." (Section VI, Synthesis Report)

APPENDIX A

Recognizing the limited time the reviewers had for study of a large and complex program of work and the fact that their own real interaction with staff and clients regarding AEL's rural specialty was an in-depth look at the KERA study, we present the following facts that may not be fully taken into account in the synthesis report:

- The Rural Laboratory Network Program (LNP) study of the congruence of the aspirations of rural youth with the expectations held by parents and school staff was reported in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* (1996, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 113-141). Results of the 21-state study were also presented at the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Small and Rural Schools Conference and at the National Rural Education Association convention. The same issue of the journal also included an article written by AEL rural specialty researchers titled "Rural Scholars or Bright Rednecks? Aspirations for a Sense of Place Among Rural Youth in Appalachia."
- AEL rural education specialty staff conducted a national study of K-12 unit schooling in America. While the study was conducted to help a rural K-12 school in the AEL region, rural specialty staff conducted a telephone conference call and subsequent mailings with superintendents of 10 K-12 unit school districts across the United States to develop and pilot test the survey instrument sent to the total population of over 700 K-12 school districts. Results of the work were presented at AASA and NREA conferences. An article has been submitted to *The Rural Educator* for possible publication.
- AEL rural education specialty staff also planned and conducted, in collaboration with the National Educational Facilities Clearinghouse, a national invitational conference on rural school facilities held in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1998. A select group of rural school administrators, researchers, and architects participated in the two-day event that addressed nine topics. AEL is in the process of producing monograph-type conference proceedings from the highly successful event.
- Sustainable small, rural high schools is the focus of work by five labs participating in a Rural Laboratory Network Program project. Four of the five labs have written a description of the two- to three-day site visit to a small rural high school in its respective region that tells the story of the school's and community's efforts to sustain and improve the high school. AEL rural specialty staff are leading the production of a monograph revealing the stories of rural high schools in different parts of the United States.
- AEL's rural specialty established, in cooperation with other labs, the National Academy of Rural School Practitioners and Researchers and its listserv (RuralAcad). The purpose of the Academy is to use electronic communications to give a voice to rural educators and researchers so that they might scale up the conversation of rural school improvement. AEL moderates the listserv. Among the topics that have been

discussed on the listserv are school facilities, school safety, applications of technology, academic standards for rural schools, and community engagement in rural schools.

- AEL rural education specialty staff facilitated a NREA/AASA policy forum on planning, implementing, and evaluating comprehensive school improvement initiatives, as well as accepted an invitation to meet with selected USDE leadership to discuss implementation of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR D) Program in rural schools across America.
- AEL rural education specialty staff have provided leadership and expertise via invitation at special meetings on rural education topics, such as teaching in rural America (National Education Association), research agenda for at-risk students (National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students), rural school transportation (Annenberg Rural Challenge), improving math and science achievement of students in rural schools (National Science Foundation), implementing a comprehensive school reform demonstration program (USDE), implications of the Telecommunications Act (Rural Policy Research Institute), and creating policy initiatives for rural schools (Annenberg Rural Challenge).

APPENDIX B

This appendix provides a listing of presentations and publications by AEL's rural specialty staff.

Presentations

- Harmon, H. L. (1999). *Overview of comprehensive school improvement initiatives at local, state, and national levels*. Presentation at the National Rural Education/American Association of School Administrators 3rd Annual Rural School Leader's Policy Workshop, Washington, DC, January 28.
- Harmon, H. L., & Smith, C. (1998). *Rural school improvement: Standards of excellence for parent and community involvement*. Presentation at the 90th National Rural Education Association Convention, Adam's Mark Hotel, Buffalo-Niagra Falls, NY, October 15.
- Harmon, H. L., & Earthman, G. (1998). *Accepting the challenge of improving rural school facilities*. Presentation at Invitational Conference on Rural School Facilities, Kansas City, MO, May 1-2.
- Harmon, Hobart L. (1998). *High schools that work for Appalachia*. Keynote address at the *High Schools That Work* 1998 Spring Appalachian Conference, Pittsburgh Doubletree Hotel, Pittsburgh, PA, March 4.
- Howley, C. B., Harmon, H. L., & Carter, C. (1998). *Rural education as a framework for critiquing globalization; or, if you think globally, can you educate locally?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA, April 17.
- Harmon, H. L., Arnold, M., & Deloney, P. (1998). *The standards movement & rural schools: Viewpoints of national academy participants*. Presentation at the Research Forum Symposium of the 90th National Rural Education Association Convention, Adam's Mark Hotel, Buffalo-Niagra Falls, NY, October 14.
- Blanton, R. B., & Harmon, H. L. (1997). *The Appalachian rural systemic initiative*. Presentation at the National Science Foundation PI/PD Meeting, Washington, DC, May 19.
- Harmon, H. L. (1997). *School-to-work transition in rural schools*. Presentation at meeting of the National Education Association's Standing Committee on Professional Standards and Practice, Washington, DC, January 10.
- Howley, C. B., & Harmon, H.L. (1997). *Sustainable small schools in the rural U.S.: Construct and exploratory analysis*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, March 25.

- Harmon, H. L., Howley, C. B., & Edwards, D. (1997). *Strategies for sustaining K-12 unit schools*. Presentation at the National Conference on Education, American Association of School Administrators, Orlando, FL, February 14.
- Chitwood, A., & Harmon, H. L. (1997). *Building a school-to-work partnership*. Presentation at the 89th National Rural Education Association Convention, Doubletree Hotel-Tucson, Tucson, AZ, September 26.
- Dean, M., Glover, T., & Harmon, H. (1997). *Implementing school-to-work in small rural schools*. Presentation at the 89th National Rural Education Association Convention, Doubletree Hotel-Tucson, Tucson, AZ, September 25.
- Harmon, H. L. (1996). *Transition to work: Dilemmas of building school-to-work systems in rural schools*. In Proceedings of the Rural Education Issues Meeting of the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, November 18.
- Howley, C. B., & Harmon, H. L. (1996). *K-12 unit schooling in rural America: A first description*. Paper presented at annual meeting of the National Rural Education Association, San Antonio, TX, October 14.

Journal Articles

- Harmon, H. L. (1999). Creating work-based learning opportunities for students in rural schools. *The High School Magazine*, 6(6), 22-27.
- Howley, C. B., & Harmon, H. L. (Under review). Sustainable small schools in the rural U.S.: Construct and exploratory analysis. *The Rural Educator*.
- Stephens, E. R., & Harmon, H. L. (1998). Standards and performance measures on the horizon. *Perspectives: A Journal of Research and Opinion About Educational Service Agencies*, 4, 3-26.
- Harmon, H. L. (1997). Rural community schools in a global economy. *The School Administrator*, 54(9), 32-37.
- Stephens, E. R., & Harmon, H. L. (1997). Cost-analysis studies of programs and services of state networks of ESAs. *Perspectives: The Journal For and About Educational Service Agencies*, 2, 7-21.
- Howley, C. B., Harmon, H. L., & Leopold, G. D. (1997). Rural scholars or bright rednecks? Aspirations for a sense of place among rural youth in Appalachia. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 12(3), 150-160.

Harmon, H. L., Howley, C. B., & Sanders, J. R. (1996). Doctoral research in rural education and the rural R&D menu. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 12(2), 68-75.