

Welcome

Welcome to the first edition of *REL Midwest Research Update*, a semiannual newsletter offering information on resources available from the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Program and from REL Midwest at Learning Point Associates.

REL Midwest is one of 10 RELs funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Under the direction of Matt Dawson, Ph.D., REL Midwest serves the educational needs of Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Learning Point Associates has operated the REL serving the Midwest for nearly 25 years.

A nonpartisan resource, REL Midwest provides expert advice to help educators and policymakers apply scientifically valid research to their decision making. We do this by:

- Collecting and interpreting data to assess regional needs.
- Developing and delivering technical assistance.
- Conducting state policy outreach activities.
- Planning and implementing short-term applied research and development projects.
- Conducting long-term research studies.

Reports that result from short-term projects are available as two ongoing Web-based series—Issues & Answers and REL Technical Briefs. Both undergo external peer review to ensure that they meet IES standards for scientifically based research before being published on the REL Program website (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/). Visit the website to browse and download all REL products (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/).

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Our Work

REL Midwest Reports on Teacher Evaluation, Teacher Supply and Demand, Data Systems, and Two-Year College Experiences

- **Examining District Guidance to Schools on Teacher Evaluation Policies in the Midwest Region** (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/REL_2007030.pdf) provides a snapshot of teacher evaluation policies across a demographically diverse sample of districts in the Midwest. According to the policies, many districts distinguish evaluation practices based on teacher tenure; few spell out consequences for unsatisfactory evaluations; most evaluations are summative reports used to support decisions about retaining teachers and granting tenure, rather than for professional development; and vague terminology leaves evaluation policies open to interpretation.
- **State Policies on Teacher Evaluation Practices in the Midwest Region** (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/techbrief/tr_00408.pdf) responds to a request to provide a view of state-level policies and procedural requirements for guiding teacher evaluation practices at the district level. This report reveals how state policies address teacher evaluation practices and briefly describes other state-level initiatives that include teacher evaluation components.
- **Calculating the Ability of Within-School Teacher Supply to Meet the Demands of New Requirements: The Example of the Michigan Merit Curriculum** (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/techbrief/tr_00508.pdf) describes how to calculate a potential undersupply of full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers in core content areas based on state graduation requirements. The study team calculated the formula using Michigan-specific values for key variables. Schools can adjust the variables in the formula (such as class size and number of periods taught by each FTE teacher) to fit their own needs.
- **Getting the Evidence for Evidence-Based Initiatives: How the Midwest States Use Data Systems to Improve Educational Processes and Outcomes** (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/REL_2007016.pdf) shows that despite a wealth of data at the school, district, state, and federal levels, the objectives of data-based decision making in education have not been fully realized. Common challenges include outdated and incompatible systems for collecting and storing information, inefficient systems for accessing and using data, and constraints

on resources and capacity. A policy brief titled *Using Multiple Levels of Data to Address Educational Issues* (www.learningpt.org/aboutus/howwework/centers/RELpubs/June2008Brief.pdf) also is available.

- **New Data Needed: Improving Survey Research on Two-Year College Experiences** (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/REL_2007015.pdf) illustrates that two-year colleges are enrolling new kinds of students, offering new options, and serving new labor-market demands; but parents, educators, and policymakers are giving advice and making policies based on old understandings—which may be outdated, misleading, and harmful.

Long-Term Studies on Adolescent Literacy and Formative Assessment

Knowing what works, for whom, and under what conditions can help educators and policymakers make informed policy and practice decisions, and rigorous studies can provide the evidence they need. Data collection has begun in REL Midwest's two long-term studies—one on adolescent literacy, the other on formative assessment. Both studies use randomized controlled trials (RCTs)—rigorous experiments designed to determine whether a cause-effect relationship exists between a particular intervention and the outcome.

Adolescent Literacy Study. Our three-year literacy study focuses on a literacy-across-the-curriculum approach in high schools. The teaching intervention is the Content Literacy Continuum (CLC) from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, which we selected after a rigorous review of current adolescent literacy instruction programs. We have recruited 33 high schools in eight districts in four states (Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin) that meet size, need, and demographic requirements. The study addresses the extent to which CLC improves students' reading skills, content knowledge, and other academic outcomes (e.g., attendance, persistence in school, course-taking patterns); the effect of a literacy-across-the-curriculum approach on literacy instruction (across teachers in the core content areas); and the factors that promote or impede successful implementation of this approach in high schools.

Formative Assessment Study. The formative assessment study examines the impact of a professional development program designed and delivered by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) that targets teachers to increase their efficacy in using the association's popular Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) program. The study focuses on the use of formative assessment to

differentiate—or individualize—instruction for elementary students. We selected this program because although MAP is used by 10 percent of all districts nationwide, no experimental studies have been conducted to determine the extent to which teachers individualize instruction or if student achievement improves as a result. The intervention assumes that teachers who receive frequent assessment of student progress will be better able to adjust instructional practices, thereby improving student performance, as observed by annual state assessments. Our study will uncover whether these assumptions are true. Thirty-one elementary schools in five Illinois districts are participating.

New Focus Coming Soon

Instead of focusing on short-term research projects during the next two years, IES has directed the RELs to conduct events at which experts bring evidence to practitioners. The purpose of these events is a dual one: (1) to help ensure that IES and REL research gets to the field, and (2) to provide opportunities for practitioners and policymakers to deepen their understanding of evidence-based research.

REL Midwest events that are in the works include “Interpreting Test Score Trends and Gaps,” intended for researchers, evaluators, and analysts who work for and with state and local education agencies, and “English Language Learners: Applying Best Practices,” intended for bilingual coaches and directors from local and state education agencies as well as representatives from regional offices of education who focus on English language learner issues.

For more information or to suggest an event in your area, contact Peggie Garcia by e-mail (peggie.garcia@learningpt.org) or phone (312-288-7642).

News, Events, and Activities

- Congratulations to REL Midwest Board member Deborah Delisle, who was appointed Ohio’s state superintendent of public instruction on October 14, 2008. Delisle previously served as superintendent of the Cleveland Heights–University Heights School District.
- Welcome to new REL Midwest Board members Jo Anderson, executive director of the Illinois Education Association, and Matthew W. Stagner, Ph.D., executive director of Chapin Hall Center for Children and a senior lecturer at the Irving B. Harris School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. Both were elected at the October 2008 board meeting.
- “Quality School Leadership: Advancing Policy, Supports, and Research in the Midwest Region,” a REL Midwest invitational leadership forum, was held

December 2, 2008, in Rosemont, Illinois. This forum brought together state-level leaders to discuss research, policy, and programmatic efforts to improve principal recruitment, preparation, succession, and support.

- REL Midwest supported the November 17, 2008, Ohio Dropout Prevention Summit with planning and dissemination assistance. The summit was timed with the release of policy recommendations from the state’s P–16 Council initiatives. It offered Governor Ted Strickland the opportunity to roll out strategies aimed at increasing high school graduation rates and reducing dropout rates.
- At the request of REL Midwest board member and State Senator Luther Olsen, who also serves on the Committee on Education in the Wisconsin Senate, REL Midwest convened a group of policymakers on the challenge of achievement gaps. Participants included representatives from higher education, the governor’s office, state Legislature, and professional education organizations. The group reached consensus about pursuing projects to push data-driven improvements in Wisconsin.
- REL Midwest is providing staff support and technical assistance to the Illinois Early Learning Council’s Special Populations Committee. Recent issues include designing an early childhood data system for the state and conducting a needs-sensing survey of Illinois early childhood service providers.
- On June 6, 2008, REL Midwest convened the Midwest Urban Research Network—school district staff charged with leading research and evaluation for midsized urban school districts throughout the region’s seven states. Working sessions identified strong interest in developing data and analytics that connect choices about instructional practice to instructional effects.
- Minnesota’s Board of Teaching is receiving assistance from REL Midwest to help inform the redesign of its teacher program approval process. The Board of Teaching has requested information on how certain other states approve teacher preparation programs and the types of data they collect to determine teacher competence (both content and pedagogy).
- In Michigan, REL Midwest is providing technical assistance to Michigan Department of Education staff based on their desire to improve their ongoing evaluation of the state’s Reach and Teach for Learning initiative. REL Midwest also provided technical assistance in response to a request from State Superintendent Michael Flanagan for a systemwide redesign effort known as “Reimagining the K–12 System.”

Ask A REL!

Educators and policymakers across the country can tap a new resource from the REL Program for information on current education issues. Ask A REL (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/askaREL/) is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the REL Program and sponsored by IES.

Ask A REL functions like a technical reference library and provides referrals, references, and region-specific education information. In responding to requests, the RELs use their in-house experts and other resources, including the National Library of Education and the Education Resources Information Center (known as ERIC). Submit your question today!

Contact Us

If you have comments on our work or would like to discuss ideas for future studies or technical assistance with a member of our staff, please contact us by telephone (866-730-6735) or e-mail (RELmidwest@learningpt.org). We look forward to hearing from you.

Watch for the next issue of *REL Midwest Research Update* in spring 2009. To add a colleague's name to the mailing list, or to unsubscribe, please contact us by e-mail (RELmidwest@learningpt.org).

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