

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Synthesis Report

Introduction

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) is one of ten Laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Funding is provided through a competitive process, and is currently in a five-year cycle (December 1995 – December 2000). The panel assigned to evaluate the NWREL consists of Robert Egbert (University of Nebraska – Lincoln, NE), Pi Irwin (Superintendent of Schools, Glen Ellyn School District, IL), Michael Jennings (Assistant Professor, University of Alaska – Anchorage, AK), Morris Lai (Director of Evaluation, Curriculum Research & Development Group, University of Hawaii at Manoa), Diane Lassman (Director, EXCHANGES, Minneapolis, MN), and Haroldie Spriggs (Retired, Independent Consultant, Albuquerque, NM). These panelists reviewed multiple operational documents (required by the *Standards*) and a sampling of materials (“advance materials”) selected collaboratively by Decision Information Resources, Inc. and the Office of Educational Improvement (OERI) Program Officer assigned to the Laboratory. A complete listing of the materials reviewed is attached. Additionally, the panelists conducted on-site data collection activities at the Laboratory in Portland, Oregon from April 5-9, 1999. An agenda for this visit is attached.

I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory

Although the Regional Educational Laboratories are funded as a group and follow similar guidelines for carrying out their scope of approved work, each Lab operates independently and sets its own programming agenda based on the needs of the region served. The NWREL serves

the states of: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington. These five states cover twenty-seven percent of the landmass of the United States but have only four percent of the people – approximately 11,000,000. The region has a few major cities, however large areas are largely unoccupied. This population distribution is a challenge to service provision in the region, as are the broad ethnic diversity and multiple languages among the region's people.

This Laboratory was one of the original RELs (1966). In the thirty-three years of its existence, the NWREL has had three Executive Directors and three Board Chairs. NWREL is housed near downtown Portland, Oregon. The OERI REL monies, \$14.8m accounted for 34 percent of the Labs total funds during fiscal years 1996, 1997, 1998. Other Department of Education sources, \$15.5m, were 36 percent of the total; Corporation for National Service and state and local sources were 30 percent of the total. The Laboratory presently employs a staff of 212.

Opportunities in serving the region include mandates by several states for school districts to adopt and implement programs where the curriculum and instruction are aligned with the statewide standards or with student assessment measures. In addition to the other areas of on-going and related focus, opportunities to provide teacher training, technical assistance, and school and district field service, and applied research and development projects are plentiful.

A primary effort at NWREL builds on the Laboratory's special knowledge and accomplishments and acts as a resource within its region, to the Laboratory network and to the nation. The focus of NWREL's specialty area development is on School Change Processes.

Training and Technical Assistance work is further subdivided among seven Centers – Equity, Mathematics and Science Education, National Mentoring, National School Safety, Technology, Community and Education Volunteer Services, and Comprehensive. Each

Center has its own operating budget and from five to ten professional staff members.

The Laboratory's research and development work is subdivided among five programs: Assessment and Evaluation, Rural Education Program, Education and Work, School Improvement, and Child and Family.

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

The peer review panel members are in agreement that NWREL has met its contractual obligations over the past three years, as outlined in the contract, modifications and annual updates. One panel member states:

The NWREL is doing very well what it was approved to do during its first three contract years. The work was carefully planned and it is being conducted in a thoughtful and constructive manner. Additional work also is being completed by the Laboratory as an institution under other grants and contracts, some of them being supplementary to the OERI Laboratory funding for the same general tasks and others being for new and, usually, related work.

Panel members reviewed 21 documents that speak to Lab "Implementation and Management" in the following categories: governance, management systems, planning, Lab staff development and strategic alliances.

Prior to the Exit Interview, panel members met to process their responses to the eight questions that frame the Interim Evaluation in terms of "Strengths" and "Areas of Needed Improvement". Certain elements or components of work at NWREL were noted most frequently by panelists. In this synthesis report these components are included for each question

and referred to as “key elements”. They also served as an outline for the Exit Interview.

For question II.A, in addition to “Have met contractual obligations”, key elements are: (a) Highly qualified staff, (b) Strong involvement of the Board of Directors, (c) Strong strategic planning process in place, and (d) Leveraging of funds and resources.

(a) Highly qualified staff

Staff, in regard to this question, refers to executive leadership and management staff. The start of this contract cycle coincided with significant changes in leadership, management and governance that “appear to have re-energized much of the Lab’s work and increased the Board’s ability to provide appropriate oversight for the work of the Lab”. (panel member) Two panel members mention the significance of the support of the Labs’ Executive Director during this period. A member of the Board of Directors’ Executive Committee stated that the newly appointed Executive Director was highly supportive of the restructuring of the Board.

In two panel member’s assessments, Lab Executive staff provide strong leadership in insuring continuity of programs and services and efficiently managing its resources.

I recognize that the long tenure of staff may make it difficult for the Lab to dynamically change, adapt and adjust. However, from my review of materials and interview notes, I have concluded that the hiring of an Associate Executive Director from outside NWREL through a national search assisted in the successful transition that accompanied Board restructuring and new directions in leadership from the Executive Leadership Committee.

(b) Strong Board involvement

Although 1998 was the first full year of the new Board configuration, the changes appear to have enabled Board members to be more deeply involved in institutional strategic planning and more seriously involved because of the new committee structure. From a panel member:

“The restructuring of the Board of Directors resulted in a move from a Board that operated in a highly ritualistic and uninvolved manner to an active working Board”. This is, in turn, almost a direct quote from a member of the Board when the panel met with Board members during the site visit. For a Lab of NWREL’s “age”, this change is particularly significant because it appears to be a form of renewal.

By March, 1996, Bylaws had been amended with key changes that included the downsizing of the Board’s membership and the reformulation of Board ad hoc committees. These two changes afford Board members increased opportunity for participation and involvement.

(c) Strong strategic planning process in place

A panel member captures the sentiment of the majority of panel members in regard to NWREL’s Strategic Plan.

Guiding the overall management of NWREL as an institution, including the OERI portion, of their contract is the *Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Strategic Plan*, adopted by the Board of Directors in June 1996. Alfred Rasp, an independent reviewer, praised the quality of the plan. I concur with that praise and found the listing of strengths fully balanced by a listing of weaknesses. The subsequent *Strategic Plan Status Report*, dated March 26, 1999 (but received by the panel before that date), reported on accomplishments for each of the previous three fiscal years for each of the strategic initiatives (in the 1996 plan, the term “strategic initiative” was not used).

Another panel member comments on the Strategic Plan.

The Lab’s Institutional Strategic Plan is dynamic, not static: it is a working plan. The Board of Directors and Lab staff review priorities and trends as well as accomplishments. There is a follow-up Action Plan to the Board’s Self Assessment evaluation,

and annually, input from the Board of Directors is used to prepare the next/coming year's Strategic Plan.

In March, 1996, the Lab's Executive Director advised that the Strategic Plan "is to become a living document designed to guide the work of over institution in providing relevant services for our clients". It does that, and "Board leadership ensures that the Strategic Plan is used to establish Lab priorities and direction and to align and monitor Lab operations in an on-going basis". (panel member)

(d) Leveraging of funds and resources

The panel is in agreement that NWREL is aggressive and successful in leveraging funds and resources to increase impact. "With OTE I and II, NWREL has built alliances with several entities, including: corporate foundations, state departments of education, intermediate educational units, schools and school districts. School districts, in turn, utilize grants and other funding sources to access Onward to Excellence". (panel member)

"NWREL is also committed to effective use of financial and people resources across programs. Both financial and people resources are allocated across programs and activities as they are needed. In addition, staff is situated physically in the work environment to encourage collaboration across programs". (panel member)

In terms of priority setting, the board established a priority for the Lab to seek diversification in funding in order to lessen reliance on OERI and federal funding. Lab administration responded in an aggressive manner and Lab funding now includes federal, district, educational agencies, private sector, foundations, higher education, community organizations, state education agencies and professional organization sources. Two significant areas of funding increasingly are represented by revenue from the U.S. Department of Justice and Americorps. Since 1996, by my

assessment, NWREL has seen an increase of approximately 5 percent in diversification of funding sources. (panel member)

Several panel members found it difficult to separate Lab activities conducted under the OERI contract from other Lab activities; given the amount of material reviewed, a Management Analysis Chart or other document may have been overlooked.

Although establishing and maintaining partnerships and collaborative arrangements with appropriate agencies, organizations or individuals did not emerge as a key element in response to this question, it does in response to another question and the importance of such alliances is illustrated throughout this report. Capability in this area for NWREL is almost a “given”: the effectiveness of their work depends on successful alliances, in the region and nationwide.

2. and 3. Areas of needed improvement and recommendations for improvement

Key elements listed by the panel are: (a) Improve representation on the Board of Directors, (b) Strengthen staff development opportunities for professional staff and the Board of Directors, and (c) Improve within Lab sharing of products and services. Throughout this report, an “area of needed improvement” is sometimes noted by a panel member without a specific recommendation for improvement.

(a) Improve representation on the Board of Directors

A majority of panel members express concern about the composition of the Board and offer suggestions for improvement. The absence of parents and students from the Board is noted by two panel members and one panel suggests that the Lab consider adding a parent to the Board that represents a parent role group. The same panel member suggests that it may be feasible to consider student representation even on a limited but focused basis. It was suggested that the

Lab “examine Board composition to ensure that the only two groups guaranteed representation on the Board of Directors (Chief State School Officers and teachers) are adequately represented in the governance structure and assume appropriate responsibility for decision-making of the Lab.” (panel member) One panel member mentions, “it appears that the CSSO from the state of Oregon is not on board at this time”. Several panel members expressed some concern that, in all instances, the CSSOs have designated a representative to the Board, usually a Deputy Superintendent. One panel member feels that the quarterly conference call with CSSOs served may be an appropriate involvement although it limits their role in governance and their accountability.

A teacher from each state in the region is represented on the Board, however, as noted by a panel member, there is not representation on the Executive Committee which includes two representatives from higher education, one from a private foundation and one school principal.

(b) Strengthen staff development opportunities for professional staff and the Board of Directors.

NWREL has a developed policy and funds designated to support professional staff development. It was suggested that in addition, for example, to developing skill in computer/technology areas and attendance at professional conferences, attention be increased toward building a “learning community” within the Lab for professional staff. In addition to building leadership and management capacity, one panel member suggested the importance of providing opportunities to learn and grow together through higher quality in-house professional development.

That there is no “curriculum” for professionals engaged in applied R&D, out reach or

technical assistance was noted by one panel member. If NWREL were to take the lead in this needed area of development it would be useful for NWREL staff, other Labs and other role-alike organizations.

There is a need for a revised format for the orientation of new Board of Director members now that the numbers on the Board are fewer and time spent on the Board is for a determined period. This was mentioned in NWREL Board material and also offered by a member of the Board at the site visit. Two members of the Board and one panel member suggested that consideration be given to on-going Board training for all Board members.

(c) Improve with-in Lab sharing of products and services

The panel is aware of many examples of successful collaboration across Centers and Programs. Two examples indicate the need to continually examine initiatives to ensure that programs and products developed in one area are used in other areas when appropriate.

One panelist discusses the need to increase coordination between School Improvement and Assessment personnel. Specifically, the discussion addresses what appears to be the parallel development of products in the two Programs that focus on the use of school profiling. The panel member suggests that use of the Informational Planner (Assessment) in the OTE effort (School Improvement) has great potential.

A second example speaks to the need for internal communication between the two Programs.

The Assessment program has developed the Six Trait Reading Assessment based on a model of writing assessment that has proven to be of great use throughout the northwest and across the United States. The Six Trait Reading Assessment model is based on sound research, best practices and is proving highly successfully in its pilot sites. The School Improvement unit

through OTE encourages adoption of instructional models based on sound research and best practice. When asked about the use or recommended use of the traits writing or reading assessment model in OTE, focus group participants indicated little awareness of the availability or success of such models. (panel member)

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

Two broad key elements were identified by the panel: (a) self-monitoring and external assessment systems are in place, and (b) quality assurance processes are in place.

(a) Self-monitoring and external assessment systems

There is agreement that NWREL uses many mechanisms to obtain internal and external assessments of their work. Examples of internal oversight and evaluation include the following.

- Standing monthly meetings of Program/Center Directors and of management staff serve to monitor staff use of feedback from evaluations and to respond to user needs and requests.
- The Strategic Plan's annual updates are shaped by the Board of Directors and by users and public input.
- Specific NWREL Programs undertake studies and evaluations. One example is a rigorous evaluation conducted of the Onward to Excellence (OTE) Program in 33 schools in Mississippi.

Several examples of external assessments are offered.

- A biennial survey of the public and school personnel is cited as an important effort. Northwest Trends Shaping Education: The 1997 Regional Education Needs Assessment: In addition to information about the region as a "unit", a major section for each of the five states served is included as well as a section that presents and discusses implications for work at NWREL. A series of seven state Forums on educational needs that involved 245 individuals in 1997 further informed the needs assessment process as did a household telephone survey conducted by Gilmore Research under contract to NWREL. Beyond needs determination, these efforts in

combination are part of a process to determine the level of awareness and use of products and services.

- Panel members offer positive comment on NWREL’s annual Institutional Evaluation “that gives, in essence, a quick status report on Lab operations and accomplishments.” (panel member) Although this type of evaluation is not required by contract, the Lab conducted external evaluations to gain additional feedback.
- Professional Activity Reporting System (PARS) is one of the primary means of self-monitoring at NWREL and is designed to track the “number and the nature” of contacts and services provided to clients.
- Other in-place mechanisms offered by two or more panel members are the records of the amount of publications sold and the number of “hits” on the NWREL web site.

(b) Quality Assurance processes in place

NWREL has a well developed three level standardized system in place to assure quality of products and services. One example is offered: “Quality assurance is well developed and comprehensively addressed in the ‘Classroom Assessment of Reading’ initiative; in Partnership Development; in Assessment Tasks and Tools; in the synthesis of reading assessment strategies in the Workbook; in the video and in training activities”. (panel member)

2. and 3. Areas of Needed Improvement and Recommendations

Two key elements: (a) Improve methodologies employed for self-monitoring, including improving response rates, follow-up procedures, and collection of comparative data and (b) Use of report findings from “NWREL Commissioned Studies” is not always clearly documented.

(a) Improve methodologies for self-monitoring

Panelists suggest areas where improvement could be improved. For example, “with a modest amount of additional effort” by “increasing the response rate (where the response rates were low, there was no indication of any additional effort to increase the rate); ensuring

representative samples as opposed to samples where clients are more likely to be favorable (collecting data only from clients requesting two or more products leaves out clients who may have been less satisfied and therefore did not request another product; and, including the collection of anonymous data, especially where that might produce more forthright answers”. Additional specific recommendations that address these concerns can be found in individual reports. They are summarized by one panel member. “Use more rigorous evaluation designs, striving for unbiased, representative samples. Follow up with non-responders to try to increase return rates, (e.g., PARS, 1998). This could be as simple as sending out another questionnaire to non-responders. Consider using incentives for responders.” Another panel member suggests that “it would be helpful to the Lab to identify key issues that it wished to collect from all respondents.” This would enable NWREL to make comparisons in responses.

Most panel members would like to see the Lab elicit constituent “concerns” as well as “compliments” (PARS, 1998). In pre-site meeting materials (Quarterly Reports, Board of Director Minutes) the need to increase “candor” appears. (February 1998 NWREL Board Post Self-Assessment). These are not easy issues for federally funded organizations and appear to be unresolved at NWREL. If evaluations and reports are grounded in improved methodology and open discussion, findings can be used with a high level of confidence.

The OTE evaluation carried out in Mississippi is an example of the need to improve the reporting of findings to avoid confusion. This concern was discussed on site and is described in one panel member’s report.

(b) Use of report findings from “NWREL Commissioned Studies” is not always clearly documented.

It is not always clear that findings from commissioned studies are used to improve self-monitoring processes. One panelist recommends that NWREL “consider strategies for formally reporting actions taken (or not taken) on the findings in independent studies and evaluation reports...” Another panelist states that, “it was often not clear to me how or whether an issue identified from feedback would be addressed”, and several panelists recommend that the reporting system track and reflect responses to feedback from such studies.

III. Quality

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

1. Strengths

Almost all panel members agree that “the planning, development and implementation of high quality products and services is, without a doubt, one of the hallmarks in this Lab’s long history of providing educational services in its region and throughout the country”.

Individual’s reports discuss a wide range of indicators and examples tied to “Quality”, from connections across the work of Programs and Centers, to the use of current technology, to Lab staff presentations and publications, to external awards. The panel identified three key elements to highlight “Strengths” in this category and one area that could be improved.

(a) NWREL uses external panels and peer review

There is evidence that both Signature Works, Trait Based Assessment for Reading and OTE II, use independent critiques in the development and operation of their programs: expert

consultants, external reviews, Advisory Groups. Both Programs use the well developed Quality Assurance system of editorial review and R & D review for all aspects of product/service development and implementation. Products and services appear to use reviewer feedback to refine products and services. These two programs are used as examples because the panel had a chance to learn about them in considerable depth through materials and the site visit interactions.

It should be mentioned that prior to dissemination, other steps come in to play to test for quality: internal reviews, pilot tests, follow up surveys, and consultations with target audiences, and unsolicited comments from users.

(b) Conducts action research in real-world applied settings

It is considered significant that NWREL's product and service development "involves action research in the field and staff work at the grassroots level – classroom, school, school district. NWREL consistently demonstrated a heavy, in-person involvement in research and development of products at the sources of intended implementation." (panel member) Examples are given particularly for the development of the Trait-Based Reading Assessment. The chief developer of OTE II also indicated that OTE I and II were informed by Lab staff working in schools and school districts. And, in regard to the Information Planner software, the chief developer "discussed his work with middle school staff and administrators, in research and development of the product". (panel member)

(c) High quality products and services as indicated by users

The panel agrees almost unanimously that the Lab's attention to developing high quality products and services exceeds expectations. "It has generated a reputation for being prolific in

developing high profile products and services that are in demand at both the regional and national levels.” (panel member)

Indications of user satisfaction with the quality of NWREL’s products and services are woven throughout individual panel member reports and this synthesis report. Many examples are of small sample surveys or from small groups of teachers, administrators or trainers affiliated with a specific Program.

2. and 3. Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

Key element: (a) Expand products and services to engage broader audiences (e.g., more community members, more teachers, non-English speakers).

This concern emerges in several sections of panel members’ individual reports: “how to ensure the appropriateness of products and services for users from different backgrounds and perspectives”.

NWREL serves multiple users representative of multiple languages, ethnicities and governmental structures. Because of the great contrast in “what works” and what is appropriate with each of the groups, NWREL should continue to address how to ensure the appropriateness of its products and services. Likely NWREL is the REL with the greatest challenge in this area as it services urban, suburban, rural, and nation-states. NWREL may make a major contribution by determining in what ways modifications must be made in products and services to address the needs of all its clients. NWREL may even determine that all products and services are not appropriate for all clients. (panel member)

IV. Utility

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

1. Strengths

(a) Products and services are used regionally and nationally and (b) NWREL uses data to improve products and services (key elements).

(a) From a peer reviewer: “NWREL proudly and appropriately cites statistics indicating great use of and many requests for products and services”. Panel members reviewed six reports related to this question before the site visit, including: “NWREL Services Activity Report”; “NWREL Marketing Report”; “1997 Program Satisfaction Survey”.

Products and services are based on regional and in several cases, on nationwide need. Information to the panel included data on “time in market”, sales and revenues generated by products for items such as research reports, and guides, instructional materials, policy papers, handbooks and synthesis papers. NWREL measures and documents measurement of usefulness of products and services to customers.

Two panel members point out that numbers are sometimes impressive, for example, 100,000 copies of “Effective School Practice” have been distributed. A GAO study found that OTE was the school change resource most familiar to schools.

Two signature works, Trait-Based Reading Assessment and OTE II provided considerable program materials prior to the site visit and during the site visit. On site, panelists spent significant time hearing from and interacting with staff, clients and/or trainers from these Programs.

Because these Programs illustrate processes of the work carried out by a signature work

and because panel members became knowledgeable about these Programs, they are often used in individual reports to respond to these “Utility” questions: IV. A and IV. B.

Broad statements summarize examples of panel members reactions/evaluation to the two signature works reviewed in depth.

- Both Programs conduct active and appropriate out-reach and marketing activities within the region and in the case of OTE, also nationwide. For both Programs needs sensing processes resulting from previous work in the field has importantly contributed to building a client base.
- In both Programs, staff have established an impressive rapport with their users and/or trainers that facilitates open and on-going communication. The relationship can also provide new opportunities for clients to consider the use of Lab products and services.
- Services and products are designed to be user-friendly, and consideration is given to the resources, such as technology, available to teachers, trainers, principals. In one instance, teachers have requested that the student materials be more user-friendly in the Trait-Based Reading Assessment Program and that change is underway.
- Clearly NWREL’s products and services in these two Programs have practical application in classrooms, schools, districts and there is ample evidence that they are being used.
- Product and service materials and interactions are available through several modes, for example: print, web sites, videos, CD ROMS, and in-person workshops.
- The long use of NWREL products and process (Trait Based Writing and OTE) testifies to their utility. All representatives – trainers, teacher users, other clients – involved with the two signature works had great commitment to NWREL products, services, and staff. “Where NWREL products are working they are working very well. Further, NWREL has documented that approximately half of its clients are repeat users”. (panel member)
- NWREL uses data to improve and expand use of products and services. Examples of revisions in products and delivery of services in response to user data are readily available with OTE and other products.
- Staff members involved in the research and development of signature and other works appear to be highly qualified and capable of producing products that are useful to clients”. (panel member)

2. Area of needed improvement

(a) A single key element is offered by the panel. There is a low involvement of institutions of higher education in the use of products and services. One panelist states it this way.

While products and services are widely used throughout the region and by a variety of client groups, it appears that institutions of higher education (IHEs) are minimally involved in using the products and services offered by the Lab. As one of the key (perhaps even critical) ingredients necessary to implement systemic school change in the region, it is puzzling that the teacher education institutions have what appears to be minimal involvement in Lab efforts toward school change.

Although there are no specific recommendations for this concern, panel members suggest: (1) Lab staff and Board might review professional development possibilities for pre-service and practicing teachers; and (2) with regard to “school change”, the Lab might consider whether more active involvement of IHEs would enhance Lab work in this area.

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

1. Strengths

NWREL continuously focuses on current and future needs. A number of methods used have been discussed earlier in this report that determine and support customer needs: needs sensing; policy development; planning mechanisms; an in-place system for materials and service; development and delivery. These several methods undergird sales, provision of training, research and development.

(a) Listed here are examples that panel members consider important that have not been previously cited in this report. They include examples of several ways NWREL uses feedback from customers.

- Each state in the region NWREL serves is assigned a Lab staff member as their State Liaison. Reports provided by the State Liaisons in Quarterly Reports indicate that they are close to the issues, the educators, and the state agencies in the states served. They spend “as much time in the field as possible”, including time in schools and classrooms.
- When the Board of Directors restructured their Committees during this contract period, an External Relations Committee was formed that appears to be making a positive difference by impacting clients through forums and conferences and by increasing awareness of Lab services. Several strategies support external communication goals that build relationships with new and expanded client groups.
- Scope of this topic is indicated in numbers served. NWREL states that 10,727 individuals from schools and school districts took part in workshops, consultations and conferences in FY 98. This approach to receiving and using feedback from “in-person” customers is impressive.
- The publication and videos, “It’s Just Good Teaching” used significant customer feedback during the R & D stage.

This short list does not do justice to the many ways NWREL uses feedback from customers but it gives a sense of the process.

Two examples from the signature works conclude response to this question: (1) “modifications of OTE were noted by Focus Group members that they believed had come about in response to their feedback” (panel member), and (2) from another panel member; “The Laboratory develops and pilot tests its products in real school settings (e.g., the Trait Based Reading Assessment model), thus enhancing the likelihood that the products will be useful to teachers and other educators”.

2. Area of needed improvement

One area is listed as a key element by the panel.

(a) Expand efforts to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate products and services to widen the customer base. The panel members understand that one way this work is underway is the translation of products and services into Spanish.

V. Outcomes and Impact

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

1. Strength

(a) Peer reviewers agree that products and services are focused on student success.

NWREL's products and services are intended and designed to improve student achievement: the Lab is "about improving student achievement". The impact of what can be called general services, and also spread and use of products, are measured with regard to client and student success by means described earlier in this report: Professional Activity Reporting System (PARS), the Gilmore Research Group survey. Results of these "self-report" surveys indicate that the Lab contributes somewhat to improved student success. Thirty percent of clients report that "student performance was positively effected" to a high of 82 percent for "new skills and/or knowledge acquired". Given the numbers of clients served, the number in these surveys is modest.

As part of the "Program Satisfaction Survey Report" a "Summary of NWREL's Impact" is listed.

- 1) NWREL serves a large number of people from a wide range of organizations serving public education
- 2) NWREL provides a variety of services to meet client's needs
- 3) NWREL is well known by educators
- 4) NWREL services have a positive impact on practices
- 5) NWREL's assistance is valued by policy makers and other service providers

Number four, "positive impact on practice" implies that there is also a positive (or other) impact on students.

A panel member reports; “Consideration must be given to the fact that there are many variables over which the Lab has no control, particularly since it does not provide direct services to students”. In the “1998 Annual Report of Institutional Performance”, NWREL states it this way. “NWREL may provide interventions at any or all steps in this continuum (path to improved student outcomes), depending on a client’s needs, resources and interests. In most cases, NWREL services are requested to facilitate just one step in the improvement process, so attempts to measure NWREL’s impact on the ultimate goal (improved student outcomes) is not realistic or feasible”.

Nevertheless, specific examples of improved student achievement may be correlated with use of products and services, for examples, OTE I and II, Six-Trait Writing Assessment, some other products. One panel member writes; “There are some case studies that show substantial student success, largely because of OTE Laboratory assistance (e.g., Bruce Mississippi schools, Snoqualmie Valley School District, Glenfair Elementary School). Some of the studies include data collected over several years”.

Another panel member writes that, “the Mississippi Weyerhaeuser/NWREL sites for OTE and OTE II lack significant documentation in the materials provided to assume that the fifteen-year-old OTE project has made substantial improvements in student achievement. Rather, a case can be made for an improved research design so as to ensure that any gains made using either OTE I or OTE II are substantiated within an accepted design framework”.

The panel agrees that improved student success is important to a Lab’s work and further agrees that the influence of a Lab’s contribution to improved student success although difficult to determine, needs more work. “A great deal more work needs to be done in this entire area – by everyone, not just NWREL...” (panel member)

2. and 3. Areas of Needed Improvement and Recommendations

Recommendations provided by NWREL entitled “Areas for Improvement in Assessing Impact” indicate staff awareness of identified areas in need of improvement that together, can contribute to student success. The Lab states its intent to: (1) create a means for assessing the understanding of the Lab as an institution. (2) Broaden surveys designed to determine knowledge acquisition and use of services to include community and other groups. (3) Increase evaluations of individual programs and projects. (4) Compile and make public more rich stories from participants in Lab work.

Another effort under way at NWREL that addresses “strengthening Evaluation of NWREL Work” concludes the 1998 “Institutional Evaluation Report”. The federal government has established performance standards for its major domestic programs, including the RELs. The objectives of these standards in contributing to the Department of Education’s goals are three in number for the RELs. The first goal is pertinent here: “To develop policies, strategies, and/or models of comprehensive, effective reform that are used to assist states and local school districts as they implement programs in which all students achieve at high levels and/or in which emerging theories of teaching and learning are continually assessed and validated”.

NWREL has been developing designs to more directly address indicators connected to outcomes and impact. “Both the R&D program and technical center directors have met on a regular basis to create evaluation strategies responsive to the new standards”. (Institutional Evaluation Report, 1998) It would seem that there is a need to increase specifically focused evaluation activities. The report states that studies based on strategies and designs that address the Standards outcomes and impact are underway, with the results of the various outcome measures becoming available in FY 99. The panel assumes, based on this information that this

contractual obligation is on track.

The panel agreed on one key element: (a) NWREL should encourage and support users of products and services to collect and analyze student achievement data.

(a) “Encourage” as used here also means “enable”: through expert assistance; through NWREL and/or other finances or arrangements with a district or state agency; through teacher and other LEA training in evaluation processes. From a panel member, “While NWREL may not have the resources to conduct multiple, in-depth studies of the impact of its products and services on student achievement, it is critical that such data be made available. Products such as OTE II represent large investments of time, expertise and resources. The fact that OTE appears to make a difference in student achievement under certain conditions is positive. However, the value of OTE over time will depend on its consistent improvement of student achievement”.

There is a need (for NWREL staff and implementing staff) to increase an understanding of the factors that make for successful implementation that positively impact student achievement. “Increased student achievement is not consistently realized by implementation of NWREL products and services, such as OTE I and II and the Six Traits Writing Assessment. NWREL should identify those factors that are precursors to successful implementation to increase student achievement”.

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

Panel members highlight two key elements to this question and believe that NWREL is meeting expectations in their assistance to comprehensive school improvement implementation. Examples of favorable comments from the panel: (1) “NWREL’s presence in comprehensive school improvement efforts throughout the United States is exemplary” and (2) “In the school

renewal area, the NWREL has established a good reputation both in the region and nationally”.

1. Strength

(a) Key element: NWREL comprehensive reform work is extensive and accessible.

NWREL’s careful attention to the aspects of managing a complex organization support and enable this area of work in educational reform to be successful. To recap a few of the “basics”: staff at every level is hardworking and capable; the Board of Directors has been “renewed”, reinvigorated, refocused during this contract period; planning processes are in place to ensure Quality and Utility; institutional planning includes strategies for action; and, needs sensing is taken seriously. These fundamentals of NWREL’s infrastructure underpin successful results. Three programs serve as examples.

- A major assistance effort is the Lab’s involvement with the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program, which “provides funds to help schools adopt effective, research-based comprehensive school reform models that will help all students reach high standards.” Funds are provided to SEAs who then award competitive grants to local school districts. The Lab appears to be providing valuable assistance to SEAs and LEAs that will enable these entities to “get started.” Assistance includes providing information on school change models, and working with states and school districts as they engage in the process of selecting and implementing models. Assistance from the Lab has enabled the five states in its region to accomplish many of the tasks necessary to acquire funding under CSRD. (panel member)

Both signature works (OTE and Trait-Based Reading Assessment) have an exemplary presence in comprehensive school reform efforts in the region and nationwide. “Products and services to support school reform are developed with the intent of scaling up” (panel member). The managers and other staff of these programs have built strategies in to early and on-going planning that promote “scaling up” and “putting the pieces together”.

Other Lab initiatives contribute to the success of the implementation of comprehensive school improvement strategies, for example: “NWREL sponsors state and regional forums to inform and provide dialogue concerning issues related to comprehensive school reform” (panel member); the Lab maintains support to school sites through the stages of implementation and follow-up. “The Lab provides focus to school efforts to employ best practices; for example, it makes available literature reviews as well as booklets designed to enhance a best-practice approach. (panel member)

Panel members found the volume of work conducted by NWREL impressive.

In FY 97 the Laboratory had about 220 formal contracts with schools, districts, educational agencies, and communities. The Laboratory as a whole conducted 3,057 activities in which 25,419 individuals participated (approximately 13, 1000 were teachers or other local school staff). There were several reports of clients citing the Laboratory as being instrumental in getting them to implement their comprehensive school improvement efforts. (panel member)

(b) High potential exists for policy impact given the makeup of the Board and NWREL’s presence at every level in the region.

State and regional forums sponsored by NWREL serve also to impact policy. In addition, “NWREL staff has testified in hearings before the Oregon legislature and has had requests to make materials available for distribution to the U.S. Congress”. (panel member)

2. and 3. Areas of Needed Improvement and Recommendations for Improvement

Two key elements are offered: (a) Increase outreach and scaling-up efforts for school renewal, and (b) Identify ways to sustain momentum when project funding (from NWREL) is completed.

(a) A primary concern here in regard to increasing outreach and scaling up, is the need

for all technical assistance and dissemination organizations to increase efforts in reaching educators, parents, students who are difficult to reach, as partners in their research, development and dissemination work. NWREL has the resources and the experience to tackle this issue and to “inform others wrestling with this issue”.

What is not clear is the extent to which the lab has been able to reach out to schools not interested in change initiatives. Have the proposed attempts to reach out to such schools been successful and if so, is the lab providing the assistance needed? If attempts have been made and were not successful, is there any documented evidence regarding the resistance to change that might inform others who are trying to reach the hard-to-reach? Such “lessons learned” would be valuable to other institutions trying to effect institutional school change. (panel member)

(b) Sustaining momentum when NWREL project staff are no longer available to provide direct assistance

OTE focus group interviewers indicated that the loss of such support is a major challenge to successful implementation. The Lab has started to identify strategies to sustain momentum, for example, web pages are being developed to provide support. “Additional strategies may contribute significantly to ‘putting the pieces together and scaling up’”.

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

School Change Processes is NWREL’s national specialty area. This Lab, during the past 15 years, has established a regional and national reputation in its specialty area: in development, research and dissemination. During this contract period, three strands of work have been undertaken: “(1) consolidating and disseminating knowledge, (2) promoting and facilitating collaborative action, and (3) facilitating comprehensive school reform under the Obey-Porter

legislation”.

Panel members agree that three key elements are “strengths” in the specialty area and offer supporting examples.

- 1) NWREL has cooperative arrangements with other agencies.
- 2) Publications are in appropriate journals for dissemination of specialty area products.
- 3) NWREL has a strong presence at local, regional and national levels in the specialty area.

Although OTE (Onward to Excellence II: A Systemic Reform) is not the specialty area, the work of this program is integral to the specialty area work. In efforts to enhance this long-term project as well as minimize duplication, a partnership was formed through the national specialty with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). This partnership has resulted in three conferences (1996 – 1998); result of the conferences has been the consolidation of knowledge around systemic school reform proceedings and related publications have been widely disseminated.

NWREL staff have been involved in regional and national conferences as managers, organizers, presenters, writers and facilitators during this contract period.

Listings of additional publications in the specialty area, including web site text were given the panel members. The inventory is significant and the dissemination is well tracked. Distribution is nationwide as well as regional, and numbers in the thousands. An example of NWREL’s national presence may be noted in the publication by ASCD of a NWREL developed synthesis on research-based effective school improvement strategies. “NWREL should be pleased with its accomplishments in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area”. (panel member)

The panel offers one recommendation for the specialty area: intensify efforts to collaborate and enter joint ventures with other Labs and other relevant entities.

Major challenges to NWREL come in terms of its ability to provide leadership in comprehensive school improvement during a time of quite rapidly changing educational priorities. “In the case of the charter school movement, NWREL demonstrated its alertness to respond to emerging issues and its willingness to take a leadership role in that response”. (panel member)

NWREL should reach out even more aggressively to the Laboratory Network Program, the alliance of seven Labs working with NWREL on this specialty area, and deans of the colleges of education in the northwest. Broader and deeper collaborative arrangements should be encouraged and facilitated over the next two years.

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

There is panel agreement that NWREL is meeting or exceeding expectations in accomplishing the goals and objectives of its OERI contract. Concern was expressed that the policy agenda of the RFP that shapes REL work does not require significant involvement of “true stakeholders”, particularly in Labs’ governance processes.

NWREL is known for the high quality of its programs, products and services and for the integration or combination of these components to serve educators.

NWREL is a strong REL that has operated effectively since 1966 and has an exemplary track record. Panel members appreciated that the Director and staff provided answers to probing questions with “candor and openness” (panel member).

We were invited to ask for more information if we believed it would help us in our

evaluation. When members did request information, it was given in a timely manner and in a useful format. The panel appreciates the intelligence, time, energy and thoughtfulness of the NWREL staff that resulted in materials, presentations and discussions prior to and during the week-long visit.

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

“Will the work we do benefit children in the classroom?” This quote from NWREL’s very capable Director illustrates the Lab’s organizational perspective on educational service and improvement. NWREL has an outstanding Director and a highly qualified staff dedicated to the development, production and use of excellent resource-based products and services. Its reconfigured governance board is strong, hard working and committed to NWREL’s present and future.

Nineteen specific strengths and thirteen areas to consider for possible improvement are illustrated in the six individual papers. Based on review of the advance and on-site materials, on-site presentations, interviews and discussions, the following ideas are offered to indicate broad areas. The ideas do not add up to a comprehensive list.

Program planning and management are definitely among NWREL’s many strengths. The structures and processes used to guide planning and operational decisions have been reviewed and refined during this contract period, and include needs assessments, implementation plans, advisory committees, monitoring and evaluation. Significant attention is paid to the effective and efficient management of the Lab’s financial and accounting strategies. NWREL’s Quality Assurance process addresses the research and development of services as well as products. The

Board of Directors has been involved in external assessments of the Lab's operation during this contract period. NWREL's efforts to collect data from users and others is extensive.

NWREL is developing high quality products and services. The Lab uses external panels, expert panels and consultants and peer review in this R & D area; it conducts action research in "real-world" settings; and it develops high quality products and services as indicated by users. Products and services of the Lab are used regionally and nationally and data and other feedback from users shapes the improvement of products and services.

The products and services of NWREL are intended to improve student success. This is especially true where NWREL's engagement runs through several stages of school improvement at implementation sites – from program selection, staff training, implementation, evaluation, etc. Work at such sites, in the two signature works reviewed, is grounded in documented rationale that indicates that the work is likely to have an impact on student success.

The Lab does a fine job of contributing to the increase of knowledge and understanding of educational problems, issues and effective strategies in the region and nationwide through publications, presentations, its website and training workshops.

It is clear that NWREL can, and does assist states and LEAs to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies. Given the makeup of the Board of Directors and the Lab's presence at every level in the region, there is a high potential to impact policy. That the comprehensive reform work is extensive and accessible is important.

The Lab's specialty area during this contract is school change processes. In a real sense, this has been the focus of all Lab work since they began in the mid 60's. At NWREL, the means put forth for school change, for example, has centered around certain behaviorist theory based programs/movements, competency-based education and the effective schools movement. The

following indicate progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in the specialty area. Individuals, agencies and organizations look to NWREL for expertise in its specialty area; Lab staff make invited presentations at major conferences in the specialty area; and the Lab disseminates specialty area products and services outside of the region, especially for OTE II. In its specialty area initiative NWREL has cooperative arrangements with other agencies, especially other Labs; NWREL publishes in appropriate journals for dissemination of its specialty area products.

Areas to review and consider for improvement the following.

- Consider including a teacher on the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors and parents and students on the Board.
- Increase the options for in-house staff development for professional staff.
- Improve within-Lab sharing of products and services.
- Improve methodologies used for self monitoring (response rates, follow-up procedures, collection of comparative data).
- Clearly document/track use of external report findings from commissioned studies.
- In regard to gathering information from users, “NWREL may benefit from not only collecting data but in listening and responding to the data from its clients and others” (panel member).
- Expand services and products to engage broader audiences. Audiences here means, for example, educators/parents where schools are based on other than behaviorist based learning programs, or other theory based programs, for example, constructivist based programs. “Audience” also includes community members, teachers, non-English speakers.
- It is suggested that it might be possible to expand efforts to provide more culturally and linguistically appropriate products and services.
- The suggestion of expanding services to engage a broader audience connects to one panel member’s hope that NWREL could begin, before this contract’s conclusion, a “brand new” R & D initiative. “Brand new” means a widening of NWREL’s portfolio of school change improvement possibilities in terms of a learning theory foundation. This work may be underway. The panel’s review of “other products and services” and

the presentation on the Charter School movement as well as “It’s Just Good Teaching” suggest this possibility.

- Panel members have a concern that the Lab increase their affiliation with faculty of regional colleges and universities.

My primary concerns are with the recognition that teachers and administrators now being prepared in our colleges and universities do not have either enough information about Laboratories or Laboratory programs or close enough ties to Laboratories to make good use of this resource. I would urge that both the individual Laboratories and the OERI make greater provision for inclusion of colleges and universities in Laboratory planning, program development, and dissemination (panel member).

- In terms of work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites, the Lab and panel are in agreement that there is a need to “increase evaluations of individual programs and projects” (Lab document). The panel also suggests that NWREL continue to engage, train, and support users of products and services to collect and analyze student achievement data.
- The panel suggests that NWREL consider strategies and assist schools and districts implementing comprehensive school improvement efforts to (1) develop outreach capability, by school, to “scale-up” school renewal in a region; and (2) identify ways to sustain momentum when project funding is completed.
- In regard to NWREL’s specialty area, the panel recommends that the Lab intensify efforts to collaborate with other Labs and organizations around research development, and outreach activities that are focused on school change processes.
- A panel member sums it up: “You don’t have to be broken to get better. NWREL does much well and should strive to become better and better at its goals. NWREL may well lead the way in acting as a catalyst for ‘scaling up’ and ‘putting the pieces together’ in comprehensive school improvement throughout the United States. The Lab is positioned to invite other Labs, agencies and institutions of higher education to join with it in collaborative efforts in comprehensive school reform.”