

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success

### I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) was established in December 1995 at Temple University in Philadelphia. Managed by Temple's Center for Research in Human Development and Education, the LSS operates under a contract awarded by OERI to operate the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, which serves the states of Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia. This portion of the mid-Atlantic region includes suburbs with some of the wealthiest and best educated people in the nation, inner-city ghettos with the very poorest and least educated, and large rural areas. The specialty area of LSS is urban education.

The interim review and evaluation visit to LSS took place on the Temple University campus from May 17-21, 1999. This reviewer examined written background materials provided by LSS staff approximately two weeks prior to the on-site visit, and additional documentation was provided by the Lab staff during the visit. Interviews were conducted on-site with the Executive Director and senior staff members, as well as with representatives from the Governing Board and the Stakeholder Board. Discussions were also held at Lab headquarters with representatives from regional schools implementing the Lab's Community for Learning (CFL) program—including teachers, principals, students, parents, and central office staff. Panelists also made a visit to Stetson Middle School, a demonstration site for CFL, and interviews were conducted there with the principal, LSS support staff, students, and teachers. Sufficient documentation and testimony were provided during the site visit to allow panelists to address the

key evaluation questions presented by OERI.

## **II. Implementation and Management**

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

#### **1. Strengths**

LSS is dedicated to serving its Region. Its Executive Director, professional staff, and Governing Board are highly qualified, hard-working, and clearly focused on serving the needs of the Region.

Responding thoughtfully and decisively to regional needs, LSS has taken on the daunting task of helping turn around some of the lowest-achieving urban and rural schools in the Region (including those in Washington, D.C. and in rural Pennsylvania). In their Technical Proposal, LSS clarified this focus for the contract period: *“The top priority must be the most troubled schools and communities where many students suffer adverse life situations compounded by inadequate schools and learning. The LSS is committed to giving priority attention to children and youth of the inner cities and the most neglected rural areas in all of its work”* (ii) It was abundantly clear to this reviewer during the site visit that in terms of following through on this top priority work during the first three years of funding, LSS is doing what it was approved to do.

The Lab has also committed itself to developing collaborative relationships with other entities to achieve its goals: *“The LSS will seek to develop institutional linkages with the mid-Atlantic region’s four state departments of education and the Washington, D.C. school system, as well as collaborations with education and related service delivery agencies and other R&D*

*organizations throughout the region and across the nation to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the Laboratory's outreach and work.”* (v) Again, it was made clear during the site visit that in this instance LSS is clearly doing what it was approved to do, although admittedly it has a stronger relationship and more leverage with some state DOEs than with others.

Another broad goal of the Lab as articulated in its Technical Proposal involves widely sharing and disseminating the results of its work: *“To achieve the educational vision of a schooling success for all students in the mid-Atlantic region, the LSS will initiate a broad-based program of dissemination and application of demonstrably effective practices in systemic ways over time. The overall goal of this program is to ensure that findings from the work of the Laboratory and other regional and national R&D resources are known and used to systematically improve teaching and learning in schools, and to build an increased capacity for education in the broader community in which students and their families live.”* (iv) The challenge for LSS has been to determine how to translate research-based knowledge into tools and products (and “procedural knowledge”) that are useful to schools. LSS has successfully met this challenge in a variety of ways.

Professional development plays a central role in LSS's role as a resource and facilitator of systemic educational reform in the mid-Atlantic region, and is one of two broad-based outreach programs within LSS's Services to the Field. The major component in the LSS strategy for capacity-building in the Region and the centerpiece of the LSS professional development model is a series of forums and seminars that focus on how to bridge the gap between the state-of-the-art and the state of practice. These include: Principal Leadership Forums, which provide opportunity for the discussion of leadership roles in implementing strategies for student success; State-of-the-Art Seminars, which are one-day seminars that provide information on recent

advances in research and practical knowledge on what works in advancing student success; What Works Workshops, which provide participants with hands-on experience in designing and implementing innovative programs and practices that are known to be effective; Advanced Study Institutes; and site-specific professional development and technical assistance.

Community for Learning (CFL) is a comprehensive school/family/community-coordinated approach to improving student learning that has evolved over the past 20 years as the centerpiece of the Executive Director's personal research agenda, and it is currently in full operation in 46 rural and urban schools. The classroom instructional component of CFL, the Adaptive Learning Environments Model (ALEM), was developed under the aegis of the National Follow Through Project and has been implemented in over 200 schools in 22 states. In the opinion of several of the teachers and administrators interviewed during the site visit, "ALEM is just good teaching." Selected components of the CFL model are in place in 37 schools, and 43 schools are in the planning stage. Implementation of the CFL components is supported by a delivery system provided by the Services to the Field Unit of LSS that provides organizational and professional development support at the school and classroom levels. Data collected from participating schools show a positive pattern of changes in math and reading scores, and demonstrate that CFL students outperformed comparison school students in both subjects. Although a range of teaching strategies are prescribed by the model, CFL does not provide or promote specific curricula or frameworks. Instead, the developer attempts to align school curricula and instruction with district or state standards.

LSS has been successful in leveraging additional resources to support Lab programs and activities through its connection with Temple University and because LSS is a major program at the University's Center for Research in Human Development and Education. In addition to

contributing to LSS operations an in-kind contribution in terms of space, fiscal, and administrative support through the University's grants, accounting, and personnel offices, LSS is also support by Temple in real dollars. Not only does it pay the entire salary and benefit cost of the Executive Director, but Temple only charges 8 percent of indirect costs to the LSS contract. This reduced overhead provides additional spending money for the LSS operations.

As a new regional Lab, LSS focused much of its efforts during the first two years in recruiting high-quality staff to expand the LSS expertise and resource base for accomplishing its goals. The forging of strategic national, regional, and local alliances has been one of the most effective ways of reaching a large number of LSS stakeholder groups. One outcome of these alliances is the co-sponsorship of national and regional events, which have helped put LSS on the map. During Year 3, for example, 6,608 people attended various LSS cosponsored professional development events. LSS has also played an important catalytic regional role in terms of creating new alliances that support common reform needs. The formation of the Mid-Atlantic Superintendents and Deans Network and the establishment of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Task Force for Teacher Quality, Certification, and Recruitment are significant illustrations of the Lab's networking and brokering role within the Region. In addition, LSS researchers are highly sought-after speakers at major national and regional meetings.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

None

**3. Recommendations for improvement**

None

**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**

Quality assurance issues are addressed through ongoing procedures involving feedback from the Governing Board, Stakeholder Advisory Board, Technical Review Board, field-based collaborators, LSS clients, and self-assessments of Lab staff. The Governing Board of Directors has been chaired for the past three years by Joseph Dominic, who is the Education Program Director at the Heinz Endowments in Pittsburgh. In addition to the chief education officers (or their representatives) of the five jurisdictions served by LSS, the Board consists of representatives from professional organizations, teachers, principals, and the Executive Vice President of Temple University. The Governing Board has the overall responsibility for establishing the programmatic goals of the Lab and for directing and overseeing the quality of the work of LSS to ensure its timely completion in fulfilling the terms and conditions of the contract in operating the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory. The Board also conducts an annual evaluation of the work of the Executive Director and the leadership team of the Lab. The Steering Committee of the Board has the quality assurance responsibility. The Governing Board is full of praise for the reputation and regional credibility established by LSS in just three short years. As one Board member puts it, “The Lab forges a strong link between the research side and the practice side.”

In addition to receiving regular feedback and input from the Governing Board of Directors and the Executive Directorate, two other Boards of Advisors provide additional expertise and guidance to the LSS staff. Members of the Stakeholder Board are drawn from a cross section of regional stakeholder groups that fully reflect the various socioeconomic status,

ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of the student population in the mid-Atlantic region. Dr. Win Tillery, County Superintendent of Schools for Camden County, New Jersey, has served as the Chair of the Stakeholder Advisory Board since its creation. Extensive conversations with several members of the Stakeholder Board during the site visit made it clear to the review team that LSS is making a significant impact upon schools within the Region.

The Technical Review Board performs several important functions related to quality assurance review to ensure that the work of LSS is not only technically sound, but also relevant and useful for improving policy and practice. Its primary role is to serve as external reviewer of the work of the LSS. LSS senior staff members shared specific examples during the site visit of how the Technical Review Board provides detailed, critical feedback on LSS manuscripts prior to submission for publication as a form of quality control. Board membership includes researchers with a wide variety of expertise in fields related to the work of LSS, including both researchers and practitioners, such as teachers and school administrators, with a wide range of complimentary fields of expertise. Although Technical Review Board members were not present during the site visit, an examination of notes from the Boards yearly meeting with LSS staff reveals feedback and suggestions that are insightful, constructively critical and fair-minded, and of the highest quality. In the Technical Review Board minutes from the Lab's most recent quarterly report, there was general consensus among Board members that the quality and intellectual value of LSS products is high.

Community for Learning has developed a built-in monitoring and evaluation process through which participating schools regularly assess the degree of program implementation and use a systematic degree of implementation assessment instrument. LSS staff assigned to the school observe the classroom teaching and learning process regularly to assess the extent to

which the degree of program implementation results in improved classroom process. Student achievement is monitored daily through a diagnostic-prescription process that teachers use in developing individualized learning plans for each student.

Annual two-day retreats of the LSS senior staff are held at off-campus meeting facilities to review feedback from OERI, the three LSS boards, and collaborators of the Lab. The Lab also conducts product satisfaction surveys that are specific to a particular product or publication. The purpose of these surveys is to determine user-satisfaction levels and to obtain other evaluative information relative to specific products. Needs assessment surveys are also conducted on a semi-annual basis to ascertain the degree of satisfaction with the work of the Lab and to help define areas of priority for meeting client needs. These surveys are sent to a random sample of stakeholders and clients in the mid-Atlantic region including state department officials, school district personnel, school staff, and research and development partners. The results from the past year indicate that the level of satisfaction with the work of LSS remains very high.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

None

**3. Recommendations for improvement**

None

**III. Quality**

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

**1. Strengths**

At each professional development event where LSS staff play a role (including State of the Art Seminars, What Works Workshops, Advanced Study Institutes, and Principal Leadership

Forums), participants are asked to complete an evaluation of LSS services and programs based on a 5-point scale (1=lowest, 5=highest). Data from years 1 and 2 reveal an average aggregate rating on this scale of 4.4 for all such events in the areas of program content, presenters, materials, and overall evaluation.

Community for Learning was cited as an exemplary program in the November 1997 Congressional Report on the CSRD legislation. Indeed, high praise for the CFL model was a constant theme during many conversations with representatives from regional schools during the site visit. One principal said that “We used it [CFL] as a framework to build a focused, cohesive school. We monitor student achievement closely and we’ve seen gains.” A school facilitator at a CFL implementation site explained that “For years it was dull and dreary, with no camaraderie. When the new principal came and we decided to use CFL, everything changed. We’re now working with each other and sharing—not so isolated.” A teacher, when asked about problems at her school with staff “buy-in” to the CFL model, had this to say: “I don’t know of any teacher in the building who hasn’t bought into the program.” A veteran principal explained why she has become a CFL supporter: “I’ve seen teachers who have embraced CFL and it has renewed their teaching in important ways.”

It was noted by several Lab collaborators consulted during the site visit that LSS has assembled a world-class team of scholars and researchers that distinguishes LSS from other Regional Educational Laboratories. Indeed, the opinion was often expressed that LSS sets the standard within the Laboratory network for research rigor and quality.

It is useful here to include excerpts from an LSS collaborator—Professor Edmund Gordon from Yale University and The College Board’s National Task Force on Minority High Achievement—on the effectiveness of the Invitational Conferences:

*“As an observer and/or participant observer at several of the conferences conducted by LSS, I am continually impressed by the quality of this program of conferences. Consistently they are well-conceived, excellently run, extremely informative, and provocative of discussion and thought. I find especially interesting the combination of persons who attend these conferences. These meetings are one place where one is certain to encounter scholars of practice, scholars of theory, and scholars involved in empirical work talking to each other with appreciation and respect. The issues discussed and the works which are reported are frequently on the cutting edges of the field. LSS seems to have a knack for being on top of and relevant to the critical issues of the day. Not only do LSS conferences make for excellent intellectual exchange among the participants, but the publications which result from these deliberations are invaluable assets to those of us working in the field.”*

This high regard for the exceptionally high quality of the invitational conferences was universally shared by all interviewees with a direct connection to those gatherings.

Because of its high visibility, the LSS National Invitational Conference Series program is under close scrutiny by its stakeholder groups. The publication of the proceedings in refereed journals and the review processes of the widely respected publishers, such as Laurence Erlbaum Publisher, is another indicator of the quality of the series. Another indicator of quality is the request for copies of conference proceedings by LSS stakeholder groups and requests for follow-up activities. For example, because of the relevance of LSS’s Conference on “Education in the Cities: What Works and What Doesn’t,” LSS was asked by the Congressional Education Committee to provide a briefing on the major findings from the commissioned papers and the recommendations from the workgroups. A significant factor in the Lab’s skill in organizing these conferences is the Executive Director’s professional connections and national reputation as

a scholar. A member of the Stakeholder Board interviewed during the site visit attested to the Executive Director’s “ability to connect with power sources to pull off these invitational conferences.”

The publications of the Lab and also the videos produced (for example, the three-video series created as an implementation tool for practitioners working with CFL) that were examined prior to and during the site visit were all of the highest quality.

Selected LSS products have been widely used, providing schools with intensive on-site professional development and technical assistance. During Year 3 of operations, for example, 215 schools are involved in implementing the 20/20 Analysis as a planning and program monitoring tool, and 173 schools are implementing or planning to implement CFL as a comprehensive reform strategy.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

None

**3. 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?**

**1. Strengths**

Data regularly collected from CFL implementation sites indicate that it is feasible for rural and urban schools to achieve a high degree of implementation of CFL within a year, and to demonstrate student learning progress. In the words of the Executive Director, “We’re doing a

disservice to the country by saying that change takes a long time.” Because of the immediate results that CFL schools are able to achieve, LSS has been asked by school districts to train principals and facilitators of other comprehensive reform models to use the LSS approach to data-based staff development. For example, LSS was requested by the Superintendent of Washington, D.C. schools to provide staff development training to all of the facilitators the district has assigned to more than 50 low-performing schools—not just those implementing CFL—to provide teacher support. The D.C. Superintendent has also asked LSS to provide training to all middle school principals, even though there is no expectation that CFL will be one of the reform approaches for their middle school initiative. The point is that the LSS model for staff development has been recognized as a useful approach as part of the gearing-up process for comprehensive reform efforts of all kinds.

An important part of the Lab’s usefulness for schools within the Region has been its growing visibility. As a member of the Stakeholder Board stated during the site visit, “They’ve done a good job of making schools aware they’re here and that services are available.” According to several sources interviewed on-site, the previous Lab was “not particularly responsive: you had to come to them—they wouldn’t come to you.” Teacher and administrator satisfaction with CFL products and the model was apparent from conversations during the site visit. The Executive Director summarized the Lab’s usefulness quite succinctly: “We help schools use their own data to plot their own strategies.” Although the ALEM component of the CFL model may appear at first glance to be rigidly prescriptive, there is enough flexibility built into the model to allow for teacher autonomy, and student choice and self-expression—coupled with a tight focus on accountability, careful record-keeping, and skills development in math and reading.

In CFL, program implementation staff from LSS provide 10-15 days of on-site professional development and technical assistance to teachers and related services staff on an as-needed basis. This assistance is custom-designed for each school based on needs identified by teachers, observations by principals, and implementation assessment data gathered by program staff. Additionally, the project coordinator and facilitators and principals from participating schools assist with professional development, and successful CFL teachers provide peer coaching and mentoring. The facilitators are trained by the developer on site and at three to four regional one-day meetings each year, and twice a year, the developer visits the school to evaluate implementation, using indicators of implementation. Implementation is supported by a team of program implementation specialists from LSS, and commitment by consensus of a school's staff is required for whole-school implementation. LSS holds an annual seminar for the network of CFL schools, and all school facilitators meet periodically for planning. A listserv has been created for CFL teachers to share ideas, and school staff receive research briefs and publications from LSS on a regular basis.

It is important to note the obvious effectiveness of LSS personnel in the Services to the Field Unit in providing capacity-building support in participating CFL schools and how often LSS staff are in the building and classroom to impact both teachers and students. The follow-up support is both necessary and greatly appreciated. A principal from a CFL demonstration site explained what most schools are accustomed to prior to their relationship with LSS: "We've had many years at our school of people coming in with new training, and two weeks later, nothing has changed. There was no follow-up."

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

LSS research publications are not written in a user-friendly style or readily accessible to practitioners. A greater effort could be made to involve teachers as an important part of the intended audience for research publications without “dumbing down” the content through a reductionistic translation process.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

Regional Lab publications provide fertile ground for attempting to overcome the exclusion of teachers as an intended audience, which helps account for their absence from high-stakes policy discussions. Imaginative and innovative ways of sharing research data and insights with the broader public including teachers must be explored.

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

In all of the program activities reviewed during the site visit, it was clear to this reviewer that the LSS is clearly focused on responding to customer needs as the touchstone of its work. In the words of the Executive Director, “You meet whatever needs are there.”

#### **1. Strengths**

The entire CFL model is organized around the accurate and ongoing collection of school data as the basis for identifying student and teacher [students and teachers are the basic CFL “customers”] needs in the areas of instruction, skills development, and professional development. The individualized instructional program for each student as organized in the prescription sheet and the staff profile for professional development planning—both made possible by CFL’s procedures for data collection—provide an accurate snapshot at any given time of student and teacher needs within a participating school.

One of the most important design features of the National Invitational Conferences is the

next-step planning at each conference that emphasizes finding solutions through policy development and program implementation processes that are responsive to the needs of schools and other stakeholder groups. These next-step recommendations also become the source for topic identification for subsequent conferences in the Series.

In addition to ongoing informal feedback and evaluation obtained from sites where LSS plays a professional development role, a series of “tracer studies” to assess the impact of LSS professional development events in the Region is regularly carried out by telephone six months after the event by the LSS quality control and evaluation unit using a 50 percent random sampling of attendees. Results of the tracer studies serve as a barometer of regional needs and inform the planning of future events.

Still another aspect of LSS’s responsiveness to customer needs is grounded in its ability to help schools build their own on-site capacity to improve teaching and learning, and to help them avoid dependence on outside support as the primary engine for school improvement. As the Associate Director put it, “From the moment we’re walking into a building, we’re walking out.” [i.e., we help them build their own capacity for change and leave critical support structures in place].

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

None

**3. 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?**

#### **1. Strengths**

The LSS 20/20 analysis tool is an example of how LSS assists schools to improve student achievement. Using student achievement data (and other related outcome measures) collected by the school and/or district, the procedure identifies which students fall in the top and bottom 20 percent of the district’s test scores. Data provided by LSS from schools using 20/20 analysis show marked student improvement in outcomes including achievement, attendance, and discipline referrals.

In its 1999 compendium of promising comprehensive school reform models entitled An Educator’s Guide to Schoolwide Reform, the Institutes for Research says the following about the positive effects of CFL on student achievement, which corresponds to data collected for the CFL demonstration site school visited during the site visit:

*“Evidence of positive effects on student achievement is promising, based on the outcomes from five studies. One study found that students using the approach had higher reading and mathematics achievement than students who were not using the approach; and that test scores in schools using the approach improved at the same time that scores in similar schools declined. A second study found that math and reading standardized test gains were significantly higher for students in CFL schools compared to national norms. This study also found that mainstreamed special education students in CFL schools scored significantly higher than similar students not using the approach.”*

Implementation of CFL has consistently been shown to contribute to improvement—

though not necessarily in a direct cause-and-effect relationship—of student achievement and related student and school outcomes, such as higher attendance rates, parent involvement in school activities, fewer disciplinary referrals, and more positive student attitudes towards school. These additional outcomes which appear to be related to CFL interventions were consistently mentioned by all school representatives interviewed during the site visit.

Schools in some of the nation's most impoverished inner city areas have achieved positive results following CFL implementation. A study of the first year of implementation of five CFL schools in the District of Columbia (schools identified as among the lowest performing in the district) found that teachers were making significant changes in classroom practice. The study also examined changes in student reading scores on the Stanford 9 and found that scores improved at all five schools, that program schools improved more than other elementary schools in the district, and that the districtwide ranking of program schools climbed considerably (one school jumped from 119<sup>th</sup> to 46<sup>th</sup>, for example). In terms of student achievement gains between fall and spring testing for the 1997-98 academic year for reading and math, all the CFL demonstration schools exceeded the District's improvement standard of a 10 percent achievement gain. Another noteworthy finding in the pattern of progress in student achievement in math and reading is the gains made by students who scored at the top 20 percent across all D.C. CFL demonstration schools, which is reflective of the design focus of the CFL program. Although most efforts to increase student achievement in urban schools like those implementing CFL in Washington, D.C. tend to focus on the lower levels of student achievement, a key design principle of CFL is the ability of staff to adaptively respond to the diverse learning needs of all students, including those at both the bottom and the top range of the achievement distribution.

The Degree of Program Implementation Assessment Battery was used to collect

information on the extent to which the 12 critical dimensions of the instructional component of CFL (known as the Adaptive Learning Environments Model or ALEM) were implemented in each classroom in all six CFL demonstration schools in the D.C. district. This Degree of Program Implementation Assessment Battery is routinely used in all CFL implementation schools to assess program implementation progress.

At a middle school in inner city Philadelphia (the one visited by the Review Panelists during their site visit) where 78 percent of students are Latino and 93 percent live below the poverty line, students have shown significantly higher academic progress than students at a control school. A follow-up study of students who had attended this middle school reported that they had a significantly lower dropout rate than their high school peers (19 percent vs. 60 percent) and that 48 percent of them were performing at grade level in the eleventh grade compared to 26 percent of their peers. A similarly situated elementary school in Houston also witnessed improvements in student achievement, along with positive changes in students' and teachers' attitudes about their school.

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

LSS is developing a sophisticated understanding of what comprehensive school reform means that goes way beyond raising student achievement test scores to include changing the organizational and intellectual climate and culture of schools and their communities. Yet, much of the LSS written emphasis in describing and promoting CFL emphasizes its role in raising test scores. Because LSS is quite successful and has established credibility in both areas—in raising test scores and in changing the larger school culture—it is in a position to help schools and their communities to think in more comprehensive and global ways about what school improvement and student success mean. Without deviating from the Lab's commitment to data-driven and

research-based approaches, LSS can begin to raise the level of discussion about school reform and keep that discussion of larger issues on the front burner wherever the Lab is involved.

Most interviewees involved in school reform efforts talked about a wide variety of positive changes in teacher, student, and parental behaviors within their schools that are not as easily measurable or quantifiable as student scores on achievement tests, yet they are no lesser indicators of school improvement and student “success,” broadly conceived. LSS can make an important contribution to the school change literature and to the “procedural knowledge base” by attending to those “other successes” and learning how to document and give credibility to them. For example, developing ways to carefully document the evolution of school/community partnerships, the move toward more positive attitudes about school on the part of everyone involved, or the difficult transition experienced by teacher who are attempting to change their practice would provide other schools with the tools they need to convince their communities of the benefits of continuing with comprehensive reform efforts even if dramatic increases in student test scores are not able to be sustained. There are a multitude of other good reasons besides raising test scores for schools to begin the change process, and LSS can contribute to this larger understanding of what a “good school” is.

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

“Collecting data” at CFL demonstration sites doesn’t need to preclude more contextualized narrative, ethnographic, and multi-voiced attempts to “tell the story” of change and student achievement—broadly conceived—within a particular school. It involves undertaking a more comprehensive, labor intensive, and multi-faceted approach to “research” and involving a wider range of participants more directly in the research process.

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

**1. Strengths**

In their Technical Proposal, LSS stated that it would “*provide assistance to state and local education agencies in their systemic reform initiatives to “put the pieces together” to achieve a systemic whole in improving student outcomes and to extend their successes to scale.*”

The Lab was quite well-positioned to respond quickly and supportively to requests from schools in the region when the CSRD legislation was passed. A state Department of Education official from the Region interviewed during the site visit made it clear that the Lab played a critical role at that time: “Schools in the Region had no way of knowing what these comprehensive programs were. There was only one place to go to be able to respond to the RFP: the Lab.” As the Executive Director described the Lab’s situation, “We’re ahead of the game: we’ve been doing comprehensive school reform for a while.” A member of the Stakeholder Board made it clear that LSS provided prompt and valuable support to schools and districts related to knowing more about comprehensive school reform precisely when it was needed: “The Executive Director responded quickly and gave relevant information to the schools. As a result, Philadelphia schools did well in the CSRD competition.” Clearly, LSS exceeds its contractual obligations in this area.

LSS excels at working with states, schools, and localities to implement comprehensive school reform. To do this the Lab identifies timely and emerging issues related to comprehensive reform and launches regional conversations on topics of importance. For example, LSS disseminated information related to the Third International Math and Science Survey (TIMSS) to professionals and other stakeholders in the mid-Atlantic region through its co-sponsorship of five

forums. At these forums participants were charged with examining what is known about effective practices for student achievement in math and science and for identifying next-step actions to meet the improvement needs of schools through networking and regional collaborative activities.

Also noteworthy in the Region is LSS's role in promoting needed discussion regarding teacher licensing and recruitment, another area closely tied in with comprehensive school reform. The National Invitational Conference Series held meetings in January 1998 on issues of standards and accountability and in February 1999 on teachers and the reform movement. As a result of these two conferences, LSS, in collaboration with the Council for Basic Education, has established a major regional initiative to work together to carry out the resolutions reached at the conference, which are largely concerned with making sure that the Region agrees upon high standards for teachers while aggressively addressing teacher supply needs. Participants at these conferences were asked to consider a common approach to graduating, licensing, recruiting, and hiring new teachers to ensure highly qualified teachers through teacher entry/exit and licensure standards and high standards for teacher preparation programs throughout the mid-Atlantic region. Related considerations were related to ensuring an adequate supply of qualified teachers, and to helping employers and teachers find each other. As a result of these LSS initiatives, these issues are now being discussed at the policy level in the Region, and several LSS collaborators questioned during the site visit made it clear that LSS plays a unique role in terms of being able to bring all the relevant stakeholders to the table for this kind of regional collaboration.

An obvious LSS connection to assisting schools in the Region with comprehensive school reform is related to the support it provides in promoting the Lab's own preferred model of

reform as embodied in the Community for Learning (CFL) model. The transition from ALEM to CFL has meant the scaling up of the LSS reform model from the classroom level to the school level, and there is a good ‘fit’ between the CFL model and the comprehensive school reform legislation and mandates at both state and federal levels. Currently LSS is expanding this successful schoolwide model to the district level (as, for example at the Penn Hills district in rural Pennsylvania), and simultaneously participating in state-level and regional policy conversations that coincide with the alignment of state policies with the recent federal CSRD legislation. LSS has also expanded the CFL approach that was originally designed for low-achieving urban schools to be adaptable to and effective in low-achieving rural districts.

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

One critical area for schools committed to comprehensive school reform and working with outside support such as LSS is the issue of sustainability: can a sufficient capacity for change be created on-site to allow significant improvement efforts to continue when the outside support is no longer there? As one regional principal put it during the site visit: “It’s like a baby that you need to wean. You can get so comfortable with all this support from the Lab that you can’t run with it by yourself.” Although the Lab remains in a position to continue to offer CFL demonstration schools ongoing implementation support for the near future, such will not always be the case. It is unrealistic to assume that LSS will have the resources to continue indefinitely being a regional provider of technical support for a growing network of CFL schools, and plans should be made that address that contingency.

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

LSS should begin to strategize now within the CFL network about the sustainability issue. How can a strong network of CFL schools support each other and continue to provide the

capacity for ongoing implementation even if LSS personnel no longer have a direct relationship with the schools? How can LSS help participating schools to continue to build local capacity for sustaining comprehensive change by leveraging additional sources of funding? Many previous reform efforts have floundered on precisely this issue, and LSS can learn from the mistakes made earlier.

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

There is overwhelming evidence from all sources examined that LSS has indeed established a regional and national reputation in its specialty area of urban education, and continues to build on this reputation. Additionally, nothing was encountered during the site visit to indicate that LSS will not continue to enjoy its well-deserved reputation. A significant part of that reputation is related to the focus of the Executive Director’s personal research agenda for the past 20 years, and her ability to bring together a remarkable collection of urban education researchers of national caliber. As a member of the Governing Board put it, “The Executive Director’s work in inner cities is world-class and groundbreaking in every way.”

**1. Strengths**

LSS’s exemplary work in urban education is vividly illustrated in the two Signature Works examined in detail by the Review Panel, the Community for Learning model of reform and the National Invitational Conferences. Because of LSS’s reputation, LSS-sponsored professional development programs connected with CFL are attended by urban school staff and policymakers from across the country, and senior staff from the Lab are often invited as keynote speakers at major professional meetings to discuss the replication of their work on successful research-based reform strategies in urban communities.

In terms of the specialty area work, LSS proposed the following in their Technical Proposal: that the Lab would “*create new vehicles of professional literature on urban education to bring together reports of research and syntheses of research and theory from all disciplines and professions.*” And further, the proposal stated that LSS would “*establish a community of learners for discussing urban education practices and policies and take on the responsibility to inform policymakers and decision makers about urban education to bring about more coherent and accountable local-based approaches to special problems.*” It was made abundantly clear to the review panel during the site visit that LSS embraces its specialty area responsibility fully and serves as a recognized national leader in the area of urban education.

Also noteworthy in this area is LSS’s collaboration with the Council of Chief State School Officers—which shares a programmatic commitment with LSS in terms of a focus on improving student success in high poverty urban schools-- in cosponsoring the January 1999 invitational conference on “Improving Results for Children and Families by Connecting Collaborative Services with School Reform Efforts.”

Another important LSS collaboration in the specialty area is related to the U.S. Department of Education’s Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community Task Force (EZ/EC) under the federal Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Once an initial contact was made with LSS staff by EZ/EC leadership, common ground was quickly identified and LSS leaders and members of the President’s Community Empowerment Board sat together as strategic partners and planned an invitational conference cosponsored by the Lab, the Department of Education’s EZ/EC Task Force, and the Department of Health and Human Service’s EZ/EC Task Force focused on “Development and Learning of Children and Youth in Urban America.” According to testimony heard during the site visit, this conference proved to be “timely,

comprehensive, and extremely successful,” and the post-conference publication was even more productive. Copies of the conference proceedings were shared with all fifty State Commissioners of Education, the Superintendents of the 105 EZ/EC school districts nationwide, and with the local Community Empowerment Boards at every EZ/EC site. In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has agreed to use the conference model for organizing a similar conference on Rural America. It was repeatedly mentioned during the site visit that LSS leaders have the capacity and political savvy to respond quickly to emerging policy issues that intersect with already-identified LSS interests and expertise. It is clear that LSS leaders are exceptionally adept at collaborating with the appropriate federal-level and state-level leadership to ensure that the resulting discussions occur with all the important regional and national players present at the table. The Lab’s leadership role in the area of urban education is a clear example of this expertise.

Finding ways to turn around low-performing schools in Washington, D.C. has been a top priority of that School District and of Congress. The school staff there faces the challenge of implementing reform mandates with little professional development and implementation support provided. Building the school-level and district-level capacity to implement innovative reforms is a major challenge faced by D.C. schools. LSS has been working intensively with D.C. schools on several fronts. In addition to providing intensive support for the six lowest-performing schools as a demonstration of how even the most challenged schools can achieve significant improvements within relatively short turnaround time, LSS was asked by the District to provide professional development for all 58 facilitators the District has assigned to schools that require extra implementation support, and leadership training for all middle school principals within the District. LSS is to be commended for these courageous efforts.

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

None

## **3. Recommendations for improvement**

None

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

## **1. Strengths**

The Lab is to be commended for building a strong data-driven and research-based foundation for all their work with schools, and for maintaining a consistent and coherent vision for applying that foundation in addressing the needs of some of the most challenging and low-achieving schools in the Region.

The Lab is to be commended for the high quality, commitment, and diversity of its leadership and professional staff, and for serving as an invaluable incubator for minority scholarship and leadership through the exceptional and supportive network of mentoring relationships that exist within the staff. Other Regional Labs and other organizations have much to learn from LSS in this important area.

The Lab quite successfully “grounds” its rigorous research efforts in field-based implementation work, and these two components continually enrich each other. Part of the balance between these two poles—research and practice--is a healthy organizational tension between a sophisticated and ambitious research agenda focused on a particular approach to comprehensive school reform which incorporates an inclusive special education component, and

a much-in-demand “generic” technical support capacity provided generously and promptly to the neediest schools in the Region.

There is great integrity within LSS. The vision, mission, and goals of the organization are congruent, and they pervade the Lab, its activities, and its products. LSS has developed and continues to enjoy a broad base of support and respect from the educational community and policymakers in the four-state region it serves. The ability to effectively collaborate with and network with various stakeholders and to form strategic alliances is a great strength of LSS and of its leadership.

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

The creation and ongoing effectiveness of LSS is quite heavily dependent upon the vision, energy, research productivity, national reputation, networking prowess, and professional connections of its Executive Director. While her many gifts and talents help to define the Lab and are themselves significant strengths of the organization, her absence would create a leadership vacuum that could affect the Lab’s ability to sustain itself. This creates an organizational vulnerability that makes the Lab unduly dependent upon one person. How can LSS “institutionalize” the many contributions of its Executive Director so that it could sustain its exemplary work without her?

LSS claims to be developing a “procedural knowledge base” that can provide guidance and insight for those undertaking comprehensive school reform in their schools, districts, and states. It is unclear, however, just what this knowledge base looks like or what it consists of. This reviewer is convinced that the Lab is in a strong position to be able to articulate this “procedural knowledge base” based on its extensive and intensive involvement in whole-school reform efforts. However, there is a need for a clearer and more focused understanding and

articulation of what a procedural knowledge base is before the knowledge base can be codified and shared. In particular, there is a need for understanding how the direct participants in comprehensive school reform efforts at the local school level—that is, teachers, administrators, students, implementation specialists, facilitators, parents, and community members—can contribute to articulating and documenting that knowledge base before it can be adequately codified and shared. My sense is that valuable and detailed portions of this procedural knowledge base will be more “story-driven” than data-driven, more process-oriented than results-oriented, and more related to qualitative, narrative, and ethnographic research approaches than to quantitative and statistical approaches. Participants in whole-school change efforts at the “micro” level—that is, the school and district levels--will need support and training in documenting and sharing what they are doing in order for this to happen, and LSS can help facilitate that process. There was some evidence provided during the site visit that efforts are being made to address these issues, and LSS should be encouraged to continue to move, thoughtfully and supportively, in this direction.

The Lab should consider committing more of its resources to the support and training of its field workers: the quality, consistency, and thoughtfulness of their work will determine future LSS relationships with schools within the Region. LSS should beware of stretching these critical boundary-spanners too thin, and should build in time and support for reflection and writing into their job descriptions. In particular, implementation specialists and school facilitators play key roles in terms of sustaining schoolwide and district-wide reform efforts once they’ve begun. They are the true choreographers of the capacity-building process, and they have much to contribute to the emerging procedural knowledge base related to school reform. Beyond that, more opportunities can be provided for interested teachers at implementation sites to participate

in LSS-sponsored activities (all the teachers, not just the teacher-leaders). When network teachers are “ready” to change, LSS should be prepared to support them in a variety of ways as they move rapidly forward.

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

LSS should consider adding special incentives for network teachers who want to become more involved in the process of comprehensive school reform: for example, providing mini-grants for action research or teacher research projects and for teacher writing and publication; invitations for commissioned papers; opportunities to co-publish and co-present at national conferences, etc. CFL clearly supports and respects teachers as implementers and instructors within the change process, but tends to ignore their potential for reflecting upon, articulating, and documenting the change process within their schools. LSS support for these enlarged teacher roles can serve the long-range best interests of the LSS agenda and of comprehensive school reform within the Region.