

Archived Information

RESPONSE OF THE NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY TO THE INTERIM EVALUATION SYNTHESIS REPORT

We are pleased that the Evaluation Panel finds that the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) has met its contractual obligations and identifies 19 specific strengths related to our governing board, staff, planning and management, quality of services and products, contribution to knowledge and understanding of education improvement, assistance to state and local education agencies, and regional and national reputation. In this response to the Panel's Synthesis Report, we:

1. Concur with the major points and conclusions
2. Respond to recommendations for improvement
3. Present clarifying information on some statements
4. Correct a few minor points of fact

Concurrence with Major Points and Conclusions

From evidence derived from NWREL operational documents, products, and interviews with Board members, staff, collaborators in other agencies, and clients, the Panel identified the following as strengths of the Laboratory and we heartily concur with their conclusions:

- NWREL has an outstanding Director and a highly qualified staff dedicated to the development, production and use of excellent resource-based products and services (we believe the Panel meant to say research-based products and services).
- Its reconfigured governance board is strong, hard working and committed to NWREL's present and future.
- Program planning and management are definitely among NWREL's many strengths.
- 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.
- NWREL's efforts to collect data from users and others is extensive.
- NWREL is developing high quality products and services.

- The products and services of NWREL are intended to improve 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.
- NWREL can and does assist states and LEAs to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies.
- Individuals, agencies, and organizations look to NWREL for expertise in its specialty area.

Response to Recommendations for Improvement

The panel identifies several areas for NWREL to consider improvement. These improvements are not to remedy deficiencies, but to achieve higher levels of effectiveness and productivity, increasing assistance to a larger number of people and schools, as well as clients with specific needs. In most cases, NWREL has already identified these needs and improvement efforts are already underway. Examples include:

1. Revise the format for orientation of new Board of Directors members: This need was identified earlier in a self-assessment of the Board. Examples of steps already being taken are to pair an experienced Board member with each new Board member as a “mentor,” and organizing a center and program “fair” for Board members to meet with staff of individual NWREL units at pre-Board meeting sessions.

2. Expert services and products to engage broader audiences, including more culturally and linguistically appropriate products and services: An initial activity to develop Spanish editions of seven NWREL products has been completed; Spanish language home pages and translated materials for parents are posted on the NWREL Web site; and development of new student mentoring resources is underway in recognition of the region’s rapidly growing Hispanic population. Additional materials are being developed for parents and information about them is increasingly being disseminated both in print on the NWREL Web site. Clients and collaborators are being identified in

relations to new areas of NWREL work in safe learning environments and community-based services.

3. Increase Lab affiliation with faculty of regional colleges and universities:

Faculty of colleges and universities have long been important partners in NWREL work in several ways--membership on the Board and advisory committees, quality reviews of NWREL materials, participation on design and development teams, and presenters at NWREL conferences. More recently, NWREL has taken leadership in organizing activities for faculty to plan and improve their own preservice and inservice programs, such as convening faculty across the region on the topic of integration of technology in curriculum. NWREL staff are increasingly participants in higher education-organized activities, such as the University of Washington-lead college teacher preparation consortium on contextual learning.

4. Increase evaluation of individual programs and products at intensive

implementation sites: NWREL is increasing its assistance to school community sites to collect and analyze student achievement data.

5. Intensify efforts to collaborate with Labs and organizations around research

and development activities that are focused on school change processes: Two examples underway are: (1) OERI and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) will be additional sponsors for the annual forum on school change and (2) several laboratories are conducting trials in their regions of school change resources being developed collaboratively. Also, NWREL has proposed that selected laboratories become regional centers for delivery of training and technical assistance to schools in implementing the Onward to Excellence (OTE) school improvement process.

6. 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, such as partners in their research, development, and dissemination work: NWREL has greatly expanded partnerships with both local schools and communities (currently 54 distinct partnerships) and joint ventures with other service providers at the state, regional, and national levels.

7. Concern was expressed that the policy agenda of the RFP that shapes REL work does not require significant involvement of 'true stakeholders' particularly the Labs' governance process (page 28): We feel that such a concern is not germane to the review of NWREL.

Presentation of Clarifying Information on Some Statements

1. 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 (page 7).

Obtaining additional resources to support activities that are consistent with the NWREL mission and complement work supported by the OERI contract is a purposeful and successful strategy pursued by Board policy. The result is increased productivity, products, and services, and impact on educational improvement.

The panel report notes (at pages 2-3) that NWREL's training and technical assistance work is administered by seven centers and its research and development work by five program units. It was pointed out to the panel that the five programs and one center (mathematics and science education) have primary support from the OERI contract; the other six centers are supported primarily from other funds. In addition,

OERI Tasks 1,3,4,5, and 6 are administered by NWREL Institutional Support units: the Executive Office, Planning and Program Development, and Development and Communications. NWREL provided the panel an Analysis Chart showing funding sources for each center and program unit, as well as center/program portfolios describing work within each unit. Further, all materials (products and publications) provided to the panel were supported by OERI resources.

2. The panel noted the absence of parents and students from the Board and suggested adding them (page 7).

Oregon law prohibits minors from serving on corporate boards. Both students and parents serve on NWREL program advisory committees to guide programmatic direction, and review NWREL materials to provide input for improvement.

3. NWREL has a developed policy and funds designated to support professional staff development. In addition 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...providing opportunities to learn and grow together through higher quality in-house professional development (is important) (page 5).

The panel was provided a list of professional development activities, with the cost for each. These activities were primarily inhouse skill building activities and professional conference attendance, plus individual academic coursework. In addition to these “cost item activities,” many opportunities are provided for staff to participate in professional development, including creating a learning community within the Lab.

Through NWREL's work in its school change specialty area, in particular, the staff recognizes and promotes the importance of schools becoming learning communities for education personnel. NWREL is committed to "walk the talk" within its own organization. Examples include regular meetings of: (1) the leadership of research and development programs on topics such as "what are effective R&D processes" or "how do we achieve quality assurance," (2) role groups such as NWREL evaluation specialists, and (3) staff working in content areas across units, such as in reading.

4. Continually examine initiatives to ensure that programs and products developed in one area are used in other areas when appropriate. There appears to be the parallel development of products in two programs that focus on school profiling. The Information Planner (Assessment) and the OTE effort (school improvement) has great potential. When asked about the use of (NWREL's) traits writing and reading assessment model in OTE, focus groups participants indicated little awareness of the availability or success of such models (pages 9-10).

Cross-unit collaborative work is a NWREL priority. Development of the Information Planner has involved 1 ½ years of joint meetings of the profiling, information planner, and data disaggregation teams. The effective schooling practices that are the basis for the Information Planner were identified by the School Improvement Program staff in its work to synthesize research on effective schooling practices.

While NWREL's writing/reading assessment model and OTE have been developed at different school sites, work is now underway to design a school reform model that incorporates both these and other NWREL products.

5. With regard to the improvement of self-monitoring processes (pages 11-12), we concur that potential non-response bias of client and constituent surveys are a perennial challenge. We are quite confident with the “candor” of our respondents, who for the last 21 years have been at times very “forthright” in expressing their concerns. We will continue our efforts to further increase the utility of this information.

6. It is not always clear that findings from commissioned studies are used to improve self-monitoring processes...consider strategies (reporting system track) for formally reporting actions taken (page 13).

NWREL gives careful consideration to every recommendation of every study it commissions, particularly through analysis and discussions of its management team (Executive Cabinet). For example, recommendations of a panel convened to examine NWREL’s needs assessment and institutional evaluation processes resulted in recommending integrating the two processes that were being carried out in different NWREL units. These recommendations were fully implemented, and the results are clearly evident in NWREL’s 1998 Institutional Evaluation Report.

NWREL has not, however, implemented a “reporting system track” to create a “paper trail” for formally reporting actions taken to incorporate recommendations.

Correction of a Few Minor Points of Fact

1. “In the thirty-three years of its existence, the NWREL has had three Executive Directors and three Board Chairs” (page 2).

The Chair is elected annually by all members of the Board. The first two Board Chairs--Dr. George Brain, Dean of Education at Washington State University, and Dr. Barney Parker, Superintendent of the Boise School District (Idaho)--each served as Board

Chair for a period of 15 consecutive years. In 1995, the first year of the Laboratory's current five-year contract, the Board amended its Bylaws to provide that the Chair and other officers of the Board are limited to serving three years. Serving as Chair since that time have been Jacob Block, Superintendent of Polson School District (Montana), two years; Dr. Robert Everhart, Dean of Education, Portland State University (one year); and Dr. Don Robson, Dean of Education, University of Montana (one year).

2. "...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. . .It appears that the CCSSO from the state of Oregon is not board at this time. . .A teacher from each state in the region is represented on the Board; however, there is not representation on the Executive Committee which includes two representatives from higher education, one from a private foundation, and one school principal" (page 8).

NWREL's corporate Bylaws provide that in addition to Board members elected by Laboratory institutional members:

- The chief state school officer from each state Department of Education affiliated with NWREL, or a designated representative, shall be a continuing member of the Board of Directors.
- Members shall be appointed to the Board to guarantee representation of classroom teachers, representatives of teacher education institutions, principals, superintendent, private schools, school board members, and community-based organizations and business/industry

The Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction has designated the Associate Superintendent for Federal Programs as his representative to serve on the NWREL Board.

All eight groups (including classroom teachers) are represented on the Board.

The six-member executive committee is elected annually by the full Board. It includes the three officers (Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, and Secretary-Treasurer) and three additional members from the Board. Mardene Collins, a teacher in Matanuska-Susitna School District (Alaska), currently is Vice Chairperson of the Board and has been a member of the Executive Committee since 1995. Rosiland Lund, a teacher in Hillsboro School District (Oregon) was a member of the Executive Committee, serving as Vice Chairperson from 1991-94.

3. There is a typographical error in referring to the number of teachers participating in NWREL activities (page 25). It is 13,100 rather than the stated "13,1000."