

Archived Information



PACIFIC RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND LEARNING

INTERIM EVALUATION RESPONSE

The Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) program at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) was recently evaluated by a panel of five peer reviewers. The evaluation focused on PREL's fulfillment of the REL contract during the first three years of its five-year funding cycle (1995-2000). The panelists spent five days in Honolulu. This resulted in five individual reports and one synthesis report authored by the panelists. PREL has been asked to respond to these reports, particularly the synthesis document.

PREL regards the Year 3 Evaluation as an important opportunity to strengthen its program of work and the structures that support it. After a careful reading and appropriate discussion of all six reports, PREL has decided to focus its response largely on the context of its work, which includes the REL, rather than provide a point-by-point clarification or rebuttal of specific items mentioned in the report(s). In addition, PREL believes that it is unlikely that any future reader will read the synthesis report and PREL's response to it and compare the two documents in an effort to seek understanding. Thus, a response to each item that PREL feels could be clarified or corrected would not be particularly useful.

Hopefully, a brief reiteration of the context within which PREL designs and carries out its work will supplement the panelists' reports. It is important to note that the panelists have not had any substantial experience within the Pacific educational community. Clearly, PREL could have done a better job in conveying the Pacific region's unique context and helping the panelists more accurately view PREL's work. Conversely, it is difficult, in a week-long visit or in a written response such as this, to convey to persons unfamiliar with the region the depth of knowledge necessary to understand program design, strategy, work, and outcomes. Acknowledging these limitations, PREL hopes the following context will contribute to the interim evaluation and its future uses.

A Brief History of the Pacific Regional Educational Laboratory

The U.S. Department of Education's Regional Educational Laboratory program has operated in the Pacific for approximately 30 years. With the exception of the past eight, operations have been under the auspices of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, Oregon. In the Pacific, the United States and service providers like NWREL have taken a work approach that tends to be highly prescriptive, using simple answers to address complex

problems. While these efforts have been well intended, they have yielded very limited results after more than 50 years of U.S. stewardship in the Pacific. This traditional approach may be the basic explanation of why such little progress has been made in building education systems that can provide quality learning for students.

A tenth regional laboratory was authorized in 1983. NWREL was given a modest yearly amount (\$500,000) under its 1985-90 REL contract in order to support the tenth lab's development in the Pacific, but the laboratory existed only as a limited program funded and controlled by NWREL. There was no laboratory dedicated solely to strengthening and supporting the education systems in the Pacific region until the establishment of the Pacific Regional Educational Laboratory in 1990. PREL's total organizational time frame is eight years, three of which were covered by the recent evaluation. Prior to 1990, PREL did not set the agenda or control the resources. This is not an excuse but a fact.

When PREL bid for the 1990 laboratory contract to serve the Pacific, it called for the extensive involvement of Pacific educators in the governance, planning, and delivery of services. Members of PREL's newly formed Board of Directors were openly skeptical about who was making the decisions—Pacific Islanders or the U.S. government. At PREL, an enormous emphasis has been and continues to be placed on the involvement, ownership, and commitment of Pacific Islanders in everything PREL does. It is important to keep this factor in mind when reading the evaluation reports. It is equally important to remember that most of the Pacific community was not independently controlled for well over two centuries, and many generations knew only dominance and outside control. After the compacts of free association in 1986, independence was granted but there was virtually no infrastructure or capacity (political, social, economic, or educational) in existence to support it. This was the starting point for PREL in 1990. In this context, a period of eight years is a very short time.

PREL's Context

It is PREL's feeling that the significance of the Pacific region's historical, political, economic, and educational context was not adequately conveyed and, in turn, was not adequately understood by the five panelists. This is not a

criticism of the panelists, but it is an aspect of the evaluation that should not be ignored.

In the main, PREL does not disagree with the comments and observations of the panelists. It is clear that they might not fully appreciate the task of building capacity as a prerequisite to systemic reform and scaling up. The synthesis report notes that PREL has not paid much attention to these two dimensions of its work, focusing mostly on capacity building, and this is accurate. PREL feels that it is futile to focus on systemic reform and/or scaling up when various components of capacity are substandard. For example, 30 percent of teachers in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) have only high school diplomas; another 50 percent completed associate degrees as their highest level of education. These well-intended educators constitute 80 percent of the classroom teachers in FSM schools, and all are under-prepared as effective teachers. How does one talk about systemic reform and scaling up when the Pacific people who are appropriately at the heart of this work have not been properly trained to carry it out? PREL does not think such discussion is practical. PREL could do things that fulfill contractual requirements but don't make a difference on the short- or long-term, but PREL will not do this.

At the same time, significant numbers of the region's educators are well-credentialed and effectively addressing systemic issues such as standards-based education, curriculum alignment, and performance assessment. PREL has been at the heart of every initiative of this type. There are few simple responses to any of the issues that were evaluated by the panelists, and areas of confusion were unavoidable, it seemed. No doubt all parties felt this throughout the five-day visit.

The diversity of the Pacific region and the limited resources available to provide educational assistance pose major challenges to PREL and its REL work. How do factors such as grossly substandard school facilities, non-existent or limited instructional materials, a lack of indigenous language materials, a majority of students whose first language is not English, per pupil expenditures as low as \$200, and extreme geographic isolation enter into an evaluation of a REL's work? PREL doesn't have a simple answer to that, mostly because there isn't one. Panelists made comments like, "We have to have an answer to this question and I don't know what it is." PREL understands and appreciates the task of the panelists, who did a good and credible job within their context. But

there is so much more to understand when looking at PREL's work, its accomplishments, and the evaluation of both. It is not likely that a few pages in response will prompt insights that will result in better understanding, but it is hoped that a reader might pause for a moment and think about the point being raised, whether positive or negative.

A few additional thoughts before closing: PREL's mission is intentionally general—"non-distinguishing," as the synthesis report states. This goes to the issue of long-term survivability. There is a historical lack of sustainability in the Pacific. Subsistent economies have no capacity to sustain fiscal initiatives; hence, they are dependent on outside resources. PREL's Board of Directors is committed to survival. They are not opposed to PREL working in other parts of the country or world to sustain an organization that symbolizes hope to most Pacific educational communities. What is unique and highly distinguishing is PREL's strategy of work and engagement. This is why, over an eight-year period, PREL has grown from an organization with one funding source and seven workers to a \$10 million dollar enterprise with nearly 90 employees and offices in most of the communities PREL serves. This is something that no other similar agency has ever achieved. Does this mean that PREL is beyond improvement, that our REL program of work can't be strengthened? Absolutely not. The panelists' insights and perspectives are invaluable to PREL's continuing emphasis on quality in its products and services. At the same time, core beliefs that focus on respect, sensitivity, involvement, and capacity to sustain will remain with PREL even though these core beliefs confuse and compound the difficulty of the work and the explanation of it.

PREL appreciates the opportunity to respond to the panelists' reports. PREL will use these documents as an opportunity to strengthen the Regional Educational Laboratory work and its documentation.