

Easton Welcome Remarks. 2012-2017 Regional Educational Laboratory Opening Conference. January 25, 2012.

Good morning and welcome. Thanks for travelling to Washington for this important and special event. Before we go any further, I want to congratulate you on being awarded the new REL contracts. We know how much work and planning you put into your proposals and we are pleased that your efforts paid off and excited and hopeful as we launch this new work. I look forward to working with you and getting to know you better over the next several years.

The first thing that I have to say may be very obvious to you, but it is worth making explicit. That is, I have a very large personal stake in the success of this round of the Labs. No doubt you saw my fingerprints on the Request for Proposals in the research alliances, with their emphasis on partnerships among researchers, policy makers and practitioners. My decades of experience working in Chicago convinced me that this is an effective model for conducting relevant, useful and rigorous research. When education stakeholders actually have a stake in the research itself, they are more likely to trust it, believe it and take it up. There are now many research partnerships all across the country. Each is unique in its own way, but they all accept the premise that their relevance, quality and usability will be enhanced by developing closer working relations among a wide range of education stakeholders. Later this morning you will hear several

experts describe their own experiences working in collaborations with researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

Given my personal investment in the new RELS, I have especially high expectations for your work over the next five years. Similarly, I have high expectations for us at IES to step up and create the supports and accountabilities that will enable your success.

Over the course of this contract I expect more relevant and usable research that is presented in clear and concise reporting. I expect a continued emphasis on and commitment to quality and rigor. I expect you to focus on a manageable number of key topics, make some real progress on them and really build knowledge about them.

Finally, I hope that considerable action results from your work – action that leads to better decision making, better policy, better practice and demonstrable school improvement. These are the criteria that my colleagues and I are going to apply in our judgments of the success of the Labs.

Ruth Neild spoke yesterday to the directors about the new products lines for REL research. These products will be the tangible means for meeting our expectations. You will hear much more detail about the five areas (and also about other products, such as tools and uses of new media), but I would like to mention these five briefly:

- Top quality descriptive studies, which may capitalize on SLDSs, other data systems or qualitative data. First rate descriptive work is really indispensable and

a good starting point for any research. It can help create a framework to conceptualize and understand an issue or problem in new lights.

- Reviews of what we already know about important topics to provide guidance and background information so that we aren't always trying to reinvent the wheel.
- Correlational studies that investigate the relationships among variables that have already been thoroughly examined descriptively.
- Applied Research Methods paper that will provide guidance to others struggling with the same topics. These might include technical issues involving the State Longitudinal Data Systems, creating MOUs with states and districts, or the technical criteria needed to identify first year freshmen.
- Finally, impact studies that use rigorous methods so that we can be sure of being able to trust the results.

For the last year or so as I've talked about this new generation of RELs, I've said that they would be engaged in **capacity building**. I've described how the RELs will help to build research, evaluation and analytic capacity in SEAs and LEAs and in using the State Longitudinal Data Systems. We have charged you with helping decision makers use data and research more productively. We have asked you to assist them in evaluating their

new programs, first with robust formative evaluations and then with strong impact evaluations. But I want to recognize that it's not just the SEAs and LEAs that need to build capacity. Capacity building and continuous improvement are essential for all of us involved in this endeavor. We at IES and NCEE have built and are continuing to build capacity for this work as well. You will see this in the very strong team that Rebecca Maynard and Ruth Neild have assembled to work with the RELs. You will see it in not only who these people are but also in how they work together – collaboratively sharing their expertise among themselves and with you and by delivering strong TA and useful feedback. They see their role as guiding, facilitating and helping you do your very best work. I would like the team members to stand: Commissioner Rebecca Maynard, Associate Commissioner Ruth Curran Neild, and team members Karen Armstrong, Chris Boccanfuso, Sarah Costelloe, Sandra Garcia, Tina Love, OK Park, Erin Pollard and Elliot Weinbaum.

Just as we have thought about building our capacity to work with you, I also want to urge you to think about building capacity within your own organizations – as you build strong internal review processes, as you concentrate on writing clearly and effectively for your target audiences, as you reach out to and communicate with your stakeholders. Think seriously about your own continuous improvement efforts to keep getting better and better at doing this important work.

Finally, when we look back five years from now, what will we want to see as accomplishments? First, we want to see a coherent body of high quality, rigorous, relevant and usable research with clear actionable implications. But more importantly, we want to see that your partners have seen the power of this work and because of its quality and relevance and their own involvement in it they have taken it up in ways that make a difference for the improvement of teaching and learning, schools, districts and outcomes for all students.

Again, congratulations on being awarded these contracts. Ruth and Becka have planned a full and thoughtful agenda for you and have brought together many excellent speakers and panelists. I hope you get a lot out of the next day and a half.