

Hearings Shed Light on Regional Needs

Tackling dropout prevention as early as the third grade, improving K–12 literacy, and preparing school leaders to spearhead reform efforts: All are burning issues on the local educational landscape. That’s according to the latest needs assessment conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Each year NWREL takes the pulse of the region through a series of hearings alternated with an extensive survey. In doing so, NWREL fulfills a requirement of its regional educational laboratory (REL) contract to identify “educational needs, strengths, and weaknesses.” Yet, as Steve Nelson, director of planning and service coordination, points out, “We see this as more than simply meeting a condition of the REL. We’re informing all of our work and serving regional interests.”

During summer 2006, NWREL held forums that attracted a diverse group of constituents in all five Northwest states. The sessions tapped into the concerns of governors’ aides, state legislators, teachers, parents, school administrators, school board association members, state education officials, librarians, and higher education representatives.

The starting point of the conversation was different this year, reflecting a change in federal priorities. “We had to shift the discussion from what needs can we serve by technical assistance to what evidence can we provide that will help you make better choices,” says Nelson. No one had a problem with making that shift, though Nelson says people were “shocked” to learn that the federal REL contract no longer funds direct services.



“We asked people to look on the horizon at decisions, problems, and issues related to No Child Left Behind where evidence would help,” adds Jim Leffler, director of REL field services. Predictably, educators around the region are still grappling with a number of NCLB requirements, including the stepped-up demand for parental involvement. “It’s not about Title I committees anymore,” says Nelson. “Some schools have been accustomed to one-way communication. Now, they have to deal with the fact that parents have a right to be involved in their child’s education and make decisions on what that looks like.”

Ultimately, the information gathered at the hearings will feed into next year’s survey. Proceedings from the sessions, compiled by the Gilmore Research Group, will help NWREL center directors identify topics for short-term research studies. The findings will also drive an agenda for collaborations with university researchers.

And, NWREL’s board and executive cabinet will use the needs assessment to find other ways to fund services. Finally, copies of the proceedings will go back to participants so they can see what their peers across the region are thinking.

“One of the values of the convening is the opportunity for networking,” says Leffler. “The people at the hearings appreciated the fact that NWREL could bring them together. I think they had as much fun talking to each other as they did to us.” ■