

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory David Leo-Nyquist April 12 – 16, 1999

### I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory

Legislation signed by President Clinton in 1994 requires that OERI establish a system of peer review for all recipients of grants from cooperative agreements and contracts with OERI. It was decided that the regional labs will have an on-site peer review during the third year of the present funding cycle, considered an “interim assessment” and conducted during a recipient’s period of performance, which will focus on formative evaluation.

This statutorily-required evaluation visit of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) during the third year of the FY 1996-2000 contract took place at the Laboratory headquarters in Charleston, West Virginia, from April 12-16, 1999. I reviewed all the advance materials mailed to me by DIR prior to the site visit, and the materials provided on-site during our week in Charleston. I also participated in all scheduled presentations and briefings detailed in the Site Visit Agenda.

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

#### Strengths

In terms of addressing the educational needs of its Region, both at the policy and classroom levels, AEL is clearly meeting its contract obligations. 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. The Signature Works reviewed in great detail by the Review Panel (QUEST and the KERA research)

are reflective of AEL’s commitment to support standards-based reform in its Region, and of AEL’s capacity for carrying out the plans outlined in their proposal to OERI.

OERI wants each Lab to carry out a long-term set of development and applied research activities that will result in a “cohesive, seminal body of programs, practices, products, and strategies based on research—responsive to an array of instructional and social contexts—that can be used to advance systemic education reform at state and local levels throughout the region.” (16). With the possible exception of the Rural Specialty area (see Question #8 below), AEL is clearly addressing through its project activities what they were approved to do.

One of the “anticipated outcomes” articulated by OERI to be attained by Labs by the end of the contract period is “facilitating creation of communities of learners within the region.” Under Task 2, AEL proposed to conduct one regional development project over the five-year period called QUEST. The articulated QUEST objectives include: to produce a framework and a process that will enable members of school communities to embark on a journey for continuous improvement; and to create a network of individuals and agencies to sustain and support those school communities in their journey. Based on the documentation and testimony provided during our Site Visit, these two goals appear to have been met. The QUEST staff recruited ten schools for each network for a total of 20 schools out of 155 contacts. Since their recruitment they have lost two schools from the high school network and four from the elementary network. The QUEST project grew out of a previous project called QUILT, which focused on teachers’ questioning strategies. QUEST’s thrust is much broader and more comprehensive, and it fits in well with OERI’s emphasis on “putting the pieces together” in the Lab’s reform initiatives.

**Areas of needed improvement**

The main suggested areas of improvement are in (1) the need for a stronger focus within

all projects on student achievement (see question #6), and (2) clarification of what “national leadership” means within the Specialty Area of rural education (see question #8). AEL’s longtime work within the Region is characterized more by its consistent and immediate response to identified regional needs, and less by its data collection, research efforts, and national-level publication.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

See the responses to questions # 6 and #8 below.

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

### **Strengths**

This reviewer was impressed by AEL’s use of the portfolio review process—which is essentially an organizational self-study—as part of their ongoing internal evaluation process. This portfolio process has been in use for a decade at Far West Laboratory and for five years at North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.

AEL involves a diverse group of individuals on its Board, which includes teachers, school administrators, local school boards, higher education, Chief State School Officers, state legislators, state department of education personnel, and representatives from business/industry, PTAs, the media, and other groups. AEL states that “the Board is deeply involved in the Lab’s ongoing work. It serves to keep the focus of the Lab on the most pertinent state and local needs and to ensure that projects deliver the greatest possible impact for the effort invested.” The interview conducted with six Board members during the Site Visit confirmed this claim. Regular meetings of the Board, which is actively involved in and quite knowledgeable about the full range of AEL activities in the Region, provide a valuable and continuous form of feedback to

AEL leadership and professional staff.

Another way in which AEL has sought to ensure cohesiveness is through the careful assignment of each staff member to several different projects, thus linking efforts through a chain of naturally developing interpersonal relationships. QUEST has also carefully documented all project events as part of a self-monitoring system. The recent (March 29-31, 1999) AEL staff retreat at Glade Springs, West Virginia, is a good example of the Lab's commitment "to learn a shared language that we all can use in communicating about our work." Within the KERA project, since the beginning AEL has convened a highly qualified Peer Review Panel once a year to provide expert advice and feedback to project staff.

For the past 10+ years, AEL has subcontracted with Daniel Stufflebeam and his colleagues at The Evaluation Center of Western Michigan University to act as the Lab's external evaluator, because of "their demonstrated interest in evaluation as providing information for decisionmaking." AEL considered other organizations and/or mechanisms to provide external evaluation services to its Lab program, and the decision was to continue the relationship with WMU for the next five years, with a focus on "constructing, administering, and reporting annual surveys of AEL's clients." An examination of these survey results makes it clear that AEL clearly responds to feedback and customer needs as it plans and adapts its activities. The fact that AEL employs both an internal and an external evaluation team, which exceeds OERI requirements, is to be commended.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

Communication across programs is much less consistent than communication within project teams. Although there are obvious recent efforts being made to address this issue (for example, the recent staff retreat and the Learning Lab strategy), more attention needs to be given

to keeping all staff “on the same page” in terms of lessons learned and strategies applied. This concern is further addressed under #2 in the “Broad Summary” section of this report.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

See Broad Summary, #2.

## **III. Quality**

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

#### **Strengths**

AEL has been deeply involved from the beginning with the implementation of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), generally acknowledged to be the most sweeping systemic reform effort in the nation. Their intensive, five-year ethnographic study (1990-95) of KERA implementation in four rural school districts has given AEL staff firsthand knowledge of the predictable developmental stages of initial enthusiasm, eventual leveling-off of expectations, and growing frustration among teachers associated with any ambitious reform effort that reaches into the classroom. This study is ongoing through 2000. AEL claims that their KERA study “has been praised by decisionmakers across Kentucky as being a vital source of information for their decisions.” This claim was well-supported by interview testimony given by a wide range of state officials during the site visit. Up to this point, the KERA work has been primarily a conversation between the researchers and multiple audiences—the most important of which are Kentucky policymakers—about the implementation implications at the local level for systemic reform.

AEL is understandably proud of the reputation of its products. In specific reference to Lab publications, AEL asserts that “the care taken in the preparation of AEL products pays off in

terms of client acceptance and use.” “Notes from the Field,” AEL’s quarterly newsletter to report the KERA study’s findings, is valued by Kentucky policymakers as well as by others across the nation who want to know more about Kentucky’s historical legislation, and it is widely disseminated. The publication is automatically sent to a mailing list of 3,441, which includes all superintendents and principals in Kentucky schools. AEL’s quarterly newsletter, The Link, is mailed free of charge to more than 6,500 educators and education stakeholders across the Region. The staff will also continue to produce two issues of Policy Briefs each year. A close examination of all these publications reveals outstanding examples of successful efforts to communicate Lab findings broadly and to provide timely information in a clear and easily understood manner.

**Areas of needed improvement**

None

**Recommendations for improvement**

None

**IV. Utility**

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

**Strengths**

It was obvious to this reviewer that QUEST offers to network teams “a rich, R&D-based repertoire of tools and strategies for continuous school improvement efforts.” The evidence reviewed confirmed this claim by the project staff. Some of these useful “tools” provided by QUEST project staff and mentioned by the teachers we talked to included Data In A Day, their

protocol approach to assessing student writing, a structured interview design, and other strategies.

The Kentucky State Writing Project consists of a collaborative research team of 16 people—including people who will use the product in schools—who have worked together over three years in this applied R&D project. The State Commissioner of Education and his staff in Kentucky identified the topic of writing as critical to the statewide reform efforts. In this AEL project the research design allowed the results of the research to be converted, with minimal effort, into a product that schools can use: the School Study of Writing Instruction Notebook. This is an excellent example of the Lab’s effort to “scale up” products that can have broad practical application, in this case in collaboration with KERA’s focus on student writing portfolios. There are plans to implement this tool statewide in the Fall of 1999. Project staff have also documented their experiences and begun sharing them with a larger audience through a recent AERA paper. Yet another example of AEL’s usefulness to Kentucky policymakers is its longitudinal study of KERA implementation in four rural districts.

#### **Areas of needed improvement**

As AEL projects move into the “scaling up” stage, more attention will need to be given to communicate with a national, not just a regional, audience.

#### **Recommendations for improvement**

None

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

##### **Strengths**

AEL’s years of experience conducting professional development activities, needs assessments, and parent involvement activities has developed their expertise in designing generic

models and materials that can be adapted to fit specific populations and needs. Their attention to customer needs in terms of planning and carrying out their activities is a great strength of the Lab professional staff. As the Review Panelists learned during the Site Visit, QUILT, CLUE, and the School Excellence Workshop packages are all good examples of adaptable school/community improvement models that produce unique results reflecting the needs, values, and priorities of the customers that use them. This expertise will serve AEL project staff well as they attempt to “scale up” their state-specific projects to the Region and the nation during the remainder of this contract period and beyond.

In the RFP (Statement of Work) for the contract period, OERI makes it clear that teachers are to be considered a critical component—and critical customer—of the Lab mission and priorities: each Lab should “involve practicing educators—particularly teachers—in all aspects of Laboratory work, including planning, quality control, ongoing conduct of development and applied research, and evaluation.” (9) Materials reviewed and testimony heard during the Site Visit confirmed that AEL’s mission to link “the knowledge from research with the wisdom from practice” is carried out in its daily work with educators, researchers, policymakers, business leaders, families, students, and others to disseminate innovative services, products, and practices that improve teaching and learning.

**Areas of needed improvement**

None

**Recommendations for improvement**

None

## **V. Outcomes and Impact**

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

#### **Strengths**

AEL is well-positioned in several of its major initiatives (KERA, QUEST, the Hancock County project) to explore a variety of important connections between significant systemic reform efforts and the improvement of student achievement. However, the ongoing collection of student achievement data in the schools it works with through its projects has not been an AEL priority to this point. It was evident to this reviewer, however, that there is increasing awareness on the part of staff of the importance of looking closely at student outcomes as an important indicator of project effectiveness.

#### **Areas of needed improvement**

However, this awareness does not yet translate into a Lab-wide focus on student outcomes, broadly conceived. Because of the Lab's commitment to helping schools find their own solutions, this focus on student outcomes may realistically vary from project to project, and the most appropriate measures to look at may not always be direct improvement in student test scores.

To illustrate this point: At this relatively early stage of its development, QUEST is not directly focused on student achievement. Rather, it emphasizes strengthening the school-wide infrastructure and collaborative environment that can make significant gains in student achievement possible. The great strengths of the project are its focusing on involving all stakeholders in the school community on school-wide improvement efforts (including a strong commitment to involving students and parents) and its success in creating a regional network of

QUEST schools that support each other in their collective efforts.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

Emphasis within QUEST schools on exploring changes in student performance levels as a result of direct AEL interventions like Data In A Day, the writing protocols, and student networking activities at periodic Rallies may yield insights about how to measure (or even bring into view) “student outcomes” that can be applied to other projects.

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

#### **Strengths**

In terms of addressing the educational needs of its Region, both at the policy and classroom levels, AEL is clearly meeting its contract obligations. 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. As mentioned above, the Signature Works reviewed in great detail by the Review Panel (QUEST and the KERA research) are reflective of AEL’s strong commitment to support state-level standards-based reform in its Region.

AEL sees it as “imperative that a Regional Lab champion and present impartial scientific evidence to inform decisionmaking at all levels of education.” The reputation of being a neutral source of information has built confidence in their work among divergent groups, even in the midst of conflict over issues related to educational policy, which was confirmed by our interviews with various representatives connected with the Kentucky State Legislature, the State Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and the Center for Strategic Policy Studies.

A great strength—and ongoing tension—within AEL is the attempt to support local schools, especially rural schools in each of the Region’s four states, as they “undertake contextually appropriate means to meet the state-mandated standards.” Each of the states appears sincere in its encouragement of local (rural) schools to respond to the state-mandated system of standards and assessments with their own bottom-up approach to implementation. AEL is deeply involved in this process of supporting local schools as they struggle to discover “locally appropriate” solutions to systemic reform initiatives, and should be commended for these efforts.

#### **Areas of needed improvement**

Increased attention within AEL to a focus on student outcomes within all projects will only serve to strengthen their already-considerable credibility within the Region and their usefulness to states and localities as they struggle to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies. (See Question #6 above.)

#### **Recommendations for improvement**

See Question #6 above, and the Broad Summary below (esp. item #4).

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

#### **Strengths**

As stated in the proposal to OERI for the current funding period, “AEL’s extensive record of publication, breadth of understanding, and experience in national leadership document the organization’s capacity to carry out the task as a specialty area.” This panelist does not dispute AEL’s claim that “our staffs’ perspective on rural education is especially broad because of our experience in operating the national ERIC Clearinghouse and because of the very active

roles many AEL staff have taken in the national arena.” However, there is a natural tension between the well-supported claim of having attained “a national reputation” and “extensive expertise” in rural education, and the more-difficult-to-support claim of providing national leadership in rural education.

OERI emphasizes that the specialty area work shall be undertaken in the context of the two overarching priorities for all Lab work: putting the pieces together, and scaling up. Two obvious questions come to mind in this regard: What does national leadership mean in terms of “putting the pieces together” in the world of rural education? And, what does it mean to “scale up” a distinctive approach to regional work in rural education so that it has national relevance? In a later section of 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.” (30) While AEL can clearly satisfy “the letter of the law” described here by continuing to carry out its Rural Specialty work in predictable ways, a more aggressive and focused interpretation of “rural leadership” may be both possible and necessary.

AEL is to be commended for the work it has already done in articulating five significant rural themes that should be part of AEL’s unique approach to rural issues. Two of these themes as outlined in AEL’s OERI proposal are “Sense of Place” and “Small-Scale Organization,” both of which provide an obvious point of intersection with other current major rural initiatives in the country—most notably with the community-based work of the Annenberg Rural Challenge.

Pursuing and developing this already-articulated ‘rural agenda’ and making the results widely available throughout the Lab, to the other Regional Labs, and also to rural educators around the country, is a path that should be pursued more aggressively as a Rural Center focus in the future.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

The KERA studies, as explained by the researchers themselves to their highly-qualified Peer Review Panel, began with a “general ethnographic approach, prior to developing the study questions, and with an effort to learn about the communities.” But after the questions were developed, the schools –not the communities in which the schools are embedded--became the focus of the study, “as they are in most of the literature on systemic reform.” This ambivalence about the KERA study’s focus (is it a rural study, or simply a school reform study?) has been reflected within the perspectives represented on the Peer Review Panel. One Peer Reviewer who sees the work as fundamentally a “rural story” urged that the study “incorporate rural issues more than superficially” instead of being framed largely “as a study of KERA implementation, simply set in rural districts, while another suggested that he had “not thought of this as a specifically rural study." ” Still another Peer Reviewer has suggested that the researchers’ strategy might be to ask: “How could KERA be redesigned to be more effective in rural communities?” And further, “What different kinds of ‘rural’ are we seeing in the four districts?” These are provocative questions that beg to be answered—and the answers provided would obviously resonate with rural audiences far beyond the borders of Kentucky.

This KERA Peer Review Panel values the objectivity of the researchers’ role and encourages their honest focus on the difficulties of implementing KERA mandates by teachers in the participating schools. However, the Panel also recommends that the KERA researchers broaden and deepen the school stories they are telling to include considerably more contextual

information about the communities within which the schools are embedded, and specifically their rural context.

In response to a reviewer of their recent article on KERA (dated February 1999), the researchers explained that in their article they “spoke frankly about the difficulties we have faced trying to “ruralize” our study of systemic reform. [The reviewer] concurs with us that we are not yet where we need to be.” They go on to say that “in the current phase of the project (1996-2000), we are gathering more information on community context, which we hope will more adequately enable us to contextualize the Kentucky reform effort.” This self-defined focus for their future research should guide the KERA researchers’ reporting and publication efforts, without abandoning their more decontextualized approach up to this point that has been so useful to Kentucky policymakers.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

The Annenberg Rural Challenge has created an energized national network of rural communities and rural schools that could greatly benefit from AEL’s resources in the area of rural education—particularly resources readily accessible through ERIC/CRESS. AEL’s regional focus appears to limit its awareness of important current developments in rural communities nationwide, and has resulted in AEL’s minimal involvement in the Annenberg network (apart from some participation in Policy and Transportation issues), and in other significant rural networks such as the Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network (BLRTN) and Foxfire. AEL’s Rural Specialty responsibilities demand that these oversights be addressed, and that AEL take immediate steps to connect its resources and expertise to existing national networks of rural communities and schools--which is not necessarily the same as connecting with national organizations. Making connections with the Annenberg leadership, for example, or with Foxfire

headquarters, is not the same thing as maintaining active ties with the individual teachers and rural communities within those networks. Other AEL projects (QUEST, for example) have clearly demonstrated the Lab’s existing capacity for creating and sustaining active networks of practitioners, and in this case (i.e., Annenberg, Foxfire, BLRTN) the practitioner networks already exist. It’s a matter of seeking greater direct AEL involvement with existing networks, and making AEL resources widely available to all parties.

The KERA researchers’ intention to deepen their inquiry to flesh out the rural context of the participating schools is significant, and is illustrative of a larger effort that needs to take place within AEL to clarify and sharpen its rural focus. KERA staff should not remain isolated in their noteworthy effort to add a specifically “rural dimension” to their research, but should be part of a focused Labwide effort that is coordinated and supported by the Rural Specialty staff. More clarity and focus in the Rural Specialty Area—specifically in terms of developing the already-articulated specialty themes related to “sense of place” and “small-scale organization”—could assist the KERA researchers in “ruralizing” the data they’ve been collecting for ten years, and could help the AEL Rural Specialty staff make an even greater impact nationwide.

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

**Note:** The numbered items in each of the following three categories are directly related to items with the same number in the other categories. Thus, each identified “Strength” is coupled with a related “Area for Improvement” and “Strategy for Improvement.”

### **Strengths**

As a result of evidence examined before and during this on-site review, this reviewer

commends the AEL professional staff for the following:

1. Strong and continuous leadership which has enabled and sustained the AEL staff's ongoing service and support to the Region for 30-plus years.
2. A strong, dedicated, and highly-qualified staff who exhibit good teamwork and collaboration within their project groupings.
3. A strong and deeply committed regional focus that directly responds to the educational needs of clients.
4. The positive impact and usefulness clearly evident within both Signature Works upon the intended primary audience/client group. Within KERA, these clients are primarily state-level policymakers, and within QUEST, these clients are participating teachers (who are professionally enriched and reinvigorated by their involvement with the project), and significant numbers of students and parents (whose voices are encouraged and listened to).
5. The deep involvement of AEL staff in several programs and thematic areas which provide evidence of great promise for having national—not just regional—significance.
6. The strong and active connections made with targeted schools, educators, parents, and students within the Region, as expressed through coherent projects and direct client services.
7. The creation of a strong electronic communications infrastructure which allows for the possibility of immediate access to useful information and research-based best practices for individual educators and networks within the Region and nationwide.

**Areas of needed improvement**

1. Because of recent and pending changes in AEL leadership at the top levels, a critical transition period has begun that involves the transfer of authority and responsibility to a new—and, in the case of the new Executive Director, largely untested—group of leaders.
2. This clarity and coherence within programs does not necessarily translate into a corresponding level of clarity and coherence across programs.
3. Adopting a truly “systemic” approach to programmatic activity within the Region—as called for in OERI’s Statement of Work—involves learning how to “scale up” successful regional programs to reach a larger audience, and, particularly in the case of the Specialty Area, a national audience. Moving their work to this new level will require the acquisition by AEL staff of a national perspective and will demand that they develop a clear sense of multiple new audiences for AEL’s products and publications, most of whom will reside outside the Region.

4. There is a need for increased emphasis within both Signature Works (QUEST and KERA) on documenting evidence of observable and measurable improvement in student learning and achievement. This reviewer believes that broadening AEL's perspective and enlarging its sense of audience will only serve to enrich their exemplary regional programs and activities.
5. Significant additional amounts of documentation and data collection, reflection, and publication and dissemination of results need to occur within programs showing the most promise (QUEST, KERA, the Rural Specialty) in order to clarify and deepen important work already done before national leadership and influence can become a reality.
6. A considerably weaker level of collaboration and communication across programs makes it difficult for a coherent and consistent Lab-wide approach to emerge, and allows for some duplication and reinvention of the wheel (i.e., one hand not knowing what the other is doing).
7. Creating a "virtual network" is not the same thing as creating and sustaining an "actual network" grounded in human relationships and face-to-face encounters. Likewise, laying the groundwork for the possibility of communication and information access through electronic media is no guarantee that communication occurs, understandings are shared, or information is accessed and digested. Written descriptions and oral testimony focused on the AEL electronic communication infrastructure often obscure these important distinctions and can shift attention away from the difficult, time-consuming, and ultimately rewarding work of face-to-face relationship-building that lies at the center of teaching and learning—and that is already a great strength of the AEL staff. A "virtual network" can support an "actual network," but it cannot take its place.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

1. Use this transition period as an opportunity for reaffirming and redefining the Lab's focus, vision, and Mission. This is also a golden opportunity to revisit the already-articulated rural focus and the five related rural themes with the entire AEL staff, since most staff are already closely involved with project work in rural schools.
2. Build on recent initiatives like the Learning Lab and the April '99 staff retreat to strengthen ongoing across-project communication. Serendipitous sharing is a crucial part of every good organization, but AEL also needs to ensure that this sharing is institutionalized.
3. Immersion in the existing literature in the Specialty Area (just for Specialty Area staff, but for all staff who work regularly with rural schools), learning from the contrasting rural emphases and perspectives of other Regional Labs, and consciously playing a larger role in national forums and becoming part of a new and expanded

rural network (i.e., breaking out of a “regional ghetto” in rural terms) would allow AEL to broaden its scope and “reach.”

4. For KERA this will mean continuing to collect and analyze baseline data for student achievement for the class of 2006. For QUEST this means becoming more systematic about collecting and analyzing baseline data for student achievement in participating schools from the beginning of a school’s involvement with the network.
5. Identify key programs and areas that show the most promise for “scaling up,” and commit adequate personnel, resources, and time to allow the learnings and insights for these showcase activities to be synthesized, coherently organized, and shared Lab-wide. For QUEST this might mean articulating how a small, successful network of schools can be created. For KERA, this might mean (1) continuing to elaborate on the ‘generic’ research approach for Kentucky policymakers and for a national audience, and (2) simultaneously “ruralizing” the existing data to share with appropriate rural audiences in future reporting and publishing efforts.
6. Beef up the Lab “stable” of gifted and powerful writers, coupled with additional time set aside for Lab-wide reflection upon activities and projects to allow for an expanded sharing and publication of Lab work in a variety of forums.
7. Connect the full array of already-existing electronic infrastructure and support to the QUEST network, the participating KERA schools, and to the Annenberg network schools, looking to the lessons learned by the Bread Loaf Rural Teachers Network through their creative use of Breadnet (their electronic support network) as a model and inspiration.