

Archived Information

Interim Western Regional Educational Laboratory Evaluation Synthesis Report: *Summary & Commentary by WestEd*

Introduction

In April 1999 a panel of peer reviewers/evaluators conducted, on behalf of the United States Department of Education and its contractor, Decision Information Resources, Inc., an interim evaluation of WestEd's 1995-2000 Western Regional Educational Laboratory [WREL] program. The panel subsequently submitted a series of reports, including a synthesis. This document offers WestEd's commentary to a summary of that synthesis report.

The interim evaluation provided WestEd with an excellent opportunity to present key components of our work and to benefit from the perspectives and insights of a distinguished, professional panel.¹ Along with our agency's ongoing review procedures — including active oversight by our Board — this assessment will help us shape the remainder of the Western Regional Educational Laboratory contract to best advantage. Additionally, the panel's findings provide important input to future WREL work.

We agree with the report's general findings and recommendations. They reflect a careful analysis by panel members of available materials and information, recognize WestEd strengths and accomplishments, and target for attention important issues for emphasis at this stage of our contract work from the Office of Educational Research & Improvement [OERI].

The panel's advice focused on these three themes:

1. Continue our agency's focus on impact while producing further documentation and evidence of results.
2. Capitalize on WestEd's strong R&D work as we further disseminate information about concepts, approaches, outcomes, and lessons learned.
3. Proceed with our current efforts to extend — beyond the regional laboratory contract — strong, flexible, and on-going program coherence.

In the pages that follow we address each in turn.

¹ Professor Robert Donmoyer, of Ohio State University, chair; professor Jamal Abedi, of UCLA; Betty Mace-Matluck, independent consultant; Jessie Pollack of the Maryland Department of Education; and, Joyce Stern, an independent consultant and former United States Department of Education staff member.

1. Continue WestEd’s focus on impact as we produce additional documentation and evidence of results.

The panel recognized that a central goal of WestEd’s work is to make a difference in the lives of children. The reviewers also observed the complexities of work focused on helping clients change policies, systems, and practices in ways that will lead to improved student outcomes. The panelists’ reports cited convincing evidence of WestEd’s impact at multiple levels, e.g., “One chief state school officer indicated that WestEd’s assistance was critical to implementing an omnibus educational reform bill passed by the state legislature. We also heard compelling testimony about WestEd’s impact at the school and school district levels.”² For example, WestEd’s work has resulted in —

- the development of an entire, new assessment system in one state,
- significant improvements reported in school districts’ capacity to report and analyze standards-based student achievement,
- newly appropriate responses by teachers to issues of cultural diversity, and
- parents ending their drug habit and finding jobs to support their children.

Our challenge is to assure that these changes translate into positive outcomes for children, to learn more about what works, and, as urged by the panel, to benefit from any failures.

The external reviewers appropriately observed that WestEd should increase efforts to document our work’s impact on students. We are pleased that as many WREL developmental projects mature, with assessments of that work yielding data, such evidence is mounting. By the end of the 1998-99 school year, for example, we have gathered information unavailable at the time of the panelists’ April visit; for example —

- Two Kyosei schools — intensive sites working with WestEd on standards-based practice — were rated in an external evaluation conducted by Stanford University as achieving significant improvement in student outcomes,
- With WestEd support, the passing rate on Nevada’s high school proficiency test has increased from 50% to 94%,
- Families supported through Marin City Families First — our interagency development project providing family visits and advocacy — demonstrated

² Donmoyer, Robert, “Interim Evaluation of the WestEd Regional Educational Laboratory — Synthesis Report, June 1999, 29 pgs.

significantly greater use of positive parenting techniques (in videotaped interactions between parents and children) as compared to a control group.

The panel recommended that we intensify efforts through the current WREL contract period to evaluate the depth and breadth of impact on students and the factors that contribute to it. We concur. Such a pursuit is consistent with direction set by WestEd’s Board of Directors, which recognizes the tension between responding to requests for service and maintaining an R&D agency’s responsibility to document and analyze outcomes. The Board has directed staff to look for additional opportunities to better evaluate our work for the purpose of helping educators in the region make better, data-based decisions.

It has been our intention to spend more of the final year of this OERI contract evaluating the effects of our work. Specifically, we will work to increase client survey response through additional follow-ups, including telephone interviews to trace impact and strengthen the technical quality of our evaluations. Additionally, our WREL quality assurance activities will more effectively integrate across programs both information gathering and reporting. We also expect to contract with an independent organization to document our efforts to extend work already identified as effective or exemplary.

2. Capitalize on WestEd’s strong R&D work as we further disseminate information about concepts, approaches, outcomes, and lessons learned.

An effective regional education laboratory provides useful service while also developing products, tools, strategies, and research insights to inform and support others. Such an R&D institution also documents what work has made a difference, analyzes how and why changes occurred, and makes such resulting knowledge widely available.

The review panel noted “considerable evidence that WestEd produces high quality products and services.” And it observed that “to date, WestEd has made generous use of the Internet to develop and disseminate its products and services.” The reviewers then called upon us to “get the word out” faster and with even greater emphasis.

Focusing more intently on disseminating results during the final stage of the WREL contract has been, in fact, WestEd’s intention. Our Communications program is actively engaged in collaborative work with program staff to produce high quality, timely publications and recently identified 13 such products in some stage of development.

The panel also urged greater use of professional journals as a dissemination vehicle, including widely distributed practitioner publications and refereed, academic journals. An important staff focus in upcoming months will be to increase current efforts to seek publication in these arenas; we agree that such outlets offer unique opportunities to assure that the results of our work better inform research and practice.

We continue to refine our dissemination efforts via the Internet and traditional print. WestEd recently improved the utility of and access to Web information through more interactive designs, ones which allow users to add information and pose questions to others. Our newsletter has been transformed to address in depth, singular, enduring issues of interest to the region.

Informational dissemination through products and publications is only part of our broader charge to affect educational reform. The panel recognizing the complexity and sophistication of WestEd's approach to "working at scale" and embedding products within extensive and often collaborative service provision, said it was "...impressed by [our] effort to move beyond simple-minded...conceptions of scaling-up..." We were encouraged by the reviewers to pursue "...further experimentation in this area," which is our intention. For example, we will broaden our current use of a "co-development" model, one which we've found insures user access to and ability to use tools and information.

3. Proceed with our current efforts to extend — beyond our regional educational laboratory contract — strong, flexible, and on-going WestEd program coherence.

The review panel found that WestEd "...exceeds expectations for carrying out the scope of work for most projects." It observed that we stay the course on persistent issues, leverage other resources to build a stronger body of coherent work, and maintain flexibility and responsiveness to changing conditions. Reviewers cited examples of WestEd appropriately responding to changing needs, such as new state reform legislation. Their report commends the agency for supplementing our WREL contract with additional resources to build stronger institutional capacity so as to respond better to client and research needs.

Gathering resources widely to respond to regional needs is an important WestEd organizational goal. Doing so helps produce programmatic coherence. We work hard to multiply efforts targeted at high-priority issues. (An example of such a critical area of need, and one that will received our increased attention throughout the upcoming WREL

contract period, is that of cultural diversity and children’s English language acquisition.) We are pleased with the panel’s recognition of our efforts to bring coherence and integration to our program work, and we strongly agree with its charge to continue and extend that pursuit.

The report, while describing the strong role of WestEd’s Board in validating needs assessment, overseeing quality assurance, and setting policy direction, suggests a reexamination of whether teachers’ voices are adequately represented in Board deliberations. As an agency, we recognize the central role of teachers and strive to meet their needs; teachers are actively involved in shaping and participating in most of our work. Additionally, we intend to explore ways to strengthen formal teacher input to broader institutional planning.

Our Board’s External Relations Committee, which addresses governance issues, has begun to examine ways in which future Board appointments might include more classroom teachers. As the Western Regional Educational Laboratory works to more effectively and equitably respond to needs throughout our four-state region, we will also consider greater use of teacher advisory groups, on-line teacher communities, and targeted focus groups.

We were pleased to find in the reviewers’ report several suggestions about how OERI can best manage and support effective laboratory operations. We agree with its citation of the agency’s contacts with our OERI program liaison as a model mechanism for supporting flexible and rapid response to changing conditions.

In stressing the need for continuity, the panel’s report cited the success of WestEd’s *Assessment Toolkit* project — built directly on prior efforts in another contract. It encouraged OERI “to make sure continuity issues are considered...for the next funding cycle.” The time required to initiate and conduct major field development, complete systematic evaluation, and disseminate broadly typically requires more than a single, five-year effort. Continuity over an extended period would help assure efficient and effective development of capacity.

Summary

WestEd appreciates the external evaluation panel’s careful assessment of our work and its clear and constructive recommendations. We agree that continuing and strengthening our focus on impact, quality assurance procedures, and dissemination will benefit this agency and the schools, teachers, and children we serve.