

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory

### I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia are served by the Appalachia Education Laboratory. The region is rich in history and diverse in population. While predominately rural, the region includes substantial metropolitan areas. Urban areas include Fairfax County, Virginia, which comprises much of suburban Washington D.C., Richmond, Norfolk, Memphis, Louisville, and Nashville, along with dozens of large towns.

The geography of the region is varied. The most striking geographic feature is the Appalachian Mountain chain which bisects the region from northeast to southwest. Since early settlement, this range has been a barrier to travel and, until well into this century, a barrier to communication and commerce.

As a barrier to commerce, the mountains have condemned much of the region to grinding poverty that persists today. The cultural impact of poverty on the educational needs of the children and the attending scarcity of resources to meet those needs dominates the consciousness of the Laboratory board and staff.

The region is remarkably interested and committed to school reform. In the 1980's, Tennessee was in the forefront of the nation's movement toward accountability, especially accountability for teachers. In 1990, Kentucky enacted the nation's most comprehensive school reform legislation. Now, nine years later, Kentucky's program is still the most comprehensive and far-reaching reform plan of any state in the union. The people, educators and Legislature of Kentucky continue in their determination to see the reform effort through to success, despite

some vexing challenges. West Virginia is leading the nation in its tax effort to support public education, despite its poverty levels. Virginia has just published the results of its first commonwealth test and plans to stay on track with test, even though some of the results are painful to consider.

Throughout all this ferment of educational development in the region, AEL has been supporting the students, schools and states as they find their way to their individual solutions. It may not be documented in this report, but it seems quite reasonable to believe that AEL has contributed a great deal to developing the region as a reform leader in the country. The reader may likely be persuaded that the people of AEL are too modest and deferential to accept the credit they are due for the helping create this strong regional commitment.

Founded as a regional educational laboratory in 1966, AEL was one of the original regional laboratories. It has won a succession of competitions to continue in this capacity continuously since 1966. The staff and leadership of the Laboratory have enjoyed remarkable stability and longevity.

## **II. Implementation and Management**

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

In 1995 the Appalachian Educational Laboratory submitted a proposal in response to a request for proposals to operate a regional laboratory issued by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Standards based education and systemic school reform were the byword of the Department of Education at the time. The Department's set piece, Goals 2000, called for all public education efforts to unite in pursuit of

national education Goals set by state governors.

The proposal submitted by AEL was good. AEL, which had served as a laboratory since 1966, won the contract and would continue to serve its region. Despite the Federal concentration on addressing national and state standards, the AEL proposal was not organized around standards or even systemic reform. It proposed to concentrate Laboratory efforts on the needs of its region as the Laboratory's traditionally understood them.

In the meantime, the standards movement took hold in Appalachian states, as it did in the rest of the nation. The Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia and, with substantial reluctance, Virginia all signed onto Goals 2000 and the standards movement. Tennessee had been an early leader in school reform. In 1990, Kentucky passed the most comprehensive school reform legislation in the nation.

AEL supported state efforts, yet, its 1994 proposal did not emphasize standards based reform. Subsequent AEL activities have addressed and corrected this lack of emphasis on standards. Now, AEL has dedicated most of its efforts to helping states and districts implement such reform. The signature works selected for study in this report illustrate the evolution of AEL's efforts to support standards based reform.

Task 6 of the proposal calls for the collaboration with the other laboratories and contributing to the national understanding and implementation of school reform. This task is receiving less attention from AEL than other tasks. Little attention is given Task 6 in the Laboratory's organizational chart. Of further concern in this regard, is the reluctance of AEL to place a high value on collecting empirical baseline data in its reform projects.

Of equal concern is the lack of emphasis given publishing and disseminating the results of AEL work. Much of this concern for AEL's limited enthusiasm for seeking to have a national

influence is balanced, and made up for, by its unwavering determination to serve its region. The director commented to the evaluation team that AEL is “terribly regionally focused”.

Rural education dominates the region and AEL’s attention. So much so, AEL has not well defined rural education. This lack of definition presents considerable difficulty for those of us in rural areas in other parts of the country. Many rural American communities do not share the same attributes as Appalachian rural areas. For much of the country, it is distance and sparse population that create the greatest challenges, not exceptional poverty. This would cause little problem were it not for AEL’s commission as the seat of the national rural specialty among the laboratories.

Considering the great needs of the area served by AEL and the organization’s adjustment to consciously pursue standards based reform, it is meeting its contract expectations. In terms of service to its region, it is exceeding expectations.

### **Strengths**

1. AEL is intensely dedicated to serving its region
2. The executive director, staff and board are hard working and determined to serve the region.
3. Leadership of AEL has been remarkably stable and earned a reputation for integrity personally and for the Laboratory.
4. The staff is small, but members are willing to wear many hats simultaneously.
5. AEL responds to its regions needs, as demonstrated by taking on the daunting challenge of helping restructure Hamilton County Tennessee schools at the request of the state superintendent. It took courage and determination to accept the assignment.
6. School reform is a long process. AEL is quite process oriented. Its mission is to help people find their own answers, not give answers.
7. There is integrity and continuity in the vision, mission and goals of AEL. Unlike many organizations, AEL lives its stated purposes.

8. Technology is an important aspect of AEL's service apparatus. It is unclear how pervasively and effectively it is being used.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

1. Intense regional dedication is simultaneously a strength and a concern. The same focus on the region can distort responses to meeting Task 6. Resources are focus on meeting immediate regional needs not on data collection, publication and dissemination. Regarding the rural specialty, regional focus limits an understanding of rural educational needs in other regions.
2. There is danger in the transition in leadership soon to impact AEL. There appears to be a sense among staff that little will change with a new director. Experience indicates that will not be true. The transition is an opportunity to test existing assumptions.
3. National publication is not quite considered negative at AEL. Yet, the staff gives the impression that the organization finds it less important use of time.
4. Years of responding to RFPs have led to organizing AEL according to projects. This programmatic organization has resulted in making communications across problems difficult. Much AEL experience and expertise is unavailable from one AEL program to another.
5. AEL is defined by its process orientation. Standards based reform is defined by a results orientation. The tension between these orientations limits the effectiveness of AEL in assisting school reform, documenting reform activities and contributing to the national dialogue of reform.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

The leadership transition should be used as an opportunity to:

1. Test basic AEL assumptions about its role in the region and nationally.
2. Define rural education.
3. Reorganize to eliminate a programmatic overlay.
4. Consider greater emphasis on publishing and dissemination activities.
5. Develop a marketing strategy for AEL and its programs.
6. Balance emphasis on process with an equal emphasis on results.

7. Reconfirm AEL's commitment to serve its region.
8. Revisit its vision, mission and goals. These may benefit from modification.. Even if they were not modified reconfirmation can be helpful.

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

AEL employs an internal evaluator and, though not required to do so, an expert external evaluator. These gentlemen report regularly. Their reports are used in a self-reflection within the Laboratory and sent to OERI.

Regular meetings of the Corporate Leadership Group (CLG) also contribute to a self-monitoring function. Board minutes reflect a continuous self-evaluation.

When appropriate, AEL requests amendments to its OERI contract. This occurs when the organization determines that adjustments in its programs are warranted.

**Strengths**

1. AEL engages an outside evaluator.
2. Reports are regularly made and published.

**Areas of needed improvement**

Opportunities for cross program critiques are lacking.

**Recommendations**

A mechanism should be developed for cross programs critiques to occur.

### **III. Quality**

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

##### **QUEST Project**

The Quest project is a work in progress. It's value as a signature work is limited by its short history. The project grew out of a previous project known as Quilt. Quilt is an instructional improvement program that developed teachers' questioning strategies.

The reflection Quilt developed in classrooms lent itself to using reflective questioning to change how schools operate. From this grew a school improvement process that became the Quest Project. The Laboratory recruited about 20 schools to the Quest Program. AEL presents the program as a process for school improvement that helps schools design their own unique improvement plan. In fact, Quest's current implementation in 18 schools demonstrates that the program results in the use strategies and AEL products common to all sites, despite designing reform site by site.

The true character of the Quest Program is not found in the documentation about it, nor in hearing about the program from AEL facilitators. Its true character is revealed in the voices of the participants, the teachers, administrators, parents and student. Discussions with participants revealed its strengths.

##### **Strengths**

1. Quest facilitates communications among teachers, administrators, students, parents and community members.
2. School climate issues are addressed in the project. This is common among the participating schools we heard from and also seen in the documentation.
3. The program grew out of an instructional development program that then was extended to comprehensive school improvement program.

4. Schools are invited to participate and take the program on voluntarily.
5. The program generates intense enthusiasm and commitment among some participants. It is hard to know from the information provided in this evaluation just how broad this enthusiasm is.
6. Each school tailors its own program, sets its own goals, develops its own strategies, and judges its progress.
7. The program leaders at AEL are modifying their approach and adding tools and strategies as they learn from each project.
8. There is great enthusiasm and commitment from the Quest staff for the program and they are loyal to the schools they serve.

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

1. Quest does not directly address instructional needs. It is possible for a school to undertake the Quest process and never address instruction, achievement or student learning.
2. It is assumed by the program developers that school climate improvement will improve learning. While that is generally true, not all climate improvement results in learning improvement.
3. The program deals only with individual schools, not districts. This seems to defy state and district attempts to create a seamless system or become “one system”.
4. High schools are underrepresented among participant schools.
5. No middle schools participate, except as they are inadvertently thrown in because they are part of an extended grade configuration.
6. There seems to be an over emphasis on governance issues rather than instructional issues.
7. Baseline data is not collected by Quest project staff or AEL. Instead it is left up to the schools to take whatever baseline data they decide upon, if they take any at all. This is a serious flaw that jeopardizes the credibility of the program when disseminated.
8. The reflection piece is outstanding, however, it appears that the Quest personnel have not engaged in using the technique often in developing their own program.
9. This evaluation team was not afforded the opportunity to hear from critics of the program.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

1. Make a direct connection to instruction as a required and immediate aspect of the program.
2. Collect baseline data on instructional and school climate issues upon application to the program and before any intervention takes place.
3. Integrate the Quest Program with other AEL projects. Ease the programmatic divisions that separate activities.
4. Scale up to a district-wide application of the project.
5. Find a funding source for the project. This will likely require packaging for marketing to occur. The program must first be “sold” to a funding source.
6. Make a connection to the External Facilitator Academy.

### **Kentucky Education Reform Act Case Study Evaluation**

In 1990 the Commonwealth of Kentucky enacted the most comprehensive educational reform program in the country. The act combined a state demand for accountability along with a determination to support and facilitate reform. The Legislature has stayed the course for nine years. Funding equity was only part of the package. The Legislature was forced to act as the result of litigation that found the Kentucky’s school system was not simply financially inequitable to students, the system itself was found inequitable. KERA, as it is known, has commanded national attention as a model for other state reform programs since its inception.

Soon after the law was enacted the Commonwealth knew it needed external evaluation help. Kentucky asked the assistance of AEL. To its credit, AEL agreed to a five-year contract to do the work. Four rural schools were selected as cases to study. Five years later the study was extended by an additional five-year contract. The same four schools continue as the subjects of the study.

As a signature work, KERA the evaluation tells much nature and performance of AEL as

it addresses Task 2.

### **Strengths**

1. The evaluation began with the implementation of KERA and is one of very few longitudinal studies of modern school reform.
2. Experience and the testimony of policy makers and educators indicate that finding of the study can be generalized to describe the experience of schools throughout Kentucky.
3. Teachers, community members and others find that the dialogue with evaluators “deepens the reform.”
4. AEL’s evaluation program gives the Laboratory greater national viability.
5. AEL is learning much about the natural progression of reform from this long-term relationship. It is seeing reform move from process domination to a greater interest in content and substance.
6. Reform also appears to be concentrating less on governance and more on instructional capacity.
7. AEL has avoided duplicating the efforts of CPRE which is studying the impact of funding reform.
8. AEL captured the reality that school reform must involve the child in the context of his community, not simply deal with issues within the confines of the school as a separate institution.
9. The KERA evaluation team is objective but greatly committed to school reform.
10. The evaluation is very concerned with what is happening in classrooms for children.
11. The evaluation is used and respected by many Kentucky policymakers.
12. The team is honest about the successes and shortcomings of KERA.
13. It appears the evaluation team has collaborative relationship with its expert advisory council. The council is made up of exceptionally qualified people.
14. A study of the impact of KERA on the schools and the performance of students is planned to commence in May of this year.

15. The team has learned to present critical conclusions in constructive ways that are politically sensitive to avoid “derailing” reform.
16. The objectivity of the team is highly valued by policy makers and advisors spoken with.
17. The quality of research, documentation and publications was affirmed by the advisory team.
18. The evaluation complements and informs the rural specialty of AEL.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

1. The advisory committee should be asked to review publications earlier in the publication process.
2. The evaluation could benefit by delving deeper into rural education literature.
3. The community context of the case study subjects should be more closely studied and reflected in the evaluation.
4. The research team is part time on this project and distant from the communities. This is both a benefit to objectivity while an obstacle to understanding.
5. The project funding ends this year. Unless remedied this problem could jeopardize a valuable and rare longitudinal study of reform.

### **Recommendations**

1. The KERA evaluation should be careful to shift its attention to the policy needs incident to the shift of reform from process to content and teacher capacity.
2. A study is needed of the careers of teachers and administrators successfully involved in school reform compared with those less successfully involved and those uninvolved.
3. Continue to document the cycles and phases of school reform in various schools, districts and states.
4. Find a funding source to maintain the KERA evaluation and maintain its independence.

## **IV. Utility**

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

AEL is committed to its region. It serves its immediate customers as seen by its response to Tennessee's request for help in Hamilton County, work with KERA and the many other products it has developed. Quest, Quilt, action research, evaluation services and help with curriculum alignment are all directly designed to meet the stated need of customers. The leadership of AEL has assured that products are usable.

Utility is enhanced by AEL's determination to keep its products affordable to a region plagued by poverty.

### **Strengths**

1. AEL's proposal to OERI was noteworthy for its lack of emphasis on implementing standards, yet in response to customer needs, it has accommodated standards implementation to a significant extent.
2. The wealth of experience AEL is developing in throughout the region, if shared, can be of great aid to reform.
3. AEL is user friendly and willing to tailor its products to the needs of individual needs of schools district and states.
4. AEL honors what it refers to as the "wisdom of practice" as it captures the experience of its clients in its product improvement

### **Areas of needed improvement**

1. Improving internal communications within AEL can help program developers tap each other's experience.
2. Marketing and packaging of products should be addressed to increase the visibility of products.

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

Upon several occasions panel members asked staff to define their customers. Examination of documents revealed little in the way of definition of customers. The only time customers were

clearly identified was when the question was put to people responsible for writing the policy briefs. Otherwise the definition was unclear.

This puts one at a disadvantage when trying to ascertain how well AEL meets the needs of its customers. It is very clear that the nation is not seen as a major customer, nor is the OERI. One is left to surmise from the frequency and manner with which AEL staff refers to possible customers groups to determine AEL customers.

The state departments of education, governors' offices and state legislatures are often mentioned as significant audiences. Superintendents are more often mentioned as important to the AEL mission. But, without a doubt the primary objects of AEL program attention are school instructional staffs and students. Communities are beginning to emerge in the minds of staff as an important customer group.

### **Strengths**

1. AEL is focused on students and their teachers.
2. Service to the field enjoys great emphasis.
3. It seeks customers, often calling to invite schools and other organizations to join activities and grant proposal.
4. When customers come with requests, AEL responds. Many of AEL's major activities, including their signature works were the result of customer requests.
5. Products emerge from the experience of customers. As with Quest, the Kentucky writing project and many other AEL products were designed in the field tailored to meet the specific needs of customers.
6. Customers have participated in designing many of the products they use. It is a very interactive design and modification approach.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

1. Clearly identifying customers of the Laboratory in general and of individual projects specifically would sharpen the focus of product development and implementation.

2. Collection of baseline data about customers would not only improve the research value of interventions and evaluations, it would also result in better knowledge of customers. This could help in product design.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

1. OERI and the national audience should be given greater consideration so that the experience can be shared.
2. Clearly identifying customers of the Laboratory in general and of individual projects, specifically, would sharpen the focus of product development and implementation.
3. Collection of baseline data about customers would not only improve the research value of interventions and evaluations, it would also result in better knowledge of customers. This could help in product design.

## **VI. Outcomes and Impact**

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

Little performance data is available by which to judge the improvement of student performance. Kentucky testing shows some improvement in elementary students and a mixed bag among high school students. Virginia has just initiated its state-wide test. Where AEL has had intensive local involvement with school reform, such as Quest, there has been little if any baseline data collected.

AEL is very process oriented and believes strongly in the efficacy of improving school climate to improve learning performance. While this belief is born out by research, two problems arise from the AEL application of the approach. First, all school climate improvement does not improve performance, and certain improvements are more effective than others. Second, without baseline data, either hard or soft, one cannot tell if there is improvement at all.

In response to questions about data, twice the response from staff is that even with data, causation could not be teased out. That is true, but correlation might be established.

Although AEL is not as focused on student learning outcomes as one might hope, it is dedicated to improving schools, instruction and assessment. There are a multitude of AEL activities in pursuit of improving student achievement, including the KERA, the Hancock County project, Quest. AEL's most direct involvement in addressing learning outcomes is its leadership in developing the Virginia assessment. This experience can be of extraordinary value in focusing AEL on student learning outcomes.

Throughout its history, AEL has emphasized process. States and standards based reform demand that schools focus on standards. This does not eliminate the need for solid group processing. Quite the contrary, accountability means schools and practitioners must change. Processing changes is essential, but it must be done in a way that produces specified results.

### **Strengths**

1. AEL is in the trenches trying to make standards based reform work in schools with real live staff and students.
2. There is a good understanding that school climate and sustained school reform are directly linked.
3. AEL is patient in working with people and persistent in efforts to support people working toward elusive, distant goals.
4. AEL is contributing to helping the region, from students to policymakers, sustain school reform efforts in material ways.
5. The Laboratory is gaining a strong theoretical, experiential and intuitive understanding of long term school reform. Time after time, staff mentioned that they are with their customers for the long term.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

1. Other than the KERA evaluation project, AEL and its programs are fixed on process to the near exclusion of results.
2. Since so many of AEL's projects are long term, one would expect to see mid-project check points for evaluation. Short and mid-term objectives are not often in evidence.
3. There are disconnects among AEL programs and between other school reform efforts in the state and region that deprive people working in proximity to one on other of the benefit of mutual experience.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

1. AEL and its programs need to balance their emphasis on process with an equal concern for results.
2. The protocol in Quest that calls on students and practitioners to reflect on the nature of their work products should be more regularly practiced by AEL. The "learning laboratory" activity could serve in this capacity.
3. Forums for local schools to present their results to other schools could be established along with newsletters that simply publish student results.
4. Whatever happens in programs and projects - success, failure or something in between - there is a value to capturing the experience. There is truth to the humorous remark that someone should publish a compendium of "worst practices in school reform". It would save a lot of trouble. Documentation is valuable under all circumstances.
5. The results of AEL work should be made more readily available to the nation.

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

#### **Strengths**

This is among AEL's greatest strengths. When states have asked for help, they have received it. In Virginia, AEL is deeply involved with implementing statewide testing. In Kentucky it is evaluating the reform act KERA and leading a state writing improvement project. In Tennessee it is assisting the state by helping a failing a district turn its fortunes around. These are daunting tasks, requiring courage and persistence of the Laboratory and its staff.

Sometimes AEL has developed projects on its own and offered projects to district, or invited schools and districts to participate. These school reform projects have improved school climate and focused schools on academic work. They have resulted in making schools more mindful of the teacher-learner relationship and concentrated staff efforts on instructional improvement. AEL has assisted states and local schools sustain long-term school reform, even when the results have been discouraging.

AEL has helped states, districts and schools leverage scarce resources. Above all, AEL has done an excellent job helping the region, from parents to practitioners to policy makers, understand standards based school reform. That is no mean task. It requires people to trust, listen and struggle to understand the interrelationships of standards, assessment, content and teaching and learning strategies. Once there is an understanding creating the policy base, attention must turn to developing practitioner capacity to implement the whole concept. It appears that a critical mass of the policymakers, practitioners and populace of the region have understood and made a commitment to long term reform.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

1. The collection and preservation of data on the history of regional reform needs improvement.
2. Communications among school improvement efforts is not strong within AEL program participants, except Quest, among AEL programs and among other school improvement programs in the region.
3. The concept of “scaling up” in AEL is understood as a marketing concept, rather than the engineering concept that it is. Scaling up means taking a prototype to production, a process that requires taking a working model and engineering it so it can be produced in greater numbers that all perform a function in the same way, given certain tolerances for variation in performance.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

1. Adopting an engineering view of scaling up would better serve the region and local districts by causing AEL to engineer their school reform products to be more portable.
2. Develop better communications vehicles within AEL and throughout the region to facilitate dialogue.
3. Promote what AEL has learned regionally to a national audience.

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

AEL has years of experience in its specialty area going back to the 1960s. Its region is predominantly rural and the region suffers economically from its isolation. Since its founding AEL has responded to the needs of its rural schools. Its staff has much experience with rural education professionally and many staff members attended rural schools as children.

Rural schools are the subject of many of the programs and products of AEL although they were not designed with rural schools in mind. Dealing with small and isolated schools comes naturally to AEL. The work with Hancock County in Tennessee and the four KERA case study schools in Kentucky are all rural and many of the challenges these schools face are related to their rural setting as are their assets. Yet, AEL's presence in these sites has nothing to do with its specialty of rural education, it is present because it is serving its region.

Often programs are not in close communications with the Rural Center. The Rural Center is, according to its leaders, a conceptual entity that is just emerging from the concept stage. The two components that comprise the Center are the Rural Specialty staff and the ERIC Rural Education Clearinghouse.

There is a blank spot in the Rural specialty of considerable concern. There is no operationally satisfactory definition of rural to help define the program. AEL is quick to note the Federal government has multiple definitions of rural and seems unable to agree on a solid

definition. AEL's difficulty in defining rural was well described by a panel member as "asking a fish to define water, it is where it lives". The definition is important because much of what AEL responds to a rural is Appalachia, the nature and needs of which differ from those of the upper Midwest, the deserts of the southwest and the wilderness of Alaska.

The lack of definition and limited national recognition of the center inhibit the ability to of AEL to provide leadership in its national specialty area. When asked about expending its leadership role in developing rural education, the response of the specialty and center leaders was that as a Laboratory the organization was to serve others on to lead. In rural education, the competition to become a leader is exceptionally sparse.

### **Strengths**

1. The merging of the Rural Education Clearinghouse and the staff of the Rural Education Specialty is promising.
2. The unique needs of African American students in rural schools are under study by the specialty.
3. Math & Science instruction in rural school is the subject of special study.
4. In conjunction with the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Project the social and psychological needs of adolescents are under consideration.
5. The specialty area people have strong ties and communications with the Annenberg Rural Challenge and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the NSF rural initiative material.
6. The specialty views rural education positively not from a deficit perspective.
7. Among the projects underway are developing programs to assist rural educators to develop a "curriculum of place" reflecting the uniqueness and variety of needs.

### **Areas of needed improvement**

1. Rural must be defined to include all rural areas of the country and recognizes their differences.
2. There is an absence of a unifying vision in the specialty area(s).

3. It seems that much time was spent putting together full staffing, indeed the new lead person in the specialty area wasn't on staff until early 1999. Getting geared up has been very slow.
4. The specialty sees its role as collaborative with other initiatives, but not itself asserting leadership.
5. Staffing is predominately spending only parts of its time on the specialty with the result of diluting efforts toward building a strong national presence.

### **Recommendations for improvement**

1. The specialty demands that the AEL exert leadership in the area of promoting and disseminating research on rural education. A plan for such leadership should be developed and pursued vigorously.
2. Consider reviewing the history of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's extension Service high school agriculture instructional approaches as a means to improve rural education.
3. Create a strategic plan including a specialty vision, mission, set of goals and values statement, soon.

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

AEL has produced many outstanding product and projects. Its relationships within the region are generally professional and personally exemplary. Its services respond to the needs of its region. The products, programs and services meet or exceed expectations for professional quality.

All activities demonstrate high professional standards of professional practice and integrity. They are designed to meet the needs of most customers. There is a regional focus that reduces the contributions AEL could make to national view of education.

AEL has a good handle on standards based reform and this understanding is reflected in the products and services it provides. There can be no doubt the AEL has played a substantial role in building and maintaining the strong education reform movement that exists in its region

and, in many ways leads the nation. AEL's consistency and perseverance over many years is of great value to Appalachia.

The reluctance of the laboratory to engage in "marketing" or to pursue national recognition is regrettable. It is regrettable because the nation is denied much of what it could learn from AEL and because AEL does not receive the recognition and resulting resources that would accrue from that recognition.

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

There is great integrity in AEL. The vision, mission and goals of the organization are congruent. They pervade the laboratory, its activities and its products. The staff is dedicated, giving long hours of service, traveling through a region that is often difficult to get around. Most staff members have given years of service. They know the region well. Several staff members are native to the region.

Much of this organizational integrity is due to the character of Executive Director, Terry Eidell and his long tenure at the Laboratory. He is committed to helping practitioners find their own answers. The needs of the region are paramount in his thinking. To him, recognition takes a backseat to service. These values are inculcated into the Laboratory.

The products and daily activities of AEL are distinguished for their echo of the voice of students and practitioners in the region.

Adhering to these the stated values that drive the Laboratory, AEL has built a reputation for service to the region, caring deeply for people both within and outside the organization. The staff is noted for its professionalism. Balancing this sense of caring is a disciplined objectivity.

This balance is exemplified by staff activities in evaluation activities. AEL is seen as an honest broker to be trusted to assess matters of vital professional interest those who engage Laboratory research and evaluation services. This to the credit of Dr. Eidell's's leadership and the strength of the staff.

In favor of pursuing service to the region, AEL has put little emphasis on cultivating its national profile. Again and again, staff members mentioned their reluctance to promote products and their reputation. Publishing and marketing are considered secondary. This has hampered the contributions that may be made by a more aggressive view toward development of AEL's national specialty, rural education and other endeavors.

The operating principles of AEL are collaboration, reflection and process. Helping others to find their own answers is the by word. AEL is invitational not aggressive. This accounts for its acceptance and respect in the region, among other regional laboratories and among professional educators around the country.

This strong orientation to process has hampered, to some extent, AEL's taking a more assertive leadership role in many areas of its activities, most notably in pursuing its specialty area, rural education. Rural education needs outspoken champions and there are few candidates for the job. An overwhelming commitment to process may also contribute to the reluctance of AEL to collect hard data outside its evaluation activities. Reticence to pursue a higher national profile may arise from an emphasis of process over results.

Communications within the organization appear to be somewhat fragmented, though not unusually so. The staff attributes much of the obstacles to communications to years of responding to calls for proposals created programmatic compartmentalization. This makes a great deal of sense. It mirrors what the Department of Education has learned about itself. This realization

caused the ED to consolidate programs, loosen restrictions on combining school programs and result in consolidating federal programs within district and schools. AEL is working in the same way and should continue to do so.

Of greatest concern and of greatest opportunity for AEL is the impending transition of the Laboratory leadership. Whether by design or simply as a matter of organizational nature, the departure of a strong leader who has served a long tenure signals great adjustments. It is a valuable time to revisit existing assumptions. This reconsideration may result in changing, modifying or reconfirming the values, culture and practices of the organization. It is a healthy exercise.

Among the things that demand a reconsideration are internal communications and organization of staff and work. Also, the view of the organization toward collecting data, especially baseline student performance data, when new instructional development programs are undertaken is essential. Documentation of reform is of great future value, even if that value is not immediately apparent. The data collected today may be vital to some future project at AEL or elsewhere. Schools and practitioners may be forgiven for being too engrossed in instruction to document improvement efforts, but not research and development organizations.

The Laboratory's view of national dissemination should be reconsidered. Recognition is not the purpose of publishing to a national audience. Its purpose is to inform deliberations. A stronger emphasis on publishing does not have to result in a slavish publish or perish environment, especially if a good writer is added to the staff to assist publication.

Associated with publishing is marketing. AEL has many very valuable products and able staff members. A concerted packaging and marketing plan will contribute to the national awareness of the lessons learned by AEL. Despite AEL having a strong presence and reputation

within its region, a marketing plan will only enhance the regional view of the region and AEL's ability to serve the region.

Among the tools suited to the job of reconsidering the Laboratory's essential purposes is the "protocol", which is the heart of the Quest program. This reflection on one's work and its results is precisely what is called for at this major transition point for AEL.

Altogether, AEL is an outstanding organization that values people and produces good products and services. It serves the students and people of Appalachia well.