

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the WestEd Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory Activities

The interim evaluation of the WestEd Regional Laboratory took place at the Laboratory headquarters in San Francisco, California from April 12 to 16, 1999. This individual report is based on the following data sources: (1) the voluminous written materials sent to reviewers prior to the evaluation visit; (2) presentations during the week long visit by the Lab staff on various aspects of the Lab program, including operations and management, the two signature programs selected for review (The Nevada State Strategy and the Western Assessment Collaborative), and a number of other programs or components of programs funded primarily or exclusively by the OERI contract; (3) a group interview with seven Board members who WestEd had invited to the Lab for this purpose (This group included the Board chair (a business retiree) as well as a state superintendent, two deputy superintendents at the state level, a district level superintendent, and two district assistant superintendents; the group had at least two representatives from three of the four states served by the Lab, though no representation from the fourth state.); (4) a group interview with three invited clients (a superintendent along with a state superintendent and a district-level assistant superintendent who were also Board members and participated in the Board interview) of the first signature program; (5) interviews with 11 clients of the second signature program selected by the Lab (This group included state and county level administrators, district and building level administrators, a teacher who also served as her school's reform coordinator, and a private consultant who had used training materials produced by the second signature project.); (6) three clients of two other WestEd programs; numerous question and answer sessions (both formal and informal, extended and brief) with WestEd staff; (7) additional written

material provided by WestEd staff in response to questions and concerns raised by panel members; and (8) extended conversations with my fellow evaluation team members.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what it was approved to do during the first three contract years?

Strengths

Most of the work proposed to be done during the first three years of the Lab's contract has, in fact, been done. The obvious exceptions to this statement are the Success for All and Roots and Wings projects which had to be abandoned when the developer of these reform models removed the two programs from the federally funded center in which they had been housed when WestEd's proposal had been submitted. The developer placed the models in a nonprofit foundation he created to do what WestEd had intended to do.

Because the decision to place Success for All and Roots and Wings in a private foundation was made unilaterally by those who "owned" the projects, WestEd can not be held responsible for this action. Furthermore, my colleagues and I are convinced that the funds, which had been allocated to the above two projects, had been reallocated appropriately to other Lab projects such as WAC and America Reads. More importantly, the OERI official charged with monitoring the Lab's activities had been well briefed on this situation and approved WestEd's plans to regroup.

In fact, this program officer has an in depth knowledge of all the Lab's activities by virtue of her nearly daily long distance contact with WestEd staff and her attendance twice a year at WestEd Board meetings. Because of this knowledge and the relationship which spawned it (One WestEd official described the relationship as follows: "She is our greatest advocate and our

greatest critic.) federal oversight can be accomplished without unduly inhibiting organizational flexibility. Consequently, when the Success-for-All crisis appeared, WestEd was able to act expeditiously to regroup and reallocate its resources without submitting detailed paperwork and waiting for approval from individuals in Washington with less than adequate background knowledge. This sort of flexibility is also important for meeting OERI's expectation that Labs be responsive to clients and to emerging needs in their regions. Because of WestEd's relationship and the opportunities for informal oversight which follow from it, WestEd could quickly respond when Nevada, somewhat unexpectedly, passed an omnibus educational reform bill in 1997 and California passed an "English only" proposition. No bureaucratic hurdles had to be jumped before WestEd's program of work could take into account these significant state-level policy shifts

Fulfilling expectations – such as the expectation about client and situational responsiveness – which were articulated in the original RFP maybe as important as doing the specific work specified in the Labs refunding proposal or turning in the deliverables promised. If this is the criterion used to judge WestEd, the center once again fulfills expectations. The Nevada State Strategy, which was one of the Lab's signature programs in this evaluation, is not only an example of responding quickly to client needs and changes in the policy landscape; it also is a very good example of how to help clients "put the pieces together" at the state level. The bedrock of WAC, the Lab's other signature program, is an initiative which attempts to create buy-in for standards based reform – and generate the skills which will make a reform effort built around standards viable – at the school building and the district levels.

WestEd's efforts may be even more noteworthy in the "scaling up" area. Traditional mechanistic approaches to scaling up no longer seem viable since the famous Rand report

authored by Berman and McLaughlin demonstrated that local buy-in and local adaptation are required to make innovations stick. Those in charge of the second signature program discussed above – and many of WestEd’s other programs as well – are aware of this study and the many subsequent studies which confirmed its major insights. Consequently, WestEd personnel are trying to find ways to scale up which are consistent with what we have learned about innovation and change over the past thirty years. One of many examples is the rethinking of the training of trainers strategy which WAC developers created when they were forced to use this approach to respond to an Arizona request to provide WAC-like experiences in all Arizona schools. In essence, the rethinking makes trainees co-constructors of the substance of what they are being trained in. The jury is still out – and systematic data have yet to be collected – on the effectiveness of this and other innovative strategies for scaling up developed by the Lab; at this point, however, it is appropriate to applaud the Lab’s efforts to move beyond simple-minded (and largely discredited) conceptions of the scaling up concept and to encourage further experimentation with approaches which appear more consistent with decades of implementation research.

Finally, it should be noted that the Lab can do what OERI expects it to do because it leverages many additional funding sources. Before arriving on site, I, along with some other panel members, were a bit concerned that the OERI goals might be dwarfed by goals of other projects given the fact that OERI funding represents only a fraction of the WestEd budget. At the very least, we feared that WestEd may have not “put the pieces together” in it’s own back yard, and that the organization was little more than a confederation of disjointed programs taken on more to generate dollars than to accomplish a reasonably coherent mission. We pushed WestEd officials and WestEd Board members hard on this issue and eventually became convinced by what

they said and the evidence they produced (including a set of guidelines RFP which had been prepared three years prior to the evaluation for use when deciding whether or not to respond to a particular) that efforts are being made to “put the pieces together” at WestEd as well as in the public education system. Furthermore, we began to see WestEd’s many other contracts as assets rather than as liabilities in achieving OERI goals. Among other things, WestEd’s large resource base means that WestEd can employ a large number of experts in a great many areas. Many of these experts were called into play after Nevada passed its omnibus educational reform bill and state officials asked WestEd for assistance in everything from critiquing and eventually fixing problematic language arts standards to developing a high stakes testing program mandated by the legislature to responding to legislative mandates related to technology.

Areas of Needed Improvement

In organizations, as in life in general, positives have a flip side and that is certainly the case with an organization with the size and scope of WestEd. We were convinced that the organization was striving valiantly to create coherence. Among the things that convinced us was the CEO’s understanding of this issue, the establishment of a leadership team to insure that leaders in the organization were aware of what other leaders’ groups were doing, a process to internally review manuscripts which kept people informed of what others were doing, and a number of other processes and procedures we heard about including a set of five framing questions which are used to critique all Lab initiatives. On the other hand, the ongoing effort to bring some semblance of coherence to an organization with the size and scope of WestEd cannot be underestimated and WestEd officials should be encouraged to keep this goal front and center in their thinking and continue to be proactive in this regard. Because we have seen evidence that issues of coherence have been proactively addressed in the recent past, this suggestion is not so

much an “area of needed improvement,” the category prescribed by the organizational format I have been asked to use in preparing this report; rather it is an area which must be continually addressed, and the leadership of WestEd are encouraged to continue there current efforts in this regard.

A second suggestion is also not so much an area needing improvement; rather it is more a suggestion to extend something which is currently going well. It makes sense to extend the opportunities for contact between the Lab and its OERI program officer. This relationship has worked exceedingly well. Both Lab officials and the program officer could cite specific changes in Lab operations which came about because of the program officer’s suggestions for improvement. At the very least, funding should be provided so the program officer could attend all four of WestEd’s yearly Board meetings rather than just two. Of course, it should be noted that increased direct contact is a necessary not a sufficient condition to make the informal oversight relationship work. Credit for the successful working relationship must also be given to the particular individuals involved in the relationship. In this case, they are open with each other and dedicated to improving the WestEd OERI program. Increasing direct contact between a program officer and the Lab he or she oversees may not always be a wise expenditure of taxpayer dollars; in this instance, past activity suggests such expenditures would be a very good investment indeed.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. Continue to attempt to “put the pieces together” at WestEd so the many funded programs will serve as leverage for accomplishing REL goals rather than as a distraction.
2. Consider arranging for even more direct contact between WestEd and the OERI program officer (through, for example, providing funding so she can attend all four Board meetings each year rather than only two) so federal oversight be even more

informal; reliance on rules and regulations for oversight purposes interferes with creating a responsive, client-centered organization.

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

Strengths

WestEd uses a largely informal, but highly effective approach to needs assessment. A key actor in the process is the state liaison who spends considerable time in the state attending meetings and talking with key stakeholders and does more mundane things such as reading the daily newspapers from the state's major metropolitan areas. We did not have an opportunity to gather evidence on the performance of all state liaisons, but evidence gathered about the effectiveness of the Lab's first signature program suggests that the person filling the liaison role in that state was exceedingly effective in scanning the environment for emergent and salient policy issues.

Board dialogue is used to validate information gathered informally. Once again, some team members—including me—initially were a bit skeptical about this part of WestEd's operation. We were familiar with Boards who functioned in largely ceremonial ways; their efforts at policy setting for their organizations were basically procedural display since, normally, they simply rubberstamped the recommendations of their organization's CEO. An extended group interview with representatives from the WestEd Board made believers of us because, among other things, the interviewees could point to specific occasions when they overruled staff decisions or took the lead in certain initiatives. An example of the former situation was the staff response to the English only initiative; an example of the latter was WestEd's affirmative action policy. After our interview, I—and I believe my colleagues—were convinced that the Board was, indeed, an

appropriate and effective organization to validate conclusions about needs and an appropriate group to judge whether the Lab's work represents an appropriate response to these needs. This group seems especially appropriate because it includes the active participation of major actors in the educational policymaking process in the four states served by WestEd.

Areas of Needed Improvement

Since dialogue with and among Board members is used to validate information gathered through informal needs assessment procedures as well as to pass judgement on the quality and appropriateness of the work done by the Lab, who is—and who is not—at the Board table is a significant issue. Some of my colleagues and I worry that teachers voices may not be adequately represented on the Board. We also worry that, in some instances, Board members may not have the technical expertise required to assess proposed, in-progress, or already completed work. Both Board members and members of the WestEd staff dismissed these concerns somewhat cavalierly when peer reviewers raised them. I urge more careful consideration of these issues. I particularly encourage the staff and Board to study whether teacher voices are able to be heard in the Board context and to realize that token representation of teachers may not be adequate. The worlds of policy and practice are often, at best, parallel universes and, at worst, totally disconnected places. Educational issues frequently look different from the vantage point of the classroom than they do from the policy vantage point. Board dialogue about WestEd programs and priorities would undoubtedly be enriched if a number of articulate teachers participated.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. Consider whether teachers are adequately represented on WestEd's Board and whether there is adequate technical expertise in critical issue areas.

III. Quality

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

Questions of quality are difficult to answer because implicit in them are questions of criteria and most of us realize that different people invoke different criteria when assessing a product's or program's worth. If we measure quality by considering impact, we would have to conclude that most of WestEd's services and many of its products have exceedingly high quality. This is made clear in the section on impact below. On the other hand, what people want is not necessarily what people need. WestEd's leadership certainly understands this distinction.

The elements of the WestEd program which my teammates and I reviewed suggest that (1) most of the WestEd staff have exceedingly good people skills and exceedingly high social intelligence and, consequently, they are effective in hearing what people want and responding to people's needs; (2) most staff members are also quite competent in their particular areas of expertise; (3) organizational norms and standard operating procedures support being responsive to clients; (4) staff members have, at times, been able to respond to client requests even when they are a bit problematic by being inventive and rethinking old and tired ideas like "training the trainers"; (5) even when they are not asked to do the R and D equivalent of "leaping tall buildings in a single bound," WestEd staff members seldom take the easy way out, whether the decision is to work with the "bruised and battered" service organizations in the Marin City program rather than directly with clients, to respond in an extensive and coordinated way to a whole state's reform initiative as is the case in the Nevada and Arizona state strategies, or to build understanding about standards based reform in the school and community or coordinate school support services, both of which WAC is attempting to do. Though measures of impact on student learning are not available and measures of impact on the system are sometimes more informal than

systematic, the evidence that does exist suggests that WestEd is doing good things in schools, school districts and state level policy making organizations. WestEd also seems to be developing valuable and at times strikingly novel insights about the reform process in education and how that process can be supported. (Unfortunately, few of these insights about reform and the support of reform have been documented and disseminated to date.)

The quality of the products that do exist is often—though not always--good. The Lab should be commended for experimenting with alternatives to print as a way of communicating its products. The organization also should be applauded for recently hiring individuals to improve the look and consistency of the Lab's publications. This effort to improve publication quality primarily will address issues of form rather substance, however.

Areas of Needed Improvement

One would hope that, at this interim point, product development might be speeded up a bit, though doing this will require potentially problematic tradeoffs. Development of quality products takes time and energy away from the Lab's technical assistance and services work, and this may make clients who look to the Lab for help unhappy and make staff members who have been socialized to respond to clients needs uncomfortable. On the other hand, one way to "scale up" is to create materials and disseminate ideas which will get played out in a broader arena.

The quality of products is even more important than their quantity, however. This is especially so because people look to the Lab for assistance and, consequently, its impact is relatively great (see below). It is especially important that research reports be of high quality since a research report distributed by the Lab will, by being a Lab publication, have a good chance of getting into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. Some of my colleagues and I have some reservations about the quality of some of the research publications we reviewed. Literature

reviews were not always as inclusive as we believe they could and should have been and, in at least one instance, recommendations were made despite the fact that the statistical analysis performed revealed no significant difference.

Several of the panel members were surprised by the paucity of publications in major research journals or even in influential practitioner/policymaker journals such the Kappan and Educational Leadership. We realize that a Lab is not a university or even one of the federally funded centers, and, consequently, we would not expect the sort of research publication output we would expect of those who work in such places. We do expect more of an effort than the Lab was able to document, however, not just because such publications represent the use of high impact dissemination forums in the field, but also—and this is the important point here—because the peer review process in research journals, at least—however imperfect it might be—is the one quality control mechanism the research community provides for its members. I should add that the proposal review process for the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (The briefing materials we received included a lengthy list of presentation to be made at the upcoming meeting of this organization.) is not a substitute for journal review since, relatively speaking, it is easy to get on the AERA program because reviews are normally less than rigorous.

To the extent that WestEd claims to be doing research—and that claim is and, I believe, ought to be made—the quality control mechanism provided for researchers by the research community should be utilized more extensively than is currently done. Certainly, most major journals have loosened up their definitions of research sufficiently so that the sort of applied research WestEd does would be accepted for publication if done well. OERI might consider

letting drafts of articles, which can be submitted to research journals, substitute for technical reports that seldom get read.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. Reconsider the policy not to encourage the use of work time—at least work time under the REL contract—to prepare research publications for peer reviewed journals so that Lab employees can take advantage of the one quality control mechanism for research provided by the research community.
2. Clarify the target audience for publications and write accordingly.
3. Increase the quantity and quality of products.

IV. Utility

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

Strengths

The customers we interviewed certainly found WestEd’s services useful. Although this evidence was primarily in the form of testimonials, the testimonials included a great deal of specificity about what happened because of WestEd interventions. Whether it was a chief state school officer describing the assessment expertise which WestEd staff had and her staff lacked; a principal describing how WAC provided her, her staff, and parents a common language to make sense of and communicate about standards and assessment; a classroom teacher describing how Bridging Cultures impacts day to day interactions in his building; or two former drug dependent mothers describing how Families First helped them get off drugs, get back to school, get good paying jobs, and improved their parenting skills, the specificity in the stories told gave the stories the ring of truth, not normally a characteristic of testimonial data. In addition, many staff

members' descriptions of their own work and the evidence they provided (e.g. lists of presentations made to major decision making bodies) also made a convincing case that WestEd's services were useful and used. The Language and Cultural Diversity group's efforts to respond to the passage of California's "English only" proposition, for instance, were extensive, highly appropriate, and quite sophisticated. The demand for these services clearly is increasing, not just in California but in neighboring states which want to learn from the California experience.

Areas of Needed Improvement

There is a need to document and disseminate information about how WestEd staff members play the support service role and to describe what the various strategies employed by WestEd reveal about supporting educational reform. It may not be appropriate for WestEd staff to do this sort of work. Beyond the time issue, there are credibility problems when people write about their own work (even in an era in which action research has achieved at least a modicum of respectability). Furthermore, it may be politically difficult for WestEd staff to attribute success to their efforts in the policy process, even if such attribution is appropriate. For these and other reasons, research into the Lab's contributions to the policy process in general and educational reform in particular may have to be done by researchers/evaluators who come from outside the Lab structure.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. OERI should consider funding an individual or organization from outside WestEd to study and disseminate findings about the strategies WestEd has developed to support educational policymaking and reform.

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

Strengths

WestEd is not only committed to responding to customer's needs; it also defines the term *customers* broadly. In much of the Nevada state strategy, for instance, WestEd staffers are working with and assisting major state policymakers and significant policymaking organizations. This initiative also responded to a request from rural administrators to help them write a grant to provide technology training for staff members in their five rural districts. Similarly, the WAC clients include school and district personnel, but also leaders of organizations which support schools as they attempt to bring about educational reform at the school building level. WestEd staff also are struggling with how to scale up their work in nonmechanistic ways so there work can be useful to a wider audience. Insights from the Parents First initiative, for instance, are now being repackaged and are about to be disseminated in their repackaged form through an early head start program in one of the states served under the REL contract.

Areas of Needed Improvement

Innovative, nonmechanistic ways to scale up the work done in a small number of sites or with a small number of participants must continue to be sought. Clearly one form of scaling up is through the dissemination of ideas. Traditional publication outlets—both research journals which are rated high in terms of impact by the Social Science Citation Index and widely distributed practitioner journals such as the Phi Delta Kappan and Educational Leadership— seem to be underutilized at the moment.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. Continue to work on the scaling up problem and consider using traditional publication outlets to scale up and increase the utility of the work currently being conducted by disseminating insights generated by that work.

V. Outcomes and Impact

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

Strengths

In some cases this is not an appropriate question, at least not at this point in time. Much of the Lab's work in Nevada is geared toward implementing reform legislation passed by the legislator and signed by the governor. Thus, in this context, the REL will be successful in promoting student success to the extent that it contributes significantly to the implementation of the legislation and to the extent that the legislation, when implemented, does what it is designed to do. The evidence clearly supports the claim that WestEd staff have contributed in significant ways to implementation of the legislation; whether the legislation which is being implemented is, in fact, good legislation and will do what it is designed to do currently is not known. What can be said is that WestEd staff members have helped insure that standards which will guide Nevada students' education are of high quality and that assessment procedures and instruments are sound and as free of bias as a possible. These are no small accomplishments and might be seen as reasonable facsimiles for "contributing to improved student success."

The other signature program, WAC, can be expected to contribute to student success, at least that is an expressed goal of the program and of the standards based approach to education it espouses. Currently, however, it is too early to look at anything but system change variables, and,

even with these variables, there is limited systematically collected data. We can say that, in some sites, WAC has helped insure students will be assessed with multiple assessment tools, not just the norm referenced tests developed by the state and that WAC has helped both parents and teachers in some intensive research and development sites become more sophisticated about what traditional tests scores mean and what alternatives are available for assessing students.

Areas of Needed Improvement

A comprehensive evaluation plan for the WAC program needs to be developed and implemented. For political purposes, it would be helpful if outcome measures included indicators of student achievement. This may be difficult to do for a number of reasons. At the very least, however, some sort of formal evaluation of impact needs to be undertaken.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. Self-report data should be supplemented with more standardized measures of the WAC program's impact on research and development site schools. The feasibility of looking at the impact on student achievement should at least be given consideration.

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

Strengths

The chief state school officer of Nevada stated unequivocally that it would have been almost impossible to implement recent reform legislation without WestEd's help in the areas of standards development; developing assessment policies, strategies, and instruments; and developing a mandated statewide plan in technology. A district level administrator in the same state also spoke of the WestEd State liaison's invaluable assistance at the district level.

Similarly the Lab's other signature program, WAC, involves extensive assistance at both the district and the individual school levels. This program also responded to a request to train

trainers in each Arizona school, well as requests for training assistance from the California county offices.

A similar commitment to assisting state and/or local groups can be seen in the Bridging Cultures initiative, an initiative included in the Language and Cultural Diversity program, as well as in a number of other programs we heard and/or read about.

Areas of Needed Improvement

Understandably, there is a tendency to situate much of the Lab's research and development in California because of cost factors and convenience. Since it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between

Research and Development work, on the one hand, and technical assistance, on the other, there is a need to consider equity questions with respect to the services provided the different states served by the REL. Cost and convenience, in other words, should not be the only factors taken into consideration in selecting research and development sites.

Greater attention should be given to generating evidence, which would speak to the issue of program impact. This is difficult to do, of course, but this issue must be addressed as a prerequisite for having some audiences find the Lab's work credible and significant.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. Continue to be sensitive to the issue of equity across states.
2. Generate more evidence of program impact.

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

Strengths

Considerable evidence exists to indicate that the Lab's expertise in the area of assessment and accountability has been recognized in the region and the nation. The chief state school officer of Nevada indicated her department and other policy making groups relied extensively on WestEd's expertise in implementing the new reform legislation in her state; there was also evidence that Arizona called on WestEd for help. Nationally, during the past year alone, WestEd staff members have consulted in at least ten states including the state of Kentucky in which WestEd has a major contract. The Lab has also been successful in leading the Laboratory Network Program's effort to expand of the assessment toolkit.

Areas of Needed Improvement

One reason the Lab was successful in its cross-Lab leadership effort is that the current work built on earlier work. Unfortunately there is no mechanism to consider continuity in the development of future RFPs for RELs. There are also few if any incentives for other federally funded organizations to use jointly developed items such as the assessment toolkit.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. OERI should provide incentives other federally funded organizations to use items such as the assessment toolkit in their work with clients.
2. Those who develop RFPs for future REL competitions should attend to continuity issues when defining and eventually assigning Task 5 activities.

VI. Overall Evaluation of the Total Laboratory programs, Products and Services

The Laboratory is staffed with highly competent people in a diverse array of fields. Most of these people also have superb social skills. Consequently their services are very much in demand. They have assisted states in significant ways as state officials have attempted to organize the system around the concept of standards based reform. WestEd staff also have made significant contributions at the district and school levels.

WestEd's work has also netted important insights and knowledge for the field. WestEd's work is especially important because the WestEd staff has been exploring innovative ways of scaling up its work, ways which are not overly mechanistic but, rather, take into account thirty years of research on policy and program implementation.

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

Rather than write what would be, in essence, a second summary of the contents of this report, I will focus here on what I consider to be a major recommendation. The other peer reviewers and I were struck by the paucity of publications in research journals and even in journals read by practitioners and policymakers. I, and I think most of my colleagues, believe such publications should be increased for two reasons: Such publications represent an important dissemination vehicle for ideas, and the peer review process used by research journals, at least, provides an important quality control mechanism for the Lab's research work.