

Archived Information

NCREL's Comments Regarding the

Interim Evaluation of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Synthesis Report

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Synthesis Report of the Interim Evaluation of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. We appreciate the professional and thorough manner in which the site visit was conducted and the report prepared.

After reviewing this report, we concluded that it generally presented a fair and balanced assessment of our strengths and areas of needed improvement across the eight evaluation questions. Only on two questions did we feel there was a need to provide additional information here to clarify statements about areas of needed improvement. The two questions and our comments are presented below.

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

The evaluation panel synthesis report noted a number of strengths of NCREL's work in providing useful products and services to educators in the region. A 1995 Gallup Survey indicated the Lab is effective in serving educator needs across a range of programmatic areas. Lab initiatives are developed through a careful process involving client needs-sensing and designing initiatives to support engaged learning. Intensive fieldwork is done to develop, refine, and validate products and services for school and district needs. The report stated that the Lab's training programs, web-sites, and partnering with others to offer professional development courses are particularly noteworthy strengths in providing useful and used assistance to the field.

In identifying potential areas for improvement, the report commented on pages 18 and 19 that there may be "gaps" in the level of Lab services provided to states in the region. Based upon their review of selected signature areas of Lab work, the reviewers felt that NCREL should refine its, "overall strategic view of how the mission of the Lab will be served in all areas of the region, especially to the level already apparent in some states" (page 19, paragraph 5).

NCREL agrees with the importance of providing a high level of service to all areas of the region and goes to great lengths to ensure that such service is provided. We believe that in this case the reviewers' perception of disproportionate service to some states in the region is due primarily to the review process focusing on only the fraction of NCREL's efforts involved in the two signature works. Evaluation panel noted this potential problem when they commented in the opening of the summary report: "In some ways it [the review process] is analogous to a group of people in a rowboat drifting past an iceberg

and attempting to evaluate not only the eighth they can see, but also the seven-eighths below the surface” (page 2, paragraph 4). In addition to examining only a portion of NCREL’s work, the request to have the evaluation team visit schools where NCREL is co-developing products and services tended to further focus the review on sites within the northeastern area of Illinois.

Although NCREL's development activities involve a number of Illinois schools, the Lab is involved in significant activities within all seven states in the region. A review of the Quarterly Reports for 1998 and 1999 reveals that NCREL is involved in providing a high level of services to all seven states in the region.

Table 1. Products and Services Provided to NCREL’s Region in 1998-99

State / Significant Activities Occurring in 1998-99
Illinois <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive Chicago Public School Sites • First in the World Consortium / Analysis of TIMSS Data • Plus 77 additional activities described in quarterly reports
Indiana <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indiana Prevention and Remediation Studies • Alternative Tax Structures for Indiana Schools • Plus 41 additional activities described in quarterly reports
Iowa <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iowa Literacy Initiative--Every Child a Reader • Area Educational Agency Services Study • Plus 28 additional activities described in quarterly reports
Michigan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Writer's Association Study--Review of Technology Plans • America Reads Project • Plus 38 additional activities described in quarterly reports
Minnesota <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gateway Project • Review of State Assessment Rubrics • Plus 37 additional activities described in quarterly reports
Ohio <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaged Learning Safari--Professional Development Seminars • Project-Based Learning--Math and Science Initiative • Plus 38 additional activities described in quarterly reports
Wisconsin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSRD Assistance and Evaluation • Wisconsin Rapids Science and Math Curriculum Intensive Site (1996 to now) • Plus 31 additional activities described in quarterly reports

Also, a number of factors, such as demographic differences between the seven states, influence to some degree the opportunity NCREL has to provide services within the region. For example, states with larger student populations have more schools and districts to serve. In the north central region, the states of Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan have more than twice as many students enrolled as in the other four states. Thus client characteristics and choices can have a significant impact on the level and nature of Lab work within each state.

We were confused at statements (page 18, paragraphs 4 and 5; page 19 paragraphs 1, 2, 3, and 5) that seemed to suggest that RELs should be accountable for implementing products and services in settings in which people do not want to implement the programs or do not have the funding to make needed changes. Resolving problems such as these are more the responsibility of state and local governments, not an R&D agency. Once the Lab has worked with educators in the region to develop and disseminate effective products and services, it is primarily the responsibility of governmental agencies, administrators, and educators from the state to local level to implement them.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT: To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

The synthesis report identifies a number of strengths and needed improvements regarding the Lab's work in assisting educators to achieve improved student success. The purpose of our comment here is to provide some additional information to aid in interpreting a statement in the report regarding the impact of seven widely disseminated NCREL products and services on improved student success. The report states that, "on a survey (March 1999) of clients' perceptions of the impact of key services/products on student learning, only 23 percent of respondents said that the service/product positively affected student performance" (page 24, paragraph 3).

If the Lab's products and services positively affected student performance for "only 23 percent" of the students in the region, this would translate into a very large number of students, given the size of the region. The region has a total enrollment of over 8.8 million students; positively impacting 23 percent would mean benefiting over 2 million students.

In addition, the number 23 percent may misrepresent the potential impact of NCREL products and services on students. The seven Lab products and services included in the survey were designed to promote student success through different means. Some of the products or services, such as professional development training on technology use, were intended to have direct application within the classroom. Given the particular survey question asked, it is natural that respondents would rate such products and services as having more immediate impact on professional practice and student performance. Other products were designed to inform educators about emerging issues or to support planning and policy development at the state, district, or school level. These products would be

rated in the survey as having less immediate impact on professional practice and student performance even though they may have a substantial impact on both in the long run.

To illustrate this, the following table shows that 35 percent of the respondents indicated that the professional development programs "Safe Passages" and "Learning with Technology" had a positive impact on student performance. It should be noted that about 66 percent of respondents also rated these programs as effective in changing or enhancing the quality of professional practice. As expected, the informational and planning resources in the survey were rated as having less immediate impact on student performance and professional practice. For all of these reasons, looking only at an “average” rating for the seven products can yield a misleading picture of impact on student performance.

Table 2. Impact of Seven Selected NCREL Products and Services on Student Performance and Professional Practices

NCREL Product or Service Rated	Area of Impact	
	Improved Student Performance	Used in Professional Practice
Safe Passage: Making it Through Adolescence in a Risky Society	35%	65%
Learning with Technology Course	35%	66%
Making Good Choices: Comprehensive School Reform	32%	41%
Charters in our Midst School Development Outreach Package	16%	42%
New Leaders for Tomorrow’s Schools: Comprehensive School Reform	9%	34%
Changing by Design School Development Outreach Package	8%	31%
New Leaders for Tomorrow’s Schools--Technology and Education: The Current Debate	6%	47%

Finally, this survey is only designed to evaluate individual products and services and it underestimates the impact of the total set of NCREL’s efforts. It does this because individual survey respondents were assigned only one Lab product or service to rate. This means that even if respondents had experience with several NCREL products or services—perhaps products that they would rate as being more effective in benefiting student success—they could only rate the assigned NCREL product or service. A more positive overall picture might well emerge if educators in the region were asked to rate all

NCREL products and services they had used during the last three years. If such a survey were conducted, it is reasonable to expect that more educators would report that at least one Lab product or service positively impacted student success.

Summary

The interim evaluation sought to answer eight evaluation questions about the quality and effectiveness of the Lab's operation and initiatives. The synthesis evaluation report presents a creditable overall assessment of Lab strengths and areas of needed improvement, particularly considering the short time available for conducting the study and the extensive scope of NCREL's activities. The only areas where we felt further information would add to the report involve the level of services provided to all states in the NCREL region and the impact NCREL products and services have on improving student performance. NCREL is active in providing significant service to each of the seven states in the region. The specific state activities are identified collaboratively with state and local agencies and designed to address important aspects of the REL contract. Further, Lab products and services—especially those directed at impacting teacher performance and classroom experiences—benefit many tens of thousands of students in the region. In both of these cases, we believe that there is substantial information to demonstrate that NCREL is being successful in addressing issues raised by the evaluation panel.