Perspectives

A Journal of Research and Opinion About Educational Service Agencies

ESAs Serving Rural Areas: Shrinking Distances and Compensating for Size

A letter from Frank Deebach, former Superintendent, Olympic ESD 114, Bremerton, Washington.

Dear Colleague,

The No Child Left Behind Act has many ESAs searching for quality programs and partnerships that will help their district clients meet NCLB standards.

As a former ESA superintendent in Washington State and former member of the AESA Council, I have always looked toward strong ESA/business partnerships as one solution to meet the diverse needs of my client districts. In selecting a business partner to assist in the staff development arena, the following criteria have always been a part of my decision process:

- Commitment to quality content backed by research

- Understanding and belief in the ESA mission to serve

- An interest in true partnership that includes flexibility and a fair revenue share plan

- A solid track record in public education

- Integrity and longevity of the company and key staff

I also used that same criteria when deciding to serve as the National ESA Consultant for Canter and Associates. Canter has built a good partnership with AESA that includes a commitment to serve member ESAs. Canter's thoughtful approach toward No Child Left Behind is one example of that commitment.

Canter's purpose of providing quality research-based professional development to the field of education fits perfectly into the role of each ESA across this country. I know that many of you have formed partnerships with Canter to enhance the staff development opportunities in your individual regions. If you haven't yet explored the advantages of a Canter partnership, I would strongly encourage you to do so.

As a Canter partner, your ESA can offer courses tailored to help each client district meet the immediate requirements of NCLB. In addition, you will benefit from a revenue-sharing plan that will help you acquire new resources to assist in expanding your services. Canter's mission of "helping schools succeed through quality professional development" is our mission as ESAs.

To get more information on a Canter partnership for your ESA, call me at my office 1-800-733-1711, ext. 1006, or my cell 360-981-2364. You can also email me at fdeebach@comcast.net.

I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,
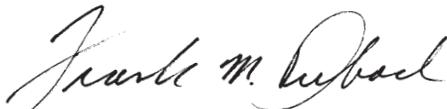
Frank Deebach
Senior Educational Consultant
Canter and Associates

Canter

Perspectives

Perspectives Credits

Editorial Board

AESA thanks our corporate partner for their support of Perspectives and their commitment to AESA's Foundation and business partnerships:

AESA extends special thanks to the staff of the Oakland Schools Intermediate School District in Waterford, Michigan, for their invaluable assistance in producing this ninth issue of *Perspectives!*

Table of Contents

Preface: ESA Opportunities

by
Brian Talbott

Today Educational Service Agencies are being asked to provide more and more services to local school districts regardless of their size. This increased responsibility comes at a time when all levels of education are facing reduced funding and are examining ways to leverage limited resources. ESAs are the agencies best positioned to leverage resources into high quality cost effective services to local school districts.

Last year's *Perspectives* focused on Metropolitan ESAs. This year we have focused on ESAs serving rural areas. However, regardless of where the ESA is located, most serve rural, suburban and urban populations. This is why leveraging resources is so critical. ESAs are also being asked to play an expanded role in the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, state education agencies, and local school districts. This past spring U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige stated in a letter to Chief State School Officers that:

> *ESAs are often the key communicators between federal and state entities and local education agencies (LEAs). In many respects, they are the agencies closest to LEAs in both distance and working relations. It is my understanding that meetings among ESAs, their local superintendents, and key LEA staff occur regularly. ESAs generally know district programs, services, and concerns. Often they are able to successfully respond to district needs in a flexible, adaptable, efficient, cost effective, and direct manner. As you implement the programs in NCLB, you may wish not only to include ESAs in the planning stages of these programs, but utilize their services to the fullest extent possible under your state laws.*

In the area of NCLB, ESAs are best positioned to offer support in areas critical to school improvement. Some of these opportunities include the following: professional development, teacher and paraprofessional training, alternative certifications, supplemental services, and technology support, especially relating to infrastructure design as well as data storage, retrieval, and management.

With these expanded roles ESAs are an even more critical part of the educational delivery system for rural, suburban and urban school districts. In this issue we will examine research and opinion about ESAs serving rural districts, as well as other articles highlighting successful ESA services.

As ESAs become even more imbedded in the educational fabric of our country, I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our ESA board members, superintendents/CEO's and staffs for all the outstanding work done on behalf of every ESA. I also want to thank those who have contributed to this and past issues of *Perspectives*. For those who have not contributed, please take the time to share your successes so that AESA can continue to demonstrate why ESAs are the educational leaders of today and tomorrow.

Brian Talbott, Ph.D., is executive director of the Association of Educational Service Agencies. He may be contacted by phone at 703-875-0739, by fax at 703-523-2146, and by email at btalbott.aesa@aasa.org.
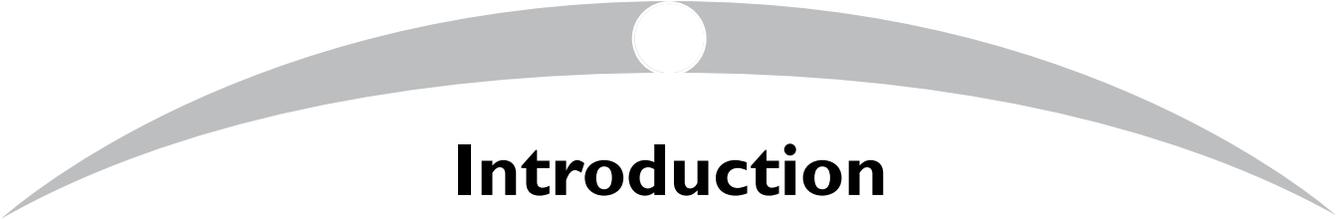
Introduction

As Brian Talbott noted in his preface, it is quite certain that no ESA serves a totally homogenous clientele—all rural, all urban, or all suburban districts. However, characteristics of geography make it likely that many service agencies have a special responsibility to meet the unique needs of very large districts and/or smaller and more rural districts.

Last year's edition of *Perspectives* provided four portraits drawn from as many states of the staffing, logistic, political, and economic issues, among others, of serving a very large school district or a comparatively large district when looked at in relation to the size of other districts in the constituency.

This year we focus on the challenges of serving a significant number of rural districts in Texas, Georgia, New York, Kansas, and Alaska. All authors tell stories that are different yet similar, but none is so different as the Alaska story. Consultants in the lower 48 who complain about many hours spent in their automobile visiting districts may feel better about their circumstances when they learn about consultants in the "last frontier" who sleep on gym floors for several evenings while waiting for transportation systems (boats, planes) to start moving again after a bout of bad weather.

We are especially pleased this year to introduce the use of a guest editor, a technique frequently used in other journals to capture the special expertise of an individual. This year's guest editor, Hobart Harmon, has been a leader in the National Rural Education Association for many years and recently authored the section on rural education for the second edition (2003) for the *Encyclopedia of Education*. His introductory piece provides a knowledgeable and focused introduction to current challenges in rural education and suggestions for ways in which service agencies can help meet the special needs of such districts.

To meet additional interests of readers, we include a piece on the strengths and weaknesses of a strategic planning effort in Iowa, another on the efforts of a Michigan ISD to focus its efforts and the strategies of its constituent districts on teaching and learning, and an essay by W. Craig Stanley that appeared in somewhat similar form in the very first edition of *Perspectives*. Dr. Stanley has now received an award from the state of Massachusetts for his well-researched efforts to prove the cost effectiveness and cost efficiency of service agencies in that state. We conclude with one of Ed Frye's always briskly written, sharply focused commentaries on the work we do every day. He asks: Are we promoting low price, quality, and/or reliable service? He states that you get to pick two.

Next year we will be seeking to describe in much more ambitious fashion some of the important contributions of ESAs to helping districts implement the No Child Left Behind Act. As this is written, a Michigan state legislator is leading an investigation of one of our ISDs for reasons too detailed to discuss here. Among her proposed solutions to a perceived problem is to send all state money to local districts, bypassing the service agency. We realize that in some states the lack of state money of any significance is nothing new, but for Michigan it would be viewed as a calamity. As noted above, Craig Stanley has been trying for years to get state support for the service agencies in Massachusetts. In Michigan the effort is to retain state aid. The need to tell the service agency story effectively will probably never end. Your agency can contribute next year to developing a national picture of the role of ESAs in the NCLB effort. We're accepting manuscripts now.

If anyone would like to serve as guest editor for this edition, please contact me. Your primary role is to solicit manuscripts that represent a cross section of the country and a diversity of roles played by service agencies and to write an introduction, as short or long as you chose. Standing behind you will be the regular editor, who will help with putting manuscripts into proper shape for publication. In addition we employ a copy editor to catch any miscues that might be missed by the editor.

Finally, let me note a growing pride in finding more and more citations in articles to material first published in *Perspectives*. We do seem to be the primary source for finding research about service agencies in America. We hope you are proud of this publication as well since you make it what it is by writing for it and reading it.

Bill Keane, Editor
Phone: 248-370-4204
Fax: 248-370-4605
Email: keane@oakland.edu; keanewg@aol.com

Opportunities for ESAs Serving Rural School Districts

by
Hobart L. Harmon

How do leaders of the nation's educational service agencies view rural schools and the requirements of No Child Left Behind? Lewis (2003) explains in an issue of the *Kappan* that it represents "Accountability on the backs of rural children." Tompkins (2003) believes it has many "pitfalls" for rural schools. In a national broadcast on National Public Radio (Rural Policy Matters, 2003), a high-level official in the U.S. Department of Education proclaimed the law provides flexibility in implementation for rural and remote schools that have unique circumstances.

Bob Mooneyham, executive director of the National Rural Education Association (NREA), believes "NCLB may be the best thing that has happened in recent years to rally a voice for rural schools and their communities" (personal communication, June 10, 2003). Like many of the directors of state NREA affiliate organizations, Mooneyham believes unless policymakers and technical assistance providers become more knowledgeable about the context of educating students in rural communities, much of NCLB will force rural schools to once again fit into urban models of schooling—including forced consolidation of small rural schools.

Opportunities abound for properly positioned ESAs to assist rural school districts with NCLB. However, much of their success will also depend on their ability to understand and work within the critical issues of rural schools and their communities. This article describes some critical issues for public education in rural America and offers some opportunities that may exist for ESAs to being the "lifeblood of services" for rural school districts. Leaders of ESAs might find this article useful in reviewing how the organization's beliefs value and encourage service to rural school districts.

Organizational Values Revisited

Effective organizations have values or beliefs that guide their actions in meeting needs of constituents. How leadership (and staff) in the ESA value rural America should influence how and what services are planned and implemented in rural schools. How might these beliefs reflect what is perceived by others?

The Kellogg Foundation sponsored three studies that explored how the American public, members of Congress, and state legislators perceive rural America. Findings from the in-depth random telephone interviews with residents of rural, suburban and urban America (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2002) revealed public perceptions are centered on a series of dichotomies. Americans both within and outside rural America perceive rural areas as a distinct culture in many ways:

- Different economy—Respondents perceive rural America as being based on an almost completely agricultural economy. In reality, farm employment is 7 percent of all rural employment. The total is

still only 11.7 percent if one adds farm input/supplier employment and processing and marketing jobs.

- *Different values*—Respondents perceive that rural communities symbolize "America" because they evolve around families committed to religious values and the liberal traditions of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.
- *Different environment*—Respondents perceive that rural America is serene and beautiful, populated by animals and livestock and landscape covered by trees and family farms.
- *Different atmosphere*—Respondents perceive rural America is friendlier and more relaxed than urban and suburban America. It is seen as a safe place to raise kids in the context of a society concerned with materialism and characterized by moral decline.

The study (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2002a) shows that respondents:

…hold strongly positive views about rural life in America, seeing it as the repository of traditional values, closely-knit communities, and residents who work hard to make a living. Perceptions of respondents reveal dichotomies where rural life represents traditional American values, but is behind the times; rural life is more relaxed and slower than city life, but harder and more grueling; rural life is friendly, but intolerant of outsiders and difference; and rural life is richer in community life, but epitomized by individuals struggling independently to make ends meet economically. Rural America offers a particular quality of life including serenity and aesthetic surroundings, and yet it is plagued by lack of opportunities, including access to cultural amenities. (P. 1)

Members of Congress see rural America as an important part of the nation's landscape, vitally important as the source of the nation's food supply. They acknowledge that rural citizens live in a particular set of circumstances and with certain traditions that mean they make a cultural contribution to the fabric of the nation. Region of the country is the most important factor influencing how members of Congress perceive rural circumstances and how they think about the issues facing America and the possible solutions.

There is near universal agreement, however, that job loss and the overall lack of economic opportunity are the most serious problems facing rural America. They agree rural America has been devastated by the decline of the family farm and the difficulty of attracting new industry to rural areas. Most believe the future viability of rural America rests in creating a more diverse economy (Greenberg, Greener and Hook, 2002).

One conclusion of this study is noteworthy for educators. Among the mutually agreed upon goals listed by the researchers that emerge across ideological and partisan divides, education is *not* mentioned. Researchers suggest that five goals offer an opportunity for a wide array of interests and individuals together to formulate a new rural agenda:

1. Increasing resources to family farmers and rectifying the inequities in the Farm Bill;

2. Expanding access to broadband;

3. Improving the rural healthcare system;

4. Generating incentives for new business starts and job creation in rural communities; and

5. Preserving the rural environment (p. 16).

The Kellogg sponsored research (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2002b) reveals the primary concern of state legislators is to create opportunities for people to stay in rural areas. Both rural and suburban legislators believe that urban issues take priority over rural and suburban issues, while urban legislators are likely to think that all areas take equal priority. When asked in what areas legislatures have done a great deal of work or some work on rural issues, most state legislators responding to the survey cited

their work on education (84 percent), the environment (70 percent), and technology (69 percent), with low wage jobs (43 percent). Opportunities for young people (33 percent), and decline of the family farm (33 percent) are at the bottom of the list.

Given the perceptions and priorities previously described, what beliefs should guide services of the ESA that can be reported ultimately to have a positive impact on needs of rural school districts? Obviously, an ESA could pursue a federal, state or public agenda for public education—even one guided by "urban thinking"—and believe services are considerate of the rural context.

Rural Schooling Issues and ESA Opportunities

Opportunities for ESA services appear limitless. But what services might align with rural realities and perceptions of circumstances in rural school districts? Clearly, the intent here is to state a critical issue and suggest two strategic opportunities that could be pursued by an ESA. The suggestions are examples only, which the author hopes will both challenge and catalyze commitments of ESA leadership and staff to advance discussion and action appropriate for meeting unique needs of rural schools and their communities. The listing of 10 "rural issues" does not imply any order of importance or priority. More information on most of the issues is found in the *Encyclopedia of Education*, Third Edition (Harmon, 2003a).

Rural Issue 1: Community vs. Individual Well-Being.

Are cultural values associated with the rural way of life at times in the way of "progressive education?" Modern society rewards individual mobility and prosperity, where "moving up" and "moving out" mean the same thing to rural youth—and many of their educators. Adults and youth who desire to stay in a rural place are usually labeled with low aspirations, persons who obviously are not considered among the "best and brightest." They refuse to seek greater personal achievement and prosperity offered in urban America. Can we have both a rural quality of life and an "urban-minded" education (Harmon and Branham, 1999)?

ESA Opportunities:

1. Support schools in helping students and their parents understand educational requirements for careers in local, regional and national labor markets. Address the negative stereotypes of living and working in a rural place.

2. Partner with school districts to recognize graduates who are making significant contributions to local communities and rural development.

Rural Issue 2: Schools as Partners in Rural Development.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley asked the nation to follow the example and leadership of rural communities in resisting the trend toward separation of schools from communities (Rural School & Community Trust, 1999). He challenged rural communities to lead by example in the battle to make schools the centers of community.

ESA Opportunities:

1. Convene legislators in service area and discuss the circumstances confronting rural schools in the larger context of their communities—and encourage development of policies that invigorate the role of schools in rural development.

2. Pursue grant funds to establish a demonstration site with a school district that is highly committed to operating school-based enterprises that spin off entrepreneurial businesses in the service area of the ESA.

Rural Issue 3: Adequate Funding.

Rural school districts, with their modest fiscal bases, usually cannot generate sufficient local resources to supplement adequately the state school finance programs the way that more affluent localities can. While equity and efficiency arguments have been prevalent in most of these cases, the current court challenges also are highlighting the need to provide a level of funding for providing "adequate" educational opportunities if students are expected to meet state-mandated standards of performance.

ESA Opportunities:

1. Establish a priority in grant-seeking efforts to first assist low-wealth school districts in offering core educational opportunities for students.

2. Operate a best practices clearinghouse on fiscal practices that maximize efficient use of local, state and federal dollars, including those available from establishment of school district foundations or non-profit organizations.

Rural Issue 4: Setting Standards.

Americans want schools where students must meet some "standard" of achievement. But who sets the standard is a critical issue being debated in rural schools and their communities. Local versus state (or federal) control of public schools is at the center of the controversy of setting standards.

ESA Opportunities:

1. Post local, state and national standards on the ESA's web site for parent review and educators' use.

2. Serve as a neutral party in facilitating community forums where standards are being debated, also making available fact sheets of student achievement results and funding requirements in rural school districts with different standards of learning.

Rural Issue 5: School Size.

Schools with high populations of students from low-income families do best academically in small schools. Public concerns regarding school safety issues also reinforce the need for small schools, where teachers know students well, and students have a feeling of belonging in the school and community (Howley, 2000). Research reveals that a high school with an enrollment of 400 students is able to offer a reasonably comprehensive curriculum, and that a high school ought not to enroll more than 600 to 1,000 students.

ESA Opportunities:

1. Form a consortium of high-poverty schools with declining student populations and fiscal resources. Foster sharing of knowledge among principals for effectively accessing exceptional educational opportunities for students and professional development opportunities for teachers.

2. Distribute information and demonstrate effective use of innovative technologies that enable small schools to be safe and serve students, their families, and their communities well.

Rural Issue 6: School Facilities.

Rural schools may be located in some of America's most beautiful areas, but in 1996 about 4.6 million rural students were attending schools in inadequate buildings (National Education Association, 1998). Fifty-two percent of rural schools report at least one inadequate building feature, such as a roof, foundation, or plumbing (U.S. GAO, 1996). Moreover, without the necessary infrastructure schools cannot use technology to help overcome historical barriers associated with rurality and isolation.

ESA Opportunities:

1. Maintain a data base of school facility needs in the service region and assist rural school districts in applying for funds to upgrade inadequate facilities.

2. Offer collective bidding for groups of schools having similar building or facility needs such as science labs or distance learning technology.

Rural Issue 7: Diversity and Poverty.

Geographic diversity best defines the issue of diversity in rural America. Rural minorities often live in geographically isolated communities where poverty is high, opportunity is low, and the economic benefits derived from education and training are limited. Multicultural education issues are "hot topics" in many rural communities today. The overwhelming majority of poor people living in rural America are white. These people are the "working poor" in rural America. However, a "poverty gap" exists between the few minorities living in rural areas and the white population. Rural minorities are significantly more impoverished as a percentage of the population. Hispanics are the fastest growing rural minority group, and now make up the largest minority group in the U.S. (Moore, 2001; Summers and Sherman, 1997).

Addressing educational opportunities and results will require solutions to both the poverty gap of minority groups and the persistent impoverished conditions of all rural poor, especially those who work for low wages. This is no easy task as "Social problems are seen as having their origin in political and economic structures beyond the control of most people who live in rural America" (Moore, 2001, p. 13).

ESA Opportunities:

1. Partner with school districts and other appropriate organizations to design an "extra-help outreach program" for ensuring children in high-poverty homes are identified and receive culturally responsive school transition services and help in academic core subjects.

2. Offer professional development opportunities for educators on teaching students in poverty, including an interpretation of "gaps" in student learning prevalent in school district data profiles by NLCB categories for data disaggregation.

Rural Issue 8: Teacher Recruitment and Retention.

Attracting and retaining quality teachers will be critical in creating and implementing higher standards for student academic achievement (Harmon, 2003b) and could be one of the greatest challenges for rural schools in implementing the NCLB law (Tompkins, 2003). The rural teacher shortage affects all subject areas but particularly math, science, and special education. According to the National Association of State Boards of Education, an adequate number of teachers is trained each year. The problem is with distribution. Also, new teachers not from the rural area originally may leave the position within three-five years if they make no connections with supportive persons in the local community.

ESA Opportunities:

1. Provide a teacher recruitment service for a consortium of rural school districts that have the greatest difficulty in attracting a desirable pool of "qualified teachers."

2. Operate a beginning teachers (induction) program in partnership with school districts and regional higher education institutions (if possible) that connects teachers with a mentor teacher and a community liaison.

Rural Issue 9: Leadership.

The most critical issues in managing and running small rural school districts are finances, regional economic conditions, state regulations, salaries, and providing an adequate variety of classes. The greatest

turnover among superintendents occurs among the smallest districts, those with fewer than 300 students. An environment of high-stakes testing and increasing public accountability for student and school success is placing a premium on persons who can effectively lead schools (and school districts). Also, the school in the rural community is still a respected institution, with a lot more focus on "people" than on "business" (Chalker, 1999).

ESA Opportunities:

1. Operate a regional leadership academy with ongoing professional development through distance learning study groups that is customized for school districts wishing to "grow their own" leaders for rural schools.

2. Maintain a database and recognition program (supported by businesses in the rural area) for retired school or school district leaders who desire to serve as personal advisors for new principals.

Rural Issue 10: Research.

NCLB requires school districts to examine the best scientific evidence when using federal funds for selecting school improvement initiatives. Few rural school districts have time or the research and/or program evaluation expertise to select programs based on research-based practices. Few university professors are committed to producing research that targets the needs of rural schools only. Sherwood (2001) reports that the challenges of rural research appear enmeshed in demographics, politics and diminishing returns.

ESA Opportunities:

1. Create opportunities for scientific-based best practices to be demonstrated in rural school districts of the region.

2. Participate in research and development initiatives affiliated with the Association for Educational Service Agencies that hold promise for creating innovative solutions for a significant number of rural school districts in the ESA region.

Summary

How do leaders of the nation's educational service agencies view rural schools and the requirements of No Child Left Behind? Most would agree that this legislation is raising the awareness among local, state and federal policymakers of the realities and perceptions about rural America. Opportunities abound for properly positioned ESAs to assist rural school districts with NCLB. The job will not be easy. However, much of their success will depend on their ability to understand and work within the critical issues of rural schools and their communities.

Where they exist in state systems of public education, ESAs must be the "lifeblood of services" for rural school districts. Clarifying the organization's values regarding perceptions of rural schools and their communities is a necessary first step. The 10 critical issues for public education in rural America presented in this article should make that step more focused on realities of rural places. Leaders of ESAs should find the 20 examples for serving rural school districts either encouraging of what they already do, or enlightening for planning a more strategic focus on needs of rural school districts.

In the following five articles, leaders in ESAs across the country describe how their organizations are serving rural school districts. They highlight some significant services offered today and point out the challenges of meeting future needs of rural school districts. As one author notes, ESAs are leading the way in support of rural schools. The five articles by ESA leaders or staff, insights in the article by E. Robert

Stephens, and contextual issues described in this article should help additional ESAs lead the way in addressing *opportunities for service* to public schools in rural America.

References

Chalker, D. (Ed.). (1999). *Leadership for rural schools: Lessons for all educators.* Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Company Inc.

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. (2002a). *Perceptions of rural America.* Battle Creek, MI: Kellogg Foundation. Available at http://www.wkkf.org.

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, & Greener and Hook. (2002). *Perceptions of rural America: Congressional perspectives.* Battle Creek, MI: Kellogg Foundation. Available at http://www.wkkf.org.

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. (2002b). *Perceptions of rural America: National state legislator survey.* Battle Creek, MI: Kellogg Foundation. Available at http://www.wkkf.org.

Harmon, H. L., & Branham, D. H. (1999). Creating standards for rural schools: A matter of values. *The High School Magazine*, 7(4), 14-19.

Harmon, H.L. (2003a). Rural education. Chapter in *Encyclopedia of education*, second edition, NY: Macmillian Reference.

Harmon, H.L. (2003b). Teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools. *The State Education Standard*, 4(1), 13-17.

Howley, C. B. (2000). School district size and school performance. [Rural education issue digest]. Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc. [On-line]. Available: http://www.ael.org/rel/rural/pdf/digest3.pdf.

Lewis, A. C. (2003). Accountability on the backs of rural children. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(9), 643-644.

Moore, R. M. III, (Ed.). (2001). *The hidden America: Social problems in rural America for the twenty-first century.* Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press.

National Education Association. (1998, September). *Status of public education in rural areas and small towns: A comparative analysis.* [On-line]. Available World Wide Web: nea.org/publiced/rural.html.

Rural School & Community Trust. (1999, December). To center schools in community look for rural leadership. *Rural Policy Matters*, p. 1.

Rural School and Community Trust (2003). Ed department official pledges flexibility for rural schools. *Rural Policy Matters*, April, p.2. Washington, DC: Author.

Sherwood, T. (2002). Where has all the "rural" gone? Rural education research and current federal reform. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 16(3), 159-167.

Summers, G. F., & Sherman, J. (1997). Who's poor in rural America? In Rural Sociological Society, *Working together for a change: Creating pathways from poverty*, (pp. 6-7). Bellingham, WA: Western Washington State University, Rural Sociological Society Business Office.

Tompkins, R. B. (March 26, 2003). Leaving rural children behind. *Education Week*, 22(28), pp. 30, 31, 44.

U.S. General Accounting Office. (1996). *School facilities: America's schools report differing conditions.* (GAO Report No. GAO/HEHS-96-103). Gaithersburg, MD: Author. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 397 508).

Hobart L. Harmon, Ph.D., is an independent education consultant and former director of the National Rural Education Specialty. He can be reached by phone at 540-901-9932, or by email at hharmon@shentel.net.

ESAs in the Shadows:
Meeting Rural Challenges in an Urban State

by
Rene L. "Jay" Bouchard

When many people think of New York State, they immediately picture New York City and are often unaware of the rural nature of much of the state. Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) were formed in New York State in 1948 to provide shared services for rural school districts that the districts are unable to provide themselves due to their small size and lack of financial resources. There are presently 38 BOCES in New York State. Steuben-Allegany BOCES, formed in 1954, provides a wide range of services to 15 component districts.

The mission of Steuben-Allegany BOCES is to deliver the highest quality education services to our community and to maximize each learner's potential, providing hope for a promising future. BOCES is governed by a seven-member board, with members elected by the boards of the 15 component districts. BOCES board members may be, but are not required to be, members of component school boards. The organization is guided by the following vision statements:

- Focus on teaching and learning
- High standards and expectations
- Parents as involved partners
- Leaders as visionaries
- Teamwork and collegiality
- Rising to the challenge
- Higher aspirations
- Making a difference

ESA Profile and Demographics

Steuben-Allegany BOCES serves 13 school districts in Steuben County and two districts in Allegany County. Steuben-Allegany BOCES has two campuses. One is the Coopers Education Center that offers the agency's career and technical education programs for member school districts. The other is the Wildwood Campus.

There are 18,660 K-12 pupils in our BOCES region, which has a total population of approximately 100,000 and covers 1,500 square miles in the southern tier of New York State. The poverty index average is 42 percent. Component districts range in size from 190 students to 5,800 students.

Upon the request of two or more school districts, BOCES can provide shared services that are approved by the State Education Department. Districts receive state aid for purchasing BOCES services. The BOCES aid ratio is based on the wealth of the district, with the minimum aid ratio being 36 percent. Due to the high

poverty in our region, the average BOCES aid ratio is 71 percent. Aid is received in the following year. Special education services are not eligible for BOCES aid.

Significant Services

Our BOCES offers a vast array of highly valued services to school districts (see web site: www.saboces.org). Two of the primary services that particularly address needs of rural school districts are Career and Technical Education programs and staff development. Most of our component districts could not provide these services on their own, due to their small size and lack of financial resources. By offering shared services, BOCES provides students with educational opportunities that would not otherwise be available to them and provides staff with the training necessary to improve student achievement to meet the New York State Standards.

Career and Technical Education programs are offered at the Coopers Education Center and include the following: Auto Body, Automotive Technology, Building Construction, Computer Network Technology, Conservation, Cosmetology, Cisco and Computer Systems Technology, Criminal Justice, Culinary Arts, Graphic Communications, Heavy Equipment, Machine Tool Technology, and Health Occupations.

Career and Technical Education programs provide learning experiences for students to become aware of various occupations and develop skills necessary for employment in specific occupational areas or post-secondary training. Emphasis is placed on teaching business and industrial practices, use of tools and equipment, and interpreting technical manuals. All students work toward the New York State Learning Standards for Career Development and Occupational Studies Universal Foundation Skills. These include Basic Skills, Thinking Skills, Personal Qualities, Interpersonal Skills, Technology, Managing Information, Managing Resources and Systems Management.

Academic skills in the areas of English language arts, math and science are incorporated into all of the career and technical program offerings in order to assist students in meeting the state standards. Course credit for Career and Technical Education, as well as credit for English, math and/or science is awarded by the component school districts.

Secondary students normally attend Career and Technical Education at the Coopers and Wildwood Education Centers for half of their school day. Seniors usually attend in the mornings and juniors in the afternoons. Alternative education students generally attend all day for Career and Technical classes and academic classes. Graduates of Career and Technical Education may enter employment upon graduation from high school or continue their training in the military service or at post-secondary institutions.

BOCES offers a significant variety of staff development programs to teachers and administrators in the component districts. Providing staff development on a regional basis that results in more opportunities for staff and lower costs for school districts than if each district operated its own program is critical for rural school districts. A relatively new and very successful method of providing staff development is through the Curriculum Mentor Program. This BOCES service provides highly trained staff to work in each participating district from one to three days per week. The goal of the Curriculum Mentor Program is to increase student achievement. Curriculum mentors provide in-district staff development and in-classroom mentoring individualized to meet each teacher's and each district's needs based on the analysis of district data.

At the school level, curriculum mentors develop rubrics, critically examine student work, create curriculum maps and units, perform a gap analysis between the local and New York State standards, share instructional strategies, demonstrate best practices, and share techniques for teachers to meet learning styles

of all students. The curriculum mentors also assist school districts by facilitating data-driven planning, focusing on the New York State Learning Standards and Assessments, coordinating concept and skill development, focusing on strategic planning, facilitating the application of professional development plans, and creating a structure for sustained professional development.

To achieve the goal of increasing student achievement, it is necessary to analyze student data to determine areas of need. The data warehouse service provided by our BOCES enables districts to do this. The data warehouse is a web-based system to store and analyze disaggregated student data. BOCES staff assist the districts to use the data warehouse to develop comprehensive plans for targeted professional development, guide curriculum and program changes, facilitate changes in classroom instruction, and design individualized instruction for academic intervention services.

Challenges

We face a number of challenges in the effort to meet the needs of rural districts. Of primary concern is funding. The richness of the state BOCES aid formula, which encourages and enables districts to participate in shared services, will continue to be in jeopardy due to state budget constraints and political maneuvers. Rural districts depend on BOCES aid to help fund a variety of programs and services.

Another ongoing challenge is that of geography. Providing services in a 1,500 square-mile region requires travel time and expense for BOCES staff, district staff and students. Recruiting highly qualified staff continues to be a challenge, both for local districts and the BOCES. Not only are the positions located in a rural area, which, in itself, presents a recruitment challenge, but the nature of BOCES also presents a unique challenge. BOCES services are dependent on the requests of the component school districts, and as requests increase, staffing needs also increase. But, conversely, if requests decrease, staffing needs decrease, making positions less secure than comparable positions in school districts.

Future Directions

To remain a key provider of services that meet the needs of rural school districts in the future, BOCES must continue to assess the needs of districts and develop new cost-effective services. This will be critical to assist districts in improving student achievement to meet the New York State Standards and in meeting the requirements of No Child Left Behind. BOCES needs to continue to increase articulation with colleges and universities in providing expanded learning opportunities for both secondary students and adults. The continuous retraining of the adult population to meet the ever-changing needs of business and industry is also a high priority.

Evolution of the Career and Technical center campuses into comprehensive career and technical four-year high schools would enable students to participate in expanded course offerings and more in-depth programs. Time lost in daily travel to and from the present half-day programs could be devoted to increased educational opportunities.

Keeping pace with technological advances and increasing the use of technology to deliver instruction will be necessary to prepare students for the work world they will enter. Virtual learning opportunities will be expanded to all segments of the communities we serve. Securing the funding for these technological advances will continue to be a challenge that must be addressed.

Summary

In a state that is perceived by many to be primarily urban, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services provide cost-effective shared services to the state's rural districts that would not otherwise be able to provide these services. Two key areas in which Steuben-Allegany BOCES offers highly valued services for rural school districts that help them meet critical needs of students are career and technical education and staff development. Through these services, BOCES expands educational opportunities to students and staff in local schools. BOCES services also give most rural districts a greater chance of meeting the New York State Standards and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Rene L. "Jay" Bouchard is District Superintendent of Steuben-Allegany Board of Cooperative Educational Services in Hornell, New York. He can be reached by phone at 607-324-7880, by fax at 607-324-0201, and by email at rbouchar@saboces.org.
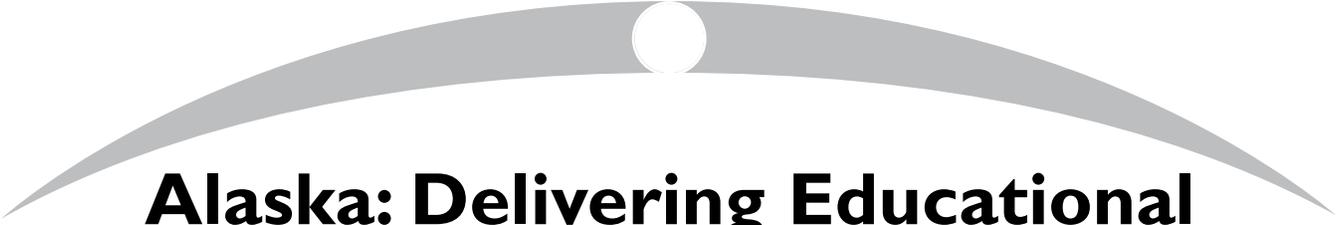
Alaska: Delivering Educational Services to the Last Frontier

by
Joan Pardes

Life in Alaska is different from what Alaskans call "the Lower 48" (the contiguous states that comprise the rest of the country) and Hawaii. With more than 570,000 square miles of land, 3,000 rivers, and 17 of the tallest mountains in North America, Alaska weighs in as the largest state in the union. For scale, imagine Texas and the next three largest states combined and that still wouldn't measure up to Alaska's breadth. Despite its size, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau, the 49th state (also known aptly as "The Last Frontier") houses one of the smallest populations in the country, a miniscule 634,892 residents.

Alaska is comprised of only 16 boroughs, (boundaries similar to counties in other states), with 53 school districts and only three urban centers. Most of Alaska is comprised of rural remote villages that are not accessible by a road system. While Alaska's three major cities may be indecipherable from small urban clusters in other states, "bush" Alaska is a world onto itself where most residents live a subsistence or semi-subsistence lifestyle.

Due to the lack of roads, travel out of "bush" Alaska is limited to air travel (by jet, prop and float planes), snow machine, and in the summer—via waterways. As surprising as it may seem, because of a limited economic base many of Alaska's villages have more in common with "third-world" communities than with other remote areas of the United States.

Despite the rustic picture that these facts may conjure up, Alaska is very much a part of the modern world. In a recent U.S. Department of Commerce report, Alaska was cited as one of the most 'wired' states in the country, and in 2001 a statewide Internet provider claimed that 70 percent of Alaskan households had computers and 60 percent of those households were online. Technology can literally become Alaska's highway to its 'bush' communities and while the 'road' to rural remote areas is getting better all the time, there are still communities where the simple task of having a telephone conversation can take several attempts due to bad connections and intermittent disconnects. In short, Alaska encompasses a vast area that supports a small and culturally diverse population that is situated in urban, rural and rural remote settings.

ESA Profile: Educating Alaska

Up until the 1970s, most residents in rural Alaska sent their children to elementary schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and for secondary education to boarding schools, which might be located hundreds or thousands of miles away from home. With the advent of new federal and state legislation that required an equal education for every student, the 70s brought major changes to Alaska that was fortunately experiencing an economic boom due to the cultivation of the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline.

Established in 1976 by the Alaska State Legislature, the Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERRC) was originally one of six regional educational service agencies created to meet the changing educational needs of both rural and urban Alaskans. SERRC's task was to provide educational services to the school districts that line Alaska's famed Inside Passage (a waterway that doubles as the region's highway system). With a little seed money from the state, the agency took root by providing special education services to the 18 school districts located throughout an area that encompasses more than 900 square miles.

Almost immediately, the other regional resource centers in the state began to struggle to stay solvent. Without any dedicated funding from the state, all five of the other educational resource centers met their demise. SERRC managed to survive by obtaining educational contracts, state and federal grants and diversifying its services. Under the leadership of Dr. Allan Barnes, SERRC expanded its K–12 services as well as moved into the adult education field, an area that remains one of the agency's largest departments.

At the same time, SERRC's leadership sought the help of other educational service agencies by joining the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA) in its fledgling years. Through its affiliation with this organization, SERRC expanded its horizon to embrace a national viewpoint that helped the agency on the local level. Today, SERRC is Alaska's only educational resource center and provides services to all 53 school districts throughout the state. More information about SERRC is available at its web site: www.serrc.org.

Meeting Needs

With over 200 programs and just under 100 employees, SERRC is committed to identifying and meeting the needs of both urban and rural remote school districts in Alaska. As one can imagine, the needs vary greatly depending on the location and student body of each school site.

For example, there are schools in rural remote Alaska that have only 11 students, all of whom are Alaska Native. In Anchorage, Alaska's largest city, a school might house 2,500 students from many cultures. Regardless of the need, SERRC is dedicated to providing the best possible service to every district, school and student—no matter where they are located.

Significant Services

On-site delivery of significant services is the key to SERRC's success in meeting needs of rural school districts. While most special education professionals in the United States drive to work or take a bus to their schools, SERRC's team of itinerants travel by plane, boat, and snow machine to deliver speech, physical and occupational therapy and psychological services as well as instruction and administrative services to rural remote districts. Because of Alaska's weather (which can be quite severe) and lack of a comprehensive road system, itinerants are often stranded in rural remote areas for days. As result they may be sleeping on the floor of a gym or enjoying the hospitality of the community—who welcome visitors with a reception and warmth that is lacking in more urban areas.

As one of the foundational programs and the primary impetus for creating resource centers in Alaska, SERRC's Special Education Department has grown from a handful of people that serviced a small number of communities to the largest provider of contractual special education services in the state. Today, special education is much more complex than the already challenging arena of focusing on children with special needs; it also requires professionals to spend time working on compliance issues, paperwork requirements, and legal matters.

The collective experience of SERRC's Special Education team enables the agency to be involved in a statewide special education projects such as Alternate Assessment, Paperwork Reduction, Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process, Surrogate Parent Video and Alaska Parent Guide. SERRC also provides secondary transition assistance and Transition Camps that offer a team approach for helping special education students successfully transition from school to work.

Along with establishing IEPs and working with students, SERRC itinerants also train teachers, paraprofessionals and parents during their on-site visits to actually deliver services. By leaving detailed lesson plans that outline accessible goals and strategies to obtain success and alternative strategies if the goals are not met, this delivery model allows rural remote districts to get the most out of their limited on-site visits by SERRC specialists. Progress of students is then monitored, reviewed and analyzed off-site via video exchanges, telephone conversations and Internet communications on a regular basis. This delivery model allows ongoing consistent service from a qualified special education professional despite the distance, sometime thousands of miles, that may separate a student and teacher.

Although most school sites in Alaska have access to the Internet, the quality of services can differ greatly. For example, out on the Aleutian chain, most school sites are still working with analog phones while the districts near the oil fields in Prudhoe Bay have state-of-the-art computer networking capabilities. In some cases, even teleconferences can be difficult while other districts may be capable of having 'real time' conversations via networked computers. To meet each district's individual needs and capabilities, SERRC customizes its Special Education service delivery (as well as all its other services) to fit with the technology available in the area.

Challenges in Supporting Schools

One of the most important services to address unique challenges of rural school districts that SERRC has launched in the past two years deals with supporting actual school structures via the Internet. The "Mollie Hooch Decision," one of the landmark bills passed in the 70s that impacted rural remote Alaska, made it compulsory for the state of Alaska to provide high schools in rural remote villages instead of sending students to boarding schools for their secondary education. The state, which at that time was flush with money due to the aforementioned oil pipeline, easily absorbed the cost of building approximately 200 high schools.

Many of the structures, however, were hastily built using engineering technologies that are not acceptable to today's standards. As a result, many of these village schools now require replacement of original equipment with modern and more sophisticated equipment and maintenance procedures, but the villagers—many of whom live a subsistence or semi-subsistence life style—have no tax base to cover the maintenance of these buildings. To further compound the dilemma, maintenance personnel in the "bush" oftentimes are required to be 'jacks of all trades' and can't easily or economically call on the expertise of certified technicians (i.e., electricians, plumbers, boiler mechanics) who may lives thousand of miles from the site in need.

While the state is cognizant that it is going to have to put money into these schools, in order to protect its investment lawmakers passed a bill that has stringent preventive maintenance requirements. In an effort to help schools be in compliance of this law, SERRC's Facilities Department created an Internet Maintenance Management System (IMMS) that allows schools to satisfy the statute and be eligible to receive funds. The system, which is highly complex but user-friendly, has created a consortium (a tool used often by SERRC to make services cost–efficient) comprised of almost half the school districts in the state.

Along with helping schools to schedule required maintenance and services through this Internet-based system, SERRC also provides on-site support and training opportunities; the agency also acts as a liaison between the state and the district. In the near future, this program will also include online chat rooms where maintenance people across the state can help each other trouble-shoot similar problems that are oftentimes unique to urban, rural or rural remote Alaska. This interactive program also has formed the groundwork for the agency's other interactive Internet-based services that are currently in development.

Another major challenge is implementing NCLB in Alaska. As many as 200 of Alaska's schools are in jeopardy of being designated as a "School Improvement Site." Obviously, America's 49th state faces some unique challenges in delivering a quality education to each of its school-age residents in such a rural place. This situation is compounded by the 'one size fits all' component of the "No Child Left Behind" act that does not take into account the realities of living in "The Last Frontier." Of our 506 schools, 135 have less than 50 students and 100 sites (20% of all Alaskan schools) have less than four teachers.

As a result, SERRC is once again working overtime to be ahead of the curve and to implement programs that meet the unique and emerging needs of our districts by offering a wide range of NCLB-related services. Currently, by combining on-site support with distance-delivered instruction, SERRC is currently developing and/or providing the following NCLB-related services: supplemental services, paraprofessional training, professional staff development activities, data collection and management services, and targeted technical assistance.

Recently, SERRC's Executive Director JoAnn Henderson, along with several other educational service agency leaders, met with U.S. Department of Education Secretary Rod Paige to discuss how educational service agencies can help implement NCLB. To establish the agency as Alaska's NCLB Interpretation Specialists and Service Providers, Ms. Henderson established an NCLB Team comprised of highly skilled and experienced educational specialists familiar with delivering services to urban, rural, and rural remote Alaska.

Summary

Even in the 21st century, life in Alaska presents situations that cannot be found in other parts of the country. By attending national conferences, networking with other educational service agencies, promoting staff professional development, and modifying delivery models to work in Alaska, SERRC has remained the state's number one service provider to rural school districts. With the infrastructure in place, qualified personnel, and more than a quarter century of providing services to an area one-fifth the size of the continental U.S., SERRC is poised and ready to meet whatever challenges may arise in its effort to deliver exemplary educational services and solutions to The Last Frontier.

Joan Pardes is Marketing Director at Southeast Regional Resource Center in Juneau, Alaska. She can be reached by phone at 907-586-6806, by fax at 907-463-3811, and by email at joanp@serrc.org.

Kansas Rural Schools and Education Service Centers: A 21st Century Solution

by
Rita C. Cook

So she closed her eyes tightly and began to whisper what had become the most important affirmation in her life, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home." Just like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, rural Kansas has been caught in tornadoes of whirling events that negatively impact all aspects of people's lives, especially the quality of education they are able to provide in their public schools.

As an adopted Kansan, I have become a great admirer of the rural Kansas way of life, a lifestyle that embraces a slower pace and a commitment to children. But wide-open spaces have become a serious problem for rural school districts that are facing the "double whammy" of dwindling student enrollment and dwindling finances. This article focuses on how rural schools and education service centers can partner to effectively challenge the problem that this "double whammy" generates.

Defining "rural" education is like describing the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. One minute you think you see it and then it disappears. Arguably, there are many definitions that seem to be shaped and formed to fit specifications for federal programs, mandates, and funding. Faith Dunne (1981) has proposed one definition that best describes Kansas's schools. She states, "Rural education is defined by these characteristically rural strengths—a lack of distinction between what belongs in school and what belongs in the community, a kind of generalism that expects people to do whatever they are able without filling specialized roles or performing strictly age-graded functions, close and supported ties between families and schools, a sense of comfort and cooperative spirit among school children, and—rural independence and self-reliance translated into the school setting."

For those who appreciate numbers another definition is given by the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (1986). This definition "considers a district rural if inhabitants number fewer than 150 per square mile, or if the district is located in a county where 60% or more of the population live in communities of 5,000 or fewer."

ESA Profile and Demographics

The rural Kansas schools served by the Smoky Hill Education Service Center (SHESC) meet both of these definitions. With a membership of 45 school districts, our boundaries cover 25 counties, 15,923 square miles and a student population of 35,000. The Policy Research Institute at the University of Kansas compiled census data that presents a picture of declining population. In recent years, counties in the north central and northwest areas have experienced an average six percent decrease in population.

Unfortunately, while these districts are rural, they are still like suburban and urban school districts. They are required to offer the same mandated quality curriculum, to hire teachers certified to teach in specific fields, to meet quality assurances determined by the state board of education, and to demonstrate continuous school improvement in order to meet state accreditation criteria.

Needs and Challenges

Rural school districts in the SHESC region have needs that arise primarily from the double jeopardy of declining student population and dwindling financial resources. The problems in meeting needs of the school districts are usually associated with five key issues: (1) distance, (2) equal access, (3) dwindling finances, (4) hiring and retaining quality staff, and (5) political support.

Overcoming *distance* is a very handicapping problem because it translates to extraordinarily high transportation costs. Teachers and students must travel long distances to school and to all school activities. Travel takes time, which is a precious commodity in today's world. Because of time and distance, rural schools often become isolated pockets within a region that create their own realities. They begin to look inward and often overlook changes that are occurring—changes that can impact them negatively if they don't respond appropriately.

Ironically, changes that could help them are ignored because, in their isolation, they don't see or realize the need for change. In effect, they create their own reality. This worked when students and families seldom left their communities but since it is imperative that students today are prepared for a rapidly changing society, rural schools must change. Change is sometimes difficult for our rural students and teachers to accept. The shift from family farming to corporate farming is one such painful change. The continuing movement of young people to more urbanized areas makes it evident that change is needed, but why that change is needed is not clearly evident to many, if not most, of those who live, work or attend school in rural areas.

Long distances often hinder *equal access* for isolated rural schools to materials and events that are readily available for those who live in more urbanized areas. In Kansas, the north central and northwest areas of the state are technology limited. While schools have computer labs, the monthly charges for Internet and broadband video are so cost prohibitive that most schools cannot get to the starting gate. So, when schools in more populated areas are sharing creative projects linking themselves to other countries or NASA, our rural schools are struggling to get enough capacity to operate a 15-station computer lab. Why?

Larger name brand utilities don't believe expansion to rural areas is cost effective, and the small companies that operate in these areas are family-owned entities that believe schools should be big revenue generators. Unfortunately, this means that many of our rural schools have sub-standard access. When our state department presents over distance learning networks, many of these rural educators must drive $1^{1}/2$– 2 hours to another location just to participate. Double that time in driving home, and it is easy to see why downlinks are often ignored.

The looming consolidation of schools, caused by *dwindling finances*, is a growing issue. At this time Kansas schools are facing a crisis in funding. There is growing public sentiment that rural schools should consolidate, thereby pooling resources in order to maintain a 21st century, quality educational program. Consolidation may be feasible in the more populated eastern region of the state but not in the western. Legislators have adopted a "starve them out" mentality rather than developing a proactive plan of action. It is not secret that any superintendent who proposes consolidation in his district often finds himself looking for a new job.

Hiring and retaining quality staff is becoming a very difficult issue for small rural schools to address. No Child Left Behind mandates that districts employ teachers who are qualified (certified) to teach in their subject area. Overall, Kansas has little difficulty meeting this mandate since 95 percent of the teachers in Kansas are certified in their subject areas. However, rural schools are facing a challenge since the state recently adopted graduation requirements that include a foreign language, three math courses, and three science courses.

Even if a rural district locates a prospective "quality" teacher for possible employment, it is difficult to convince the new teacher to move to an isolated area where there are few housing choices, limited medical services, and limited access to quality-of-life choices. If new teachers do move to a rural area, it is difficult for them to adapt to a cultural climate that may differ significantly from their own previous experiences and expectations. It's hard enough for new teachers to start practicing their profession. But rural schools also depend upon them to be sponsors, gatekeepers, and coaches. They must wear "multiple hats" in order to serve the many needs of the small rural schools.

Although candidates for elementary positions are adequate, finding secondary level teachers in areas such as math, science, special education, music, and industrial arts is difficult. Principals are even harder to find because they are lured to more urbanized areas by higher salaries, more support staff, and quality of life. High school principals in western Kansas often end up being disciplinarian, instructional leader, building manager, athletic director, transportation director, consolidated programs director, and enforcer of all afternoon and evening student activities—in addition to being the "principal."

Garnering *political support* for rural school s becoming more essential than ever. Kansas is simply a microcosm of what we see happening nationwide. Legislators who represent urbanized areas are increasing in numbers. This makes sense because of demographics. However, as this is occurring, we are also seeing a shift in societal thought. In the past, a rural life was seen as just one choice that people could make—a slower paced life that fits different personalities. It was viewed as simply a choice, not a privilege. Now, more and more, legislators and urbanized school leaders are beginning to say that those in rural areas must pay more for their schools because it is a privilege to live there. Rural school districts must find ways to bring their needs to the attention of those individuals and groups who apportion state money for public education.

Never before in the history of Kansas has education had collaboration and cooperation among rural school districts been more important. Districts that have a history of self-reliance are facing severe cuts in funding and the reductions they force in staffing, supplies, and operations. Many have turned to their regional support education service centers for help through this financial crisis. Kansas education service centers are responding in a variety of ways.

Significant Services

Smoky Hill ESC provides a long list of services that uniquely benefit rural school districts (see Appendix and more services at website: smokyhill.org). Together, school districts and the education service centers are a winning team in tough times. As the costs of delivering staff training and responding to the demands for accountability are escalating, the funding to support *change in delivery systems* is declining. Districts have asked education service centers to become the hub for district training. Rather than spending $20,000-$30,000 to implement a program locally, districts are now asking education service center staff to provide the training and ongoing support—support that is too expensive for individual districts to purchase.

Many ESCs have trained staff in content and process areas that are research-based and therefore approved programs. Districts select their level of support and, rather than paying for a costly, nationally-known presenter, they have continuous access to a trained professional who can shape and adapt a program specific to their needs. Much of the support and training occurs on-site so that districts don't incur travel costs, and teachers are out of the classroom as little time as possible. On-site support is more than just training; it is modeling, counseling, and encouraging teachers.

Smoky Hill Education Service Center realizes that time and money are precious commodities for teachers. We seek to minimize cost by providing *direct delivery* of classroom materials, expensive multimedia equipment, and curriculum through our multimedia library. Our van delivers and collects media from over 150 school buildings each week. Through an easy click, teachers may choose from over 10,000 items and/or equipment for specific dates throughout the year.

On-line classes for students and staff development offerings for teachers are another choice available for rural districts. Students and teachers may take classes 24 hours a day from any location they choose.

More and more districts are seeking ways to cut costs and access available funding. Kansas education service centers offer a variety of cooperative cost cutting approaches. At Smoky Hill ESC, several cooperative programs are available, such as: cooperative purchasing, scanning/scoring achievement tests, and cooperative grant programs/services, and research and development.

Over 80 districts purchase supplies, foods, light bulbs, lumber, and other products through our *cooperative purchasing program*. By combining district numbers, the service center serves as a facilitator for the bidding process. Districts can save between 15–30 percent on products purchased through this program.

Scanning and scoring achievement tests are important services to rural schools. Most of the schools in Kansas continue to use norm-referenced tests in addition to state assessments. The service center has the ability to scan, score, and produce student reports for significantly less than test companies and can shorten the turnaround time by half. Additionally, schools have a choice of multiple reports for one cost rather than paying separately for each one.

A *cooperative grant programs/services* meets the needs of schools that can no longer ignore funding opportunities through various grant programs. Increasingly, funds are becoming more competitive. However, rural districts have few resources for funding a full-time grant writer, and staff often lack the expertise or time that grant writing requires. Through Smoky Hill ESC, districts have access to a full-time grant writer as well as numerous staff members who write and oversee various grant programs.

No Child Left Behind promotes "scientific-based school programs and improvement." Possible loss of funding requires that schools become very selective in purchasing a program or service. Rural district administrators are already on overload. Their teachers are drowning in mandated paperwork. So, who has time to research, compare, and select the best choices for our schools? Education service center staff can assist local school districts in this most difficult task by offering *research and development services*.

One of the value-added services that Smoky Hill ESC provides for our districts is to assess trends and programs to determine the best among the many available choices. Districts ultimately make the final choices but it saves them a tremendous amount of time—and worry—when we do the groundwork for them. It is even more valuable to the small rural districts that simply have no time available for existing staff to perform R&D functions. Also, if a number of districts desire to select the same specific program or service, the service center offers to negotiate a cooperative price for them so that they get the service for the lowest cost possible.

The winning team approach of the ESC and the school districts for making available significant services is needed particularly for *hiring and retaining staff*. There are two staffing hurdles that our rural districts face: (1) hiring staff, and (2) keeping them. For the last 13 years, the Smoky Hill ESC has offered a Beginning Teacher/ Mentor Teacher program that provides year-long dual support to new teachers through training and by matching them with a mentor teacher who has agreed to be their lifeline for the year. Because of distance, we offer this program in three locations throughout the region. Although it is a program that could be offered through distance learning, our new teachers often need hands-on and after-session "personal time" with presenters and mentors.

It is becoming even harder to attract and keep administrators. Over the years, we have offered numerous Leadership Academies to support administrators. We also sponsor principal luncheons quarterly in four different locations (12 per year) so that principals have a chance to meet as colleagues to discuss educational issues. Superintendent groups meet monthly to read and discuss current educational literature. We meet monthly with superintendents in three different locations so that they can provide input on needs and ESC programming. A support structure has developed through these meetings that assists administrators as they face rapid changes in their school districts.

An increasingly significant service of the ESC and school districts together is to provide information for *political advocacy* of rural schools and communities. It is imperative that school districts respond to the rapidly declining base of political supporters who represent their interests. Although each and every constituent should continue to actively contact and communicate with their elected officials, when their voice is combined with larger numbers, they receive much more attention from elected officials. Forty-five districts speak in a greater volume than one, and our education service center serves as the messenger by representing them.

These days there are fewer and fewer people who have the time or the resources to travel to the capital. And if they make an effort, the amount of time they have to give is limited. Letter writing, telephone calls, and e-mails are effective, but nothing compares to face-to-face meetings and the rewarding relationships that develop over time with appropriate legislators and other state-level policy-makers.

Legislators also benefit because they can save time by, where feasible, addressing collective concerns of school districts in the ESC region, rather than addressing limitless requests from individual school districts. The service center meets directly with the superintendents in each district to develop targeted needs. In addition to meeting directly with legislators, Smoky Hill ESC facilitates legislative meetings with board members, district administrators, patrons, teachers, and elected officials through luncheons, receptions, and breakfast meetings. These activities help to keep the needs of rural education on the political agenda.

Finally, education service centers can serve as conduits between rural districts and entities that can provide support. These entities include legislators, state and federal education departments, and various foundations that support education. Through making personal contacts and developing successful proposals, grant money and support for districts can be obtained. Education service centers provide a collective voice that increases the ability of rural districts to be heard and supported by these entities.

Summary

So, what is the forecast for school districts and education service centers? The beginning of the 21st century has not been bright for many rural school districts. Across the country there are growing demands made upon schools. Ironically, demand for more accountability is coming at the same time as demand for cost-cutting measures in state budgets. It is unrealistic to think that life in rural school districts can remain unchanged. Those who will be most successful are those who see the value in cooperative ventures. Schools that learn to share costs and services will be more likely to survive.

Kansas education service centers are already providing cost-effective services to schools and are ready to step to the plate and do more. Smoky Hill ESC is uniquely positioned as a regional entity to offer essential services and support. No Child Left Behind legislation sets more stringent goals and benchmarks, and rural school districts are facing a double-edged sword. Financial shortages are like dark clouds swirling over their heads, and they are forced to respond by cutting teaching staff, activities, and materials. At the same time, NCLB is requiring increased accountability and reinforcing the high stakes on students' test scores and yearly performance of schools. Getting results will not be easy, or likely, for many small rural school districts that must "go it alone." Most rural school districts must have a cost-effective support system in place. Kansas education service centers are their best choice. Working together, rural schools and education service centers can meet the challenges of the "double whammy"!

References

Dunne, F. (1981). Is there such a thing as rural education? A portrait of the small rural school. *The Small School Forum*, 2, 2-4.

National Rural and Small Schools Consortium. (1986). *Definitions of rural, small, and remote schools.* Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University: Author.

Rita C. Cook is Executive Director of Smoky Hill Education Service Center in Salina, Kansas. She can be reached by phone at 785-825-9185, by fax at 785-825-9195, and by email at rcook@smokyhill.org.

Appendix
Selected ESC Services and Benefits to Rural School Districts

ESC Services	Benefits to Rural School Districts
1. Staff Development	Affordable, quality staff development saves districts money and provides them on-site support.
2. Volume Purchasing	Group purchasing results in discounts and savings.
3. Dropout Recovery Programs	Decreased dropout rates and alternative education placements for non-traditional students.
4. Scanning/Scoring Achievement Tests	Significant savings (30%) as well as quicker turnaround time for reports and on-site support.
5. Computer Repair	Pick up/drop off service result in 40% savings.
6. Curriculum Development	On-site support in developing, aligning, and assessing district curriculum as well as ongoing revision are provided to reflect trends and mandates with reduced costs.
7. Crisis Intervention Programs	Training, prepared documents, and crisis teams provide on-site guidance and counseling when a crisis occurs.
8. Peer mediation	Youth peer mediation training is offered with no costs to districts.
9. Career and Technical Education	ESA facilitates advisory boards, internships, and job shadowing; technology purchasing savings are provided.
10. Alternative/Charter Schools	Schooling is provided for at-risk populations through cooperative ventures.
11. Multimedia Library	Van delivery of resource and support materials is provided; expensive equipment is available for check-out.
12. Grant Writing	Grants are researched, written, and facilitated for districts in order to offer needed services.
13. One-Stop Services	Financial and job support to rural youth who are homeless or in difficult home situations are provided.
14. Foundation Services	All districts receive funding for special projects through this 501(c3) foundation; money may be targeted for specific districts or projects; a greater audience of donors is accessed through this larger foundation.
15. Beginning/Mentor Teacher Program	Training and support are located at three sites within the region; districts are able to retain new teachers and better prepare them for the classroom; mentor teachers benefit as well.
16. Administrative Study Group	Administrators in isolated areas meet and discuss current research and literature.
17. Assessment Services	Services range from consultant support to actual formatting and analyzing district data.
18. Technology Support	A variety of services including e-rate application, networking assistance, training, and development are provided.

19. Parents as Teachers	Through collaborative efforts, districts pool funding in order to hire staff and provide programming.
20. Reading Programs	Reading specialist is available to districts to provide a range of services from consulting to implementation of service center developed programs.
21. Title I Program Improvement	Districts opt to purchase school improvement services in a variety of locations for schools that need program improvement and assistance in student tutoring.
22. Supplemental Services	The service center offers supplemental services in a variety of locations for schools that need program improvement and assistance in student tutoring.
23. Staff Contracting	Districts may contract for a portion of staff time for teaching assignments.

Leading the Way in Support for Rural Schools in Texas

by
Terry A. Harlow

Where can the small, isolated rural school with limited resources find support? Who will be there when assistance is needed? In west central Texas, the answer is frequently the Region 14 Education Service Center (ESC-14) located in Abilene. This organization is designed to help schools identify issues and problems and provide technical assistance and training in meeting those identified needs (see web site: www.esc14.net).

The ESC-14 mission statement defines the organization's intention "to support schools through quality service that assures excellence in student achievement." The organizational goals state that the service agency will (1) assist school districts in improving student performance, (2) enable school districts to operate more efficiently and economically, and (3) implement initiatives assigned by the state legislature or the commissioner of the state education agency (SEA).

ESA Profile and Demographics

A seven-member lay board governs the ESC-14. Members of the board of directors are elected by members of local school districts' boards of trustees located in the region. The board develops policies regarding center management and operation, programs and services to be offered, and financial support. Also, they are empowered to employ and dismiss the executive director subject to the approval of the SEA commissioner.

Region 14 ESC funding comes from three sources: 18%—local districts, 23%—state sources, and 59%—federal funds. The high percentage of federal money is due primarily to the large number of districts that participate in shared service arrangements for programs in Titles II, III, IV and V.

Region 14 Education Service Center serves 43 independent school districts, 1 charter school, 3 universities, 3 colleges, and 1 technical college in 13 counties in mostly rural west central Texas. The one large population area in ESC-14 is Abilene, which has 17,000 students. Thirty-two of the schools qualify as rural with a total of 11,365 students. Twenty-five of the rural schools have fewer than 500 students. Overall, rates of economically disadvantaged students in the rural schools peak at 81.2%, with a low at 30.5% and a median of 58.5%. The state averages 49.3%.

While the number of economically disadvantaged represents a large percentage, the rural schools score high on the state-issued school report cards. The report cards are determined by the Texas State Education Agency (SEA) as measured by the Academic Excellence Indicator System. The SEA considers such measures as student performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TASK) tests,

attendance, dropout rate, etc. Seven school districts earned a rating of "exemplary," 15 earned a rating of "recognized," and 11 earned a rating of "acceptable" with none earning "unacceptable."

Needs

The overarching needs of the rural school are associated with declining fiscal resources and declining enrollments. Two main needs are quality staffing and technology. ESC-14 identifies needs in the small rural schools through a variety of methodologies, including local requests for technical assistance; communications with administrators, school board members, teachers, and other stakeholders; monthly meetings with administrators; and requirements and mandates from state and federal programs.

Given the overall concern for reductions in school finance and for reduction in student numbers, the two main identified needs of these rural school districts specify quality staffing and technology. The needs associated with quality staffing include the following:

(1) Training and technical assistance to new administrators in the region has become a major concern. Over a three year period, the rate of turnover of superintendents is 82 percent. The turnover rate for principals is 47%.

(2) Training and technical assistance required to keep school board members, administrators, teachers, teaching aides, and other stakeholders updated in appropriate areas such as governance issues, curriculum and instruction, and new state and federal requirements and mandates require much attention.

(3) The staffing of teachers in these rural isolated schools necessitates study and action because of the classes taught by teachers with specialties needed for one class only, or with specialties in short supply, such as those associated with Spanish, math and science courses, including courses for advanced placement in college.

At least two needs are associated with technology:

(1) Sustainability of the telecommunications infrastructure in rural school districts is a great concern. If the poor rural school districts, particularly, do not have assistance with e-rate and other reoccurring costs of maintaining connectivity, students will be denied access to the Internet and distance learning. In Texas, the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund that helps to provide the necessary educational technology and related training is at high risk of being discontinued.

(2) Distance learning capabilities need to be expanded and sustained to meet the three training and technical assistance needs outlined under quality staffing. Additional staff development and course offerings must be delivered to meet the needs of students, teachers, administrators, school board members and/or community members.

Significant Services

ESC-14 strives to offer a vast assortment of services to meet needs of member districts. Over 60 ESC services and their possible benefit to rural school districts are listed in the appendix to this article. Two primary strategies and related services utilized in meeting the needs of the schools are technical assistance and training. The needs of the new administrators are addressed on a one-to-one basis as per their requests and as recognized by specialists as being frequently needed by new administrators.

Needed services are provided as supplements at the monthly meetings held to update administrators of new rules, regulations, offerings and available assistance. During on-site visits, 10,931 hours of training and technical assistance have been completed over the past year. This on-site assistance served 7,465 (duplicated count) school board members, administrators, teachers, teaching aides, and other stakeholders. Traditional staff development/training sessions held at ESC-14 attracted 9,033 participants from the rural schools. ESC-14 hosted 725 training sessions to serve these participants.

The staffing of courses which require teachers with specialties needed for one class only or with specialties in short supply, such as those associated with Spanish, math, science, and courses yielding advanced college placement are beginning to be addressed through distance learning. In 1997 only three students participated in distance learning advanced placement courses through ESC-14. In school year 2002–003, over 500 students have participated in 27 college courses, and 15 high school courses.

Applications of distance learning continue to be explored for offering exciting educational experiences. For example, students in classes of rural schools maintained connections and communications with students from Brazil, sharing cultural experiences and other types of virtual field trips. The capabilities of distance learning need to be expanded and sustained because the benefits of cost-sharing and of expanded student courses and staff development training offerings. ESC-14 can serve as an advocate in securing adequate fiscal resources by representing the districts at meetings when and where possible and appropriate, by encouraging effective and efficient strategies of school management, and by forming partnerships or consortia to secure grants.

Challenges

The challenges of local rural districts and, therefore, challenges of ESC-14, relate to maintaining high standards of student achievement while at the same time dealing with the stress associated with the interaction between declining student enrollment and limited fiscal resources. These challenges are compounded by new state and federal requirements, such as those outlined in the No Child Left Behind law and the "highly qualified" requirements for special education as defined in IDEA-B.

The distance of the rural schools to Abilene and the expenses associated with increasing travel costs result in skyrocketing costs of ESC-14 services delivery to the rural schools through traditional delivery systems. The reduction in the number of students in many of the smallest rural school districts places additional burdens on staff time and expertise in meeting the needs of all students. All of these together increase demands on available funds of ESC-14, place stressful demands on staff time and expertise, and call for innovative uses of technology.

Future Directions

A desire to return to "normalcy" is natural. However, the challenges associated with reduction in available funds, reduction of student enrollments, new threats linked with homeland security, demands of the public's right to know, and increased accountably demand new and innovative thinking and actions. The rapid changing environment also causes many stresses. We need not panic! Yet, the changes bring about the need to restructure how we look at education, how we deliver educational services, and how we continue to address the needs of all students.

The small rural schools in west central Texas face many challenges, especially those relating to quality staffing and technology. Region 14 Education Service Center stands ready to assist them in any way possible. The education service agency provides the greatest potential in assisting these small isolated

communities in maintaining one or more schools and avoiding consolidation. Without the schools, the communities will continue to decline.

Terry A. Harlow is Executive Director of Region 14 Education Service Center in Abilene Texas. He can be reached by phone at 915-675-8609, by fax at 915-675-8659, and by email at Harlow@esc14.net.

Appendix
Selected ESC-14 Services and Benefits to Rural School Districts

ESA Services	Benefits to Rural School Districts
AEIS-IT (Curriculum on-line project)	Increased student performance
ATLAS (Administrators' Project)	Increased efficiency in school operations
Advanced Academics (G/T) Support	Increased student performance
Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate –Statewide Initiative	Implement special initiatives
Alternative Certification-Special Education	Increased efficiency in school operations
Bilingual/ESC	Increased student performance
Bus Driver Training	Increased efficiency in school operations
Career/Technology Support	Increased student performance
Child Nutrition Programs	Increased efficiency in school operations
Cooperative Purchasing	Increased efficiency in school operations
Curriculum Support	Increased student performance
Drug/Alcohol Testing Program	Increased efficiency in school operations
DEC Support	Increased efficiency in school operations
Dyslexia Training	Increased student performance
ESCcc Project	Increased student performance
Education Production Lab	Increased efficiency in school operations
Education Technology Support	Increased efficiency in school operations
Education Technology Training	Increased student performance
Field Agents (Assistance to Administrators)	Increased efficiency in school operations
504 Assistance	Increased efficiency in school operations
Fine Arts	Increased student performance
Food Purchasing	Increased efficiency in school operations
Food Commodities Processing	Increased efficiency in school operations
GR Decentralization	Implement special initiatives
HIV	Increased student performance
Headstart	Increased student performance
IDEA B Charter Schools	Increased efficiency in school operations
IDEA B General	Increased student performance
IDEA B Preschool	Increased student performance
IDEA B Rider 25	Increased student performance
IDEA B TBSI	Increased student performance
IDEA B Visually Impaired	Increased student performance
ITEK Star (On-line curriculum project)	Increased student performance
LIFTS	Increased student performance
Math Education Services	Increased student performance
Media Services	Increased student performance
Reading Recovery	Increased student performance
Reading Education Services	Increased student performance
RSCCC- Business (Data entry support)	Increased efficiency in school operations
RSCCC – Student (Data entry support)	Increased efficiency in school operations
Scan-It	Increased student performance

School Board Training	Increased efficiency in school operations
School Finance	Increased efficiency in school operations
School Health	Increased efficiency in school operations
School Meals Initiative	Increased efficiency in school operations
School Operations	Increased efficiency in school operations
Science Education Services	Increased student performance
Service Learning-Statewide Initiative	Implement special initiatives
Services for the Visually Impaired	Increased student performance
Speech Services	Increased student performance
TRI-SSI	Increased student performance
Title I Contracted Services	Increased student performance
Title I Migrant	Increased student performance
Title II Part A	Increased student performance
Title II Part B	Increased student performance
Title II Technical Assistance	Increased student performance
Title III ESL	Increased student performance
Title IV Safe and Drug Free Schools	Increased student performance
Title V TRMI	Increased student performance
Title V Innovative	Increased student performance
TSBESS –New Teacher Mentoring	Increased student performance and increased efficiency in school performance
TSTAR Maintenance	Increased efficiency in school operations

Meeting the Needs of
Rural School Districts in Georgia:
One ESA's Story

by
Terry T. Nelson

Educational service agencies serve many functions and take on various roles in meeting the needs of the customers that they serve. The nature of the work varies from district to district, but the overall mission remains the same. The challenge in leading a premiere service agency to ensure success is on finding the appropriate balance of services while providing quality leadership for member districts. In assessing and addressing the needs of the customer, it becomes increasingly apparent that the needs of rural districts differ from those in other member school systems. Often the needs and expectations of rural school districts are in stark contrast with those of urban or suburban districts. This article describes how the Central Savannah River Area Regional Educational Service Agency (CSRA RESA) is seeking to meet the needs of rural school districts within its constituency.

ESA Profile and Demographics

CSRA RESA serves an area of Georgia that is the second largest metropolitan area of the state, an area comprised of 12 school districts and 125 schools. The districts range in size from the smallest in the state to the fifth largest. Ten of the 12 districts would be considered rural and seven serve predominately minority students. Nine of the districts have a majority of students on free and reduced lunch.

CSRA RESA is a state-affiliated agency that provides direct services to school districts in a 12-county area. The agency also serves as fiscal agent for River Quest Psycho Educational Service Center located in Midville, Georgia and the Technology Training Center at the National Science Center in Augusta, Georgia. The mission of the agency is to provide services and experiences that result in increased student learning. Our vision is that all schools will provide exemplary education for all students.

This mission and vision is carried out through a highly skilled staff that coordinates activities in conjunction with representatives from member school districts. An overall focus of our agency is to build the capacity of member systems to improve student achievement. Staff members also provide direct assistance to students through model lessons and participation in other programmatic efforts. School improvement planning and implementation are essential in preparing students for the rapid-paced technological workplace of today and tomorrow. Another equally important purpose of our agency is to serve as a conduit for promoting seamless educational programs throughout the region.

Local superintendents and college/university presidents who work to support this goal govern the agency. Staff members coordinate and serve on various committees/boards to facilitate articulation

agreements and coordination of regional efforts. Staff members are committed to leading and supporting change within member school districts. This is done by focusing on results and allowing flexibility to address local initiatives. Plans and other activities are formulated with our customers in mind. CSRA RESA serves as a positive catalyst for promoting positive educational endeavors in both the region and throughout the state. Additional information about CSRA RESA is available at our web site: www.csraresa.org.

Meeting Needs

CSRA RESA is service-driven, customer-centered, and results-oriented. The preceding sentence is not a mere aggregate of words, but the conceptual guide in framing and carrying out the work of the agency. Needs of member districts are assessed through formal and informal processes that are performed throughout the year. A formal needs assessment is conducted during the spring of each year. A questionnaire consisting of a set of guiding questions is sent electronically to the administration in each district. This occurs as prior preparation to a formal visit by a CSRA RESA team of staff that meets with the leadership team from the central office and principals from each member district. The questionnaire is revised annually and is designed to solicit areas of work in meeting state and federal requirements, in addition to local initiatives that the district requests assistance in implementing.

Needs are also assessed during the year through various agency collaboratives such as the Professional Development Council, curriculum directors, school nurses, counselors, youth apprenticeship, personnel directors, technology coordinators, literacy consortium and other viable support groups. In most instances the unique characteristics of small rural districts present needs that are more compelling than those of larger districts and require more direct services and support, whereas larger districts tend to be more self-sufficient and require only information or targeted services. Rural districts tend to rely heavily on the ESA for most professional development offerings, greater assistance with school improvement planning and implementation, cooperative purchasing, curriculum development and overall support services.

This writer believes that six assumptions can guide decisions about how to address the needs of rural school districts:

1. Because of limited funding in most instances rural school districts expect agencies to provide more cost-effective and efficient services (e.g., data analysis, alternative preparation programs, grant writing assistance);

2. Cooperative purchasing and planning are leveraged through CSRA RESA to stretch limited resources;

3. Because of the tendency or the propensity for high staff turnover, rural districts rely upon agency personnel to provide a continuity of leadership and a sense of legacy to support the work of the district;

4. Through agency collaboratives, districts are aided in implementing structures and frameworks for continued improvement;

5. Rural districts rely on CRSA RESA staff particularly to research and make available trends in education, primarily through agency products, processes, and services; and

6. Quality professional development is expected from the CRSA RESA to offset the limited resources sometimes available even in larger districts for quality professional development.

Meeting the needs of rural districts requires not only the essentials of providing quality services but also necessitates an up close and personal relationship with school district personnel to better match their needs with available solutions. At our agency we consider ourselves to be members of the team, and our success is aligned with the success of our member districts.

Current trends in education require us to address the needs of our rural districts in three critical areas: (1) developing future teachers and leaders, (2) providing quality professional learning activities, and (3) providing direct assistance to schools identified as low performing. The ability to recruit and retain certified personnel is often a problem in small rural districts. Chronic staff shortages are caused by several factors: differentials in salary between rural and other areas, lack of cultural and social activities, and an apparent lack of resources to support professional learning and student success.

Through our Teacher Alternative Preparation Program we currently have individuals teaching in all 12 of our districts, with a sizeable number of the 140 current program candidates teaching in rural districts. A significant number of these teachers are both male and minority, a demographic shift that strengthens the profession. We currently have the second largest number of candidates in this statewide program. We are also working with districts in preparing aspiring administrators.

In the area of professional learning we offer courses to meet state requirements, work with districts to initiate study groups with a focus on action research and best practices, and address local requests. In addition to providing professional learning activities to support district improvement efforts, we conduct diagnostic visits with leadership teams and other stakeholders to facilitate school improvement planning and implementation. Meeting demand of NCLB is important. For example, we tested 689 paraprofessionals using the state-developed assessment to meet federal requirements as outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Challenges

Two major challenges are faced by CSRA RESA in meeting the needs of rural districts:

(1) the apparent inability to meet all needs for intensive service because of limited staff at the service agency;

(2) the rapid turnover rate of staff, specifically teachers, in rural schools impedes consistency in our efforts. Complicating the challenge is the inadequate number of substitute teachers, thus, impeding of quality instruction for students and also the ability of CSRA RESA to successfully provide professional learning offerings during the school day.

As stated earlier, needs of rural districts tend to be more intense or greater than those in larger districts. Work with rural districts presents special challenges. But rewards are oftentimes more apparent and equally gratifying.

Future Directions

Future directions and strategic actions have been developed to meet the needs of these districts. CSRA RESA provides continuous school improvement planning for leadership teams within the schools to increase student achievement for all students. The agency emphasizes assistance with implementation of instructional best practices, and provides specific professional development to ensure that all teachers are highly qualified. In addition CSRA RESA encourages inter-district communication links, and provides clearinghouse services

regarding federal and state mandates. This goal is achieved through continued participation in the many collaboratives that have been instituted to address identified needs of member school districts.

Table 1 lists five examples of CSRA RESA services that position the agency to particularly benefit the current and future needs of rural school districts. Additional services are described at our web site: www.csraresa.org.

Table 1.
CSRA RESA Example Services and Benefits to Rural School Districts

Services	Benefits to Rural School Districts
Tapp Program	Assist with teacher recruitment and preparation
Fixed Assets Program	Assist with federal accounting regulations
Low Incidence Areas	Teacher of visually impaired; teacher of hearing impaired
School Improvement	Intensive assistance with School Improvement Planning and Implementation Model
Enhanced Teacher Quality	Enhanced professional development opportunities

Summary

At CSRA RESA we operate from a plan of action that centers around four pillars: *focus on results, measurement of impact, quality service, and deep and full knowledge*. It is our vision that all schools can be exemplary places for the teaching and learning of all students. Many specific programs and services are developed and implemented to meet identified needs of rural school districts. Key CSRA RESA activities lead districts as they work to ensure success for all students.

Rural districts face several unique challenges that center on the lack of equitable resources, recruitment and retention of qualified personnel, need for more direct support services via professional learning activities, and greater access to research and other information services. Other services include offering an alternative preparation program for teachers, providing support and technical for school improvement efforts, and increasing access to current information via established communication channels. CSRA RESA must continue to strive to offer support services so rural school districts can meet identified challenges in ensuring that no child is left behind.

Dr. Terry L. Nelson is Executive Director for the Central Savannah River Area Regional Educational Service Agency in Dearing, Georgia. He can be reached by phone at 706-556-6225, by fax at 706-556-8891, and by email at tnelson@csraresa.org.
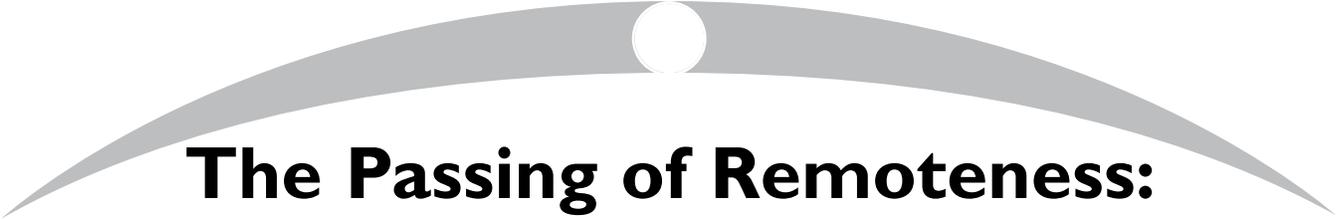
The Passing of Remoteness: A Commentary

by
E. Robert Stephens

Both the editor of *Perspectives* and the guest-editor are to be complimented for choosing to focus this issue on the general theme of how educational service agencies serve as an important support system for rural school districts. On the one hand, this decision provides a balance to the theme highlighted in last year's issue, ways in which service agencies provide assistance to metropolitan area school districts.

But there are also other more substantive reasons why highlighting examples of service agency contributions to nonmetropolitan area systems is to be welcomed. Several of these will be introduced in the closing section of this brief reflection piece. When first asked to take on this assignment, I hesitated to do so because of other commitments. The opportunity to think again, even briefly as is done here, about the vital role service agencies play in support of the nation's still large number of rural districts in America's long-term, seemingly unending push to make schools more accountable makes me glad that I did.

First, though, what do the six articles in this collection say to members of the educational service agency community and others regarding the need for service agencies to provide assistance to rural districts? That is, what are some of the most important insights the reader should take away from a reading of the six pieces? I certainly recognize the limitations of generalizing from five one-context pieces, which should perhaps be viewed as mini-case reports, not comprehensive case studies. However, the articles do establish a number of key points that serve as meaningful examples of significant roles that are likely repeated all across this country.

The Contextual Piece

Certainly Harmon's lead article provides a useful reminder that service agencies must be cognizant of the interplay between a number of global, national and state-specific social, economic, political, and educational forces that both affect and are affected by rural districts. His listing of what he regards to be 10 major issues that have their origin in these developments is helpful. However, in some ways it is useful to note that for the most part the issues cited could have a date line of the early 1980s or early 1990s, not just the early 2000s. This by no means lessens the value of his efforts to construct a meaningful context in which many rural districts across the nation must function, and then, begin to think about what are the implications of these developments for the work of service agencies whose catchment area includes large numbers of rural districts, as is the case for most agencies. This is especially important for those service agencies serving non-metropolitan areas where the dominant economic activity base is centered on agriculture or natural resource extraction. Viewing the contemporary scene as a continuation of deep-seated difficulties facing rural systems should, among other possible responses, cause service agencies and others to be more sensitive to these systems, the goal of Harmon's introductory profile.

Additionally, Harmon's suggested 20 strategic opportunities for ESAs to address his 10 issues are all useful. The problem I have is that the human and fiscal resources available to a service agency are finite. And, based on data available in early summer of 2003, state appropriations for a number of state networks are being reduced even farther.

The clear implication for organizations having finite resources is that they must prioritize what, and in what ways, they will allocate available resources. The answer for an increasing number of service agencies that are part of a state network is equally clear, a requirement that they deliver a core set of programs and services that are predominantly oriented improvements in teaching and learning, or viewed to be associated with the improvement of teaching and learning. Moreover, because of the requirements of the NCLB Act of 2001, it seems highly probable that rural systems that receive programs and services from a cooperative form of service agency will have the same programming expectations. Thus, the agenda for most service agencies of whatever type is likely to continue to be narrowed in the immediate future, no matter how meritorious their former discretionary program efforts. The one major exception to this predicted trend is in the area of discretionary management programs on behalf of rural districts, an area likely to continue to expand.

The Five Mini-Case Reports

The brief comments that follow are organized around several of the key points that the guest-editor asked each of the five authors to highlight in their mini-case reports.

1. Describe the process(es) used by your agency to identify the needs of rural schools and their communities, and identify the most pressing of these that relate to the requirements of NCLB Act of 2001 and other issues important to your region and state.

2. Describe how your agency attempts to meet these needs, giving special attention to two "signature services" that are most prized by your rural districts; that is, the two services valued highly by rural systems because of their rural setting and which they would likely have to do without were it not for your agency

3. Identify the challenges faced by your agency as you continue to provide assistance to rural districts, and relatedly, the problems, if any, of simultaneously serving very small rural as well as larger districts.

4. Describe the two or three strategic directions or actions that your agency must take if it is to remain a key provider of services that meet the future needs of rural systems.

In an apparent attempt to urge the five authors to concentrate on two "signature services" judged to be most prized by rural districts, the guest-editor made the wise decision to recommend that the authors resist trying to describe all programs and services offered by their agencies. Rather, he recommended that they include a listing of these in an appendix, and also that a brief statement be provided explaining why each program or service provided is a benefit to rural systems (Memorandum from Hobart L. Harmon to the five authors, no date).

Most Pressing Needs and How Identified

The five authors were in agreement that the rural school districts in their respective catchment areas face unique challenges in their efforts to provide and sustain a quality education program. Moreover, while

differing somewhat in how these challenges were described, a consensus is apparent that the issues in many respects center on an exploration of the age-old problems of a declining enrollment and limited fiscal resources, a deadly combination that is the source of still other current pressing issues like the inability to meet all requirements of the NCLB Act of 2001.

Other significant issues cited were those of the remoteness of rural schools (a challenge emphasized by Pardes, Cook, and Bouchard) that had severe implications for rural district staff recruitment and retention efforts and the troubling issue of the declining political support for rural interests, a point stressed by Cook.

The fact that the issues of small enrollment size and limited fiscal and human resources, and their attendant problems, are perennial and that these are now compounded by recent federal and state requirements does not diminish in any way the observations of the authors. What we have here are the insights of individuals who are, to use a popular contemporary term, "on the ground." If pressed for more details, their stories would make interesting case studies for those anxious to add to the existing knowledge based on rural school improvement efforts, and how educational service agencies attempt to respond to this vexing challenge.

Most of the authors devoted only limited attention to the second half of this lead question posed by the guest-editor, how they identify the needs of rural districts, a question that is central to uncovering why and in what ways the agencies do what they do on behalf of these types of systems. One might be puzzled by this limited treatment. However, my take is that this probably reflects a situation where most service agencies routinely engage in a variety of needs assessment exercises and a number of some of the more conventional ways this is done were in fact cited. So, the lack of coverage of this type may merely be due to the fact that some of the conventional needs assessment efforts are so institutionalized in the work of the agencies that these were not cited, and where some mention was made, it was done only sparingly.

One of the authors (Nelson) did indicate that an annual meeting is held with each school district administrative staff to review the results of an annual needs assessment survey. The merit of this practice, that is not judged to be widespread, seems indisputable.

"Most Prized" by Rural Systems

A number of commonalities and differences are to be noted in the responses of the five authors to this, the second question posed by the guest-editor. As expected, staff development, one of the long-standing core services of most educational service agencies across the country, including the five featured here, was regularly cited. However, there were some differences in the reported objective(s) of the staff development as well as the focus of still other reported "most prized" programs and services. Noteworthy examples that in part illustrate these points are described below.

• Pardes reports on comprehensive special education support services, and her discussion highlights the extraordinary ways the itinerant staff members of the service agency attempt to provide these services on-site to remote rural schools in "bush" Alaska in order for these schools to meet federal and state requirements. Also significant is her description of the Internet Maintenance Management System established especially to help remote rural schools have access to technical assistance and staff training in order to meet state facility maintenance requirements.

• Nelson's discussion of his agency's role in a statewide Teacher Alternative Preparation Program and how this contributes to one of the most critical needs in this agency's catchment area, the development of future teachers and administrators, is important. Also of interest is his list of most critical issues relating to low-performing schools. His agency addresses this issue by leading an external evaluation team organized

to assess a troubled school and then provide customized professional learning activities in support of the school's improvement agenda.

• Several examples of program initiatives reported by Cook address one of what she cited as a critical issue facing rural districts in her agency's service region, the decline in their fiscal capacity. For example, her agency maintains a cooperative purchasing program with a reported savings of from 15–30 percent to districts on products purchased through the program. Additionally, the agency administers a cooperative grant program, staffed by a full-time grant writer, to help rural districts be successful in federal and state grant competition. Another noteworthy topic described in Cook's report is what is viewed to be an extraordinary commitment to maintain close relationships and communication with the agency's member schools, which spread over approximately 16,000 square miles in a sparsely population region in Kansas. The staff time needed to conduct monthly meetings of superintendents held in three locations and the quarterly luncheon meetings of all principals held in four locations represent a huge investment of staff time and resources.

• The Curriculum Mentor Program cited by Bouchard stands as a powerful example of how and in what ways a service agency provides targeted technical assistance and staff development to school districts in their efforts to engage in comprehensive school improvement. This program provides staff specialists who work in participating districts from one to three days each week throughout the school year. These specialists provide assistance and training in a range of areas that enjoy widespread support in the literature as essential needs for sustained school improvement (e.g., the design of curriculum maps and units, the development of alternative instructional strategies, the use of data in school district planning and evaluation).

• Harlow's essay is especially valuable in that it is the only one that provides data about the two primary strategies and services used by his agency to address the needs of rural districts. The data drawn from the past school year for the provision of school district on-site technical assistance and training are impressive (e.g., 10,931 total staff hours), as are those for staff development sessions held at the central office of the agency (9,033 participants from rural schools who enrolled in 725 different staff development sessions).

Challenges Faced

A range of challenges in serving rural school districts was identified by the five authors. The majority of these centered on a number of familiar themes: lack of fiscal resources to provide needed services; the recruitment and retention of staff specialists where funding is dependent on annual renewal of contracts with local districts; expanding and sustaining the existing telecommunications infrastructure; the increasing costs of delivering services; the need to design new service delivery models; addressing the needs of rural systems caught in what in many cases are the related problems of declining enrollment and declining fiscal resources; how best to assist rural systems in addressing both old and new federal and state regulations; and the resistance to change seemingly present in some rural areas.

Many of these same themes would likely be included in the responses of the chief executive officers of agencies serving largely metropolitan area districts. Such a convergence of opinions does not diminish in any way the comments of the five authors. Rather, it in part demonstrates the universal nature of the challenges facing service agencies irrespective of locale served.

A mild surprise was evoked by the absence of references to several issues that were anticipated as a challenge but were not directly cited by several authors. One of these relates to the issue of the recent injection of market forces into the work of at least two of the agencies, those located in Georgia and Texas. In both cases, recently enacted legislation allows a school district to purchase a service from any service

agency in the state, not just their home agency. Perhaps this is not a major challenge; perhaps this new option is not being extensively used by rural systems, which apparently are quite satisfied with present arrangements.

Relatedly, no mention was made of the potential challenge presented by the injection of market forces in the new NCLB Act of 2001. It may be too soon to judge the implication of this new phenomenon. Or, this may merely reflect the typical scarcity of multiple competing service providers in non-metropolitan regions.

Nor did the writers representing the agencies in Georgia and Texas identify as a major challenge, at least not in a direct way, the state accountability requirements imposed on them as a major challenge. Nelson may have had this in mind when he referred to "the apparent inability to meet all needs for intensive service with limited staff at the service agency." The Texas accountability system for service agencies is viewed here to be the strongest of any system in the nation, and has been in place for a number of years. One interpretation of the lack of reference to accountability may be that the system is simply now fully integrated into the work of the agency.

Future Directions

Several themes dominated the responses of the authors when asked what strategic steps their agency must take in order to remain a key provider of support services to rural districts. Though the approach used varied somewhat, there was an understanding that the future viability of their respective agencies centered on the ability of the agency to continue to assist rural systems in comprehensive, sustained school improvement efforts.

Other noteworthy responses included Bouchard's recognition that the continued progress of his agency rests with the ability of the service agency to enhance its current adult training programs, provide virtual learning opportunities to all segments of the rural communities, and enhance the current articulation with post-secondary institutions in order to provide greater learning opportunities for both secondary school-age students and adults who reside in rural areas.

Other Comments

I close with several other of the most significant insights warranting special mention that were gained from a reading of the five articles.

1. The probability is high that in many cases rural systems that have access to a comprehensive educational service agency owe their very existence to their participation in the support programs and services provided by these agencies. The validity of this claim seems indisputable. Moreover, and importantly, by assisting rural districts, the claim can also be made that service agencies play a critical role in strengthening the infrastructure of an entire state system of elementary-secondary education, an issue seemingly only lately recognized in state policy circles as a necessary prerequisite for sustained comprehensive school improvement in a state system.

2. The critical role that all five service agencies play in the provision of technology support services for rural systems certainly comes across clearly. As such, ESAs represent an important, and in some cases a likely indispensable, player in pursuit of the rapid developments in telecommunications that will contribute to one of my favorite expressions, the origin of which is unclear—"the passing of remoteness."

3. Bouchard's reference to two other long-standing ways that state policy makers in New York have utilized its state network of educational service agencies to address the needs of rural districts in particular should not be minimized: ambitious state fiscal incentives to encourage districts to share services through a BOCES, and the state fiscal support for the establishment, through the BOCES, of a statewide system of regional Career and Technical Centers and regional special education support services. The New York state commitment to promote collaboration among school districts in the production, delivery, and evaluation of selected programs and services is one of the reasons why some observers regard the infrastructure of this state system of elementary-secondary education to be one of the strongest in the nation.

4. The inclusion of representatives of post-secondary institutions in the new governance of the 16 Regional Education Service Agencies in Georgia reported by Nelson is one small but important step that illustrates how one state has mandated its efforts to create a seamless Pre-K–16 educational system, a state goal being advocated in an increasing number of states. It is encouraging that decision makers in that state recognized that the 16 service agencies are a natural platform for initiating movement toward the realization of this state policy goal.

5. The comprehensive statewide data system maintained by the Texas Education Agency, and referred to by Harlow, must surely be at the forefront of all state developments to collect, organize, and report meaningful aggregated and disaggregated student demographic and student assessment data, and staff and financial data on each school campus and district in the state system. Of importance, one of the principal ways these state data are reported is by each of the state's 20 Education Service Centers. This practice stands as a good example of where a state has placed important school improvement responsibilities on its state network of service agencies, including the need to address low-performing schools, and then is committed to put in place one of the prerequisites for performing these roles, access to comprehensive, timely data.

Concluding Comments

The five articles provide a brief glimpse of how five service agencies, from a potential pool of approximately 600 service agencies that serve predominately rural areas, are engaged in essential work in providing assistance to rural school systems in their respective service regions. The education service agency community across the country should be appreciative of the five mini-case reports that, at a minimum, provide meaningful illustrations of how service agencies serve what still remains an important component of this nation's public school universe. Commendations also to the guest editor for taking on this assignment.

E. Robert Stephens is Director, Institute for Regional and Rural Studies in Education in Edmond, Oklahoma. He can be reached by phone at 405-348-1851, by fax at 405-341-1385, and by email at erstephens@aol.com.
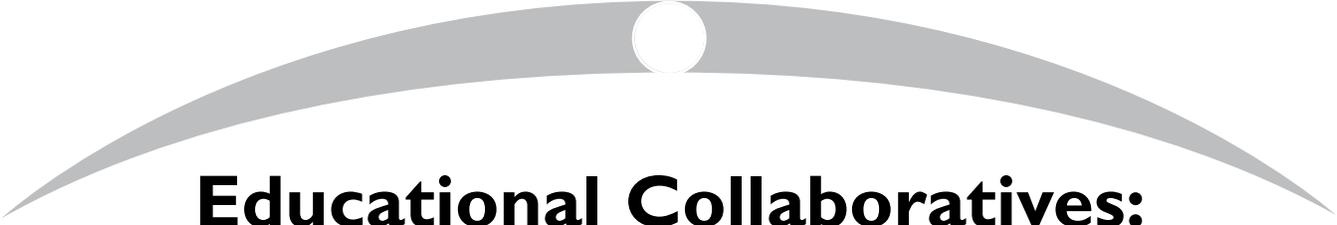
Educational Collaboratives:
Saving Tax Dollars for Massachusetts Schools

by
M. Craig Stanley

The Problem

The American educational system is going through a period of intensive critical evaluation. Numerous studies have demonstrated the need for significant reform in our schools if we are to address the needs of our rapidly changing society. Several national trends have propelled this need for change in our schools, including the following:

- our rapidly escalating trade deficit, indicative of our need to become more competitive in the world economy
- changing demographics in our student population, reflecting a greater diversity in social, economic, and cultural background
- increasing numbers of "at-risk" students, including school dropouts and those with social, emotional, and other difficulties who are unable to profit from the traditional school curricula and require alternative educational services
- a continued disparity between the level of student achievement in affluent suburbs versus inner cities or rural areas
- increased demands for school district accountability, as reflected in the MCAS requirements for Massachusetts students and the provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act
- the increasing difficulty of offering quality education in the face of overwhelming budget constraints, especially acute in Massachusetts, as school districts grapple with the projected revenue shortfall of fiscal year 2004.

This combination of factors presents an apparent dilemma. On the one hand, schools are facing new and complex challenges that require considerable financial resources to address. On the other hand, the ability of our school districts to address these challenges is severely hampered by federal, state, and local budget constraints.

These unprecedented challenges cannot be addressed efficiently if each individual school district tries to meet them alone. To minimize the impact of budget cuts on instructional services to students, public school officials must examine every possible way to streamline administrative and support services so as to maximize cost effectiveness and avoid duplication of effort.

The Solution

Massachusetts has 351 cities and towns and, at last count, 377 operating school districts (includes 46 charter school districts). It also has another 108 nonoperating school districts, districts so small that all students are tuitioned into neighboring districts. With so many school districts, it is incumbent upon our state leaders to look for every possible way to effect economies of scale. Regional educational collaboratives are the answer!

Educational service agencies (ESAs)—known as "educational collaboratives" in Massachusetts—have proven to be very effective organizations for providing educational support services. A review of the function of these agencies in other states indicates that most states utilize their regional agencies to offer a much broader range of services than does Massachusetts and save money as a result. By assuming all the routine support functions required to run an effective public education system, educational service agencies free up the state educational department to provide effective leadership and school districts to provide quality student instruction.

Fear of losing local control over an educational activity can certainly be an obstacle to expanding the use of collaboratives in the Commonwealth. However, as budget constraints become more severe and as fiscal year 2004 approaches, that fear may dissipate against the prospect of a drastic reduction in services or a loss of services altogether. As the old adage goes, "Necessity is the mother of invention."

Studies that compare the costs of regional service provision to the costs of individual school district service provision demonstrate that regional ESAs produce substantial savings. Typical savings range from 15 percent to 50 percent (Stanley, 1992). Studies also indicate that ESAs have the potential to improve overall efficiency, quality, and equity of educational opportunity.

In order to make informed decisions about which programs and services can be offered more efficiently on a regional basis, cost analysis, the basic tool of cost-effectiveness study, is required. A detailed discussion of cost analysis appears in Appendix - Cost Analysis: The Decision-Making Tool.

Which Services Should Be Regionalized?

The activities listed in Table 1 are typically assigned to ESAs in other states (Stanley, 1992). Massachusetts should consider regionalizing these and perhaps other school support services by reviewing available cost data and conducting cost analyses.

Implementation Issues
Composition of Collaborative Regions

Nearly every other state utilizes educational service agencies (ESAs) to provide support services to school districts and to the state education department. *In every other state, all school districts belong to one and only one ESA*. Therefore, the state can effectively and efficiently utilize its ESAs to support all its school districts.

Despite the large number of Massachusetts collaboratives (32) relative to the size of our state (for example, Pennsylvania has only 29, Texas has only 20, and Connecticut has only 6), roughly one-fourth of Massachusetts school districts are not even members of a collaborative. And several school districts are members of more than one collaborative.

Table 1. Support Services to Consider for Regionalization

Administrative and Management Services

- Cooperative purchasing of large volume goods and services
- Data collection and data processing
- Shared Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services
- Shared fiscal services such as payroll and budget preparation
- Management planning
- Insurance coverage
- Student transportation services
- AV/computer repair
- Shared staff, such as legal and medical personnel
- Personnel recruitment and screening
- Energy management
- Facility maintenance
- Safety/risk/crisis management planning

Curricular and Instructional Support

- General staff development
- Leadership training
- Teachers' centers
- Learning resources library (videotapes, DVDs and instructional software)
- Curriculum development
- Technology and telecommunications services
- Printing services
- Student testing and evaluation
- Program evaluation
- College and career fairs
- Shared network of skilled substitute teachers

Education Programs

- Low-incidence special education services
- Itinerant therapy/instruction
- Occupational education
- Enrichment for gifted and talented students
- Hospital and homebound instruction

Twelve to 15 collaboratives, under local governance with state advisement, encompassing all Massachusetts school districts, would be an appropriate number to serve all Massachusetts school districts. Smaller existing collaboratives could be easily incorporated into larger ones, and a new collaborative will need to be developed in northwestern Massachusetts, where there is currently none.

Well–Defined Roles and Responsibilities

Ambiguous roles have contributed to underutilization of collaboratives in Massachusetts. By adopting weak enabling legislation (MGL Chapter 40, Section 4e) in 1974 instead of proactive, visionary legislation, the state virtually guaranteed a limited role for collaboratives. Core roles and responsibilities of educational collaboratives must be clearly defined. By utilizing cost analysis, it should be possible to determine, with some degree of confidence, which activities should be regionalized and what the collaboratives' role should be.

Governance

Each Massachusetts collaborative is governed by a board of directors composed of a representative from each member district school committee or a designee of the school committee, usually the superintendent of schools, and an ex-officio representative of the Department of Education who serves in a non-voting capacity. This structure is dictated by MGL Chapter 40, Section 4e.

Grassroots, local control has generally proven very effective, and when the superintendent serves as the school committee representative on the collaborative board, he or she can act directly on behalf of the district, streamlining the decision-making process. However, a superintendent can sometimes find him- or herself in an uncomfortable position when the interest of the collaborative conflicts with the interest of his/her individual school district. This, combined with the increasingly high turnover rate among superintendents, provides support for a school committee member to serve on the collaborative board instead. School committee members are typically more "connected " to the community over the long term than today's superintendents. The Department of Education representative is extremely important to provide

necessary linkage to the state, but over the last decade, due to cutbacks in staffing, DOE representatives have generally been absent from collaborative boards.

Funding

Most collaboratives in Massachusetts rely on local tuitions and fees as their primary source of revenue. Other states find it cost-effective to distribute some local aid and state grant funds through their ESAs; all school districts can thereby be impacted while the state realizes significant economies of scale, avoids duplication, improves equity among districts, and minimizes the monitoring, record keeping, and other burdensome paperwork involved in tracking grant expenditures from hundreds of individual school districts. The question of how much and what types of state funding should be appropriated directly to collaboratives to provide services to districts would need to be studied and recommendations developed.

The projected cost-effectiveness of funding various initiatives through regional collaboratives is a relatively simple and straightforward endeavor, as outlined in Appendix A. Research indicates the total amount of state funds required to fund any given activity at the existing service level would likely average 33 percent less than the current amount required.

Implementation Plan

Five-Stage Process:

Stage I: The proposed Secretary of Education establishes an Office of Collaborative Development (OCD). This office would be headed initially by a consultant Principal Investigator. Depending on the size and scope of the new collaborative initiatives, the office might later be headed by an appointed Associate Commissioner for Collaboratives (a position similar to the Associate Commissioner for Charter Schools).

Stage II: Within the structure of the State Board of Education, the Secretary and/or the Commissioner establishes a Collaborative Advisory Group (CAG) of state and local education officials, staff, parents, and advocates. CAG examines proposed collaborative structures encompassing all Massachusetts school districts, including the available research on cost effectiveness, to decide which educational support functions to regionalize.

Stage III: Working with legislative staff, CAG drafts enabling legislation, which prescribes the constituent districts and functions for each collaborative, including the governance structure.

Stage IV: CAG advises the Secretary and the Commissioner as to required authorizations with expected review and approval timelines from the Massachusetts Legislature, the Office of the Governor, and the Board of Education.

Stage V: Working with the Secretary, the Commissioner and the Office of the Governor, the Principal Investigator convenes an Implementation Committee of CAG members to roll out the Collaborative Implementation Plan statewide. This Implementation Plan announcement will include an explanation of training and technical assistance to be provided by OCD to all collaboratives and LEAs to insure the success of the new initiatives. The plan will also provide for an evaluation system to monitor the quality and cost-effectiveness of the new service delivery mechanisms, as well as to provide periodic and annual reports to the Secretary, the Commissioner, and the Board of Education.

Timeline: It is reasonable to expect that the first two stages could be completed within six months. If the third stage is "fast-tracked" by the Governor's Office, it is probable that collaborative activities could begin as early as July 1, 2004.

Budget and Staffing: In addition to the consultant Principal Investigator, OCD will need a skilled administrative assistant and a budget analyst. Any additional short-term staffing needs required for the various stages of implementation could be addressed most efficiently through a modest consultant line item.

Cost and Benefits

Not much hard research has been done to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of collaborative programs. However, the results of the following four studies indicate the significant savings that can be realized by adopting a regional approach to educational support services.

The Stanley Study

This research (Stanley, 1992) compared the cost of individual school districts performing six specific services to the projected cost of the districts acting jointly to provide the services. Levin's (1983) cost-utility (CU) and cost-benefit (CB) analyses were utilized to conduct the study (see sidebar).

Actual fiscal year 1990 costs for eight school districts in northeastern Massachusetts were compared to the projected costs of a collaborative service, as determined by the researcher and stakeholders from each of the eight districts participating in the study.

Analyses of the cost data indicated a clear and significant savings in three of the six services studied: shared personnel recruitment/job bank, shared staff for low-enrollment courses, and cooperative purchasing of printing services. Projected savings in these three areas were 39 percent, 78 percent, and 22 percent, respectively. Very slight and insignificant differences in cost were indicated in the grants directory (1.2 percent less expensive) and learning resource library (1.7 percent more expensive). A cost comparison of data-processing administrators indicated that it was not an option they wanted to pursue at the time.

Southwest and West Central ECSU Study

A comprehensive cost-savings analysis was conducted by the Southwest and West Central Educational Cooperative Service Unit in Marshall, Minnesota (1989). For every service offered by this ECSU, the cost through the ESA was compared to the cost if the ESA were not the service provider. Figures for the 1988-1989 school year (FY 89) were used for all analyses. Results for four major service categories follow:

Cost Factors

Levin (1983) describes five general ingredients to consider when computing the cost of an educational service: personnel, facilities, equipment and materials, other inputs (those that do not fit into one of the first three categories), and client inputs (resources contributed by the clients, in this case the participating school districts).

Levin describes four different types of cost analyses used to evaluate educational programs and services, as follows:

• **Cost-effectiveness (CE) analysis** refers to the evaluation of alternatives according to both their costs and their effects with regard to producing some outcome or set of outcomes. The alternative chosen would be the one with the maximum effectiveness per level of cost or the one that requires the least cost per level of effectiveness.

• **Cost-benefit (CB) analysis** refers to the evaluation of alternatives according to a comparison of both their costs and benefits when each is measured in monetary terms. It attempts to measure the values of both the costs and the benefits of each alternative in terms of monetary units, choosing the alternative that has the highest ratio of benefits to costs.

• **Cost-utility (CU) analysis** refers to an evaluation of alternatives according to a comparison of their costs and the estimated utility or value of their outcomes. CU analysis is appropriate when subjective assessments must be made about the nature and probability of educational outcomes as well as their relative values.

• **Cost-feasibility (CF) analysis** refers to the method of estimating only the costs of an alternative to determine whether or not it can be considered, that is, whether or not the costs are within the budget.

Special Education: The cost of services through the ECSU was compared to the cost of services through private schools, mental health centers, and hospitals. During the year under study, member districts paid $1,176,101 to the ECSU, while the cost for the same services through the other providers was $3,767,550. The difference of $2,591,449 represents a 69 percent savings to the participating school districts.

Cooperative Purchasing: The cost of supplies purchased through the ECSU joint bid, $3,324,944, was compared to a cost of $4,443,670, resulting in a savings of $1,118,726, or 25 percent. A breakdown of savings by product indicates the following savings:

    Custodial supplies 28%
    School paper 37%
    Office and classroom furniture and AV equipment 19%
    Computer hardware and supplies 19%
    Cafeteria food 13%
    Miscellaneous supplies 51%

Film Services: The ECSU rental price per film or videotape ($6.84) was compared to the only local alternative available, the film library of the University of Wisconsin, where the cost averaged $21.14 per film or videotape. ECSU fees for this service during fiscal year 1989 were $240,546. The comparison cost would have been $752,909. The ECSU saved $512,363, or 68 percent.

Workshops: The ECSU average daily price per participant for workshops was $27.32. This was compared to an average price of $50 through other sources available to district teachers. During FY 1989, a total of 2,903 educators participated in workshops at a cost of $79,296. The comparative cost was estimated at $145,150. The difference of $65,854 represents a 45 percent savings.

Overall, member school districts of the Southwest and West Central ECSU spent $11,409,798 for collaborative services during fiscal year 1989. Without the benefit of the ECSU, they would have spent an estimated $16,926,415. The difference of $5,516,617 represents overall savings of 33 percent.

Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative 20-Year Longitudinal Study

Since 1979, the Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative (GLEC), a consortium of 10 school districts in northeastern Massachusetts, has been comparing its tuition rates and fee schedules for special education programs and services to rates available in the private sector (Stanley, 1995). Each year, GLEC's rates are compared to the rates of comparable private schools and vendors that are utilized by its member districts. Over the 20-year period between FY 77 and FY 96, Stanley demonstrates that GLEC member districts saved $13,221,163 in special education tuitions alone. This does not include additional savings in transportation costs, gained by having students closer to home than they typically would be if they were attending private schools. Stanley estimates the average savings from interdistrict collaboration to be 33 percent. This is the same figure estimated by the ECSU study described above.

Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives Study

The Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC, 1988) conducted a survey among its 29 member collaboratives to estimate the savings realized by collaborative programs and services. The survey indicated the following savings:

    Special education tuitions ....40% to 60%
    Special needs transportation services ....20% to 30%
    Itinerant therapists (OTs, PTs, SLPs) ....25% to 50%

Although this study was conducted by survey and the estimates of each agency were not able to be verified, it is clear that the savings are indeed significant.

How Does Collaboration Save Money?

Massachusetts school administrators unfamiliar with ESA structures in other states often ask just how a collaborative venture will improve cost-effectiveness, efficiency, quality, and equity of educational opportunity. It may help to look at a specific example.

Professional development for educators is an activity that lends itself well to a collaborative model. If districts pooled their local professional development funds through a collaborative and if the state dispersed its professional development district allocations through collaboratives instead of to each individual school district, the savings would be substantial.

In this example, a regional professional development program does the following:
- *Avoids duplication of services.* Instead of 15 school districts running 15 after-school workshops on No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a collaborative might run three workshops on NCLB in three schools spread out across the collaborative area to enable all teachers in the region to attend.
- *Improves efficiency of administration and coordination.* Each district would no longer need a full- or part-time professional development coordinator; the entire professional development function would be handled by the collaborative.
- *Saves on printing costs.* Each district would no longer have to design and print its own brochures on its professional development opportunities. A larger, more comprehensive schedule of offerings would be distributed to all district educators through the collaborative. In Texas, for example, each of its 20 Educational Service Districts (ESDs) publishes a catalog of several hundred pages of workshops, seminars, and courses available to all educators within the service district.
- *Improves quality.* By pooling state and local resources, the collaborative could contract with a presenter with more expertise than an individual district might be able to afford.
- *Improves equity of opportunity.* Teachers from smaller and/or poorer districts could avail themselves of the same professional development opportunities available to educators from larger or more affluent districts.
- *Insures standardization.* By contracting with fewer presenters, the state Department of Education and its collaboratives could better monitor the content of what is being presented to ensure that all educators are receiving the same information.

This year the Massachusetts Department of Education granted $49.5 million to its school districts for professional development. Next year's allocation is expected to be the same, according to the DOE's FY 2004 Request for Proposals #1: Federal Entitlement/ Allocation Grants: March 2003 publication. If state grant funds for professional development were granted to regional collaboratives instead of to individual school districts, and local funds were also leveraged through the collaborative, the current level of services could be provided for substantially less. Applying the documented range of 15 percent to 50 percent savings to the professional development grant funds alone, we can estimate a reduction in costs of $7.43 million to $24.75 million!

If as little as 10 percent of this year's $3.3 billion Chapter 70 funds were leveraged by local education agencies through collaboratives, the savings statewide could total $49.5 million to $165 million.

Obstacles

Although there are always obstacles to any systemic change, this is an ideal time to introduce a cost-saving regional approach to educational support services in Massachusetts. Some of the obstacles to expanding the use of educational collaboratives in Massachusetts are as follows:

- First and foremost is the Massachusetts tradition of "local control." "No, thank you, I'd rather do it myself" could almost be the Massachusetts slogan when it comes to local government. However, we are in a fiscal crisis, and the need to conserve scarce resources has never been greater. It is said that if folks don't want to give serious consideration to proven cost-saving measures, "They're just not hungry enough." Our budget deficit insures sufficient hunger!
- Second is our reluctance to look at new ways of doing things and review the entrenched systems we have built over the years. However, we now have a new governor who is committed to developing and supporting new ways of providing public services.
- Our state department of education has a history of being less than supportive of educational collaboratives. They have been viewed as merely one of many providers of special education programs and services, along with private schools. Until recently, collaboratives were virtually unrecognized by the state, deemed ineligible to receive most grant funds, never invited "to the table" to discuss any school issues except for special education. Again, the state's fiscal crisis may finally prompt the Department of Education to look to other means of getting its job accomplished. Chief State School Officers in other states frequently say they could never do their jobs without their regional units.
- As is frequently the case, "we are our own worst enemy." Collaboratives in Massachusetts have each evolved in a unique way and carved their own niches. We have 29 collaboratives in our small state, which is far too many. Texas has only 20, and Iowa has 15. However, in the next five years more than half of the state's collaborative directors, many of whom have been with their organizations since their inception in the mid-70s, will retire. This is an ideal time to cut the number of regional units to a more manageable number—12 to 15 would be ideal—or to designate a few key collaboratives to fulfill each major role, such as professional development, purchasing, data processing, transportation, etc.
- Another obstacle, again historical, was Massachusetts's "false start." In the early 70s, we created a dual system of regional entities, setting up six regional DOE centers and, at the very same time, enacting loose and permissive legislation for educational collaboratives. Instead of creating special service districts, under regional governance (not regional government), we instead created extensions of state government and informal cooperatives; neither model is efficient. It's time we correct our previous mistakes and redesign our regional service agencies.
- Finally, the Massachusetts legislation governing educational collaboratives (MGL Chapter 40 Section 4E) merely allows school districts to enter into collaborative agreements with neighboring districts. Collaboration is entirely voluntary, and collaboratives, by definition, are temporary organizations. What is needed is strong legislation that defines the key features and functions of education collaboratives in Massachusetts.

Replication: Models From Other States

"Regional Governance, Not Regional Government"

Because most states have educational service agencies, there are many models from which to choose if we wish to replicate an ESA structure used by another state. Variables to consider include alternative structures, governance models, functions/roles, and funding mechanisms.

Structure: There are three potential structures for educational service agencies: extensions of the state educational agency, special service districts, and informal cooperatives (the structure now utilized by Massachusetts collaboratives). A combination of features from special service districts and informal cooperatives would work best in Massachusetts and is suggested by Stephens (1991) as perhaps the most effective.

Governance: Two states stand out as potential models for governance of Massachusetts ESAs: Connecticut RESAs (regional educational service agencies) and Colorado BOCESs (boards of cooperative educational services). Both are governed by boards composed of representatives of constituent school committees rather than independently elected governing boards. This maintains the operative construct of "regional governance" as opposed to "regional government," a very important consideration since we do not want to create a new layer of government in Massachusetts. States whose ESAs are extensions of the departments of education (New York BOCESs and California County Boards of Education, for example) would not work well in Massachusetts, given our need to streamline rather than expand, the role of state government.

Functions/Roles: Nationally, educational collaboratives fill two major roles. 1) They provide cost-effective support services to school districts, including purchasing, professional development, transportation, substitute teachers, data processing, insurance, legal services, and many others. 2) They manage some of the more unwieldy state educational functions, such as district data collection and teacher licensure.

Iowa and Texas offer much for Massachusetts to consider in the area of programming. Texas' Educational Service Centers (ESCs), for example, offer a complete range of professional development services to districts. Iowa's Area Educational Agencies (AEAs) provide regional data collection and processing services for their constituent districts and their state department.

Funding: Many ESAs receive most of their funding from their state departments of education. Although it would be a grave mistake for Massachusetts to go in this direction, it must consider the cost efficiencies of decentralizing some of the department's unwieldy functions such as teacher certification, a function that has ground to a halt due to cumbersome regulations and lack of support personnel. Also, the state could realize significant economies of scale by using collaboratives to administer many of its grant programs. The entrepreneurial spirit of Massachusetts collaboratives should nonetheless be acknowledged and preserved.

Conclusion

As outlined in the Implementation Plan, in order to coordinate a statewide effort, the proposed Secretary of Education should establish an Office of Collaborative Development (OCD) within the Office of the Secretary of Education or the Office of the Commissioner of Education. OCD's mission would be to enhance and coordinate the Commonwealth's system of regional collaboratives to serve every Massachusetts school district.

The proposed implementation process suggests the development of a Collaborative Advisory Group (CAG) composed of state and local education officials, staff, parents and advocates. Broad representation must be insured. Legislation amending the existing Chapter 40, Section 4e, will need to be developed. The Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives has submitted legislation that is pending in committee. This bill should be reviewed and revised as recommended by the Collaborative Advisory Group.

Key to the success of any implementation plan is the backing of the Governor. Therefore, immediate meetings should be scheduled with his key staff to discuss the feasibility of various implementation plans.

The Office of Collaborative Development has the potential to realize staggering economies of scale. Just as the private sector outsources services that support its core function, public resources can and should be pooled among school districts and leveraged for maximum cost effectiveness. The reorganization required to do this will build on existing structures and follow strategies that have proven to be successful in other states.

References

Association of Educational Service Agencies. Various papers and publications. Arlington, VA.

Batchelder, E. & Stanley, M.C. (1990). MOEC position paper to Massachusetts Department of Education.

Levin, H.M. (1983). *Cost-Effectiveness: A Primer.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (1988). *Programs and Services.* Framingham, MA: Auhor.

Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (1989). *Analysis of Savings Survey.* Framingham, MA: Author.

Minnesota Educational Cooperative Service Units (1988). *Information Handbook 1988–1989.* Marshall, MN: Minnesota Department of Education.

Southwest and West Central Educational Cooperative Service Units (1988). *Cost savings analysis 1988–1989.* Marshall, MN: Author.

Stanley, M.C. (1992). *Analyses of Potential Effectiveness of Educational Collaborative Service Expansion.* Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Stanley, M.C. (1995). *Analysis of Savings through Collaboration: A Twenty Year Longitudinal Study.* Lawrence, MA: Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative.

Stanley, M.C. (1995). Proving ESAs Save Dollars: A Research Design That Works. *Perspectives: A Journal of Research and Opinion about Educational Service Agencies*, 1, (1), 13-22. Arlington, VA: American Association of Educational Service Agencies.

Stephens, E.R. & Turner, W.G. (1991). *Approaching the Next Millennium: ESAs in the Decade of the 1990s.* Arlington, VA: American Association of Educational Service Agencies.

Stephens, E.R. (1989). *A Brief History of State-Sponsored Inter-District Coordination and Some Conjectures About the Future Direction of this Policy Strategy.* San Francisco, CA: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development.

Stephens, E.R. *State Planning for Inter-District Coordination.* College Park, MD: University of Maryland.

Appendix
Cost Analysis: The Decision-Making Tool

The elements of a tested research design follow; the design was developed as part of a doctoral dissertation conducted by the author (Stanley, 1992) at Boston College. The original research involved eight school districts in northeastern Massachusetts, members of the Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative. The design has been modified to apply to this specific endeavor, namely making accurate and informed decisions about which educational support services should be regionalized within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to realize the greatest cost savings while preserving or even enhancing quality of service and equity of services across districts.

The design focuses on determining the potential difference in efficiency (i.e., cost-effectiveness), quality, and equity when a proposed regional collaborative activity is compared to individual school district activities. The design yields a detailed cost comparison between the two options so that potential savings can be calculated.

Broad Representation from Stakeholders: A thorough examination of the potential effectiveness of a new regional activity requires the support and cooperation of many stakeholders. The chances that a collaborative effort will be successful are enhanced if time is spent building a solid foundation of support among key stakeholders.

Therefore, not only should a Collaborative Advisory Group be established before any work has begun, as recommended in the Implementation Plan, but a representative group of educators/school officials responsible for each activity under study should be established. For example, since many of the suggested activities are in the realm of management/administrative services (cooperative purchasing, data processing, fiscal services, maintenance services, transportation), a representative group of school business officials should be involved from the outset.

The researcher must then meet with the stakeholders to develop the regional service delivery model. Their assistance will be vital throughout the study, the recommendation, the approval, and the implementation phases, as the researcher will be relying on them to provide necessary financial and other data.

Development of the Analytic Framework: The regional model developed by the stakeholders must be "costed out" through one of the four types of analysis used to evaluate educational programs and services: cost-effectiveness, cost-benefit, cost-utility, and cost-feasibility (see sidebar on p. 51 for definitions).

Levin's cost-utility (CU) analysis is usually the most useful of the four types of cost-analysis for determining the potential effectiveness of new collaborative service delivery models, as it refers to an evaluation of alternatives according to a comparison of their costs and the estimated utility or value of their outcomes. Cost-utility analysis is appropriate when subjective assessments must be made about the nature and probability of educational outcomes as well as their relative values. Subjective assessments must be utilized when we are dealing with outcomes that cannot be measured accurately in advance, such as student achievement. The stakeholders, therefore, should be the ones who rate the utility of the alternatives, as they are usually in the best position to be able to judge the potential quality of the proposed regional service.

When our primary concern is monetary, such as in considering the savings a regional transportation network or a regional data collection/processing effort might afford to school districts, Levin's cost-benefit (CB) analysis can be employed, as it refers to the evaluation of alternatives according to a comparison of both their costs and benefits when each is measured in monetary terms. Here we can simply choose the alternative that has the highest ratio of benefits to costs.

Therefore, the activity under study is assigned to one of the four types of analyses, the rationale for each assignment explained and the probable cost ingredients of each alternative described.

Data Collection and Analysis: For activities utilizing cost-utility (CU) analysis, stakeholders are asked to judge the utility or value of the two alternatives (individual school district and ESA) on their estimated efficiency (cost-effectiveness), quality of service, and equity across districts. These data are solicited via a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, a response of "5" indicating the stakeholder predicts the ESA activity will result in far greater quality, for example, than the individual school district activity and a response of "1" indicating that the stakeholder predicts the ESA activity will result in far less quality than the individual school district activity.

By applying t-tests to the data, the results of the Likert scale questionnaire indicate the level of significance of the stakeholders' predictions. The t-test is a useful tool, even when working with samples as small as five. Values over .05 are considered significant; generally speaking, the higher the level of significance, the more reliable the prediction. In the author's experience, significance levels as high as .001 are not unusual, meaning that only one time in a thousand would our results be attributable to chance.

Cost data are collected from audited school district financial reports and financial reports filed with and by the state Department of Education. The cost of individual school district activities can then be accurately compared to the projected cost of a regional activity, using Levin's model. By utilizing this research design, we now have comparative cost data as well as predictions on relative efficiency, quality, and equity.

Implementation and Evaluation: Armed with these data, an informed and accurate decision can now be made as to which of the many possible educational support services should be regionalized through collaboratives. Three semi-annual formative evaluations and one final summative evaluation are suggested for each new initiative. A two-year time frame is generally adequate to determine if the collaborative model is resulting in savings to the school districts and/or the Commonwealth.

M. Craig Stanley is executive director of the Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative in Methuen, Massachusetts. He can be reached by phone at 978-685-3000, by fax at 978-689-7466, and by email at cstanley@glec.org.

Making Learning Rigorous Yet Personal:
An ESA/Constituent District Partnership

by
William C. Miller

The Conference on Teaching and Learning is a unique, on-going effort spearheaded by the school leaders in Washtenaw County, Michigan to improve teaching and learning for all students. The superintendents of the 10 local school districts and the intermediate school district (the Michigan version of an ESA) are working together to design and implement a more unified system of programs and services to help each district meet the needs of every student in increasingly diverse populations. Instead of trying to meet those needs as isolated districts, Ann Arbor, Chelsea, Dexter, Lincoln, Manchester, Milan, Saline, Whitmore Lake, Willow Run, and Ypsilanti are addressing this challenge together. The framework for this "conversation" has turned into a countywide initiative that is supporting teaching and learning in Washtenaw County.

The superintendents expanded the "conversation" by convening a stakeholder group representing each district to help develop a shared vision and to identify a set of key strategies for moving schools toward that vision. The stakeholder group included more than 100 parents, teachers, principals, and community members. At the heart of the shared vision this group developed is a desire to personalize learning and create schools that are truly "learner centered."

With the help of the stakeholder group the school leaders identified six key strategies for collective work that are highly interrelated. This group charged the ESA with focusing its resources and energies on helping districts implement those strategies.

We engaged in this process because we recognized the need to manage paradox in policy and practice. As educators, we understand that standards-driven policymakers and reformers expect the same standards to be used to guide the learning of all students and that progress must be documented toward these standards. Educational leaders also realize that in order to achieve optimal success in learning, we must honor every student's perspective as well as the diversity of perspectives from the families we serve. We must also make school a place for students to achieve their personal goals.

Public schools across the nation are under mounting pressure to meet academic demands. With the implementation of NCLB at the state level, external mandates are now accelerating the trend toward measuring the quality of an individual student's education on the basis of a single test score. The high stakes testing and standards-based content design are now being imposed as the sole method of evaluating a community school and those children who attend these schools.

These external mandates can lead to a move toward conformity, uniformity of curriculum and lockstep teaching practice. There are many consequences associated with designing a public education system solely around standardized test performance. Among them are the following:

- the tendency to use a single test score to sort and compare students, schools and communities;
- a lack of customization of instruction;
- an increase in student alienation and resulting drop-out rates;
- exclusion of students who are on the margins of achievement;
- a lack of emphasis on the personal goals that students and families hold;
- pressure to implement teaching approaches that expect all students to learn at the same rate, in the same way, at the same time.

Recognizing these challenges, we collectively developed a countywide, collaborative 11 school district plan (10 locals and the ISD) that integrates the goal of high common standards and expectations with what we have learned about quality teaching practices and learner-centered education.

In the learner-centered discourse that we have adopted, the learner actually builds the curriculum within a standards-based orientation.

The work began two years ago when the area superintendents identified a set of shared, countywide expectations for student learning. Though clearly in line with the Michigan Curriculum Framework, the eight expectations reflect the broader values and purposes of education for all students and define the "common work" of these 10 very diverse local districts. The eight common expectations are:

1. **Literacy:** Students read with fluency and comprehension. They know how to read and write strategically for different purposes. They are well read across a variety of genres. They construct meaning from, analyze, and appreciate text, including electronic and non-print media (e.g., speech, movies, video).

2. **Mathematical Knowledge and Application:** Students are fluent with fundamental mathematical concepts, operations, strategies, modes of representation, problem-solving, and technological tools. They know how to apply their mathematical knowledge strategically for different purposes. They comprehend a variety of representations, including textual, algebraic, geometric, graphic, etc.

3. **Identifying and Accessing Resources:** Students know how to identify and locate information or resources for a range of purposes, from a variety of sources, and by using diverse technological tools. They listen, view, discuss, and read to obtain, interpret, organize, and evaluate information. The information and resources include those related to languages, literature, mathematics, social science, science, technology, physical education and health, the arts, employability, career preparation, and daily life.

4. **Content Knowledge:** Students possess, appreciate, and use, beyond simple recall, knowledge of important concepts, terms, vocabulary, modes of inquiry, operations, relationships, and systems within and across the disciplines of science, mathematics, language arts and literature, social sciences, technology, physical and health education, and the arts.

5. **Complex Thinking:** Students apply creative and complex planning, thinking, reasoning, and/or problem-solving skills to authentic issues, problems, or systems within science, technology, math, language arts and literature, social sciences, the arts, physical education, math, and interdisciplinary issues. These complex thinking skills include making important connections within and across disciplines; i.e., interdisciplinary thinking. Students understand what they are asked to do; they can

define the problem, issue, or request; they can identify relevant information and resources; they can outline approaches or solution strategies and carry them out successfully.

6. **Communication:** Students communicate information, knowledge, strategies, and personal opinions or expressions to a variety of audiences for a range of purposes and occasions. They speak and write well and can be expressive as well as clear and concise, with control of the conventions of writing. They also communicate their ideas effectively in other modes, such as numeric, symbolic, graphic, video, and artistic. They employ good listening and speaking skills as they participate effectively in public discourse.

7. **Personal and Interpersonal Skills:** Students work well both independently and collaboratively in a variety of authentic settings, with people of diverse backgrounds, in a range of roles (e.g., team member, leader, teacher, advocate, mediator). They monitor their own behavior, exhibit self-control, resolve conflicts, evaluate progress (self-assess), adapt to change, and set personal goals.

8. **Habits of Mind:** Students display responsibility, confidence, integrity, eagerness, and curiosity, as well as respect towards learning, their own and that of others. They see themselves as continual learners and show personal investment and pride in their work. They utilize their knowledge and skills as active, constructive participants and responsible citizens in our democratic society.

Following the development of these eight common expectations, we collectively developed a "six-point plan" to assure that students reach these achievement strands. (See Figure 1.)

This ongoing process of sharing, feedback and planning we call the "Conference on Teaching and Learning."

At the heart of this plan is our mutual commitment to the concept of personalized learning. Our moral purpose, built on the principles that ignite our passion to provide the very best education we can for every student, is grounded in this distinct point of view. The concept of personalized learning is grounded in the research on learner-centered schools. (See Table 1.)

Personalized learning means teachers and students share responsibility for learning based upon their mutual understanding of their needs and aspirations. Educators know and develop a relationship with each student and his/her family. Their knowledge and the evolving relationship are then used to collaboratively plan and direct that young person's education based upon the Washtenaw County common expectations. Together, teachers and students determine and agree to learning opportunities, instructional choices and assessment criteria.

To implement personalized learning at the district, school and classroom level, the ESA has had to redesign our support structures, collaborative committee work, professional development and resource allocation system. This redesign has resulted in a focus on building leadership for the implementation of personalized learning. "Ideas in action school" sites have been identified and supported. Work groups, involving broad-based local representation, have guided the work at the county level.

To implement the "six-point plan," each of the strategies has a corresponding leadership work group. Most work groups are meeting monthly to move the "conference" from conversation to action. The groups have representatives from each district and WISD and are co-facilitated by WISD and district leaders. Some examples of work group activity include:

- A work group of local curriculum leaders from each district has reviewed current research documents and has identified practices most closely connected to improvements in student

achievement, regardless of race, class, or gender. The group, focusing on the effective instructional practices strategy, has endorsed the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards as the "standards of practice" for Washtenaw County teachers. The professional development offering at WISD are constructed around these practices.

• A county-wide Assessment Work Group, with a representative from each local district, has created a template that has been used by local districts to develop a balanced approach to assessment. This tool can be used to give teachers feedback about classroom instruction, measure and communicate individual student progress toward county-wide learning expectations, and report the state of the public schools in Washtenaw County to the community.

Figure 1

Common/High Expectations
(All students meet the Washtenaw County expectations for student learning)

Effective Instructional Practices
(Research based instructional strategies are evident across all schools)

Multiple Assessments
(A system of balanced assessment that informs instruction, measures individual student performance and provides information for the community)

Teaching/Learning Teams
(Professional teams of educators wrap resources around all students)

Early Childhood/ Family Support (0-5)
(Working with the community for a successful early start)

- The superintendents, special education directors, and curriculum leaders from each district met at WISD to discuss how general and special educators might work differently to wrap services around students before they fail. The Teaching and Learning Teams initiative involves efforts at both the district and state levels. Three districts are engaged in an instructional consultation model to implement this strategy.
- First Steps Washtenaw (FSW), launched in the spring of 2001 as a county-wide program offered through every local school district, is working with community agencies to support early childhood and family education. FSW offers school readiness support to all families with children ages 0-5, including:
  Home visits,
  Parent/child playgroups,
  Parent support/information groups,
  Periodic screening to assess overall development,
  Connections to quality preschool services and
  Connections to community resources.

Implementing the concept of personalized learning has been challenging for policy makers. Internal differences in how to implement the concept have evolved into a split in approach. In some districts the leaders are pushing for a standard "form" for developing the personalized plan. Other leaders have been content to focus on a secondary educational development plan (EDP) as evidence of personalized learning. Implementing changes at the classroom practice level has been extremely challenging, with the simplified alternative being opting for a process that involves a written personalized plan. Issues of teacher time for communication with families have been difficult to resolve on a large scale. The development of models for solving these challenges to personalization rest with the "Ideas in Action" school locations. Work with these schools continues to evolve with support from the ESA team.

With the adoption by Washtenaw County Superintendents' Association of the characteristics of personalized learning, each district identified teacher leaders and principals who effectively use the principles of personalized learning in their classrooms. These local leaders play an important role in providing the professional development for "Ideas in Action" schools.

This clarity of vision around personalized learning within the ESA and among the ESA and local constituents has led to unprecedented alignment of effort. This has not occurred without numerous setbacks. The turnover rate among superintendents has resulted in a continuous need to revisit the plan and recommit to the common goals. In the past year 50% of the superintendents are new to their position. Of the current eleven school district leaders, three are beginning their first superintendency. The constant turnover makes collaboration difficult, especially when the leaders are faced with the many new demands brought on by NCLB, plus a new state accreditation system and a significant state education budget problem.

Personalized learning is designed to assure that all students achieve the county-wide high common expectations. To do this, we are developing assessments, data collection devices and infrastructure to allow teachers to use student information about progress to change instruction. Time to plan, share and examine data on student learning has been built into the process of instituting personalized learning. This includes the web-based pilot project utilizing the Scantron Performance Series for assessment of student progress in reading and math, as well as administering a high school senior exit survey. The implementation of these common assessment systems has been complicated by the increasing emphasis being placed on the state assessment test results and the associated "adequate yearly progress" standard. Multiple data reporting systems continue to be piloted and evaluated.

Table I

Essential Characteristics of Personalized Learning	Rationale for Using Personalized Approaches to Learning	School Practices
Teachers and students share responsibility for learning based upon their mutual understanding of their needs and aspirations.	[1]The distinctiveness and uniqueness of each learner must be attended to and taken into account if learners are to engage in and take responsibility for their own learning.	✓ Socratic seminars based upon authentic questions related to core knowledge are common. ✓ The individual student plan is monitored by teacher, student, and family.
Teachers, students, and families increase their capacity to trust one another in order for students to become independent learners.	[2]Learners' unique differences include their emotional states of mind, learning rates, learning styles, stages of development, abilities, talents, feelings of efficacy, and other academic and nonacademic attributes and needs. These must be taken into account if all learners are to be provided with the necessary challenges and opportunities for learning and self-development.	✓ Allow students to make choices. ✓ Allow students to select their own learning activities and ways to demonstrate how they learn. ✓ Allow for continuous home/school feedback.
Teachers and students identify and use their individual learning styles and background, prior knowledge, and experiences to guide, construct and maximize learning opportunities.	[2]Learning is a constructive process that occurs best when what is being learned is relevant and meaningful to the learner and when the learner is actively engaged in creating his or her own knowledge and understanding by connecting what is being learned with prior knowledge and experience.	✓ Help students surface their primary learning styles. ✓ Present learning opportunities that are varied and open to student suggestion
Together, teachers and students determine and agree to learning options (opportunities), instructional choices, and assessment criteria.	Regular planning and review of the curriculum and instructional organization are necessary for the communication and monitoring of learning by the student and teacher.	✓ Project-based learning ✓ Student-driven units of study ✓ Co-constructed rubrics and student choice of learning opportunities ✓ Evidence of scaffolding instruction ✓ Differentiated instruction
Families support the implementation of the individual student program at school and home.	[2]Learning occurs best in a supportive environment, one that contains positive interpersonal relationships and interactions, that contains comfort and order, and in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated. (Though families are the child's first and most important teachers, positive involvement with the school is of utmost importance to maximizing individual achievement.)	✓ Model educational values embedded in the common expectations ✓ Support instruction in school by providing feedback on a regular basis of their perceptions of student progress ✓ Generate learning opportunities at home and in the community
Teachers, students, and families co-plan an individual student program based on the Washtenaw County Common Expectations for student learning.	The family, teacher and student working together create the optimal educational plan.	✓ Individual student plans ✓ Student led conference ✓ Self-assessment of individual weekly progress
Post Secondary Transitioning Teachers, students, and families prepare for transition to post school life through a personal plan that identifies goals and alternative means to reach their goals.		

[1] Adapted from the Five Premises of the Learner-Centered Model found in McCombs, B. L. & Whistler, J. (1997). *The learner-centered classroom and school: Strategies for increasing student motivation and achievement.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

[2] Taken directly from the Five Premises of the Learner-Centered Model.

[3] Taken directly from the Five Premises of the Learner-Centered Model.

Personalized learning is an evolutionary idea, not a revolutionary one. The time for personalization of learning has come with the advent of the information age and relational data-bases. We are learning how to design and implement personalization and high standards for achievement simultaneously. Once the idea of personalization is accepted and support to implement the concept has been developed, then the teaching challenge is to fit the skills and content to the learner rather than fit the learner to the curriculum.

Finally, implementing personalized learning means that we must believe in our students and trust that our students will do their very best.

William C. Miller, Ph.D., is superintendent of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He can be reached by phone at 734-994-8100, by fax at 734-994-2203, and by email at wcmiller@wash.k12.mi.us.

Did Statewide Strategic Planning Work?
A Ten Year Perspective

by
J. Gary Hayden

In the early 1990's, the Chief Administrators of Iowa's 15 Area Education Agencies (AEAs) began discussing the need to focus more on working together as one statewide system. A significant amount of that discussion focused on the need to develop a statewide strategic plan as a way to identify and focus on those activities needing more statewide emphasis.

These discussions culminated in a decision to conduct a statewide strategic planning effort involving all 15 AEAs. The Chief Administrators decided to use the Cambridge Management process in this effort. An outside consultant was hired to facilitate the planning effort.

The purpose of this article is to examine the statewide planning effort approximately ten years after the first planning session. It is an attempt to evaluate the impact of the planning on Iowa's AEAs by reviewing what has happened since the original planning in 1991. In addition to the original planning session, a second planning session was held eleven months later with an update of the plan being done in 1993.

First Planning Session

The first session in this process was held in mid-November, 1991. A broad-based team of 33 persons met in Des Moines. The team comprised all of the major stakeholder groups impacting AEAs in Iowa. During the three-day session, team members developed the strategic plan following the format used by Cambridge Management Associates.

The Mission developed by the group exemplified the desired focus for the AEAs statewide. It read:

"The Mission of Iowa Area Education Agencies is to lead the transformation of the early childhood, elementary, secondary educational system into universally recognized excellence by the year 2000, by providing quality equitable services which meet the needs of our clients through a cooperative network of innovative regional service centers."

A set of beliefs compatible with the mission statement was then developed. Eight belief statements focused on the concepts of change, high expectations (all people can learn), lifelong learning, partnerships and safe environments.

The group also developed parameters to focus the statewide efforts. The parameters developed by the planning team are applicable today. They were:

- We will not supplant or be in direct competition with any programs provided by LEAs.
- We will not initiate any new programs or services that do not contribute to the achievement of our mission.
- We will initiate only those services that project a favorable return on investment. All AEAs will commit to the mission of the AEA statewide system.

There were 10 strategies defined by the planning team. A listing of each strategy and implementation results isx defined below. The specific strategies were the following:

STRATEGY 1: "We will externally and internally strategically organize all AEAs into a network of innovative regional service centers to accomplish the stated mission."

RESULTS: Two parts of the state, the northwest and the northeast, involving 8 of the 15 AEAs, formally developed regional programs and services. Other AEAs participated in some regional activities, but developed no formal organization to do this. Another part of this action plan included developing a central clearinghouse for facilitating communication, sharing, and innovative projects. No "official" clearinghouse was really implemented, but innovative projects were developed.

There has been collaboration with other, mostly statewide, initiatives. A website, a Contemporary Leadership training program, and a statewide testing protocol for math and science are three of the most significant of these activities.

STRATEGY 2: "We will develop partnerships with local education systems and all stakeholders to achieve transformation."

RESULTS: Each AEA developed partnerships with local schools. Some AEAs developed a contract with their local schools to specifically define those programs and services the AEA will deliver to the school. In the past few years, there has been extensive involvement with local schools to assist each school in developing and implementing their comprehensive school improvement efforts.

In 2001 a mentoring and induction program for new teachers was started in Iowa. AEAs are heavily involved in the training of mentors for this program.

STRATEGY 3: "We will assist our clients in developing community partnerships which work toward assuring that every student is ready to learn every day."

RESULTS: The action plans for this strategy focused on improving early childhood services, developing partnerships with community providers, initiating a directory of family-support groups, piloting interagency collaboration, unifying community agencies for service delivery and fostering parent role awareness. The area of early childhood has been an active area for AEAs during all of the years of existence of AEAs. The AEAs worked with the Department of Education to place early childhood consultants in all of the regions of the state. These consultants were part of the AEA structure. The AEAs also have facilitated the deployment of empowerment zones throughout the state to promote early childhood services. The empowerment zones have involved the Departments of Social Services and other community organizations. This strategy involved regional activities rather than statewide activities.

STRATEGY 4: "We will provide staff development that results in clients possessing the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their mission."

RESULTS: Staff development serving all school personnel has also had major emphasis since the inception of the AEAs. In 2000 alone there were over 40,000 participants statewide in professional development activities. However, programs have been implemented through individual AEAs rather than designed for a statewide audience. There were, however, a few statewide projects such as the Iowa Behavioral Initiative.

STRATEGY 5: "We will create awareness among all Iowa Educators and within all Iowa communities of the need for educational change."

RESULTS: This strategy involved sharing information among educators and communities on current and future societal issues and their implications for needed changes in education. This strategy was implemented through the individual AEAs. Getting the information to all communities proved a daunting task and was not extensively accomplished. However, position papers on key issues were developed.

STRATEGY 6: "We will develop a variety of prototypes for transformation which lead towards educational excellence in each AEA."

RESULTS: Many of the AEAs developed or adopted research-based models or programs to demonstrate innovative methods in teaching and learning. No specific statewide prototype was developed, yet there was significant sharing of this information among AEAs. Individual AEAs worked with their schools and directly focused on the development of useful models.

STRATEGY 7: "We will help our clients develop the student outcomes necessary for success as lifelong learners in the 21st century."

RESULTS: AEAs have recently been working with local schools in developing standards and benchmarks. Other planning initiatives in Iowa, such as the "Comprehensive School Improvement Planning," have helped keep this focus. The evolution of other planning initiatives has helped implement this strategy.

STRATEGY 8: "We will motivate and provide support to our clients so they can design and implement their own change plans."

RESULTS: The objectives for this strategy focused on initiating transformation teams for each AEA and local school. Implementing processes included study groups in schools led by an AEA facilitator that would discuss how to achieve significant change. AEAs continue to be heavily involved with schools in helping them achieve transformation. Most AEAs have teams that work with schools in this area. Much of this activity occurred during the last few years when comprehensive school improvement evolved as a major emphasis by the state. Again, the strategic plan identified a cutting edge issue, and though implementation was not immediate, it continues today.

STRATEGY 9: "In collaboration with our clients we will establish innovative and efficient services and resources to support transformation so as to maximize flexibility and freedom of choice."

RESULTS: Action plans focused on a clearinghouse of innovative transformational services and cooperation among regional consortia of AEAs to promote transformation. The electronic clearinghouse was not implemented. Some AEAs work together regionally on topics concerning school transformation and school improvement.

STRATEGY 10: "We will work with stakeholders to identify and access increased resources from traditional and non-traditional sources to achieve our strategic objectives."

RESULTS: The action plans focused on developing a statewide system for resource procurement and seeking out traditional and non-traditional funding for schools. Grant writing service development was also part of this strategy. No specific AEA group focused on identifying possible funding sources outside of regular funding channels. AEAs did participate in federally funded grants for special projects that focused on transformation. Regular state funding for AEAs has not expanded significantly. Funding has even been reduced for AEAs because of state revenue shortfalls. Because of continuous legislative scrutiny, AEAs have had to focus on maintaining current funding sources.

A Planning Update

The update of the strategic plan occurred in the early part of 1993 and resulted in a basic reaffirmation of the existing plan The team felt progress was being made even though it was perhaps not as rapid as many had hoped. It appeared that people realized how difficult it was to implement a strategic plan on a statewide basis. Probably no plan for any organization is fully implemented within the first year or two.

Critical Issues

As part of the 1993 update of the statewide strategic plan, the planning team identified critical issues affecting the AEA system. Two foci were identified in this process: surfacing the greatest opportunities and the greatest threats to achieving the plan.

Significant threats
- Loss of LEA support and trust;
- Inability to create a functional team back home to support implementation;
- Lack of total commitment to the mission;
- Failure to recognize and address the needs of local schools.

These four threats proved to be important ones as one looks back over the years. What was not identified at that time was the potential threat of the legislature, governor and other influential individuals and groups questioning the viability of the AEAs. A second issue not identified by the group was the continual limitation on funds available from state and local funding sources particularly arising from state financial shortfalls.

Evidence suggests that fear of loss of LEA support and trust has not happened. Customer satisfaction with the AEAs is very high today. Two significant studies have confirmed significant support. One of these studies was commissioned by the AEAs themselves and was conducted by the North Central Regional Education Lab and Dr. Robert Stephens. The second study was conducted by the Iowa Department of Education. The focus of AEA work on "Meeting needs of local schools and particularly focusing on school improvement," listed as a threat, has not been a real threat because of the increased focus of AEAs working with their local schools.

Significant Opportunities
- Many entities are looking for viable facilitators to be drawn from the collective network resources.
- Statewide planning offers opportunities to maximizing AEA talent across the state.
- AEAs are able to recognize and address the needs of local schools before they are requested and thereby exceed the expectations of local districts.
- Working as a team with the Department of Education in providing service to the LEAs in facilitating their school improvement efforts will provide synergy to the efforts of both parties.

The greatest opportunities that were identified appear to have been valid as one looks back over the decade. Teaming with the AEAs has become a critical need for the Department of Education because of reduced funding and resulting staff cutbacks the last few years. Working with school improvement has been an important area of collaboration because of the high emphasis placed on it by states and the federal government. AEA staff members have worked extensively with schools, the Department of Education and others in this area.

AEAs have also pursued collaborative efforts with agencies other than schools. Many of these entities have realized the talents available throughout the AEA system. All AEAs have worked closely with individual schools to jointly identify areas where the AEAs can assist the local schools in their improvement efforts.

While other significant opportunities could have been identified, the four opportunities seem to be very consistent with the evolving work and issues of the schools.

Organizing for Implementation

In 1994, the Chief Administrators of the AEAs began discussing the need to hire a person to coordinate the statewide activities that were developing. It was agreed that the role of this person should be one of facilitating the implementation of the statewide strategic planning activities. This proposal was discussed in each of the AEAs and through our statewide governance structure.

In 1995, the AEAs statewide agreed to jointly hire a person for 60 days a year to serve as a statewide coordinator of strategic planning efforts. Her title is Joint Services Coordinator. Since the initial hiring, the days she serves the AEAs has been expanded to 90 days a year. Her position has also evolved beyond implementing the AEA statewide strategic plan. She is involved in a variety of meetings representing the AEAs. Examples of these include attending State Department of Education meetings impacting AEAs, and working with a variety of AEA committees. The Joint Services Coordinator has worked very effectively to coordinate planning efforts and activities of the AEAs. However, during the last few years her efforts have focused on planning and implementation efforts other than the statewide strategic plan.

Other Planning Efforts

Since the statewide strategic plan, a number of other planning efforts have taken place which directly impact the AEA system. While these activities do not specifically align with the statewide strategic plan, they do correspond to the evolution of statewide activities of the AEA system.

NCREL Study

As noted earlier, in 1997 a massive study of the AEA system was conducted by the North Central Regional Education Lab (NCREL) and Dr. Robert Stephens of the Institute for Regional and Rural Studies in Education. The impetus for this study was a result of discussions among the Chief Administrators. At that time, it seemed that there were a number of comments being made by legislators and others expressing dissatisfaction with the AEAs. Typically, no specific areas of dissatisfaction came into focus. As a way to counter the perceived lack of support, the AEAs commissioned the study by NCREL and Dr. Stephens. There were two primary purposes for the study. They were: (1) To create objective data/information about AEA system performance; and, (2) To develop a baseline of data as part of a new AEA Accreditation System that had been mandated. (See below for further details.) It was an external and objective evaluation of the AEA system, and it included input from a variety of stakeholder groups (including legislators). The final report included 46 recommendations from the researchers.

Administrative groups representing the 15 AEAs studied the recommendations and focused follow-up efforts on those recommendations that were considered to have the highest in priority. It is important to remember that the results of the study were positive. The AEAs are still working to implement several of the high priority recommendations.

State Survey

In 1998 the AEA Statewide Planning Steering Committee conducted a statewide study of AEAs in order to determine the areas of focus that AEA personnel felt would be most appropriate for statewide implementation. This survey was an outcome of the NCREL study. It, again, was separate from the initial statewide strategic plan. Ten prioritized areas for potential statewide system efforts were identified.

AEA Accreditation

In 1997 the Iowa Legislature passed a law authorizing the Department of Education to implement an accreditation system for all of the AEAs. The accreditation planning took effect in the fall of 1997. Each AEA wrote its own comprehensive accreditation plan focusing on the specific components of planning identified by the State Department of Education. The AEAs supported this legislation as a way of assuring the legislature and others that AEAs were focusing on educational issues of major concern. The plan specifically identified four academic areas (math, science, reading and language arts) and seven program and service areas. The program and service areas initially included special education, technology, school and community planning, instructional media services, curriculum, professional development, and discretionary services. Beginning with the 2001 plan, the areas of leadership and management services were added to expand the number to nine standards (earlier identified as program and service areas). "Discretionary services" was dropped as an area, and "special education" was changed to "diverse learning needs and inclusive schools," each as a separate standard.

Legislative Definition of Mission

During this period, a law passed by the legislature defined the mission of AEAs to be "To provide an equitable education for all students in Iowa." This provided a much narrower focus than the mission statement derived from the statewide strategic planning process.

AEA Reorganization/Restructuring Study

The 2000 legislative session produced a law requiring the State Department of Education to conduct a study of AEAs and make recommendations to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The final report had four recommendations regarding reorganization and restructuring of the AEAs. It identified nine AEAs that were losing population to the extent that they needed to consider merging with one of the six other AEAs or with each other in some manner.

Other Laws

Two other laws have impacted the AEAs. In 1998 legislation was passed to increase standards for accreditation of local schools. The law mandated comprehensive school improvement planning (CSIP) for all schools. The AEAs are heavily involved in working with local schools in such areas as assessment, standards and benchmarks and curriculum improvement. This effort is very similar to one of the strategies of the AEA statewide strategic plan. AEAs have a specifically mandated role in working with low performing schools.

During the 2001 legislative session a law focused on Teacher Quality and Student Achievement was approved. One part of the law required mentoring and induction of new teachers. The AEAs have taken the lead in training mentors. The mentoring tracks back to the AEA statewide strategic plan.

What Happened?

The primary intent of this article is to look back to 1991 and 1993 and review what results occurred from the strategic planning process. As part of that review of the past, it is important to consider what other events and planning efforts occurred through the years.

The events, studies, and legislative actions that occurred after the original strategic planning effort had a great impact on statewide planning by AEAs. Though they engendered results that were very consistent with the goals of the original strategic plan, the primary effect of the intervening events has been to cause AEAs to focus on new activities rather than continue working to implement the strategic planning tasks as originally designed.

Summary

Planning by AEAs on a statewide basis proved very difficult for a voluntary association. We found that it was difficult to get significant buy-in and effort from all AEAs. This happened for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most obvious was the fact that each AEA had its own initiatives, and agendas that were important to them. Their first focus was on their own work plans before turning attention to statewide efforts.

The most positive outcome of the statewide strategic planning effort was that it did encourage and promote the notion that AEAs constituted a statewide system. The number of statewide cooperative efforts has expanded since the original strategic planning process. This planning strategy set the stage for more cooperative efforts and collaboration by the AEAs. This has been a landmark outcome of the process.

The reader must also keep in mind that this article summarizes changes that occurred prior to 2001. Since then other issues have impacted AEAs, including the No Child Left Behind legislation, a state financial shortfall and the hiring of a state "coordinator" for AEAs.

J. Gary Hayden retired as the chief administrator of Area Education Agency 4 in Sioux Center, Iowa in 2001. He may be reached by phone at 520-744-4640, by fax at 520-744-8421 and by email at garyhayden@msn.com.

Service As a Value Proposition for ESAs

by
Edward T. Frye

I often ask ESA leaders around the country what they are offering their clients. They usually respond with a rather generic mission statement: "We seek to provide the best educational programs and services at the lowest possible price." At first blush, this seems reasonable enough. However, I believe this "good stuff cheap" stance is untenable for the long haul in the new educational marketplace. This belief is based on three realities.

Here is the first reality. In the cold, gray light of dawn, ESAs are no more about education than breakfast cereals are about nutrition, cars about safety, beer about taste, or newspapers about news. Businesses are driven by sales; profitability is a requirement. Profitability comes from the manufacture and marketing of products or services that consumers want or need. For Revlon, it's lipstick; for Domino's, it is pizza; for H & R Block, it is tax returns. Each must have an allure, a "value proposition," to the consumer. If that means making the cereal more nutritious, cars more crashworthy, beer more flavorful, or papers easier to read, that is what the company will do.

Our products happen to be educational programs and services. For a moment, let us suspend any romantic, lofty, altruistic notion that we serve the public good, or that the education of children is altogether different than any other industry. While we are certainly vital to our communities, districts, and children, often the most damaged among them, let us not think that ESAs should provide our services for zero gain.

Increasingly, because of stringent funding changes, ESAs are no longer wards of the state, robustly supported by government largesse. To survive, ESAs must now be more entrepreneurial, carving out specific marketplace niches. Like it or not, we have to sell something—and make some money doing it—or we and all our wonderful programs perish. In this regard, we are similar to any other business. Simply put: no margin, no mission.

Price, Quality, and Service—Pick Two

So how do we go about carving out our marketplace niche? We may take some lessons from our colleagues in private enterprise.

That brings us to a second reality. No matter what the enterprise, be it finance, landscaping, food, sneakers, construction, or education, there are really only three things for sale: Price, Quality, and Service. Savvy business people develop a personal and organizational passion for up to two of these feature benefits, making those the "value added" benefits that they intend to sell. They focus all business behaviors, from product development to marketing, around these one or two features, allowing the third to fall where it must.

Despite the claims of some dubious advertisers, few successful businesses attempt to seduce intelligent consumers with proclamations that they sell the highest quality item at the lowest price while offering world class service. Because lowest price is a non-viable market stance for a company specializing in high quality products and service, any salesperson promising this is either disingenuous or unclear with regard to a marketing plan.

So, how is price, either alone or in tandem with another benefit, addressed in marketplace? Sometimes, it depends on the client base. Many one-time sale enterprises, knowing that they will probably never see the same customer twice, deflect any real discussion of quality or service. The boardwalk jeweler is a good example; he simply points to the 75% discount signs in the window. "Lowest price, period" is the advertising tact taken by such vendors.

Because ESAs are expecting long-term, repeat business from our clients, the strategy of focusing on price only is not particularly useful. So we generally do what other businesses often do; we tie it to another feature benefit.

Home Depot is one of only a few businesses that attempts to tie price to high service. Home Depot has competitive pricing, but has worked hard to position itself as the most service-oriented, client-friendly warehouse purveyor. They can focus on price and service because most of their products are made by someone else, so they have little control over quality. In most industries, however, a service/cost approach is simply too labor-intensive, and low quality goods are not worth servicing anyway.

Instead some businesses, discount stores for example, pair low price with high quality. Most electronic gadgets are easier and cheaper to throw away than to service, so the people selling them feature price and quality, not product support. That is what many ESAs do; we try to become the Wal-Mart of the educational world.

It is easy to see how we fall into this trap. Discussions with clients so often involve dollar signs that we begin to believe that high prices, real or perceived, are the problem. This is where the trouble starts. The tail—price—begins to wag the dog. Assuming we have high-quality offerings, and that quality is what the customer wants, we fixate on low price as the way to close the sale. Because we are unwilling to lower the quality of the program, we slash prices or offer programs "at cost."

In attempts to control costs, we start the knee-jerk, chain reaction to price complaints. We bargain hard with our unions, we shave support services, we devote fewer resources to staff development, we keep machinery too long, and we skimp on materials. We do so at our own peril, because all this ends up affecting the quality of our offerings anyway. We are then left with no position in the market.

And what is the message to the consumer of all these price reductions? It must be that a quality product does not cost any more than an adequate one, or that the original price was inordinately inflated in the first place.

ESAs ought to forget attempts to be the cheapest option available to our districts. From an educational view, do we want to be the lowest cost provider, the bargain basement model of school services? That is unfair to the children, who deserve the best we can offer them, not the cheapest. Second, it isn't fair to our staff, a staff with more specialized training and skills than present in most districts we serve. Third, it keeps our profit margin inordinately low. That thwarts the development of new programs and services for the same clients clamoring for cheap programs now but more of them later.

I am certainly not recommending price gouging. We probably ought to seek some mid-point—or high

end mid-point—in the price ranges available to our clients. We need to position ourselves as the "best buy," not the "cheapest buy" and help our clients understand the difference.

A focus on price is a myopic, losing strategy for ESAs. Actually, price is probably not the real reason why high-quality programs are not growing in the marketplace. When clients complain about high prices, they often do so because they do not value, or are unaware of the programs and services actually provided for that fee. This "disconnect" between cost and benefit is the problem we ought to be attacking. More on this later.

Businesses selecting quality as their value added do not worry about price. The Rolls Royce salesman says, "If you have to worry about the price, you can't afford it." Instead, the focus is on craftsmanship, quality materials, enhanced status, or the investment value of the purchase. French restaurants do the same thing.

I have yet to meet an ESA leader who tells me that he/she has simply lousy offerings. Instead, these leaders tell me that they have great programs. Their staff is exceptional, well educated, child-centered, and professionally motivated. They report adequate facilities, up-to-date materials, and a reputation for quality.

So we often attempt to sell quality. This presents some problems. Touting top quality alone decreases potential market size. If everyone thought highest quality was the only thing to purchase, we would all be wearing Rolex watches and Gucci shoes. However, some clients can't afford the highest quality, but are reluctant to say it. Others don't value quality as much as a bargain. My own experience with this approach has not been good. Several years ago my ESA lost a nationally validated program because my superintendents just didn't want to pay world class prices for it, great as it was.

Just offering high quality programs will not be enough.

Good businesses know this, so they tie great quality to great service, allowing both to be reflected in the price. Trendy mail order houses, boasting designer labels and liberal return policies, commonly take this approach. Lexus owners can expect to have their cars picked up and delivered for routine servicing. High-end fashion designers and tailors make house calls for the convenience of their clients.

Companies that offer a service rather than a product—housecleaning, auto repair, and auditing, for example—necessarily advertise the high quality of that service. Quality to them is in the service itself, not in a product. Companies featuring service usually advertise the convenience of the service—"We deliver free," "We'll pick you up," "Leave the driving to us"—offering turnkey or "total solutions" to the client's problems.

Service providers point to the thoroughness, the attention to detail, and the meeting of customer needs as the value added. Their message is, "You get what you pay for."

Nine Suggestions for Making Service a Value Proposition

So, we have this mix and match process of price, quality, and service. We have eliminated simply focusing on price or quality as robust strategies. We also eliminated matching price and quality. We are left with service and how that may fit into the positioning of ESA offerings.

Let's assume that ESA leaders are correct in their conviction of existing quality. We will assume also that their clients share that conviction. Certainly quality should be one of our two value added elements.

We are left with service as our second selection. It is a very good choice, if we know what to make of the opportunity. I think ESAs need to become the educational marketplace leaders with regard to quality and service. And the greater of these is service. Service sells.

I believe the viable future of ESAs lies in how well we can pair our already high-quality offerings to excellent service, not low prices. We should make our clients aware of our service as a value proposition worth what we are charging them for it. We have to groove this pitch as if our futures depended on it. They probably do. This is our third reality.

There are essential attitudes and actions that must be part of ESA operations, and certainly our marketing plans, if we wish to sell exceptional service as one of our value propositions. Here is an abbreviated list of examples.

1. Make your service visible.

In his wonderful little book, *Selling the Invisible*, Harry Beckwith (Warner Books, 1997) reminds us that, unlike most product sales, the provision of service is often invisible to the client. Because a product is tangible, its quality can often be judged by how long it lasts, how well it performs, how aesthetically pleasing it is, and so on. But services often aren't seen because they are provided in places removed from the paying client. That makes it difficult for the client to value them.

Few ESA clients really know and understand what we do for them. They would value us more, they would do business with us forever, and they would pay high-end fees to get our services if we could just make our stuff more visible. Great service must be evident to the client. It all starts with communication.

If you are working for someone, never let him/her forget that fact. Define what the specific services you are offering in terms that go beyond "regular maintenance." Show the client how the professional support you offer is an integral part of the quality program that they can see. Meanwhile, offer new ideas, solve simple problems for them at no charge. Issue a personalized client report to them, reviewing what you are doing for them at what cost with what results. Give them some good news about your end of their business. Share relevant articles and books with them.

"Dollarize" your work so clients know everything they are getting, including support services. List beside each item cost the critical services/support each provides. Show them the consequential costs of not using us. Otherwise, we risk losing their business.

Saying thanks is a great way to communicate with someone. Good sales people thank the client immediately after the sale. Excellent ones find ways to do it continually.

2. With six you get eggroll.

I call my financial advisor/tax preparer several times a year. I ask for advice, for IRS rule interpretations, and for ways to trim my tax exposure. He doesn't charge for that service. "That's what I am here for," he always says cheerfully. Then, for preparing my tax return in late March, he charges me the high-end rate for that convoluted task. I can't imagine ever changing financial advisors.

We all like to get something extra—something for nothing. Give that to your client. From the sales phase forward plan to provide more to the client than required or expected. Don't charge clients for incidental and unexpected occurrences. Always exceed your contract demands. Do not exceed the contract figure. That's known as "bait and switch," and it is irritating.

Given most service industries today, delivering a service on time or earlier than expected has come to be viewed as an "extra." Did you ever wait for the cable guy to arrive? He said he would be there by noon; maybe he showed up at 2:00. When that happened to me, I got a satellite dish. Competent and trustworthy service providers know that keeping promises, beyond simple courtesy, is good business. My advice: promise P.M. and deliver A.M.

Don't give clients a song and dance about why you failed to deliver on time. Clients don't care what problems you encounter along the way. They don't want excuses or reasons. They want to feel as if they are the most important things in your world. Let them know that they are.

3. Minimize inconvenience for the client.

I could put fertilizer on my own yard; I could roll sealant on my own driveway. I do neither, but not because they are too technical or backbreaking. I let contractors do both for me because I do not want to spend the time running off to purchase the materials, loading and unloading all those buckets and bags in my car, and getting all slopped up when I apply the products. Too much inconvenience. For a few dollars more, I can have the job done, probably better than I could, and my time can be spent on other things.

Some of your clients do business with you, not just for quality programming, but for convenience. They want both a program and all the ancillary services because it is easier for them to hire experts rather than take on the task themselves. That is exactly what you have to sell. Not only do you have the right people, skills, and quality, you have the time. While you service a contract, be on the lookout for other ways to help clients save time, effort, or dollars. Make doing business with you easy. Answer calls promptly; be available; fill out the forms; attend to the details.

4. Think in terms of clients for life.

AT & T was my long distance carrier for 30 years. I switched carriers because another company called, offering a better financial deal than I had. Two days after I switched, AT & T called—surprise, surprise—offering me a better price than they had previously charged me. Sound familiar? This is an industry fixated on price, not quality or service. Old Ma Bell hadn't contacted me for 30 years to provide me any service, let alone lower rates. Now they want me back? Can you imagine the earful they got from me?

Experts estimate that it costs four times as much to get a new client as it does to keep an existing one satisfied (AT & T might think about this.) Wayne Block, my new business partner, has made his fortune in office equipment sales. His original company thrives from his strict adherence to one expectation. When he gets a client, he refuses to lose that client to someone else. He has a "client for life" attitude—a formal program, actually. If someone buys from him once, he does everything in his power to keep that client happy. His employees are trained in ways to serve clients; they follow some written, formal steps of customer service to ensure that the client knows what he/she is getting for the money. If a client intimates that he/she may switch vendors, several company employees launch several pre-identified steps to avoid the departure. His customers are so pleased with Block's product service that most of his new clients come by way of referral.

We need to do our business this way. We need to share our passion for service provision with our clients so they know that we are working for and expecting a long-term business arrangement with them. Once we penetrate the market they represent, we must be dedicated to doing business in such a way that they would never leave us.

5. Marketing begins with me.

King Louis XIV said, "L'etat, c'est moi." "I am the state." Whatever he did and was, so would France be perceived. Likewise with each of your employees.

I tell ESA staff members that each one of them is Louis XIV—they are the organization. They are certainly the organization's marketing department. They must represent their ESAs well. Just as we judge restaurants by the wait staff or the chef, our clients will judge our organization by the employees they see representing it. So every employee must smile, worry about deadlines, communicate with clients, and provide more than is required.

Poor service in one division drowns great service in another one. If ESA employees alienate district employees in the classroom, the lunchroom, or the meeting table, your organization will suffer in the long run. The tiniest interactions have significantly large positive or negative long-term results. In chaos theory, this is known as The Butterfly Effect: One small flap of the wings, and there is a typhoon at the other end of the chain.

Clients like doing business with happy, pleasant people. Maybe the Soup Nazi on Seinfeld has a product so great that people will buy it even though he is so unpleasant, but that is so rare that it is only the stuff of television. In real life, clients want to deal with people who go the "extra smile." Smiling—sincere, warm, and appropriate to a situation—builds trust. Smiling is a visible sign that you are confident in your ability to make this deal, complete your part of it well, and honest in how it was struck. ESA leaders should hold employees accountable for providing good and pleasant service. It is a rubric of success.

You will know that you have this one in line when the client, not you, says, "It's a pleasure doing business with you."

6. Don't look like a bozo; don't act like a bozo.

This one is at the top of my list for employees. I stole this poignant advice from my friend Bill Banach, a fellow educational consultant. Bill and I warn ESA staff about the importance of "looking the part." Here is a nutshell version of dressing for success: Dress better than the client. If the client's culture is shirt and slacks, your employees wear sport jackets and ties. If your client wears sport jackets and ties, you wear a suit. If your client wears pant suits, you wear a dress. Goofy fashion statements are for the Paris runways; we are running a business here.

More important then appearance, however, are actions. As a consumer, I control with whom I do business. I avoid bozos. I simply do not abide rudeness, arrogance, condescension, late delivery, non-professionalism, empty promises, or crudeness in the marketplace. Most of your clients feel the same way.

7. Actively seek client complaints.

Think about the cashier in many restaurants. After you've eaten, after you are already committed to having to pay for everything, the money taker asks, "Was everything okay?" This without looking at you, and usually in a weary reiteration of an obligatory question. The cashier really doesn't care, and you know it. If you say, "My mashed potatoes were cold," the poor soul is generally left with no response beyond, "I'm sorry." She/He still takes the money, of course. Do we go back there?

Complaints are our friends. While they are often difficult to swallow, while we might disagree with the client making them, we are well-advised to listen to them intently and act on them aggressively. Research

indicates that one vocal objection represents three others, expressed only by client exit. In other words, most clients vote with their feet.

If something needs fixing, shouldn't we learn about it while we may still do something about it? Good businesses have organized methods of getting customer feedback. Great ones do something about those complaints.

I am not advocating the use of one of those long, multipage assessment documents. They do not minimize inconvenience for your client. Better, I think, is ongoing dialogue, both formal and informal. When I led a Pennsylvania intermediate unit, I met with every superintendent at least twice a year in his/her office, and once a year for lunch expressly to seek client reactions to our work for them. I never wanted to be surprised by a client who suddenly chose to end our contracts without ever telling us why.

8. Cultivate a quick response mode.

We educators are often slow to change things. Historically, we subject a newly-proposed program, big or small, to endless study groups, development groups, progress reports and first, second, and third reviews by our governing boards, including extensive staff information and later training, and on and on. Our bureaucracies are not very nimble.

When a potential client approaches us with a new idea, venture, or request for proposal, we need to be quick on our feet. While we jump through all those hoops, the potential client waits, and waits—and then leaves.

When my own organization needed business badly, we learned to say yes first and figure out the how later. "Ready, fire, aim" became our mantra. We reconfigured ourselves and our service skills quickly because our survival hung in the balance. Along the way we made an interesting discovery. The programs and services we deployed in this rapid response mode were just as good, and in some cases better, than those developed using our old developmental model. Quality people can deliver quality goods quickly. Desultory debate and development helps no one, not the client, not the children, not the ESA.

One of the best means of creating a quick response mentality is to allow your employees increased freedom to attend to client needs without always having to "check it out with the boss."

In my local movie rental store, hanging right behind the counter is a sign that reads, " Each of us at Blockbuster is empowered, authorized, and expected to take care of you." Nice touch. Clients know that they can expect to have their movie rental problems considered by the store representative standing right in front of them.

Are your employees authorized and expected to make professional decisions on behalf of your organization? Or, do they behave like that bozo in the automobile showroom who has to run every proposal by the sales manager in that elevated corner booth? Problem solving by the person closest to it minimizes bureaucratic debate and customer inconvenience.

While there certainly are limits, your staff can solve the most frequent situational problems that occur in their own workspace. They need to be empowered to do so. Sales opportunities can be lost when we fail to take advantage of the judgement, professionalism, and fairness of our staff. These things led us to hire them in the first place, so let's use them.

9. Train your clients to expect good service.

My office equipment friend doesn't think he is selling office equipment at all. He is selling total solutions to people who need to make copies, to file data electronically, or to improve interconnectedness of offices. By total solutions he means that he takes over the client's problems from acquisition to delivery, from client training to equipment service, from payment plan to replacement cycles. When a business buys equipment and a service agreement from him, any problems encountered are his, not the client's. He promises—and delivers—same day service on anything he sells. His technicians consult with office staff before and after they work on a copier. His technicians always leave a report of their visit, so no one can forget they were there. They often leave a tip for future operation, or a pen or candy bar with the company name on it. They always ask before they leave if there are any other problems in the entire building. My friend's long-standing contracts with myriad clients are testimony to the fact that people will pay for what they value. He has moved his clients beyond the service reach of his competitors.

Service is the middle name of ESAs. We should corner the market on it and train our clients to expect and value it. That alone will separate us from the competition.

And, in all of this lies a serendipitous result: an improvement in product quality. The better we are at service, the higher the quality of the program we offer. Staff dedicated to great service simply will not represent poor quality. They develop too much personal investment in their long-term relationships with clients to look them in the eye while they peddle junk.

So, are you focused on price control, reductions, and deal-making in efforts to continue to offer your high quality programs? Or, are you combining your high-quality programs with relentlessly pursued excellent service? I think your future lies in your answers to these questions.

Edward T. Frye, Ph.D., is the former executive director of The Capital Area Intermediate Unit in Summerdale, PA. He now provides speaking and consultant services to ESAs across the country. He can be reached by mail at 2008 Mountain Pine Drive, Mechanicsburg, PA, 17050, by phone at 717-732-6060, and by email at efrye@blazenet.net.

Perspectives Order Form

Additional copies of this or previous editions of *Perspectives* may be purchased for $6 each plus $3.50 for postage and handling per order. AESA accepts prepaid orders only, by check or money order. Please include number desired of each issue, name of recipient and shipping address.

Send your request to:

Association of Educational Services Agencies

801 North Quincy Street, Suite 750

Arlington, VA 22203-1730

(703) 875-0739 Phone

(703) 807-1849 Fax

btalbott@aasa.org

Invitation to Authors

Perspectives welcomes manuscripts from all those interested in the work of service agencies in America. The journal publishes articles of research as well as opinion. Interviews with public officials (legislators, chief state school officials, business leaders, etc.) regarding their positive views of the work of service agencies are also welcome since they can be helpful to colleagues in other states where the environment might not be so friendly.

For further information about how to prepare a manuscript, please contact the editor by email at Keanewg@aol.com or by phone at 248-370-4204. Deadline for submissions is April 1 of each year. Any necessary editorial assistance will be provided.

The 2004 edition especially solicits manuscripts about the efforts of service agencies to help school districts meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

Canter: Your AESA Business Partner

for Professional Development

Master's degrees
More than 13,000 graduates from four master's degree programs

Graduate-credit courses
More than 33,000 annual enrollments

Online courses
More than 12,000 annual enrollments in online continuing education courses

The Canter library
Hundreds of staff development resources used in more than 9,800 districts nationwide

---

How may we help you meet your professional development goals?

For information on how to tailor a Canter Business Partnership for your ESA, please contact Frank Deebach at 800-733-1711, ext. 1006 or via email at fdeebach@comcast.net

Canter®
www.canter.net