

# Archived Information

## Interim Evaluation of the WestEd Regional Educational Laboratory

### I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory

As an educational Laboratory contracted to the US Department of Education to serve the states of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, WestEd is both old and new. “Old” in that it derives from two regional entities of long standing—SWERL and FWL; “new” in that it was recently constituted from a merger of the two. One member of this merger, FWL, had received federal funding as an educational Laboratory for some time. But meanwhile, SWERL remained a viable educational service operation. The merger of these two vibrant organizations has brought to the field a large, intellectually strong, and experienced enterprise, whose potential to positively impact the world of education was well articulated in the technical proposal and operationalized in the activities and products observed by the evaluation panel.

The Department’s RFP required that Labs provide broad-based comprehensive school improvement strategies; conduct programs of development and applied research; promote widespread access to information about educational research and best practices; promote excellence and equity; enhance collaboration between schools and parents; involve practicing educators; provide access to services; and use advanced technologies in their operations. Priorities were for the Labs to “put the pieces together” to enhance systemic reform and to “scale up” reform for wider impact. Other requirements are that models be constructed in which technology is integral; ways to scale up are identified or produced; communities of learners are helped; Labs partner with others to further a nationwide education information and assistance system; and that links be forged with the research community. The status of Lab progress in

addressing these charges is presented below in the appropriate sections.

## **II. Implementation and Management**

### **A. To what extent is WestEd doing what it was approved to do during its first three contract years?**

#### **1. Strengths**

Administratively, WestEd is moving conscientiously to carry out the missions addressed in its technical proposal to the RFP. One administrative element that deserves to be highlighted in this report is the Governing Board, composed of prominent educators and other stakeholders in each of the four service states. The WestEd Board members who we met during our site visit were committed to the success of the Lab in carrying out its missions and to guarding its integrity. I observed that not only is it an active board, but one that, through a committee system, exercises both serious oversight and involvement with setting policy. Panel interviews with Board members also revealed strong confidence in WestEd administration and operations. New and veteran members expressed this. It was also evident that WestEd sees itself operating as partners with the Board, reporting to them fully and responsively. Collaboration as a goal thus begins at the top—between WestEd senior staff and WestEd’s Governing Board. One key example of Board influence on policy is its call for sustained Lab intervention in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah. This contributed to the creation of State Alliance Projects whereby WestEd works with state education leaders to further the capacity for reform. For example, WestEd helped the Nevada Alliance apply (successfully) for funding to carry out an extensive and long-term technology initiative in several rural schools in that state.

Impressions of high quality implementation achievements follow. The “Signature Work”

of the Nevada State Strategy is an example of Lab intervention at its finest. WestEd was uniquely positioned to assist the state at a critical hour when the state legislature passed the major reform bill of 1997. By “uniquely positioned,” I mean the professional link between the Lab and the state had a long history. Trust had been established. Members of the legislature and the SDE expressed full confidence in WestEd overall—as a resource for policy guidance and technical expertise--and in the Lab’s State Liaison in particular. For its part, expertise in the Lab permitted it to serve the state in terms of helping to draft legislation, and in participating in the standards setting required by the new law and the assessments to be crafted. Board members repeatedly voiced the opinion that “it [the law and SDE responsiveness to it] could not have happened without WestEd.” The story of WestEd’s role in helping to transform education in Nevada at this time—without infringing on the prerogatives of Nevadans—is one of “winners.” The legislature got what it sought, the SDE could meet the deadlines set by law, and WestEd further enhanced its professional reputation. Ultimate winners will be the children who will benefit from having a better education as a result. In the context of this evaluation, it must be said that the Nevada experience illustrates the full potential of what the federal government must have had in mind when it conceived the concept of “scaling up.” WestEd, with its in-house expertise, was able to translate a decade of relevant research and experience nationwide about standards and assessment into new operations for a state that some would say had generally not been in the forefront of education reform initiatives. In this instance, it can truthfully and with some wit be said that the Nevada strategy is “at scale.”

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

Despite numerous stellar examples of success, there were instances where WestEd progress did not go according to plan. This was most noticeable to me regarding what in the

proposal was a flagship program—the mission to expand in this region the Baltimore-based program, *Success for All*. It is clear from the quarterly reports that WestEd was having difficulty keeping pace to hire trainers for the number of schools that wished to adopt the program. But in the documents supplied to the review panel, the demise of the program received little mention, and then “disappeared,” leaving this reviewer to wonder what had happened to the program as well as to the personnel and federal dollars associated with it. While these concerns were dealt with responsively and responsibly on site, it would have been preferable had this (and other programmatic alterations) been noted in the printed material we received prior to our visit.

### **3. Recommendations**

This recommendation is directed as much to the evaluation contractor as to the Laboratory. For evaluation purposes, I suggest the status of programs be tracked or presented in some way that makes it clear to the reader what has happened in the case of programs that have either been radically overhauled or have dropped by the wayside for what ever reason. A long discussion is not necessary, but it is important for reviewers to know some specifics about program status, especially when one is dealing with the fate of a flagship program. Interestingly, the outside reviewers who preceded this panel to WestEd, made a similar observation.

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

##### **1. Strengths**

WestEd operates in a culture of “reflection.” During the first day’s briefing session, the panel was frequently reminded that self-monitoring was not an “event” but was on-going. Staff members continuously ask about their program’s progress, success in carrying out its mission, and its effects or what the Lab terms, its “impact.” Emerging from this culture of reflection, and

strongly influenced by the Board asking “Tell us what difference you have made” were five new framing questions that are to inform subsequent work of the Lab. They are:

- What do students have to know and be able to do?
- What evidence will show that they know it?
- What opportunities to learn are needed to assure that each student achieves?
- What professional and community capacities and systems supports are needed?
- What system policies and resources are needed?

Further, the Data Sources binder contained a section specifically addressing Quality Assurance and Evaluation. The “Update on WestEd Quality Assurance and Evaluation” was particularly useful, outlining the array of QA strategies:

- periodic assessment of client views (telephone survey)
- program portfolio reviews with the Board of Directors
- project/program-specific QA:

Some examples are (a) formal advisory group; (b) content review panels;

(c) external reviews by partners; (d) external reviews by peers; and (e) internal review by peers.

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

Having read the extensive materials provided, I still wondered how consistently the review process is actually applied. So I was glad to read that the Lab plans to have the programs “learn from one another” (p. 4), which should contribute to systemic improvement and the sought-for “coherence”. As a former editor, I can only underscore the need for rigorous prepublication review by content specialists.

Then there is the related issue of the kind of feedback WestEd gets on its products, e.g., print materials, videos, website—beyond orders placed and “hits.” The Director of Evaluation told us that all users are surveyed as to the quality and utility of the document they ordered. In this connection, The Quality Assurance and Evaluation tab included (3.7) the recent Program Evaluation and Quality Assurance Report submitted only last month to the Board. It reported a high level of customer satisfaction. However, the low response rate might call into question the validity of the findings.

### **3. Recommendations**

The “Product Quality Assurance and Marketability Review” now in process, may be addressing my concerns. Had there not been such a review underway, I would have recommended that an outside evaluator might look at some of these issues like front-end QA by content experts to ensure the most up-to-date thinking on a topic, and the question of customer assessments.

## **III. Quality**

### **To what extent is WestEd producing high quality products and services?**

#### **1. Strengths**

With the caveat that the evaluation panel was exposed to only a selective sample of products and was introduced to highlights of the sorts of services WestEd provides, the overall impression is quite positive. In the words of one Board member, “WestEd means ‘quality,’” and I saw nothing to challenge that view. A small number of examples will illustrate my point.

a) Print material: The monographs I personally examined—“Standards: From Documents to Dialogue”, the one addressing Proposition 227, and “Educating Limited-English Proficient

Students: a Review of the Research on School Programs and Classroom Practices,” are of high intellectual caliber and reflect the state of the art. (Indeed, the standards work of the Lab is cutting edge, to say the least.) For that matter, the capacity of WestEd staff generally to articulate clearly and present information in a tidy, readable way was reflected in the briefing materials –both in the materials prepared for that purpose and in documents prepared for other purposes and used illustratively in the review process.

b) Programs: One indicator of success in this category that I would like to address is “implements a coherent and sustained program of work.” I think WestEd seeks to excel in this regard, and largely succeeds in this ambition. While a few efforts seemed to have lagged, WestEd has been consistent in supporting the range of activities it set out to do with this federal contract. Also to the point, and I think this is critically important, the Lab strives for “coherence”--meaning, I understand, that each piece should inform the work of other pieces. The program assessment component, operating across all programs, is just the most obvious illustration. This point was stressed often in our briefings on site. In another illustration of coherence, it is noteworthy that WestEd has chosen to address, at some level, work in every pupil age group—from birth (e.g., Marin City Families First) to high school (e.g., Talent Development), and to address the interests of the range of critical stakeholders, from state officeholders (e.g., crafting legislation on prospective professional development centers in Nevada) to parents (e.g., Marin City Families First and the Western Assessment Collaborative--WAC), to limited English speakers (e.g., Bridging Cultures and across several programs). The result is that the Lab has something significant to contribute to the knowledge base for a range of student groups.

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

WestEd, from the testimonies of its users, is known and trusted in the region. However, my impression is that, except in academic circles, the work of the Lab is not well known otherwise. There does not seem to be a significant push to extend its knowledge resources beyond its regional boundaries and that is unfortunate because WestEd has much to teach others in national forums other than academic conferences. The list of publications in which staff members have published was useful to the review panel, though only half of the items were printed during this contract period. It showed the caliber of journals that accept REL work. However, only one *Kappan* piece was listed, and that is a representative vehicle that would be suitable to present information on much of the Lab's interventions.

## **3. Recommendations**

Because of the timeliness, relevance and quality of its work, I would like to see WestEd reach a larger audience. Perhaps this will be achieved with the push for cross-Lab collaboration and the charge to avoid duplication of effort. But what I am really talking about is having the work of the Lab get exposure in national magazines and journals—academic or popular, as appropriate—not merely for the sake of exposure, but so that what WestEd has learned can be imparted to others.

## **IV. Utility**

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

Refer to IV. B.

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

**1. Strengths**

WestEd revealed in its RFP an acute sensitivity to the needs of its region--in particular, the political focus on student assessment issues in all four states. Of course, the nature of this focus is very different in each state. In terms of on-going needs assessment, what emerged from my reading and visit was a sense of strong reliance by the Lab on the Governing Board and on the Lab's State Liaisons, as well as on partner interviews. For example, the updated plan for 1997 (p.15) noted the creation of these positions as "an institution-wide point of contact with every state in the region" with responsibilities including "contributing state-level data to WestEd's overall assessment of regional needs." The Operations Briefing book documented in considerable detail the process of Board input into the needs assessment process (2.4) in 1998, as well as WestEd responsiveness to that input. Finally, in talking to WAC clients brought to the Lab office for the evaluation site visit, it was clear that they were continually helping to shape and refine the work of that cutting edge initiative.

In this context, I would like to use this opportunity to revisit the role of the State Liaisons. It was abundantly clear from the written material and from the site visit, that these REL individuals play a central role in alerting the Lab to emerging issues in the states and in involving WestEd meaningfully in state education activities. State liaisons are pro-active, are known in their states, are a "presence" there, and are politically astute, knowing for example, if, when and how WestEd should seek to become involved. (While I am basing this assessment largely on my study of the Nevada project briefing book and on the Nevada liaison's presentation to the panel, it also came through for the other three states elsewhere in the materials supplied the panel, but most noticeably for Arizona.)

Some relevant observations to these two questions appear under Question 2, above, so I shall only make some additional ones here. Over the course of the contract, WestEd has sought to better serve its clients in a variety of ways. The Lab obtains feedback, e.g., from questionnaires after conferences and meetings, and on a continuing basis in its intervention activities. It is continuously asking if its strategy is working. Customer/client/partner input revises the intervention accordingly. I will give three examples:

- In the Marin City Families First project, the REL shifted from using paraprofessionals as family advocates to using professional caseworkers because higher skills were needed;
- In the Career Preparation Assessment project, the pilot resulted in program modification to obtain teacher buy-in. Now, most sites are using portfolio constructs altered to the site, rather than the original model. This has resulted in teacher commitment to the effort.
- This final example addresses a product prepared on request, rather than one in the original plan that had to be modified. The Lab at the request of state education officials in CA, prepared a briefing document on class size issues to prepare educators to deal with new legislation limiting class size in that state. This is a prime example of responsiveness to customer need and reflects as well the depth of in-house expertise that can be readily drawn upon in the REL.

## **V. Outcomes and Impact**

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

#### **1. Strengths**

At this point, the programs are of different maturity and so the answers must vary accordingly. The Marin City program, for example, has resulted in transforming the lives of those families affected. Marriages have been saved, client employment is up, youngsters are getting better parenting. Anecdotal evidence in the Career Preparation Assessment suggests the process

engages the pupils involved. Likewise, the professionals involved in the WAC project speak of transformed classrooms and children similarly engaged in learning, advances they attribute to the *Kyosei* Assessment Dialogues.

In addition, each of the REL programs to one degree, or another, “contributes to increased knowledge or understanding of educational problems, issues or effective strategies.”

Again, some illustrations will suffice:

- Marin City has documented a successful strategy to positively impact families afflicted by drug abuse and unemployment, while at the same time identifying ways to address the stressed government agencies that are supposed to be helping such families.
- *Kyosei* is meaningfully addressing how to change the school culture to benefit the entire student body through school and community involvement in standards and assessment.
- The REL papers on language instruction and on class size, both topics of “national significance,” are helping administrators and officials better grapple with these issues.

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

At this point, there is no student outcome data for the larger programs. This could possibly be a problem later on when the Lab program is being re-authorized. Happily, it seems that it is being addressed in the programs we examined. I do wonder in some cases, if it will be truly possible to attribute change to the intervention strategy.

## **3. Recommendations**

The Board calls for evidence of program impact, and “impact” has become a watchword in the Lab. Similarly, I urge the Lab to examine how to obtain outcome data for all its programs. In the context of the sought for “coherence,” perhaps a cross-project evaluation design could be developed.

A good example of where impact data was presented to the review panel during its site visit, is the Marin City handout that reported relevant results of this nature, e.g., number of adult clients going to school. Likewise, the 1997 performance plan report for all the Laboratories identified eight student impact indicators (Indicator 1.4). Most of these are applicable to the various WestEd interventions and could be considered, though I am sure there are many more that would be program-specific, as was the case with Marin City and the *Kyosei* Accountability Dialogues reflections in the Sources briefing book.

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

**1. Strengths**

The Lab recently received additional funds to help schools that received grants under the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program. It held a conference for schools in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah that had received funding under the new law to help them understand what was expected and to help them choose among program options. Staff depth on this issue makes WestEd uniquely positioned to carry out this mission. It is a prime example of the indicator of “facilitating widespread access to information on best practices.”

The WAC initiative is concentrated in a small number of CA and AZ sites and districts, but the potential for this model of democratic thinking about standards as a vehicle for profound reform is great. I personally hope it will be allowed to incubate, during which time measures of change can be designed so that its effectiveness on teachers and students can be measured and fully reflect impact of this dynamic approach to whole school reform.

The State Alliances, are very effective mechanisms for promoting whole school change. The Nevada example, cited in another context above, will bring technology into a number of

isolated and poor schools. Here WestEd not only “developed an appropriate alliance,” but also built the capacity of its partner sites.

CA’s backlash against bilingual education, threatening to spill over into AZ, resulted in WestEd publishing a guide on the issue, an example of service to policymakers already noted above.

This reviewer is cognizant of a conscious effort by WestEd to address the needs of rural schools and students, in its larger programs. This is most appropriate given the demographics of the state.

Finally, the recent work in Nevada, discussed at length above, is a prime example of the indicators of “influencing policy” and “scaling up.”

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

All four states do not seem to have received uniform attention in the scope of things. Utah particularly seems to be less impacted. Also, I was surprised that the CSRD participant evaluation comments were not more uniformly laudatory.

## **3. Recommendations**

Examine each state’s demographics and devise a formula for more funding equity across the region.

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

### **1. Strengths**

The Lab specialty is Assessment and Accountability. Its director is a nationally known figure with experience as a state director of assessment and with experience in relevant national initiatives, notably SCANS. In terms of indicators of reputation, he has recent publications in

academic journals.

As noted elsewhere in this report, assessment informs the work of a number of Lab programs. The specialty specifically receives funding under WAC. The Nevada State Strategy and the Arizona State Alliance project, as well as an independent allocation. The review panel was briefed on the A&A work with the Career Preparation Assessment project, and the cross-Lab project (Laboratory Network Program-LNP), both research based development projects with high potential for utility. I have discussed the former above, but will note in this context that the Lab is focusing on the “tailored” portfolio scoring process and the potential for whole-school reform.

The Assessment Toolkit is an expansion of a vehicle for assessment design that was originally conceived and produced at the northwest Lab. Its further evolution is taking place under the leadership of WestEd as the lead Lab for assessment and accountability, and involves active input from all 10 Labs. In fact one of its strengths is the commitment evidence by all Lab participants to this effort.

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

I would like to have learned more about the 1997 change in the WAC change agent seminar from “performance assessment to looking at student work” (Updated Plans for 1997). The implications for Lab work in assessment and accountability overall are not clear. Also unclear is the potential for CPA to affect whole school reform given that the effort is so small. It seems too ambitious a goal.

The Toolkit, though a popular vehicle for training teachers on the development and use of alternative forms of classroom assessments, has grown to unwieldy size in my opinion. I believe I heard mention that another Lab had boxed the Toolkit differently (three volumes instead of one, for different subjects). Finally, while the Lab is active on the assessment and accountability stage

at the micro (CPA) and more macro (Nevada) levels and there is potential for national visibility and influence, more linkages need to be developed to give WestEd even greater prominence in the national arena.

### **3. Recommendations**

Regarding CPA, whole school reform potential may be out of reach. Rather, I would like to see a focus on the results of more technical work on scoring, e.g., validity, that could inform the field, together with a realistic assessment (small “a”) for reformers and school officials of the “proper” place of portfolios in the overall evaluation of student work. For example, what proportion of the portfolio should “count” toward high stakes determinations?

The Toolkit could benefit from repackaging. I strongly suggest preparation of a small version, of true “toolkit” scale, that could serve to introduce practitioners to the ideas of the larger product. Those “signing on” could then “graduate” to the larger opus and begin designing assessments.

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

I would say the Lab is definitely on target with its declared mission and its making a significant, positive difference in the lives of its intended audiences both in terms of intervention and in terms of policy guidance and shifts.

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

Rather than talk about which programs seem stronger, I would like to look at the bigger picture. WestEd’s true strength is the quality of its leadership (including the Board) and its staff.

Another quality I sense is its willingness to step out of the box and engage in risky ventures like Marin City and WAC. (The former is “risky” in that it crosses the border into social work, but the Lab is bold enough to say the obvious--that home and family is where education begins and we have a construct of what it takes to turn families around in a particularly blighted area. WAC, and *Kyosei* in particular, is risky because it challenges conventional thinking about the fundamental purpose of assessment.)

In terms of improvement, I would suggest the following:

- Perhaps WestEd’s efforts are too fragmented to achieve desired coherence; the Lab should reflect on this and confront some hard focus choices.
- Dissemination should reach wider audiences, i.e. WestEd stories should be told in a greater variety of venues.
- I applaud the effort at improving QA
- I also applaud the shift of focus toward professional development as central to the success of any accountability reform. The hoped-for Nevada centers are a case in point, which Lab work in WAC, the Toolkit, and CPA should inform.