Interim Evaluation of the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education

I.　　Brief Overview of Laboratory

The site visit for the interim evaluation of the Southeast Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) Laboratory was held May 10-14, 1999 at the SERVE headquarters on the campus of the University of North Carolina Greensboro. Some staff members from SERVE offices in Florida and Georgia joined the headquarters staff for the site visit. Panel members were sent many documents to review prior to the site visit. I reviewed these documents prior to conducting the site visit, and reviewed some of them again during the site visit. In addition to the group interviews scheduled for all members of the Panel, I also participated in a brief conversation with the Director of the Technology in Learning Program and another panel member. I also was involved in a conversation around the topic of quality and evaluation with SERVE staff and a couple of other panel members. Despite four very intensive days and the review of the comprehensive set of materials provided, I still feel there are areas of Lab activities about which I should know more in order to evaluate them. Many of the areas that go unmentioned in this report are not here because I think they are just fine or because I did not feel informed enough to comment. Lack of discussion should not be construed as lack of support.

II.   **Implementation and Management**

A.   **To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during the first three contract years?**

SERVE, now in its second 5-year contract, has undergone substantial changes since it was created in 1990. Approximately 1.5 years ago, there was a change in leadership in the Lab. With the approval of the Board of Directors and the Lab monitor in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education, major changes were made in the structure and organization of the Lab. The new structure has program areas reflecting key content areas of interest to the Lab, selected based on the needs of the region. This new organization seems to make it easier for Lab clients to identify where in the organization to go for assistance. In addition, it allows for newly funded activities to be organized with existing activities for better coordination. The changes included in the Fiscal Year 99 Annual Plan reflect what appear to be appropriate changes in the activities from those stated in the Lab Proposal written in 1995. Some of the activities proposed were vague and were eventually found to be of little interest to the educators in the region. Other activities evolved over the course of the contract, and the Annual Plan describes these changes. As a result, comparing the performance of SERVE to the original proposal is not only difficult but also inappropriate. My comments about the quality of the work, thus, will reflect the scope of work as it is now being carried out for the most part.

The restructuring of SERVE also included some changes in staffing. What was previously a flat organizational structure at SERVE, now has an administrative layer that has the potential to promote coordination and quality in programming. Staff in the two new Deputy Director positions are new to their positions (one has not even started yet), so it is difficult to

evaluate how well the new structure will work. However, it is clear that the new Executive Director brings strong organizational skills to the position. For instance, in the brief time he has been at the Lab, he has improved the quality and timeliness of quarterly reports. Key staff members who have been with the Lab for a number of years are to be commended for continuing to do excellent work despite leadership problems at the beginning of this contract. It is time, however, for the Lab to move ahead to bring more cohesiveness to its activities under the new leadership.

1. Strengths

Despite its youth, SERVE appears to be well-established and functioning efficiently. SERVE benefits from the support of the University of North Carolina Greensboro, and especially the Provost, who was one of the original founders of SERVE. Many of SERVE's policies for salaries, hiring practices, and other general organizational policies are in place because they are required by the University. SERVE also has a very supportive Executive Board. The Executive Board seems to represent the many types of users in the region, and their comments were very helpful to the Panel.

SERVE is clearly a client-oriented organization, responding to all requests, apparently. One particular area where this client-orientation can be seen is in the placement of Senior Policy Analysts in the state education agencies in SERVE states. Hired with the assistance of the chief state school officer, the state's policy analyst assists the chief and other state officials in doing research, developing policy briefs, and advising on cross-state issues, often with the assistance of the other policy analysts. Many positive statements have been heard concerning the importance of the role of these policy analysts, such as that they are neutral and objective. While the diffusion of staff can present many problems with communications, this unique way of

distributing personnel appears to offer many advantages such as having the policy analysts working within the context from which the issues arise and having staff close to conduct training.

SERVE obviously has shown its worth and the support of the U.S. Department of Education (USED) as it has received numerous additional grants and contracts from USED, including the SouthEast and Islands Regional Technology in Education Consortium (SEIR*TEC), the National Center for Homeless Education, the Eisenhower Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education, the Comprehensive School Reform Development project and other activities. Arranged as they are under the seven SERVE program areas, there is much opportunity for the Lab to benefit from joint or supportive activities.

SERVE has also developed useful relationships with other organizations in the region, primarily for conducting special projects of interest to individual states. Among the groups with which SERVE has worked are the Public School Forum of North Carolina, Delta State University, the Georgia Partnership for Early Childhood Education, the South Carolina School Boards Association, and the National Dropout Prevention Center. SERVE has also begun work with the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Center for Early Development and Learning on its specialty area of Early Childhood Education.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

One of the major concerns I have about the functioning of SERVE is the lack of substantive communication and collaboration between projects within programs and across programs. The distribution of personnel in several offices does not appear to be a major cause of this lack of communication, although it must surely contribute. Discussions with program and project staff have shown that obvious content connections are not made, nor are staff encouraged to discuss their activities in such depth as to promote collaboration and coordination.

For instance, there is an obvious content connection between the Alternative Assessment project and the Senior Project activity. I sensed a lack of coordination among the two projects which may be, in part, because SERVE uses consultants who have developed the activity and provide the training, while SERVE is primarily a convener and facilitator. The Senior Project is an example of an alternative assessment, and could be discussed (and in fact may be) as such in the training on alternative assessment. Likewise, there are things that can be learned from the Alternative Assessment project that could feed into the training on the Senior Project, particularly as a district or school looks to infuse Senior Project type of activities into the overall curriculum.

Similarly, the Assessment, Accountability, and Standards Program seems to work in isolation of the School Development and Reform Program, except for the joint planning of a conference for low performing schools. Clients of the School Development and Reform Program who were asked if they had heard of SERVE's Alternative Assessment project indicated they had not heard about it. Assessment, accountability and standards are essential components of the school reform movement, as is Math and Science Education. Still, the linkages do not seem to be acknowledged in program activities, and the activities do not benefit from the collaboration around the most important issue – student achievement. Other linkages seem to be missing between REL and non-REL funded activities, such as between the Technology in Learning and the SEIR*TEC activities. One logical linkage came up during our discussions that had not been previously identified. Thus, an opportunity is lost to show the linkages to educators in the region so that they could see other ways they could benefit from SERVE activities.

SERVE appears to be behind in the efforts to build its specialty area into a national

powerhouse. It is difficult to tell exactly why problems arose in moving the activities along on time. It could be that the focus on completing a seminal work for policy makers was secondary to providing training in areas where SERVE had expertise. In any case, SERVE is hard at work moving along the revision of the Framework related to early childhood education.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

Schools and districts are bombarded with programs and professional development activities, and they often do not have the where-with-all to determine how they fit together. The same may be true for educators who see the vast array of disparate offerings from SERVE. I recommend that SERVE staff set aside time to step back and look at the overall area of School Development and Reform (which is the overarching idea of all activities within SERVE) and discuss the content of their activities and programs in depth so that they could determine where logical linkages occur and where projects can benefit from collaboration. Such an activity would assist in determining collaboration activities possible in current Lab activities, evaluating how well the Lab is serving its clients, as well as for long term planning.

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

1. Strengths

SERVE described a Quality Assurance (QA) process that is supposed to be used for publications and activities of the Lab. From what I can see, the publications seem to go through the rigorous QA process before being published. There were several instances of where publications were supposed to be out, but were withheld for revisions due to the QA process.

A major component of the QA process is feedback from the field, and there was evidence provided of studies and surveys done to assess the satisfaction of clients with regard to SERVE

publications and activities.

With regard to the School Development and Reform Program there was mention of a staff debriefing focused on how well the clients were served and what could be done to improve the services provided.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

The SERVE program areas could benefit from more scrutiny from outside of the states in the region. Sometimes the focus seemed to be state-specific. By using more outside reviewers SERVE might be better able to identify areas of their research that are repetitive of other research already done or areas where the research does not clearly show effects.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

SERVE should continue to use outside reviewers of documents and bring in folks to provide evaluative information about seminars and training sessions. In particular, publications which purport to have the best research on a particular topic should have an outside review by someone who is knowledgeable about the research and who could offer more informed suggestions for improvement. Division H of the American Educational Research Association does evaluations of its sessions at the annual meeting. Such an evaluation process could be implemented to promote high quality sessions at SERVE meetings.

III. Quality

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

1. Strengths

SERVE has a number of interesting and high quality activities. For instance, the Senior Project is a very exciting activity that SERVE is sponsoring. This is a good example of SERVE

brokering the assistance of the program developers. In addition, it is nice to see SERVE take the very interesting Toolkit on Alternative Assessment and provide training to the field. This is an area of much interest in the instructional improvement area, and SERVE seems to be filling a critical need in this area. Helping the client to exploit these materials for the benefit of preservice education is a particularly enticing area.

SERVE staff obviously benefit from a skilled publications office capable of putting out slick, easy to read documents. This is important because educators are reluctant to pick up dreary looking documents. In addition to being colorful and nicely formatted, they are interesting to read and informative. We learned that two of SERVE documents have received national recognition, namely *Achieving Your Vision of Professional Development*, honored by the National Council on Staff Development, and *Study Guide for Classroom Assessment: Linking Instruction and Assessment*, honored by Division H of AERA. Staff are to be commended for these honors.

It is clear from the presentations we have observed that SERVE staff conduct well-organized and interesting seminars, workshops and training sessions. Participants are given many opportunities to interact during the sessions, something they rate highly in their evaluations. Materials are attractive and nicely put together. There is some evidence of attempts to make information more widely available and in an attractive format on the SERVE web site.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

A major concern of mine is the lack of complete and current research documentation of the products and services provided to help the clients. Many of the products reviewed for the site visit contained few if any research citations, and many of the citations were dated or from questionable resources. For instance, the Assessment HotSpots document had no listing of

references that I could find, although one reference was cited. We were not provided copies of the "researches" provided by DISC to clients. It is highly possible that these documents are simply listings of research citations, but not carefully reviewed lists that sift through what is available for the clients.

I feel that many of the ideas "researched" by SERVE staff are "good ideas" that a school or district is trying, and that SERVE thinks would be valuable to watch, rather than field-based implementation of proven models. Often these studies rely on observations of a very few schools. Based on these activities, the idea is written up and shared with other schools. Doing work with a few schools would be okay if carefully designed research components were included that could be linked to other studies. For instance, surveys and other documents based on research on the change process could be used to help evaluate the implementation of a program by a school. This baseline data is important in looking at how the program is implemented and what types of student outcomes could be expected. While there was some mention of such a research-type activity, a commitment to careful collection of data was not very apparent. Some mention was made of looking at student achievement next. A better plan would be to incorporate these types of outcomes into the activity from the beginning rather than identify these needs at the end. The activities associated with Alternative Assessment and Senior Project need to be linked more closely with student achievement. State assessments are available in all of the states in the region (although some are new). Most districts also do testing. These testing programs could also be used. A useful focus would be determine why programs are not successful in some places or with some types of teachers or students.

SERVE does not yet have the national reputation on its specialty area that it is seeking. In part, this is due to problems seen in the Lab over the past few years. On the other hand, I

think SERVE and its partners in the LNP have had a difficult time determining what products make the most sense to provide. Some of the originally planned activities appear to have been abandoned.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

At the beginning of each contract year, training materials, in particular, should be reviewed for the relevance of the contents and the quality of the references. Periodic reviews of the literature should be done to see newer references or references that suggest some materials should be removed from training materials.

It would be useful if SERVE staff would provide carefully put together annotated bibliographies for their clients on a set of topics closely related to school improvement and reform. SERVE should be careful to include only references to programs that have been shown by research to be effective.

SERVE could take it further, however, by working with early implementers to identify ways that the project has had a positive effect on other facets of schools' curriculum and instruction. For instance, one client we saw talked about how the skills required for Senior Project are now being promoted in earlier grades so that students are better prepared to succeed by the time they reach 12th grade. Many of the issues in the Senior Project and Alternative Assessment project are related and more connections could be established between them.

IV.   **Utility**

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

1. **Strengths**

Testimony by the clients over the course of the site visit and documents we received indicated that the products and services provided by SERVE are extremely well-received and used often. Reviews from training sessions complimented SERVE on the quality and usefulness of the information presented, and the thanks felt for SERVE providing the opportunity for school and district folks to come together for training and collegiality.

SERVE has been strategic in its commitment to the "train the trainers" concept, since it builds both capacity at the local level and leverages the ability of the SERVE staff to meet the needs of their many clients. SERVE has obtained training for its staff in areas of interest to the region, such as Conflict Resolution. Building this capability in staff is an excellent way to serve the community. Using outside resources where internal resources are not available is also a strength of SERVE in some areas.

There is some evidence that SERVE customizes training for various clients. Adjustments in training sessions are made based on the suggestions of the site. For instance, one client mentioned that SERVE was asked to do the beginning and ending sessions of a training series but the district folks provided the middle part. It appears from client testimony that SERVE staff and very responsive to requests for assistance, and provide follow-up as requested.

Showcases were designed and presented according to the wishes of the state education agencies. Other projects were done for entire states rather than a cross-section of states.

SERVE also seems to provide some services to the needy areas in rural locations and

those with high numbers of low performing students.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

SERVE clients, at least the ones we have seen, read about, or heard from, indicate complete faith in the materials provided by SERVE. This means that the products must be of the highest quality possible. It also means that the viability of the research presented in the documents is essential, as a program described in a SERVE publication may be adopted wholesale as it is presented.

Another critical area where SERVE products and services could use some improvement is in the area of evaluation. While it would be impossible for SERVE to follow all of its clients to the end of program implementation to see what is the impact, it is essential that SERVE work with clients to establish benchmarks for appropriate implementation and concrete outcomes that schools and districts can use to see if the innovation is successful. This is particularly true with Title I and CSRD projects, as evaluation is an essential component. Many SERVE documents and training modules have customer satisfaction as a desired outcome. I think this is shortsighted. The major outcome should be student achievement, and some mention of this goal should be present in all of the SERVE materials.

I do not feel I have a good sense of how promising programs are scaled up from one location to another, other than by spreading the word through seminars. In some instances SERVE has done some excellent work in conjunction with a state (e.g., North Carolina and, to some extent, with Alabama). It was not clear if the development work done for these sites was then offered to other states within the region.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

As mentioned in question one, SERVE should look at each activity from the standpoint

of what it offers to achieving school reform in the service of student achievement. Since SERVE projects are not formal research activities, the link to student achievement may not be direct. However, clients should be encouraged to look at both how the process of educating students is changed through input of SERVE and how student achievement may be affected for the better. For SERVE applied research activities, student achievement or other student outcomes (e.g., increased attendance, continued attendance for potential dropouts, satisfactory completion of projects) should be evaluated to the extent possible. This may include reviewing the unacceptable performance of some students and looking at what pieces might be missing from the training or the implementation of the project. This type of thing was discussed in the session with regard to the Senior Project.

One issue that came up was the development of a database containing information about participants in SERVE activities. The plan is to link participants to information about their sites so that SERVE can analyze the types of clients being served. When asked if this type of thing was being coordinated with other Labs, the answer was no, not at this time. I recommend that SERVE take the leadership in bringing together the Labs around the issue of developing commonalties among their databases so that data from the Labs can be analyzed together in a more meaningful way than if all Labs "do their own thing." This is not a complicated process. It requires identifying the information needs that are common to the Labs (most especially the data needed for reporting indicators), specifying what data elements and definitions should be used, and discussing logical formats for collecting and reporting the data. Lab staff charged with the responsibility for analyzing data (probably folks in the evaluation unit) could use this activity to ensure that their data systems contain the common data elements and other elements unique to the Lab. I recommend that this activity be conducted with the assistance of a person

knowledgeable about Labs and information systems from outside the Lab who can help Lab staff identify potential connections in areas which they might otherwise miss.

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

1. Strengths

With the assistance of the Evaluation Program, SERVE conducts DELPHI needs assessments, customer satisfaction surveys, and other activities focused on learning how pleased the clients are with SERVE services and activities. These activities are done both in general at the beginning of each contract year, as well as for specific projects and activities. SERVE staff indicated that changes are made in their activities based on this feedback. For instance, some originally planned activities, such as the pilot approach to high school self-assessment, were dropped "due to lack of school interest."[1] Others were refined in response to suggestions from the field.

Many specific products have been mentioned that were produced specifically for a state or other group. For instance, special training materials were developed for Alabama. SERVE is now looking at grading and reporting, an area of much interest, in response to work being done with a district.

SERVE has begun to provide materials in a variety of formats. They are producing a series of video magazines providing "staff development" around a topic raised in the field. Materials have also been produced on CD-ROM, instead of just paper format.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

SERVE staff seem too willing to provide something in response to every request from the field. This means they feel they must develop expertise and produce something when there may

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[1] Supplement to the *FY '99 Updated Annual Plan*, p. 16.

already be something available. Some products may be less than fully-researched and provide guidance based on faulty conclusions or dated ideas.

SERVE could use a more concentrated effort to meet the needs of schools with special needs in the community, such as rural schools and schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students. While many of the activities conducted by SERVE are used by Title I and rural schools, there is no special outreach to the ones who do not choose to participate, at least that I could see.

I also think SERVE should find more and better ways to use other technologies.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

SERVE should look at its overall structure, as mentioned above in question IA. As a result of this review, SERVE staff should be able to articulate exactly what components of school reform they feel they have materials and services to cover. Where there are holes in SERVE capabilities, the organization should identify other sources (e.g., Labs, centers, other research-based information) to fill particular educator needs. Careful consideration should be made as to what resources are cited in response to local questions. Recommended resources should be fully research-based, have undergone public scrutiny, have been implemented in schools, districts or states, and have been evaluated according to whether they were implemented correctly and whether there were concrete outcomes delivered. Only after a careful review of existing literature, should a new program of work be begun. In addition, SERVE should undertake new work in collaboration both with experts from inside the organization and with experts outside the organization.

I think SERVE can do some more scaling up with other rural schools but involving them in collaborative activities with other rural schools. SERVE should promote continued

discussions via listservs and exchanges of promising practices. I hesitate to tell SERVE what they should do, because they probably can come up with better ideas. But, I think more focused attention on rural schools would be effective.

I would like to see SERVE use technology more for disseminating materials and promoting communication. Clients who have participated in SERVE activities should have listservs to promote discussion and problem solving between meetings. The CD-ROM Toolkit is a good example of what can be done. Providing materials on CD-ROM allows for easier duplication, revisions to meet local needs, etc. For training materials on school-level planning and evaluation, Internet links to other resources can be made on CD-ROMS. Videos can now be put on CD-ROMS and accompanied by training materials. Distribution of CD-ROMS is much easier than large notebooks and videotapes. I would like to see more information included in the SERVE web site, such as up-to-date bibliographies, training for how to do literature searches, etc. The web site is very attractive and there are many links to useful information. However, there is more that can be done.

V. Outcomes and Impact

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

1. Strengths

There was some evidence regarding the Student Project that student performance is positively effected, although it appears to be mostly anecdotal and after-the-fact. Similarly, there is a sense that the Alternative Assessment materials may have an effect on student performance. The School Development and Reform program had some achievement data provided by clients,

but it seemed to be data identified and collected after the program was over.

SERVE has produced numerous publications extolling the virtues of the various programs. The distribution of these documents appears to be wide, with many materials reaching the desk of school principals in the region.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

There was a lack of research basis for some of the SERVE work; thus links to student achievement may have been difficult to assess. From questions to staff, we learned that there is a desire to look at the effects of their activities on student achievement. However, they are talking about looking at achievement long after the implementation process has begun. Evaluation planning should be done before the project is begun. Issues related to what succeeded and what did not are especially relevant in applied research such as is typically done by Labs.

Although many of the materials developed by SERVE are widely distributed, they may have limited applicability if they are not addressing a cohesive set of activities toward school reform. Thus the publications may not make if off the principal's desk and into the hands of innovators.

Most of the work completed by SERVE is relevant to the national debate about reform. However, the SERVE work does not always appear among the references cited in training manuals and reports. By framing its work in the context of research-based "best practice" and how it contributes to the field, SERVE could most likely gain a better reputation and more widespread recognition if the programs were drawn together more closely, had a more up-to-date set of references, and were researched in a more careful fashion.

3. Recommendations for Improvement

SERVE should develop comprehensive research summaries related to their various

activities and show how these activities contribute to school reform. Other activities in Labs and centers around the US should be referenced if relevant. Increased collaboration with researchers could help to improve study design and ensure effective outcomes. In addition, working with well-known researchers can lend credibility to SERVE work and help to ensure that it gets published. SERVE needs to write some articles about their well-done projects and seek collaborators or other pilots sites in the region and outside of the region (working with the relevant Lab).

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

1. Strengths

SERVE has provided numerous opportunities for states and localities to get assistance on the implementation of comprehensive school improvement strategies. In addition to various annual workshops, SERVE staff have worked directly with states, districts, and schools to provide technical assistance and training related to school improvement. For instance, SERVE staff provides workshops on how to develop a comprehensive school reform plan for Title I schools developing schoolwide programs, workshops on how to apply for federal funding under CSRD, and showcases of recommended research-based activities that can be adopted as a part of CSRD. In addition to providing training and technical assistance, it appears that they provide opportunities for schools, LEAs, and/or states to present information about the programs they have adopted and get feedback from their peers. It appears that SERVE staff help CSRD schools think through the evidence they will need concerning the impact of the program implemented. One document, in particular, *Catalog of School Reform Models* provides specific resources about research-based programs. In addition, information is available on the SERVE web site. SERVE

seems to have a broad array of materials that are relevant to schools undergoing reform that are readily available and disseminated somewhat efficiently.

I think the training materials developed by SERVE are very attractive and probably very useful. I noticed activities in the training materials, and they appear to be appropriate to the content and useful for keeping the interest and promoting involvement of the audience.

It appears that SERVE is very responsive to the states in terms of preparing specialized training activities. I notice several notebooks in which SERVE materials appeared with locally produced materials in an activity for a specific state. Apparently SERVE has a number of time-tested training materials in certain areas that it can pull off the shelf and use to customize a workshop according to the needs of the field.

While certain SERVE training activities are finite in length and do not lead directly into another SERVE activity, it appears that SERVE staff are responsive to requests for additional assistance and readily available to answer questions.

With regard to policies issues, SERVE's network of Policy Analysts provides excellent assistance to policy makers on site at the SEAs. It is good to see that the chief state school officers have such trust and confidence in these folks. This network of policy analysts both within SERVE and across Labs is a particularly useful group, I would imagine. The extent to which they can help state level policy makers understand how all these reform efforts fit together only makes the Labs more essential to the states.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

This is one area where linkages between the programs would seem logical. The materials prepared for schools by the School Development and Reform Program do not include information about alternative assessment and accountability prepared by the Assessment,

Accountability and Standards Program. I did not see them even referenced in the training

materials.

The availability of research references differs across the program area documents. While

some have complete listings, others have no references at all. For instance, I really did not see

research references in the Forum training materials. Granted the various presenters should

provide references to their own work. On the other hand, it would seem useful for SERVE to

provide up-to-date references on topics key to the discussions at the forums.

3. Recommendations for Improvements

I think one of the most useful roles of the Labs is the dissemination of up-to-date

information on research-based programs. With the use of the Internet, this information can be

disseminated more easily and can be updated as needed. One issue that organizations must face,

however, is whether they rely heavily upon sales of printed documents or if they are willing to

give away the contents of their documents. In my experience, I have found that many folks will

still want the printed document even if it is available on the Internet, so providing access via the

Internet should not reduce revenues substantially. I would like to encourage SERVE to provide

its documents online, not just sell them. Education policy is moving so rapidly that the Internet

has become a major source of information for decision making. If SERVE's excellent

documents are not available online, then their value will be missed. I am particularly interested

in having SERVE provide Internet access to up-to-date bibliographies, particularly if the items in

the list can be linked via the Internet. Better yet would be syntheses of research placed on the

Internet, or linked to via the Internet. North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Mike Ward said in his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor,

and Pensions that while basic research about teaching and learning is helpful, "the research

activity that is often most helpful to policy makers is the synthesis and publication in a single, understandable report of multiple studies examining a given topic" (p. 2). SERVE is currently providing some of these policy documents, and they are excellent. If other Labs are doing similar documents, it would be useful to have links to them to serve your clients. I suspect this will be a part of the Lab web site. In the meantime, making the links directly to other Labs should be possible, rather than making your clients have to search for them.

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

1. Strengths

SERVE entered into the current contract with some expertise and experience in the area of Early Childhood Education. As a result, it was easy for SERVE staff to begin immediately responding to requests for help in the area of Early Childhood Education. SERVE has produced some very nice documents concerning transitions, training of teachers and caregivers, policies related to providing good child care experiences for children, brain research, and linking services for children. The documents have been distributed widely within the region. The training materials we saw on transitions looked very nice and useful.

SERVE has taken the lead in the area of Early Childhood Education and has enlisted the collaboration of several other Labs, the National Center on Early Development and Learning, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. These are some of the logical groups to include, although there are probably others that should be included. These organizations can help to disseminate the information that SERVE has developed and will be developing. SERVE has done a nice job of presenting its specialty area on the web and linking the SERVE web site to other sites with related information.

SERVE is being called upon by a couple of its client states to provide specific assistance in the area of Early Childhood Education (North Carolina and Florida). This focus by these two states may help to identify areas and services not presently met by SERVE or other organizations, and lead to more interesting activities in this area.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

The ramping up of this set of activities by SERVE was apparently hampered during the first three years of the contract. As a result, we see only a few limited, but nice documents, and not the seminal work one would expect in a specialty area. The Framework under development was actually developed by another Lab during the previous contract period. Thus the work being done on the framework is apparently not original to SERVE. I do not wish to take away from the importance of the revision work and pilot testing that is being done. I only hope that SERVE will be recognized for the importance of its portion of the work. As a result, it is imperative that SERVE look for ways to more widely disseminate the materials it has developed about early childhood.

We do not have evidence from this site visit or the materials about the distribution of the early childhood publications other than what was sent out originally to the mailing list. We were also not provided information about hits on the web site either, so it is difficult to look at distribution of the information to interested parties outside of the SERVE network. This is true of all the SERVE publications.

3. Recommendations for Improvements

The area of Early Childhood Education is a hot area, both from a policy perspective and from a practical perspective. I saw a link to the first National Education Goal in one document. I think there are many more partners and alliances that are possible for SERVE to pursue that

could help dissemination information and provide input into how documents can be used. I think it would be good to look at the contacts of the National Education Goals Panel. I suggest you consider adding the Council for Exceptional Children. Although their focus is more on children with special needs, there is a lot going on in Special Education and services to children ages 0-2 and 3-5. There is much to be learned from Special Education in this area.

SERVE staff already know that they have a need to do a better job of writing up its work for journals. And, I think there is work to be done on a dissemination plan. Placing the documents online would probably bring much more attention to SERVE in this area.

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

As a relatively new Lab, I do not have the same expectations for SERVE as I would for a more experienced Lab. In addition, the changes in organization and staff have yet to be fully implemented. Thus I am making my comments in the spirit of what SERVE has the potential to become.

SERVE clearly has an excellent reputation as a responsive and service-oriented Lab. The staff is clearly devoted to the vision of the Lab and what the Lab can bring to the communities in the Southeast. The focus of the Lab on school improvement and student outcomes is right on target both for the region and for the country as a whole. The work SERVE is doing to assist states with Title I and CSRD implementation is very good, and the districts and schools appear to be very grateful. The small, decentralized staff has been sorely taxed to provide a wide array of services to the region, and it has been able to provide an amazing amount of training to the field. Probably as a result of this diffusion of effort, there has been limited progress in the development of the specialty area.

I think that SERVE has the potential to provide even better assistance to the Southeast if it can build a more cohesive programmatic focus and a clearer picture of how the work that it is doing relates to student success. More rigor is needed in identifying effective programs and researching the effects on educators, school, and, most importantly, students. SERVE needs to look outside the Southeastern boundaries for expert help to assist in program design, development, and implementation. In addition, SERVE needs to look for better ways to disseminate SERVE work outside of the Southeast.

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

SERVE has an excellent staff and an interesting set of programs and activities. SERVE has an excellent reputation in the region among those who know about the Laboratory, and the comments about the responsiveness and helpfulness of the staff are impressive. In its short life, SERVE has managed to develop a set of programs that meet the needs of educators both in the Southeast, but also across the United States.

I refer to the programs as a set, such as a group living under one roof, or in this case many roofs. Unfortunately I do not see them yet as a cohesive set even though they all address the same mission of promoting and supporting "the continuous improvement of education opportunities for all learners in the Southeast."

All of the SERVE programs relate to essential elements of school reform and each offers an important contribution to overall school improvement and student achievement. As it appears today, the programs seem to be operating independently; that is, while there may be conversations between staff of the programs, there is no concerted effort for staff to collaborate

on research or products. With the reorganization of the programs and the full staffing of positions in the organization, now is the opportunity to pull together the disparate pieces of the organization to make it a cohesive whole. By conceptualizing the organization around school improvement and student achievement, you can identify where the SERVE strengths are in providing assistance to your clients. You can also identify where you have no relevant program, and then you can identify resources outside of the organization that could be brokered for use by your clients. Such a plan could result in your clients having the very best assistance possible.

Specifically, I have seen little real collaboration between programs and even within some programs, other than pulling together symposiums. By collaboration I mean meeting together to discuss an idea generated by one program and identifying ways to work together in such a way that both (or all) programs get something that adds to their component of the whole. In other words, there would be synergy, where the sum is greater than the parts. There are many logical links between the Assessment, Accountability and Standards Program and the School Development & Reform Program. One of the documents I reviewed in the first area is *Using Accountability as a Lever for Changing the Culture of Schools*. This document expands the definition of accountability beyond assessment and suggests the use of indicators to monitor improvements in the school. Another document, *Total Quality Management: Passing Fad or the Read Thing*, also speaks to the issues of continuous school improvement. These documents provide evidence of important knowledge and resources within that Program. Comments from SERVE clients show an understanding of how important the Assessment Program activities are to overall school reform and student achievement. But there is no evidence of collaboration by these two programs around school improvement. We were surprised to hear on Wednesday that clients of the School Development and Reform Program had not heard about the Alternative

Assessment and Senior Project activities. It seems like if you are trying to give your clients the benefit of SERVE's vast experience and knowledge base that you would share information about other programs within the organization.

Another bit of evidence in this area is that there is a project planned by the School Development and Reform Program around "Becoming an Expert Teacher of Reading (Training Program)." The staff of the Assessment Program has developed several documents related to instruction in reading. In addition, there is a new program on Teachers and Teaching. Yet we heard no mention of collaboration among these programs, merely a mention of talking between two staff members.

I have seen a few documents and activities that have joined concepts from across programs, such as the Choctaw Project involving early childhood education and technology, but I don't see much scaling up, and there are many more possible connections. I have not seen very many connections between non-REL activities and REL activities, although having persons working in dual roles by necessity means there is some connection. Again, I think collaborative activities could be designed that address both REL and non-REL requirements, and benefit from the joint effort. I think this is what USED hoped would happen.

The notion of projects/programs working together in Labs and centers is not a new one. In the early 1980's, when I was working at the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, USED was urging (maybe even demanding) that projects within centers and Labs collaborate, not just tolerate each other. My project thought we were way ahead of everyone because we were spending a lot of time on the road doing workshops on classroom management under the sponsorship of the Labs. But then we were told to make it work within the Center. I remember how hard it was, as some of the projects were very different, unlike the

complimentary nature that we see here among SERVE programs. Specifically I remember getting trained in the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) and other related activities of that project so that their work could inform the work we were doing on the implementation of research-based classroom management and we could share our findings back with them. Our project worked closely with another project that focused on providing research-based professional development and support to beginning teachers. We provided classroom management training to the teachers in their project, they monitored implementation, and together we looked at the results of the study to add to the knowledge base of both our projects. It can be done, but it takes work, dedication, and support from your leadership. And you have distance issues to be addressed.

I suggest you invite someone such as Jennifer O'Day to facilitate your discussions about how the SERVE programs fit together and where opportunities to collaborate exist. She worked with us at the Council of Chief State School Officers and provided great insight and leadership in helping us work through how our different activities fit into the overall goal of improving education organizations to promote student learning.

By rethinking how your programs fit together and developing more collaborative activities, you should find that the organization is more cohesive, and you may find yourselves better positioned to compete for the next cycle of funding. Your clients will benefit from seeing how the pieces fit together, and you will be better able to help them find assistance in areas where you do not currently have activities. You have a capable and enthusiastic staff and many excellent activities and ideas. You have laid the groundwork for a better organization. I would like to see you get there and have continued success.