

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory

### I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

Seven states, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota and Wyoming comprise the mid-continent area served the Mid-Continent Regional Education Laboratory (McREL). The region is vast and geographically diverse with its population widely dispersed. The region stretches from Canada to Oklahoma and Iowa to Utah. From the Mississippi River it spans the Great Plains, then straddles the Continental Divide. Travel can be difficult due to long distances and weather. Where air travel is possible, travelers are subject to multiple connecting flights and often left with over two hundred miles of ground travel to complete a trip.

While there are major population concentrations including the Front Range of Colorado, St. Louis, Kansas City, Oklahoma City and Omaha, small towns, small cities and rural areas characterize most of the region. Diverse and under-served populations exist throughout the region. They are transparent since they live in small pockets and interspersed throughout the larger population or so remote they are not recognized. In rural areas there is poverty that is exacerbated by the scarcity of services and communications. Under-served populations are often too small to command attention and are their educational needs are hidden within the relatively successful schools they attend. Distance and the widely dispersed population compromise communications.

All of the states of the region are all involved with school reform. Some of the states are leading in the reform movement; others are slowly overcoming inertia. Several of the states in the region are among the most educationally successful in the country by traditional measures. This is both a boon and an obstacle to school reform.

Founded as a regional educational laboratory in 1966, McREL was one of the original regional laboratories. It has won a succession of competitions to continue in this capacity since 1966. Stability has contributed to the McREL's success and ability to serve its region and assisted in building its national reputation.

The Laboratory has three major operating components. The first component is the regional educational laboratory. It implements the contract with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement and its resulting activities. The second component is the Institute; it conducts not-profit activities that fall outside the purview of the OERI contract. These activities include non-profit contracts with states and school districts outside the service region. The third component is MCL. It conducts for-profit activities.

## **II. Implementation and Management**

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

McREL is remarkable for its metamorphosis over the last four years. Its 1995 proposal was committed to systemic reform, but was not specific about what systemic reform meant. It didn't address standards to a notable degree. Now, four years later, it has defined itself by its connection with standards.

As early as 1989, McREL began to research standards and assist the education community as it responded to the National Governors Associations call for developing national standards as the keystone of school reform. Throughout the nineties McREL has continued to build a national reputation as a repository, clearinghouse and synthesizer of national, state, and

local education standards. Yet, it is only in the last few years that the Laboratory gained such a strong national reputation that it feels obligated to remind the public that the standards it circulates are collected from the work of many professional organizations, states projects and local efforts and are not "McREL" standards. McREL has done the nation and OERI a great service in compiling and explaining the many content and process standards that have been developed over the last decade. In this regard, McREL is meeting its overall mandate in the contract. McREL serves as a good partner to OERI and the nation.

The 1999 Lab proposal was commendable for its identification of customers. It strongly focused on addressing the learning needs of students as its mission. Support for teachers and other line practitioners were also well identified as a priority. In this current evaluation process, however, the student voice is entirely absent, and the voice of practitioners has been limited. The Lab has shown no evidence of a healthy level of doubt or concern for what may be the negative effects of a headlong implementation of standards based reform on the students, teachers and state school systems. Many of the states, and many schools within the states, are historically very successful educationally. Care should be taken not to risk what works.

Recent comprehensive school reform literature addresses the need to address multi-faceted school change, beyond curricular alignment, as essential to successful school reform. Concern for learning outside cognitive standards should be valued too. Listening to students, practitioners, parents and communities as was indicated in the proposal would inform the standards work of other reform efforts.

The Laboratory is developing a good national reputation. It is engaged in reform activities. It is collaborating with other regional laboratories and appears to be responsive to

OREI needs and requests. Much of McREL's work is national, even international. This intense involvement in larger arenas may be detracting the attention it could be giving its region.

Overall, McREL is meeting expectations for the execution of its contract with OERI.

### **1. Strengths**

- A. McREL has become a national center for learning standards.
- B. The Laboratory has built a strong reputation as a resource for assistance in developing and setting standards.
- C. McREL has redefined itself around standards.
- D. The organization has arranged its work so various organizational efforts overlap and reinforce one another resulting in strong leveraging of resources and influence.
- E. In keeping with the independent natures of its constituent states, McREL is adept at helping its clients build a sense of ownership in projects assisted by McREL.

### **2. Areas of needed improvement /Recommendations for improvement**

- A. McREL should seek and hear the voice of its customers, students and practitioners, as identified in its 1995 proposal.
- B. There should be a cultivation of a healthy skepticism about standards based reform and greater recognition of the complexity of comprehensive school reform. This adjustment in terminology has meaning beyond being more politically correct.
- C. More attention should be given regional needs. This may require re-examining the concept of an institute that carries on non-profit activities without concern for laboratory boundaries.

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

McREL monitors itself chiefly through internal means. It emphasizes a Quality Assurance format regularly. This process is clearly in use in assessing the quality of its products and services to the field. Several mechanisms, formal and informal, are used to monitor the internal process of the Lab. These include program directors meetings and brown bag sessions at regular intervals. The Laboratory Board engages in strategic planning every few years.

Among the few customers the evaluation team spoke with, some believed McREL was not especially responsive to their needs. Products were preconceived and only after a time adapted to their individual needs.

**1. Strengths**

The Quality Assurance process may be challenging and causes some self-reflection on internal process and the quality of services and products offered externally.

There are participant satisfaction surveys and similar instruments that are regularly collected and, it is assumed, influence the future presentation of the products.

**2. Areas needing improvement/Recommendations**

A. The written mission and goals contained in the proposal are strong. Regular opportunities for staff and the board to reflect on how well they are achieving the mission and goals should be developed.

B. The mission and goals should be discussed with customers to afford the Laboratory the value of the perception of how well customers assess the work of the Lab.

### **III. Quality**

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

The organizing principle of McREL is centering its work on helping schools, SEAs and the Nation implement content and instructional standards. Dedication to this principle is well demonstrated by the two signature works selected for this review, *Moving Standards into Practice* and *Partnerships as a Field Services Strategy*. Both works have the development and implementation of standards as their centerpiece.

##### Signature Work #1

##### *Moving Standards into Practice*

Earlier it was noted that that McREL is leveraging resources, energy and attention on through its leadership with standards. It is interesting that its number one signature work is also its area of specialty. This concentration has rendered a service to the country. It has even made an international contribution. McREL, along with its institute is offering standards assistance in most states, either to the SEAs or LEAs.

It is curious that it is the McREL Institute that offers McREL's # 1 signature, not the REL itself.

#### **1. Strengths**

- A. The *Compendium of Standards* is an invaluable work for school reformers.
- B. The project has contributed to strong relationships with professional organizations such as AASA, NEA, and NASSP.
- C. *Moving Standards into Practice* is very responsive to the national reform agenda.
- D. The slogan of the project "to make McREL the operating system" of school reform expresses the centrality of standards to the reform and the role of standards.

- E. The leverage of funds and other resources through Moving Standards into Practice is quite effective.
- F. The direct relationship with schools, makes McREL a true partner in implementing reform. This is commendable and gives the Laboratory greater credibility.
- G. The data base on standards and its availability on the Web is a great resource to practitioners and researchers.
- H. McREL's field experience is informing research.
- I. Data on the improvement of 12th grade writing in Minot, North Dakota was helpful.

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

- A. The Gallop Study was criticized for its methodology. This criticism has yet to be answered. Nonetheless, the subsequent Gallop Studies are scheduled, apparently without modifications.
- B. It would be helpful to study the relationship of Moving Standards into Practice to the adjustments implied by shifting from standards based reform to comprehensive school reform. School reform has moved far beyond curriculum reform.
- C. The role of principals and superintendents in school reform is not emphasized in the implementation of Moving Standards into Practice.
- D. Base line data has not been collected at Moving Standards into Practice sites. The answer to the question of why it was not collected was that it could be reconstructed as needed in the future. While this may be true to some extent for student performance, it is not true for teacher practice and performance. Since teacher behavior and practice is widely perceived as the key interim indicator by which to evaluate reform, this is a major deficiency.
- E. Most of this signature work is an Institute activity, not an REL activity.
- F. Most of the Moving Standards into Practice activity occurs outside the Lab region.
- G. Schools in the program are not evaluating teachers according to teaching to standards. It seems the principals may or may not understand the standards based classroom. Unless principals choose or are directed by the districts to participate in Moving Standards into Practice program, they may not understand practices of the teachers. McREL should consider requiring principal participation as a condition of subsequent contracts.

- H. The response to the question of how to deal with the shortage of time to cope with the abundance of standards and benchmarks was inadequate. An answer to this critical question about standards requires more than suggesting teaching vocabulary. This question requires thoughtful consideration.
- I. This evaluation team was not afforded the opportunity to hear from critics of the program.

### Signature Work #2

#### Partnerships as a Field Services Strategy

The overlap with other Lab work is great. As noted the centerpiece of field services is helping states LEAs with school reform through standards. McRELs work includes helping states to develop and implement their own school reform plans. These state plans vary drastically throughout the region. The independence of the states served is remarkable and explains the dramatic differences among the state reform efforts.

Many good examples of the how partnerships engage McREL with schools, school districts, states, universities and other organizations are found in McRELs work in assisting in the development of Consolidated School Reform Demonstration Projects. Congress determined the RELs would assist implementing these projects; McREL has chosen to fulfill this obligation through its partnership approach.

McRELs approach to its partners has been a highly invitational and individual process resulting in active involvement in the CSRD activities in all states in the region. Most of the services provided within these state projects have been at no cost to the states and localities.

As is the nature of partnerships, McREL's partnerships identify mutual benefits to all parties. States gain access to all the expertise and experience of the McREL, along with access to its national networking. McREL benefits from the opportunity to test its ideas, programs and

products in the field. These experiences help improve McREL and keep it current with the needs of customers.

### **1. Strengths**

- A. Partnerships bring McREL close to the people it serves and brings its expertise to the field.
- B. Partnerships keep McREL grounded in the reality of the classroom.
- C. Partnerships allow McREL to build long term relationships with states and localities within its region and, thereby, get to know the region intimately.
- D. States and local schools gain knowledge and understanding of standards based reform that they might otherwise miss.
- E. Partnerships not only allow McREL to leverage its resources, they allow states and local districts to leverage their resources as well.
- F. The partnerships bring people in the region together on issues that are similar across district and state boundaries.

### **2. Areas Needing Improvement / Recommendations**

- A. Field testing services could be made more rigorous.
- B. Some of the local districts feel that the McREL service providers are so busy that they are too rushed, resulting in their offering canned answers. Listening to local needs could enhance service.
- C. The purpose of standards and the measure of success of reform are improved student performance. At local sites and, to a lesser degree, in the states there is little interest in collecting baseline data on student achievement. Data is not as easily reconstructed years later as McREL appears to believe. McREL should collect baseline data.
- D. It is true that student achievement is not a good early measure of reform. There are interim indicators that are good, however. Foremost among the interim indicators is teacher instructional behavior. McREL should make the collection of baseline data on teacher instructional behavior a part of the partnerships. Studying instructional changes, if they occur, may demonstrate a correlation to the partnership activities.
- E. By the Lab being invitational, it appears that administrators are often non-participants in the partnership activities. Since changing teacher behavior is an integral part of

achieve project purposes, the supervisors of teachers should know and understand what teachers are doing.

#### **IV. Utility**

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

Nearly all McREL activities are the outgrowth of responding to the needs of the region, a national research agenda or the request and priorities of OERI. Practicality defines the work of McREL.

Strongly focused on the development, explanation and dissemination of standards, McREL has created a database that is a national resource. This database is readily accessible to the world in both print and electronic forms. McREL uses this data base and its staff expertise in standards as an entrée to participate with professional organizations, serve its regional clients and others in the country who are working to implement standards.

McREL's regional customers, while they sometimes are concerned that McREL seems too busy to craft projects specifically for their needs, does respond with expertise and concern. Customers believe that the support they receive is ultimately appropriate and beneficial. One customer, a superintendent, commented that were it "not for McREL, this school would not have survived" as an institution.

McREL is to be commended for selecting some of its long-term field sites precisely because the needs and challenges of those schools and districts are so great. While this report expresses some level of concern about the absence of baseline data before administering services, it is recognized that McREL senses the urgency to respond to the immediate needs of

customers. This often precludes enacting lengthy methodologies. McREL leadership is sensitive to the need to get into the states and the local schools to help them get the job of reform done. The Lab leadership is articulate about its recognition of what legislatures expect states and schools to accomplish quickly. They understand that practitioners need to act and improve the education of his generation of students.

### **1. Strengths**

- A. Products and services are developed in response to the needs of the nation, states, local schools and the professional field.
- B. McREL responds to the urgent needs of the field with the products and services it needs.
- C. The work of McREL is centered on standards. This fits perfectly as a component of comprehensive school reform.
- D. The services of McREL leverage the resources of the region, states and local schools.
- E. There is an immediacy of McREL services that supports the state and local imperative to act.

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

- A. McREL should help the public and schools put standards into a realistic perspective. Much more thought and study must be put into the time to learn to the standards issue.
- B. Despite the urgency to act in school reform, it is important to collect data on student achievement and teacher behavior before program changes are begun in states and schools.
- C. Even though it may seem antithetical to Lab interests, it is important to document failure as well as success. It is as important to know what does not work in school reform as to know what does. States and schools have a great reluctance to reach negative conclusions, but if researchers don't, who will?

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

As previously stated, products and services of Lab are created in response to customer needs. There is one concern as to just who is the customer, however. Students are the ultimate customer, yet the impact of services on students is often not apparent and determining the impact not pursued.

Certainly, McREL is focused on serving its regional states, reaching a national audience interested in standards and the needs of OREI. It is less clear how well local schools and districts are served, especially those that are not identified as long or short-term Lab sites. They receive Lab publications and certainly are the indirect recipients or subjects of McREL services to their state.

The self-monitoring of the Lab is informed by surveys of customer satisfaction as well as through conversations with chief state school officers and other advisory and action teams that combine Lab staff and customer groups. Regular de-briefings with staff, senior leaders and program directors reflect on field experiences to help refine the customer focus. Annual external evaluations of the Lab commissioned by the Lab evidence another means of monitoring and adjusting to customer needs.

### **1. Strengths**

- A. Regular self-monitoring helps keep the Lab focused on customer needs.
- B. By having a strong national presence in standards, McREL brings great experience and networking resources to remote states and districts.

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

- A. Scanning the needs of districts where the Lab has not presence is problematic.
- B. McREL's focus on standards may limit its ability to respond to various other customer needs unrelated to standards.

## **VI. Outcomes and Impact**

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

Little student performance data is collected with which to judge the improvement of student performance. It is noted that in several cases it is too soon during the intervention to expect to see improvement in student performance. Yet, the absence of baseline student data is troublesome. For, if there is no basis for comparison, how can it ever be shown that a product, service or intervention has had any impact. Reconstructing data years later as needed was suggested as a way to resolve this concern. This is not easily accomplished.

Other measures could also be developed that are interim measures of how well a reform effort is doing. These especially involve how teachers change their teaching. Again, there is no data collected to give a baseline picture of how teachers are teaching before the signature work efforts are implemented.

The previous comments do not hold true for the writing programs where student data is available and, in places, show improved students writing. There is a strong, unquestioned faith at McREL that standards will improve student performance. That assertion must be verified.

#### **1. Strengths**

- A. Standards are clearly established or being established with and by McREL products and services with a focus on improving student achievement. A target is being set.
- B. McREL is adept at helping states and practitioners understand the value of the alignment of reform components.
- C. It appears that McREL is establishing the partnerships and state and local capacity to student performance.

## **2. Recommendations for improvement**

- A. The absence of data is limiting the Labs actual focus on improving performance.
- B. McREL has a vested interest demonstrating the efficacy of standards in promoting improved student achievement, in general. In particular the Lab should study which standards and instructional approaches to standards are most successful in promoting overall student achievement.
- C. The issue of the time it takes to teach standards to various students v. the amount of time available to address standards are vital to successful reform. McREL raised the issue to a very high level of national attention and should address the issue. Nothing on the Lab's agenda is more important than this.

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

Standards are at the heart of comprehensive school reform. The work of McREL to make standards available, understandable and usable by states and local districts is of tremendous assistance to the field. Comprehensive school reform strategies begin with standards. In this regard McREL is doing great national service.

#### **1. Strengths**

McREL uses its greatest assets, its expertise and prominence in the field of standards to help states and districts implement reform. As it uses this asset it brings great resources to the state and local levels. It has created a reform presence in the mid-continent region that would be hard to imagine could be there without McREL.

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

Standards and systemic reform cannot succeed in a vacuum. Standards and alignment must be embedded into a larger view of school reform to improve student performance. McREL should reflect on its view of standards and how they fits in with assessment, professional development, school climate, finance equity and other inescapably important aspects of school reform. Shifting terms from standards based reform comprehensive school reform has deep meaning and deep implications for McREL. Practitioners should be heard from more to explain these matters to researchers. Research tries to isolate variables, practice demands working in complexity and ambiguity.

Documentation of failure as well as success is a service to school reform. It would be well for McREL to take the view of object researcher more frequently.

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

#### **1. Strengths**

- A. McREL has firmly established itself as a leader in compiling standards and making them useful and understandable to the field. It has earned this reputation by compiling a tremendous data base on the subject and made it easily available to practitioners, policy makers and researchers.
- B. McREL identifies both policy level issues regarding standards and the differing issues faced by practitioners implementing standards.
- C. It makes its services available to other Labs and other organizations outside the region.
- D. McREL participates with and enlightens professional associations in the constructing professional development activities related to standards issues.

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

So great is the reputation of McREL regarding standards that it must now be circumspect in its pronouncements about the subject. Being among the most highly reputed experts on the matter gives the Lab great credibility and influence. In working with Gallup in a study with, what the Lab admits were serious methodological limitations, McREL entitled the work “What Americans Believe it is Important for Students to Know”. It appears the title was over reaching, considering the limitations of the study.

McREL acknowledges the limitations, yet, plans to follow up with two sister studies that will use the same questionable methodologies. Since McREL has attained a national stature as “a keeper of the national education standards”, it should be obligated to requires a greater research rigor.

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

**and**

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

McREL is generally meeting expectations. It is being challenged to attract and hold highly skilled staff in a highly competitive market and in a location with a relatively high cost of living. This challenge is interfering to some degree with the ability to of the Lab to move ahead as quickly as it otherwise could. It appears to have substantial staff turn over, difficulty attracting diverse staff, despite a desire to do so, and is slow to replace lost staff members.

The Lab is making a great contribution regionally and nationally to the cause of school reform. It assists reform, and the people committed to it, by compiling and explaining standards so that those implementing the standards can understand them.

The Lab is service oriented, committed to respond to customer needs. It does not limit itself to assisting with the components of comprehensive school reform. Although most of the discussions with the evaluation team dealt with reform issues, a study of the publications of the Lab demonstrates that it assists the field through treatments of other policy issues. An overview of this assistance is seen in the newsletters and the policy briefs published by the Lab, as requested by state policy makers and others.

Worthy of mention is the direction taken to assure that the needs of diverse populations are recognized as standards are set and implemented. Making standards an asset to improving the performance of under-served populations from the outset is a promising approach. Within the Lab, diversity of staff is an ongoing concern and progress is very slow. This does not appear to be the result of a lack of recognition of need or commitment.

McREL is defined by its work with standards. It does good work in this realm, yet, there is a degree of myopia that results from this concentration on a single component of reform. It is important for McREL to step back and reflect on how its work fits into the larger milieu of today's schools.

Setting standards and aligning curriculum, assessments and professional development addresses only about 40% of what schools should do to improve student performance. School reform is a much larger undertaking than just these components of standards based reform account for.

The utility of McREL products and services would be improved if they reflected a greater recognition that there is very important school life beyond standards and assessment. This concern was brought into crisp focus during a discussion of the time necessary to teach all the standards “American’s believe are important”. There was an assumption that all the time in schools is available to teaching to the standards. Even if that were true and desirable, there would not be enough time. McREL should help the public and schools put standards into a realistic perspective. Much more thought and study must put into the time issue, the relative importance of various standards and the efficacy of depth versus breadth in educating students.

The issues of the time it takes to teach standards to various students and the amount of time available to address standards are vital to successful school reform. McREL raised the issues to a very high level of national attention and should address the issues. Nothing on the Lab’s agenda is more important than this. All activities demonstrate high standards of professional practice and integrity. They are designed to meet the needs of most customers.