



# EdEVIDENCE

Newsletter of the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands

## CONTENTS

- 1 Letter from the Director
- 2 Task 1 Projects: "Struggling Reader" Report Released
- 3 Task 2 Studies: Recruiting Begins
- 4 Supporting Research to Help the Legislative Process
- 5 Policy Challenges Conference Brings Together Researchers, Stakeholders
- 6 State Liaisons: Representing Jurisdictions
- 7 In Practice: What Works at the SEE Forum

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## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

### Making Connections, Addressing Challenges



Greetings from Newton, Massachusetts! And welcome to the first edition of *EdEvidence*, the newsletter for the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands.

As our tireless research and project staff can tell you, we have been hard at work trying to understand some of the critical issues that confront education practitioners and policymakers in the Northeast and Islands region. We have connected with state educators, legislators, superintendents, teachers, and staff in varied professional organizations, and continue to dig deeper into the significant education issues of our time.

This work has been an eye-opening experience for everyone involved. The area that we serve, which includes regions as diverse as New York City, rural Maine, and the Virgin Islands, benefits from educators at all levels who are committed to making schools work. Yet we have identified a number of high-priority challenges that need to be addressed, such as building and retaining a highly-qualified teaching corps, providing adequate support to low-performing schools and districts, and better understanding how assessment can inform instruction. While we do not expect our research to reveal easy solutions to any of these issues, I believe we have the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the research base in these key areas, and to provide stakeholders with real evidence they can use to inform their decisions about education policy and practice.

We have accomplished much already. Through the diligent work of our state liaisons and researchers, we are helping to bring evidence-based decision making to our region's states, districts, and schools. It has been rewarding to collaborate with practitioners and policymakers on the specific issues that confront them, and dig deep into the available research on those topics.

With *EdEvidence*, we hope to bring the work of REL-NEI to a wider audience, and to report the ways that this research is being used by real stakeholders—teachers, administrators, legislators, professional organizations—in the field of education. *EdEvidence* is a snapshot of how our work impacts the region, and how people are integrating research into their decision making processes. In upcoming issues of *EdEvidence*, we will also explore how podcasting, webinars, and other technology-based tools can be used to inform a wide range of stakeholders about our work. Look for these, as well as an expanded website, soon. We have spent the past two years examining the critical educational issues in the region—now we want to share what we have found!

Sincerely,

Director, REL Northeast and Islands

## “Struggling Reader” Report Looks at Literacy Interventions in Four Urban Districts

Judy Zorfass is concerned. “I want people to worry about this problem after reading this report,” she says, her voice sounding a hint of alarm.

Zorfass, an EDC researcher with extensive experience in middle-grades literacy development, is not prone to hyperbole. She was the lead developer for the Annenberg-funded Literacy Matters website, and has written a book based on her work with middle schools and interdisciplinary teams. So it is noteworthy that she is concerned about the state of programs designed to help struggling middle grade readers.

Along with her REL Northeast and Islands colleague Carole Urbano, Zorfass recently completed a study of foundation reading skills in four school districts (Worcester, MA, Nashua, NH, Yonkers, NY, and Providence, RI). Specifically, the pair wanted to know how these districts assess “foundation” reading skills—essential for academic success—and provide programs to struggling middle-grade readers.

The report, titled “A description of foundation skills interventions for struggling middle-grade readers in four urban Northeast and Islands Region school districts,” and which is [available online](#), concluded that all four districts were in the beginning stages of both testing and providing foundation skills programs. The type of diagnostic assessment that was used in each district varied, as did the number of students that were included in each district’s intervention program. If programs existed, progress monitoring was built in.

While the results of this study show that these districts are beginning to address the needs of struggling readers in their schools, Zorfass wants to see more attention paid to the issue.

“This report should motivate people to think, ‘This is a big problem,’” she says. “These representative districts—who have high-need populations—recognize that they must be doing more.”



### FALLING BEHIND EARLY

“Foundation reading skills” are reading skills that students typically develop in the primary grades. They include three elements: phonemic awareness (the awareness that spoken words are made up of individual sounds), knowledge of high-frequency sight words, and the ability to decode words from print to speech. Students who lack foundation skills struggle with reading, and often do not succeed in academic areas that rely heavily on reading (such as social studies and science).

Zorfass points to research studies which show that not all students in middle school have these necessary reading skills, despite a focus in the elementary grades on building literacy and helping struggling readers. One example of this focus is the Reading First program, a federally funded grant stream that supports the development of many reading programs targeting students in grades K-3.

Reading First programs, Zorfass says, are supposed to catch struggling readers early, and help build the skills for reading success. She praises the initiative, but adds that such interventions stop after Grade 3 even though many

students, especially those with disabilities, are still mastering foundation reading skills. Additionally, Zorfass points out that many students either missed out on Reading First programs or continued to struggle with reading into the upper elementary grades. These difficulties often persist into middle school.

The results of the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly referred to as “The Nation’s Report Card,” confirm Zorfass’ point. On the reading portion of the NAEP, fewer than half of fourth graders in each of the states involved in this study scored at the “proficient” level or above. And reading scores did not improve over time; the percentage of eighth grade students achieving “proficient” or above mirrored the scores of the younger students—indicating that a large number of students continue to struggle with reading well into the middle grades.

### COLLABORATION NEEDED

Wondering what types of remediation programs were in place to help students who had not mastered foundation reading skills, Zorfass and Urbano talked with administrators involved in special education, literacy, Title 1, and English Language Learner (ELL) programs in the four districts. They also collected district statistics, read public documents describing the literacy programs, and consulted state literacy plans.

The administrators identified six factors that could promote the success of middle grades reading programs in their districts. They listed policy-level factors, such as extending Reading First initiatives into the middle grades, and making use of Response to Intervention (RtI) and three-tier reading models. The administrators also identified school-level factors such as flexible scheduling to accommodate interventions, and staffing schools with enough highly qualified reading teachers.

Further, administrators viewed collaboration among English language arts, special education, Title I, and English language learner departments and programs as important for any change in instructional planning. The data gathered from these four districts shows that responsibility for the intervention cannot be housed in any one school department, but must be a collaborative effort at all levels of the district. School administrators all indicated that they realized the importance of shifting to a collaborative decision-making process when designing intervention programs.

A particular challenge that school leaders say they are facing is how to scale up their middle grades reading interventions to impact more students. Zorfass singles out the intervention program in Worcester, Massachusetts

as an example of a program that only benefited a small group of students in one pilot school.

“What surprised me,” Zorfass says, “was that the educators were able to do strong thinking about design of program, and even successfully pilot it, but faced typical barriers in scaling it up.” Administrators noted that lack of adequate funding, a dearth of highly qualified teachers, and changes in administration can hurt even effective programs.

The strength of this report, Zorfass believes, is that it provides educators at all levels with a structure for discussing reading intervention programs for middle grades students. She spotlights the report’s appendix as especially useful, with resources for teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders that can “anchor the conversation” around

literacy and reading interventions.

Zorfass and Urbano recently presented selected project findings at REL-NEI’s second Policy Challenges Conference, held in March. They were joined by Cindy Mata-Aguilar, an expert in adolescent literacy, of the New York and New England Comprehensive Centers. The three led regional stakeholders—including educators, policymakers, and administrators—in a discussion of the current research on reading interventions, and shared some resources that were available to practitioners.

What did participants take away from the presentation? “Adolescence is not too late to intervene,” says Zorfass, reflecting on her experience in the field. “In my opinion, carefully designed interventions—with good teaching—can work.”

## REL-NEI Begins Large-Scale Studies, Recruiting

Schools throughout New England are encouraged to apply for inclusion in one of two new large-scale randomized controlled trial studies conducted by REL Northeast and Islands. These studies address two critical issues in education: broadening access to Algebra I in the eighth grade, and improving adolescent literacy.

“We are hopeful that both of these studies will make significant contributions to the research literature and provide important guidance to inform high-stakes educational decisions,” observes Katie Culp, Director of Outreach for REL-NEI.

REL-NEI is currently conducting outreach to schools in Maine for the Virtual Algebra study, which seeks to examine the policy implications of offering an online Algebra I course to eighth grade students. The study seeks to attract students who are prepared to take an Algebra I course, but who attend schools that do not offer the course until high school.

Specifically, the study seeks to determine whether students who take the online Virtual Algebra course in



eighth grade demonstrate higher mathematics achievement than students who take the mathematics offerings as currently structured in their high school. The study will also examine higher-level mathematics course-taking patterns and success in ninth and tenth grade.

“This study is important to Maine,

and other REL-NEI jurisdictions,” says Pam Buffington, REL-NEI’s Maine State Liaison. “The results have policy implications that relate to equity of access to critical gateway skills for advanced mathematics courses, expanded post-secondary options and higher levels of achievement for students including those from small, often geographically isolated, schools and communities.”

Schools participating in this study stand to gain many benefits, including a high quality Algebra I course offered online for eighth graders at no cost, a highly qualified teacher to teach the course, ongoing technical support, graphing calculators, and compensation for on-site proctors and teacher participation.

REL-NEI is also reaching out to sixth-grade teachers in high-need schools in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Rhode Island for another technology-based study that focuses on reading comprehension. This study will assess the effectiveness of Thinking Reader, a software-based intervention designed to advance literacy development among middle-grades students.

The Thinking Reader software presents digital versions of nine popular, multicultural, award-winning novels, and uses a software program with embedded supports to help students practice and master various reading comprehension strategies in an online format. The program will supplement students' regular English language arts curriculum, and is appropriate for English Language Learner (ELL) students, struggling readers, and special education students, as well as on-grade-level readers.

"During our regional needs analysis, it was clear that adolescent literacy was and is one of the most urgent issues to address," says Teresa Duncan, the study's Principal Investigator. "We conducted a scan of different adolescent literacy interventions, trying to determine which ones had promising—and rigorous—prior research to support the developer's claims. The Thinking Reader software program stood out as an intervention that was both grounded in literacy theory and based on empirically proven literacy strategies."

Participating schools will receive free Thinking Reader software, headphones and microphones, paperback books and teacher support materials for their sixth-grade reading classrooms. Teachers will also receive professional development and ongoing technical assistance.

Research and project staff from Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) and American Institutes for Research (AIR) will collaborate on both research studies.

Participants interested in learning about either study can visit their respective websites: <http://www.virtualalgebrastudy.org/> and <http://www.literacyintervention.org/>. Both studies will be conducted during the 2008–2009 academic years, with data collection for the Virtual Algebra study continuing for an additional two years.

## Supporting Research to Help the Legislative Process



In the state of Massachusetts it takes an average of seven years for a bill to become law, according to William Haberland, Chief of Staff to Massachusetts State Senator Robert O'Leary, who spoke with members of the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (REL-NEI) in early February.

According to Haberland, one reason for this extended timeframe may be the fact that every citizen in the state—from politicians to teachers, from high school students to lobbyists—has the right of petition, meaning that anyone who wants to propose a law may do so.

The architecture of such a system may beg questions of efficiency, which is one reason why legislative aides—staffers who funnel information to state lawmakers—would benefit from the

research support and technical assistance of REL-NEI. Unlike the U.S. Congress, they have no Research Service devoted to their needs.

Legislators like O'Leary rely on their aides to vet legislative proposals, with a particular eye towards looking at the proposal's alignment with current research data. And this is where academic study comes in, said Haberland; if there is "persuasive research" on a given piece of proposed legislation, "it will trump the lobbyists."

During a question and answer period, a number of REL-NEI staff were eager to know how best to offer legislators assistance in supplying the research that legislators need when considering policy. The answer: through the legislative aides, who also could benefit from training in how to discern quality research.

When asked if webinars would be useful formats for such training, Haberland responded that this sort of technology would "very much" be appreciated and suggested a short series of one-hour trainings—ideally ones that would allow the aides to stay at their desks.

In response to Haberland's comments, REL-NEI staff will follow up with Massachusetts legislative staff to create a series of webinar trainings for legislative aides around the theme of becoming more effective consumers of education research.



## Policy Challenges Conference Brings Together Researchers, Stakeholders



Research about high-risk student populations was the focus of REL Northeast and Islands' second Policy Challenges Conference, held at the Providence Biltmore Hotel on March 5 and 6. The conference was attended by over 100 educators, researchers, policy-makers, and stakeholders representing all states and jurisdictions in the REL-NEI region.

Dr. Ron Ferguson, director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, offered a keynote speech about the role of research in understanding and addressing the specific needs of at risk students in the United States.

"We've got to find ways to deliver really high quality instruction to kids at the bottom of the achievement distribution and put just as much thought and energy and enthusiasm into that as we do for the kids...at the top end of the distribution," said Ferguson. "We need some research on how you actually make that happen in real schools."

The event opened with a panel discussion featuring Paula Dominguez, Senior Education Policy Advisor to the Rhode Island legislature, Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, and Carrie Parker, Research Scientist at EDC. Dominguez and Burke Bryant described the role that research played in informing a key piece of

legislation on dropout prevention in Rhode Island, while Parker explained how she has been working with assessment directors in several states to ensure high-quality assessments are available for all students.

The conference showcased REL-NEI research projects that examine issues in high-risk student populations, and offered participants the opportunity to ask project staff about the research during roundtable discussions. These sessions also helped stakeholders exchange ideas about the potential impact of the findings, and discuss how this research may affect their decisions about state education policies.

Presentations allowed all participants to learn about current research and to share challenges that they faced in their own states and districts, according to Maria Teresa Sanchez, a member of the REL-NEI research staff. "For several of the state groups," she added, "it provided an opportunity to talk about how the REL could be of help to them."

State teams, comprising educators, policy-makers, and state department of education staff, had multiple opportunities during the two-day conference to work together to identify policy challenges and discuss possible new initiatives in their jurisdictions.

One roundtable session, "Making the

Best Use of English Language Learning Data," was led by Sanchez and three colleagues. Besides an overview of the latest research on assessment of English language learners (ELLs), this forum offered a glimpse of one project that is examining the relationship between test scores of ELLs on English language proficiency assessments and content-based achievement tests.

"For people who were not aware of the state of the current research, the presentation was helpful," said Sanchez. "The types of conversations that people were having were interesting, stimulating, and important."

Conference participant Susan Hayes, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Coordinator for Vermont, found that the ideas presented in this session connected to her work in the state, especially around the issue of students in poverty. "The ELL piece was relevant because that's a growing section of our kids," she said, citing the crossover nature of poverty and ELLs. More than urban poverty, rural poverty remains a high-priority issue in Vermont.

Other panels focused on issues such as reducing urban minority student drop-out rates and addressing the disproportionate representation of high-risk students in special education classes.

Jill Weber, Director of REL-NEI, hailed the conference as an effective way to convene a group of researchers and decision-makers to examine how research can be applied in different contexts.

"We value these conversations, as they help us get closer to our goal of making education an evidence-based field," said Weber. "The Policy Challenges conference was an opportunity for us to learn from practitioners and for them to learn from us. It allowed REL staff to continue to define the most useful pieces of work we can do in this area, and to focus on ways to bring research to regional policymakers."

## State Liaisons: Representing Jurisdictions

Within the Northeast and Islands region, the state liaisons are the primary point of contact between REL-NEI and the individual states and jurisdictions. State liaisons ensure that the breadth and depth of the educational issues in each jurisdiction are well represented in setting priorities for the REL's technical assistance and research projects. The liaisons also keep stakeholders in the jurisdictions aware of the support that the REL can provide.

A liaison's work begins with "needs sensing"—the process of identifying issues of interest and relevance in a jurisdiction. Liaisons facilitate meetings with a wide range of stakeholders, including education commissioners and staff from state education departments, statewide support organizations, local education agencies, universities, and districts, in order to gather information about educational issues of importance to each group.

Through these needs-sensing events, the liaisons come to understand a jurisdiction's education issues from a variety of perspectives, and build relationships between education practitioners and REL-NEI staff.

"Our event provided a great opportunity for the REL to connect with educational leaders and legislators in Maine," says Pam Buffington, the Maine state liaison, who organized a needs sensing dinner in January. "It provided a perfect opportunity to reach out and inform these state leaders about the REL, and also to engage in conversations about issues that they feel are key to education policy in the state."

Liaisons also coordinate research-based responses to a jurisdiction's needs, meeting frequently with high-level state education staff. Such meetings help REL-NEI support jurisdictions in their work, as evidenced by a recent collaboration between Katie Culp, Director of Research for REL-NEI, and the Connecticut Commissioner of Education's extended cabinet. The two parties met to discuss the State Education Department's research needs and to explore ways in which the REL



might help to address those needs.

"This was an important connection to make," says Laura Jeffers, the Connecticut state liaison. "The cabinet is made up of Associate Commissioners and Bureau Chiefs, many of whom regularly use research in the process of developing, promoting, and implementing educational policies and programs in the state."

After an initial meeting and a follow-up conversation, the group decided to tackle the issue of early childhood assessment. They were specifically interested in learning about kindergarten screening and progress monitoring assessments that had been deemed effective and reliable by experts in the field, as well as different states' approaches to assessing students in the early grades.

Culp took these questions back to the REL. Assisted by researcher Charlie Rockman and researchers from EDC's Center for Children and Families, she soon returned to the cabinet with two Technical Assistance documents designed to inform the department's efforts to improve strategies for assessing young children's readiness for early education programs, as well as their progress in those programs.

"This is an example of the technical assistance process at its best," continues Jeffers. "Our colleagues at the Connecticut State Department of Education posed a question, and we were able to respond quickly with research that was directly relevant to the issues they were grappling with."

In addition to serving as a bridge between state stakeholders and the REL, liaisons manage a variety of other tasks. Liaisons coordinate the work of REL-NEI researchers within their jurisdiction, recruit participants for focus groups and other cross-jurisdiction activities, and help to identify opportunities to leverage the work of other federally funded centers (such as Comprehensive Centers) in response to the needs of the jurisdictions.

Liaisons work as senior staff at REL-NEI partner organizations, Education Development Center, Inc. and Learning Innovations at WestEd. Their extensive experience in technical assistance and educational research is pivotal to developing working relationships with a broad range of stakeholders in each of REL-NEI's nine jurisdictions.

## Learning About What Works at the SEE Forum

Seeking to foster the use of evidence-based research to shape state and federal education policy, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is sponsoring a new series of forums designed to connect research, policy, and practice.

The Scientific Evidence in Education (SEE) Forums are organized by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and invite policymakers and practitioners to learn about new products, projects, or avenues for integrating rigorous research into education. AIR is a partner in the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (REL-NEI), one of ten IES-funded regional laboratories across the United States.

The first of six SEE Forums was held in March at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, and attended by members of the U.S. Department of Education and representatives from the National Education Association, Alliance for Excellence in Education, local universities, and several public and charter schools. The Forum promoted the idea that, in the words of SEE Forums Director Steve Fleischman, "science really matters" in education. A highlight of this first forum was the introduction of new research-based resources that help to bridge research and practice.

"Research and practice are obviously very different," says forum attendee Richard Fournier, a member of the REL-NEI research team. "Combining the two can be a challenge, and the SEE Forum is a piece of the puzzle. I'm happy that we have events like the SEE Forums helping us get the word out to practitioners and policy makers."

The one-day forum introduced two resources for educators: the IES Practice Guides and the Doing What Works website. A panel of education experts, including Fleischman and Russell Gersten, Panel Chair for the IES Practice Guides, introduced the new educational tools.

The IES Practice Guide series is a compilation of recommendations for practitioners to use when deciding whether to implement programs on a particular subject, such as English Language Learning (ELL) instruction. Each guide gathers available research on one subject, typically an educational issue lacking strong impact evidence, and provides insight into the research base. Practitioners, including teachers and principals, can use the guides—presented in a digestible format that requires little knowledge of research methodology—to understand what research suggests about various teaching practices and programs.

The Doing What Works website, available at <http://dww.ed.gov/>, is an online version of the IES Practice Guide series, and tailored specifically for teachers. The website provides visual examples of teaching methods teachers might implement, including animated and real-life video clips. Additionally, it provides interviews with members of the IES panel and other researchers.

Fournier noted the relevance of the forums, saying that states in the Northeast and Islands region can benefit from the guides and the website that were



showcased. "If these districts and schools start using these resources," he says, "I'm sure it'll have a direct impact on the types of requests that REL-NEI will receive. Schools and policymakers will be more informed."

The remaining five SEE Forums will take place within the next year and a half. More information on SEE Forums and resources can be found at <http://www.seeforums.org>.