

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The evaluation visit to Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) in Greensboro, N.C. took place on May 10-14, 1999. The members of the review team were Joyce Stern (chair), Barbara Clements, Marilyn Crawford, Kerry Davidson, Bob Egbert and Nancy Karweit. OERI representatives Carol Chelemer and Debbie Williams attended. The agenda and schedule of activities are included. An additional meeting took place (not on the schedule) among Elizabeth Bynum, Barbara Clements and Nancy Karweit to discuss the Technology in Learning program (Chelemer and Williams also attending).

Extensive background materials were supplied before the meeting and were reviewed using the DIR supplied rating sheets.

The regional Lab (SERVE) was established in 1990 and serves the six states of Florida, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. SERVE, the REL, is a part of the umbrella organization SERVE, a non-profit corporation. Of the total \$11,853,807 annual budget for SERVE, the organization, the REL makes up \$6,810,142 or about 58 percent. The Lab is considered to be the “core business of SERVE” so that all the projects within the organization are intended to complement the work of the REL.

SERVE, the corporation, includes the regional Lab and other initiatives and projects. These include, the Eisenhower Consortium on Math and Science, Comprehensive School Development, Charter School Institute, Comprehensive Technical Assistance center, and regional technical consortia. The Lab and non-Lab projects are combined into six programs (assessment, accountability and standards, children family and communities, education policy,

improvement in math and science, school development and reform, technology and learning), and one initiative (teachers and teaching) which are governed by the deputy director for programs. The technology services, publishing and quality assurance, evaluation and new projects greenhouse, are overseen by another deputy executive director. Both divisions are directed by the executive director of SERVE who in turn is overseen by the Board of Directors. In year 4, an executive management team (executive director, the two deputy executives and director of operations) will lead the organization.

The Board of Directors is comprised of forty members, including representatives from the governor's office in each state, the chief state school officer in each state, an educational researcher, corporate executive, state legislator, state or regional education organization representative, three teachers drawn from teachers who had received the teacher of the year award and a representative of the Native American Tribal Council. The term is for three years. The Board meets twice annually.

SERVE is a part of the University of North Carolina higher educational system and is located on the University of North Carolina Greensboro campus. It is the only Lab associated with a public institution of higher learning. It is also the first Lab to house a policy analyst in each of the state capitals, and the first to utilize a set of decentralized offices, and the first Lab to focus attention on low-performing student populations.

The specialty areas of SERVE are assessment, early childhood education and technology. These areas are to have a more national focus.

The Laboratory's mission is to "promote and support the continuous improvement of education opportunities for all learners in the Southeast". The vision of SERVE is that of "a world in which all persons are members of productive learning communities that contribute to

the continuous improvement of the quality of life.” To this end, SERVE hopes to establish schools and communities with a learning culture, where continuous improvement takes place.

The regional context is important to understand as it affects the way SERVE approaches its work as well as issues they focus on. Three characteristics are particularly important: the geographic and psychological isolation of the region, the mistrust of education and anti-intellectualism that characterizes the South, and the enduring poverty of the region. The SERVE proposal argues sensibly enough that any work in the Southeast must address these issues of attitudes, poverty and isolation. SERVE’s work, including the specialty areas, the services to the field, and the applied research, focuses on specific strategies that are meaningful given this historical context. In particular, extended efforts for collaboration are proposed to overcome the effects of physical and psychological isolation. Building the capacity to define and address problems in education through systematic reform and scaling up of effective practices is seen as a way to overcome the economic and attitudinal constraints.

The executive director has been at SERVE for less than a year. In that time, there has been a reorganization of the Lab from a “flat” structure in which the executive director oversaw all program and services to the present more differentiated structure with two deputy executive directors.

SERVE now has a staff of 90 located in three major offices in Atlanta, Greensboro and Tallahassee. There are regional offices spread throughout the six states. Interactive technology, from conference calls to desktop video, are utilized to keep the decentralized structure connected. SERVE maintains an internet site in which each program can be accessed from the home page. Links to other sites such as other regional Labs and R&D Centers conducting work

in related areas are provided on the web site.

SERVE's decentralized structure has a great benefit in that they can quickly respond to schools in their region. Specific projects augment their staff by adding consultants or by subcontracting work to training and marketing firms.

The research agenda is set via a Delphi process of needs assessment with the Board and with the other important stakeholders in the Southeast region. This is done annually. There are also focus groups which meet on these identified needs at the annual Regional Forum on School Improvement. Quality assurance processes for the development of publications, research and development activities and products are also in place.

II. Implementation and management

A. To what extent is the regional Lab (REL) doing what it is approved to do?

At this interim reporting period, the Lab appears to be performing adequately in fulfilling the details of the original proposal and modifications. Significant departures from the original and revised proposal occur. However, these changes are usually documented in the various quarterly and annual reports, although it is difficult to track these changes over the years.

SERVE is undergoing not just a change in leadership and organizational structure, but to some extent a change in the nature of work from a field service organization to a full service R&D one. These changes in organization make it easier to understand some of the slow starts and erratic patterns of program performance. The work in the first three years was not always performed in a timely fashion as indicated by the dates when the quarterly progress reports were filed. No reasons were given for the late filing. However, the more recent reports seemed to be filed on time.

1. Strengths

1. A decentralized organizational structure that is suited to meeting the needs of the clients and the needs of a research and development organization.
2. The reorganization of SERVE.
3. Meaningful, on-going relationships with Labs, centers and other significant educational partners.
 - a. Significant contribution to the NLP in the development of Toolkit94 and revisions to become Toolkit98 and the development of train the trainer materials.
 - b. Significant and meaningful partnership with individual Labs (PREL, NCREL, AEL) and R&D centers (ECE, Nat'l drop out prevention center, CRESST, CEPRE).
 - c. Significant and meaningful partnering with other agencies (NASA, Department of Justice).
 - d. Significant, on-going long term alliances with schools and school districts (e.g. assessment project).
 - e. Intensive connection to political stakeholders governing education in the various states.
4. Support of the university where it is housed. There is evidence that the relationship with the university is supportive. One, the provost took the time to attend the opening session of the review panel. Secondly, the university is providing more space for the Lab to expand. Finally, although this is not entirely clear, there may be a redistribution of some of the overhead paid to the University to support start up costs of the green house project.
5. The fact that SERVE is addressing significant and timely issues.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Although implementation and management are adequate, there are several areas in need of improvement for the balance of this contract period.

1. There is a need for more integration and consistent networking across and even within projects. In particular, they may not incorporate the work of others from SERVE in a consistent way. The discussion about collaboration arose many times in the five days. The appearance is that cross project collaboration is uneven. For example, Signature Work 1 and Signature Work 2 collaborate on the low performing

schools project, but appear not to on other projects that would be natural points of collaboration. The CSRD for example, could incorporate the Senior Project, or the development of the reading training program could incorporate the assessment work. These are natural links. This may come into place down the pike as programs mature and get a solid research base behind them. That is, it may simply be too early in the life of these projects to be sharing as yet incomplete and unevaluated endeavors.

The discussion about collaboration usually degenerated into a discussion about communication. Meetings of senior staff on a regular basis do take place, there is a Forum which all attend, there is now a Deputy Director across all programs, and presentations are made at Board meetings, but there is still a lack of collaboration and communication. Across project communication may need to be by design, not by chance. The usefulness of what they can learn from each other has to be balanced, however, against an organizational wish to have fewer, not more, structures in place.

2. The scope of work appears to have settled in place after an uncertain and uneven beginning.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. Address issue of project isolation directly by looking for potential areas of cross project collaboration and design specific strategies with measurable goals to assist in accomplishing this task. Possibly consider hiring an outside facilitator to help identify ways that are consistent with need for collaboration and palatable organizational change.
2. Examine the balance between being responsive to needs via the Delphi process and having a coherent program of work. Examine the possibility of deleterious effects of responding to short term issues vs. continuing with long term enduring themes. Issue of balance of responsiveness and continuity needs to be considered.

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 has in place a self-monitoring system for products, services and research and development activities. In addition, customer satisfaction questionnaires and focus groups are extensively and routinely used. Finally, because projects are routinely presented to the board of Directors there is an additional point of review and monitoring. Employee performance is also evaluated on an annual basis. Each employee in concert with supervisor devises a yearly work plan. Evaluation of the employee is done against that plan.

1. Strengths

SERVE consistently seeks feedback for its products and services from the clients or from the organization.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Although there is a system in place, the feedback from review and from customers is not consistently designed to help improve the product or to identify areas in need of improvement.

3. Recommendations

Increase attention to quality, purpose and utility of feedback from clients.

III. Quality

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

SERVE provides training and technical assistance and research and development work. Their view of quality is one in which it is built in “in a process of constant review and renewal of products, research and development efforts, services and organizational processes”. Creating a quality culture is the responsibility of all the staff.

One measure of the quality of the work is the reputation that the Lab has for excellent, unbiased and useful work. Conversations with various state stakeholders revealed their trust in the research of SERVE and belief that they are unbiased in their approach and fair in their conclusions. As one board member said although the “issues are political, we can count on SERVE to provide an objective, neutral, but informative analysis. They provide information, they do not evaluate: they are experts, not advocates.

Testimony by Michael Ward, NC State Superintendent of Public Instruction before the Senate committee on health, education, labor and pensions salutes the work of SERVE in their work on charter schools, in the services of their senior policy analyst and in their work on

comprehensive school reform.

There is a need to consider audience in any discussion of quality. The audience for many of SERVE's reports are primarily policymakers, legislators, and other state stakeholders interested in education. These stakeholders look to SERVE to provide "research-based information" for decision making.

The documents and reports SERVE provides are typically synopses of research issues and areas. As such, the reports appear to be more executive summaries than full blown research reports. Consequently, the reviews of the literature document the research base for products and services, but typically in a very brief way. This brevity is OK as long as it does not distort the research base by oversimplification or omission of important work. An analysis of quality on this basis is well beyond the scope of the present task. But, a cursory look at the publications suggests that citations and attention to long list of bibliographic information is not characteristic of the REL work.

It is significant to emphasize how critical it is for SERVE to produce high quality research reports for their clients. The clients depend upon these research based reports to be accurate, thorough and useful. This is especially the case in the information on effective strategies which the schools rely upon as a basis for decision making about school reform. The entire enterprise of Comprehensive School Reform turns around the idea that there are programs with documented, research proven records of effectiveness. If this reputation of being research based is sullied, the remainder of the enterprise - the training, the staff development, the technical assistance becomes beside the point or even detrimental. It is important that research based maintain a specific meaning and that the findings are presented accurately, even if it means the findings can't be presented in three sentences or less.

The clients who came in from the schools who were in the process of writing school improvement plans clearly depended upon the SERVE publications to point them to research proven practice. They assume that if it came from SERVE it was research based.

SERVE attempts to minimize duplication of effort by using the LNP network and other contacts to find publications that are needed as opposed to writing them on their own. Several examples of utilizing materials written by other Labs were presented.

Publication of materials in refereed journals is not that frequent, and does not seem to be a priority for them. Authors do participate in annual meetings of AERA and ASCD.

The major thrust of the work of SERVE that we reviewed was in the area of professional development. The major methods involve surveys of clients, focus groups and interviews.

SERVE recently was awarded two prestigious awards. One was for Achieving your Vision of Professional Development which was named best book of the year by the National Council of Staff Development while the Study Guide for Classroom Assessment was also honored by Division H at AERA.

A report may go through several internal review iterations before it is approved, as was the case with several papers in our briefing materials. If appropriate, a methodological review will also be undertaken.

1. Strengths

Studies are built upon understandings of the literature and effective practices. They are building professional development models for teachers that are based on best practices. It is particularly noteworthy that they are developing materials for use in preservice education as well.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Consistent quality of reviews.

Clarify meaning of research based.

3. Recommendations

Carry out external review of publications by knowledgeable experts.

IV. Utility

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

According to the clients we interviewed, SERVE is doing an outstanding job of providing useful services for its clients. Of particular note is the consistency of quick response and the willingness of SERVE people to go the extra mile to provide high quality and useful services.

In speaking with members of the board of directors, the utility of SERVE products was suggested several times. In particular, one board member mentioned the work in charter schools as being very helpful. Another cited the high quality publications that made research accessible to principals and teachers. Other clients of the Signature 1 and 2 projects repeated over and over again that they did not know how they could have done this work without SERVE's help and assistance.

“It is incomprehensible that we could have made progress in the district without SERVE”

“Senior Project has changed the culture of the school system by focusing attention on the process by which all children can leave public education as critical thinkers, collaborative workers and productive citizens ...this starts in kindergarten.”

“SERVE is there every year ---it doesn't go away”

1. Strengths

-- SERVE is addressing significant issues and problem areas.

- SERVE provides timely and responsive products.
- SERVE provides products that can be accessed by different means.
 - web pages
 - video
 - print
 - CD-ROM

2. Areas in need of improvement

- increase visibility of products to a national audience.

3. Recommendations

None

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

1. Strengths

The Lab is focused on the needs of its clients. It assesses customer needs at least annually, at the Forum meeting. SERVE has a system in place to track the requests for materials and services. But, this system does not contain information about who is using the Lab services or how frequently they may be using it. There is not a system in place for identifying potential customers and so it does not conduct extensive outreach activities by this means. They are more interested in serving the current clients than reaching out to new ones.

Customer satisfaction surveys routinely accompany their training sessions. They find that the customers rate the training sessions highly for organization and clarity of presentation. For example, in the schoolwide improvement planning process they report that 94 percent of participants responded that the overall organization of the session was good or excellent. Some 91 percent reported that the clarity was good or excellent.

SERVE also deserves high marks for using different media to get across its message. Printed reports, from research books to brochures are probably the most frequently used means

of communication. In addition, SERVE produces a number of videos, from 8-minute overviews to full-blown training tapes, such as the one to accompany Awesome Beginnings.

They are to be commended for placing the TOOLKIT98 materials on CD-ROM so that one need not carry around a 6-inch notebook to have access to the TOOLKIT.

Finally, the website is excellent, providing a rapid and efficient overview of their programs and linking to other Lab and educational websites that are relevant.

SERVE does not routinely publish its materials in Spanish and English. They do however, have Family Connections translated into Spanish.

SERVE is committed to providing products and services to its clients.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Tracking system for monitoring use and access to SERVE products is needed.

3. Recommendations for improvement

SERVE could play an important leadership role in recognizing that as Labs get increasingly into the business of school improvement activities, there is an increasing need to monitor and follow schools and even students who have contacted/participated in SERVE projects. To the extent that the Labs use common definitions of key data items and follow consistent formats, they may be able to create a powerful database for analyses in this period of significant school change. The various Labs have the important information about implementation that is so important for understanding the insides of school reform.

V. Outcomes and impacts

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

There is a great reluctance or at least very slow movement toward measuring school success in these projects. There are, however, some indicators of success. In the Student Assessment project (SW#1), an intensive implementation site, the major way that outcomes on students are assessed is by examining teacher perceptions of student reaction to the use of authentic assessment in their classrooms. The results were obtained for over 1000 teachers in Bay District Schools, Florida and showed by and large a positive effect of the use of alternative assessment on engagement and enjoyment of the task.

In the School Improvement Process (SW #2), the evidence connecting SERVE's work to student outcomes is indirect. A principal reports "our reading scores had tremendous gains. In grade three, the reading score went from 33 percent to 53 percent. There is a general attitude of improvement in the school--all around--the children are happier." Another teacher reports:

"Based on informal analysis, we have had unbelievable gains in reading. Other impacts include more family involvement and a feeling of pride in the school...."

A district instructional coordinator reports: "We have had steady increases in reading test score in the last three years. We have hit the 50 percent (national percentile) on ITBS. This year's scores are positive...."

1. Strengths

Projects address student outcomes.

2. Areas in need of improvement

Limited incorporation of evaluation design at beginning of project.

3. Recommendations

Conceptualize the process of effects on students and incorporate measures consistent with this conceptualization.

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

The REL excels at working with schools and localities to implement comprehensive school reform. The collaborative activities under the CSRD initiatives directly affect comprehensive school reform. The location of policy analysts in the state education agencies assures their ability to be responsive to states. The policy analysts perform invaluable services to the states and to SERVE.

1. Strengths

Many of the schools that are to be recipients of the CSRD dollars are in SERVE's region. SERVE is helping many schools in this process early on.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Hopefully, as the REL assists states in comprehensive school reform, this endeavor can have a direction besides serving every school in the region. Why not be purposive about growth in assisting states to implement comprehensive school reform in order to learn something about when, where, and how reform works? To learn about how reform works, we need carefully crafted comparisons of conditions of effectiveness. How do you scale up unless you understand when things work. If one size does not fit all, are there no sizes that fit most? Purposive selection of sites to add to the understandings of when and how reform works may be a useful investment. Growth without such a plan just increases your workload without adding systematic information.

3. Recommendations

Continue to assist states and localities, but select them in such a way that will magnify chances of understanding when, where, and how comprehensive school reform works.

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

The various researchers at SERVE have not as a group published very much in refereed journals. They have published their work as SERVE reports and on the internet. The reports are primarily available through these two avenues.

1. Strengths

SERVE is focusing on very important topics for which there is a great need for research and professional development activities.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Need to focus studies strategically.

3. Recommendations

None

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

Overall, SERVE is conducting timely and usable research and development work. In many of the categories reviewed here, SERVE was performing at expectations.

1. Strengths

The overall strengths of SERVE include:

- the decentralized management structure
- the recent reorganization

- locating policy analysts at the state level
- the responsiveness to the clients needs
- focus on important issues in educational reform
- highly skilled and dedicated staff
- understanding the region and its context
- networking and alliances
- strong board of directors
- support from University
- focus on preservice education

2. Areas of needed improvement

- Improve and extend national audience and reputation, especially in area of early childhood
- Cross project exchange of information, strategies needs to be more effectively done
- Limited attention to publishing at conferences and in refereed journals
- Limited attention to impact on students
- Limited consideration of student voice
- Uneven attention to quality of literature reviews
- Failure to use diversity in research sites as parameters in studying school reform and scaling up
- Limited availability of products in Spanish
- Lack of national advisory panel to advise on substantive and methodological direction
- Lack of attention to tension between responsiveness and maintaining sense of forward direction for organization
- Lack of data system needed to respond to project and management needs

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

1. Strengths

The ability to effectively collaborate with various stakeholders and to form strategic alliances is an important strength of this regional educational Lab. They are excellent at circling an issue, serving as a catalyst for interest and focus on it, and then convening bodies of people to collaborate on finding solutions to it. They catalyze and convene. The REL is actively collaborating with other regional Labs, including SEDL, NWREL, and many state Departments of Education and other interested parties to education. The staff of the Laboratory are excellent networkers and are able to make strategic alliances among the education community. Another strength is that the REL is engaged in significant work, of high quality and utility. The new work associated with the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration is one example here.

Now for three areas of needed improvement.

First, in the future, studies need to consider student outcomes and effects directly. The utility of the work is reduced because the effects on student outcomes are not considered. Granted there are complexities in studying and interpreting effects, it is still important to do. Also, effects do not have to be discussed only on traditional measures.

Second, more attention to selection of school sites should be given to insure variation in important demographic and contextual factors in the studies. Many times in the studies, schools seemed to be in a study because they were nominated by someone from AEL or the Board of Directors. One advantage of purposive selection and recruitment of schools with certain demographics is that it could inform our understanding of what types of things seem to work in what kinds of schools. This could be valuable insight into your school reform work with CSRD.

Third, as was discussed many times over the last five days, there is a need to become clients for each other's work. Information about strategies, findings and myriad other things found in one project can and should inform the work of others.