



ESA Spotlight Series

# Perspectives

[www.aesa.us](http://www.aesa.us)

August 2017

**An Interview with E. Robert Stephens:  
One of the Founding Fathers of Educational Service Agencies**

*By*

*Timothy S. Grieves*

*Originally published February 24, 2012*

*Excerpts reprised and published August 3, 2017*

## **Introduction**

*With the recent passing of Dr. E. Robert “Bob” Stephens in February 2017, it seemed appropriate to share excerpts from an interview I conducted with him in February 2012. Bob’s life was dedicated to education, specifically educational services agencies. In fact, many educators and administrators across the country believe he is the “grandfather” of ESAs. He wrote the original legislative language to create one of the first systems in the nation when Iowa’s Area Education Agencies (AEAs) were born in 1975.*

*You might be aware of the E. Robert Stephens Award from AESA. The award is given to an individual(s) whose research advances the understanding of educational service agencies at the regional, state, and/or national levels.*

*AESA was once again grateful that upon his passing, the family named the AESA Foundation for contributions in his memory.*

*Here are excerpts taken from that interview.*



Sitting: E. Robert Stephens  
1st Row left to right: Brent Siegrist, Sam Miller, Paula Vincent, Joe Crozier, Tim Grieves  
2nd row left to right: Jeff Herzberg, Pat Heidersheit, Bill Decker, Jon Sheldahl, Lane Plugge

### **An Interview with E. Robert Stephens: One of the Founding Fathers of Educational Service Agencies**

Dr. E. Robert “Bob” Stephens was born and raised in Sioux City, Iowa, and attended Morningside College in his hometown. Bob attained a master’s degree from Drake University and a Ph.D. from The University of Iowa. He began his career teaching in a small rural district and moved on to become a superintendent of another small school district in Center Point, Iowa. It was during his graduate work that Bob was approached to study community colleges and regional service agencies in Iowa. Most of his career was spent at the University of Maryland where he championed the benefit and impact of service agencies. He was known for his writing and had a significant impact on the national level.

The rest is history, as they say. His career took off, and he would eventually serve in a national capacity as a board member for the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESAs). Bob Stephens conducted numerous research projects and studies in his career that benefited regional service centers. In his retirement, he returned to his home state of Iowa. The Iowa AEA system has truly benefitted from Bob’s contributions. For six years, from 2010-2016, Bob served as a coach for the state’s chief administrators. He attended our monthly meetings and our

yearly retreats. He helped write our mission statement and goals, our AEA Compact in 2012, which gave us direction for the future.

The following excerpts demonstrate his philosophies and provide a historical perspective from a giant in our field.

### **Narrative between Bob Stephens and Tim Grieves**

**TG: So how did you decide to focus on regional education service agencies as kind of a priority in your career?**

**EBS:** Well, I've been asked that question before, thought about it a little bit. When I was superintendent at Center Point, Iowa, I had a high school principal, but I had no elementary principal, and I knew sikkum (sic) about elementary schools. Well, the Linn County superintendent of schools had one professional staff person, he was an elementary specialist. He was a graduate of the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) and, in effect, I had him working almost full-time. We were doing curriculum alignment before I'd ever heard the term "alignment." We were doing assessment exercises in the elementary school before it became required and prevalent across the country.

**TG: This sounds like a good practice that is still being used today.**

**EBS:** The other thing I think that was very instrumental in my sensing the impact that a service agency could have is when I was mentored by Arnold Salsbury. Arnold Salsbury was the superintendent of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which had 30,000-some students. He somehow adopted me, he became my mentor. I used to call Arnie up and say, "Arnie, I need some help with some of your curriculum people." It did not make any difference what it was; science, math... in some cases, he would send them up to Center Point at no cost, to spend a day with our people. Not only instructional assistance, but he provided some of the non-instructional assistance; school bus drivers, school lunch. Well it occurred to me, why couldn't every school system have access to that kind of service? So that's really what triggered it. Then again, Iowa got a federal Title III grant to do a study to revamp the county offices in Iowa, into some kind of regional service agency. So, I was asked to do that study.

**TG: Did the Iowa Department of Education ask you to do the study?**

**EBS:** It was the county superintendents in the state, plus the Department, which at that time was called the Department of Public Instruction. They asked The University of Iowa to do the study, and the university asked that I direct it.

**TG: So, you helped with the study of beginning community colleges in Iowa and also the beginnings of education service agencies?**

**EBS:** Yeah, with some other people. The Department of Public Instruction, their attorney was a fellow by the name of Leonard Able, and he and I wrote a model bill that identified and proposed a way you would move in Iowa from a county and joint county school system into the new Area Education Agency system (regional service centers). So, the study I did influenced the legislation. The study was a four-volume study. One of them proposed a system for Iowa, and another one of the volumes I developed was a prototype for Linn county, or what became Grant Wood AEA. My interest was piqued with the concept of service agencies and that became the bulk of my professional work.

**TG:** *Were the Community Colleges in place before the area education agencies, and did you identify those same boundaries for these two entities?*

**EBS:** The Department of Public Instruction required the boundaries to be the same, and unfortunately required it. I don't want to editorialize, though.

**TG:** *That's fine, that's what this interview is about.*

**EBS:** It's why there is such a strange configuration of the AEAs now. At one time, it made sense. Here we have the community colleges in place, and a study of what became the AEAs. The requirement was the geographic boundaries of the AEAs had to be conterminous with the boundaries of the community colleges. And the big issue then, and has still surfaced over the years, was why not merge the two? And man, that's one of the biggest controversies I had to deal with. I violently opposed that merger; argued that the mission of the two was totally separate. There needs to be some cooperation to be sure, but you would dilute the energies of both if you tried to combine them into some single governance structure. And that argument prevailed, but it keeps popping up.

**EBS:** So anyway, after that, I was asked to do a study, and take a leave of absence from the faculty of The University of Iowa. This was in 1971, and the study was to be about the Vietnam GI Bill of Rights. I was supposed to be in Washington, D.C., for three to six months, but it lasted a year. Then they offered me a job, a chairmanship at the University of Maryland, and that's where I spent my career.

**TG:** *So, you started in 1971 at the University of Maryland and stayed for how long?*

**EBS:** 1996. Tim, what's important about that, in terms of your question about what caused me to be interested, was that the proximity of the University of Maryland College Park facilitated access to federal agencies. One of the things that came out of being close to D.C., was I was given a grant to try to see if there was any support for some kind of a national organization of service agencies. So, I held three meetings across the country. One at College Park, one in Detroit, and one in San Francisco. What came out of the meetings was the beginnings of the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESAs).

**TG: So, the beginning of your contribution to the start of the AESA was because you were in the proximity of Washington D.C.?**

**EBS:** Well, I would argue that assumption. At that time, there was the old National Institute of Education (NIE). They had a major initiative in diffusion of educational knowledge, and they saw the potential of service agencies as a way to assist NIE's priority to disseminate research. They used service agencies as a conduit.

**TG: About what year was that, was it about the mid-70s?**

**EBS:** About 1977. Following that, I took a leave of absence from the university and did a national study. At that time, in the late 70s, 28 states had a statewide network of education service agencies. The study was a major effort to coordinate the statewide networks. I think there was something like nine different volumes that came out of that project.

**TG: That's a good transition to our next question. The AEA/ESA organization structure really then became your career, didn't it?**

**EBS:** Major interest, yeah. I also had a strong interest in rural education, but only because I saw service agencies as a salvation for them. I philosophically have always been opposed to mandated rural reorganization. It's no question that there are major changes in non-metropolitan America, but we ought not to force, through government decree, some kind of magic number. There should not be a minimum enrollment size for a school district.

**TG: It really is different for each community; sometimes the small community will support their school even more than a little bit bigger community.**

**EBS:** Most communities will ultimately recognize that we can't offer the best, so why don't we consider reorganization? That's a timely process, wastes a lot of money, but nonetheless we honor what I think is a pretty important principle. You don't force people to make fundamental decisions about whether there is a school in their community. For that reason, when you take a school out of a community, you, in effect, sign a death rule for a local community. One of the really sad things is, when I came back to the state three or four years ago, I was driving through what was previously prosperous towns with no empty buildings, and yet to find that is not the case today. It's sad.

**TG: Let's change it a little bit and talk about your writing. Not many can communicate through writing as well as you do. How do you approach an article or idea? How do you get that set in your mind? You're very clear.**

**EBS:** Thank you, as I'm not as clear as I should be. One of the rules I use, with my grad students, and personally, sounds sort of simple but it's very effective. You tell me the title of your proposed dissertation. You can change it subsequently, but it's important you be very clear in the beginning what it is you're trying to do. Similarly, when I do writing, I make sure I spend time and try to be very clear and state early what is the title. What are you trying to do here?

And I spent a lot of time developing outlines, very detailed outlines. In some cases, I can outline longer than the article. The other thing that helps me, and antiquates me, is I do everything long hand. I think I can think clearer.

**TG: Probably the way you learned to write.**

**EBS:** Everybody tries the other way. But that's the best response I can give.

**TG: What are some of the books or articles that you're proud of? There are many, but what are a couple that you're proud of?**

**EBS:** Well, let me say what I'm not proud of doing. I had two good books out of the late 1970's. I got so wrapped up in my own work at the university that I never produced them into a manuscript or a book, even though the study was disseminated. In answer to your question, I think a book that I especially liked, in my judgment, has as much utility today as when it was written 10 to 15 years ago. It was an attempt to say, "How can a service agency best assist, provide support and technical assistance to rural schools?"

**TG: So, you combined two of your major interests, both rural education and service agencies?**

**EBS:** Right. Some of the work I did most recently with colleague Bill Keane, was a text titled, "ESAs as America's Invisible Partner." The book was intended to be an introduction to educational service agencies. It was to be followed up, and that's another disappointment. I've written one chapter so far, but got pulled away by doing other things. I'll get back to it. I wanted the new writing exercise. What are the characteristics of high performing service agencies? I want to pick a small number of case studies to test what I think those criteria characteristics are, and see if, in fact, what I think most people would judge to be four, five, or six, a small number of truly exemplary innovative ESAs. How closely would what they do match it? And what changes do I need to make in my list of characteristics, having done the in-depth work in the small number of ESAs?

**TG: Knowing you, I know you have a hypothesis. Give me two or three characteristics that you would think that would be considered?**

**EBS:** Adaptable, clearly. Responsive.

**TG: We were in a meeting earlier today. Nimble was a word used...**

**EBS:** That's a nice word. Very descriptive. Service agencies that practice quality management tools. They are institutionalizing every fabric of the organization. Quality management techniques. Being transparent, accountable. You know all the buzz words. Those are some of the things that loom large in my mind. The problem, you're aware, in assessing the effectiveness of any organization, you always have to be conscious of contextual considerations. Those vary so greatly across the country. Iowa's system probably has one of the

strongest systems in the country. If you think about what makes Iowa's system strong, I would heavily weigh such things as a mission statement that's codified, a high degree of organizational autonomy, a funding source that's definite, even though it isn't enough. There is a definite funding source compared to some counterparts.

**TG: Bob, what do you believe are important characteristics for a leader of an ESA or Educational Service Center? Take into account anything you want...cognitive, interpersonal, group facilitation skills, leadership skills, things like that, that you think are important.**

**EBS:** A couple years ago I asked two other individuals to co-write an article on the uniqueness of the leadership role of a service agency. One of the things that we pushed was that it's important for a service agency administrator to recognize that they really have several leadership roles, not just one. They have to provide leadership at the local service agency; they have to provide leadership among the member school districts, and to a lesser degree, but not in your case, leadership to the state association. Now, the practice across the country has been the majority of people who come to these positions, come from local school system superintendencies. In fact, that's usually an unwritten requirement for employment. That's fine, I have no problem with that, but you can't automatically use all those local school district competency skill sets in the same way that is a regional basis. Some transfer to be sure. One of the things that looms large, I think in my mind, between the successful and perhaps not very successful administrator is consensus building. It is absolutely a requirement. When the issue is divisive, consensus building better be in the administrator's back pocket. How do you build consensus?

The opposite of that, how do you resolve conflict? Those two are separate but related, the other side of the coin in some cases. How do you help people change? Helping people change is a critical characteristic and will test the creativity and imagination of even the most effective administrator. If you have 30 districts in a service region, you could have every shade of resistance and /or support for change. That's tough. Those stand out in my mind: consensus building; conflict resolution; and change, in addition to prerequisites.

**TG: What are one or two of the most important pieces of advice you would offer a new AEA or ESA leader?**

**EBS:** Nothing original about this, you do your homework. You make sure your homework is in terms of, "Is this really the best position for me?" Well how do you find out whether it is or not? How do you get some indication? Talk to other administrators who have similar roles, interview them, spend the time finding out. Trying to reduce the possibility that there isn't, "I don't like this kind of work." But you find that out before you take the job, rather than after. There's nothing magic about that, just common sense. That would be my best advice.

New service center leaders have to demonstrate that their energies go toward assisting local school districts and enhancing student achievement. They need to assist local school districts in assuming non-instructional functions, allowing those school districts to use those savings to improve student achievement. So, the emphasis is student achievement, and that's got to be the focus and can be approached in several different ways. AEAs across the country have got to change, that's all there is to it. They can't do everything just because school districts A and B and C want it. You have to say, "No," unless it can be demonstrated that their request has to do with the primary mission, student achievement. That applies certainly to AEAs as well.

**TG: What do you see as your greatest personal success, Bob?**

**EBS:** That's a tough one. I've had some impact in a fairly large number of states across the country. I adopted a standard for success for when I'd go into a state and work with them; state legislators, state department, or a group of service agencies. If a third of the recommendations are adopted, it's a success. That's pretty low, a low level.

**TG: It's the same as baseball, if you hit .333 in baseball, you're in the Hall of Fame!**

**EBS:** That is exactly the rationale I used in coming up with a third! When you measure success in consulting work, you measure success if you take small steps. I'm a firm believer in incrementalism, that fundamental change doesn't happen very often, so you change incrementally, as long as you know what the goal is, and incremental steps then are consistent with reaching that goal. That's not bad.

**TG: Any greatest challenge you have had in your career?**

**EBS:** The challenge is always in finding time to do more writing.

**TG: You've done quite a bit.**

**EBS:** I've had a lot of raw material just certain things happen at certain times in a person's professional career.

**TG: You would have liked to have done more writing to explain your position?**

**EBS:** Part of the problem in the 60s, 70s and some 80s was the need to do descriptive studies and not more applied research, let alone original research. That's not to minimize descriptive research, because as we're now belatedly discovering, in some quarters, that we now want to call it transcendental research, which is fine. It is really descriptive research, which is great! Anyway, what you had was a problem of trying to stay abreast of what was going on in the country. It was a full-time job. You couldn't go to a legal file, and here's the legislation for state A or B or C or D. You had to dig that out. It was tough work.

**TG: As you look at challenges in education, what are some of the great challenges we'll have in education in the next 10 to 20 years, overall?**

**EBS:** Of no particular importance, demographic changes, huge. Preparing for 21st century "education," agreeing on what that is, is the debate of course. How do we define 21st century? No one disputes we need to move in that direction, but how do we get there, and what are the components?

Certainly, the decline in public support for education, public education. This notion of competition and choice, that isn't going to go away. You just hope that there aren't too many people willing to sell the interstate highway system and other infrastructure in this country, including public education. If we destroy public education or leave it only to what goes on in large urban centers, we can kiss this country goodbye as far as I'm concerned.

**TG: That's my biggest concern too, Bob.**

**EBS:** Fortunately, belatedly as it always is, some voices are being raised that are asking what's our common interest in this country? And the public-school system has been, and this is not new to you, the greatest success story of any society, at any time, in any century.

### **About the E. Robert Stephens Award**

AESA bestows four national awards to outstanding candidates for their contributions to ESAs at the regional, state, and/or national level. The E. Robert Stephens Award acknowledges contributions that advance understanding of regional educational agencies through research, writing, and/or publications at the regional, state and national levels. The criteria for the award includes:

Advancement of the goals and philosophies of educational service agencies.

Scholarly nature of the work(s).

Impact of the research on educational services agencies.

We have truly lost a giant contributor to our field. I hope this article has shed a bright light on the impact and contributions E. Robert Stephens has made for educational service centers.

Timothy S. Grieses, Ph.D.  
Chief Administrator  
Northwest Area Education Agency  
Sioux City, Iowa  
712-251-5350  
tgrieses@nwaea.org.