



Evidence-based
2003
annual report

Education:

Bridging Research and Practice for Student Success

A History of Supporting Student Achievement
page 3

Evidence-based Education for All Gives Educators the
Power to Educate and Students the Power to Learn
page 4

Academic Success for All Through Evidence-based Practice
page 6

New Tool Fosters *Kaizen* in the U.S.A. (AEL)
page 6

360 Degrees of School Improvement (LAB)
page 9

Mega Results at Grant Elementary (LSS)
page 11

Technology with the Human Touch (McREL)
page 13

Making Good Choices Among Comprehensive School
Improvement Models (NCREL)
page 15

Forging the Trail to High-Performing Learning Communities (NWREL)
page 18

Embracing Differences in Language and Culture to Develop
Early Literacy (PREL)
page 20

Growing the Capacity to Support Student Achievement in Reading (SEDL)
page 22

Teaming Up to Improve Student Achievement (SERVE)
page 25

Using Student Work to Improve Teaching (WestEd)
page 27

National Leadership Areas

AEL: Beyond the Obvious: Finding Educational Applications for
Technologies
page 30

LAB: Partnerships that Bring Research and Best Practices
to English Language Learners
page 32

LSS: Educational Leadership Informed by Evidence and Proven Practice
page 34

McREL: Developing a Practical Guide to Standards Implementation
page 35

NCREL: Integrating Technology to Help Teachers Teach
and Students Achieve
page 36

NWREL: Re-Engineering Schools for Student Success
page 37

PREL: Emphasis on Early Literacy as a Means to
Academic Achievement
page 39

SEDL: Family and Community Strategies for Student Success
page 41

SERVE: Student Learning Beyond the Traditional School Day
page 42

WestEd: Improving State's Efforts to Assess Educational Achievement
page 43

Regional Educational Laboratories: Map and Contact Information
page 44

contents

annual report

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2003

A History of Supporting Student Achievement

Congress initiated the Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL Program) in 1965 as part of the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which addressed the educational system's failure to provide all students with high-quality instruction and achieve high levels of performance. The Act created a system of Regional Labs to develop and disseminate—in cooperation with schools, state education agencies, and research universities—ideas and programs for improving educational practices throughout the country. In 1994, the REL Program was reauthorized (Public Law 103-227) with the mission "to promote knowledge-based school improvement to help all students meet high standards and to help the nation meet the National Education Goals."

Support of Research and Best Practices in Education

The REL Program is a major research and development effort supported by the U.S. Department of Education, designed to help educators, policymakers, and communities improve schools and help all students attain their full potential.

Administered by the Institute of Education Sciences, the network of 10 Regional Labs works to ensure that lessons about school reform developed or learned in one site can be appropriately applied elsewhere and that everyone involved in educational improvement will have access to the best available research, knowledge from practice, and exemplary and promising programs.

In 2000, a competition was held resulting in the award of new 5-year contracts under the Regional Educational Laboratory Program. The Request for Proposals established 10 principles meant to characterize all work of the Regional Labs:

- * based on high-priority regional needs;
- * focused on well-defined problems;
 - from the research and practice communities;
- * designed with attention to rigorous standards of quality related to the conduct of work and the quality of all resulting products;
- * conducted with special attention to the needs of rural areas as required by statute;
- * attentive to students most at risk of failure due to barriers of language, culture, or poverty;
- * characterized by appropriate use of both widely used and emerging technologies;
- * noted for extensive use of partnerships and networks across a wide spectrum of organizations at local, state, regional, and national levels;
- * designed to forge a stronger Laboratory system, including encouragement to make wider use of strategies, products, and services created by other Laboratories; and
- * noted for its impact on policy, procedure, and practice with in its region and, in certain circumstances, across the nation.

Regional Educational Reform Leaders

Each Regional Lab works to ensure that all students achieve at high levels by supporting states, districts, teachers and students with the best research and evidence-based education methods. Guided by governing boards that represent the constituents in the regions, including teachers, researchers, and high-level policymakers, the Laboratories use rigorous applied educational research practices to assist in solving site-specific problems and use those experiences to develop solutions to be adapted and used throughout the country.

National Educational Reform Leaders

Each Laboratory takes a leadership role in a significant education issue that can make a contribution to the procedural knowledge required to build high-performing learning communities. Leadership work includes synthesizing research-based information, disseminating the information, and applying the information in ways that transform policy and practice. The National Leadership Areas include: Assessment of Educational Achievement, Curriculum and Instruction Related to Reading and Language Mastery, Educational Leadership, Educational Technology, Expanded Learning Opportunities, Family and Community Connections with Schools, Re-Engineering Schools for Improvement, Standards-Based Instructional Practice, and Teaching Diverse Learners.

Collaborating to Support School Improvement Across the Country

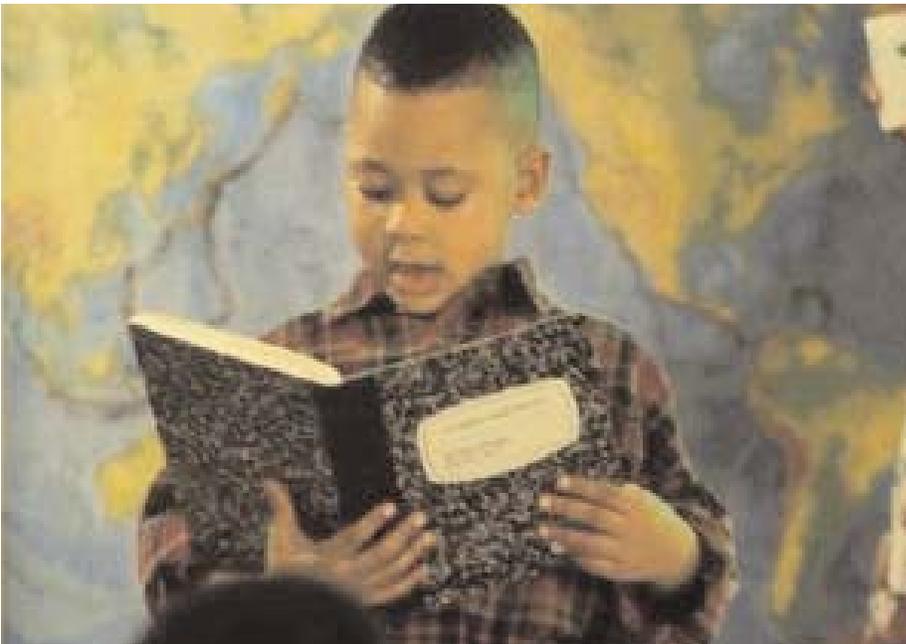
Each Laboratory participates in collaborative activities with other Laboratories to optimize the uses of Laboratory resources, create nationwide resource collections, and apply experience across the Laboratory network to specific problems.

Evidence-based Education for All Gives Educators the Power to Educate and Students the Power to Learn

Education is extremely powerful. A high-quality education opens doors, provides opportunities and establishes a future of inquiry and endless possibilities. A high-quality education can also be a great equalizer, leveling the playing field for children with different levels of previous academic success so that all can achieve, excel and experience their full potential.

Education of this kind is powered by effective educational practice. Teachers and students need tools and methods that are proven to support student achievement. These practices must both derive from research and practice and themselves be researched in actual classroom settings thereby providing understanding of why and how these practices work so they can be implemented effectively with students nationwide.

The Regional Educational Laboratories (REL) are researching, developing and disseminating evidence-based practices in a wide range of critical areas of education. Individually, their work exemplifies some of the best of what is known about improving teaching and learning through research-based educational strategies. Collectively, the RELs are leading the national movement to bring the power of education to all students by developing and using evidence-based practices.



Research, Development and Dissemination

The RELs' commitment to improved student achievement is evident in their willingness to track and evaluate their efforts. In 2001, the RELs began a new contract with the U.S. Department of Education aimed at turning low-performing schools into high-performing learning communities. Since then, the RELs have put additional effort into research and development work that employs evidence-based educational reforms to improve student achievement. A major focus of that work is the study of how schools make systemic changes that stimulate improved instruction and increase student achievement. Additionally, the RELs have continued to adhere to quality assurance procedures that guarantee the quality of their research designs and the development of their products and services.

Research and Development

Quality research and development of evidence-based educational strategies is the centerpiece of the REL's work. The laboratories work with states, districts, schools and teachers around the country designing and studying practices that will improve student achievement. REL staff also help develop the capacity of educators to utilize research as well as analyze their own practices to make changes, if necessary, based on their findings. Additionally, the RELs have a solid history of analyzing the breadth of educational research and making the best of it available to educators in a way that allows them to use the findings of others to inform their own practice.

RELs partnered with educators in 252 locations or "sites" across the country in 2003 to study how schools, districts, intermediate agencies, and states incorporate and sustain evidence-based strategies that support improvements in student achievement.

In doing so, the RELs worked with 4,838 teachers, 1,398 administrators, and 611 parents, representing substantial increases in sites and participants from 2002. Specifically, the increases from 2002 to 2003 were as follows: Sites, 22%; Teachers, 12%; Administrators, 33%; and Parents, 128%.

A site is defined as a school, district, intermediate agency, or state in which the REL is engaged in collaborative fieldwork that is a) direct, face-to-face, long-term, and intensive; b) designed with the explicit goal to improve practice; and c) expected to produce outcomes that are measurable and indicative of improved practice. A participant is defined as "an individual directly involved in collaborative field work."

The RELs' research and development work in 2003 led to both improved educational practices and increased student achievement:

- * Examples of areas for improved practice included differentiated instruction to help all students succeed, effective use of assessment resources/tools/practices, efficient and effective resource allocation, or increased capacity to deliver high-quality professional development.
- * Of the 252 development sites reported, 164, or 65%, indicated a direct focus on the outcome/category of increased student achievement. The other 88 sites were focused on research and development to enhance capacity to improve student achievement.

Dissemination

The RELs' successful efforts with individual states, districts, schools and teachers are further extended through the dissemination of the resultant products and services. In 2003, RELs distributed almost a million and a half print and electronic products, and received over two and a half million web hits. In addition to these impressive figures, RELs served over 80,000 clients with face-to-face services such as technical assistance, training events, conferences, and network-building opportunities. All these figures exceeded the RELs' performance targets for 2003.

The RELs also collect data from clients to ensure the products and services the RELs disseminate are of high quality and useful. By mutual agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, data relevant to quality of products and services is collected and reported biannually, making this an off-year. Data for 2002 are available and continue to be validated anecdotally by recipients of REL products and services. In 2002, 92.1% of REL clients reported products and services to be of good or excellent quality. REL clients also reported that the products and services increased their knowledge and skills, were useful for decision making and planning, enhanced their professional practice, and had a positive effect on student performance.

The examples of the RELs' work described here are representative of the many ways evidence-based educational practices are being developed and implemented by the REL Network. This work brings solid research to critical areas of educational practice and supports educators as they work to bridge the gap between research and practice in their own classrooms, districts and states. The RELs have both the knowledge and understanding of the complexities of what it means to support improved teaching and learning and the experience and expertise to fashion solutions based on solid educational research.

With more than 30 years of experience studying and implementing strategies that work, the REL Network is leading the field in evidence-based educational improvement and bringing the power of education to our nation's teachers and students.

Academic Success for All through Evidence-based Practice



Every day in cities and towns across the country, students are achieving academic success. Understanding what works for some students and why is essential to ensuring all students experience success in school.

The Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) are deeply concerned with studying and understanding what works and why and then developing tools and processes for applying this knowledge to other districts, schools, classrooms and students. Additionally, they buttress their own research with that of others, delving into the literature on a given educational method or topic for further supporting evidence. Finally, the RELs' work includes developing tools and processes that bridge the gap between research and practice by building skills to use evidence-based methods and to collect, analyze and utilize data to make informed decisions about teaching and learning.

Using the best research and development techniques available, the RELs provide a scientific base to their efforts to improve student achievement across the country. The stories that follow examine some examples of the RELs' use of research to support improved practice and build practitioner capacity to both use existing research and conduct their own research to provide the evidence they need to improve student achievement.

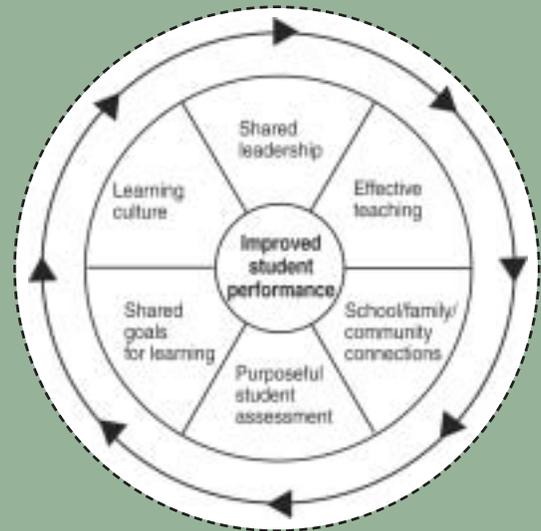


New Tool Fosters *Kaizen* in the U.S.A.

No Child Left Behind makes it crucial for schools to show steady progress toward meeting the needs of all students. Research shows that one way schools can support all student subgroups is through professional learning communities—that is, communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. The AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire gives schools a way to gauge their progress in creating such communities. A school's professional staff can use the results to identify a starting point for creating an organizational culture that produces high levels of achievement for all students, even when challenges arise or the environment changes. The Japanese have a word for this vigilance in pursuit of continual improvement: **kaizen**.

The AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire measures a K-12 school staff's perceptions of their performance on dimensions related to continuous school improvement. The 60-item questionnaire was designed with busy school professionals in mind. It takes only about 30 minutes to administer. Completed instruments are mailed directly to AEL, where analysts prepare a three-page school report that summarizes and interprets the results. The report helps staff gauge how well the school is performing on several dimensions related to continuous school improvement.

A high-performing learning community, as defined by AEL researchers, is a school with high levels of student achievement that is also committed to improving student and staff performance through continuous learning and improvement across seven dimensions: shared leadership, effective teaching, school/family/community connections, purposeful student assessment, shared goals for learning, learning culture, and aligned curriculum. AEL called on its years of research to develop this definition in response to a charge to the Labs from the U.S. Department of Education. The AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire measures high-performing learning communities, not high-performing schools (schools with high levels of student achievement).



It also helps staff **focus** on specific activities and characteristics that might be overlooked in a discussion or more general analysis as they interpret and act on the results.

School improvement facilitators who assist low-performing schools in Tennessee say it "gets at a lot of different things related to school improvement," has "caused reflection," and is an "eye-opener."

A user manual provides schools with procedures for administering, scoring, and using the results of the AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire. A unique feature is its inclusion of detailed information about the questionnaire's research base. It also provides charts for converting raw scores to percentiles so schools can compare themselves to others that have used the questionnaire. This manual received a first-place award in the 2003 American Educational Research Association's School Evaluation and Program Improvement Division's Outstanding Publications Competition in the category of Staff Assessment Training Materials. "This is a very engaging approach to the preparation for staff assessments," commented the judges. "It is clear, well reasoned, and appropriate to the audiences. It acts as an excellent resource and learning tool."

AEL sees the questionnaire as a tool for improving a school's organizational culture, which can, in turn, improve student **performance**. "Organizational culture is both a mirror and a maker of how things are done in an organization, what is valued by its members, and what the

organization strives to do," says AEL researcher Dr. Jackie Walsh. "While there are many definitions of culture in the research literature, two values that are central to high-performing learning communities are the beliefs that all students can learn at high levels and that teachers' actions matter."

The key word here is **action**. According to a former teacher who now works as a school improvement facilitator, "A problem of low-performing schools is that they don't take initiative. [The questionnaire] can help them focus on a starting point."

School performance on the AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire is based on the combined perceptions of all professional staff—principals, teachers, teachers' aides, media specialists, librarians, counselors, and any others who have classroom or advisory contact with students or parents. The questionnaire was developed around a research-based framework of six dimensions related to high-performing learning communities, with items for a seventh being tested for reliability and validity:

1. shared leadership
2. effective teaching
3. school/family/community connections
4. purposeful student assessment
5. shared goals for learning
6. learning culture
7. aligned curriculum (to be added)



The conceptual framework underpinning the questionnaire evolved between 1996 and 2000, when AEL established and supported a network of schools dedicated to building **learning communities** that supported high levels of student and adult performance. The Quest Network for Quality Learning Communities, as it was called, contributed to the questionnaire's research base and participated in the pilot test.

Pilot and field tests in 207 schools in four states have shown the AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire to be both valid (meaning it measures what it purports to measure and its results correlate with other validated instruments) and reliable (meaning it is internally consistent and people who respond to the questionnaire two times within a short time period answer nearly the same way both times, across all dimensions).

AEL has compiled a database of questionnaire responses from 3,821 professional staff members in 132 schools in AEL's four-state region. High-performing and low-performing schools were included. Eleven schools had been previously identified by their state departments of education or by AEL's Quest staff as being "continuously improving." Responses from this subset of schools were compared to responses from the other schools to see if differences emerged. Also, schools were identified by Johnson codes, which indicate each school's degree of rurality or urbanicity. When researchers examined these data, they reached the following conclusions:

- * Professional staff at high-performing schools consistently obtained higher scores than their low-performing counterparts, indicating that the questionnaire is an effective way to assess the reculturing of school staff.
- * Respondents in elementary schools and schools with elementary grades (preK-12) had the highest scores.
- * There is no evidence that scores are related to whether a school is located in an urban or more rural area.
- * Across states, professional staff identified the area of school/family/community connections as being the area most in need of improvement among all areas measured by the questionnaire.

These results support the AEL assumption that a school staff's **commitment** to continuous learning and improvement is critical to defining high-performing learning communities. Such communities constantly look for ways to improve processes and results, even after standards are met. Those using the AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire may yet create an English term for kaizen as they **nurture** it in their school communities.

Resources

Read condensed summaries of research supporting AEL's framework for research-based school improvement in the Winter 2002 issue of *The Link*, available at www.ael.org/link/v21n4/link214.pdf.

For practical tools, activities, and resources schools can put to work right away, consult *Inside School Improvement: Creating High-Performing Learning Communities* by Jackie A. Walsh and Beth D. Sattes, the AEL researchers who facilitated the Quest project. The book is available from Scarecrow Education, www.scarecroweducation.com.

To see sample items from the questionnaire, a sample school report, and additional information about the AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire, visit www.ael.org/page2.htm?&index=727&pd=1&pv=x.



360 Degrees of School Improvement

Less than a year into her tenure at Quinnipiac Elementary School in New Haven, Connecticut, principal Pat Morgillo viewed charts of the school's math and reading scores disaggregated by each strand of each test. The charts had been prepared by district staff to help Morgillo look at her school's data in a new way. What she saw opened her eyes.

"Kids would score between 44 and 49 [above intervention level] on the multiple choice parts of the test," she said. "Then you'd see intervention scores on comprehension sections. Why? Well, sometimes the topics of the readings don't resonate with the kids. So they just give up reading. We realized we needed to teach strategies they could apply to anything."

This revelation led to changes in instruction at the school. The teachers began to focus on the skills students needed to answer short answer and essay parts of the test, including reading a topic sentence, identifying the "who, what, when, where, and how," and predicting the end of a story. Morgillo also insisted that her staff have access to the data in order to create high expectations and to gain a better understanding of student needs that can lead to improved student achievement. So she created the Wall of Achievement in her office, a huge color-coded chart of students' scores that shows gains over time and serves as a reference point for teachers about the effectiveness of their instruction.

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) witnessed several such strategies for sharpening teacher practice and boosting students' skills when they began observing all 28

Connecticut priority schools at the request of Connecticut's Commissioner of Education, Theodore Sergi. Quinnipiac was just one of the priority schools, defined as those schools having the largest numbers of students at intervention level on the Connecticut Mastery Test. Each school had been working on a school improvement plan for at least a year, but the commissioner wanted a wider view of the schools' improvement strategies than test scores alone could provide.

"The approach we took was looking at multiple stakeholders and their views about what was working and what the problems were," says Richard Giordano, managing specialist for research design and implementation at LAB. "We tried to be as inclusive as possible to give the commissioner a 360 degree view of each school."

To do this, LAB staff created interview protocols for meeting with administrators, community groups, parents, teachers, students, district staff members, and each school's improvement team. Each staff member who would be visiting a school attended training sessions on how to use the protocols, including the five key questions that would be common to each interview. These questions asked for information about core improvement activities, strategies that worked to improve student achievement, the outside supports necessary to the school's progress, the nature of the school's stakeholder engagement, and the overall changes observed during the course of the year. During the visits, staff also looked at progress tests, standardized test scores of various kinds, attendance rates, and other school improvement data.

"This way, we would get more information that gave a clear view of what was happening and how stakeholders interpreted what was happening," says Giordano. "We talked to a lot of people who had to have a common vision in order for improvement to occur. Effective practices began to emerge across schools."

Through the varied data collection, LAB staff learned about the dynamics at play in each school—information that was essential to understanding the implementation of improvement strategies in each unique environment. They wrote individual reports for each school and then analyzed the data from all the schools to extract common practices that seemed the most effective.

"Once we identified the high-payoff practices, we looked at those in light of the larger research base," says Chris Dwyer of RMC Research Corporation, a LAB partner in the Connecticut work. "How do these link into the information [in existing research] about what works?"

The overall report to the state identified the effective practices as:

- ✱ a focus on literacy
- ✱ a principal who was an instructional leader (like Morgillo)
- ✱ a consistent curriculum with frequent assessments embedded in classroom activities
- ✱ on-site professional development
- ✱ personalized relationships with students
- ✱ integrating parents into the staff as paraprofessionals and tutors
- ✱ co-teaching strategies
- ✱ sharing leadership responsibilities
- ✱ networks of external organizations supporting the academic mission of the school

The report also pointed out district practices that supported the schools' efforts, including training for principals in the use of data for instructional decision making and the availability of district-wide professional development and curriculum resources. The LAB then took its study a step further, identifying barriers to long-term improvement during the second year of visits. While the first report had given the state a good idea of what strategies produced short-term gains, the second emphasized that all levels of the system had to work together to ensure sustained progress.

"We can use the second-year report as a bridge to the district," says Juan Lopez, director of leadership initiatives at LAB. "We are interested in the use of some of the things we recommended and supporting what the districts do for their schools. We want to know, are [they] facilitating getting over these barriers?"

Dwyer echoes the theory that information in the reports can help staff at the district level look critically at their role in the schools' improvement.

"It is important to point out to districts that some schools are getting left out of district resources and attention," she says. "But it's not just about what they do with individual schools. It's also about what they can do on their own to help, like the way they organize professional development."

Now in the third year of the project, the LAB is beginning intensive work with a subset of priority schools that have made little or no progress over the two years. This next phase of the work naturally includes the district as well as the state and the schools.

"We were able to look at practices in the schools that had some success and then get that information into the hands of schools that didn't make enough progress," says Dwyer. "Now we see ourselves working with the districts to help make sure that the ways in which these schools are spending their money are the best uses of their resources."

Based on analysis of data from the two years of school visits as well as existing research, LAB staff is now helping the subset develop further plans for improvement. This work requires listening to the district's priorities and folding those into the lessons LAB has learned to date.

"We customize our assistance to them," says Lopez. "We find ways we can help the district with new approaches to their problems. We help them prioritize around instruction, data analysis, time on task, staff development, and communication between classes. The key is to listen and see the things that come to the top."

The information LAB has identified through observation and study of the schools and districts in Connecticut has also informed change in other states in the region. In both Vermont and Rhode Island, LAB staff and state education agencies are working together to apply the findings to development of appropriate expectations for their districts in relation to low-performing schools. The results of this study are helping these states support their districts in ways that make sense for compliance with No Child Left Behind and sustainability of the long-term improvement implied in the law.

"Ultimately, the issue is sustainability," says Lopez. "You can do it for a year or two, but sometimes it just goes away when a principal or a teacher leader leaves. The system needs to sustain teacher training, alignment of curriculum, and effective hiring practices. And, the whole community needs to shift their focus and learn to understand and use data so that they really know who is learning and who is slipping through the cracks."

Resources

- Print:
1. The Principals' Leadership Network: Leading in New London
 2. What It Takes: Ten Capacities for Initiating and Sustaining School Improvement.
 3. Elementary School Where Students Succeed in Reading.
- Web:
1. The Knowledge Loom: The Principal as Instructional Leader Spotlight (www.knowledgeloom.org/pil/)
 2. The Teaching Diverse Learners Web Site (www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/)



Mega Results at Grant Elementary

At Grant Elementary School in Trenton, New Jersey, the mission statement asserts, "Staff and parents believe that our school's purpose is to educate all students while fostering a positive self-image, respect for others, and a desire for learning." It is a mission that the school and community have embraced, and the results are a school brimming with pride and enthusiasm for learning.



By the Spring of 1999, test scores at Grant were exceptionally low and the school applied for and received comprehensive school reform funding, initiated by the U.S. Department of Education. The school contacted the Laboratory for Student Success' (LSS) Community for Learning (CFL) program for assistance. The CFL program supports a restructuring of decision making that reorganizes a school for success. Subject area teams develop instructional materials that facilitate individualization of curricula. A visiting implementation specialist helps staff with goal setting and data collection strategies, elements that are crucial to successful implementation of the program. Another key feature of the CFL program is Degree of Implementation (DOI) data, which is collected for site-based teams and support teams and maintained in reference manuals. The principal, assistant principal, and facilitator also meet regularly to align school goals with implementation and to adjust support to teachers, as needed.

Recognition of the strengths of the CFL program was not immediate. The first year required the teachers, principals, facilitator, and students to become familiar and comfortable with the requirements this new program presented. However, according to Irene Stewart, CFL Facilitator at Grant, the staff's diligent implementation efforts were quickly rewarded. "Since we have used the CFL model," Stewart said, "students seem to be more motivated, going to various learning centers to reinforce learning. There has been a higher attendance rate, and our scores have gone up."

Because of these positive results and the possibility of even greater improvement, Grant Elementary was selected to participate in the LSS Mega Demonstration Project that began in Winter 2000. The Mega project integrates additional successful programs and evidence-based practices that have been field-tested by LSS into existing school improvement efforts. Mega gleaned from all of LSS's work the very best practices and most successful programmatic innovations and created a matrix of this research and experience. The matrix is used in particular schools to develop a consolidated program to transform low-performing schools into high-performing learning communities. Using data-based decision making, the Mega program is an integrated program that identifies both the areas requiring school improvement and the professional development tools to facilitate that improvement.

Grant is an urban school, built in 1938. Grant, a PK-5 school, enrolls 480 students, 95% of whom come from low-income families. With a student population that is 60% Hispanic, 39% Black, and 1% representing other racial/ethnic backgrounds, the school has been designated one of the district's bilingual centers. It is staffed by 52 teachers, 4 administrators, and a number of specialists 95% of whom come from low-income families. With a student population that is 60% Hispanic, 39% Black, and 1% representing other racial/ethnic backgrounds, the school has been designated one of the district's bilingual centers. It is staffed by 52 teachers, 4 administrators, and a number of specialists.



Resources

The Laboratory for Student Success.
<http://www.temple.edu/LSS>

The Academic Development Institute.
<http://www.adi.org>

The Matrix of Interventions

Several key matrix components contributed to the overall successful development of Grant Elementary's educational profile. Utilizing features of LSS's Alliance for Achievement program and communication tools developed from the teacher's components of the School-Family Partnerships program, a new Support Team process was created. The Support Team—comprised of the principal, the CFL Facilitator, two teachers, and four parents—have subsequently provided well-attended, successful parent education programs.

The LSS Early Learning Program component was developed for the youngest members of the school community. Grant students in this program showed statistically significant improvement on the Metropolitan Readiness Test, primarily in reading. According to Evelyn Klein, program developer and LSS researcher, "Even the youngest students managed to really take charge of their learning. They became young experts at using the learning centers and made good choices in selecting recreational reading after finishing their required projects," she said. "You could see the differences in their socialization skills and ability to follow directions."

The Advanced Technology for Learning (ATL) component supports the use of technology as part of the intervention process. At Grant, the entire teaching staff, the principal, and CFL facilitator attended ATL technology workshops. This training encouraged teachers to become avid users of technology as a tool for student learning and to develop a feel for the best technology tools to integrate into their classroom curriculum—thereby creating exciting, valuable learning experiences for students.

Data—A Key to Achievement

Particularly impressive is Grant's meticulous attention to student learning data in its decision-making processes. The Opportunity to Learn (OTL) component of the Mega program encourages data-based decision-making and provides a process for the routine examination of student data by subject area teams, whereby students having academic difficulty receive assistance. The Mega team regularly provides teachers with student achievement data and with updated manuals to record this and other data, thus facilitating the ongoing review of the individual student's needs. This data-driven, individualized, hybridized program has achieved some remarkable results in student improvement. From Spring 1999 to Spring 2002, the fourth grade reading scores on the state assessments had increased from 29% of students in the top two proficiency categories to 92% of students in those categories. Likewise in math, the scores rose from 16% in 1999 to 58% in 2002.

To Sam Redding, the principal investigator of the Mega project, such results partly explain the school's renewed energy and enthusiasm for learning. But, according to Redding, the ultimate impetus was recognition of the need for change, for doing better for the students. "The administrators and teachers have taken advantage of training provided and established strong relationships among the teams and with parents," he said. "By learning to use data to improve teaching and learning, they have made giant strides toward becoming a high-performing learning community."

Technology with the Human Touch

Standards-based education, changes in state and federal legislation, and advances in technology have led to a number of changes in education in recent years.

Teachers must not only keep abreast of the tasks traditionally associated with the profession, such as updating curricula and maintaining discipline in the classroom, but also learn to incorporate technology into the mix—a daunting task for many.

In an effort to develop a comprehensive set of solutions to address teachers' technology needs, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) launched the McREL Technology Initiative (MTI) in 1999. The MTI is based on the premise that teachers are the key to successful learning, and that successful integration of technology in classrooms starts with teachers gaining the skills and understanding needed for implementation. A number of research studies¹ have demonstrated that the use of technology can help improve learning; other literature (see, for example, Marzano, 2000) suggests that teachers are a critical component of students' academic success. The MTI's dual focus on technology and instructional strategies is a key part of its appeal, according to McREL Director of Technology Howard Pitler, who notes that the MTI can be "an important tool for educating teachers in research-supported classroom strategies."



Since the inception of the Initiative, McREL's technology and evaluation teams have conducted school technology audits, a variety of workshops, mentoring, and technical assistance at six pilot sites. As part of the on-site audits, McREL conducted teacher and administrator interviews and reviewed each district's technology plan, hardware and software inventories, and technology goals. In addition, McREL provided schools with up to three workshop sessions per year related to technology management, technology in the classroom, and technology training (including basic computer skills). Another key component of the pilot testing was the initiative's mentoring component, through which program participants shared what they had learned with their colleagues. Schools participating in the pilot tests were able to customize their training by combining mentoring with the workshops that met their individual needs.

McREL's experiences in the pilot sites resulted in valuable feedback that is being used to develop a replicable, standardized approach to addressing school technology needs. For instance, McREL learned that strong leadership support and comprehensive technology infrastructures in schools are elements critical to the Initiative's success. Armed with this kind of feedback, in the spring of 2003 McREL moved into the field-testing phase of the Initiative.

From a pool of more than 100 candidate sites, McREL selected six field-test sites—two elementary schools, two middle schools, and two K-12 districts. As part of the site selection process, McREL administered the MTI Readiness Rubric, which analyzes a potential site's hardware, software, and networking capabilities to ensure that a solid foundation is in place on which to build a comprehensive technology action plan. McREL also asked the leadership team at each site selected to sign a contract pledging its full support for and involvement in the program.

In addition to the test sites, 12 comparison sites were identified. Data from these sites will be collected and compared against data from the six field-test sites, in order to gauge the efficacy of the interventions put into place during the Initiative. The comparison sites are demographically similar to the field-test sites in terms of size, grade level, student population, and performance range characteristics.

During the field test, a number of activities will be conducted at each site. All teachers will be surveyed, and some will be interviewed in depth, about their level of technology proficiency, amount of technology use, and comfort level in using technology, as well as their assessment of students' use of technology. A comprehensive action plan will be developed in conjunction with each of the principals, superintendents, and other key school leaders who make up each site's leadership team. These plans will detail the goals of the Initiative and a schedule of training sessions to be delivered.

Following the planning stage, each field-test site will move into a year-long intervention stage, during which McREL technology consultants will work closely with a peer leadership group. The group will include teacher-leaders nominated by school and/or district leaders. McREL will provide a variety of training sessions at each site on how to integrate technology into lesson plans and curriculum units, and how to effectively mentor others in integrating technology into instruction. Throughout the implementation stage, mentors-in-training will regularly participate in meetings to reflect on what they have learned and to share strategies with other members of the local leadership team.

According to Dr. Mark Froke, superintendent of the Flandreau School District in South Dakota, the peer-mentoring component is a large part of the MTI's appeal.

"Our goal is to develop teacher-leaders in technology with McREL's guidance. It's important to us to have a technology integration system in place that is self-sustaining. McREL's program is an exciting way for us to build capacity with our teachers to improve student learning."

The field-test component of the Initiative, which began in May 2003, will run through December 2005. McREL's evaluation team will collect both baseline and longitudinal data to assess the Initiative's effects on teacher practices. McREL hopes to observe a "continuum of outcomes" in which teachers gradually become more comfortable with technology, integrate it into their classroom practice, and ultimately use it as a tool to boost student achievement. Ultimately, McREL intends to parlay this information into technology products and services that will be made available to districts and schools in the Central Region and across the nation.



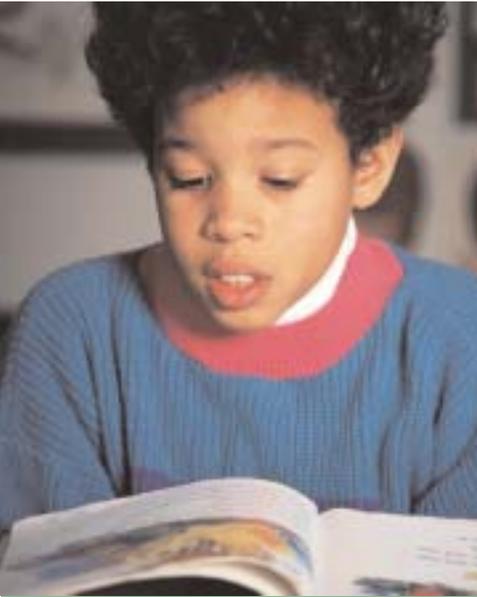
Resources

Marzano, R. J. (2000). *A new era of school reform: Going where the research takes us*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

Software Publishers Association. (1997). *Report on the effectiveness of technology in schools, '90-'97*. Washington, DC: Author.

¹ See *Report on the Effectiveness of Technology in Schools, '90-'97*, commissioned by the Software Publishers Association, for a review of many supporting studies.

Making Good Choices Among Comprehensive School Improvement Models



NORTH CENTRAL REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY

Making Good Choices: Four basic steps in a decision-making process about comprehensive school reform.

1. Laying the Groundwork. You decide who will be involved in the process, what kind of outside help you need, and what sort of timeline to set.
2. Evaluating Your Current Situation. Your school takes a look at where you stand in three categories: your students' learning and accomplishments, your current school program, and the support for school improvement in your external environment.
3. Profiling. You create a profile of an ideal comprehensive school reform approach for your school.
4. Deciding. Based on your profile, you conduct research on a variety of comprehensive school reform models and make a decision about what to pursue.

With dozens, possibly even hundreds, of comprehensive school reform (CSR) models to choose from, finding one that meets a particular school or district's vision, goals, and current environment can be challenging—if not impossible. "We were lucky to have a framework to work from," stated Stephanie Ramstad, Principal at Carpentersville Middle School in Illinois, when asked about the process that her school leadership took in selecting a CSR model.

"One of the most challenging aspects of selecting a CSR model is that there is too much information to go through," stated Ramstad. "CSR model providers come and sell their products—telling us everything the different models have to offer—but without knowing what we needed, it was impossible to make decisions about whether or not a particular model was a good fit for us."

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) understood the needs of Stephanie Ramstad, and hundreds of other similarly situated educators—and kept them in mind when developing *Making Good Choices*. This resource is not a comprehensive school reform model. Rather, it is a tool for schools and districts that guides them through four basic decision-making steps when selecting and implementing a model.

The four basic steps are: Laying the Groundwork, Evaluating Your Current Situation, Profiling, and Deciding.

"The summary tool [Summary of Self-Evaluation] included in *Making Good Choices* is excellent," claimed Ramstad. "We were able to look at our strengths and needs and find a model that would benefit both." The summary tool is one of seven appendixes that serve as actual "workbooks" for CSR leadership teams. Additional appendixes include the Self-Evaluation Tool, Profiling Tool, Target Populations Served by Model, Research Grid, Resources, and Research Questions. Each is further described below.

The **Self-Evaluation Tool** is designed to "help schools create a snapshot of where they are—in relation to critical factors such as governance and management, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and community involvement," (*Making Good Choices*, page 21, <http://www.ncrel.org/csri/tools/makegood/mgc.pdf>.) Leadership teams make "judgments" about various aspects, such as to what extent students are meeting learning standards; is the school staff supportive of a vision for the school; are school goals for student performance aligned with state and local standards and assessment; does the school effectively assess student learning; and to what extent are parents involved in the school community. The measurements identified in this tool were determined by NCREL's review of the research on effective school improvement and extensive experience working in schools.

Once teams have completed the self-evaluation, the **Summary of Self-Evaluation** creates the opportunity to pull together the information in a way that reveals the school's assets and challenges. Six guiding questions are presented, such as "Of these areas for improvement, which have the highest priorities?" and "What are our school's major strengths?"

The **Profiling Tool** presents a list of characteristics of CSR approaches. Indicators identified by research and best practice are given and the leadership team is asked to determine the extent to which a CSR model should address the indicator. Ratings of essential, desirable, does not matter or apply, undesirable, or unacceptable are given to each indicator. Example indicators include, does the CSR program build support within the school for program improvement; is a comprehensive set of goals and benchmarks included; and will it allow the school to use the current curriculum?

Appendix D, **Target Populations Served by Models**, provides a list of actual CSR models and indicates whether that model serves PK, K-5, 6-8, and/or 9-12. Based on the schools, they will quickly be able to eliminate a number of providers without extensive research.

A blank **Research Grid** will assist leadership teams in making a final cut of models. By listing each provider that remains after the "target population" cut and the essential or unacceptable statements generated from the Profiling Tool, it will be easy to see which models are likely to meet the needs of the school. Additionally, this process gives schools the opportunity to engage in research, a critically important exercise to support all data-driven decision making.

A list of **Resources**, including publications and Web sites, will guide educators to research information about the remaining models that are still under consideration for their school.

Finally, a list of **Research Questions** has been outlined to guide leadership teams in their research of the remaining CSR models. These questions are primarily outlined in alignment with the 11 federal CSR Program criteria. Seventy-five questions, organized in 11 categories, will help teams make final considerations about their narrow list of models. For example, under the heading *Strategies That Improve Academic Achievement*, questions include, "Does the model provide evidence of academic achievement in other schools?" and "Does the model provide research studies to support its scientific research base?" Under the heading *Professional Development*, questions include "Is there training for school leadership?" and "How much additional staff development time will be required for the whole staff?"

The Comprehensive School Reform program, reauthorized with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, provides \$235 million (FY 2002 appropriation) for Title I schools and \$75 million to public schools. The 11 criteria required in the implementation of a CSR model by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education are an essential component to NCREL's *Making Good Choices*.

Revised in 2003, *Making Good Choices: A Guide for Schools and Districts* is reflective of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, addresses the two newest components of federal comprehensive school reform program, and includes an interactive CD-ROM that contains all the tools included in this resource.

"What we were able to determine through *Making Good Choices* is that literacy needs to be a primary focus for us. Only 40 percent of the students at Carpentersville Middle School are reading and writing at the state level," said Ramstad. "With a high truancy rate and significant gang involvement, we also determined that encouraging and supporting parent involvement is crucial to our school reform efforts. By conducting the step-by-step research process outlined in *Making Good Choices*, we also discovered that it was important for us to find a provider that offered long-term support," Ramstad stated.

As the school bell rang to begin the new school year in August 2003, principal Stephanie Ramstad was confident that the comprehensive school reform model that is being implemented is the very best one for Carpentersville Middle School. "*Making Good Choices* helped us look at the evidence, and more importantly, it helped us find what we needed," said Ramstad. Since January 2003, school officials and the CSR provider have laid the groundwork for implementation. "There is a common understanding among all with regards to planning and implementation, and a professional development design team has been trained to plan, implement, monitor and sustain professional development. "We have an outlined three-year plan, and we're very excited about what the future will bring," said Ramstad.



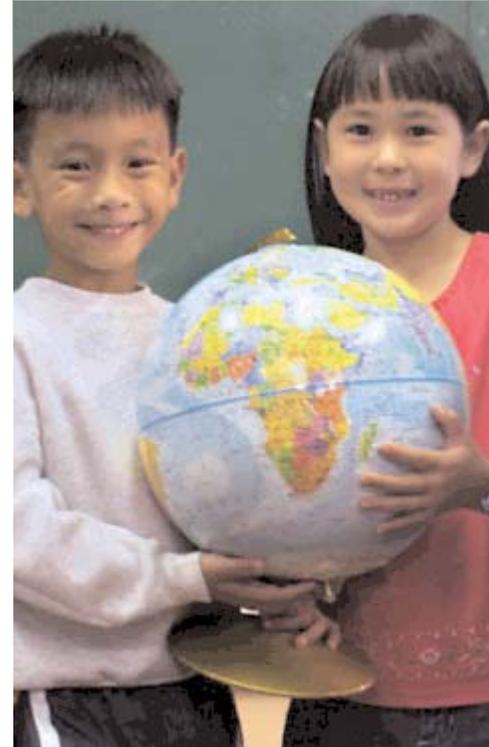
Resources

Making Good Choices: A Guide for Schools and Districts
<http://www2.learningpt.org/catalog/cart/item.asp?productID=15>

Making Good Choices: Districts Take the Lead
<http://www2.learningpt.org/catalog/cart/item.asp?productID=55>

NCREL's Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Web site
www.ncrel.org/csr

No Child Left Behind: A Collection of Online Resources
<http://www.ncrel.org/policy/curve/resource.htm#resources>



Almost 200 years ago, explorers William Clark and Meriwether Lewis battled bears, waterfalls, and mosquitoes on the powerful Missouri River near present-day Great Falls, Montana. Today, just miles from the "Mighty Mo," teachers at Whittier Elementary are facing their own daunting challenges. In this high-poverty, inner-city school, educators have discovered the value of some of the same qualities that helped Lewis and Clark: collaboration, commitment, and being open to new ideas.



Forging the Trail to High-Performing Learning Communities



Whittier is a pilot site that is part of a larger Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) research and development effort to help schools become high-performing learning communities (HPLC). As processes and resources are found to be effective, they are further developed for other schools to use in their school improvement initiatives.

Using scoring rubrics developed by NWREL—based on the work of Paul Berman—Whittier staff were introduced to the dimensions of a high-performing learning community and the attributes staff must develop to perform at the highest level. NWREL first collected baseline data in the 2001-2002 school year to determine where Whittier stood on its path to becoming an HPLC.

In the Spring of 2003, NWREL's site assessment showed evidence of progress, with an improved rating along the dimensions of both "shared facilitative leadership" and "organization for learning." School staff report a strong sense of responsibility for ensuring the academic success of every student and are continually seeking new ideas. The evidence of growth is strong with surveys, interviews, and focus groups all showing the same pattern of responses.

Resources

Atkins, B.S (Ed.). (1995). Number of poor children under six increases from 5 to 6 million 1987-1992. *News and Issues*, 5(1), 1-2. New York, NY: Columbia University, National Center for Children in Poverty. Retrieved September 10, 2003, from www.nccp.org/media/win95-text.pdf

Connard, C., Novick, R., & Nissani, H. (1996). *Working respectfully with families: A practical guide for educators and human service workers* [Training modules]. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Cotton, K. (1995). *Effective schooling practices: A research synthesis. 1995 update*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Epstein, J.L. (1995). *School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share*. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701-712.

Historically, the problems at Whittier were obvious and loomed large. "We've had large turnover during the last three years," reports literacy teacher Colleen Way, "and last year 42 percent of the staff was new to the school or to their position." Besides assimilating new staff members, long-time teachers struggled with the problem of close relationships getting in the way of "business as friends were reluctant to criticize each other.

"The leadership team identified friendship as a barrier to their continuing growth," notes NWREL team member Beverly Flaten. "Once they acknowledged that, we started exploring the professional research on collegiality and how to handle conflict within a close relationship. Flaten—who describes her role as bridging the gap between research and practice—helped the team evaluate best practices and what matters most in improving school effectiveness.

Progress has been achieved through the staff's focus on student learning, shared facilitative leadership in identifying and dealing with problems, and willingness to find solutions. A strategy Whittier calls "classroom triage," which ensures that each child is ready to learn, is a visible and valuable consequence of becoming a professional learning community.

Classroom triage recognizes and prioritizes problems, treating the most pressing cases right away. "Unless you take care of a child's physical and emotional needs, you can't begin to address his educational needs," explains Way. Longitudinal studies by the National Center for Children in Poverty (<http://www.nccp.org/>) have underscored the importance of meeting children's basic needs in order to help them develop and learn.

To make sure every child is ready to learn, teachers quickly scan the classroom—looking for potential problems—in the first 15 minutes of the school day. It might be a child who's forgotten his glasses or left his inhaler at home. Maybe a student has come to school late and missed breakfast. Or, perhaps, a kid is upset over something that happened at home. Whatever the issue, the teacher raises a red flag—literally and figuratively—alerting one of three staff members who each patrol a wing of the K-5 school. The trio dispatches a parent resource worker to the child's home to pick up the missing glasses or medicine, orders breakfast delivered to the classroom, or sends a child to the counselor's office to talk over what's bothering them.

The system has proven efficient and effective. "It's definitely helped us become more intentional and organized

in how we meet students' needs early, so they have a successful day," says Principal Diane Long.

Joyce Ley, NWREL's Montana liaison, remembers when the partnership began two and a half years ago, she met with everyone from the custodian and school crossing guard to the principal and staff. "I asked them to tell me about their strengths and assets, as well as their challenges," says Ley. What came out of those meetings and subsequent training sessions were two priorities: creating a stronger leadership team and fostering community support. Along with strengthening the sense of community inside the school, staff have been working on bolstering parent and community involvement, too.

It's always a struggle to get parents involved, when a large number of your students are low-income," says second grade teacher and leadership team member Kerry Albrecht. "School is the last place parents want to be." But, Whittier was able to boost parental involvement in the classroom and enlist the help of neighborhood organizations after NWREL held workshops on building community relations. Workshop activities were based on the Comer Model, developed by Yale University's School Development Center. In this model, teachers, administrators, and community partners work in tandem to create a high-performing learning community. Whittier staff joined parents and community members for a series of facilitated exercise, from constructing asset maps to analyzing issues from a family perspective.

"Now, we have more of an open door policy," says Albrecht. "We tell parents that if you have a day off, come visit." Classroom volunteers—parents, "foster grandparents," and neighborhood supporters—help students hone reading skills, offer motivation, and encourage accountability. Parents drop in on the school's resource center, where they might share a cup of coffee, use a computer, or pick up clothing for their kids. A local church has been enlisted to provide school supplies, snacks to fortify students on standardized test days, and holiday gifts. Additional support comes from a local hotel, which recognizes different students each month, treating them to a VIP lunch.

Principal Long recognizes that accountability remains a big challenge, along with the need "to work smarter, not harder." What sustains staff, Long believes, is "tremendous commitment and a belief that we can make a difference. Like the intrepid Lewis and Clark, the Whittier team keeps dodging the rapids and perseveres with a sense of mission.

Embracing Differences in Language and Culture to Develop Early Literacy



Considered groundbreaking in a region where early reading assessments in local Pacific languages did not previously exist, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning's (PREL) research and subsequent development of a six-part battery of early reading, classroom-based assessments in seven Pacific languages have paved the way for local literacy improvement efforts. PREL staff collaborated with Pacific linguists, central office staff, and teachers to develop Pacific language early reading assessments based on the English versions of assessments of Phonological/Phoneme Awareness, Concepts About Print, Alphabet Sound and Symbol Recognition, Sight Word Identification, Listen and Retell, and Written Story Construction. Building on sound research in early reading, assessment, and professional development, PREL conducts its own research on improving early reading achievement through professional development.

In response to an overwhelming need in the region to improve teachers' knowledge and instructional practices in early reading, PREL developed the Pacific Communities with High-performance in Literacy Development (Pacific CHILD or P-CHILD) model of professional development. The P-CHILD model has been in development for two and a half years through PREL's Regional Educational Laboratory Program. The formative use of assessments is a cornerstone of PREL's work in early reading.

The framework for the P-CHILD model is based on an adapted version of the Teaching Learning Cycle, i.e., assess, plan, teach, and reflect (Herzog, 1997). The model

focuses on professional development in early reading instruction through the use of ongoing formative assessment in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension. The Teaching Learning Cycle is built upon the notion that new learning more often occurs when it is based on student strengths, as demonstrated through the series of assessments. After the teacher administers the assessments, s/he reflects upon the evidence provided, and uses it to plan for instruction. PREL provides various modes of professional development to build teachers' capacity do this including study groups and online discussion boards.

Individual student needs as well as the curriculum and standards are also taken into account. PREL staff provides professional development to the teachers in effective reading/writing strategies and builds on early reading principles, such as comprehension through retelling and 'think alouds.' In addition, assistance is provided in classroom management and setting up environments conducive for literacy learning. The teachers use these strategies as they plan and teach.

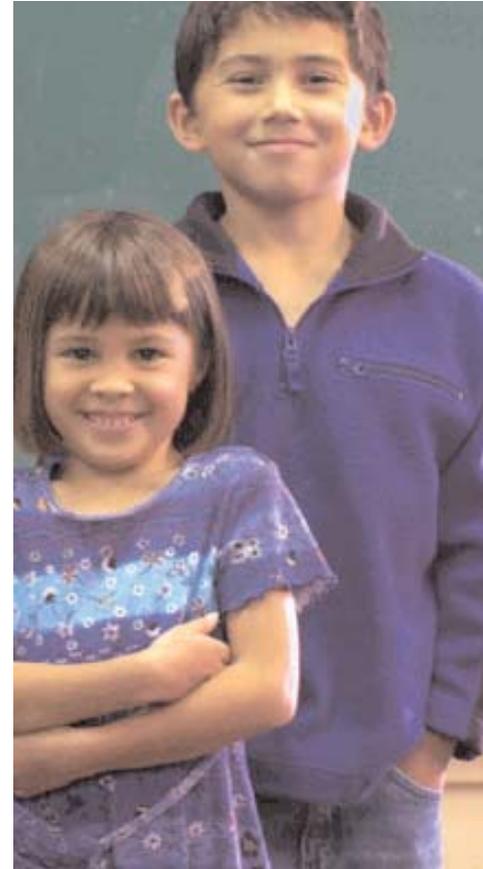
The P-CHILD model is currently being implemented in nine intensive school sites across the Pacific region. Preliminary qualitative and quantitative student and teacher/classroom data suggest that there is a relationship between the professional development provided through the Pacific CHILD model, improved classroom instruction and student reading achievement. In five schools from which data were collected on Concepts About Print, on a fall/spring measure, students at all five schools (N=211) showed a median increase of one competency level (levels are: 1-Beginning, 2-Developing, 3-Transitioning, and 4-Independent). Likewise, across all schools for which data were collected on Alphabet Sound and Symbol Recognition, more than half of the 381 students (59%) improved by at least one competency level from fall to spring. At one small Pacific school, 75 percent of lower elementary school students (100% English as a second language), showed at least a one level increase in Sight Word Identification. Twenty-five percent of the total number of students moved 3 levels from Beginning level competency to the Independent level. Student achievement data were correlated with professional development data that included frequency, duration, content, and processes used as well as with quantitative and qualitative classroom observation data.

Because few Pacific language early reading assessments existed prior to the Pacific CHILD, a variety of questions continues to guide our research and development work.

Questions such as, "How are assessments that measure Pacific alphabet letter identification knowledge created, when two discrete letters actually make one alphabet symbol and sound?" provide interesting material for discourse. The Pacific CHLD team views these questions as opportunities to delve deeper into linguistic issues related to phonology, re-evaluate teaching priorities, and resolve assessment issues. A discussion facilitated by PREL staff addressed the above question. Unlike English, in which every letter has a name, sound, and corresponding symbol, Pacific languages vary in their orthographic agreements. For example, in the Palauan language, Ng is identified as a discrete alphabet sound symbolized by, "Ng." N also stands alone as an individual letter. However, the letter G is not recognized as an individual letter, but rather, only in lower case form and in combination with the N. For assessment purposes, in Palauan, the symbolic representation of G can be named, but has no associated sound. The symbol "NG" cannot be named, but its sound can be identified. The team encountered these kinds of linguistic complexities while developing written assessments for use in the P-CHILD model. Understandably, becoming a reader in these settings is a complex process. Teaching competency in such environments becomes even more critical.

In many Pacific schools, teachers were unfamiliar with the use of assessment to inform instruction. However, data collected during the 2002-2003 school year reflect a shift in both thinking and practice. Fifty-four teachers in grades kindergarten to three are now using the P-CHILD assessments with over 1200 K-3 students. As a result, many of these teachers have expressed the need to develop additional assessments for use in making decisions about grouping and examining individual student needs.

The development of assessments in local Pacific languages is a difficult and time-consuming task. Shifting teachers' perceptions and practices regarding the formative uses of assessment further complicates the endeavor. Nevertheless, the availability of these initial assessments provides a springboard to further support and promote the use of formative assessment as an integral part of early reading instruction. As evidenced by the numbers of Pacific teachers who are now using these early reading assessments to measure their students' progress and inform their instruction, in some ways, the shift is already happening.



Resources

Assessing Early Reading: Change, Culture, and Community in a Pacific Island School

By Marylin Low, Winton Clarence, and Keti William

http://www.prel.org/products/re_/assessing.htm

This paper chronicles the first year of a process of change in literacy practices at one Pacific island school in which the language of instruction is not English. 19 pages.

Making Episodes, Making Connections, A Reading Comprehension Assessment Tool

Lead Writer Marylin Low

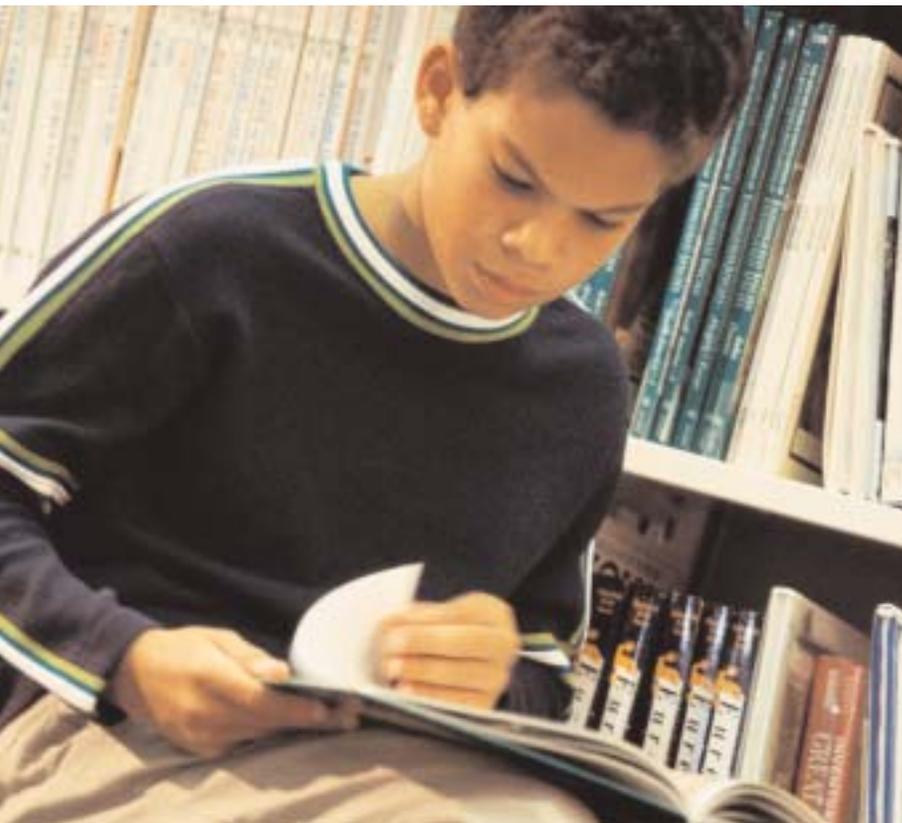
http://www.prel.org/products/re_/makingepisodes.htm

An interest in language and literacy development during the pre-school age and its implications for later reading ability has led to the design of a tool that assesses pre-reader comprehension in non-print events. Making Episodes, Making Connections, A Reading Comprehension Assessment Tool is currently being piloted at Co-Development Partner school sites in the Pacific region. 33 pages.

A Focus on Fluency Forum

PREL's successful "Focus on Fluency Forum," held November 6-7, 2002, in San Francisco, examined the issue of developing reading fluency from the researcher and practitioner points of view. The forum brought together more than 120 participants from the Regional Educational Laboratories, Comprehensive Centers, state and district departments of education, and institutes of higher education, as well as researchers in the area of fluency, to learn and share current knowledge. Presentations on current research included definitions, strategies, interventions, assessments, and conditions that promote fluency.

Among the nationally recognized reading researchers who shared their current work were Dr. Marilyn Jager Adams (Harvard University), Dr. Barbara Fooman (University of Texas - Houston), Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert (University of Michigan - Ann Arbor), Dr. Michael Kamil (Stanford University), Dr. Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois - Chicago), Dr. Steven Stahl (University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana), and Dr. Joseph Torgesen (Florida State University). Researchers also shared PowerPoint slides of their presentations.



Can a small, low-performing school district in the Delta region overcome a history of traditional teaching and modest expectations for students to become a high-performing district focused on reading achievement? That is the vision of Gary Masters, superintendent of the Marked Tree School District, located in northeastern Arkansas about 20 miles from the Mississippi River.

Marked Tree is one of 20 districts working with Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in a research and development effort to create and refine a systemic model for improving achievement in reading or mathematics.

Growing the Capacity to Support Student Achievement in Reading

The Working Systemically Model

SEDL's *Working Systemically* model is based on a rational planning process (Blum & Landas, 1998; Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte & Jacoby, 1992) that relies on the identification of problems and the development, implementation, and monitoring of a plan to address these problems. The model works across all levels of the educational system—district, school, and state—and it specifically addresses student achievement, rather than such concerns as school environment, discipline, or parent involvement that does not necessarily improve achievement (Johnson, Asera, & Raglund, 1999; National Center for Educational Accountability, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). It also provides a framework and set of protocols that structure and direct the activities being undertaken at the district and schools. SEDL executive vice president and chief operating officer Joan Buttram explains, "SEDL's model provides districts and schools with a process for understanding what their problems are as well as figuring out solutions and testing them." The first critical step is a data scan, followed by a systems exploration. From the data scan, school and district staff identify a general problem and issues that contribute to that problem. They delve into the issues more deeply to identify the root cause of low achievement in reading or math. This enables the staff to create an action plan for improving achievement. The model also includes monitoring progress and reassessing their action plans, recycling through the process if necessary. Buttram says, "It is okay that the problem isn't solved the first time out. This process for improvement is an iterative process."

Although Marked Tree has been low achieving in both mathematics and reading for a number of years, the district leadership team—composed of administrators and teachers—focused on reading after completing the initial self-assessment the *Working Systemically* model requires in the systems exploration stage. Superintendent Masters says, "We saw that improvement in reading would likely boost other scores, whereas a focus in math wouldn't have the same impact." Then, as the model dictates, the leadership team determined the root cause of low achievement in reading. The team found "there is not enough frequent and specific data on student achievement, nor knowledge and skill to use these data to determine effective strategies for instruction." They identified three critical components on which to concentrate to raise achievement:

- * Collecting and using assessment data to track student achievement;
- * Strengthening reading curriculum and instruction to address student needs identified by the assessment;
- * Increasing teacher collaboration to work together on assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

In an effort to get the faculties at the two Marked Tree schools—a K-6 elementary school and a 7–12 high school—to collaborate and to build the capacity needed for improvement, SEDL developed a project in which everyone would have a stake. Because the district had no organized data other than that from the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Accountability, and Assessment Program (ACTAAP), which did not provide test scores for all grades, SEDL saw the opportunity for Marked Tree to create a districtwide reading assessment that would provide interim data for every grade level. SEDL program associate Sebastian Wren says, "We knew that by bringing the group together to create a product, they would struggle, but they would learn problem-solving and collaboration skills and learn to be more innovative. They would also understand the assessment because they created it." SEDL program associate Ann Neeley, who is site coordinator for Marked Tree, adds, "I don't think we would have gotten the buy-in from staff or generated the excitement that we did if we had used a standardized assessment."

Developing a Districtwide Reading Assessment

During the summer of 2002, with guidance from SEDL, Marked Tree developed assessments for all grade levels. The K-6 assessments cover the five skills being supported by the U. S. Department of Education's Reading First program: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency,

vocabulary, and text comprehension. Wren says that the assessments for grades 7-12 also draw on the five skills, but are most focused on reading comprehension.

Before beginning to develop the assessment, SEDL staff provided training on SEDL's *Cognitive Foundations of Learning to Read*, a framework of the cognitive elements that must be developed in every good reader. The group also examined Arkansas's Smart Start (grades K-4) and Smart Step (grades 5-8) initiatives, which emphasize many of the elements of SEDL's cognitive framework. This ensured the assessment would be aligned with state initiatives and benchmarks.

The reading team that developed the assessment chose items that ACTAAP had released. They obtained the buy-in of other teachers by getting input on text that they would expect their students to read and understand independently in a variety of subjects. "The test is a nice mix of genres taken from authentic instruction," Wren notes.

After administering the assessment twice during the 2002-2003 school year, the reading team revised the assessment this summer. They found that some of the multiple-choice items had two acceptable answers so the wording on the distracters needed to be changed. Other changes were made due to the teachers' evolving understanding of the reading process and of the assessment.

Evidence of Progress

The upcoming school year brings new challenges for Marked Tree. Masters is the first to admit that his staff must become more proficient at analyzing data and using the findings to inform instruction. A few of the teachers are beginning to see the need to change instruction-based on assessment results, but most teachers have not been able to make that leap.

Masters also realizes that though his staff has made progress working collaboratively, they have a long way to go. He spent four weeks this summer as a fellow in SEDL's Education Leaders Fellowship Program, designed to deepen participants' knowledge of applied research and development. While at SEDL, Masters not only honed organizational skills needed to move his district forward in its reform effort, but he developed a plan that focuses on collaboration throughout the district for the upcoming school year. He also visited a New Mexico district that is successfully using the *Working Systemically* model to improve reading instruction, which helped him

further visualize what change and improvement should look like at Marked Tree. "You see the possibilities," says Masters. "It's so exciting to see success in other places. It helps to know there are other people with the same problems." He was impressed with how the New Mexico teachers were able to discuss data and how they were changing instruction. "Everyone [at the New Mexico site] knows what their plan is and how they're going to get where they want to go. That is proof that they collaborate well. We've got to get to that point."

Neeley says the New Mexico visit provided a spark for Masters that will spread through his district. She says his growing leadership capabilities and his willingness to learn, to provide professional development, and to reallocate and obtain necessary resources are key to helping the district improve.

Superintendent Masters reports, "We realize that our progress has to come from within. We all feel that we're moving in the right direction. Working collaboratively to develop the assessment has brought faculty and staff together and we're united in our effort to improve. In my view, that's progress."

Marked Tree is seeing more tangible evidence of its efforts, too. Standardized test scores in literacy have shown improvement over the past two years—at every level tested, the percentage of students scoring at the below basic level of proficiency has dropped and the percentages scoring at the basic and proficient levels have increased. From anyone's view, that's progress.

Resources

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SEDL's Related Web Resources

<http://www.sedl.org/re/>

<http://www.sedl.org/reading>





Teaming Up to Improve Student Achievement

Research-based instructional strategies need to find their way into more classrooms. But for teachers to apply research findings to their own classroom setting, they need time and structures for discussing research, thinking about implications for instruction, trying out the strategies, and reflecting on how well they worked. It is unlikely, based on the history of change efforts in education, that teachers working in isolation will read and apply research findings on a schoolwide scale. So how can teachers be encouraged and supported in improving instruction, based on research?

SERVE's work in facilitating the implementation of Professional Learning Teams (PLT) began in 1999 based on increasingly apparent evidence from schools that schoolwide improvement in a particular content area depended on building a process for teachers to regularly meet and work together. For example, in *The Work of Restructuring Schools: Building from the Ground Up*, Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond reports that schools where teachers worked collaboratively on teaching and learning showed academic improvement more quickly than schools where this did not happen. In collaborative schools, teachers work jointly to examine student data, experiment with new research-based teaching practices, engage in action research, examine student work, modify teaching strategies, and increase their expertise and knowledge.

From an initial pilot in two schools, SERVE learned that the focus for such regular meetings and collaboration needs to be the continuous improvement of each teacher's instructional practices with regular support and monitoring from school leaders. By 2002-2003, SERVE was testing its approach to facilitating the implementation of PLTs in eight schools, one of which is described below.

When eighth-grade teacher Molli Rose first heard the news, she felt a surge of apprehension. She took a deep breath and thought to herself, *How am I going to do this? How are any of us going to pull this off?* It's not that Rose and other teachers at Chowan Middle School did not see the value in the new, schoolwide focus on reading; it's that some of the staff at Chowan, located in Tyner, North Carolina, felt ill-equipped to tackle the imposed challenge.

The goal of the initiative was clear: to improve reading scores for all students. Determining how to reach this school goal, however, was less clear. In the spring of 2001, the school agreed that SERVE would provide the professional development to assist teachers in learning how to teach reading in all subjects and across the three grade levels. As the vehicle for improving instructional strategies, SERVE would facilitate the implementation of Professional Learning Teams with a disciplined purpose—better meeting students' instructional needs in reading.

The school already used the teaming concept and common planning time for teachers to engage in ongoing, instructionally focused learning. SERVE suggested Chowan establish Professional Learning Teams to focus on the schoolwide goal with teachers spending one 60-minute planning period per week in professional inquiry about reading instruction and develop research-based reading strategies to pilot in their classrooms. Convincing teachers of the benefit of regular collaboration on instruction, however, is not as simple as it sounds. "Because most teachers tend to plan and do their work in isolation, they aren't accustomed to opening up a dialogue about teacher practice with their peers," explains Anne Jolly, a Senior Program Specialist with SERVE.

Not surprisingly, when the notion of PLTs was first mentioned, Chowan teachers did not express delight at having to participate in what they suspected was "just another meeting" that would eat up their time. In addition, they were not thrilled at the thought of planning teaching strategies with their colleagues in other disciplines on a weekly basis. And they were not sure how this process looked, why it was necessary, and how it differed from other types of planning meetings.

Despite their doubts, the teachers gamely embarked on interdisciplinary Professional Learning Teams. Each team contained four teachers who shared common students. Team members began by looking at information about teaching reading and deciding what strategies could best help their students. From there, they chose common strategies, applied these in their classrooms, met back to reflect on student responses, and worked together to revise their strategies and monitor students' learning. Teams also kept logs to document their progress and note how effectively they were collaborating and meeting student needs. They shared these logs with the principal, SERVE staff, and other teams.

Working so closely enabled team members to focus collectively on specific problems the students were grappling with and tailor their instruction to meet those needs. This process brought an instructional uniformity and coherence across classrooms that positively affected both students and teachers. Teachers reported students seemed more excited about reading. Additionally, teachers gained new knowledge about reading and effective teaching practices.

One key to successful PLTs is building trust among teammates, and that may take time. Year 1 of implementation was similar to the commitment someone makes to change his or her overall health. A long-term health change means you cannot expect to see immediate results; rather, you must adopt long-term lifestyle changes and remain committed to keeping your focus. The same is true when establishing and maintaining healthy PLTs. Long-term commitment equals long-term results.

"During Year 1 most teachers didn't see the relevance of learning teams," admits Shannon Byrum, an eighth-grade teacher at Chowan. In Year 2, however, a noticeable shift in thinking occurred when Molli Rose videotaped a lesson

in which she modeled a reading strategy (called a "think-aloud") to her classroom. The lesson was not highly successful, and Rose knew it, which is precisely why she shared the video with her team. She asked them to critique her lesson, help her determine why her approach did not work, and offer suggestions for what she could do differently next time. She also had another motive for sharing. "Teachers usually see videos of accomplished teaching and don't know how the teacher reached that point," says Rose. "I wanted to show them where I started." Before long, other PLTs at Chowan asked to see Rose's video.

During Year 2, teams e-mailed their logs to the entire school staff to encourage schoolwide sharing of ideas. By this second year of implementation, not only did teachers realize the value of collaborating on instruction, but they also saw for themselves the importance of continual learning. "I know now that last year wasn't a waste after all," says Byrum. "You have to evolve to this point."

Over time the teams at Chowan evolved. They progressed from working in isolation to sharing individual strategies in a team setting to ultimately working together as partners and colearners in a schoolwide learning community. "Learning teams have become an integral part of the way we operate—a way to collaborate and learn together, a way to talk about and focus on improving student learning," observed Principal Winborne.

District administrators are impressed as well. "Our goal was to create an environment where self-directed learners met high expectations," says Allan Smith, superintendent of Edenton-Chowan Public Schools. "PLTs have provided the framework whereby teachers direct their own focused professional growth to this end."

Resources

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Using Student Work to Improve Teaching

If all children are to achieve to high academic standards, all teachers must have a shared understanding of what that achievement looks like: teachers in the same subject area, at the same grade level, all working with common expectations about what students should know and be able to do, all using the same performance criteria to judge the quality of student work. This may sound self-evident, but it's not how most schools operate.



WestEd. Traditional instruction is not driven by the key questions, what should kids know and be able to do as a result, and what evidence will show they can? Instead teachers, isolated in their classrooms, plan engaging activities focused on a curriculum topic, decide when and how they will test, and determine their own performance criteria, which often differ from classroom to classroom. When the current chapter or curriculum unit is finished, instruction moves on to new topics, whether or not every student has learned and understood the earlier lessons.

The Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC) at WestEd has for years been working intensively with schools and districts to reverse this model. Drawing on our own experience and a growing body of research, WAC has developed powerful strategies and tools needed to make subtle but profound shifts in instructional practice: starting with a standard not a topic, planning an assessment before not after teaching, and using the results to make sure students reach the standard. At the heart of that change is a focus on student work. "The challenge for instructional leaders," says Trudy Schoneman, WAC's Assistant Director, "is to help teachers learn to mine student work for what students really know, what they have misunderstood or not yet learned, and use that to guide teaching."

A new WestEd video and facilitator's guidebook, *Collaborating for High Standards: Analyzing Student Work*, offers leaders concrete strategies for helping teachers examine their students, work to:

1. develop a shared understanding of the characteristics of work that's "good enough" to meet the standard;
2. plan reteaching of concepts based on what students know and need to learn; and
3. see patterns in student work that enable faculties to plan program improvements.

The video illustrates these strategies as teachers at San Francisco's Bancroft Middle School examine results of a cross-content student assignment. Math and English teachers jointly selected this assessment because it addresses academic standards in both subjects, stating that students will be able to compute and analyze statistical measurement of data sets, and be able to write persuasively. After teaching units of instruction addressing the standards, teachers are now going over the students' response.

Setting Performance Standards. In their collective analysis, the goal is first to determine what level of performance is good enough to show that a student has met the standards. Teachers start by sorting the student samples "to standard" or "not yet to standard." The power of this collaborative analytic process is multifold, and it begins with disagreements.

Some teachers may find a paper satisfactory, others think its ideas aren't developed enough to make a convincing argument. In the process of articulating and arguing the particular qualities of the work in front of them, teachers sharpen their sense of what 'good enough' really means. "Based on what I'd covered in my class," says 6th grade math teacher Ed Powe, "the sample seemed okay." But in the give-and-take about what needs to be evident in the paper "I became clearer about what it looks like in terms of student work." His colleague Marielle Cammarata agreed: "Everyone's impression of what's good enough varies, and it's only through opportunities like this to sort of plead our case that we come to consensus."

It's an evolutionary process. Teachers may start out, for example, saying that a "persuasive essay" should make "a well-supported case." Pushed to name the specific qualities that make a paper strong, they grow more specific: "supports student's argument with more than one piece of evidence and related targeted examples." They then come across an essay with three pieces of evidence, but two are slightly off point and the third has been stuck in without a good explanation of how it connects to the student's argument. The teachers might further refine the criterion: "to standard" work must include "three pieces of evidence that are directly on point and clearly tied to the paper's central argument." And through this process, as the criteria evolve into a set of precise performance-based characteristics that define high quality, teachers themselves begin to evolve a *shared* understanding of the kind of work that should be expected from all students.

But a commonly agreed-upon understanding of what quality work looks like is only part of what this dynamic process generates. "Thinking out loud, then being forced to defend your position," says principal Mary Beth Barloga, "the incredible deep conversation that comes from teachers really digging into the evidence that's right there—those disagreements give us our greatest insights." As teachers begin to internalize the specific characteristics of high quality work, which allows them to reflect on their own practice, they begin to teach to the standard in a more focused way. They develop the same expectations for all students, and consequently students have a better understanding of what's expected and perform at higher levels.

Planning Reteaching. Once performance standards have been set, the group examines the same student work again, this time looking for patterns of weakness, errors, or misunderstandings. They look first for what students already know, then for what they may be struggling with or do not yet understand. This in turn informs teacher practice. "When you see a pattern of errors in your students' work," says math teacher Mich Krulewich, "you realize it's a result of something they experienced or didn't experience in the classroom. I realize I have to go back now and do some reteaching." You analyze the work, says Powe: "Did they get it? And if they didn't, come up with a different way, another method."

Program strengths and weaknesses. In the final strategy teachers are looking at student work for programmatic concerns. This particular analytical lens allows teachers to consider what help they themselves need to improve instruction. For example, if a cross-section of writing samples from several classrooms reveals that very few students understand thematic focus, this may call for some specific professional development. At Bancroft the teachers saw that while students could identify statistical measures in isolation, "find the mean, find the mode," application was lost. "The idea of making predictions based on statistics is something they don't understand very well." The group question then became, "How can we structure instruction to develop that skill?"

The very nature of this collegial, artifact-focused conversation about performance promotes the skills teachers need for standards-based instruction. For principal Barloga "looking at student work is the *best* professional development. Teachers learn so much from each other and it forces them to think more deeply about standards than they often give themselves time to do."

"For years we've used such strategies to help teachers internalize standards," explains WAC director Kate Jamentz, "working with state departments and support agencies. These new materials were created to reach a broader audience. Along with detailed instructions the facilitator's guide includes student work samples school leaders and their faculties can use to practice the process before using student work from their own classrooms." WAC is disseminating these materials to partner organizations and networks serving low-performing schools throughout our region.

What Schoneman sees over and over in this process, piloted in dozens of schools, is "change in professional practice and professional culture. Once faculty are grappling with 'what's good enough, how will we know, what do we have to do to make it happen,' they are no longer focused on what the teacher presents, but on what students really learn and how to improve instruction to increase student performance."



Resources

Collaborating for High Standards: Analyzing Student Work

Produced by the Western Assessment Collaborative at WestEd (2002), this video captures a faculty group using student work to establish performance standards, plan reteaching, and identify student performance patterns that will guide their programmatic planning. Supplemental materials provide student work samples used in the video, along with protocols instructional leaders can use to guide their own faculty through similar analysis.

Standards in Practice

Sponsored by the Education Trust, this project provides professional development to teacher groups, helping them look at student work and assess whether their assignments are rigorously aligned with standards; what instruction their students need to reach standards; and how to change their practice so that all students are successful. More information about the project is available at www.edtrust.org.

Exemplars

Exemplars is an online resource that provides classroom-tested, standards-based assessment and instructional materials tied to national standards. Classroom activities include rubrics and annotated benchmark papers. The project also offers professional development support and products covering Mathematics, Science, and Reading/Writing/Research. More information is available at www.exemplars.com.

Web Sites of Interest:

Looking At Student Work: A project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform www.lasw.org

Coalition of Essential Schools www.essentialschools.org.

National Leadership Areas

Improving student achievement is a national issue requiring both broad attention and detailed research and analysis. The Regional Education Laboratories have in place an interconnected set of research-based products and services that focus on the key areas of school improvement and, together, provide a comprehensive approach to improving student achievement nationwide.

The national leadership area of each REL allows for the detailed focus, research, analysis and support needed for broader and deeper improvement in each of these critical areas. Taken together, these national leadership areas provide a well-developed network of research and information. This information is made available to policymakers and practitioners across the country through annual conferences, networking with other national education reform organizations and Web sites including the REL Web site at www.relnetwork.org. The RELs also develop and disseminate a broad range of tools and resources that allow in-depth knowledge of the national leadership areas to be accessed nationwide.

The following examples of each REL member's national leadership area illustrate the depth of research and knowledge members possess—and are continually growing. Taken together, these examples also provide a glimpse at the thorough and expansive support made available to educators across the country by the REL Network.



AEL *unlocking today's technologies
for tomorrow's students* →

Beyond the Obvious: Finding Educational Applications for Technologies

AEL's national leadership specialty in education technologies focuses on the purposeful use of new and emerging technologies to improve teaching, learning, and school management. This work is accomplished through AEL's Institute for the Advancement of Emerging Technologies in Education (IAETE). Guided by a national board of advisors, the Institute engages high-tech companies, educators, researchers, and others in efforts to see how education might harness technologies developed for the business and consumer sectors. Especially relevant to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are explorations of how existing technologies might support reading and enable intelligent assessment.

"You might say we're looking for ways education can capitalize on the tools and toys of daily life," says the Institute's executive director.

The institute leverages a network of strategic partnerships in pursuit of its mission. For example, IAETE invited two University of Washington vice provosts to write about their work with Internet2 in *INSIGHT*, an IAETE journal. Later, IAETE joined with the University of Washington and Advanced Network and Services to cohost an "Exploring the Future of Learning" event (www.futureoflearning.org) that included students in ThinkQuest Live. Such partnerships keep IAETE in touch with cutting-edge thinkers-many of whom write for *INSIGHT*, host online discussions, or present at events arranged by IAETE or its partners.

This network contributes to the Institute's multifaceted approach by:

Exploring current issues.

What current technology might facilitate the diagnosis and treatment of dyslexia? What are teachers' perceptions of education research, how do they compare to those voiced by policymakers, and what role might technology play in addressing these concerns? These are among the issues being explored.

Conducting and disseminating meaningful research.

IAETE conducted an exploratory study to determine if regular use of a popular, interactive multimedia game improved individual performance on reading and writing assessments of students with demonstrated reading impairment. Jason Della Rocca, program director for the International Game Developers Association, responded, "Your work is of great interest to us. The more we are aware of these potentials as designers, the more we can possibly do to help."

Developing models and prototypes.

After examining the benefits and limitations of traditional print-based textbooks and e-books, the Institute developed an alternative: prototype, interactive textbook pages that retain the salient aspects of print media while providing access to unlimited electronic resources.

Stimulating and focusing discussions.

Forums on the Institute's Soapbox Web site (www.iaete.org/soapbox) aim to generate a wider discussion among educators, education researchers, and members of the educational technology community. National symposia/workshops involve practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in dialogue as they help generate a research agenda on intelligent assessment systems, which might harness empirical evidence such as research and student data to help schools meet the NCLB goals of improving student learning and monitoring progress.

Providing research-based solutions.

Built on research on critical issues in online, large-scale assessment, *Making Decisions for Online Assessments: A Tool for Education Leaders* provides a process for states to use as they address these issues.

Illuminating possibilities.

The insights of leading education experts and visionaries in emerging technology research are featured in *INSIGHT*, an annual publication that links leading-edge technology with top educational practices.

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Partnerships that Bring Research and Best Practice to English Language Learners

No Child Left Behind emphasizes that English language learners (ELLs) should be integrated into regular classrooms and supported in achieving high standards. More educators than ever before need to be informed about ELL-appropriate assessments, strategies for building upon students' first language knowledge, and effective practices for advancing ELLs' achievement.



To help meet this need, the LAB's national leadership area efforts, Teaching Diverse Learners, includes dissemination of research-based practices on language and culture to an audience of teachers, administrators, policymakers, and other educators who work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. This work includes three major strategies: (1) developing syntheses of research that identify effective practices and policies to advance the knowledge base on effective education of ELLs; (2) organizing and presenting at national conferences, and partnering with national educational organizations to engage more stakeholders by making work widely available; and (3) strengthening communication and collaboration through online dissemination of its work.

"Our strategies for addressing professional development and promoting effective teaching and learning for all students align with the mandates of NCLB," says Maria Pacheco, LAB's director of Equity and Diversity programs.

The LAB's 2002 national conference on Literacy, Diversity, and Equity in the Context of Reform and its first research synthesis, *The Diversity Kit: An Introductory Resource for Social Change in Education*, were designed to advance procedural knowledge regarding effective practices and policies at local, regional, and national levels, especially in the context of low-performing schools.

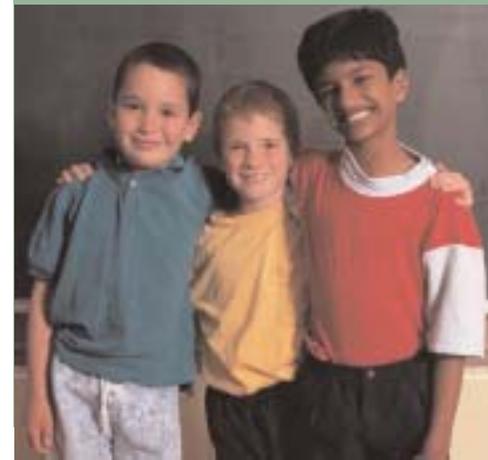
With input from its national advisory panel, composed of leading scholars on equity and diversity issues, LAB aligned the content of its research synthesis and conference with its Teaching Diverse Learners Web site (www.lab.brown.edu/tdl). Demand for *The Diversity Kit* was so strong that LAB is reprinting it as a textbook for preservice and inservice teachers.

In 2003, the LAB has increased its linkages to national organizations by giving presentations at the National Association for Bilingual Education, National Association for Multicultural Education, and partnering with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and Brown's Education Department on a research symposium, Improving High School Learning Opportunities for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: Learning from Evidence-Based Practices. Partnerships with state education agencies have proven an effective means of disseminating best practices in Connecticut and Maine, and LAB has provided direct services to districts serving large numbers of ELLs throughout its region.

A second research synthesis, *Claiming Opportunities: Improving the Education of English Language Learners through Comprehensive School Reform*, provides a systematic means of helping practitioners and administrators plan effective policies that place ELLs' concerns at the center of education reform. LAB has expanded its collaborative efforts by producing an issue of the National Education Association's newsletter, TRENDS, on "Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners," and developing its third annual research review on recruiting and retaining minority teachers.

"We look at systems, the integration and infusion of what's known from research, and leverage our knowledge into effective practice," says Pacheco. "Our work continues to be about connecting and fostering partnerships, bringing people to resources."

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Educational Leadership

Informed by Evidence and Proven Practice

LSS
educational leadership

Since No Child Left Behind was signed into law, states have responded to the requirements of the law by submitting accountability plans to the federal government ensuring that all students will become proficient in reading and math by 2013-2014. "Plans alone are not enough," states Patricia Montgomery, Director of Educational Leadership at LSS. "Now school and district leaders and state departments of education must find ways to turn around high priority schools. It is our challenge to provide them research-based and proven strategies to help raise student achievement."

To meet this challenge, LSS seeks to provide a leadership path to support school districts and states in their efforts to identify scientifically based research on "what works" in identifying and developing leadership and leadership potential. To build state-, district-, and school-level leadership that enhances professional and instructional practices, LSS provides a wide range of services, programs, and information to all members of the school community.

Currently, LSS is providing key technical assistance throughout the mid-Atlantic region through redesign of central office services to schools for increased teacher and student performance. In several school districts in New Jersey and in Delaware—in collaboration with the Educational Research Service—LSS' High-Performing School District Project supports the replication of research in school districts that have achieved a remarkable improvement in student achievement.

To complement these technical assistance projects, LSS personnel present a series of programmatic professional development offerings: Principal Leadership Forums build leadership capacity of principals and aspirants; State of the Art Seminars provide leaders with topical knowledge through in-depth analysis of current research-based knowledge for effective application in schools and districts with researchers and practitioners; What Works Workshops present information to leaders for designing and implementing effective programs and practices; and Advanced Study Institutes provide team opportunities to develop strategic expertise in building-based improvement planning and leadership.

The LSS expertise in building capacity for educational leadership is itself supported by a robust, ongoing program of research and publication. Among a number of seminal works published by LSS is *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems* by Gordon Cawelti, which identifies and profiles school districts successfully serving at-risk students. The LSS Review features research articles on educational leadership, leadership for successful reading instruction, and central office leadership issues by the most knowledgeable researchers in the field. The LSS Synthesis of Educational Leadership Literature presents an ongoing, up-to-date synthesis of the latest research on educational leadership at all levels of practice, including school, district, and state educational leadership.

Through its signature program of national invitational conferences, LSS brings together nationally recognized researchers and practitioners to examine current topics, including what leaders need to know to effectively lead their schools. This series has supported LSS in building a strategic network of collaborators across the nation to build on existing strengths in educational leadership. This collaborating network now includes, in addition to many individual researchers across the nation, key organizations: AERA, Division A; Educational Research Services; Institute for Educational Leadership; the American Psychological Association; National Society for the Study of Education; National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE); Vanderbilt University; and Penn State University.

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Developing a Practical Guide to Standards Implementation

Assistance in using standards and standards-based curricula, instructional strategies, and assessments has emerged as a high-priority need in McREL's service area. As part of its leadership in the area of standards-based instructional practice, McREL is committed to putting a broad range of tools in the hands of educators as they work to implement standards in their classrooms. Included in this body of work are annual syntheses of research on selected aspects of standards-based instructional practice; an online database of standards and benchmarks; a quarterly newsletter highlighting key education issues; periodic policy briefs; and an annual journal drawing on McREL research and fieldwork. This work is intended to give teachers and principals guidance for helping students meet high standards—a goal in keeping with the intent and provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Because standards implementation is made up of many different components, creating a coherent, targeted plan for their implementation can be a daunting task for schools and districts. As McREL's work on standards-based instructional practice has progressed, the need to help administrators and curriculum developers "bring standards alive" in the classroom has become increasingly apparent. To assist practitioners in that endeavor, McREL continues to build its portfolio of tools and products related to standards implementation. For instance, in 2002, McREL developed, and organized by topic, a set of science benchmarks that reflects the instructional sequence commonly found in well-regarded state standards documents. In 2003, McREL developed a similar set of sequenced benchmarks in the area of literacy. McREL also periodically partners with other organizations in conducting standards work. For example, McREL has conducted research on early childhood education standards for the National Institute for Early Education Research, in conjunction with the development of McREL's own prekindergarten standards.

McREL is currently developing a comprehensive set of strategies for implementing standards in the classroom. This suite of products will pull together McREL's body of knowledge about implementing standards in the classroom, help administrators put implementation tools in the hands of classroom teachers, and set the stage for the use of standards to shape classroom practice. Drawing on the research literature and field experiences of McREL staff, the work will clarify what is needed to effectively implement standards in the classroom in light of current legislation and accountability measures (including NCLB), among other factors. Topics and strategies will include guidelines for identifying essential standards; distilling standards and benchmarks into knowledge and skill statements; establishing performance levels; integrating higher order thinking skills into instructional practice; and aligning assessments to standards.

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Integrating Technology to Help Teachers Teach and Students Achieve

"Growing Up Digital." "Digital Age Readiness."
"The Digital Divide." "Digital Age Learning." It is likely that, at some point, most of us have heard at least one of these adages that all point to an exciting challenge in our nation's schools—as educators, we must prepare students to succeed in tomorrow's world, not yesterday's.

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) continues to assist educators in meeting this challenge, while passage of the No Child Left Behind Act gives a refreshing sense of urgency to the task. With educational technology as the organization's National Leadership Area, NCREL is rooted in the belief that technology integration is the key to helping teachers teach and students learn.

"As we looked at the year ahead of us [2003], it was easy to see two main areas that needed special attention and focus, in addition to our longstanding efforts to improve the academic achievement for all students," said Gilbert Valdez, NCREL chief officer. "The first was to help states with the NCLB requirement that calls for all students being competent in their use of technology by 8th-grade. In fact, the states in the NCREL region told us that was their greatest need." The second area, as identified by Valdez, is one that NCREL has prioritized for many years—the achievement gap between majority and minority students.

Among the most useful of NCREL resources, the Understanding the *No Child Left Behind Quick Key* series focuses on specific topics about the legislation in an easy-to-understand format. *Technology Integration*, the third in the series, helps educators understand the significant technology elements of the legislation. In a similar format, NCREL created a quick and easy to understand brochure to help educators understand the *enGauge*® *21st Century Skills* that are crucial to students' survival in the Digital Age. Additional resources around the 21st Century Skills have also been made available to educators, including, "enGauge Indicators and Their Relationship to No Child Left Behind: Enhancing Technology Through Education," "What Works—Enhancing the Process of Writing Through

Technology: Integrating Research and Best Practices;" and *enGauge 21st Century Skills: Literacy Learning in the Digital Age*.

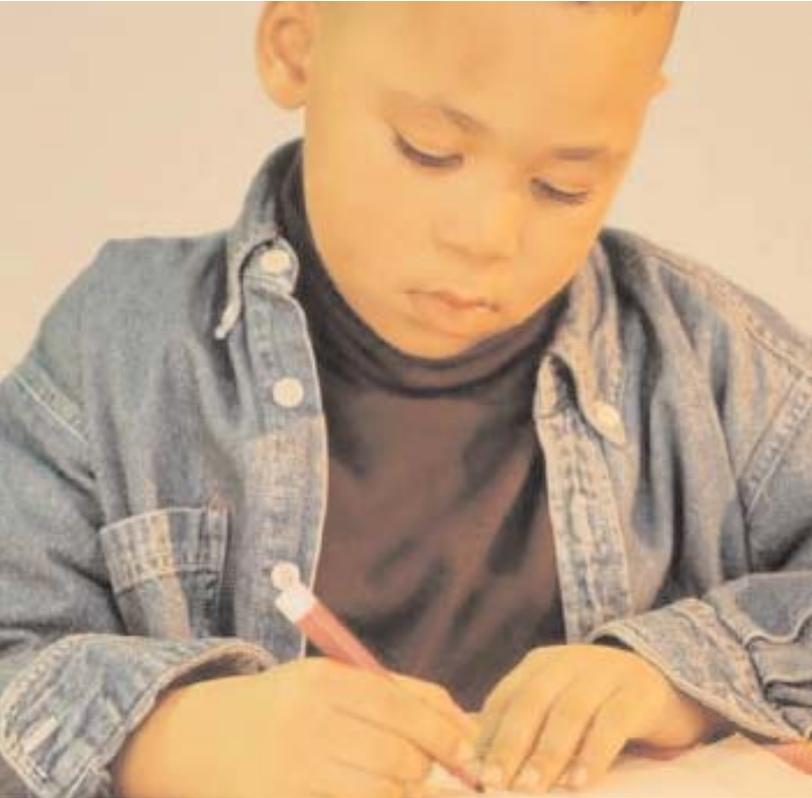
After identifying that limited English proficient students and those with disabilities are among the most critical populations addressed by the No Child Left Behind Act, NCREL modified its study of High-Performance, High-Technology learning communities in an effort to support the improvement of special-needs populations. Among the most notable works, NCREL has released two *Critical Issues* including, "Mastering the Mosaic - Framing Impact Factors to Aid Limited English Proficient Students in Mathematics and Science," "Using Technology to Support Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students' Learning Experiences," and currently being developed is a *Critical Issue* that highlights the effective uses of technology for special-population students identified in No Child Left Behind. Critical Issues can be accessed at www.ncrel.org/pathways.

"The best use of technology is that which is in context with real-life application," stated Valdez. "Through our technical assistance sites, case studies, research-based studies, products, and publications, we try to show educators how technology can, and does, positively impact student achievement. Ten years ago it was impossible to really see an atomic reaction, which is too fast to see in real life. It was also impossible to see evolution, which is too slow to see in real life. But through technology, a student can virtually see both—what a wonderful time to be a teacher," gleamed Valdez.

NCREL has established partnerships with countless organizations to achieve its work around educational technology. From school districts and state agencies, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the Consortium for School Networking, to Harvard University and the George Lucas Foundation, NCREL finds value in the mutual support that each partner brings to the work. "Through partnerships we can bring cutting edge information to each project," stated Valdez. "We don't waste time and energy reinventing the wheel, we want to use every bit of energy to helping students learn better and in more exciting ways."

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Re-Engineering Schools for Student Success

"Our work is directly linked to No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)," says Dr. Robert Blum, director of NWREL's Center for School and District Improvement. "Because progress is based on state achievement tests, we're helping districts recognize how important it is to align what they're teaching with what's tested. We're also getting staff and parents on board so everybody works together to make AYP."

In Leland, NWREL is working with consultant Rochelle Brown to provide goal-setting workshops, assist with curriculum mapping, and improve community outreach. In the two years since the project started, Leland schools climbed from a low-achieving Level 1 to Level 5, the highest ranking on Mississippi's achievement tests.

Brown doesn't take full credit for the improvement. She notes, "Leland had real talent but they didn't know how to work together. That's the value we brought them." Leland superintendent Ilean Richards adds, "The project has been most helpful in (getting) staff and school teams to assess strengths and weaknesses, and using those assessment data to create strong team approaches for improved teaching and learning."

The leadership development project is a partnership between NWREL and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and American Association of School Administrators (AASA). Three other laboratories—SERVE, SEDL, and AEL—are also active partners in this effort. The collaboration creates a "very rich dynamic" among the three major membership-based organizations and the labs, according to NASSP's Rosa Aronson.

NWREL *re-engineering schools
for improvement*

Leland, Mississippi is known as the birthplace of Kermit the Frog and the home of the blues. It's also home to a 2,100-student rural school district that has historically struggled at the bottom rung of state achievement tests.

Leland is one of three pilot sites—along with Memphis, Tennessee and Freeport, New York—where the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) is focusing its national re-engineering leadership work. This work helps school districts boost student achievement by establishing common purpose throughout the district; bringing closer alignment to curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and using data for decision making and accountability.

"The hope is that the associations will bring back findings and enhance the capacity of their constituents to improve their schools and districts," says Aronson.

While direct assistance to school systems makes up an important portion of NWREL's national leadership area work, a larger audience is touched by two other initiatives. An annual forum, addressing timely topics in re-engineering, brings together 100 invited practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and others from around the country. The 2002 conference examined high school reform while this year's conference looks at the district's role in comprehensive school reform. Forum proceedings are widely disseminated through NWREL's Web site.

Also on the Web is NWREL's widely respected research synthesis, *Research You Can Use to Improve Results*, which is continuously revised. "We've responded to the federal government's new emphasis on research rigor with our latest changes," says Blum. "The information is layered so people can see the findings in short form, the studies that support them, and then abstracts of the studies." A section on parental involvement was recently completed, with other updates underway.



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Emphasis on Early Literacy as a Means to Academic Achievement

*curriculum and instruction related to
reading and language mastery*

PREL



How can teachers, literacy coordinators, central office administrators, and other educators find the information they need to make informed decisions about reading and reading instruction? How can they be assured that the information they obtain is reliable? How can they connect with the most current research being conducted?

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) clearly emphasizes early reading literacy and highlights reading as a key to academic achievement. The goal, as stated in Objective 2.1 of the *U.S. Department of Education Strategic Plan, 2002-2007*, is to "ensure that all students read on grade level by third grade."

In support of these national needs and priorities, PREL's leadership area engages three principal components: the Focus on Reading Forums, the earlyreading.info Web site, and the Reading and Language Mastery Advisory Panel (RLMAP).

The Focus on Reading Forums are annual national events focusing on a specific component of early reading. The Forums bring together nationally recognized researchers who present the most current research to state-level literacy leaders and administrators. Small group sessions by region and by role group follow the presentations, during which participants develop discussion questions. The whole group then reconvenes and participates in interactive discussions based on the questions developed during small group sessions.

Presenters at the 2002 Focus on Fluency Forum addressed applications of and implications for research on reading fluency. Presenters included Marilyn Jager Adams, Barbara Foorman, Elfrieda Hiebert, Michael Kamil, Timothy Shanahan, Steven Stahl, and Joseph Torgesen. The event drew 125 participants from 33 state departments of education, all 15 Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers (CCs), and 9 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs).

The 2003 Focus on Vocabulary Forum brings together 175 participants from almost all 50 states, all 15 CCs and all 10 RELs to consider the implications of research on vocabulary instruction for policy and program decision making. Most participants are literacy leaders responsible for literacy initiatives in their respective states. Presenters include Diane August, Isabel Beck, Andrew Biemiller, Margarita Calderon, Maria Carlo, Anne Cunningham, Barbara Foorman, David Francis, Elfrieda Hiebert, Michael Kamil, William Nagy, Judith Scott, and Steven Stahl.

Forum researchers collaborate with the Pacific REL staff to select collections of readings distributed prior to and following the Forum. Other related products include *A Focus on Fluency* (http://www.prel.org/products/re_fluency-1.pdf) and a booklet on fluency assessment. Presenters' PowerPoint presentations are available in their entirety at www.prel.org and the *earlyreading.info* Web sites.

The *earlyreading.info* Web site provides classroom teachers and Reading First applicants with ready access to reliable research information. A "three-click" browse function connects Web site users to information on the five components essential to early reading literacy. Since its launch in April 2003, Web site resources increased 17 percent. Resources are reviewed by the RLMAP to ensure that they adhere to the highest standards of research rigor.

In addition to resource reviews, the Reading and Language Mastery Advisory Panel has partnered with the Pacific REL by providing feedback on the REL's intensive site work at schools and suggesting Forum topics, presenters, and articles. RLMAP members are Elfrieda Hiebert, M. Susan Burns, Margarita Calderon, Anne Cunningham, David Dickinson, Jana Echevarria, David Francis, Richard Johnson, Edward Kame'enui, and Michael Kamil. Panel members have also participated in post-Forum activities, including the Third Annual Guam Education Summit, "A Focus on Fluency," for which Drs. Richard Johnson and Elfrieda Hiebert served as keynote speakers. Eloise Sanchez, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction in the Guam Department of Education said, "I was so inspired by PREL's Focus on Fluency Forum and I wanted to give Guam's teachers the experience of hearing from a well-known expert—someone they had only read about."

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Family and Community Strategies for Student Success

"When schools, families, and communities work together to improve student achievement everyone wins," says Catherine Jordan, director of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's (SEDL) National Center for Family and Community Connections in Schools. "Findings from our annual research syntheses indicate that when schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children do better in school, have better attendance, show improved behavior at home and at school, and stay in school longer."

Through a dissemination plan that includes an annual research synthesis, practical guides for educators, an online resource database, presentations at national conferences, videoconferences, and satellite broadcasts, the center is working to foster increased family and community connections with schools in ways that support achievement and strengthen research in the field.

"The potential of family and community involvement to help improve student achievement is in the spotlight as never before," Jordan says. She explains that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) signals a clear and growing commitment to the role of families, not just to improve achievement, but to hold schools accountable for results. NCLB requires districts and schools to involve parents in the development of plans to help low-achieving students meet challenging academic requirements, build the school's and the parents' capacity for more involvement, and coordinate involvement strategies through a variety of programs such as Head Start, Reading First, Even Start, and Parents as Teachers.

The National Center strives to help educate administrators, teachers, policymakers, parents, and community groups about research-based strategies and tools that can help them make the best decisions with regard to family and community involvement activities and partnerships. For example, this past spring, National Center staff conducted a workshop on how to implement an effective parent involvement program to more than 100 state agency, district, and cooperative administrators in Arkansas. Since then, Jordan has received numerous reports from workshop participants who have gone on to train district and school personnel who have since established parent involvement programs. She explains, "Schools, policymakers, and community organizations must be knowledgeable about strategies and tools and be able to assess which of these would be most successful in raising student achievement given their local situation."

To spread the word about effective strategies and research findings related to family and community involvement in schools, the National Center collaborates with organizations such as the Institute for Responsive Education, the National Center for Community Education, the Public Education Network, Parents for Public Schools, the National School Board Association, the International Roundtable on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, and the American Federation of Teachers. Center staff have also made dozens of presentations at workshops and conferences sponsored by educator organizations including the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the Interstate Migrant Education Program, the National Association of School Boards, the American Association of School Administrators, and the National PTA.

"By collaborating and sharing what we know about engaging the family and community," Jordan says, "we can help schools make good decisions about their involvement programs so that such efforts make a difference to those who matter most—our children."

Student Learning Beyond the Traditional School Day

SERVE

expanded learning opportunities

"Additional learning time." "Nontraditional instruction."
"Reaching at-risk populations." With the accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind, schools are looking for help with all of the above and then some. Increasingly, expanded learning opportunities programs—programs outside the traditional school day or regular school curriculum—are seen as potential strategies for improving student achievement. Research on expanded learning opportunities programs such as LA's BEST, an after-school program serving hundreds of students in Los Angeles, supports the notion that these programs can make a difference in students' performance during regular school and on standardized measures of student achievement. SERVE's Expanded Learning Opportunities Program is working to help schools, districts, and state education agencies develop effective expanded learning opportunities to support and extend efforts within the regular school day program to improve student learning.

After-school programs, one of many types of expanded learning opportunities programs, provide students with supervision and learning experiences during the hours after school dismisses. SERVE is working to improve the effectiveness of after-school programs through research and dissemination of research-based information. By conducting research syntheses on after-school programs during Year 1 and Year 2, SERVE has amassed a tremendous amount of information about the nature and impact of after-school programs. Two reports—the first entitled *Evaluations of After-School Programs: A Meta-Evaluation of Methodologies and Narrative Synthesis of Findings* and the second entitled *After-School Programs: Evaluations and Outcomes*—a comprehensive review of after-school evaluations and research, as well as recommendations for improvements in after-school programs. Research examining the link between after-school programs and improvements in student achievement are a significant focus of the reports. To make this information more accessible to those in the field, SERVE is also developing a searchable database of research on after-school programs that will be housed on

the SERVE Web site. Users will be able to search the database by variables such as the type of program, ages of students served, or the type of research design used to study the program.

SERVE's dissemination of research on after-school programs has not been limited to research reports and databases. In the spring of 2003 SERVE partnered with the National Center for Community Education's Southeast Regional Advisory Committee on after-school training (SERAC) to sponsor a national conference. Entitled *Linkages to Learning: Planning the Work, Working the Plan*, the conference offered sessions on how to support student learning by infusing math, science, and reading experiences into after-school programs, establishing effective collaboration with the regular school day program, and conducting effective program evaluations.

"The Linkages to Learning conference provided a stimulating combination of research-based information and practical applications within the context of after-school programs. The partnership with SERAC was an important opportunity for SERVE to design a conference that was uniquely suited to the needs of after-school providers. Members of the planning team [from both SERVE and SERAC] were instrumental in planning a conference that presented information participants could take home and use," notes Catherine Scott-Little, the lead conference planner.

This work in the area of after-school programs is one of several initiatives SERVE's Expanded Learning Opportunities Program has undertaken to strengthen the capacity of expanded learning opportunities programs to support student learning. Research suggests that expanded learning opportunities may be a nontraditional way for schools to provide extra learning opportunities, improve student achievement, and close the achievement gap. Schools who use the time outside the traditional school day can go a long way toward meeting the requirements of No Child Left Behind. SERVE has collected research information, developed products, and provided assistance to states and districts in the areas of school readiness programs, tutoring programs, and initiatives to support children's transition to school. Taken together, the work is a multifaceted effort to strengthen expanded learning opportunities as a strategy schools and communities can use to improve student learning and meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind.

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Improving State's Efforts to Assess Educational Achievement

The push for standards-based accountability, especially challenging for low-performing schools, confronts educational leaders across the nation with a host of tough issues: lack of coherence across state, district, and school practices; poor alignment across standards, assessments, and accountability; and inadequate support mechanisms for building the capacity of schools, teachers, and administrators to meet increased expectations. WestEd's national leadership work, through expert assistance, studies and timely products, focuses on helping educators and policy-makers successfully deal with these issues.

This work is increasingly focused by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which has intensified the pressure for states to put in place standards-based accountability systems focused on results. "WestEd has contributed significantly," says Stanley Rabinowitz, director of WestEd's Assessment and Standards Development Program, "to the educational community's ability to develop and implement reliable, valid assessment and accountability plans that meet both the letter and spirit of NCLB. We have focused our resources on studying successful state models and working with practitioners and policy makers across the country in improving state plans."

Complementing ongoing work in more than 20 states, WestEd brings together quarterly the National Assessment and Accountability Workgroup. Comprised of nationally recognized technical experts and representatives from innovative states, the group has studied barriers to successful NCLB implementation and developed products and strategies to help states overcome these barriers. Products are targeted to key issues such as alignment, feasibility, pacing, addressing the needs of special populations and alternative schools, along with technical adequacy of different forms of assessment. "Many statewide tests," explains Rabinowitz, "are not technically adequate to perform all the tasks they're asked to. Even at their best, statewide tests capture only a portion of what we expect schools to do."

WestEd staff also co-authored the highly praised publication, *Making Valid and Reliable Decisions in Determining Adequate Yearly Progress*.

(www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/AYPpaper.pdf)

In addition to briefings for state and local policy and technical staff, WestEd has provided direct technical assistance to states on NCLB issues through a range of strategies including work sessions with state department of education staff and state board members, participation on State Technical Advisory Committees, and telephone consultations. This year, for example, WestEd created materials to use in training people to develop test items for high-stakes assessment, and worked with many states on developing the Accountability Workbooks they submitted to USDE describing their assessment and accountability plans. WestEd has also worked with several states as they develop new statewide assessment systems or expand existing ones to meet NCLB, including California, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia

An annual assessment conference is cohosted each fall with the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment. Other partners include state departments of education; universities; organizations like the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Council for Measurement in Education; and the national research center, CRESST.

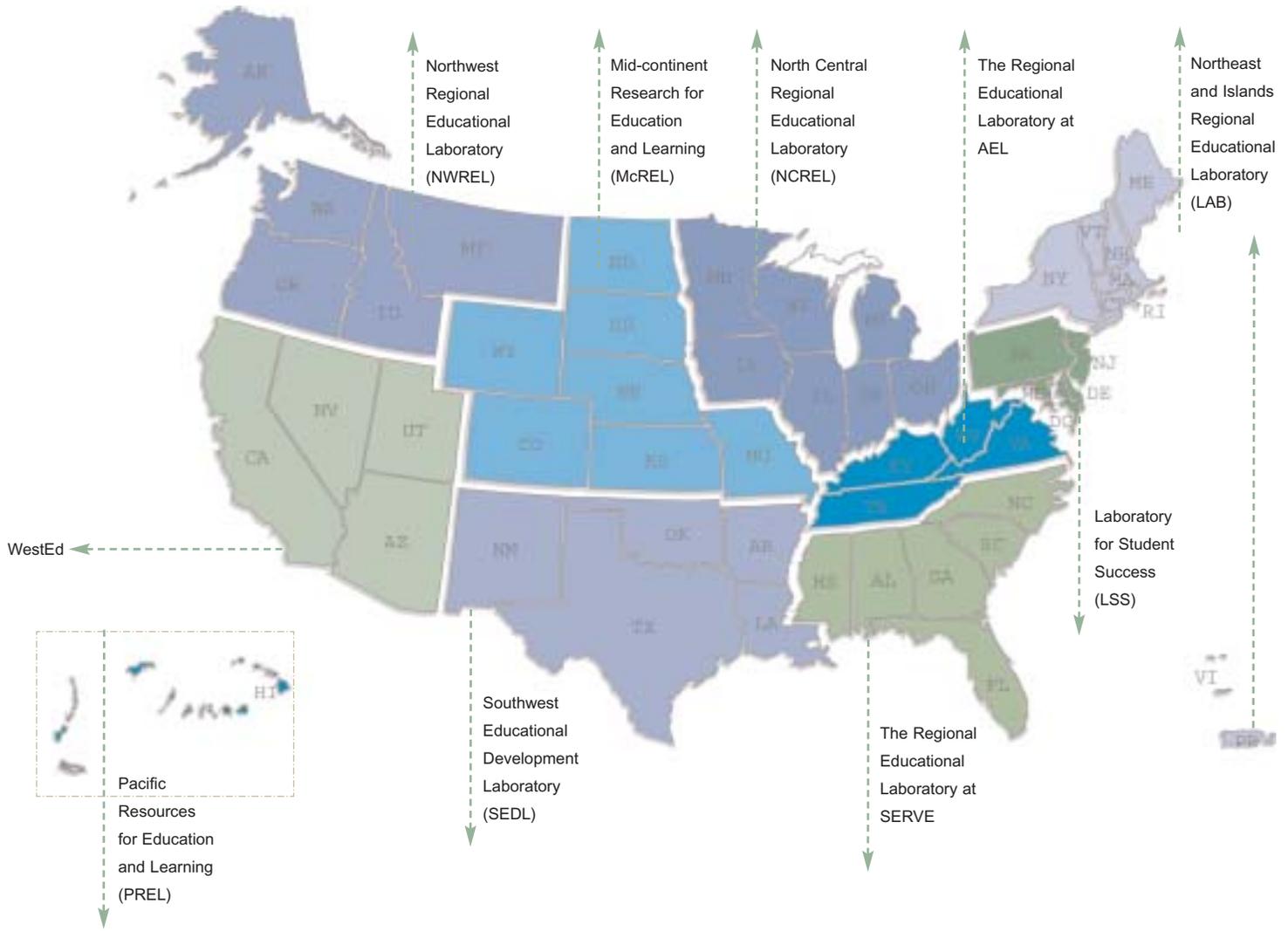
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