

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Overview

As part of the NCREL interim evaluation team, I participated in a one-week site visit to the Laboratory on April 26-30, 1999. I reviewed Laboratory materials extensively both prior to the visit and as a natural part of the flow of work during the site visit, including both materials mailed to us prior to the visit and on-site materials. I participated in numerous focus groups and presentations, two site visits of intensive work, and interviews with NCREL staff. I had full access to information, and the staff readily provided additional resources and information upon request.

II. Implementation and Management

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

Strengths

Overall, NCREL is meeting or exceeding expectations in performing the work they have been contracted to do. NCREL is meeting or exceeding expectations in their work of: (1) providing design consultation to schools and communities; (2) identifying exemplary programs and resources in critical content areas; (3) providing national leadership in promoting the use of technologies to improve learning; (4) establishing NCREL as a leading regional resource for networking and policy; and (5) establishing NCREL as a leading regional resource for professional development.

NCREL is completing work with focus on making connections and scaling up. Overall,

NCREL's strength at this point in the cycle is on making connections, although the Lab is currently meeting expectations for developing infrastructure for scale-up. The work on scaling up is underway, with the focus on potential to scale up evolving primarily from the context of making connections as contracted: their work in contributing to strategies for moving educational innovation to scale is emerging through focus on developing products and processes amenable to roll-out. For example, work such as Learning with Technology is developed in context of the field and is then converted to format amenable to broad access such as professional development packaging, software and/or or web-based tools. This pattern fits the design of the contract plan as outlined in the OERI contract, in which each of the four centers has a specific subsection that outlines "contributions to scaling up."

There are three major areas of focus NCREL is using to successfully meet or exceed expectations: (1) fluid, project-based organizational structure that allows flow of human resources; (2) external partnerships that make connections between research and practice and maximize resources; and (3) using technology as an organizer and vehicle for making connections and supporting scale-up.

First, NCREL has developed and implemented a coherent organizational structure that focuses on internal connectedness and, as such, supports the organization in completing work they are approved to do in context of connections and scale-up. NCREL is completing its work through a project-based approach that connects its work across its four main centers as described in their OERI contract: (1) Center for Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum (CTLC); (2) School and Community Development Center (SCD); (3) Center for Scaling Up (CSU); and (4) Evaluation and Policy Information Center (EPIC). Although these four centers are used as organizers for work NCREL was approved to do during this contract, it is clear from interviews,

quarterly reports, products, and planning documents that projects cut across centers according to the demands of the tasks. There is also evidence of evolutionary planning, with work flowing differently across centers and with external partners as the demands of the project change. This flow of work is best exemplified by the project description of how NCREL provided support for helping states, districts, and schools build awareness of, apply for, and select partners for Comprehensive School Reform – NCREL functioned as a “learning organization” in its best sense, with fluid response in a timely, focused manner. Throughout the quarterly reports, there is evidence of this flexibility and mutual support in completing the work the Lab was approved to do, with cross-center work ranging from advisory roles to full partnerships. Cross-center operation of the four-group organizational system positively impacts the quality and the successful completion of approved work. For example, there is strong evidence of EPIC’s evaluation input and assistance throughout the Lab’s work, regardless of which center hosted the project. There is also strong evidence of the Center for Scaling Up’s focus on building an infrastructure of materials and processes amenable to being moved to scale; this influence cuts across the centers and is infused throughout the projects.

Throughout the visit, there was strong evidence of strength and commitment in personnel, a climate of thoughtfulness, and an everyday norm of cooperation and positive working partnerships across the organization. This exemplary team and their joint approach to project-completion positively impacts completion of the work NCREL has been approved to do. The leadership team was highly effective and dynamic in their approach to NCREL tasks and utilizing the human resource potential of the Lab.

Second, NCREL is completing work in context of external partnerships and connectedness outside the organization, including work on a variety of levels that ranges from

intensive site effort to national level policy efforts. This effort helps create infrastructure to move to scale through connections with a wide array of partners. By completing work in partnership with a wide array of external individuals and organizations, the Lab is developing products and processes in context of connecting research with the reality of practice. This was particularly evident in the intensive sites as well as in interviews with external partners.

NCREL is providing design consultation to schools and communities and using that consultation as a Laboratory for developing materials and processes that are both connected and supportive of scale-up, as outlined in follow-up interviews and site interviews for intensive intervention sites. The intensive site work provides solid grounding in practice for the research and development work of the Lab, serving in a sense as professional development in “the practical” for NCREL. For example, the Lab is focusing effort on filling the research knowledge gap in how external consultants with specific areas of focus can best fit into the complex work of site reform with maximum impact and intensive site work offers a Laboratory opportunity to explore and find solutions to this important issue in context of the reality of practice. Furthermore, NCREL is connecting their broad audience – ranging from classroom teachers and schools to policy-makers, states, and regions – with exemplary programs and resources, cutting through the complexity by maintaining a focused eye on teaching, learning, and increasing student success as the centerpiece of their work as evidenced by the materials and products they produce for dissemination.

Finally, NCREL is using the broad concept of “using technology to support instruction and learning” as an organizer for making connections and creating infrastructure with potential to move to scale as defined in their OERI contract. Using technology both as exemplar and as medium, the Lab is providing local, regional, and national leadership in promoting the use of

technologies to improve learning. They serve as a strong resource for networking and policy both through direct work with clients and indirectly through materials and processes made available on a broad scale through print and electronic media. Using both face-to-face work and technology, NCREL is establishing itself as a leading regional resource for networking and policy with focus on teaching, learning, and achievement. Professional development is receiving top priority, with products and processes emerging from work in partnership and through field experience then packaged, presented, and made available to a broad spectrum of consumers.

Areas of needed improvement

While NCREL is meeting the agreements they were approved to do during the first three contract years, it is time to begin to shift focus more strongly to the recipients' issues of moving to scale. Scale is an issue both of delivery and dissemination – moving products, services, and processes out into the field – but it is also an issue of receiving. The organization and work seems to be more focused on delivery and dissemination, with less attention to issues of reducing the disconnect between delivering and receiving, particularly as it may be an inherent part of the materials and processes themselves. This work is hampered by the disconnect between the broad, sweeping focus of the national Lab work – making connections and a deep and meaningful way and informing the daunting issue of moving reform to scale – and the five year cycle of Lab work. Educational change at this level of focus – making connections and moving to scale -- requires a much longer range cycle of effort and persistent focus. NCREL is doing well within the time parameters imposed externally. They are struggling more Labwide with the area of scale-up in relation to issues of making products and processes “receivable” than they are with making connections – as would be expected with a five-year cycle of work.

Recommendations for improvement

1. Explore options for partnerships and opportunities to extend the focus of the Lab's work beyond the 5-year cycle, with the 5-year span in context of a larger strategic view of the issues of connectedness and scaling up.
2. Deliberately shift focus for the last part of this contract to scale up issues of both delivering products and services out and issues of consumer use on a broad scale. Focusing deliberately on the products and processes already developed or firmly underway, looking in great depth and with a researcher's eye at how to move them to scale by increasing their potential to connect with consumers in context of the practitioner's reality. This is particularly pertinent for teachers, students, classroom, and school level audiences – the most difficult audience to impact in moving to scale.

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

Strengths

NCREL uses the Four Stage Model that includes assessing needs and setting goals, designing planning and evaluation systems, implementing the plan, and evaluating the plan then renewing effort according to that feedback. The Lab uses this model to design and evaluate their own performance internally as well as to build in effective strategies into projects across the centers. There is evidence of strong feedback throughout the Lab's work, ranging from simple surveys as part of professional development activities to the highly technical Gallup Polls that were contracted out to external reviewers.

Areas of needed improvement

NCREL has made web-based information readily available to those who have technological capacity, which includes not only the concept of having adequate hardware but also the human skill and motivation to access the information. Because the use of technology in education is in itself a cutting edge piece of the puzzle, it is difficult to separate technology-based delivery of products and processes from their receipt by the potential consumer –

particularly to educators in the field. There appears to be a disconnect between the products and services being made available through technology and the capacity and/or will of the potential recipients, such as teachers in intensive sites who have not accessed information electronically and the relatively low percentage of Pathways hits that come from teachers. When focus on receipt of information is not incorporated as a key area of focus of the work of the Lab, any significant disconnect between NCREL dissemination and consumer utilization threatens to limit use of high quality Lab products and processes. There is definite impact on the rollout potential when the plan for moving to scale is heavily linked to “scale-friendly” packaging.

Recommendations for improvement

Use intensive Lab sites to view the contextual perspective on consumer utilization of electronic products and processes.

Because NCREL is directly involved in intensive sites, workers have direct access to viewing Lab products and processes through the eye of the consumer. While providing hardware, skill training, and motivation to potential consumers is beyond the scope of the Lab’s work, accessing electronic products and processes in context of overall school reform efforts offers easy opportunity to learn how the Lab might adapt its electronic products and delivery systems so they are more readily used and useful in context of holistic change. It also offers opportunity to research in a more deliberate way the consumer side of the issues of moving to scale using technology in context of practice. NCREL staff working in intensive sites who may be less familiar with products such as Pathways or Gateway offer golden opportunity to view Lab deliverables with an external eye that is analytical and educated. This knowledge can then be looped back in and may have implications for adapting products, processes, and delivery systems of NCREL’s work.

III. Quality

A. To what extent is NCREL developing high quality products and services?

Strengths

NCREL has developed and is in the process of developing a wide array of quality products and services that are applicable to different audiences, such as research articles, conferences, technical assistance, print, web-based, and electronic formats.

In particular, NCREL has exhibited strength in developing high quality products and services around the concept of “engaged learning” as a powerful conceptual framework for reconceptualizing high quality teaching and learning on a broad scale. The engaged learning concept encapsulates changes in both the role of student as active participant in learning and in the role of the teacher as coach and facilitator rather than as disseminator of wisdom. This concept appears to be strongly infused into the vernacular at the teacher, school, district, and state (Illinois) levels, with indication that the concept is moving throughout the service region – a major positive factor in the scale-up potential of the products and services being created. It was evident at the sites visited and through focus groups and interviews that teachers and administrators actively use the construct in rethinking learning and teaching in their daily work and that it is serving as a powerful organizer for core level school change. This paradigm shift is phenomenal: it reaches directly into the classroom with a powerful metaphor that makes major changes in conceptualization of learning and teaching. It moves directly and strongly into the normally impervious arena of core technology – learning and teaching in the classroom.

Using the concept of engaged learning, NCREL has developed a number of strong products and processes. CTLC and SCD have focused in particular on the teachers’ role in delivering instruction and in understanding how students use that delivered instruction to learn,

with products such as the Engaged Learning Safari offering educators clear benchmarks for understanding engaged learning and with potential for scale-up inherent in the product. The Gateway Project currently under development offers particular promise for supporting engaged learning in context of local, state, and national demands for high achievement of standards as measured by performance assessment: a rich array of resources tailored specifically to the teachers' perspective offers exciting new possibilities for supporting teachers in particular -- and learners to some degree-- in achieving critical "gateway" standards. The site supports both improvement of teaching talent as well as teacher content knowledge, and it is a very user-friendly way to explore an important construct (such as "energy" in the science area) in great detail as well as to obtain an assortment of teaching resources. It is masterful in its focus on prioritizing standards as a way to cut through issues of volume and overload in the world of standards and assessment, as well as in its approach to improving teaching and learning.

By engaging experts in development of materials, such as Hallinger and Bridges' involvement in Problem-Based Learning, the Lab not only harnesses expertise for informing its own products and services and for attracting the attention of a variety of audiences but also provides direct link to existing bodies of knowledge and collections of high quality work outside the Lab's influence. Through these direct linkages, the Lab is very efficient in extending its arm of influence with minimal relative expenditure of the Lab's funds, time, and talent.

Areas of needed improvement

First, the concept of "engaged learning" is permeating the field of service in a positive way, but it is not as highly visible in the products, processes, publicity, and dissemination processes that will let the Lab move the concept to scale. The concept is there in the materials and processes, but it is not "front and center" like it seems to be in the field. There is opportunity

lost for making this amazing paradigm shift on a broad scale and for creating positive ethos related to concepts of constructivist learning and radical change in teaching delivery systems as well as student roles. Pulled to the front in a deliberate way, the concept of engaged learning could be a powerful tool for scaling up by creating positive context for a wide range of supportive materials and processes, both those created by the Lab and those created elsewhere.

Second, although the Pathways server continues to make a wide range of information available to educators and has received numerous awards and receives a large number of “hits”, it has a number of quality issues that need to be addressed. In attempting to serve the needs of a broad audience, the product fails to maintain high enough quality for the empirical research world or to be user-friendly enough to serve teachers in their world, and it has not kept pace with changes in the technology field as well as with issues of effective web-based communication strategies. More specifically, for example, while there is a great deal of research information compiled on different topics of potential interest, the research articles in particular have definite limitations that make them “unfriendly” both to researchers and to practitioners:

- many contain citations in context of text but lack a reference section at the end of that text
- many of the literature reviews have obvious gaps and fail to cover the literature thoroughly or evenly
- the reviews are writing with authority and certitude rather than with the tentativeness and conflict that is a natural part of the emerging nature of knowledge construction and thus some of the research reviews tends to take on an editorial slant
- the overall writing styles are formal and unfriendly to a non-researcher audience
- best practice exemplars and empirical research is blended rather than clearly delineated, sending an overall message of authority and expertise when it is not necessarily supported empirically

Third, research findings in depth remain relatively inaccessible to people in the field, with the exception of broad translations in the form of reviews. Electronic research is a cutting edge part of the field of technology, and the Lab seems to be behind in this arena. Although there are bibliographies and reference lists available on the web site, hand-delivered through the resource center, and incorporated as part of written materials, the information in these listings remains virtually inaccessible to consumers unless they expend considerable time, energy, and resources to filter through the list and then go out to obtain the sources. Lists of sources alone are inadequate in communicating research findings, and there are broad web-based and electric resources readily available that are not part of NCREL's web sites or services.

Recommendations for improvement

1. Use the concept of Engaged Learning as a major organizer for products and processes.

The concept of engaged learning is more visible in interviews and discussions with people than it is in products and processes ready to be disseminated on a broader scale. This is a powerful construct that has potential to make major impact in the field, and it needs to be "pulled front and center" and used as an organizer for the web page, as a conceptual framework that links NCREL products and processes into a seamless, readily-understood conceptualization of overall change in classrooms, schools, states, and regions. It is to your credit that you have developed such a powerful mental model, one that has already begun to shape major conceptual changes in the field. It is effective with a broad audience, ranging from individual teachers and schools to policymakers and state officials. Take the next step and use it more deliberately and extensively.

2. Capitalize on the potential strength of Pathways, even though it is not a “new” product.

Pathways has strong name recognition and numerous visitors – almost a “brand name” strength – and it offers strong possibilities for maintaining cutting edge information. Capitalize on this strength. First, clearly identify your audience and create top quality work targeted to that group. There is some indication that the site is preferred more by audiences other than teacher audiences (such as curriculum directors). It might be strengthened by tailoring it to a more narrow audience such as curriculum planners and students in pre-service courses, curriculum planners, and others. In order to be usable to that audience, the research reviews need to be comprehensive and current, and citations need to be included with more information readily available on each article. All major perspectives should be included, even where there is disagreement and knowledge gaps – a natural part of the empirical field. Teachers could continue to access and use Pathways as an information source, with a higher level of integrity in the information available to them. If, on the other hand, a broad teachers audience is the focus, changes in the writing styles and layout of research should make empirical information much more user-friendly, and research findings might be organized around field-friendly conceptual frameworks such as the concept of “engaged learning”.

3. Make research more readily accessible.

Rather than simply providing lists of references, focus on the next level of quality – supporting access to the information each of the references holds and supporting users in being able to create their own lists through searches rather than depending on the Lab for direct services. Bibliographies alone offer little information, and that

information is difficult to obtain without great effort. Consider supporting references and bibliographies with another layer of available information. For example, the Resource Center might create annotated bibliographies for all sources cited using summaries of findings such as those found in ERIC, rather than simply listing sources. Or you might provide links to library web sites where that information is available. You might help the region organize consortia (or use existing groups) to purchase access to full text journals and other resources normally available only to students in universities, to set up easy access to ERIC searches, and to make sources available electronically so users can move beyond the list of sources on the web, perhaps even letting consumers (schools, districts, policymakers) pay their share of the costs.

IV. Utility

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

Strengths

There is strong evidence that the Lab is developing a wide array of products and services that serve a broad constituency, ranging from teachers in classrooms to policymakers. As mentioned in the section on quality products, there is a wide range of products, processes, and supports available, and this array is connected conceptually around broad themes.

Through partnerships with existing schools and organizations, the Lab creates these products and services in context of the field. Teachers, administrators, university professors, central office members, state department officials, and others spoke often and with pride of working in partnership with NCREL to develop usable products and services that were then

disseminated to broad audiences. Through evolutionary planning using an ongoing cycle of planning, effort, feedback, and change, NCREL works dynamically with partners in the field to create products and processes that merge research with practice and are useful to practitioners. By forging partnerships with outside agencies such as Ameritech to create products such as Parentech, NCREL takes advantage of the energy and funding available externally to craft strong work in context of existing demand – a natural for scale-up.

One of the strongest delivery systems for Lab products and processes in terms of consumer access and desirability – and thus potential for moving to scale -- is the use of courses as a delivery system. NCREL harnesses the power of the course structure to make products and services useful and used by customers in two ways: (1) the Lab has created, and continues to create, courses that can be used for in-service training, and (2) the Lab has formed working partnerships with teachers in higher education so that Lab products and processes can be used in context of pre-service education courses. It is obvious from the quarterly reports that NCREL is capitalizing on this vehicle and is designing more courses as vehicles for moving products, processes, and information sources to scale.

NCREL has developed a broad dissemination strategy for in-service training based on rollout through train-the-trainer models, with the idea that Lab-controlled training will hold the line on quality while allowing scale-up that is cost-effective. While the train-the-trainer model has definite limitations, feedback from consumers indicates that it has been highly effective in some sites, particularly in those sites who attached sufficient funds and supportive policies, while it has been ineffective in others as replication of planned delivery. However, there is evidence that the rollout process was sustained in many cases by consumers' adapting the product and/or using parts of the product in ways they deemed to be helpful to their overall work.

NCREL makes products and processes widely available to potential consumers and attempts to make them aware of the availability of the information through mass mailings, web-based links, meetings, and partnerships at all levels.

Areas of needed improvement

The area of needed improvement for this question is the same as the area addressed in Section II B. There is greater focus on delivering products and processes out, once developed in partnership, than there is on those unfamiliar with the products receiving and using them. This greater focus has implications for scale-up, since the plan for moving to scale is highly related to packaging and dissemination using technology and other processes amenable to scale.

Recommendations for improvement

Focus on the consumer receipt and use of products and processes, particularly those products and processes that will be linchpins in the rollout process.

B. To what extent is NCREL focused on customer need?

Strengths

The Lab provides a wide array of services in response to requests throughout the region, and they take a wide range of opportunities to move the products and processes that emerge from these partnerships to a broader audience. Projects such as the Leadership for Integrating Technology are developed through pilot testing with ongoing adaptation in response to customer need.

On a broader scale, NCREL is responsive to large gaps in the knowledge base that impacts customer need, even though the consumers themselves may be unaware of its impact. By exploring gaps in knowledge -- such as contributing to the knowledge base on the nature of successful technical assistance for those entering schools and districts from the outside and ways

for schools and districts to obtain best fit between their needs and the external assistance available – the Lab makes major contribution to customers in a way that is, in the beginning, indirect but powerful. Through work at intensive sites, the Lab is exploring contextual barriers to change and the interplay between single interventions in context of whole school and classroom context. This serves as both Lab for knowledge construction as well as offering going professional development for NCREL staff that keeps their intellectual work and perspective grounded in learning and teaching at a practical level.

Areas of needed improvement

Focus on customer need tends to be on specific partners and projects, with an eye to the scale-up process as part of the process of developing products and processes amenable to scale. Focus on customers at the “to-scale” level is not as dominant a theme and is designed to emerge from the primary focus on immediate customers through scale-friendly packaging and dissemination strategies. There is less focus on “the customer” at a scale level – what will people need when they have absolutely no face-to-face intervention? This is, inherently, one of the critical knowledge gaps in moving to scale and is among the stickiest of our national problems.

Recommendations for improvement

Shift customer focus to “customer” in its broadest sense. This recommendation is related to the recommendation to shift focus to issues of scale as stated in the Recommendations for Improvement in Section II A., recommendation 2.

V. Outcomes and Impact

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

Strengths

NCREL is playing an active role in the quest to raise student achievement at intensive implementation sites. Achievement test data is lending support to the Lab's contribution to achievement, as well as to improvements in other measures of student success such as the high attendance rates at one of the sites we visited. The Lab has strong impact on teachers and is providing focus on engaged learning and changing instruction throughout the school.

Areas of needed improvement

It is most difficult empirically to identify causal relationships, and it is particularly difficult in context of practice where there are multiple interventions that are part of the school's innovation history as well as their current efforts to reform. It appears that NCREL staff who are participating in the interventions are also serving as primary documentation collectors within those intensive sites. Thus data is being collected on the site participants themselves, but there is little empirical evidence being collected on the researcher as subject.

Recommendations for improvement

Study researchers themselves in context of practice. The work at intensive sites offers perfect opportunity for the research world to gain knowledge on researcher interventions in context of practice and whole school change. Consider having external researchers study NCREL staff on site to measure the impact of NCREL interventions on intensive site improvement and changes in student success that can be attributed to NCREL interventions.

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

Strengths

NCREL is participating in a wide range of intensive site efforts that include a wide variety of interventions. The work in these broad projects is evident in the quarterly reports. By combining OERI funds with a wide range of other externally contracted projects, the Lab leverages opportunity to assist states and localities in implementing improvement strategies and to learn from these efforts in the process.

Areas of needed improvement

None

Recommendations for improvement

None

C. To what extent has NCREL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its field?

Strengths

NCREL has strong focus on the use of technology to support instruction and learning. As well, the Lab focuses its energy on harnessing the strength of technology for design of user-friendly products and processes, for dissemination on a broad scale in a cost-effective manner, and for broad and open access to information through technology.

Many of the Lab's products are exemplars that serve as benchmarks for the public in designing technology-based educational resources and supports, such as the Gateway web site and the Engaged Learning Safari CD-ROM, web, and video formatted project. In both instances, the Lab is folding a number of key issues of importance into a technical format. The Engaged

Learning Safari, for example, harnesses the power of the concept of “engaged learning” to create a paradigm shift in the field and to portray constructivist, research-based practice in a politically palatable manner. At the same time, it gives benchmarks for engaged instruction so teachers and schools can begin to get a sense of “how good is good enough”, and it is disseminated in a wide range of media so that customers with different preferences will be served through technology.

The Lab has extensive projects within its region, in partnership with others outside the region, and in partnership and coordination with other Labs. The Department of Defense Education Activity for professional development in technology applications sends a strong message of support for the Lab’s sound national reputation.

According to ongoing customer feedback, the Gallup polls in particular, NCREL has strong name recognition with a wide variety of audiences. NCREL has participated in a wide range of partnerships, and the quality of the work that emerges from those partnerships and the quality of the individual NCREL staff members creates an overall reputation of strength

Areas of needed improvement

The lowest level of name recognition among customers appears to be among teachers. The teachers know the Lab’s work under other terms such as through the popular work Plugging In, but they do not necessarily link that work with NCREL.

Recommendations for improvement

Explore opportunities to expand name recognition among teachers. This “brand name” associated with quality products might offer a valuable tool in the process of scaling up, since overarching name recognition is a factor in advertising and distribution.

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

Overall, NCREL is meeting or exceeding contractual obligations, serving both the region and the nation with broad array of quality programs, products, and services that are nested in context of the comprehensive view of education reform and that meet contractually-defined scale-up requirements. The Lab has created a yeasty, thoughtful culture capable of struggling with key issues of education reform in a deep way. At the same time, the Lab is grounded in practice, both through partnerships and through work in intensive sites. The Lab has managed to attract and maintain a large cadre of talented, committed individuals who work hard – both individually and collectively – to find ways to improve education through comprehensive school reform and scalability of reform efforts.

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

NCREL exhibits a wide array of strengths. Overall, NCREL is making strong contribution to educational change. The Lab is meeting or exceeding all contractual expectations and has developed – and continues to develop -- quality products and processes with structural and partnership capacity to move to scale. The work of making connections; creating “scalability” in products, processes, and partnerships; and making major gains in the specialty area of technology runs throughout the Lab’s work. NCREL is staffed by committed, talented personnel, and the Lab uses fluid, project-based work and evolutionary planning to maximize human potential and flow resources and intellectual capital across centers. NCREL holds high quality standards for data gathering, analysis, and use of data to make decisions, with both internal and external reviewers and processes in place. These high standards are evident in both the internal work of the Lab and in their external partnerships, products, and processes. The Lab

has created a monumental paradigm shift through the concept of “engaged learning” that is having impact both at the policy formation level and at the policy implementation level. And, finally, NCREL maintains focus on using technology to support school and student achievement in a deep, systemic way.

There are a few areas for improvement, and they fall primarily within the arena of building on current strengths and successes. First, one area for improvement is beyond the scope of the Lab’s control but bears mention: a five year planning and implementation cycle for work of this scope is prohibitive. Second, NCREL tends to focus including customer voice through development of products and partnerships in strong collaboration with practitioners in the field, using feedback processes through field tests, then following with revisions and rollout. This highly effective strategy is a strength, but the voice of the “non-face-time” customer is less evident in the process than is the customer who also has personal contact with the Lab in some way. The silence of this distance consumer creates potential scalability limitations in the work under development, since there is limited “voice” given to the future consumer who has no “face time.” Third, NCREL has not fully developed the growth potential of areas of strong success, such as harnessing the concept of engaged learning as a powerful organizer for NCREL products and processes or maximizing the Pathways server’s name recognition to draw people and organizations to cutting edge information. Fourth, the Lab is behind in the area of supplying consumers with references, focusing on providing lists rather than linkages to searching through technology or otherwise making summaries of information found within references more readily available.

Strategies for improvement include:

1. Nest the five year contractual context within a broader and more long-range strategic plan through planning with external partnerships, since the scope of work the Lab is undergoing operates best in context a longer view of change.
2. Shift focus somewhat at this point in the contract cycle to include greater focus on the voice of the non-face-time consumer, and insure products and processes are in the best condition possible to serve this to-scale audience.
3. Capitalize on successes by bringing the concept of “engaged learning” to the front page – it’s probably more of a communication and marketing issue rather than a direct educational issue, so the Lab might need to explore opportunities for advice and support within those fields rather than within the usual fields of education change. Also, use the Pathway web site as a centerpiece for cutting edge information, since it has brand name recognition and gets a lot of traffic.
4. Rethink the Lab’s role in helping consumers access information through references, focusing in particular on the role of technology in accomplishing that work.