



EdEVIDENCE

Newsletter of the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Innovation Ongoing at REL-NEI



In my previous letter, I talked about the emphasis on educational innovation at the U.S. Department of Education (ED) under President Obama. With more than \$4 billion in discretionary Race to the Top grants to be awarded in coming months, the Administration is urging states to think creatively about new and better ways to deliver teaching and learning to public-school students.

To inform REL-NEI's ongoing conversation about innovation, I have invited Professor Clay Christensen of Harvard Business School to speak at our February [Governing Board](#) meeting. In a best-selling book called *Disrupting Class*, Christensen and his colleagues apply his well-known "disruptive innovation" framework, which emerged from his Silicon Valley experiences in the 1990s, to education. Focusing on prosperity and the rise of Japan and now China and India, Christensen and his co-authors write: "Because of a variety of cultural, economic, and societal factors, the United States' schools start from a disadvantage compared to many of their international counterparts, where there is far more extrinsic motivation in society." At our meeting, I look forward to learning Christensen's views on how innovation can make learning intrinsically motivating for American students.

Recently, I met individually with education commissioners Deborah Gist of Rhode Island and Armando Vilaseca of Vermont to discuss the innovative ways that REL-NEI can support their states. It was interesting to think together about how they can utilize REL resources, such as the [Reference Desk](#), and help us align our research support with priority issues in their states. Both are relatively new members of our Governing Board and will hopefully join us at our upcoming meeting.

Innovation was also on the minds of the REL directors in December as we met in Chicago with researchers from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, or CCSR, where John Easton served as director until Education Secretary Arne Duncan tapped him last May to lead the [Institute of Education Sciences \(IES\)](#). For twenty years, CCSR has been conducting research to inform policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools, and it is unique in its long-term focus

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

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on one large, urban school district. While REL-NEI serves over 2,000 districts, CCSR provides an interesting model of researchers and practitioners collaborating on useful, relevant research, and we are exploring how similar work might be done under the REL contract.

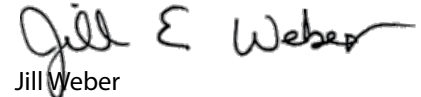
Also in December, I attended the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) fall forum in San Diego. A REL Midwest senior policy associate and I spoke about the REL program and other IES resources, particularly as they relate to STEM, or science, technology, engineering, and math curricula. Participating legislative aides from around the country were most

interested in learning about the Reference Desk and the policy implications of our randomized controlled trial examining the impact of [eighth-grade access to Algebra I](#) on student math achievement. The RELs are legislated to serve state lawmakers, and on January 20th, REL-NEI and NCSL will bring an expert on dropout-prevention research to speak at the Rhode Island legislature.

I look forward to a productive year as we continue our research, outreach, events, and dissemination of evidence-based resources. Already, we have several winter events on the calendar, including a [January 28th webinar](#) on response-to-

intervention (RTI) policies in 16 states, co-hosted with REL West. Don't forget to [register!](#) In addition, we anticipate the publication of our [Thinking Reader randomized controlled trial](#) report later this year. If you have an idea for an event in your state, or would like to meet with a researcher or state liaison, please send me a note at relneiinfo@edc.org. Happy New Year!

Sincerely,



Jill Weber

Director, REL Northeast and Islands

Stanford's Michael Kamil Talks Evidence to Improve Adolescent Literacy

A December 1st [Policy Challenges Webinar](#) co-hosted by REL-NEI and the [New England Comprehensive Center](#) brought together Stanford University Education Professor Michael Kamil with about 130 state-, district-, and school-level educators and policymakers from across the country to discuss strategies to help struggling adolescent readers.

A member of the National Reading Panel and a leading researcher on language and literacy instruction, Kamil presented five evidence-based recommendations from the [Institute of Education Sciences \(IES\) Practice Guide, "Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices."](#)

[IES Practice Guides](#) provide discrete, actionable recommendations and identify strategies for implementation to help address complex educational challenges. Each recommendation is connected to a "level of evidence"—strong, moderate, low—which is determined by the level of rigor of the available research studies upon which the recommendations are based. Kamil chaired the panel that authored the adolescent literacy Practice Guide.

Kamil shared data from the ACT showing that eighth-grade students who are unprepared in reading have only a 1-percent chance of passing later science courses and only a 15-percent chance of passing future courses in math. This compares with a 32-percent chance of success in science and a 67-percent chance of success in math for eighth-grade students who can read effectively.

"This is prima facie evidence that reading is a crucial skill that students must have to prepare for later work," he said.

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION, STUDENT MOTIVATION

In discussing the Guide's five recommendations—which include explicit instruction in content-area vocabulary and comprehension strategies, as well as extensive opportunities for student discussion around texts—Kamil stressed that content-area teachers must teach reading in their disciplines. He also emphasized the importance of effective professional development that models for teachers how to implement literacy-instruction strategies.



Professor Michael Kamil at Stanford University says content-area teachers must teach reading in their disciplines.

"You need to teach teachers how to select vocabulary words based on how important the words are in the content disciplines," he said. Teachers also need to be trained in leading productive discussions of text that engage students' critical-thinking skills. Too many classroom discussions focus on how students feel about something they read, rather than teaching them to analyze or critique it, he said. Teachers should develop discussion "protocols" and assign different tasks to students, such as the "recorder" or the "summarizer," to guide their participation.

"The important thing here is that explicit instruction works," Kamil said. "For at least 20 years of research, we

have found nothing that suggests anything but the improvement of comprehension if you do explicit instruction.”

While many educators believe that student motivation and engagement advance student literacy, the scientific evidence of this effect is moderate, Kamil said. Still, the Practice Guide recommends teachers create meaningful and engaging content learning goals, which increase reading and comprehension ability. Allowing students a choice of what to read, particularly with respect to supplemental materials, also can improve student literacy and learning, he said. Teachers sharing their own favorite books in their discipline increases student engagement as well.

Following Kamil’s presentation, three panelists from across the Northeast and Islands Region discussed their own work on adolescent literacy, focusing on one or two of the Practice Guide’s recommendations. Bill Clarke, Middle-High Instructional Dean at the Times² Academy in Providence, R.I., shared his experience introducing a “Directed Notes” reading-comprehension strategy across all content areas at his school. With “Directed Notes,” students can write directly on the text, write questions in the margins, or use sticky notes to facilitate improved comprehension.

“This is a very nice, explicit comprehension strategy and a springboard for all others,” Clarke said. “If we’re thinking about preparing students for college, the use of that strategy is exactly what we have to do in our college textbooks.”

Deb Wiswell, Administrator for the Bureau of Accountability at the New Hampshire Department of Education, discussed her state’s literacy plan for the 21st century, which was published in 2007. The plan encourages extensive discussion of texts for adolescent readers, she said. Christina Nola, Assistant Principal at Saunders Trades and Technical High School in Yonkers, N.Y., spoke about her efforts to make all teachers at her



magnet school take responsibility for improving student literacy.

“It was my top priority to make every teacher an English teacher, a writing teacher,” Nola said.

[Learn more. View the archive.](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [IES Practice Guide: Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices](#)
- [Doing What Works Website: Adolescent Literacy](#)
- [Evidence-Based Resources on Adolescent Literacy](#) (PDF, compiled by the REL-NEI Reference Desk)
- [New Hampshire’s Conceptual Framework for 21st Century Literacy](#) (PDF)

RELATED REL RESEARCH:

- [Five States’ Efforts to Improve Adolescent Literacy](#) (REL-NEI)
- [A Description of Foundation Skills Interventions for Struggling Middle-Grade Readers in Four Urban Northeast and Islands Region School Districts](#) (REL-NEI)
- [Using Strategy Instruction to Help Struggling High Schoolers Understand What They Read](#) (REL Central)

Five Recommendations for Improving Adolescent Literacy (and their levels of evidence)

1. Provide explicit vocabulary instruction. (strong)
2. Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction. (strong)
3. Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation. (moderate)
4. Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning. (moderate)
5. Make available intensive and individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided by trained specialists. (strong)

Source: “Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices,” Institute of Education Sciences

How Are States Approaching Response to Intervention?

A new REL-NEI Issues & Answers Report finds that the six New England states and New York support response to intervention, or RTI, for overall school instructional improvement and for determining special-education eligibility at the local level. Published by the [Institute of Education Sciences \(IES\)](#) on November 30th, "[Features of State Response to Intervention Initiatives in Northeast and Islands Region States](#)" also includes narrative descriptions of each state's approach to RTI.

RTI is a data-based approach to instruction, assessment, and intervention that enables early identification of students who are experiencing academic or behavioral difficulties. The 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) introduced RTI as a means for schools to identify students with specific learning disabilities, which led to a surge of interest in RTI. REL-NEI produced the report to inform state decision-makers across the Northeast and Islands Region as they develop RTI-related policies, procedures, and practices in their states.

"Often what I hear from state education leaders when they are struggling with a new policy area is they are interested in what other states are doing," says co-author Kristin Reedy. "The IDEA legislation does not detail how RTI should be implemented or monitored, so our report describes how states thus far have chosen to approach RTI."



Natalie Lacireno-Paquet



Kristin Reedy

Between July and September 2008, Reedy and her research team systematically reviewed publicly available RTI-related documents on the websites of state education agencies (SEAs) in REL-NEI's nine jurisdictions: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Vermont, and U.S. Virgin Islands. The researchers found no documents addressing RTI on the Puerto Rico or Virgin Islands SEA websites, but Reedy and project co-director Natalie Lacerino-Paquet say this is not evidence that these two jurisdictions do not permit the use of RTI in the special-education eligibility determination process.

IMPROVING INSTRUCTION FOR ALL STUDENTS

While RTI developed as a diagnostic tool for evaluating and identifying students with learning disabilities, research has shown that it holds promise as a tool for ensuring that all students receive high-quality instruction. RTI begins with universal academic screening of all students in a school or classroom, and instruction is subsequently adjusted and individualized based on how students perform.

"I was pleased that in all the states where we found RTI documents, we found evidence of people discussing RTI not just for special education students but as a way of improving instruction for all children in general education," Reedy says.

The report finds Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont all allow local districts to use RTI to determine special-education eligibility and all require or recommend a three-tiered model of intervention. In addition, five states

require or recommend a local readiness self-assessment or plan prior to RTI implementation (Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont), and four have appropriated state funds for RTI pilot or demonstration sites (New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont).

The REL-NEI report is one of four recent REL reports examining state-level approaches to RTI. It includes a bibliography of RTI research references as well as a list of all documents analyzed in the report. It was written by Lacireno-Paquet, Reedy, Candice Bocala, and Daniel Mello of Learning Innovations at WestEd, a REL-NEI partner.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Assisting Students Struggling with Mathematics: Response to Intervention \(RTI\) for Elementary and Middle Schools](#) (IES Practice Guide)
- [Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: Response to Intervention \(RTI\) and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades](#) (IES Practice Guide)
- [National Center on Response to Intervention](#)
- [Center for RTI in Early Childhood](#)

RELATED REL RESEARCH:

- [Models of Response to Intervention in the Northwest Region States](#) (REL Northwest)
- [The Status of State-Level Response to Intervention Policies and Procedures in the West Region States and Five Other States](#) (REL West)
- [State Policies and Procedures and Selected Local Implementation Practices in Response to Intervention in the Six Southeast Region States](#) (REL Southeast)

Don't Miss the Webinar!

"Response-to-Intervention Policies in 16 States," Thursday, January 28th, 2010, 3 p.m. EST/ 12 p.m. PST. [Register Today!](#)

Kathy Dunne: Facilitating Conversations in New Hampshire

For New Hampshire Liaison Kathy Dunne, one of REL-NEI's most important roles is to bring like-minded education stakeholders together in conversation around research and evidence.

Manchester, New Hampshire's largest city, for example, faces challenges and concerns similar to other mid-sized urban districts in the country but is unique in the state. REL-NEI can play a vital role by brokering meetings between Manchester's education leaders and those of similar districts in other states.

"Such meetings allow school and district leaders to share experiences and ideas, as well as request and review education research that is relevant to their daily lives," says Dunne. "It is important to foster these kinds of conversations among the urban districts in our region."

Since he became director of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) last summer, [John Easton](#) has emphasized the need to increase the relevance and useability of research by developing closer links between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. "I think people value, see the importance, and are hungry for research," Dunne says. "At the same time, people benefit from learning how to become effective consumers of research and use research findings. People need help getting quick access to research, and they also need opportunities to discuss the strengths and limitations of the quality of the research."

HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN A NH PRIORITY

Before transitioning into her role as a facilitator and provider of professional



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development, Dunne, a New Hampshire native, was a teacher for 11 years. She joined REL-NEI partner Learning Innovations at WestEd in 1996 and became REL-NEI's New Hampshire liaison in 2007. As part of her liaison role, she helped REL-NEI co-host a statewide forum in 2008 on high school redesign—"[Moving from High Schools to Learning Communities: New Hampshire's Vision for Redesign](#)." And in April 2009, Dunne served as overall facilitator at a statewide Governor's Summit on High School Graduation and Dropout Prevention.

Dropout prevention has been a key New Hampshire education priority since 2007, when the state legislature raised the compulsory age of school attendance to 18 and Gov. John Lynch declared a state goal of a 100-percent graduation rate. Since then, the New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) has developed regulations allowing high schools greater flexibility in assessing student performance and competency in courses.

Dunne and REL-NEI New Hampshire State Researcher Sarah Cremer travel the state promoting REL-NEI research reports and other services, including the [Reference Desk](#), a free service that provides quick-turnaround responses to education-related research questions. This past summer and fall, they attended conferences of the New Hampshire School Administrators Association and the New Hampshire Principals Association; a New Hampshire Mathematics and Science Partnership Institute; and an Instructional Coaching Conference sponsored by the NHDOE.

"People respond to the Reference Desk and find a lot of value in it," Dunne says. "It's so helpful to educators to have that kind of quick research-scan support."

Dunne communicates regularly with New Hampshire's new education commissioner, [Virginia Barry](#), who serves on the REL-NEI Governing Board, to stay abreast of New Hampshire's priority education issues and concerns. Currently, Commissioner Barry and her staff are intensely focused on reorganizing the state's supports and services around the four American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) education assurances: rigorous standards and assessment, support for struggling schools, effective teachers and leaders, and longitudinal data systems.

Looking ahead to 2010, Dunne is eager to continue building relationships and facilitating conversations that bring evidence to New Hampshire educators: "I'm really looking forward to working with the department and other constituent groups to craft a coherent action plan that is supported by the rich resources REL-NEI can provide."

Connecting to Practice: Meet REL-NEI Liaisons at An Event Near You!

In 2009, REL-NEI [state liaisons and researchers](#) participated at more than 40 education-related conferences and meetings across the Northeast and Islands Region, often staffing booths and providing overviews of REL-NEI. Liaisons and researchers do needs sensing, disseminate research findings, gather [Reference Desk](#) requests, and talk about REL-NEI research-support services, webinars, and events with stakeholders at the state, district, and school levels. Below is a sampling of events REL-NEI attended in 2009. To request REL-NEI's presence at an education event in your state, e-mail relneiinfo@edc.org.

[Connecticut](#)

- Connecticut State Department of Education Dropout Prevention Summit—Oct. 19
- Joint Conference of the Connecticut Associations of Public School Superintendents and Boards of Education—Nov. 20–21

[Maine](#)

- Maine Curriculum Leaders Association Spring Conference—April 2
- Maine Adult Education Conference—June 24–25
- Maine Conference of Higher Education Leaders in Washington County, “Harvest of Ideas”—Oct. 13
- Maine School Management Association—Oct. 22–23

[Massachusetts](#)

- Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives Conference—Oct. 19
- Massachusetts Dropout Prevention Summit—Nov. 2

- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Curriculum Summit—Nov. 3–4
- Joint Conference of the Massachusetts Associations of School Superintendents and School Committees—Nov. 19–21

[New Hampshire](#)

- Governor’s Summit on High School Graduation and Dropout Prevention—April 10
- New Hampshire Association of School Principals Annual Conference—June 29–July 1
- New Hampshire Instructional Coaching Conference—Aug. 11–13
- New Hampshire Middle School Principals Conference—Aug. 19–21
- New Hampshire School Administrators Association “Course Competencies and Grading” Conference—Sept. 30

[New York](#)

- New York Comprehensive Center Conference: “Teacher Preparation: Easing the Transition from Pre-Service to In-Service”—March 20
- New York State School Boards Association Annual Convention—Oct. 16

[Puerto Rico](#)

- University of Puerto Rico Research Congress on Education Reform—March 13–15
- Instituto de Política Educativa at the Sacred Heart University—May 1
- Puerto Rico Statistics Institute—Aug. 17
- Puerto Rico Association of Private Colleges and Universities Conference—Aug. 31
- Annual Conference of local Puerto Rico chapter of ASCD—Oct. 2–3

[Rhode Island](#)

- Rhode Island State ELL Directors Meetings—April 22 and Dec. 16
- Rhode Island Association of School Principals Summer Conference—Aug. 3–4
- Rhode Island Dropout Prevention Summit—Oct. 8
- Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals QuEST 2009—Nov. 6–7

[Vermont](#)

- Vermont Educational Service Agency, Southeast Region, Curriculum Directors Meeting—April 15
- Vermont Superintendents and Special Education Administrators—May 13–15
- Vermont Special Education Leadership Academy—Nov. 5
- Vermont School Boards and Superintendents Joint Conference—Oct. 16
- Vermont Association for Middle Level Education, Dropout Prevention Summit—Oct. 29

[Virgin Islands](#)

- Virgin Islands Department of Education, Division of Cultural Education—April 7

[Region](#)

- New England League of Middle Schools Annual Conference—April 5–7
- New England Forum on Education Reform—Nov. 10

Reference Desk Sees Growth in 2009, Launches Database for 2010

REL-NEI's free [Reference Desk](#) service saw considerable growth in 2009. Education stakeholders across the Northeast and Islands Region submitted some 300 questions, and REL-NEI researchers provided 3- to 5-page, quick-turnaround responses—drawing on studies, journal articles, and websites—to help practitioners and policymakers make decisions based on available evidence.

"Thank you so much for the information," replied a Reference Desk user from Vermont's Department of Education, in early January. "[This response] will be very helpful as we move from our 'best practices' research to concrete strategies for helping schools improve."

"You and your team did a wonderful job finding a nice selection of resources; this will keep me going for quite a while," responded another user inquiring about change in school culture. In this case, the response contained guidebooks and field books related to school change, as well as links to research and other documents.

The Reference Desk also can be useful to federally funded technical-assistance centers in the region. In December, the director of the Region II Equity Assistance Center said: "Thank you very much for this information; this was exactly what I was looking for."

"Many of REL-NEI's stakeholders need quick access to information when making

decisions regarding resource allocation, curriculum planning, teacher training, student behavior, and a myriad other issues educators face on a daily basis," says Reference Desk Manager Heidi Larson.

"Reference Desk researchers sort through the research for them, drawing upon Institute of Education Sciences and other federally funded resources as well as electronic databases and other sources to compile the best evidence in the time allotted."

Half the questions received by the Reference Desk in 2009 focused on issues related to low-performing schools, school improvement, educational equity, and special populations. Here are representative examples:

- What does research say about successful action steps and strategies for school improvement?
- What does the research say about whether the Co-Teaching Model is directly related to or responsible for increased IEP student achievement, including mastery of core subject material?
- What research exists on grade configurations and different academic transition points, especially concerning social engagement and academic achievement?

Responses typically are emailed to requestors within two weeks.



In some cases, Reference Desk research helps influence state or local decision-making. For example, officials in Meriden, Conn., used the Reference Desk when they proposed reducing the number of tiers in their academic leveling system. ([See related story.](#))

REL-NEI's weekly [online Reference Desk Digest](#), which was launched in July, is also growing in popularity. Each week, the Digest features a new question paired with its response. Popular Digests address questions about research on elementary mathematics programs, alternative certification for teachers, and dropout-prevention programs for students in the younger high school grades. Reference Desk questions can be viewed online by topic, by state, and by the four American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) education assurances.

Later this winter, watch for a new searchable database featuring all Reference Desk questions and responses logged since April 2008. This new database will provide 24/7 access to a wealth of research resources that address critical education priorities across the region.

[Ask your education question today!](#)

DISCLAIMER

The Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (REL-NEI) is run by Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and WestEd's Learning Innovations program. REL-NEI is one of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories funded by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. REL-NEI provides rigorous research that is relevant to national education priorities, responsive to local needs, and usable for policy and practice.

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