

How did Utah elementary schools respond to the state's reading improvement program? How do the courses that California's minority youth take in high school affect their postsecondary education opportunities? How does the performance of Arizona's school districts in need of improvement under *No Child Left Behind* compare to the performance of the schools in these same districts? What's the rate at which Nevada's college-going high school graduates need remediation before they're ready for college-level mathematics?

How effective is the Program for Infant and Toddler Care (PITC), a professional development strategy intended to improve the quality of preschool programs and the cognitive, language, and social development of infants and toddlers? And what about the effectiveness of Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL), a professional development program designed to equip secondary teachers to advance the development of academic English for English language learners?

These are just a few of the wide-ranging, needs-driven questions being addressed by researchers at REL West under the newest in a long series of competitive regional educational laboratory (REL) contracts granted to WestEd by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences.

A Call for Research-based Action

The 10-laboratory national REL system, first funded by Congress in 1966, was conceived as a means to bridge education research and practice. While much in education has changed over the intervening decades, the need for research-based policy and practice has only grown. Today, as state and local education agencies and their schools struggle to ensure that the nation's increasingly diverse youth

population is well educated and otherwise prepared to succeed in life beyond school, public education is center stage in politics and public discourse. Everyone wants to see progress — now! — and having trustworthy evidence on which to base policy and practice is essential.

While districts, schools, and other education-related agencies in REL West's four-state region — Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah — share many challenges, their specific needs for research and support can differ. Thus, REL West reaches out broadly and regularly to education stakeholders across the region to analyze needs. Based on these analyses, REL West researchers conduct fast-response projects intended to inform immediate action and policy decisions. At the same time, REL West is carrying out six large, multi-year studies to evaluate promising interventions (e.g., PITC, QTEL) that, if proven effective, could help meet important needs in the region and nationwide. All REL West work is reviewed extensively and held to the high research standards of the Institute of Education Sciences; final reports are posted on the national REL web site: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

This publication — *REL West Research Digest* — keeps educators and others abreast of the research being carried out by REL West and, as relevant to the western region, of work being done by other laboratories. In addition to providing abstracts of final research reports as they are completed, the twice-yearly digest may provide descriptions of upcoming fast-response work and REL-related events. This premiere issue also introduces readers to one of REL West's multi-year evaluations of promising interventions.

REL West Fast-Response Projects

Fast-response projects are proposed and approved on a rolling basis, so the number underway at any given time varies. Over the course of 2007, REL West researchers worked on a dozen such projects. In carrying out these projects, a REL may analyze or otherwise draw on existing data, studies, and research reviews. As projects are completed, their results are captured in an Issues & Answers report, which is posted on the national REL web site. Depending on the research topic and the audience(s), REL West staff may also disseminate project findings through presentations to legislators, at conferences, or to staff of regional comprehensive centers; they may convene interested stakeholders to examine what research results might mean for their work; or, for far-flung stakeholders, they may produce web-based seminars (i.e., webinars).

CURRENT ISSUES & ANSWERS REPORTS

(Available online at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/projectarea.asp?pid=1>)

An Analysis of Utah's K–3 Reading Improvement Program

This project analyzed data from the second year of Utah's K–3 Reading Improvement Program to provide insights to Utah and other education policymakers in the region seeking to develop effective state policy in support of early literacy. Researchers found that more Utah districts and charter schools reported implementing key elements of the state literacy framework and meeting their own goals in Year 2 of the Reading Improvement Program.

Measuring Resilience and Youth Development: The Psychometric Properties of the Healthy Kids Survey

This report summarizes findings from a study of the psychometric properties of a key component of the Healthy Kids Survey, which is a comprehensive student self-report tool for monitoring the school environment and student health risks. The study looks specifically at the survey's "resilience and youth development" module, which assesses environmental and internal assets associated with positive youth development and school success. Environmental assets refer to meaningful and pro-social bonding to community, school, family, and peers. Internal assets are personal resilience traits, such as self-efficacy and problem-solving skills. This particular module is increasingly used in evaluation work to assess student-level changes over time, but researchers found that widespread use of the module, particularly for evaluation, may be premature.

The Distribution of Teaching and Learning Resources in California's Middle and High Schools

The project was designed to yield a more detailed picture of the condition of education for California's middle and high school students by examining current levels of specific key resources. Researchers looked at issues related to teacher quality, class size, and types of available courses. They found that access to important educational resources in California's middle and high schools is not equal among schools that serve different student populations. Overall, the most disadvantaged student populations are likely to have the least access to the resources necessary for learning.

Course-Taking Patterns and Preparation for Postsecondary Education in the California State University Systems among Minority Youth

This report examines the extent to which California 12th graders fail to meet the high school curriculum requirements for admission to the state's two public university systems by investigating students' course-taking patterns and whether the courses they take meet state university entrance requirements. Because students from a variety of minority groups have been and continue to be underrepresented in California's higher education systems, this study includes a subgroup analysis by ethnicity. The findings demonstrate a consistent pattern: students who complete college-preparatory courses in 9th grade begin a clear trajectory that continues throughout high school, propelling them toward higher education. Students who fall off the college-preparatory track early in high school tend to move ever further from a complete college-preparatory program as they progress through high school.

SELECTED FAST-RESPONSE PROJECTS UNDERWAY

High School Coursework and College Remediation: Examining the Link

The Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) reports that 36 percent of Nevada high school graduates matriculating to an NSHE institution (i.e., community college or state university) in 2006 were enrolled in at least one freshman remediation course; 40 percent of entering students were in remedial courses in 2005 and 2004. Because such courses are expensive and, arguably, redundant, the NSHE is interested in understanding more about the issue and making appropriate recommendations to districts and high schools. To that end, it has asked REL West to analyze the high school coursework of remedial versus non-remedial students, to better understand which courses

are associated with college preparedness and future college success.

Dropout Recovery: The Conundrum of Re-enrollment

All four states in the region are feeling an urgent need to keep students on track to graduate from high school and to get them back on track when they lose their way. Yet “recovering” dropouts by re-enrolling them in schools is challenging for districts. This mixed-method case study of the San Bernardino (CA) Unified School District explores current efforts to recover students who have dropped out, as well as the policy incentives and disincentives to do so. It will draw from existing data and interviews with students and school and district administrators.

REL West Multi-year Evaluation

REL West is currently conducting six randomized controlled trials (RCTs) designed to look for causal evidence of the impact of education interventions that are well-defined and fully developed, have shown promise through preliminary studies, and address high-priority needs in the region. (Interventions developed by WestEd, REL West’s parent organization, are being evaluated by outside researchers.) These evaluations are multi-year studies whose results will not be available for another year or two, but each digest will introduce one of the projects.

Program for Infant and Toddler Care

The Intervention: The core professional development curriculum of the Program for Infant and Toddler Care (PITC) consists of four modules that cover various aspects of infant and toddler learning and development and are delivered to childcare workers over 60 hours, over a six-month period. The sessions provide training on program policy recommendations, program operation, and environmental arrangements. The intervention is intended to improve the quality of preschool programs and the cognitive, language, and social development of infants and toddlers.

Study Period: March 2007 – February 2010

Study Questions: The key research questions examined in this study are:

1. What is the impact of PITC on the quality of childcare in childcare centers and family childcare homes?
2. What is the impact of PITC on children’s learning and development 6 months and 18 months after providers complete the training, especially on measures associated with school readiness?
3. What is the impact on children who are English language learners?
4. What are the implications of the findings for further replication of the program throughout the western region and elsewhere?

Design and Samples: This study involves 1,650 infants and toddlers and all caregivers who work at 90 group childcare centers and 150 family childcare centers in rural and urban communities in Arizona and California.

Each selected center will be randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions.

Outcome Measures: Childcare program quality using several measures (e.g., Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale); and child learning and development

using the Bayley Scale of Infant and Toddler Development, and for children ages three and older, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and certain subscales of the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery or other normed measures of school readiness.

Work from Other RELS

“Coach” Can Mean Many Things: Five Categories of Literacy Coaches in Reading First

From REL Northwest

The use of coaching has come to be seen as an important method of providing teachers with ongoing, job-embedded professional development and is increasingly used in literacy instruction. As a prelude to examining the effectiveness of this professional development approach, policymakers and educators need an accurate picture of who serves as coaches and what they do in this role. This report provides part of that picture. Using data from and about Reading First coaches in five western states, researchers found that how coaches allocate their time across similar tasks and how they understand and describe the focus of their work varies widely. This report identifies and explains five categories of coaches: data-oriented, student-oriented, managerial, and two teacher-oriented categories, one working largely with individual teachers and one working largely with groups of teachers.

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