

THE REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY: Implications for the Future

THE freeway may look a little like a speedway but it is a great deal more. It is the answer to a need, a good answer. It is moving more people greater distances in less time and with more safety than the old more familiar pattern of streets it replaced.

This is the era of humanity in a hurry, pressured by more and more people. It is a time, too, of other freeways through the jet airplanes above, and still others that point us straight out to space. No wonder that we who must move ideas must begin to fashion freeways of the mind. The inadequacy of older ways should be felt acutely. Progress, once as optional as distance on a Sunday drive, no longer merely interests or gently prods us. Today it compels us.

For a modern educator the push of change is nothing new. Many have watched the comparatively swift transition from the day of the little red schoolhouse to the era of the big yellow bus, symbolizing as it does new forms of cooperation among educators to produce consolidated goals that benefit the children who are our responsibility. Even so the needs of the future call for greater changes to come, changes at every level from the preschool to the graduate school. If anything is abundantly clear, it is that the existing working relationships in the educational world are as inadequate as yesterday's highways.

Today, as never before, school and college educators through the regional laboratory development, have the opportunity to establish new interchanges of creative experiences and cooperative endeavors. The free access to these interchanges and the elimination of the idea bottlenecks of the past coupled with an overall successful laboratory program in general, may be the major reason that the federal money which is now being appropriated will really strengthen education.

The regional educational laboratories were established under Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Last June twelve of them were funded for six months. Seven more were given development grants. Decisions on full

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funding for these seven and for continuing funding of the twelve will be made by December 1966. To date, \$10,778,571 has been allocated to the regional laboratories. Together, these nineteen laboratories, with an additional one yet to be approved, blanket the country.

What are these regional educational laboratories and why are they considered so crucial? Richard Bright, Associate Commissioner for Research, Office of Education, has said that the laboratories

. . . will be a necessary link in the chain of progress that leads from basic research to widespread classroom practice. . . . Perhaps the most important feature of the web of associations that a lab will comprise is the classrooms, the schools that will participate in it. For research without development—ideas that are not translated into action—is meaningless.¹

President Johnson, in a letter to John W. Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, written on July 5, 1966, said:

These laboratories constitute a major new kind of institution to achieve rapid increases in educational quality on a mass scale. . . . The laboratories should be large and significant enterprises, equal in size and scope to the major tasks they seek to accomplish. They ought to be conceived as comparable in their way to the large-scale laboratories of the defense or atomic energy establishments. Nothing less will do. Their missions are equally important. . . .

I look to these laboratories to stress putting into practice what we already know. The increase of knowledge through research must proceed at a rapid pace. But we have an even greater obligation to overcome the lag between discovery and use, and to convert the results of years of research into application in the classroom. This process will be speeded by establishment of extensive experimental schools and pilot projects showing educational innovation in real situations that can be seen and understood by administrators, teachers and school boards.

¹Richard Louis Bright. "Back to the Drawing Boards." *American Education* 2(5):15; May 1966.

The laboratories, being regional in nature, can reflect the needs of a particular geographic section of the country. Educators and citizens of a region are thus provided the opportunity to harness the total resources of the area for the purpose of strengthening education.

Each of the laboratories is developing programs to meet the particular needs of its region. For example, the Appalachia Lab has as its six objectives: (a) to reduce cultural deprivation, (b) to modernize the curriculum, (c) to combat isolation, (d) to improve the transition from school to work, (e) to raise educational aspirations, and (f) to speed educational change. Laboratory directors are meeting bi-monthly to learn from each other and from Office of Education personnel and consultants.

A description of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) may be helpful in illustrating the way laboratories are being set up and the programs which they are planning. McREL has a contract with the Office of Education to furnish services for the improvement of education in major parts of four states—Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and Oklahoma. The regional offices are in Kansas City, Missouri.

The laboratory, a non-profit corporation, is governed by an Executive Committee of sixteen (four from each of the member states) who are also members of a larger governing body—the Board of Trustees. The Board is comprised of eighty citizens and educators from throughout the region. The professional staff numbers approximately thirty, supplemented by consultants from the region and the nation.

Sixteen area service centers have been established to provide the means by which schools and colleges can have ready access to the resources of the laboratory. Each of the area service centers has a coordinator who, in cooperation with an advisory committee, will identify the needs of the area and channel regional and national resources to the schools in the area. Coordinators will not only sensitize the regional staff to local area needs, but will also alert the regional office to the exemplary practices and research findings of the area schools which, in turn, can be useful throughout the region.

McREL has region-wide action and demonstration programs in Reading, Community Service Schools, and Student Teaching. These projects were identified for immediate attention by two hundred educators and citizens who participated in planning sessions during the development period. The laboratory staff is also gathering data on developing projects slated for active status in the months ahead. These include administrative problems such as making better use of funds, space and personnel; helping students in their transition from high school to higher education; continuing education for educators and updating vocational education programs.

Conditions for Success

Will the laboratories succeed? They can and must if education is to serve its function in our society. They will succeed only to the extent that teachers, professors, and administrators change in their aspirations, insights, attitudes and

skills. Human beings learn most when they perceive the importance of what they are doing, when they set goals for themselves, and when they work hard to achieve results. Strengthening education occurs when people sense that changes are necessary and then utilize the best of current practice and related research to bring about the needed improvements.

Three conditions for success are essential: involvement; availability of sound research and promising practices; and cooperation.

Involvement

The programs and projects upon which a regional laboratory is working at any particular time should be those which the educators of the region believe to be important. Some problems can be approached on a region-wide basis because they are of concern to the total region. Often, however, a need will exist in a particular area in which several school systems wish to work. Developing a cooperative project which might qualify for a Title III grant is an illustration.

The resources of a regional laboratory are, of course, limited; therefore, the particular concern or problem of an individual teacher, of a school faculty, or of the total staff of a school system may at first seem beyond the scope of the laboratory services. Ways must be found, however, to enable local educators to sense that the ongoing programs and projects of the regional laboratory do have a relationship to their own concerns. Often the laboratory staff can refer a teacher or administrator to an appropriate source for help when the laboratory itself, in terms of its limited personnel, is not able to provide direct assistance.

Availability of Sound Research and Promising Practices

Research findings may not necessarily lead to changed behavior or improved classroom practices. Certainly variables, conditions, situations and people are sufficiently different that particular findings may not be useful to others.

Regional staffs, in their development of banks of exemplary practices and research, must screen carefully. Criteria for selection must be based on sound learning theory, developmental needs, and demands of living in the foreseeable future. Research and development centers, other research-oriented institutions throughout the country and the laboratories themselves must face up to the fact that there is not now available as much significant research as there should be.

The laboratories can perform a most significant service by identifying the kinds of educational problems upon which more research is needed and when feasible sponsoring needed research prospects. Lee J. Cronbach suggests that

... we professionals do not know enough about learning and instruction to design the desired reform. ... Effective educational designs, worth careful development and field trial, can emerge only from a deep understanding of learning and motivation.²

² Lee J. Cronbach. "The Role of the University in Improving Education." *Phi Delta Kappan* 47(10):539-40; June 1966.

It becomes highly important, therefore, that regional staffs have competency not only in developing sound research designs, in evaluation techniques, in communications, in selecting, organizing and in disseminating research findings, but also that they be soundly grounded in the psychological and social foundations upon which education should be based.

Cooperation

Educators and citizens must learn to compete only in a framework of cooperation. In football we know that a tackle likes to be a star, but if he is a good football player, he submerges his individual motivations to team play. Educational endeavors in the past have not always been characterized by a high degree of cooperation. There are some institutions of higher learning which, figuratively speaking, are out to cut each other's throats.

There are administrators of neighboring school systems who seldom, if ever, confer together to solve their mutual problems. Many public, private and parochial educators feel that they are in different educational worlds. In the laboratory development, citizens and educators, through working together—through cooperation—can reduce the lag between theory and practice, thereby strengthening education significantly. All those interested in better education must learn to work together: elementary with secondary; secondary and elementary with higher; higher with each other; academicians with educators and educators with citizens.

The regional laboratory has a great potential for success. The time is ripe in America for a major forward movement in education. Many citizens have great interest and readiness to work with educators. Through cooperation, through involvement, and through making readily available sound research and exemplary practices, the regional laboratories can make a difference. The next few years will tell whether they have succeeded. Each of us has the opportunity to do his part to make education more vital through his participation in the regional laboratories. ❧

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