

## Collaborating To Support Oregon Schools in Improvement Status

**Territorial issues are not uncommon in school improvement programs with multiple stakeholders.** However, the Regional School Improvement Coordinator (RSIC) program, an Oregon initiative to establish standardized statewide support for Title I schools in need of improvement, has been a model of collaboration. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory helped craft the program in a unique arrangement that involves the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), education service districts, school districts, and individual schools.

Through the RSIC program, external facilitators help schools connect with training, tools, and other resources that support their improvement plans. The coordinators are typically retired school administrators who are highly skilled in group and change processes and who understand the challenges schools face in meeting No Child Left Behind requirements.

Under the leadership of NWREL's Deborah Davis and Nanci Schneider—who have a combined total of 47 years' experience working with Oregon schools—NWREL helped design the RSIC program. Under contract with ODE, the Laboratory assists in recruiting school improvement coordinators and provides ongoing professional development for the coordinators, district staff, and school administrators.

According to Schneider, the purpose of the RSIC program is to build staff capacity so that school improvement structures can be effectively maintained after the school's two-year commitment to the program ends. "Some low-performing schools tend to have high staff turnover," states Schneider, "so it's critical to make sure key players at both the building and district level have the skills, knowledge, and tools to carry on the work when the RSIC is no longer there."

### A REMARKABLE GROWTH SPURT

Although new, the RSIC program has rapidly gained in popularity. At the beginning of the 2005–2006 school year, the project began with five RSICs in nine schools. At the end of

October 2006, there were 18 RSICs in 25 schools. What makes this growth truly remarkable is that it's voluntary: Schools are invited by their education service district and local district to participate in the process.

Several factors contribute to the high rate of school and district buy-in. The program is based on best practices from proven sources like the Quality Education Model and research on continuous improvement processes. It also incorporates aspects of Washington state's school improvement model. Since the inception of Washington's program in 2001, 47 percent of the participating schools are no longer in need of improvement.

RSIC's popularity is also due to the fact that the program is highly individualized. According to ODE's Cathryn Gardner, "RSIC assignments are not random—we look at several factors from the skill set and background of these external facilitators and carefully match them to a school's needs. RSICs receive in-depth and continuous training and guidance from NWREL so that they can assess these needs and respond accordingly."

In addition to its work in designing the RSIC program and providing training, NWREL also produced a school improvement handbook and toolkit for the Oregon Department of Education, along with a Web site. Schneider

describes the site, which the Laboratory maintains, as "[ODE's] own best practices library." It connects school improvement teams to promising practices on whatever issues they request.

### HOW NWREL CAN HELP

NWREL is equipped to help states establish programs similar to RSIC to support Title I schools. State and local education agencies in the Northwest interested in receiving school improvement assistance from NWREL can contact Nanci Schneider (schneidn@nwrel.org or 800-547-6339, ext. 557). Districts in Oregon that would like to participate in the RSIC program should contact Cathryn Gardner of ODE (cathryn.gardner@state.or.us or 503-947-5622). ■



*ODE's Cathryn Gardner (far left) works with NWREL's Nanci Schneider (middle) and Deborah Davis (right) on intensive training for school improvement coordinators.*