

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

### **I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory**

The Southwest Educational Laboratory - SEDL evaluation visit was conducted on May 10-14, 1999 at its headquarters and related sites. Having reviewed advanced materials on the Laboratory and interviewed a number of staff members and other relevant personnel, I submit the following report.

The mission of SEDL is to find, share, and sustain effective solutions for the most urgent problems facing educational systems, practitioners, and decision-makers in the southwestern United States. SEDL's particular emphasis is on ensuring educational equality for children and youth who live in poverty; who are Hispanic, African-American, or other minorities; or who have mental or physical exceptionalities.

SEDL's work is organized under six inter-related research, development, and dissemination goals which are as follows:

Enhancing family and community involvement in education

Addressing diversity: language and culture

Aligning and supporting policy development

Promoting instructional coherence

Applying technology to restructuring and learning

Changing the organization and management of schooling

### **II. Implementation and Management**

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

### **three contract years?**

SEDL appears to be on target generally speaking, realizing that over the past three years there has been a tremendous amount of staff turnover with retirements, resignations, transfers, dismissals, reassignments, and the like. Existing among these same forces has been the issue of recruitment of professional personnel.

#### **1. Strengths**

The Southwest Educational Laboratory is performing adequately in most areas. The fact is that SEDL management and staff recognize many of their deficiencies and are open in their communication and where their strengths and weaknesses are . There is a history with select managerial persons who have survived the background and changes within the organization. Thus, a degree of consistency for positive reasons exists.

The three areas of research, development , and dissemination as permeating the goals for the Laboratory during this funding cycle reflect adequate integration into the mission of SEDL. Strengths of the Lab include the following: Competent and dedicated managerial personnel; budgetary structure and oversight; communication with the field (SEDL Links); client-centeredness versus contract-centeredness; product development and dissemination; interfacing with the board of directors.

Because SEDL is an independent non-profit organization, much of its funding is provided by not only the federal government but also state government and private sources for specific projects. Monies for REL purposes, therefore, are supplemented in order to enhance services within the region. Even though staff are assigned to various categories of responsibility and are compensated within identified budgets, members of the Laboratory administrative staff may be

salaried across several funding sources. This does not appear to present any operational difficulties.

It has been said that “Laboratories are a very peculiar place to work”. This being the case, SEDL has found it useful to collaborate with other regions and states outside the southwest vis-a-vis the Comprehensive Assistance Program at SEDL and drug-free schools through SERVE - Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi. This is merely one example of the fact that this Laboratory is making efforts to establish partnerships with other institutions and regional educational Laboratories.

The relationship between the Board of Directors and the Laboratory is reportedly to be an excellent one. Orientation of new board members is personalized and is conducted by the SEDL’s President/ Chief Executive Officer on the local site of each person joining the board. Even though board members receive less paperwork under the new management of the Lab, they feel that they are still kept well informed of the policies and practices of the organization. Former major concerns of the board, e.g., image, compensation, titles, communication, no longer exists due to the fact that this governing body has greater confidence in the present administration of the Lab. Holding programmatic persons accountable for fulfilling their job description and promoting achievement of objectives of the proposal is recognized by the board as being an asset. These policymakers, then, support the idea of the Lab’s getting people in the five-state region’s helping SEDL to identify problem areas to be addressed and at the same time responding to the advisory role of the board toward ongoing assessment of service delivery to its constituencies.

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

Although SEDL meets expectations in this particular category of the evaluation, there are areas that need improvement. Below are recommendations which the Lab should consider for improvement in order to enhance its meeting requirements of the Laboratory's contract with the federal government.

### **3. Recommendations for improvement**

1. Continue to work toward filling staff vacancies of coordination and leadership expeditiously with emphasis on the Language and Diversity Program as well as the Office of Institutional Assessment, Evaluation, and Policy Services.
2. Strengthen the research component of the Laboratory's work in order to enhance development and dissemination activities.

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

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory recognizes the critical need to monitor itself and its products and services in order to optimize its value to the region. Because SEDL has its own quality assurance system, it usually is not necessary for stringent evaluative criteria to be imposed on the Laboratory. The internal QA team within the Lab reviews the majority of works emerging from SEDL such as agenda for large meetings, instructional modules, reviews of literature, curriculum designs, and research instruments. If necessary, a conflict resolution process is in place by way of a QA facilitator and program manager.

In using a peer group, reviews from practitioners also contribute to the quality assurance plan. Ultimately, SEDL sees its QA process as promoting best products for service and as representative samples from the Lab.

#### **1. Strengths**

1. Use of results for 1997 and 1998 REL Performance Indicator Data forms

2. Evaluation on effectiveness of SEDL's staff development and assistance activities
3. Quality assurance reviews by select staff at SEDL to promote best products
4. Regular staff meetings and intensive reviews at the Laboratory
5. Existence of evaluation plan for every SEDL project
6. Use of performance indicator forms

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

1. Ongoing method of collecting information on issues in service communities to be expanded
2. Non-systematic external critiques of programs for feedback

### **III. Quality**

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

High quality products and services are a priority for the management and staff of this Laboratory. The products come in various forms such as printed materials in the form of books, pamphlets, brochures, literature reviews, training modules; videotapes, WEB sites; workshops. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory designs products and implements services for its audience following assessment of the needs of persons within the five-state region. While applied research projects are partially in force, the execution of the same in a sound manner could be improved.

#### **1. Strengths**

SEDL is making assertive efforts to produce quality products and services. These products have a wide range, from electronic media to paper products and from on-site consultation in the field to conferences in Austin. Generally speaking, results from evaluation of these services and products indicate that clientele favorably receive their acts of outreach from

the Lab. The impetus for applied research efforts is in place and, given the third year of a five-year contract, shows promise for continuation.

Peer reviews of products are conducted by the Lab on a formal and informal basis. Internally, staff at the REL undergo an extensive quality assurance review process of most products to be implemented and disseminated.

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

1. Ensure that products generated by SEDL are consistently at a high standard and are promoted in order that national and regional recognition can be attained, supporting services rendered by the Lab.
2. Consider upscaling your efforts to use well tested approaches to strengthen services to be implemented by staff, co-developers, and others representing SEDL. This includes incorporating research documentation and a base for developing products.

Clients who were interviewed as well as staff indicate that those products that have been made available to them on a regular basis are utilized effectively and efficiently. Interviewees also report that the aforementioned products and services have resulted in positive changes in their schools and communities. Field notes and conversations with staff reveal that Fabens, Texas is a primary example of the tremendous impact which SEDL services and products have had on a local community - individuals, school board, parents, students. As one person stated, "The human experience must be kept in mind." Having participated in thorough interactions with REL staff and customers from the field, Signature Program #1 and Signature Program #2 respectively are illustrations of the broad extent to which the Lab's products and services are used by customers.

#### **IV. Utility**

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

Products and services provided by the REL are numerous and have an impact within the region. Being that SEDL focuses its activities in the states of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, New Mexico, and Louisiana, the activities in which they are engaged make a great difference among their clientele. Interviews with select customers, particularly representing Signature Program #1 - Applying Technology to Restructuring and Learning and Signature Program #2 - Development and Refinement of the Collaborative Action Team Process, suggest that products and services generated by the Lab are compatible with, and in some areas, exceed their expectations.

Staff members in both programs above represent diversity in terms of their academic backgrounds, professional experiences, and worldview perspectives from regional to international. They use a variety of modes to convey knowledge to their clients. Products range from paper-generated ones to electronic media. Services range from hands-on experiences through workshops and meetings to technology. The Constructivist Learning Environment (CLE) and the Collaborative Action Team (CAT) projects are illustrations of this range of activity.

Services as CLE have allowed for the delivery of instruction in ways which have changed schools in districts involved in this project. This has also allowed for co-developers to assemble and share their knowledge across school district lines. The planning-redesign-literature review phase also results in customers indicating the usefulness of products and services. Client interviews from both CLE and CAT projects resulted in this cross-sampling of comments:

*“It has made good teachers in our district better teachers through the use of technology.”*

*“Students are taking a real ownership in and out of class throughout our school.”*

*“My empowerment as a teacher has been enhanced as a result my work in technology.”*

*“SEDL has given me a name for something I have been doing for 20 years - constructivism.”*

*“It has changed the face of our school in many ways.”*

*“I now have a different way of approaching curriculum and instruction.”*

*“This method helps me to be more effective in teaching low socio-economic students.”*

*“We are aligning our curriculum with technology.”*

*“The faculty wants more.”*

*“Co-developers are effective, having been trained as facilitators by SEDL.”*

*“Continue to build youth and society.”*

*“Of 90,000 students in our district, we have impacted 26,000 through this project.”*

*“Students and parents take ownership and are involved.”*

*“I have a real passion for this work.”*

## **1. Strengths**

1. Products and services openly received and used by customers
2. Technological and in-person interaction with clients as they use select products
3. Products and services developed such as modules, “Active Learning Environments”
4. Electronic and other means applied to make work accessible
5. Responsiveness to clients

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

1. Quantifiable measures for determined appropriateness of products and services
2. Office of Evaluation in need of leader and implementation
3. Diversification of assessment of customer needs

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

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory is partially driven by the needs of its customers, primarily in its five-state region. The needs are at times initiated independently and conveyed by customers to the Lab and at other times needs may be stimulated by SEDL through research, publications, focus groups, and even entities such as the Regional Policy Analysts and Advisers Network that interfaces regularly with the Laboratory. Representatives on this 30-person network include chief state school officers,, education committee chairs in the state House and state Senate, Governor-designates who examine educational policy issues, and teaching pipeline for diversity. The policy staff at SEDL is actively involved in conducting focus groups within the region and customer needs may emerge from this.

Priorities are established by the Lab based on research literature reviews, need compatibility with goals of the project, staffing patterns and skills, and potential for change. Services and products are designed to comply with identified needs and potential value. In order to ensure clarity and mutual commitment toward service goals, a memorandum of understanding is signed by the school district and SEDL prior to officially commencing service.

Customer feedback is solicited in the form of surveys, conferences, evaluations, and performance indicator forms. As pertinent, refinement and modifications are made to the service/products plan to enhance quality and customer satisfaction.

**Strengths:**

1. SEDL consistently focuses on customer needs.
2. Products and services are tailored to intended audience.

**Areas of needed improvement:**

1. Assessment of customer needs should diversify.

3. Office of Evaluation needs leader and implementation.

**V. Outcomes and Impact**

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

While student success is traditionally determined in a general manner by the amount of progress shown on standardized tests, a number of other ways have been evidenced through the work of SEDL. These include more leadership positions assumed by students who participate in Signature Program #1 and Signature Program #2; using conflict resolution measures to promote cooperation among students along with healthy competition; promoting school attendance and graduation rates and selecting alternative programs for continuation of education as opposed to dropping out; expanding breadth of knowledge through the use of technology.

**1. Strengths**

1. Implementation of programs to increase knowledge and understanding permeating programs at SEDL consistent with the Lab's goals
2. Involvement in school reading programs in New Mexico (4) and Arkansas (1)
3. Programs in place, addressing issues of national significance

**2. Area of needed improvement**

1. Measurement of student success needs additional clarity and, thus, institutionalized
2. Permanent staff leadership for the Office of Evaluation and Policy Studies
3. More integrative work across various programs in the Lab toward cross-training and collaboration

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

One approach which the Laboratory uses, albeit indirect, in creating an awareness of and readiness for school improvement strategies is going into the field, especially primary target audiences, and becoming involved in schools as well as communities in general. Evidence is limited on the overt level of activation of the REL on assisting states to implement the aforementioned strategies.

Accepting the challenges which accompany school reform represents a passion by staff interviewed representing goal #6 (strategies for increasing success). The philosophical belief that people have to learn in order to change drives the work of this particular professional group. It should be noted that an interrelationship exists between SEDL and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory on the school change collaborative in an effort to share knowledge and resources. Individuals working on this project are beginning to engage teachers in their region to look at student work as a fundamental part of school reform.

**1. Strengths**

1. Implementation of Project FIRST as a series of comprehensive school change tasks
2. Emphasis on what works for students as a focus of “strategies for increasing school success” goal
3. Quality staff with national reputation
4. Work with the Regional Policy Analysts and Advisers Network in collaborative spirit as co-developers and advisers to SEDL.

**2. Areas of needed improvement**

1. Become more active in engaging the Lab in formulating strategic alliances with key agencies, institutions, and other linkages toward shared resources, contacts, and educational impact.

2. Continue to explore ways of influencing educational policies at state, regional, and national levels.
3. Examine the extent to which the Lab's Office of Research accepts a role in this category on educational advancement.

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

This is a major concern, as the REL's specialty area of language and cultural diversity should be at the core of improving student success, enhancing cultural understanding and identity, broadening intercultural and intercultural communication, and generally serving as a systemic base for human growth and development.

It was noted that the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the Lab is overseeing on a temporary basis the Language and Diversity Program and task seven which is related thereto and, at the same time, fulfilling her functions as a the second leading administrator at SEDL. As competent and motivated as this person is, the volume of work required to meet obligations of these functions can be exhausting. This specialty area for the Lab is too important and plays a strategic role in promoting the mission of SEDL. The fact that the position of program manager for this area has been vacant for an extended period of time causes concern and could jeopardize, indeed, the Lab's ability to meet its contractual obligations within the remaining period of this funding cycle.

The existence of seven projects for a staff of seven persons directly assigned thereto suggests that what appears to be dormant at first sight has much potential. A \$1.2 million budget should allow for significant activity and outreach in the region for language and cultural diversity. The staff of this program is looking ahead in exploring a companion piece for teacher

training in higher education and adaptations for students themselves. Despite the staffing limitations and lack of institutional infusion, the main components of the Language and Diversity Program are being developed and are moving forward. This is a positive reflection of dedicated professionals, commitment to tasks, and managerial leadership.

### **1. Strengths**

1. Strategic location in a geographical area that is rich in language and cultural diversity due to the breadth of its population.
2. Development of eleven modules concentrating on cultural knowledge, self-awareness, communication skills, and beliefs about students is positive.
3. Recognized need wisely to curtail specific projects not effective nor efficient is acknowledged.

### **2. Areas of needed Improvement:**

1. The position of Program Manager for the Language and Cultural Diversity program needs to be filled expeditiously.
2. The active integration of major components of this program with other aspects of SEDL's work should be promoted. Infusion into the total fabric of the Laboratory is essential.
3. Assertive efforts to take necessary steps to offer qualitative services and produce products which will enhance attainment of a regional and national reputation in the Lab's specialty area are highly recommended.

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

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory is in a strategic position to have a major impact of changes in education as we enter the twenty-first century. The geographical location with its intercultural population, combined with the competent and dedicated staff at SEDL, makes for a tremendous opportunity to move forward. The programs being in place, the products being generated, and the relevant services being provided are attributes that warrant acknowledging.

During the early phase of this contract period, the Lab sensed the need to undergo an extensive internal review. This process represented a bold step on the part of SEDL and the leadership/support of the Lab's administration. Overall, the programs at this site reflect sound organizational structure, the products reflect research and quality, and the services are reported to be in tune with the needs of targeted audiences. The President and Executive Vice President/Chief Operating Officer recognize the significance of SEDL's work and are providing excellent leadership with openness and caring as the Laboratory fulfills its mission through competent and dedicated staff.

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

The following captures the essence of strengths and issues for the REL to consider as the organization moves forward:

1. Internal review process showed evidence of a mastery of sense of purpose for the Lab's existence and focus of expediency and effectiveness in meeting its contractual obligations.
2. Individuals in the field report satisfaction with services provided by SEDL. In expanding on these services and broadening the base of participation, a coherent data base at the Lab is recommended.
3. While the leadership of SEDL is strong and should be acknowledged, it is also prudent to work aggressively at recruiting and hiring appropriate individuals to fill managerial vacancies in key positions within the Lab, keeping cultural diversity as a priority.
4. The excellent programs with a very competent staff are at the core of commencing activities of a nature that can serve as a source of cultivation for attaining national recognition by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.