SEDL's Quality Assurance System:

Updated Plan

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RFP Requirements

In response to the requirements of the REL request for proposals (RFP), SEDL has designed a Quality Assurance (QA) system that "will ensure the highest possible quality of its work and its substantive products (e.g., major publications, trainers' kits, audiovisual materials, and internet-based products)." The system will review all work and "major" substantive products across Tasks 1, 2, 3, and 6 and includes the following:

- delineation of criteria and procedures for QA review of all proposed work's alignment with critical regional needs, including the appropriateness of products for the intended audience;
- delineation of criteria and procedures for QA review of the design and methodology of major development and applied research initiatives;
- delineation of criteria and procedures for QA review "of all products, including external review by both research and subject-area experts as well as representatives of the intended audience for the product throughout the product development process;"
- the use of expert panels or focus groups to inform product development, and periodic surveys of user satisfaction;
- a description of the kinds of reviewers to be used in the QA system; and
- assignment of responsibility for QA to a laboratory unit.

The specific RFP requirements that will necessitate the greatest adjustments to SEDL's present QA system are: (1) mandatory reviews earlier in the development process, (2) an emphasis on mandatory external reviews (by subject-area experts and intended users) at various stages of the development process, and (3) the inclusion in the process of products which OERI has not previously required to be reviewed in the QA system.

History of QA at SEDL

The development and dissemination of quality products and services has always been a priority at SEDL. The first "formal" QA system at the Laboratory was implemented in 1991 in response to OERI's request for REL proposals in 1990. A number of internal and external evaluations of SEDL's QA process have been conducted since 1991, and the system has been continually refined and improved as a result of these assessments and our experiences.

In 1991, two staff members were assigned primary responsibility for conducting internal QA reviews of SEDL products and services, although other staff members could serve as reviewers when they had appropriate content expertise or writing proficiencies. Based on the findings of an external evaluation as well as an overall commitment to improving the process, SEDL revised the QA system in its 1995 REL proposal. Major changes in the revised QA process (introduced in 1996) included: (1) use of a QA facilitator housed within the Office of Institutional Assessment and Evaluation (OIAE) responsible for oversight of the QA process, (2) development of QA review teams comprised of REL staff members, and (3) development of an Editorial Review Board composed of REL unit managers to review institution-wide publications (e.g., SEDL's general newsletter disseminated to the region). Specific criteria for quality were also established to guide the review process.

This system has evolved since its introduction four years ago and has been formally evaluated twice – most recently in July of 2000 by an external consultant. Positive aspects of SEDL's present QA system noted in these evaluations included evidence that procedurally, the system operates well; the use of internal peer review teams is effective; participating staff members benefit indirectly from their involvement (e.g., increased understanding of work across the Laboratory and communication with colleagues); and, most importantly, the process results in improved products. Recommendations for improvement from the most recent assessment included: (1) provide additional training for staff, including clarification about review criteria; (2) increase the use of external reviewers; (3) clarify the role of managers in the review process; and (4) improve communication between various participants in the process. These recommendations, as well as the requirements of the REL request for proposals listed above, were used to

adjust and further refine the QA process at SEDL to insure that its REL products are of the highest possible quality and that utility remains a high priority in their development.

The Criteria for QA Review

All major products and services produced by the Laboratory and intended for an external audience are subject to QA review. In addition, some products intended for internal use at SEDL (e.g., evaluation reports and research designs) will also be reviewed.

General categories of products to be reviewed include:

- Research designs and reports
- Other reports and papers (e.g., synthesis papers and evaluation reports)
- Training designs and materials
- Serial publications (e.g., regularly published newsletters or bulletins)
- Tools, toolkits and portfolios
- Conference designs and materials
- Video and audio tapes
- Electronic products (e.g., CD-ROMs and WWW pages).

The following products were stipulated in the RFP as being exempt from the QA process:

- Products published by another organization
- Papers and presentations at invitational conferences
- Progress reports and updated annual plans

Non-major publications.

Criteria for Product Reviews

Under SEDL's system, the basic criteria to be used in reviewing all Laboratory products are:

Regional Need:

- What specific regional need has been identified and how will the product address that need?

Audience:

- Who has been identified as the intended audience and is the product appropriate for that audience? (e.g. Has the likely background knowledge of the audience been considered? Will the product fit well into audience members' work context?)

Utility:

- Do the organization and presentation of information in the product make it useable for the intended audience?

Feasibility:

- Are the product design and plans for development feasible, given available resources?
- Is it likely that a quality product can be provided, given those resources?

Content:

- Is the substantive content of the product appropriate and sufficient to achieve its stated purpose?
- Is information presented in a consistent and coherent manner?
- If the product includes written text, is the writing of high quality?
- Do the contents of the product reflect current thinking and research in the area?
- If the product is part of a research initiative, are the design and methodology of the research appropriate to its purpose? Are the findings warranted, given the data collected?
- Has duplication of existing work been avoided in developing the product?

Dissemination:

- What dissemination strategy has been planned and is it appropriate for the product's purpose and intended audience (e.g., timing, delivery format, etc.)?

Outcomes:

- What are the intended outcomes for the product and how will these outcomes be achieved?

"Fit" with the larger goals of the Laboratory:

- How will the product help promote the transformation of low performing schools into high-performing learning communities?

SEDL's Office of Institutional Communications will be responsible for reviewing products for appropriateness of overall layout and appearance. Additional product-specific issues that need to be examined in a particular review will be clarified in pre-review communications among developers, managers, and review team members.

Components of the Proposed QA System

SEDL's experience with its formal QA system over the past nine years confirms the efficacy of using an internal review process in maintaining high standards of quality throughout the design, development, and dissemination phases of product development. We are, therefore, planning to retain the internal QA review process, with some modifications, and to expand the existing external review component to meet the requirements of the RFP. In addition, multiple reviews of a product (i.e., at different stages in the development process) will be required. These changes are outlined in the discussion below, and a flowchart illustrating the overall process can be found in Appendix A at the end of this report.

Participant Roles

Internal reviewers

Internal review teams will be composed of REL programmatic and evaluation staff members (in Associate or Specialist positions) and senior staff members at the Dana Center involved in collaborative work with the Laboratory. A team of three staff reviewers will be assigned for specific product reviews, and the same internal team will participate in reviewing a product throughout the various stages of its development. SEDL's Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer (COO) will serve as an additional reviewer in the system.

Standing internal review teams will be created, with team assignments made on the basis of information provided by staff about their primary areas of expertise and interest. The composition of the internal peer teams will be reviewed periodically to insure that individual staff members are properly placed. Each review team will designate a team leader at the time of the first review of a product. The team leader will be responsible for coordinating and scheduling reviews as well as facilitating group discussions about products under review and providing documentation of the review process to SEDL's Evaluation Services (ES)[1] unit. The COO will review all products subject to the QA process.

Managers

Managers will oversee the work of developing products and initiate the review process at particular stages of product design and development. In requesting a review, managers will provide the QA facilitator with a copy of the product to be reviewed and a completed Product Specification Form (containing a general description of the product and its purpose, intended audience, intended outcomes, planned dissemination strategy, resources allocated for development, and contract reference). The manager's signature (required) on the Product Specification Form will indicate that he or she has reviewed the product and believes it is ready for QA review.

External reviewers

The two primary categories of external reviewers will be: (1) subject-area experts and (2) representatives of the intended audience for products. External reviewers will be remunerated for their services and will be asked to participate in reviewing a product or service at different stages in the RD&D process (see discussion in next section). Products may be reviewed externally by individuals, expert panels, or focus groups, depending on the appropriateness of each of these approaches for a particular product and the timing of the review (e.g., focus groups made up of intended audience members may be most useful in informing the early stages of development).

[1] Formerly the Office of Institutional Assessment and Evaluation

Appropriate external reviewers will be selected by managers and product developers, based on potential reviewers' area of expertise and/or anticipated use of a particular product. Staff and managers will be responsible for providing a rationale for their choice and a vita or resume for each external reviewer chosen to participate in the QA process (for documentation purposes). Another source of external information about SEDL products will be user satisfaction survey data collected by SEDL's ES unit as part of its annual performance indicator data gathering and reporting activities.

Development Stages and Reviews

In response to staff suggestions in the July 2000 evaluation of SEDL's QA system and to the requirements of the RFP, the new QA system will provide for the review of products at three specific points in the development process: (1) the conceptual stage, (2) the design and early development stage, and (3) the completed draft stage. The review process may be iterative if either the developer(s) or the reviewer(s) feel that multiple reviews would be beneficial at any given stage of product development.

Conceptual stage

The first stage review will focus on the general idea for a proposed product. Developers will provide reviewer(s) with a brief description of how they envision the product, its intended audience and purpose, and general ideas about how they plan to develop it. At this stage, a strong priority will be placed on eliciting feedback from reviewers about the need for the product in SEDL's region, its potential utility, its appropriateness for the intended audience, and whether or not it properly reflects the overall proposed goals of Laboratory work.

Design and early development stage

For the second stage review, after initial work on the product's design is completed, developers will submit an outline describing the general design of the project and specific plans for how development should proceed. Reviews at this stage will focus on such issues as whether or not the proposed design will achieve the intended purpose of the product; if it is methodologically sound; if the design and development plans are

feasible, given available resources; and the appropriateness of the proposed dissemination strategy.

Completed draft stage

The third stage review gives internal and external reviewers the opportunity to assess a completed draft of the product (i.e., all of the proposed components of the product have been fully developed). Primary considerations for the review at this point will include: the product's usability, its overall coherence and fit with existing work in the area, the overall quality of its written content, and whether or not it has been developed in a way that will achieve its intended outcomes.

Timing of Reviews

As shown in the following table, different types of reviews (i.e., external, internal peer review team, and COO reviews) are either required or recommended at each of the three stages.

Timing of QA Reviews

		Type of Review		
		External	Internal Team	COO
Development Stage	Conceptual	X	X	X
	Design/Early Development	*	*	*
	Completed Draft	*	*	*

* = required review X = recommended review

At the conceptual stage, product reviews by external audience members or content experts, internal peer review teams, the COO are recommended. The second and third stages require external, internal peer, and COO reviews. While the overall process provides for reviews at all three stages of development, the manager and development team will need to determine when some types of feedback will be the most useful. For instance, in some cases, needs sensing information may be most helpful at a very general level at the conceptual stage, before any concrete plans are made for development. In other cases, developers may want to provide more initial descriptive information to

reviewers, so that they can address more specific questions about how to proceed. In the latter case, needs sensing information may be sought from external reviewers after the initial work on product design has begun. In the second and third stages, more detailed feedback from all reviewers becomes increasingly important in shaping the product's development and enhancing its overall quality.

In all three stages of development managers will initiate the review process by notifying the QA facilitator of the need for a review and then negotiating a feasible time frame for the process with assigned reviewers. In order to avoid development delays, the time for the review process at each stage should not exceed three weeks. All reviews in the final stage will occur simultaneously, and internal peer reviewers, along with the COO, will meet with the developer(s) to determine a final course of action, based on written input from all of the review sources.

The requirements of this three-stage review process will apply to all major Laboratory products and services intended for use by an external audience. Some specific requirements will be adjusted for products intended for internal use at SEDL. For instance, evaluation and performance indicator reports (products under Tasks 3 and 4) will be included in the formal QA system only at the completed draft stage. The designs or plans for these reports will be reviewed in earlier stages by members of SEDL's External Evaluation Advisory Team, the program managers and staff members whose work is the subject of the evaluation effort, and the COO.

Appeal Process

An appeal system will be established to deal with any unresolved conflicts (e.g., among reviewers or between reviewers and developers) that might arise during the review process. The QA facilitator will first assist in trying to resolve such conflicts. If this attempt is unsuccessful, the issue will be referred to the President and CEO.

Role of Evaluation Services in the Process

Responsibility for the QA system has been assigned to SEDL's Evaluation Services unit. An Evaluation staff member has been designated as the QA facilitator and will be

responsible for internal review team assignments as well as for carrying out monitoring, reporting, and training functions for the system.

Internal review team assignments

The first time a product is reviewed by an internal team (either at the conceptual or the design stage), the QA facilitator will determine which three staff members will serve as reviewers for that product. The internal team will then remain consistent throughout the development process.

Tracking, archiving, and reporting

A tracking system for all reviews will be maintained, and copies of all written reviews and the products to which they refer will be filed by ES. Records maintained in this way will be used for reporting purposes and as an information source for evaluations of the QA system. Information on the status and outcomes of QA reviews will be reported in quarterly progress reports to OERI, and copies of written reviews will be made available to OERI upon request.

Evaluation

The QA facilitator will be responsible for monitoring the system on a continuing basis. Implementation issues and system outcomes will be the focus of at least three descriptive summaries of the QA process. These summaries will be reported as a part of selected Annual SEDL Evaluation Reports. In addition, an annual staff survey will be used to provide data to inform continuous improvement efforts, and less formal feedback from staff and managers about the QA system will be encouraged (with the QA facilitator as the primary contact for such discussions).

External evaluation advisory team

Members of the externally staffed Evaluation Advisory Team will be available to provide input to staff about various facets of the QA system.

Training

Evaluation staff will be responsible for training SEDL and Dana Center staff members who participate in the QA system. Overall, these training efforts will focus on ensuring

that reviewers are well-prepared to conduct reviews and to deliver feedback. More specific training components will include: an overview of the purpose of the system, the identification of products to be included in the QA process and the criteria that are to be used in reviewing them, the general procedures to be used for the review process, and the reporting responsibilities of participating staff. The initial one-half day staff training has been scheduled for March 8, 2001, and follow-up training sessions will be offered as needed.

Staffing

Program Associate	Bell	.50 FTE
Administrative Assistant	Medina	.05 FTE

Milestones

Milestones for this subtask include the completion of an updated plan for the QA system, training for SEDL and Dana Center staff members participating in QA, and at least three descriptive summaries of the QA process to be included in Annual SEDL Evaluation Reports.

Timeline

Activity	FY01 Quarter				FY02 Quarter				FY03 Quarter				FY04 Quarter				FY05 Quarter			
Subtask 4.1	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
Submit an updated plan for the QA system	•																			
Provide training for SEDL and Dana Center staff members participating in the QA system	X																			
Monitoring of the QA process		S	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	F

S = Start X = Event - = Ongoing F = Finish • = Deliverable

Appendix A

Quality Assurance System Flowchart

QA FLOWCHART