From the CEO:

Inaugural newsletter highlights assessment

Welcome to this first issue of R&D Alert.

This inaugural newsletter is somewhat different from our previous efforts to share information about our work. That's because each issue of R&D Alert will focus on a single topic, one we think is of interest because of its timeliness and importance to the support of education reform. We hope you will agree.

This first issue highlights standards and assessment. Reacting to voter sentiment and encouraged by the media, federal and state politicians are demanding that administrators, teachers, and students be held accountable for student academic performance. To ensure that accountability, policymakers are exploring various assessment tools.

Our assessment work focuses on many of the tough issues inherent in any widespread effort to hold people accountable for their performance. For example, WestEd is particularly concerned about how to go about the difficult task of helping schools, districts, and states create a coherent, balanced, and bias-free assessment system.

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Standards and assessment systems pose new challenges to educators

Policymakers and educators generally agree: Higher educational standards are a good thing. And, students need to be assessed regularly to determine if they're meeting these standards. At the same time, somebody ought to be held accountable for producing higher student achievement. So far, so good. But the devil is in the details.

Educators and their time. In some cases, ill-conceived — but adopted nevertheless — systems of standards and assessment have generated considerable opposition to the very idea of testing and accountability.

The stakes are high.

"We must ensure that this generation of students has the skills and knowledge to be successful, both at work and as citizens," says Stanley Rabinowitz, who, with Sri Ananda, directs WestEd's Assessment and Standards Development Services (ASDS) program. To this end, the emphasis in accountability has undergone a profound shift from measuring inputs, or what goes into the system, to defining what we expect students to know and be able to do — and to developing the capacity to prepare them to meet these objectives.

Those at each level of the education system — school, district, and state — have a stake and a function in this process.

The challenge for those engaged in reform is to define the role of each party, and to use the strengths of each to their greatest advantage.

The hallmark of successful, integrative standards and assessment systems is thus a "top-down, bottom-up" approach, one that invites those from a variety of perspectives to engage in a creative, rigorous process of reform. Creating coherence between state- and district-level standards and assessments, and local-, classroom- and school-level standards and assessments is the primary objective.

At each level of the education system, reform must be guided by several fundamental questions: What do we expect students to know and be able to do? How will we measure their grasp of these skills?, and How will we ensure achievement for all students? The processes by which these
questions are answered are key to the success of the education system.

What Do We Expect Students to Know and Be Able to Do?
Establishing content standards is one of many controversial aspects of systemwide reform. Who should decide what is important for our students to know? Standards alternately have been criticized for being so specific as to strip teachers of instructional autonomy, or so vague as to be rendered meaningless, or biased against specific groups of students. What's more, competing interests may generate more standards than students could possibly master in their years of schooling, which means that we have failed our primary mandate — to improve educational opportunity and achievement for every student. Finally, that which is valued as "knowledge" may vary from community to community, and creating consensus has proven elusive. (continued on page 4)

Nevada's Education Reform Act (NERA), building off of a series of earlier reforms, moved Nevada to the forefront of school reform efforts in 1997. NERA raised the stakes for the state's entire education community by linking the existing high school exit examination to the more rigorous content standards. While WestEd already provided the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) with technical support for standards development, its work now has expanded to focus on assessment as well.

"WestEd's expertise, history, and commitment to the region made us uniquely qualified to work with all constituencies in the state," says Stanley Rabinowitz, Godirector of WestEd's Assessment and Standards Development Services (ASDS).

WestEd helped NDE establish committees comprising teachers, teacher educators, and other stakeholders to propose standards in science, mathematics, and language arts. Moreover, WestEd provided the research essential to informed standards development in each of these content areas. The resulting proposals served as the springboard for the Nevada Council on Academic Standards' final recommendations to the State Board of Education.

Nevada reform spurs WestEd assistance

WestEd played a key role in ensuring the high school exit examination meets all legal and technical requirements for a high-stakes graduation test. This included conducting bias reviews for culture, gender, ethnicity, and handicapping conditions; as well as studies to identify students at risk of failing the examination, and effective preparation and remediation models.

For more information on WestEd's services related to assessment and standards, contact Rabinowitz at (415) 241-2711, or visit the ASDS Web site at www.WestEd.org/asds

The solution lies in recognizing the complementary roles that the state, district, and school can play. While state-level standards must, by definition, adopt a broad-based approach, school and district leaders may more closely define their standards to meet local goals while supplementing the state-established goals. As a facilitator of this process, WestEd works to align these levels, creating a system that is comprehensive, and eliminating the redundancies that prove burdensome and costly to the system.

WestEd’s Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC) is an excellent example of how the local facilitation process works. WAC works directly through school and district leadership teams to build the capacity and organizational culture to sustain standards-based practice. For example, participants in WAC’s ‘Kyosei’ project receive on-site coaching, engage in annual diagnostic institutes, develop student performance plans, and attend an intensive workweek each summer. In addition, Kyosei district and school partners conduct public engagement processes to establish standards, and examine assessment data for understanding school performance and how it might be improved. (The project name, Kyosei, is the Japanese word meaning “spirit of cooperation.”)

How Will We Measure Students’ Grasp of These Skills?

No less demanding than establishing standards is establishing the means by which to assess student performance relative to these standards. Much has been learned in the last decade about how best to accomplish this. The needs of those who use assessment information for large-scale accountability purposes must be balanced and reconciled against the needs of those who use it to diagnose and guide teaching and learning, and provide a local level of accountability.

Currently, no single assessment system offers both kinds of information. Traditional pencil-and-paper assessments, while useful for measuring what students know, offer little information about what students can do. Rather, these assessments provide the state, the public, and educators with a broad picture of student performance, and generate valuable information about student, school, or district performance relative to an established norm.

In addition to the broad-based information garnered from traditional assessments, school and district leaders need information that tells what individual students are learning, what misconceptions they may have, and what they still need to learn. These needs require that educators have data in relation to how individual students are faring against specific standards. At this level, administrators have greater flexibility to tailor assessment instruments to these specific requirements. The results of these assessments offer the greatest opportunity to guide improvements at the classroom level.

The challenge in assessment reform is to develop models that alleviate the tension between the two levels of
accountability, and provide information useful for both purposes.

How Will We Ensure Achievement for All Students?

Even with good, sound standards and assessment systems in place, significant questions remain. Based upon what is learned, will the system reallocate resources to assure every student the opportunities to learn that will facilitate their meeting those standards? Will all teachers be prepared to teach—and to differentiate instruction to ensure success by every student?

As assessment strategies have evolved, therefore, a commensurate need has arisen to provide teachers, counselors, and administrators with the tools to implement, evaluate, and act upon the information they yield.

“There is this huge assumption that if you have good standards and assessment, schools just get fixed,” says Kate Jamentz, who directs the Western Assessment Collaborative. “Schools need support in figuring out how to become standards-based and to use assessments to their greatest advantage.”

As Arizona grappled with establishing high standards for all students, State Superintendent Lisa Graham Keegan and Associate Superintendent Billie Orr called on WestEd. In response, WestEd developed a school-level workshop that helped build bottom-up momentum for standards-based reform throughout the state.

WestEd’s Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC) enhanced an existing seminar to create a two-day workshop tailored to meet Arizona’s needs. Conducted by Arizona Department of Education consultants trained by WAC staff, the workshops have prepared teams of teachers, administrators, parents, and district administrators statewide to become advocates for standards-based practice in their own communities.

"As schools engage in standards-based practice, it is important for members of the school community to be able to articulate to their colleagues and parents a compelling case for having high standards," says WAC Associate Director Trudy Schoneman.

"Through the workshop, local school leaders build their case for standards, assess their own work against a vision of standards-based practice, and develop an action plan that focuses on ensuring that all students achieve high standards," Schoneman says.

For more information on the workshop, contact Schoneman at (415) 241-2704.
When local- and district-level parties initiate and develop standards-based reform, the odds of having an impact in actual classroom practice increase dramatically. Such involvement reaps the ancillary benefit of creating a sense of "ownership," and generates critical support for the reform. Recognizing this, professional development activities and teacher education through technical assistance, summer institutes, and workshops are a vital component of WestEd's work.

**Conclusions**

The complexity of our education system — its goals and its practices — belies the sort of easy, one-size-fits-all solutions sought in the early standards and assessment reform efforts. Much has been learned since then. WestEd has learned that a comprehensive, equitable, and feasible system of standards and assessment occurs upon a continuum, where local and state programs play complementary, rather than conflicting, roles. We have learned that good, sound standards and assessment development is not a discrete event, but is ongoing. Finally, we have learned that engaging many voices in the process of rigorous and challenging debate is, in itself, emblematic of progress, and essential for success.

WestEd's California Systemic Initiatives Assessment Collaborative (CSIAC), funded by the National Science Foundation, assists systemic initiative programs nationwide in their reform efforts. These include the development, administration, scoring, and reporting of science assessments aligned to recommendations of the National Science Education Standards (NSES) and the Benchmarks for Science Literacy.

Available at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in both English and Spanish, the assessments include enhanced multiple-choice items, open-ended questions, constructed response investigations, and hands-on performance tasks.

Over the last three years, the CSIAC assessment has been administered to more than 130,000 students in 16 states and Puerto Rico. Results are reported via the NSES at the school, district, and initiative levels, allowing participants to measure their growth against the national standards, and to demonstrate student achievement and program impact.

One of CSIAC's unique features is that systemic initiative leaders and teachers participate on its advisory board and development teams, helping to guide the direction of the project and its products to meet the needs of their sites. Teachers assisting in the scoring of student work have praised it as "one of the best forms of professional development."

**Science reform advanced through assessment**

In providing feedback on the test, one student commented, "This test is one of the best I have ever had. It made me think and it was fun."

For more information, contact Kathy Comfort, CSIAC Director, at (415) 565-3061.
In California, Linda Granger’s San Leandro High School classroom is part of the high school’s Business Academy, a “school within a school.” The Academy’s teacher team plans and delivers an integrated curriculum for the 100 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade students in the program.

Granger and her Academy colleagues are supported by the Career Preparation Assessment (CPA) portfolio model, tailored to meet their Academy’s needs as part of WestEd’s Regional Educational Laboratory work. The portfolio documents a student’s mastery of key interdisciplinary standards (e.g., communication, interpersonal skills, problem solving), and includes writing samples and letters of recommendation. These are tools that students will need in postsecondary education and the workplace.

Educators note that the tailored CPA has potential in the classroom and statewide. Sandy Williams, Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment for Escondido Union High School District, says that “the tailored portfolio isn’t just a vessel for assessment information — it is a catalyst for starting a dialogue about grading methods, instructional practices, and professional development.”

The tailored CPA can be implemented schoolwide. WestEd helps to clarify a school’s standards, tailors a standards-aligned portfolio, and trains teachers to use it. Later, WestEd helps schools analyze student performance and redesign the portfolio to be used in high-stakes situations, such as a graduation requirement.

Ten schools and 2,500 students have partnered with WestEd to use tailored versions of the CPA.

“I cannot believe the level of flexibility WestEd has given us and allowed us to make the portfolio our own. I don’t know why any school wouldn’t do this,” says a Peoria High School teacher in Arizona where the tailored CPA is used.

“By building on WestEd’s classroom-tested model, partner schools acquire an assessment tool that meets local needs without reinventing the portfolio wheel,” says Daniel McLaughlin, who directs the tailored CPA Project.

For more information on the tailored CPA, contact McLaughlin at (415) 241-2720 or visit WestEd’s Assessment and Standards Development Services Web site at www.WestEd.org/asds.

**Students, teachers attest:**

**Portfolio approach could translate to better teaching, learning, and assessment**
Teachers and administrators often complain that test scores of children in impoverished inner-city schools are unfairly compared to those in suburban districts. Yet the conditions of those schools are often vastly different.

Demographic comparison data help urban districts analyze student achievement

For example, in some urban Arizona schools, up to 40% of the student population changes each year. In addition, many of the students receive a free or reduced lunch, and are limited in English proficient. To level the playing field, schools in Phoenix came to WestEd last year asking if comparisons of their student achievement could be made with other, similar schools in the state.

Led by WestEd Assessment Specialist Jeanne Miyasaka, WestEd, in collaboration with the Greater Phoenix Educational Management Council and Arizona State University, coordinates a project that helps local school districts analyze, interpret, and report Stanford-9 student achievement results, taking into account the socioeconomic, language, and mobility demographics of the students. This involves comparing student achievement in these schools with that of students in similar schools elsewhere in Arizona. Two data analysis methods provide information that enables educators to answer the questions, Given the demographics of our students, is their achievement as high as it should be? And how are our students doing compared with other schools with students like ours?

For more information, contact Miyasaka at (602) 252-0005.
Alternative Assessment: Issues in Language, Culture, and Equity
Knowledge Brief #11
Elise Trumbull Estrin, 1995
8 pages  $3  KN-94-01
How do teachers, school administrators, and school policymakers create fair and useful assessments for English language learners and students from non-dominant cultures? This publication discusses the issues as well as steps in developing fair assessments for diverse student populations.

Charting the Course Toward Instructionally Sound Assessment
Kate Jamentz, 1993
136 pages  $8  PD-94-01
Drawing on the experience of 22 pilot projects, this California Assessment Collaborative report lays out a powerful conceptual map to guide assessment reform. It focuses on both creating alternative measures and schoolwide strategies for using them to improve student performance.

Cross-Industry Assessment and Certification: Framework and Implementation Guide
Assessment and Standards Development Services, 1998
130 pages  $12  ASDS-98-01
This report presents performance-based methods that cut across individual industries for the benefit of employers, workers, students, and educators.

Coming in Summer 1999
Developing a Standards-Based Assessment System: A Handbook
Assessment and Standards Development Services
200 pages (approximately)
Price to be determined
ASDS-99-01
A resource for schools and districts interested in developing and implementing a standards-based assessment system, this handbook introduces key steps in the assessment development process. It also discusses several issues to consider when developing and implementing a new assessment system. Examples from existing assessment systems are provided.

Effective Assessments: Making Use of Local Context
Kathleen Tyner (Producer/Director), 1995
16-minute videotape  $10  VD-95-01
This videotape offers practical strategies for creating culturally relevant student assessments for teachers and staff who work with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

For ordering information, please refer to the product order insert.
Guide to Developing Equitable Performance Assessments
Nanette Koelsch, Elise Trumbull Estrin, & Beverly Farr, 1995
75 pages $10 PD-95-01
This guide includes principles for developing performance assessments that are in tune with students' particular cultures, professional development workshops, and a selection of assessment tasks for grades 4-8.

Improving Classroom Assessment: A Toolkit for Professional Developers
Regional Educational Laboratories, 1998
This product of national research and development efforts is designed for those responsible for coordinating and facilitating professional development in classroom assessment. It's filled with hands-on workshop activities, and includes a 1,200-page notebook binder, plus a CD-ROM with overheads. To order, contact Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 101 SW Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204; telephone, (503) 275-9519. $66.50 (includes shipping and handling).

Coming in Summer 1999
Learning from Assessment: Tools for Examining Assessment Through Standards
Tania Madfes & Ann Muench
Copublishers: WestEd & the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics
202 pages (approximately) $31 ($25 plus $6 shipping and handling [S&H]; omit $2.50 S&H on order form) LFA-99-01
This comprehensive training package for middle-school mathematics staff developers provides a collegial process that prompts serious discussions about the things that matter to teachers of mathematics.

National Health Care Skill Standards
Sri Ananda & Joan DaVarzo, 1995
84 pages $20 HC-95-0
This report presents the knowledge and skills health-care workers need in order to deliver high-quality health care. The standards can be tailored to meet the day-to-day needs of practitioners and educators. Also available online at www.WestEd.org/nhcssp

Standards: From Document to Dialogue
Kate Jamentz, 1998
94 pages $9 PD-98-01
This document assists schools in engaging parents, teachers, and other school leaders in dialogue about standards-based practice.

For ordering information, please refer to the product order insert.
What's new, hot, useful

Class Size Reduction: Lessons Learned from Experience
Joan McRobbie, Jeremy D. Finn, & Patrick Harman
Copublishers: WestEd, The Laboratory for Student Success, & SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education, 1998
12 pages $3 PO-98-01
This policy brief starts from the position that class size reduction is not a silver bullet, but rather one approach that has been shown to improve learning, especially in the early grades. Also available online at www.WestEd.org/policy/pubs/full_text/pb_ft_cs23.htm

Coming in Summer 1999
Improving Student Achievement by Extending School: Is It Just a Matter of Time?
Julie Aronson, Joy Zimmerman, & Lisa Carlos
20 pages $10 PO-98-02
This report distills the research on the complex relationship between time, learning, and student achievement. Also available online at www.WestEd.org/wested/papers/timeandlearning

Putting the Pieces Together
Stephen Mills (Producer), 1998
Two videotapes: 138 minutes (total) $12 TIE-98-01
This videotape series includes roundtable discussions with panelists analyzing successful technology planning, and the steps to develop, fund, and implement a plan. Additional information on the series and the videotapes, as well as online ordering information, can be found at www.WestEd.org/tie/techplan/videos.shtml

Groupwork in Diverse Classrooms: A Casebook for Educators and Facilitator's Guide
Judith H. Shulman et al., 1998
Casebook: 105 pages $17.95
Set: $28 PD-98-02
Guide: 62 pages
$14.95 PD-98-03
These compelling stories will lead teachers to examine their own prejudices and attitudes toward typical dilemmas involving groupwork in their classroom. The companion guide provides information needed to use the cases in structured professional development experiences. Details and a sample case are available at www.WestEd.org/IED/CBgroupwork.html

We Make the Road by Walking...Together
Celia Reyes (Producer/Director), 1998
16-minute videotape $10 MSSP-98-01
The Model Support System for Paraprofessionals (MSSP), an educational partnership in Tulare County, CA, fosters the development of promising bilingual paraprofessionals. In this videotape, participants describe the development of the model and their success completing both bachelor's degrees and teaching credentials.

For ordering information, please refer to the product order insert.
Meeting the above criteria is hard. It’s easier to do it wrong than right. If good assessment practices that everyone agrees on are not in place throughout the school, district, and state, the entire reform effort fails. Assessment that works throughout the educational system is crucial to getting at what our students know and can do. We don’t have all the answers yet to creating such a coherent assessment system, but we’re working on them.

We have staff from many program areas conducting school improvement work related to standards and assessment. Leading WestEd’s efforts described in this newsletter are Sri Ananda, Kate Jamentz, and Stanley Rabinowitz, all nationally renowned assessment experts. Ananda and Rabinowitz codirect our Assessment and Standards Development Services program. Jamentz directs the agency’s Western Assessment Collaborative.

This newsletter highlights our work and knowledge. Please, let me know what you think and what we could be doing to be of assistance to you in your efforts to provide a high-quality education for all children.

Glen Harvey
Chief Executive Officer
WestEd

WestEd is committed to helping to create schools that provide all students, especially those most underserved, with the skills and capabilities necessary to lead satisfying, productive lives. We play a pivotal role in school reform by translating the best research into practice, providing state-of-the-art knowledge and assistance, and promoting risk taking that leads to real change.

WestEd serves as the U.S. Department of Education-designated regional educational laboratory for Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah.

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For more information about WestEd, call (415) 565-3000 or visit our Web site at www.WestEd.org

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