

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northeast and Islands Laboratory at Brown University

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The site visit for the interim evaluation of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB) was held May 24 - 28, 1999 at the LAB headquarters on the campus of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Included in the meeting were LAB staff and staff from some of the LAB's partners, including the Center for Applied Linguistics, the Center for Resource Management, and RMC Research Corp. Panel members were sent many documents to review prior to the site visit. I reviewed most of these documents prior to conducting the site visit, and reviewed some of them again during the site visit. Despite four very intensive days and the review of the comprehensive set of materials provided, I still feel there are areas of LAB activities about which I should know more in order to adequately evaluate them. Many of the areas that go unmentioned in this report are not here because I think they are just fine or because I did not feel informed enough to comment. Lack of discussion should not be construed as lack of support.

I. Implementation and Management

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

Background

The LAB at Brown is one of the two newest regional laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Housed within the Education Alliance (a department at Brown University), the LAB was funded for the first time in 1995. The development of the LAB

proposal took into consideration the expressed needs of the chief state school officers and others prominent in education within the region. Through the advance planning of the Education Alliance and with the support of Brown University, the LAB was able to get off to a fairly quick start with a strong staff, well-equipped partners, and a somewhat well-defined set of activities. The LAB capitalized on partners with established activities and work sites to get some applied research activities underway very quickly, and these partners are considered essential to the dissemination of information produced by the LAB.

In the original proposal, the LAB included ten partners. These partners included the Center for Resource Management, Center for Applied Linguistics, RMC Research, Inc., TERC, Inc., Abt Associates, Jobs For the Future, and the University of Massachusetts at Boston (all of whom are still involved in the LAB activities), as well as Super Teams Ltd., Bolt, Baranek and Newman Inc., and Hunter College (that are not still involved). At least one new partner has been added, namely the University of Vermont.

The original LAB proposal contained a large number of research and development activities, many of which were integrated through the specialty content area of “Language and Cultural Diversity.” Other projects were related to “Transforming Teaching and Learning, School Structures and Environments That Support High Levels of Learning, and Partnerships and Connections That Support Systemic Reform”. Urban Education was also a strand that was woven throughout the LAB’s proposed work. These content areas evolved into the program areas of Standards, Assessment & Instruction, School Change & Community Improvement, Secondary School Restructuring, Professional Development for Educational Leadership, and Urban Education. Again, Language and Cultural Diversity was threaded throughout the work of the LAB.

Many things happened over the course of the first couple of years that caused the changes in structure of the LAB and the design of the research activities. As expected, the design of LAB activities evolved with the input from partners, participants, and the context in which the work was being done. Some projects were concluded, revamped, or postponed. As a result the program of work differs in a number of areas from the original proposal; however, this is not necessarily inappropriate. The changes to the structure of the LAB seem to be appropriate in that it makes it somewhat easier for clients to know where within the LAB to find the assistance they need.

The LAB has chosen to stay pretty much within its scope of work as presented in the original proposal, and not seek other funding for activities. Because the LAB had such an ambitious agenda proposed, this is probably a wise decision. It is possible that the LAB's partners are leveraging their own activities thus bringing additional internal resources or conceptual understandings to the LAB; however, we do not know what other activities are conducted outside of LAB activities by the LAB partners.

The work of the LAB has reached a point where dissemination is essential to the impact of the LAB on the region. The work is far enough along to provide guidance to practitioners who have a need for the research results and professional development guidelines. Because of the evolutionary nature of the work, dissemination plans are not fully developed nor is it possible to get a good sense of how well the work will be "scaled up" in the future, although the Panel sought to get discussion of these areas. Many of the recommendations, thus, will address areas where current planning is either unclear or undeveloped. To the extent that these things are already being considered but may not have been mentioned to the Panel, the LAB may consider these recommendations as a confirmation of planning already underway.

1. Strengths

Despite its youth, the LAB appears to be well-established and functioning efficiently. The LAB benefits from the reputation of Brown University as a progressive institution in the support of education reform and a neutral provider of information on policy and practice. Some of the LAB's staff is on the Brown faculty, which can be helpful for a couple of reasons: Brown staff may discuss LAB activities with other faculty members and get outside insights into what the LAB is accomplishing, and Brown faculty can identify outstanding and interested students to work at the LAB either during or after their schooling years at Brown. Brown also provides guidance to the LAB through required policies related to salaries, hiring practices, and other general organizational components.

The LAB has recently developed a carefully designed set of procedures for initiating and monitoring research, projects, and activities. These procedures seem aimed at ensuring that staffing and budgets are appropriate, the quality of the work will be high, and the findings will result in useful products. This information is very well spelled out in the LAB's Program Manual. While this has only been recently been developed, it seems as though it will be useful to ensure appropriate work is done by the LAB in the future.

The LAB has a very supportive Board of Governors (and especially the Executive Board). Indeed the Board of Governors has been involved in conceptualizing LAB activities and monitoring the quality of the services provided. The Board seems to represent many types of stakeholders in the region, and they seem very interested (apparently the attendance rate at meetings, hosted by various states, is very high). The comments of the Board members were very helpful to the Panel in that they indicated a strong bias toward certain types of activities to be conducted by the LAB to the exclusion of others that have been done in the past by Regional

Educational Laboratories (RELs), such as technical assistance and workshops.

In addition to its network of partners described above, the LAB has started to develop some useful working relationships with other organizations in the region, such as the teacher unions (NEA and AFT, and the UFT in New York City), national associations such as NASSP and NABE, and regional associations such as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). Some of these relationships have resulted in joint activities. For instance, the LAB supported reform efforts initiated by the NEASC, doing research to inform the revision of the accreditation process. These connections also serve as major ways to disseminate LAB information. The LAB also has a working relationship with other RELs through formal activities such as LNPs, and for joint activities, such as a forum jointly sponsored with LSS. Connections have evidently also been made with CREDE, which is the national center related in content to the specialty area of the LAB, although concrete evidence of this connection was not seen.

The LAB's continuing partners seem to be strong additions to the work of the LAB. Despite potential problems in managing multiple organizations in multiple locations, this does not appear to be a problem with the LAB. The LAB seems to have worked out a meeting schedule that does several things. It facilitates collaboration as logical connections are found among projects. Meeting around the region in conjunction with Board Meetings and holding seminars adjacent to the meetings enables the LAB and partner staffs to have contact with each other and with more people from within the region and promotes discussion about improving the activities underway.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Although there are opportunities for and encouragement to collaborate, I still feel that there are possible collaborations or interconnections among projects that are not being pursued.

The beauty of having a focus on English language learners (ELLs) across the majority of the projects is that ideas and materials can be shared, particularly when there is a long-term relationship between the LAB and a study site. Information about other activities related to ELLs is not always being shared across the various related studies nor across potentially related projects, however. For example, information on portfolio assessment for ELLs did not appear to be discussed with the Lowell, MA folks working with the LAB on professional development activities around implementing standards-based instruction for ELLs.

It is difficult to see the extent to which the LAB has been able to build a national reputation around its specialty area, despite the quality of the work done so far. I think a better focus on making materials available to audiences in a more interesting and useful way would help with the dissemination, which would help get more visibility for LAB work. This is discussed more below.

Although the LAB has benefited from being associated with Brown University, there are additional connections that could be of benefit to the LAB, and were alluded to in the proposal. For instance, we were not able to find any evidence of joint activities with the Annenberg Institute despite the logical connections in the work.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

It would be useful for the LAB to look for more ways in which the projects can collaborate and learn from each other, particularly across program areas. In addition, it would be beneficial if the products from the activities related to ELLs could be looked at as part of an overall set of materials that can be used to work with educators interested in providing better instruction to “all students.” Right now the activities and products do not look as if they fit together other than the same basic cover on publications.

The LAB has pretty much conducted the work according to the original proposal and modifications; however, the set of activities seems to be too many and too diverse. As described below, the LAB would probably benefit from looking closely at the remaining set of activities and concentrate on doing a better job of exploiting the work done so far, rather than starting a new set of disparate activities.

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

The LAB established a relationship with Abt Associates from the beginning to provide external evaluation assistance. Prior to the Interim Evaluation, Abt was asked to help the LAB develop self-assessment procedures. As a result of this set of activities several things were accomplished, including the development of an extensive set of procedures to document and promote quality in all activities and products. The Program Manual evidently went through several revisions, but seems to provide good guidance for staff and useful information about the various projects.

Another recommendation of Abt was the development of an electronic database containing information about all of the LAB projects. If the database contains information about numbers of constituents served and other descriptive indicator information, this database can be a valuable tool for continuous improvement of LAB activities.

Abt also has begun to conduct a consumer satisfaction survey for the LAB on a regular basis, and they also are collecting satisfaction information from the LAB's Board of Governors and other key stakeholders throughout the region.

The Panel was provided with a variety of evaluation forms completed on products and

services completed by clients and external reviewers. It is difficult, however, to determine the extent to which the comments received were used to refine the products and services offered by the LAB.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

LAB staff obviously recognized the need for additional assistance in the area of self-assessment and called upon Abt Associates to help design better procedures for monitoring program and product quality. It was difficult to see where the effects of this collaboration had benefited LAB activities and products, but I will assume there were positive outcomes.

One area mentioned by Abt was the sheer volume of information about LAB activities and the difficulty anyone, including LAB staff, would have in seeing the connections among all of the activities. Also, there was concern among staff about their perceived roles with regard to research or service provision. I was concerned when I read the proposal about the vast number of activities planned in so many different areas. I felt it would be difficult to adequately staff and coordinate all of the activities. As a result, I was pleased to see modifications in LAB structure and activities that made it easier to see the logical connections of LAB activities to the overall goal of school reform and increased student learning. I still think, however, that there may be too many uncoordinated activities, and that further reductions in activities might make sense. I worry that some activities considered “completed” in year three actually could have been further researched in subsequent years rather than starting new activities.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

The LAB has the beginnings of an important database that can be used for improving services to and products for the region. Additional information about LAB activities may need to be added to make the database even more useful. For instance, the database can be used to

determine which states/islands in the region are not being reached as much as possible. As dissemination efforts become more prevalent, this information will be useful in the database.

The LAB should continue to focus on self-evaluation and reviews, and plan how the information can be used to improve the quality of the work being done.

III. Quality

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

1. Strengths

One area where the LAB seems to excel is in providing information about research and facilitating discussions among practitioners about the research. The LAB seems to be very conscientious about providing comprehensive and current reviews of the literature and basing their activities on what they find in the literature. When the activities call for implementation of the research, LAB staff helps practitioners to understand the information and how it could be implemented. This type of technical assistance provided by the LAB is a very valuable use of LAB staff time.

In other venues I have heard chief state school officers and others mention that it is very helpful for them to have someone review and distill the research to make it more accessible. The *Policy Perspectives on School Facilities* is a good example of a helpful document that serves that type of need.

The LAB is to be commended for promoting the strand of Language and Cultural Diversity throughout its work. This work being done by the LAB is useful to the field, and does not appear to be duplicative of efforts in other labs and centers. The work on the implementation of standards for ELLs is particularly timely and useful.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

The LAB's focus on applied research seems too narrow. One concern I have is the lack of follow-up to many of their activities. For instance, the LAB seems to have limited interest in developing training type materials related to their research findings. This must be somewhat related to the direction of the Board, as the Board Chairman said that the LAB should not provide technical assistance to school districts nor try to meet the needs of everyone; rather it should do its research work, then set the stage for distributing the information to others. This attitude was reflected in presentations by staff around the signature works and how they planned to disseminate information. It appears that dissemination of "learnings" will be done primarily through written research-type documents (in printed and on-line format) and in presentations to relevant groups, such as NABE, TESOL, AERA and regional associations. "Scaling up," on the other hand, is to be done by users of the disseminated information without any particular support from the LAB such as training or training-type materials.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

The LAB could provide much needed information about implementation of the research-based activities they conduct if they would try out the work in a variety of sites. The vast majority of the work we were shown was being done in one school or one city. Granted New York City is large enough to be many cities. However, it would be interesting to see if parent groups in other cities could benefit from some of the things learned by the LAB in New York. Rather than tackling new challenges, it would be useful to see the LAB try to replicate and "scale up" their findings in other parts of the region and with different populations of people.

IV. Utility

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

1. Strengths

There are many high quality products and services being provided by the LAB, and the response by clients is complimentary. One client indicated that she could not have done the work she did with School-to-Career restructuring without the assistance of the LAB. Other clients we talked to were equally enthusiastic about their experiences with the LAB.

The type of research done by the LAB is designed to be responsive to the needs of the client, and the clients are full participants in planning what the LAB will do. As a result, the clients are very pleased by the services they receive. One pleased client was mentioned above. The Lowell clients also indicated how helpful it had been to have the LAB staff working with them to provide information and facilitate activities. Even participating in the research by having in-class observers seemed to have been considered a service by teachers who participated in the study rather than an imposition.

There is some initial work to provide networking of teachers via the LAB web site. This type of discussion and sharing of materials can be very useful.

One example of a very nice and useful-looking document is *Electronic Collaboration*. This new document has a format that is practitioner-oriented, provides lots of examples, and is very informative. Some of the other documents produced by LAB partners look as if they would be very helpful to practitioners.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

We do not have much evidence of how popular LAB publications are or how they are

used. Nor can we tell how feedback is used in revising documents.

I do not feel I have a good sense of how promising programs are expected to be scaled up from one location to another. It appears that once research studies are done, the clients are left on their own to further implement the work, unless they ask for additional assistance. The other ways that information is expected to lead to scaling up is through presentations and publications. It does not appear that the research conducted is being replicated in other sites nor is any other type of continuing work underway, such as trying out a research-based professional development program based on the work with standards and English language learners that has already been done. As mentioned above, there is much that can be done to make the research findings more useful to practitioners.

A related concern I have is about the design of many of the LAB documents. The appearance of many documents is that of a research document, not a user-friendly practitioner-oriented document. In my experience, these types of documents are placed on the shelf or passed along until they land who knows where. They are not enticing to pick up and read. It is even difficult to identify ends of paragraphs in some documents. The reviewer comments for the document *What Policymakers and School Administrators Need to Know About Assessment Reform for English Language Learners* illustrate my point about some of the LAB publications. The internal reviewer, while generally positive about the contents of the first two chapters, noted that “Concepts need to be illustrated with details from studies that would make the points come alive....It seems that an overview of this topic is important, but the document needs to suggest what actions should be taken by particular groups.” The external reviewer was also complimentary about the presentation of the research, but indicated “I don’t think I could use it [the document] with teachers without some elaboration...the implications are too broad to make

it usable by teachers!”

3. Recommendations for Improvement

I would like to see the LAB take some of its interesting but less user-friendly documents and create something that is more practitioner-oriented. An example of the type of document I consider interesting and useful in addition to *Electronic Collaboration* is the document produced with the assistance of the LAB called *Promising Futures: A Call to Improve Learning for Maine’s Secondary Students*.

For example, there is much interesting content in two of the LAB documents about English language learners. One is *Standards, Equity and Cultural Diversity and Implementing Standards with English Language Learners: Initial Findings from Four Middle Schools*. Neither of these documents is likely to get the reading it should because of the plain appearance both on the inside and outside. I think it would be useful to create a document that contains much of the same information, but also enough information for another school to learn enough to take the “learnings” and do a similar project. Perhaps this is planned, but it was not apparent from our discussions, so I will elaborate. A more useful and use-friendly document would provide several sections in a colorful (and with pictures) and easy to read format. Information and materials such as those provided in the packet on implementing standards with ELLs should be incorporated into this document. The sections of the document would thus include:

- Background information (e.g., research background and information about work done in Lowell)
- A more thorough discussion of the methodology used, including references for the more traditional staff development content, a discussion of study groups, and a description of the sustaining strategies introduced in the second year. These can be presented as examples, not a set program of work. Results should be noted, even if they are qualitative.
- Checklists, activities, and other specific things done in the original study that could be

used by practitioners to try out the components of the research study.

Since the LAB staff may be concerned about creating a “training guide” without the expertise to do so, they could present it as a longer, friendlier description of the research conducted. Further, if possible, I would give this document to another school or a group of practitioners who was interested in trying out these ideas, and watch to see how they use the materials, adapt them, etc. This is applied (descriptive) research about the implementation of findings from other research, and it is very much needed.

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

1. Strengths

It appears that quite a lot of the LAB’s activities are based on the needs of customers in the Northeast region. An extensive look was made at what the region needed prior to designing the proposal for funding. Members of the Board, especially the chief state school officers, had definite ideas about what they wanted the LAB to do for them, and these activities were built into the proposal. Indeed, it appears that the LAB partners were selected primarily because of expressed needs for certain types of work and the partners’ ability to get the work done with minimal start-up time.

Since the LAB was funded there have been several occasions when the LAB has put together an activity in response to the needs expressed by their constituents. For instance, work with Hartford was initiated by the Connecticut chief. Work with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges was in response to a request for assistance.

The LAB says that the primary sources of needs assessment information are the state liaisons and the Board of Governors. Most of the state liaisons are residents of the states with which they work, thus they are present for discussions around needs that arise in the states.

Others do not live in the states they represent, but have many contacts with their states. LAB staff has indicated that the information they receive from the state liaisons is invaluable. The Board is also a rich source of information about needs. Since all of the region's chief state school officers are on the Board, there are ample opportunities for them to express their concerns and wishes for assistance. The Board also has as members people representing all different types of stakeholders in the region; thus, information about their needs should be readily available.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Unfortunately, I think the LAB does not do enough to reach out to its constituents other than chiefs and Board members. There are other ways, such as through the customer satisfaction surveys, that the LAB can proactively ask for input into its programs and services rather than waiting for the phone call from the needy site. In addition, there could be a way of determining other schools that might be interested in learning more about the research activities that the LAB has conducted, as I mentioned above.

In addition, I think the LAB could make a more concerted effort to reach out to schools with special needs in the community, such as rural schools and schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students. While some of the activities conducted by the LAB are used by Title I and rural schools (such as the CSRD outreach activities), there is no special outreach to the schools who might need the assistance of the LAB based on what has been learned, unless a special call for assistance has been received.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

I think the LAB should propose to chief state school officers that they recommend schools or districts that might need and be willing to receive additional services from the LAB, particularly around the specialty area of the LAB. While the chiefs do not want the LAB to be

all things to all folks, the LAB should be encouraged to reach out to help places within the region that can use their assistance. As mentioned above, materials and techniques researched in other places could be tried out in new locations, and conditions noted that lead to successful implementation (or not so successful implementation).

Another way that the LAB could be of assistance is to organize more exchange activities using technology to assist. This was mentioned by one of the clients with whom we spoke. These linkages should include networks already established with listservs where practitioners can interact with others both within and outside of the region around topics of mutual interest.

V. Outcomes and Impact

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

1. Strengths

The LAB has wisely tapped in to activities related to some effective programs, such as the School-to-Career activities of the Jobs for the Future partner. There is some research related to positive student outcomes from these programs. This provides a track record of looking at student success for the LAB. In addition, it is illustrative of the types of outcomes information that can be sought from other programs.

LAB activities are related to essential needs of the region and, indeed, the entire United States. The focused attention to the process of implementing reform is important, particularly with regard to the needs of ELLs.

The LAB is moving along in finding ways to distribute what they have learned to various audiences. The focus so far seems to have been on the research audience, rather than

practitioners.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Since the LAB is young and the work continues, it would be difficult to see much in the way of student learning results so far. However, I think there could be more attention to ultimate outcomes for all LAB activities, and more of an effort made to look at impacts on student performance. In fact, we heard very little in the way of planning to assess impacts of interventions or research. It may be that we just didn't hear about the more student-focused activities or the long term effects on teacher behaviors.

Another area that seems disjointed is the planning for dissemination of findings. Distribution of information from all of the LAB activities should be considered from the beginning of a set of activities rather than as a consideration at the end. The separation of the dissemination role is somewhat unusual, and seems to imply that dissemination is to be considered once the work is completed.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

Not only would it be beneficial for LAB activities to include a look at student outcomes in their work, it is important for work with practitioners to stress the need to evaluate the outcomes of research and development activities with indicators of student success.

Generalizability of the information learned is important, and the LAB should seek ways to try out what they have learned in a variety of sites and monitor progress over time.

Consideration of how the results of LAB work will be disseminated to various audiences should be considered in the planning stages of the work, with adjustments made as the work continues. LAB staff should consult with the clients with whom they work to identify ways that the information would be usefully distributed. Pilot tests with materials would be helpful if the

materials are geared toward professional development.

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

1. Strengths

The LAB provided opportunities for states and localities to learn more about the different models of comprehensive school improvement strategies. Initial presentations made to the states as a group were later repeated for individual states. The LAB circulated the document on effective models put out by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

One LAB activity focused on site-based management in effective schoolwide programs. Research was done to identify what were these schools doing that contributed to the efficacious implementation of the schoolwide program. These guidelines for capacity are being made available in printed documents.

Other LAB activities have relevance to school improvement, such as the implementation of standards for instructing ELLs, building capacity for school change and working with parent groups.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

There did not seem to be any LAB activities on helping large numbers of schools and districts to implement comprehensive school improvement programs; the focus was on small “demonstration-type” activities. Nor did I hear of a concerted effort underway to provide materials to or study the programs being implemented in the region.

3. Recommendations for Improvements

The LAB has a number of documents and “learnings” that could be useful to schools moving from targeted assistance to schoolwide programs for Title I since these schools contain

large numbers of disadvantaged children and English language learners. In addition, there are other useful documents available from other RELs. I think it would be useful for the LAB to develop a packet of materials that could be provided to these schools either in paper documents or online. For instance, there could be a special area on the web site for including materials that could be used by these schools. Another suggestion is the facilitation of a guided discussion about implementing these new programs.

The LAB should become familiar with what types of school reform programs are being implemented across the region. The LAB could serve an important role of getting schools together with others using the same program so that they could share ideas. The LAB might even want to study what is being done, particularly where there are large numbers of ELLs or in rural parts of the region.

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

1. Strengths

The LAB and its partners have numerous connections through which they can make LAB activities known. Many of the LAB's alliances, such as with NAESC and NASSP can also help to promote the reputation of the LAB. One ASCD publication contains work done by the LAB.

In conjunction with two other RELs with the same specialty area, the LAB is building a framework that will provide guidance to schools seeking to be successful in helping their students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Hopefully this document will enhance the national reputation of the LAB.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Now in its fourth year, we should be starting to see the LAB referred to for its work in the

areas of assisting English language learners, restructuring secondary schools, and identifying capacity for school change. However, there is not a great deal to show yet. Many of the publications distributed by the LAB were done by partners' staff, and the partner organizations are the names featured on the documents. In part, this may be because the published work was already being done by the partners prior to the beginning of the LAB's contract.

3. Recommendations for Improvements

There were some areas of the literature that I did not see in LAB bibliographies, or at least not cited in documents, such as work done by Lorrie Sheppard and Lily Wong Fillmore on assessment of English language learners. While it is difficult to sift through a very extensive literature base and find all of the relevant research, it is important to identify other researchers who are involved in similar or related activities. Connections with these researchers can be beneficial in bringing to light the research being undertaken by the LAB.

If the LAB chooses to start developing more practitioner oriented materials based on its findings, it could provide training sessions in conjunction with national associations, such as ASCD and the national staff development association.

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

In general, I think the LAB's overall program focus is impressive. The LAB is providing very helpful research-based information to the states and islands in its region. The needs of the region are clearly the basis for the work being done. There is a good focus on working with the clients rather than doing something to the clients. The staff is very capable, enthusiastic, and well-respected. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many of the LABs constituents are pleased with the work that has been done. Clearly the LAB has much to offer the region and the nation

as the information learned is disseminated.

The LAB should place a greater focus on the outcomes of its research. The notion of applied research is too narrowly defined and appears to be just observing what happens when there is an intervention or when a particular program is adopted by school staff. A better defined set of research would look not just at what is done, but what are the results of the activity. In order to look at the results, the research activity must have a plan from the onset to see what baseline information is needed and how results will be measured. This should not be done “after the fact.”

I think the LAB would greatly improve the utility of its work if more attention were paid to replication and scaling up of their findings. At the end of a five-year program of work, there should be a set of materials available that describe a problem or situation that is important to the region, provide potential solutions based on the research, and stress the need for monitoring student outcomes. These materials should be distributed widely throughout the region, as well as the nation to some extent. The LAB can provide this service if it plans to follow through on its well-designed activities. Another way to assist in this area is to design materials that are more user-friendly and provide training to groups of people interested in learning more.

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

1. Strengths

The LAB and its partners are conducting a set of activities that address essential needs of the region and of students. Despite its youth, the LAB is very well-organized, and is committed to continuous improvement. Much useful information has been learned in the first three years,

and the LAB is doing a pretty good job of disseminating this information. In particular, the LAB is focused on the needs of the region and is serving some of its constituents in the region well.

There are many exciting areas being researched by the LAB, and the documentation of experiences so far is very interesting. The strand of work on English language learners is perhaps the most interesting and most useful. The LAB is to be commended for seeing the connections among many of its activities and promoting the sharing of information.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

There are two main areas where the LAB could make significant improvements. So many of the LAB activities seem to be one-time intensive collaborations around a particular area of need expressed by a client in the region. The LAB does an excellent job of working with the client and providing research-based assistance. However, there does not appear to be any focus on the outcomes of the work being done. Improvement of student learning is an essential component of REL work. Even if the work done is short-term, there should be at least some description of how the work will contribute to student learning, and clients should be encouraged to include this in their planning from the beginning of the research activity.

Another concern is related to the short-term nature of the work. There does not appear to be any attempt to follow up or expand this work to look for generalizability or other issues related to implementation. The products produced look more like case studies and research reports, and provide little in the way of prescriptive guidance for practitioners wishing to use the LAB's "learnings." As a result, the information will likely have less than the desired impact on the field.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

I recommend that the LAB look at its program of work and do fewer stand-alone

activities and more programmatic types of research. The activities of the LAB should be the types of things that can be spread to many users in the region and elsewhere, and thus the focus should be on developing findings and products that will inform the constituents and encourage the implementation of research-based improvement activities. Doing more sustained evaluative activities with an eye to effects on students would better fulfill the obligation of the LAB to assist the region. The LAB has a good foundation for this work. I would like to see the LAB's work more widely reviewed, critiqued, and implemented.