

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory

### I. Brief Overview of Laboratory and Evaluation Activities

The interim review and evaluation visit to the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) by the site team took place at the Lab's offices in Charleston, West Virginia, from April 12 - 16, 1999.

Data sources that this reviewer reviewed included those sent by the AEL approximately two weeks prior to the on-site visit, and additional documents provided by AEL staff during the site visit.

Interviews were conducted with project staff, the Executive Director, representatives of the governing Board of Directors, project directors, project participants from the field, including teachers, administrators, parents, and students, as well as policy makers. Two video teleconferencing sessions were held with two schools involved in the QUEST project and two phone teleconferencing sessions were held with QUEST schools.

The AEL was as founded as a regional lab in 1966. From the beginning operations of the lab the focus has been on responding to the needs of education in the predominately rural areas of the four state region of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Most of the school districts in this region are county units with Kentucky having 68%, Tennessee with 66%, Virginia at 68%, and West Virginia having 100% of its school districts as county districts. Additionally, W. Virginia has 66% of its students attending rural or small-town schools, followed by Kentucky with 62%, Tennessee with 42%, and Virginia with 37% of its students attending rural or small-town schools.

The region served by AEL is also characterized by the generally high levels of poverty. Relatively large percentages of children in this four state region come from families below the federally established poverty level: Kentucky with 28.3%, followed by, W. Virginia, 26.8%; Tennessee, 22.4%;

and Virginia with 16.2%.

AEL is governed by Board of Directors with seven representatives: the Chief State School Officer (or alternate), a school administrator representative, a teacher association representative, a teacher-educator representative, and three “at large” representatives selected by other members to provide a balanced perspective of the state. The Regional Lab is considered the “core” of the AEL operation and accounts for approximately 45% of the Lab’s funding and project activities.

## **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 AEL and Regional Lab are effectively governed by an Executive Director, Dr. Terry Eidell, who serves as the Executive Director of both the Regional Lab and the AEL, a Board of Directors, a Corporate Leadership Group (CLG), a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Team (CSRDT), a variety of advisory committees primarily project specific. On all advisory and governance committees there appears to be sufficient and excellent representation of all expected constituencies, from teachers, administrators, students, parents, policy makers, and state department personnel.

The governing board holds one of its four annual meetings on-site of one of the REL projects to gain first hand knowledge of the project and interact with project participants. Board members serve on project advisory committees, and provide oversight on all projects according to board member and past president, Gill Cobbs. Furthermore, as described by board member, W.A. Franklin, “We don’t micro-manage but we are involved with REL’s projects. We work from the state house

to the classroom.” The board members indicated that the administration and staff of the REL, “went out of their way to keep us informed.” Another board member commented that, “project staff have never made a substantive change without bringing it to the board for recommendation.

There appears to be sufficient resources to carry out the various functions and programs proposed and implemented by the Lab, although like any externally funded organization decisions must be made as to where best to allocate a finite set of resources to a limited number of projects. However, such decisions appear to be made with the input of appropriate persons, including clients, decision makers, and project staff. The REL executes the projects as outlined in their various contracts in a timely manner with modifications from ongoing internal and external evaluations/reviews. Documentation from proposals to completed reports appear to be based upon good- to- excellent research, review, and knowledge of best practices.

From the review of documents provided by AEL, interviews with project participants and recipients of project reports (e.g., state policy makers), it is abundantly clear that the REL is doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years. Furthermore, it could be concluded that the REL has exceeded the expectations of Implementation and Management of the projects/tasks as outlined in the technical proposal and subsequent revision documents. For example, there was not one example, that this reviewer encountered, which would suggest that the signature programs of QUEST and KERA together with the other projects reviewed, were not being implemented and managed as expectations would dictate upon review of the relevant documents or responses from appropriate clients/customers.

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

More attention and effort needs to be put into a more formalized intra-lab network of interactions between project staff.

Increased attention to national implications of lab projects in specialty area.

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

Recognizing and incorporating from proposal to completion stage, an increased national perspective from the lab's more regionally and state focused projects; especially in the lab's specialty area of rural education. The REL should develop and implement a plan for formal networking among the various projects that operate out of the lab.

#### **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**

Self-monitoring, or more generally, monitoring, of REL projects can be viewed as a three-fold process: Internal project monitoring/evaluation, evaluations conducted by staff from the AEL's Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) unit, and then external evaluations conducted primarily, if not exclusively, by the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University under the conduct and direction of Dr. William Wiersma. It should be noted that such evaluations as the external evaluations conducted by the Evaluation Center at WMU are not required by OREI. Thus, the fact that AEL voluntarily participates in such evaluative activities is seen as a definite strength.

Within project monitoring/evaluation/feedback is facilitated by availability and use of evaluation/survey instruments developed by the PRE unit within the AEL. Interviews with project staff and clients revealed that within event, e.g., workshops/symposia, monitoring often takes place as a source of immediate feedback to on-sight project staff. A review of project proposals, project revision documents, and final reports reveal that such evaluation/monitoring activities have been used appropriately to revise and improve project activities. This was particularly true for the signature projects of QUEST and KERA that received an in-depth review.

The external evaluations that have been conducted by the Evaluation Center at WMU have had two major components: an annual client survey, and the meta analysis of AEL's internal evaluation reports. The annual client survey has been conducted by Dr. William Wiersma for the past 8-9 years together with the meta-analysis of AEL's evaluation reports. According to Merrile Meehan, Senior R&E Specialist of AEL's PRE, these external evaluations have been used by REL's project staff to revise and improve projects, project reports, and PRE's evaluation reports. It is abundantly clear that the REL is committed to high levels of monitoring/evaluation of its projects and seeks a variety of input from internal evaluation staff, clients, and external evaluators for the improvement of project proposals, projects activities, project products, and project reports.

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

A more formalized, internal to project, researcher/evaluator position should be added to the signature and specialty area projects.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

Internal evaluations are currently conducted by staff from AEL's PRE unit on an assigned/buy-out basis. It may be appropriate for the REL to consider including in signature and specialty area projects, e.g., KERA and QUEST, a full-time researcher/evaluator as part of the project staff.

### **III. Quality**

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

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

From AEL's initial operations in 1966, the REL has had as a major focus, rural education. Given that initial and continuing focus, the REL has had the advantage of developing and collecting

a substantial research base upon which to implement a series of coherent and sustained applied research projects. The lab has also benefited from a relatively low level of staff turnover which adds to the consistency of project emphasis and direction. Given the nature of the REL's focus, driven in part by the educational needs of the four-state region served by the REL, the REL has focused more on the "service" area than in the "product" area. This is especially true of the two signature projects, QUEST and KERA. Exceptions would be the more "product" oriented projects of QUILT, Data-In-A-Day, and Protocol. Quality of both products and services appears to be, at least, at the adequate level while more characteristically at the "above expectations/excellent" level.

The products and services emanating from the REL's operations appear to be enhanced by the knowledge of the applied areas by project staff, knowledge and reviews of the relevant research literature, and input and reviews by appropriate clients and other target audiences. The generally positive respect, as evidenced from the interviews with project clients and other targeted audiences, has enhanced the REL's ability to receive in-depth and timely feedback on product and service development.

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

Minimize potential areas of duplication and/or improvement of products and services by a formalized process of intra-lab interactions.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

Develop a formalized system of intra-lab interactions of project staff.

#### **IV. Utility**

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

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

From the person-to-person and teleconferencing interviews with project clients/customers, it has become quite clear that this area of “utility” represents an area of major strength for the products and services provided by the REL to the educational community and policy makers of this four-state region. The following is a sample of comments made by the interview participants which addresses the issue of product and service, “utility”.

From participants in the QUEST program:

1. “They helped us in thinking about a different framework of dealing with school reform.”  
-school principal
2. “AEL has kept us informed of the latest research.” -school principal
3. “I can always rely on the AEL network to provide continually high level of professionalism and has been continually helpful in finding resources when needed.” -  
school principal
4. “ Successfully used AEL’s Smart Learner information to improve my instruction and my student performance.” -teacher
5. “We have used AEL’s instructional design/changes to help students prepare for state-level and classroom tests. These have been very successful.”
6. “Our school culture has changed for the better [due to AEL’s involvement] and this has had the direct impact of improved student achievement.”-school principal

Other themes that emerged from the responses of project participants were: (a) the total professionalism of the project staff, (b) the usefulness of research literature and other documents provided, (c) improved school climate as indicated by teacher interactions, student behavior, and parent involvement in parent conferences, (d) improved evaluation of student performance and

instructional techniques, and (e) ability of total school community to look realistically at its strengths and weakness.

From the KERA project:

1. “Legislators respect the [project staff’s] objectivity.” -state dept. staff
2. “AEL has managed to be a consistent voice regarding reform in our state. AEL’s strength is in the comprehensiveness/consistency of reporting. With AEL there is a long history of a sense of trust.” -state board of education member
3. “They were very quick to respond when the federal office did not know how to respond.” -former state secretary of education
4. “Longitudinal nature of their work is unique and valued.” -former state secretary of education
5. “I appreciate their staying power in following through on the KERA study. They are highly respected as being impartial/objective in their reporting.”
6. “They can and have synthesized complex information in an elegant and useful way.” -state department staff

The themes that emerged from the interviews with participants were,

- (a) trustworthiness and objectivity of project reports,
- (b) timeliness of response to requests,
- (c) AEL’s good positioning to do longitudinal study of systemic educational change.

From a review of the written documents and participant interviews it was clear that the REL focused on customer needs and thus, appropriately set project priorities in accordance with those customer needs, as identified within the four state region served by the REL. This was particularly noteworthy in the REL’s specialty area of, “rural education” as identified by projects under Task 7.

As evidenced from the information contained in the 1998 & 1999, “Annual Plan and Budget”, the REL has been making sufficient efforts to revise and tailor the products and services under Task 7 based upon lab solicited feedback from those most impacted by these projects, including policy-makers.

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

Expanding the customer/client base from a more regional perspective to one that is more inclusive of a national perspective.

## **3. Recommendations for improvements**

Development of products and services that could be used by a more inclusive segment of the rural education community, e.g., migrant education.

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

#### **1. Strengths**

From the composition of the governing board, to the membership of the program and lab advisory committees, to the development and revision of individual projects, products and services, there is a consistent attention to focusing on customer needs, within the four-state region. This is in contrast to the possible expectation that the REL's activities and products would be primarily a reflection of the REL's staff's personal applied research agenda. This reviewer found that this was simply not the case. The REL appears to operate in a genuinely collaborative, interactive, and supportive way with members of the broadly defined education community of the region. The REL's focus on customer needs was evident in virtually all of the documents reviewed and interactions with all project participants interviewed.

The expertise of the REL staff and administration appears to be ideally suited to meet the needs of the customers in the REL region, and the REL has continued to expand staff and projects to continue to meet the educational needs of the region, as funding has allowed. The REL has taken the initiative to pursue additional funding outside of the OERI to help address customer needs.

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

Expand definition of client to be more nationally inclusive

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

See above

## **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**

References to, “improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites” can be found in several project tasks goals, objectives, and rationale statements. In particular, references to improved student performance, including student achievement test performance, can be found in Task 2.1, the Kentucky state project, Goal 1, Objective 2.1.1a; Task 2.3, the Virginia state project, Goals 1 & 2; Task 2.5, the QUEST project (one of the signature projects) in their Rationale statements 1 - 8; Task 3, Services to the field, Objectives 3.1.2 and 3.1.2a, and Goals 1 & 2 for task 3.6; Task 7, the KERA project (another signature project), Goal 2 and Objectives 7.1.1 - .3, 7.2.1a - .1b, and 7.2.2a which specifically refers to, “...ways to improve student success in school, particularly academic achievement (Goals 1 and 4)”, and objective 7.2.3a.

In the examples of goals and objectives of the REL's projects/tasks cited above, the accompanying documentation, project reports, and responses from interviewed participants all suggest that the REL is utilizing models that contribute to student success. Primarily based upon discussions with projects staff and project participant interviews, there appears to be an increasing awareness of the importance of looking at student academic success as one of the key indicators of project success.

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

Increased use of student performance indicators needs to be included in measures of project success.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

The incorporation of specific goals and objectives related to student performance, specifically student academic performance, into a greater number of project proposals.

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

#### **1. Strengths**

A major strength of the REL is the extent to which REL projects are specifically directed to assist states and localities in the four-state region to implement comprehensive school reform. The two signature projects, QUEST and KERA, and thus, the rural specialty area are excellent examples of the REL's commitment of resources to aid such comprehensive school reform. This finding was amply supported by all of those individuals interviewed from students, parents, teachers, administrators, state department representatives and other state policy makers.

Interviews with project participants, customers and other clients, combined with the external evaluation reports conducted by the Evaluation Center at WMU, reveals that the REL has provided educators and policy makers with appropriate research based information, other needed/requested information and materials, e.g., the REL's Policy Brief and Issue Packets publications, and has been very successful in establishing necessary and appropriate alliances within the four state region. Additionally, this reviewer found that REL projects tended to be designed to provide local and/or state participants with the information, techniques, and models necessary to empower them to be potentially successful in comprehensive school reform, including the "scaling up" of reform measures.

The QUEST project was found to be a particularly good example of a project with the concept of “scaling up” built into the design.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

None at this time

**3. Recommendations for improvement**

None at this time

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

**1. Strengths**

As suggested by this reviewer’s observations as stated above, there appears to be sufficient evidence from all sources that the REL has indeed established an excellent reputation in its specialty area of rural education, particularly in the four state region it serves, and continues to build on this reputation. Additionally, nothing was encountered in the site visit that would suggest that the REL would not continue enjoy its well-earned reputation.

The REL is also to be commended in its increasing awareness of the importance of establishing a national reputation in its specialty area and its continuing efforts to increase its visibility nationally by its participation in such organizations as the National Rural Education Association (NREA), the Annenberg Rural Challenge, American Educational Research Association’s Rural Special Interest Group, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, and Organizations Concerned About Rural Education (OCRE). Additionally, publication of the special issues of Journal of Research in Rural Education and The Rural Educator (both in progress), together with the continued use of the AEL Web site to profile new and promising rural R&D resources developed by the REL, will help to increase the REL’s national visibility.

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

It is this reviewer's belief that the REL needs to take a more proactive role in establishing the lab as a national leader in the specialty area of rural education. This would suggest that the REL go beyond the role of linking, collaborating, and participating with other individuals and organization in rural education and take on the role of, or at least one of, the leaders in the area of rural education across the nation.

Expand the scope of applied research and development activities that would be more inclusive of the diversity of rural educational settings found across the US.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

None at this time

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

The REL can be characterized as having established a strong, positive, and supportive reputation in the four-state region that it serves. The projects/tasks that operate out of the REL provide a reasonable balance between being state or within state specific and having a broader four state regional focus. The organizational climate within the REL is very conducive to providing a supportive and enhancing environment that appears to maximize the opportunity for individual and project wide success. The REL appears to be addressing important areas of concern and need as identified by the customers and clients of the educational community and policy makers that it serves or are recipients of its products and/or services. The REL is viewed by the educational community and policy makers of the four state region it serves as an essential partner in the support of, and its study of, comprehensive school reforms that have a positive impact on students, teachers, administrators, and the broader educational community.

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

### **1. Strengths**

The REL has developed and continues to enjoy a broad base of support and respect from the educational community and policy makers in the four-state region it serves.

The projects/tasks operating out of the REL are addressing important areas of need and concern as identified by the educational community and policy makers in the four-state region it serves.

The REL's governance structure, from Director, to governing board, to advisory committees, to the organization of projects and tasks, has created a positive, supportive environment that contributes to the potential and actual success of the REL attaining its goals and objectives.

The REL has and continues to attract qualified staff, who are genuinely concerned about serving the needs of the educational community and policy makers in the four-state region it serves.

The REL utilizes a good representation of participants in the process of monitoring projects/tasks.

### **2. Areas for Improvement**

The REL should increase: (1) its national visibility and (2) its leadership role in the area of applied research in its specialty area of rural education.

The REL should provide for more formalized opportunities for intra-lab, i.e., across projects/tasks, collaboration.

The REL should give greater attention to the measurement of student outcomes, particularly student achievement test performance, across all projects/tasks.

### **3. Strategies for Improvement**

See above.