

Running head: ESAs

Educational Service Agencies: The Invisible Partner

William G. Keane
Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA), Houston, Texas. August 7-10, 2001

Education Service Agencies: The Invisible Partner

This author served as the superintendent of a local school district for nine years and was then selected to serve as the chief executive of one of Michigan's 57 service agencies, which in that state are called intermediate school districts. A parent who was intimately involved with the local schools read about the appointment in the paper and called to offer congratulations that I had become head of all the junior highs and middle schools in the county.

This confusion on the part of one of the county's best informed citizens is typical of the lack of knowledge, or if not outright misunderstanding, that many citizens have in those states that have a mid-level form of school government. Perhaps the only citizens who have a good idea regarding the nature and purpose of educational service agencies (ESAs) are the teachers, administrators and other school personnel served directly by the agency.

This lack of information about service agencies is not just a problem for local citizens. Information about service agencies collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is generally considered unreliable, in no small part due to a definitional problem as to what constitutes a service agency (Stephens, 1997). The Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESAs) has attempted to capture some basic information about service agencies around the country, but the value of its data has been dependent upon the willingness of individual agencies to report the requested data and the uncertain accuracy of information that is reported.

This is not a trivial matter. There are no books in general circulation today about service agencies. There are no higher education programs that focus on this level of school administration. While it is true that a review of Doctoral Dissertations Abstracts International identified 20 doctoral dissertations written on some aspect of service agencies since 1973, most were dealing with topics that were site specific, whether looking at one service agency or, at most, several or all within one state. Several were simple studies of perceptions of various groups: local superintendents (Popper, 1982; Culver, 1987), views of “officials and personnel of operating units” (Yonke, 1970), and attitudes of local district board members (Martisko, 1985). Such studies may generate important information about the operation of individual agencies, but they provide insubstantial data about the educational service agency system itself.

No one knows for sure exactly the economic impact of services provided by such agencies. Yet one study (Stephens, 2001) demonstrated that service agencies in five states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington, and Iowa) spent over 2.2 billion dollars either to support their own programs and services or by distributing flow-through money to local school districts, for which they almost always have a monitoring responsibility. This vacuum on knowledge is a major problem. Leaders in the field of research and teaching about school administration need to join hands in helping to overcome this lacuna of information about public education.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to the area of educational service agencies in hopes that others in the professoriate will find an interest in helping to fill this information gap.

The basic approach will be use a question/answer format to identify basic information that researchers will need to get started on the task.

What is an educational service agency (ESA)?

An educational service agency is defined here as an entity which operates between a state education agency and a local school district and which is designed to achieve one or more desired goals: to make efficient use of state dollars, to foster collaboration among school districts, to serve as a conduit for the implementation of state initiatives, and to provide programs and services to smaller and/or poorer districts that they would be unable to provide on their own, thereby equalizing opportunity among all schools in the public school system.

What is the history of ESAs?

The concept of establishing a unit of school government that would operate between the local school district and the state department of education is not new. Delaware, in 1829, was the first state to create the office county school superintendent ((Deffenbaugh & Covert, 1933). The purpose of this office was to assure better supervision of schools, especially the many one-room school houses that were so common in the early history of the state.

By 1879 34 of the then-existing 38 states had established similar offices with comparable functions to perform administrative and supervisory functions on behalf of the state department. These functions included assuring that schools met basic health and

safety requirements and that teachers met minimal standards of academic preparation (The County Office of Education, 1950).

Beginning in the early 1960s and extending well into the 1970s, many states began to reconceptualize the roles and functions of these middle echelon units. Perhaps the most significant feature of this change was to move them from almost exclusively supervisory functions to a major role in providing programs and services needed by constituent districts (Stephens and Turner, 1991).

Educational Service Agencies were identified in federal legislation for the first time in the 1994 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, where they are defined as "...regional public multi-service agencies authorized by state statute to develop, manage, and provide services or programs to local education agencies."

Do all states have ESAs?

It is probably true that every state has some form of service agency, but at least 15 states have a state-designed network of service agencies intended to serve all or almost all local districts in the state, herein called "special districts." (In some states where service agencies exist very large school districts are not included in the service area of any of the agencies since the cities are determined to be self sufficient and not in need of services from another entity.) It is also true that this number is subject to interpretation. Some states began with largely voluntary entities that existed by selling services or receiving grants, but they are now beginning to be recognized as viable instruments for achieving

state policies and are called on more and more to play key roles in policy initiatives.

Connecticut is one such state to give growing responsibility to its six service centers.

States that do have such agencies do not call them by the same title, assign to them identical responsibilities, fund them in the same way or assess their value with the same rigor. Their titles vary widely; for example,

Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) – Michigan

Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) – New York

Area Education Agencies (AEAs) – Iowa

Intermediate Units (IUs) – Pennsylvania

County Offices of Education – California

Educational Service Units – Nebraska

Education Service Districts (ESDs) - Washington and Oregon

Though there are exceptions, states that organize school districts in units smaller than the county level are more likely to have service agencies within the state's delivery system than states that organize K-12 education on a county basis. Policy makers in such states appear to feel that districts serving all schools in a county are usually comprehensive enough to be able to provide programs and services to large numbers of clients in a cost-efficient manner and have little need for service agencies to provide these offerings. However, there are exceptions (Georgia).

Is there some commonality among ESAs despite this variation?

Since the multi-functional service agency is a relatively new phenomena, scholarship regarding these entities is relatively recent. The first attempt to classify service agencies was made by E. Robert Stephens, then a professor at the University of Maryland in 1979. His typology of service agencies is still used today.

He defined three types of service agencies:

Type A, Special District ESA: A legally constituted unit of school government between the state education agency and local education agencies. They are intended to serve the needs of both local districts and state agencies. They tend to be constituted within a legal framework based on the state constitution, state law, or regulations authorized by law.

Type B, Regionalized State Education Agency: Such offices are a regional branch of a state education agency (SEA) designed to bring the state department closer to the local school districts. Such units may provide administrative services only or general and administrative services.

Type C, Cooperative ESAs: Such entities are usually a voluntary confederation of local education agencies intended to provide services exclusively to members of the cooperative. They are often single purpose entities; for example, many such entities have been created around the country to provide cost effective programming for low incidence handicap students whose education would be prohibitively expensive if offered in each local district. (Stephens & Turner, 1991)

Table 1.1 summarizes the organizational characteristics of each type of ESA.

Table 1.2 summarizes the states that have Type A service agencies; that is, a state-sponsored network of service agencies serving all or nearly all local districts in the state.

(All tables in this report are credited to Stephens, 2001.)

How are educational service agencies governed?

Describing the governance system of Type B (state department sub-offices located regionally) is easy. Since the state department is the originator of such offices, state department officials maintain full control and operating responsibility for their regional entities as well as the head office.

Defining the governance of Type C entities is equally simple. Type C (voluntary collaboratives) are almost always governed by the chief executives of the sponsoring bodies. Thus, if four school districts decide to form a cooperative for one or more educational purposes, the chief executives of the sponsoring districts usually make up the board of the new entity.

Summarizing the governance structure of Type A special districts is not so easy. Table II captures the governance features of the networked Type A districts. As can be seen, the governing board may be composed of superintendents of constituent districts, as well as others (Georgia), may be elected at large (California), may be elected only by constituent school districts (Michigan), may not be engaged in education in any way

(Texas). The variety of governance structures merely hints at the variety of programs and services available from service agencies across the country.

How are service agencies financed?

Differences in financing among Type A special districts are just as pronounced as differences in governance structures, though there is another area where complete information is simply not available. Of the 15 networked states only three permit service agencies to have independent taxing authority (California, Michigan, and Oregon). Some states require that the service center be almost totally entrepreneurial and live off revenues generated by the sale of programs and services to local districts (North Dakota) while other states provide a decent amount of aid to relieve the burden of payment on local districts. For example, state sources in Ohio provide approximately 50% of the expenditures of the service agencies (Stephens, 2001).

Conclusion

This paper is not intended to offer some new data about educational service agencies nor to argue a policy perspective about service agencies. The author believes that there is a growing body of research being done, especially by service agency chief executives and their staffs, to demonstrate that their services are perhaps the most cost effective, cost efficient solutions to assisting local school districts achieve their primary mission, producing an educated population ready to take on the economic, civic, and personal responsibilities of adult life (Campbell, 2001; McKinney and Gauntt, 2001).

Rather, this paper argues that there is a vacuum of understanding about educational service agencies among the educational administration and leadership professoriate. Also, as a result of this knowledge vacuum, the service agency movement continues to be the least understood and least researched area of public school administration.

It is hoped that surfacing this neglected area of school administration will lead to a greater interest in service agencies among college instructors, a growth in knowledge about them among students, and an increasing desire to build a knowledge base through research. Professors, doctoral students, and even masters level students can help fill the conspicuous void of information that now exists.

References

Campbell, D. (2001) . Proving the worth of ESAs: A cost efficiency study for an ESD in Oregon. Perspectives, 7, 25-28. (Washington, DC: Association of Educational Service Agencies).

Culver, T. (1987) . A study of the relationship between local superintendents' expectations and perceptions of actual performance of Michigan ISDs . Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo.

Deffenbaugh, W. S. & Covert, T. (1993). School administrative units with special reference to the county unit. Pamphlet No. 34. Office of Education, United States Department of the Interior. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.

Department of Rural Education . (1950) . The county superintendent of schools in the United States . Washington, DC: National Education Association.

McKinney, B & Gauntt, K. (2001) . escWorks . Perspectives, 7, 8-19. (Washington, DC: Association of Educational Service Agencies)

Martisko, L. L. (1985) . A study of educational cooperative service units in Minnesota: Mission as perceived by board members and directors. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

Popper, W. J. (1982) . Superintendents' perceptions of cooperative educational service agencies in Massachusetts . Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Stephens, E. R. (1997) . The design of standards of performance measures for educational service agencies. Unpublished manuscript.

Stephens, E. R. (2001) . Characteristics of state networks of educational service agencies comparable to the Ohio educational service centers . Unpublished manuscript.

Stephens, E. R. & Turner, W. (1991) . Approaching the next millennium: Educational service agencies in the 1990s . Washington, DC: American Association of Educational Service Agencies.

Yonke, A. J. (1970) . The role and function of the emerging regional educational service agency in Iowa as perceived by officials and personnel of operating units.
University of Iowa, Iowa City.

TABLE I.1

STEPHENS TYPOLOGY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES AGENCIES BASED ON DOMINANT PATTERNS ON FOUR CENTRAL CHARACTERISTICS

Type of ESA	Four Central Characteristics			
	Legal Framework	Governance	Program and Services	Fiscal Support
Type A: Special District ESA	tends to be highly structured in legislation and/or SEA regulations	tends to be lay control	tends to be determined by member LEAs and the SEA or by statute	tends to be a mix of local, regional, state and state/federal
Type B: Regionalized SEA/ESA	tends to be structured in SEA regulations only	tends to be professional advisory only	tends to be almost exclusively determined by SEA	tends to be almost exclusively state and state/federal
Type C: Cooperative ESA	tends to be general (i.e., intergovernmental regulations and statutes) and/or permissive legislation	tends to be composed of representatives of member LEAs	tends to be almost exclusively determined by member LEAs	tends to be almost exclusively local and state/federal

Source: Stephens, E. R. (1979). *Major Policy Issues Surrounding the Education Service Agency Movement and a Proposed Research and Development Agenda*. Burtonsville, MD: Stephens Associates, p. 3.

TABLE L2

**SPECIAL DISTRICT ESA STATE NETWORKS
INCLUDED IN COMPARATIVE PROFILE**

State	Title of Agencies	Year Initially Established	Number of Agencies in Network	Statewide or Virtual Statewide System
AZ	County Office of Education	1912	15	Statewide
CA	County Office of Education	1859	58	Statewide
GA	Regional Education Service Agency	1966	16	Statewide
IL	Educational Service Regions	1975	57	Statewide
IA	Area Education Agencies	1974	15	Statewide
MI	ISD ¹⁾	1963	57	Statewide
MT	County Office of Education	⁴⁾	56	Statewide
NY	Board of Cooperative Educational Services	1948	38	Virtual ²⁾
ND	County Office of Education	1889	53	Statewide
OR	Education Service District	1963	21	Statewide
PA	Intermediate Unit	1971	29	Statewide ³⁾
TX	Education Service Center	1967	20	Statewide
WA	Education Service District	1965	9	Statewide
WV	Regional Education Service Agency	1972	8	Statewide
OH	Education Service Center	1995	63	Virtual
Total			515	