

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The SERVE (South East Region Vision for Education) is the Regional Laboratory that serves six southeastern states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. These six states occupy about eight percent of the land mass of the United States and, according to the 1990 census, they have approximately fifteen percent of the nation's population. Approximately 6,568,445 students are enrolled in the elementary and secondary schools of these six states. The pupil teacher ratio for the six states is 17.3 and ranges from 16.2 in North and South Carolina to 18.9 in Florida. The average salary for teachers is \$32,067 with a high of \$34,002 in Georgia and a low of \$27,600 in Mississippi. The average per pupil cost for this region is \$4,874 with a high of \$5,275 in Florida and a low of \$3,951 in Mississippi. Compared with the nation as a whole, this six state region has a higher percent of 5-17 year olds below the poverty line (23.6 percent versus 19 percent), a higher percentage of minority students (41.4 percent versus 35.2 percent), a higher percent of the population living in rural areas (25.2 percent versus 20.2 percent), a lower percent of the population with four years of high school (77.5 percent versus 81.1 percent), and lower annual expenditures per pupil in K-12 public schools (\$4,874 versus \$5,689).

SERVE, located in Greensboro, North Carolina, became a Regional Educational Laboratory in the 1990 competition. It replaced SEIL, the Laboratory that formerly served these six states. The SERVE Board of Directors has 40 members-six from each state plus each Teacher of the Year, beginning in 1997, and a representative of the Native American Education Council.

Each state is represented by its Governor, Chief State School Officer, a state legislator, a corporate executive, a regional or state based corporation, and an educational researcher.

In each instance, the Board member may be represented by a designee. Five of the six governors are represented by a designee. By contrast, only one educational researcher is represented by a designee.

SERVE's present Board Chair is an Alabama corporate executive, Mr. Al Knight. Mr. Knight characterized the Board as being hard working-not a rubber stamp board. As chair, he is a "coordinator", not a "leader". Everyone on the Board, according to Mr. Knight, is "opinionated." They all want a high quality Laboratory. They interact with staff seven to ten times per year. Mr. Knight also said that the Delphi approach to establishing priorities was useful.

Richard Thompson, Chief State School Officer from Mississippi, indicated that the Board has two overnight meetings per year and they have at least quarterly conference calls.

Lynda McCulloch, Board member designee for Governor Hunt of North Carolina also said the SERVE Board is very active and that her highest priority is for the SERVE staff to keep the Board well informed about educational issues. As a state participating member, she is in frequent contact with SERVE and staff members are always responsive to her requests. Several other members also indicated the importance of SERVE policy analysts in their states. Among others, these included Holly Robinson, Georgia's CSSO's designee, and Richard Thompson, Mississippi CSSO.

As described by Dr. Sanders in his introduction of the Review Panel to SERVE, the Laboratory was begun as a dream of three North Carolina educators. Their proposal had several unique features including (a) basing the Lab at a university, (b) having a decentralized set of offices, (c) assigning an education policy analyst to teach the six state capitals, and (d) involving

teachers and administrators in a large number of the Region's schools that enrolled low-performing student populations. As indicated by Dr. Sanders, adopting these unique features was bold. Furthermore, each of the uniquenesses presented both opportunities and potential problems. For example as suggested by both Lynda McCulloch and Holly Robinson, having a SERVE policy analyst immediately available at the state level can be extremely helpful; on the other hand, this degree of decentralization also can complicate the life of an organization. SERVE leaders clearly understand both opportunities and potential problems in this arrangement. In a series of discussions with SERVE leaders, this review panel member became increasingly comfortable with the accommodation that is being achieved in communication and collaboration working arrangements within the SERVE. Staff members talked very freely about past problems and also were able to describe both conceptually and in some detail ways in which both successful communication and truly collaborative working arrangements are being accomplished.

In a summary financial document, SERVE is shown as receiving \$6.8 M in Regional Educational Laboratory funding and just over \$5 M from other sources, primarily from the U.S. Department of Education. This money is used to fund seven program areas. The program areas are (a) Assessment, Accountability and Standards, (b) Teachers and Teaching, (c) School Development Reform, (d) Education Policy, (e) Children, Families, and Communities, (f) Technology and Learning, and (g) Improvement in Science and Mathematics. The Support Systems are (a) Publishing and Quality Assurance, (b) Evaluation, (c) Technology Services, and (d) New Projects Greenhouse.

Although the work of the SERVE is organized in seven program areas and four support systems, it also is organized as seven tasks. These tasks do not fit neatly in direct relation to the

program areas and support systems. For example, Laboratory management is the first of the seven tasks. This task includes all of the support systems, with the possible exception of the New Projects Greenhouse. Tasks 2 through 7, and related program areas, are:

<u>Tasks</u>	<u>Program Areas</u>
1. Laboratory Management	*Publishing and Quality Assistance *Evaluation *Technology Services *New Projects Greenhouse
2. Development and Applied Research	*Assessment, Accountability and Standards
3. Services to the Field	*Teachers and Teaching, * Educational Policy, *School Development and Reform *Technology and Learning
4. Participate in the formation of a nationwide system of educational information and assistance	
5. Laboratory Network Program	
6. Assistance to the OERI (Optional)	
7. Specialty Area Development	*Children, Families, and Communities

The SERVE Executive Director is Dr. John Sanders who has been in this position for approximately nine months. The Deputy Executive Director is Dr. Jean Williams who assumed this position on February 1, 1999. Deputy Executive Director for Planning and Development, Dr. Rick Basom will arrive on June 1, 1999.

II. Implementation and Management

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

I added the "have been" to "were" to indicate that a statement of work is seldom static. As time passes, a statement of work that was appropriate at the beginning of a contract period may change either by request of the funding agency or through discussions that lead to a modified statement. Sometimes, the "statement" changes may be so minor that no formal change in written statement is necessary. Given the above interpretation, "yes", is the answer to whether SERVE is doing what it was approved to do during its first three contract years.

1. Strengths

Through both formal and informal needs sensing, SERVE has kept in good contact with current and developing needs.

2. Areas of Caution

With legislative changes at the Federal level, e.g. EdFlex, and state legislative and administrative changes as well as with changing circumstances, e.g. rapidly developing teacher shortages, SERVE will need to be especially sensitive to local and state needs.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

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

SERVE uses a combination of DELPHI , several survey techniques and feedback from a regional policy analyst in each state to keep in touch with constituent groups and give guidance in program initiation and modification. Staff members also regularly use participant surveys for

judging the success of each workshop and/or training activity.

1 Strengths

One of the strengths of the self-monitoring process is the use of multiple approaches in establishing priorities. By combining a multiple state Delphi approach with a survey, staff members are able to stay in touch with fairly large numbers of constituents in a variety of groups. Each of these techniques permits covering a large enough sample to have confidence in the results. When the individual policy analysts add the responses from leaders in the six states, SERVE can be sure that it is sensing the region.

2. Areas of Caution

Perhaps the greatest possible concern is being sure that questions/items are being interpreted as intended. An example could be the one given on Wednesday, May 12, when we heard that parents placed school safety at the top their list of concerns and students placed it very low. It turned out that parents were concerned about putting their children on the bus, not what might happen in the school building or on the school grounds. Students were interpreting the question the way it was intended-safety at school. Incidentally, both issues may be important.

3. Recommendations

Maintain the needs sensing and be sure to check respondent interpretations.

III. Quality

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

Quality is judged both internally and externally. SERVE has a Quality Assurance Unit that is responsible for ensuring that publications are well planned and prepared. This unit, which is managed by Dr. Charles Ahearn, has in place a seventeen-step system, described in a flow chart, for ensuring that each publication and product is of high quality. This process requires four

formal reviews with a subsequent decision to proceed with publication or not. Reviews 1, and 4 appear to be internal. The second review is by an external team.

1. Strengths

SERVE's greatest strength in this area would appear to be the carefully designed, systematic approach to ensuring quality. SERVE products and publications have received national recognition and are well respected within the southeastern region.

2. Areas of caution

I would prefer to say "areas of caution" rather than areas of needed improvement. The caution comes in deciding which "products" need to be put through the seventeen-step process described in the Quality Assurance flow chart. Clearly, books and other major publications that will carry SERVE's imprimatur and will be sold should go through the process. Furthermore, materials for formal training sessions will go through a formal, though perhaps not a seventeen-step, clearance process. Less clear is the need for thorough, multi-level review of less formal materials that will be given to small groups such as a Laboratory review team. Even then, though, the possibility exists that the team will quote the material and only later SERVE or someone else will learn of inaccuracies. "When" to review and "how thoroughly" is a judgement call.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

IV. Utility

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

Both products and services provided by SERVE are valued by their clientele. This is demonstrated by sales of books and other publications, by participation in workshops and professional development activities, and by the force with which participants in discussion groups endorse SERVE's work with them. An elementary principal from Georgia described how SERVE helped her school as they moved from targeted Title I to a whole school program. She also stated that SERVE clearly was there to serve. An assistant principal from Florida praised SERVE publications, the promptness with which staff members respond and their great working relationship with the state education department. A teacher from an elementary school spoke of SERVE's continued focus on the "real" issues.

2. Areas of needed improvement

None noted.

3. Recommendations for improvement

None noted.

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

As mentioned earlier, SERVE uses a multi-stage process to ensure that its work is directed toward customer needs at state, regional and national levels. A three-round Delphi needs assessment is conducted with (a) SERVE's Board of Directors, and (b) nominations from a variety of education associations. In the first round, participants are asked to name the three most pressing needs and suggest how SERVE can best meet those needs. In subsequent rounds, panelists are asked to rank the needs that were nominated by their degree of importance. At

SERVE's annual Forum, attendees are randomly selected to discuss with staff members the top identified needs for their applicability to individual situations.

The Delphi needs assessment is anticipatory; that is, it asks participants what help is needed. Follow up and impact studies are conducted to help SERVE know the success of its efforts. In one follow-up study, 300 participants from various training sessions and workshops across programs were called and interviewed concerning ways in which SERVE was helpful as well as ways in which its products and services could be improved.

1. Strengths

The combination of anticipatory and evaluative studies -- and SERVE'S response to this information -- is the greatest strength of the process.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Perhaps more formal studies and reports would be useful.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

See #2 above.

V. Outcomes and Impact

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

This is always a difficult area to assess. Multiple choice achievement tests constitute the simplest measuring instruments and they can provide useful information. Unfortunately, scores on such tests also can be misleading in their simplicity. At the other end of the scale are portfolios and other complex "projects" that are quite difficult to "score." Equally difficult to interpret are "stories" describing successes and non-successes.

1. Strengths

Given the difficulties described above in measuring and interpreting student outcomes, SERVE does appear to have considerable success in improved student outcomes. The Senior Project approach, for example, appears to have considerable promise as a means of helping students to focus on a major task that can produce both traditional academic success and non-traditional outcomes of substantial value and interest. An important byproduct seems to be the attraction that the senior projects are producing for younger students who are beginning to prepare for the senior project experience at much younger ages.

2. and 3. Areas of Needed Improvement/Suggestions for improvement

This is not a “needed improvement” but rather a suggestion for extension of the program. The Katz and Chard book *Engaging Children’s Minds: The Project Approach* might suggest that SERVE could productively offer the Senior Project opportunity to much younger students.

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

1. Strengths

This is an area in which SERVE has been particularly successful. In a two-page diagram, SERVE has described a school improvement process with a focus on student learning. The plan begins with the recognition that the school improvement process can be of several “types” but that, to be successful, the plan must focus on the student, particularly the student’s learning. The process then describes four interlocking, interdependent components of school improvement and then concludes with a description of the planning process. In Task 3-- Services to the Field, SERVE has described its overall approach to helping schools, especially low-performing schools, to improve.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

SERVE probably could work through its policy analysts to ensure that all six states are equally well informed about the comprehensive school improvement programs. This could lead to discussions of ways in which the program could be made available to equivalent numbers of schools, especially low-performing schools, in each state.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

See #2 above.

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

SERVE does not appear to have made as much progress in this area as in some others. It does have some useful publications, e.g. Families and Schools: An Essential Partnership (1996), but the full potential of this specialty may not be advancing as far as it might. For example, despite the national and international attention given to the Perry Preschool Project, no reference is made to this work, or, for that matter, to AEL's seminal work in the early childhood area.

1. Strengths

Some useful publications.

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

Perhaps more resources could be allocated and a stronger effort could be made at helping states and school districts recognize the importance of this issue.

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

In this reviewer's judgement, SERVE is making excellent progress. As stated in the opening section of this report, the bold steps taken by SERVE's founders – basing SERVE at a

university, decentralizing staff, assigning a policy analyst in each state capital, and involving large numbers of teachers and administrators based in low performing schools in the school renewal process-have paid huge dividends for SERVE. In addition, it appears that the decision in late 1997 to restructure SERVE management such that a completely flat organizational structure was replaced by one with Deputy Executive Directors was virtually essential. A single person can only respond to a limited number of people. At the present, through a variety of communication methods, the business of the SERVE appears to be conducted in an efficient and effective manner and Laboratory staff members give strong evidence of effective communication and collaboration. In fact, in the various meetings of the Review Team with groups of SERVE professional staff members, persons working in different parts of the SERVE appeared, to this reviewer, to be more conversant with and supportive of various parts of the SERVE program and operations than is often the case with different high school and University departments in the same building-and even different grade level teams in some elementary schools. (This reviewer could truthfully make the same statement about some government agencies, research groups and private businesses in which he has been employed.)

SERVE's need sensing processes clearly are effective in helping staff to address important issues in a timely and effective manner. Quality assurance procedures assist in ensuring the development of appropriate and high quality products.

Having policy makers on a Regional Educational Laboratory Board is appropriate. Keeping them informed and responding to their interests and concerns is a quite different matter. Among the most impressive "meetings" of the Review Panel at SERVE was its teleconference with members of the Board of Directors. Each Board member spoke in substantive and glowing terms of contributions the SERVE make to education in the Southeast region.

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

SERVE strengths have been discussed in Section VI. Among the areas of some concern, perhaps the greatest one is the continuing need for SERVE to track Federal and state legislation as well as various education trends in order to keep policy makers informed and to permit and facilitate appropriate dialogue both within and among the states and between the SERVE region and the rest of the country.

Of lesser concern are such issues as (a) deciding what products need to be thoroughly reviewed before general circulation, (b) conducting additional and more thorough research and evaluation studies related to SERVE's various undertakings, (c) extending current very useful work to additional populations, e.g. extending senior projects to younger students, (d) working with policy analysts to ensure that all six states receive equivalent treatment, and (e) increasing support for SERVE's emphasis on early childhood care and education.