



The Essential Role of Ohio's Educational Service Centers in the ESSA Era

Recommendations for Action in Supporting
Student, School and District Success

July 2016

Foreword

Educational Service Centers (ESCs) have over a century of service, in partnership with the state of Ohio, to students, schools and districts across the Buckeye State, including the implementation of a myriad of federal and state education reform efforts.

The recently enacted federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law on December 10, 2015, thereby reauthorizing the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's national education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students.

ESSA creates a fundamental shift in the focus and control of public education systems by empowering states, districts and schools to drive local engagement and decision-making to improve educational outcomes for all students in all schools. ***This is the ESSA era, and we welcome the opportunities it presents for all Ohio students.***

The Ohio Educational Service Center Association (OESCA) is committed to working in cooperation with the Ohio Department of Education, school districts, allied educational organizations, state and local policy makers, and other stakeholders to promote and support implementation of ESSA and related state-level educational reform efforts that provide for an efficient, effective and quality system of education that is fiscally and academically accountable and which prepares all students to achieve high levels of success in college and careers.

The following report was created with this commitment in mind to assist the Ohio Department of Education and State Board of Education in developing the required state plan under ESSA.

The report offers eight strategic recommendations for how the state can partner with ESCs, Ohio's statewide system of support, to ensure the continuous improvement of every school and district in Ohio.

We look forward to working with the Ohio Department of Education, State Board of Education, and the legislative and executive branches of state government to set a new, bold vision for public education in Ohio.

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Executive Summary

The reauthorization of ESEA, the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), creates a fundamental shift in the focus and control of public education systems. States, districts and schools are now empowered to drive local engagement and decision-making to improve educational outcomes for all students in all schools. *This is the ESSA era, and we welcome it.*

We believe ESSA creates an opportunity for Ohio to set a new, bold vision for its education system that focuses on high quality local implementation of evidence-based practices for educational improvement. However, local implementers require significant support. This is a challenge the state simply cannot manage alone. Reaching every corner of the state, Ohio's Educational Service Centers (ESCs)—are ready to help make Ohio's new vision a reality. As the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) designs and implements the state's ESSA plan, ESCs must be key collaborators in advancing the state's efforts to raise student achievement.

This report offers eight strategic recommendations for how the state can partner with ESCs to ensure the continuous improvement of every school and district in Ohio. By working together, the students of Ohio—our future—can emerge as informed citizens, drivers of the state's economic growth and prosperity, and essential contributors to realizing Ohio's opportunities.

Recommendation 1 Develop a unifying vision and actionable strategic plan for Ohio's public education system.

The time is right for Ohio to develop a unifying vision and strategic plan for education in the state, which benchmarks Ohio against the highest performing states and nations. ESSA's stakeholder engagement requirements create an ideal opportunity to examine Ohio's progress and challenges and gather input to chart a bold path forward. At a minimum, this plan should also clarify 1) the role of the state as setting the direction and creating the conditions necessary for schools and districts to succeed, 2) the actual work of improvement within schools and districts, and 3) the critical support and guidance provided by ESCs and other regional partners to ensure sustained success.

Recommendation 2 Prioritize the creation of a culture of continuous improvement at all levels and among all key players.

ESCs are well-positioned as part of the statewide system of support to communicate, shape and expand this culture consistent with the state's priorities. Ohio must emphasize that continuous improvement is everyone's responsibility, every day, and not only in low-performing schools. Creating a culture of continuous improvement requires effective communication across all levels in the state's education system—to exchange ideas, celebrate successes, roll out initiatives and policies, discuss common challenges and brainstorm solutions.

Recommendation 3 Focus improvement activity at the school level.

With this target in mind, the state should leverage ESCs to both provide direct supports to schools and enable districts to align multiple school-based improvement efforts into a cohesive, sustainable plan for district improvement. We know from experience that no two schools are alike. The work of educational improvement must therefore have one destination—an excellent educational program for all students of all abilities—but many paths to get there. ESCs have a strong track record of delivering high-quality services to help schools and districts make progress on their unique improvement journeys, all aiming to reach the one destination.

Recommendation 4 Designate and resource ESCs as the state’s “go-to” regional support providers, a role that needs to be reflected in the state ESSA plan.

ESCs provide schools and districts with strategies, resources and tools to drive improvements in school-level performance at scale. ESCs are uniquely positioned to partner with the state to support improvement efforts in districts and schools. They are flexible thought partners and solutions developers, with experienced staff, leadership and expertise in key instructional and operational areas. They also bring deep knowledge in each area of ESSA implementation, such as school improvement, and the capacity to have an increasing impact.

Recommendation 5 Establish a revitalized working relationship between ODE and ESCs that includes clear communications, well-defined expectations, and active and continuous collaboration.

The partnership between ESCs and ODE should be based on a shared commitment. ODE and ESCs should revisit existing structures to ensure maximum impact on the continuous improvement of schools and districts, including the parallel support structures of ESCs and State Support Teams, performance agreement structures and the methods for allocating school improvement funding. ESCs should also serve as critical thought partners to ODE, helping to identify and promote the evidence-based approaches and interventions most successful for achieving strong student outcomes.

Recommendation 6 Utilize ESCs as key partners in the various opportunities created by ESSA to drive educational and school improvement.

ESCs should be a key voice in the design and implementation of the state ESSA plan, as they are best-positioned to coordinate and support initiatives designed to have impact at the local level. In particular, they can help provide direct student services and ensure the effective use of federal grants and other funding to improve educator effectiveness and support students in and out of the classroom.

Recommendation 7 Commit to developing and adopting a flexible, but meaningful, system of ESC accountability in partnership with the state.

The accountability system should be fair, reasonable and directly aligned to the roles and responsibilities carried out by ESCs.

Recommendation 8 Fund ESCs at appropriate levels of state and federal funding commensurate with the expectations for their levels of service as defined by state law and the state ESSA plan.

The state should align this funding distribution beginning in FY 2018 consistent with implementation of the next biennial state operating budget and the ESSA state plan.

As the state and ESCs begin to define the new roles and responsibilities previously outlined in this report, the state must ensure ESCs have the funding levels necessary to effectively conduct their work. ESCs can help the state make the best use of available resources and new funding opportunities at the federal level to support implementation of educational improvement strategies as part of ESSA.

Introduction

Today, Ohio has a unique and tremendous opportunity to make a difference in the lives of its 1.7 million students. A confluence of circumstances—new state leadership, new federal regulations and an upcoming budget—creates this opportunity, which Ohio should seize with a sense of urgency and excitement. Ohio’s Educational Service Centers (ESCs), longstanding contributors to high-quality education in the state, are committed to being partners in seizing the moment and helping drive Ohio’s education system to greater accomplishment.

Ohio possesses substantial assets (districts, schools, career-tech centers, ESCs, institutions of higher education, advocacy organizations and philanthropies) and hundreds of thousands of individuals (teachers, principals, superintendents, board members, administrators, school staff and others) deeply committed to student success. The state has all the ingredients necessary to achieve a bold vision.

We believe Ohio’s education system can be one of the best in the country and the world, where all students can receive a high-quality education that readies them for life, postsecondary pursuits, careers and citizenship.

For the past few decades, Ohio’s education reform agenda has primarily focused on developing and implementing state policy. State policy is important, but it has limited direct impact on student outcomes. What drives improvement in these outcomes are changes that take place in classrooms, schools and districts. This reality illustrates a fundamental truth about education: local implementation is what matters most. As every district and each building face different strengths and challenges, successful local implementation should be a highly-customized activity with a common focus on continuous improvement of schools and students. To make Ohio one of the best education systems in the nation, every component of this system must be committed to continuous improvement toward a shared vision of student success.

We believe Ohio needs a measurable strategic plan for achieving its statewide vision of success for public education. All levels and components of the educational system should align to this plan through a shared commitment to continuous improvement, even though the paths chosen may look different from one school or school district to the next.

With the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Ohio will see a significant shift in the focus and control of education. While the federal government will continue to specify certain requirements for state education systems, states, districts and schools will now be empowered to take ownership of educational improvement. Local stakeholders will engage in discussions about evidence-based strategies to inform local decisions, leading to a higher likelihood of success. This is the ESSA era, and we welcome it. This is an opportunity to carry out educational improvement in a very deliberate and customized way. While ESSA calls for states to focus on the lowest-performing schools, continuous improvement in teaching and learning must happen in all schools for all students if Ohio expects to close achievement gaps and excel.

Ohio's 612 districts and over 350 community schools will be expected to improve. They will need access to meaningful supports and resources to enable effective decision-making and implementation of proven improvement strategies. Local implementation presents a challenge the state cannot manage on its own. This is where ESCs can provide critical support and comprehensively address district needs— on school improvement, educator effectiveness, data analysis, curriculum and instruction, educator equity, social service integration, multi-organizational collaboration and several other drivers of educational improvement.

In order to meet a bold vision for its education system, Ohio's focus must be on high-quality implementation of effective practices at the school and district levels. Schools and districts should continue to pursue an improvement journey adapted to their own needs. To support them along the way, Ohio must leverage, engage and empower its ESCs.

Most people and organizations involved in Ohio's education system want to be the best they can be. But being the best often requires coaching and ongoing support. ESCs have a strong track record of helping districts and schools adopt and use research-based strategies and practices. In this report, we feature a variety of examples of this work by ESCs¹. In our experience, local decisions— informed by solid research and expertise, and implemented with robust technical assistance and other supports—can lead to important educational changes and better outcomes for students. ESCs are the key resource needed to help schools and districts continuously improve in the ESSA era.

We developed this report to offer recommendations for leveraging ESCs to support the state's vision for the education of all Ohio students. Other states have made great strides in aligning the work of their educational service agencies to state priorities in pursuit of common goals for student success (see page 15 for a discussion of Iowa's activities). Drawing on these efforts and the diverse experiences of ESCs, this report highlights specific areas where ESCs can lend their expertise to assist the state in designing and implementing a new education vision for Ohio. In particular, as the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) proceeds to develop the state ESSA plan, ESCs have an essential role to play in advancing the state's efforts to improve schools and raise student achievement.

¹For more examples of ESC innovations designed to enhance educational improvement, visit <http://www.oesca.org/vnews/display.v/SEC/INNOVATE>.

Overview of Educational Service Centers

ESCs are large-scale service providers offering administrative, academic, fiscal and operational support services to Ohio’s districts, chartered nonpublic schools, community schools and STEM schools. ESCs serve 612 school districts, 107 charter schools, 166 nonpublic schools, 25 STEM schools and partner with countless community-based and state-level agencies.

ESCs are defined and grounded in both state and federal law:

- ESCs are local political subdivisions.
- ESCs are school districts under state law (Ohio Revised Code sections 3311.05 and 3311.055).
- ESCs are local education agencies (LEAs) under federal law (20 USCS §7801(17) (ESEA, IDEA, HEA, Perkins)).

ESCs are also the central component of Ohio’s Statewide System of Support for School Improvement. Under Chapter 3312 of the Ohio Revised Code, the educational regional service system is established to support state and regional education initiatives and efforts to improve school effectiveness and student achievement. Sixteen ESCs hold the contracts for the State Support Teams (SSTs), which intervene and provide technical assistance to the lowest-performing schools and districts. ESCs are also required to implement state or federally funded initiatives assigned to them by the Ohio General Assembly or ODE.

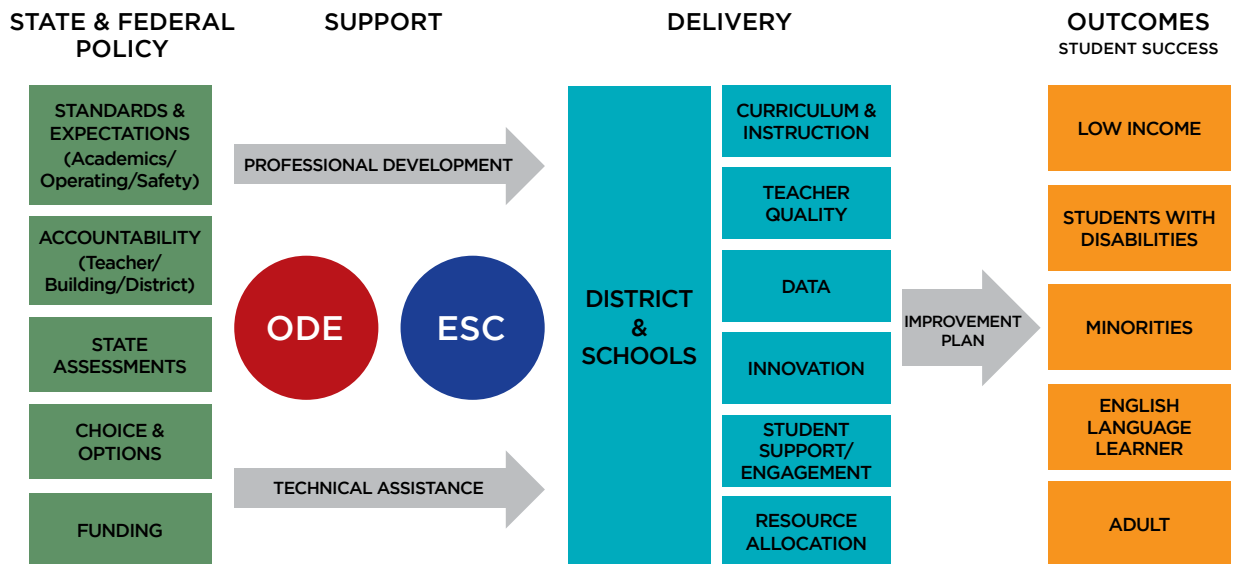


Figure 1: Role of ESCs in helping translate state and federal policy into school and district practices that enable improved outcomes evidenced by student success across subgroups



A Shared Vision and Plan for the Future of Ohio's Education System

Great organizations have a clear vision of what they want to accomplish. They align themselves around this vision, plan the approaches needed to reach specific goals, define who will do what, and work diligently and strategically to achieve success. Similarly, in the context of a large system of organizations, stakeholders can unite around a clear and shared vision of excellence. A common vision, however, does not imply the use of common strategies or actions; there may be multiple and diverse paths to success, each involving different kinds of strategies and activities, but all leading to a common objective.

Today, there is no specific vision and plan for the future of Ohio's education system. Without a strong and clear vision, state initiatives emerge as isolated actions instead of elements in a holistic approach to statewide educational improvement.

With the rollout of ESSA, the time is right for Ohio to develop a unifying vision and strategic plan that reflects the input and general consensus of its primary stakeholders. ESSA requires the state to engage in substantive discussions with stakeholders about key policy areas. We believe Ohio should seize this moment to go above and beyond these requirements to assess its educational progress, identify persistent and emerging challenges, and chart a path of continuous improvement for the future. ESCs must be involved in this work and are positioned to make a significant contribution to it.

Recommendation 1 Develop a unifying vision and actionable strategic plan for Ohio's public education system.

ESCs are prepared to make a significant contribution to the development and implementation of this plan. While Ohio must meet the requirements in ESSA, a new comprehensive strategic plan should guide all aspects of the state's education system. As part of this effort, the state must define the components of the plan in consultation with stakeholders:

- **Vision:** What is Ohio's vision for the education system and the desired student outcomes?
- **Goals:** What does success look like? What specific evidence would indicate that Ohio is making progress toward achieving the vision?
- **Principles:** What fundamental beliefs—such as local control, a reliance on evidence-based strategies, continuous improvement, use of effective data analysis and others—should guide the work required to realize the vision?
- **Strategies:** What strategies can make the greatest contribution to advancing Ohio's goals?
- **Action areas:** What areas require special attention to effectively apply the chosen strategies? How does Ohio best leverage existing assets to generate meaningful change?
- **Measures and targets:** What metrics can be used to measure Ohio's progress toward the goals? What targets should the state set to motivate action and inspire the work?

The plan must also specify the roles, expectations and responsibilities for each key participant in the education system—schools and districts, ODE, ESCs, local communities and others. In particular, the state’s role should focus on “steering”—setting the direction and creating the conditions to help schools and districts make decisions that drive improvement—rather than “rowing”—doing the day-to-day work of improvement². Schools and districts must take on the responsibility to do the hardest work—aligning resources to insure implementation with fidelity and quality.

We believe the ESC role should be two-fold:

- 1. To support ODE with information, research, and experience-based support as it sets the direction and strategic design for Ohio’s education system; and***
- 2. To provide direct technical assistance and support to enable schools and school districts to better understand the challenges they face, identify evidence-based solutions, and enhance their continuous improvement efforts.***

² David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government* (New York: Plume, 1993).

A Flexible but Relentless Focus on Educational Improvement³

If we are to create a system where all students receive a high-quality education and learn at higher levels than they currently do, we need to be relentless and smart in our commitment to improvement. Fortunately, most of the people who work in education have a keen interest in improvement and are always seeking ways to get better. Ohio needs to amplify this inherent disposition and emphasize that continuous improvement is everyone's responsibility, all of the time.

Recommendation 2 Prioritize the creation of a culture of continuous improvement at all levels and among all key players.

ESCs are well-positioned as part of the statewide system of support to communicate, shape and expand this culture consistent with the state's priorities. Creating a culture of continuous improvement means that in every speech, in every presentation, in every encounter about education, we stress the importance of always looking for opportunities to get better to help students succeed. We consistently ask how to improve the way we are tackling the complex challenges in the education system, and integrate this thinking into the fabric of our work. This desire to improve is not an admission of failure or inadequacy; instead, it reflects our pride and determination. Even the best performers and organizations strive to get better.

The field of improvement science identifies the key elements of a continuous improvement culture⁴:

- Determine a small set of **specific problems** and examine them from the user's perspective.
- Analyze **variation in performance** by asking what works, for whom and under what conditions.
- Apply a **systems perspective** and conduct causal systems analysis.
- Use **measurement for improvement** rather than for evaluation or accountability; gather leading indicator data and embed data collection into daily routines.
- Accelerate **learning through networked communities**; learn from others to enhance improvement and convene to achieve a common goal.

³ In this report, the term "improvement" does not imply a deficit mindset or the idea that schools must fail first before they can get better. Improvement is a commitment that even the best performers, in education and other sectors, make on a continuous basis.

⁴ Anthony S. Bryk et al., *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Ohio Valley ESC Partners with Local Colleges and Universities to Support Students

The Ohio Valley ESC and Muskingum Valley ESC co-lead the Appalachian Ohio P-20 Council, which convenes districts, higher education institutions, business and community leaders, and elected officials across nine counties to create a regional strategy for student success and workforce readiness. In 2014-15, the council hosted public events attended by nearly 300 stakeholders to field ideas for its priorities. In 2015, the council released its first regional strategic plan outlining key strategies, such as: using media to raise student awareness about the role of soft skills and career development, and working with teachers to integrate real-world career development skills into classroom instruction.

In 2014, the ESC started the Student Readiness Collaborative—a group of 13 districts, two career centers and six higher education institutions—to address the high rates of college remediation among high school graduates in the Ohio Valley region. Starting in 2016-17, the collaborative will roll out strategies to enable K-12 and higher education educators to jointly develop pathways that connect high school to college courses and work with businesses to provide mentorship and career development opportunities for students, among others. Collaborative members meet regularly to plan their activities and will monitor outcomes as implementation continues in 2017-18.

A continuous improvement culture also requires effective communication. ESCs cultivate this culture by sharing information, facilitating discussions of common challenges, exchanging ideas and solutions, and mining successes for best practices. To reinforce the coherence of its education system, the state can also rely on ESCs to communicate to local stakeholders how new initiatives and policies fit into existing state and local structures to support continuous improvement.

Hamilton County ESC Contributes to Improved Student Outcomes at Western Hills University High School (Cincinnati)

In 2015, Hamilton County ESC partnered with leaders and staff at Western Hills University High School to address their school improvement needs.

The ESC conducted comprehensive data audits, led teacher teams through an analysis of the data and helped develop the Western Hills Continuous Improvement Plan. This plan created goals for the school, each with strategies, action steps and timelines.

To raise staff capacity to execute the plan, the ESC developed new professional development adapted to the school's routines, preferences and unique needs. In parallel, the ESC established a system to track data, capture the school's progress and identify areas for further intervention.

In 2016, the school saw positive results: student satisfaction increased by 14 percent, student referrals decreased by 35 percent, and failure rates (grades of "F" in report cards) dropped for every grade level (7th through 12th). The school also met two indicators in its state report card. While the school still has a way to go, the plan laid the foundation for years of progress to come.

Recommendation 3 Focus improvement activity at the school level.

With this target in mind, the state should leverage ESCs to both provide direct supports to schools and enable districts to align multiple school-based improvement efforts into a cohesive, sustainable plan for district improvement. Student learning largely takes place in a school, and so it makes sense to focus our improvement efforts at the school level. But a school is not just a collection of independent classrooms; it is a system of interacting pieces that deliver educational services and supports to the whole child. When schools get better, most students reach higher levels of achievement.

From our experience, we know that no two schools are alike. This means that no two schools will have the same approach and combination of strategies and activities to drive improvement. Nevertheless, we can still hold schools and districts responsible for reaching the same destination—an excellent educational program for all students.



We think of this approach as many paths, one destination. The work of change and continuous improvement is more than a compliance exercise; rather, it is localized and customized. There must be deep engagement at the local level, including the involvement of teachers, administrators, parents and community members in analyzing data, understanding challenges, researching best practices, adopting strategies and action plans, and implementing solutions effectively.

The Center for Urban Educational Services at the Hamilton County ESC has identified the essential system components for supporting school improvement:

Phase 1: Data collection and review. An ESC leads schools through a review and analysis of the appropriate data, which also includes a variety of diagnostic activities.

Phase 2: Implementation planning, facilitation & customization. Good planning is critical to success. Planning focuses on school culture, instruction, discipline, internal processes and procedures, as well as other elements that merit targeted action based on the data analysis.

Phase 3: Building knowledge. To ensure high-quality implementation of the improvement plan, schools build staff capacity through professional development and coaching.

Phase 4: Accountability. Schools monitor implementation, identify challenges and fill gaps through targeted interventions.

Phase 5: Support & coaching. Coaching is embedded, targeted and includes co-planning, co-teaching, modeling and reflecting.

Phase 6: Evaluation & measuring growth. At this point, schools review a summary of their effectiveness and determine their next steps to continue on their improvement trajectory.

We recognize that over time learning and opportunities for improving student achievement will take place in increasingly diverse settings, inside and outside the walls of a school. Innovations in distance learning, out-of-school and expanded learning models, and technology-enhanced personalized instruction, among others, are reimagining when, where and how students learn. ESCs have already supported schools and districts in pursuing many of these promising opportunities, adapted to their unique needs and context. As these innovations gain traction and scale in Ohio, ESCs have the necessary capacity and experience to catalyze and facilitate this work locally.



The Essential Role of ESCs in School Improvement

For the state to reach a bold vision for education, there must be a greater focus on supporting local improvement activity. Doing so, however, is simply not within the capacity of state government and ODE to accomplish by itself. To succeed in its role as a steering organization, ODE should focus on developing policy, setting goals, gauging progress, creating accountability structures, establishing partnerships and evaluating improvement.

Ohio has a network of ESCs already providing a wide range of high-quality services to help schools and districts row effectively. Rather than creating new entities, Ohio should take advantage of this existing ESC infrastructure, which continues to demonstrate significant value, to assist schools and districts along their improvement journey. ESCs have the necessary capacity—including over 510 personnel trained in the Ohio Improvement Process—to play this role.

Recommendation 4 Designate and resource ESCs as the state’s “go-to” local and regional support providers.

ESCs provide schools and districts with the strategies, resources and tools needed to successfully tackle educational challenges and drive improvements in school-level performance at scale. The state should reflect this ESC role in its forthcoming ESSA plan. ESCs exist in large part because schools and districts elect to retain their services. They must consistently show their value or risk losing business. Ultimately, ESCs are accountable for producing results for their customers. Over the years, and in response to the state’s competitive market for services, ESCs have acquired and capitalized on unique features that reflect their core value proposition:

- **ESCs have significant knowledge capital and are responsive and flexible. They are effective thought partners and solutions developers.** Improvement is something ESCs do with districts, not to them. Because of their significant experience, ESCs have accumulated knowledge about what works and can respond quickly to requests for services from districts. They can be a resource for research and information on evidence-based models and best practices. They can also rapidly gear up to deliver services and customize the type of services based on local needs.

- **ESCs have deep relationships with schools and districts and can serve as “critical friends.”** ESCs are independent entities highly trusted and respected by their member districts. Because of this, they can serve as external “critical friends” and provide rigorous feedback to schools and districts, identifying challenges or opportunities the district may not have recognized or acknowledged independently. As a result of their work in multiple sites, ESCs can also share what is happening in other districts to help create a better understanding for the need to sustain a commitment to improvement and effective implementation.
- **ESCs are close to the customer.** Being geographically close to a customer is often very important to the provision of many different kinds of services. The ability of ESCs to visit on-site and to interact directly with school and district staff provide an important local perspective on a wide range of educational improvement activities.
- **ESCs have experienced staff and leadership, and can build specific expertise.** Not every district can afford to have all the experts they might need on staff. Because ESCs are in a position to aggregate demand for certain services, they have the ability to hire highly-qualified staff that may be beyond the reach of any individual district. ESCs can become focal points for expertise in certain instructional and operational areas. They can provide the needed “boots on the ground” to supplement district capacity and impact results.
- **ESCs are effective conveners and partnership brokers.** ESCs bring people and organizations together and foster more effective solutions to meeting academic and non-academic needs of students. Many ESCs have connections to social service organizations and local Family and Children First Councils. They can be effective liaisons and brokers of community services.
- **ESCs collaborate effectively.** ESCs support districts in ways that go beyond their own capacity by collaborating with one another. The network of all ESCs offers unparalleled experience and skills as well as a key venue to share knowledge and resources.
- **ESCs are highly accountable, transparent and demonstrate results through consistently high customer satisfaction.** The majority of ESC revenues come from contracted services and deductions from state payments to districts. Districts now have the ability to choose which services they receive from which ESC. Therefore, to be successful, ESCs must therefore be responsive to customer needs and attentive to customer satisfaction. Nearly all districts choose to continue working with their ESC, even when presented with the opportunity to switch to another ESC every two years. This reflects strong district confidence in the value of the services provided by their ESC.
- **ESCs stay ahead of emerging issues and trends across many districts.** ESCs stay ahead of emerging issues and are tuned into growing trends as a result of their involvement in state-level committees and work with multiple school districts. As connectors, ESCs are well positioned to share information with districts to raise their awareness and deepen their understanding of these issues and trends. This further helps districts achieve results by keeping them apprised of best practices and innovative approaches.
- **ESCs model and promote efficient and effective operations.** In today’s market-driven environment for ESCs, they have every incentive to operate efficiently and cost effectively. Moreover, by acting as a shared service provider, ESCs create economies of scale and contribute to the efficient use of resources between and among districts. ESCs demonstrate their efficacy by saving districts time and money.

ESSA focuses on a variety of activities that are fundamental to educating all students to high standards. **ESCs bring a track record of expertise and success, and the capacity to have a continuing and increasing impact in the specific areas prioritized in the new federal law.**

- **District and school improvement planning.** ESCs have significant expertise and experience in assisting all schools and districts plan for improvement, regardless of the district's current level of performance. Many ESCs have a long history of using the Ohio Improvement Process, the Decision Framework and other tools to identify improvement opportunities and develop meaningful strategies.
- **Teacher and leader professional development.** ESCs have long played a role in delivering this kind of professional development, from pre-service through an educator's entire career. ESCs have provided leadership, planning and coordination to support beginning teachers and administrators with mentors. They understand how to provide effective professional development that is job-embedded, sustained and impactful. The depth and breadth of knowledge that ESCs offer meet the needs among teachers and leaders for high quality professional development in all components of college and career readiness (e.g., literacy, numeracy, remediation and other key areas of student success).
- **Supporting the design and implementation of intervention strategies for the lowest-performing 5% of schools.** ESCs have assisted schools and districts with turnaround efforts. Their high-quality staff have many years of experience making a difference in school improvement. In fact, Ohio included an ESC in its federal Race to the Top application to lead technical assistance and monitoring of the state school turnaround strategy. The ESC directed this work over five years and developed significant knowledge in research-based interventions and strategies to support low-performing schools.
- **District and school data analysis to drive improvement.** ESCs recognize that all of their client districts review and analyze data. ESCs support and grow this capacity and provide additional assistance in facilitating data-driven insights and making conclusions actionable.
- **Stakeholder engagement.** ESCs regularly help districts with stakeholder engagement strategies and can use their existing communications structures to help the state do the same. Given their presence in every corner of the state, ESCs can be an efficient mechanism for gathering stakeholder input and feedback, and for sharing critical information.
- **Supporting focused attention on special populations—at-risk students, students with disabilities, English language learners (ELL), low-performing students and others.** More and more of the work of ESCs is focused on providing specialized services and supports to schools and districts that address the needs of special populations. They already have significant assets in place to do this work. For example, one ESC is home to two competitively-bid statewide contracts to provide technical assistance and services for students with autism and low-incidence as well as sensory disabilities. Many other ESCs are bolstering district capacity to support ELL students. ESCs also provide services to districts in hard-to-fill services positions such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychologists, pre-school and special education teachers, among others.

ESC of Central Ohio Targets Student Reading Outcomes

The ESC of Central Ohio provides high quality supports to districts locally and statewide to raise literacy outcomes for students at all grade levels.

Literacy coaching: Supporting districts to improve reading instructional strategies

Starting in 2011, the ESC has coached all teachers in Madison-Plains Local School District on effective strategies in reading instruction. The district has seen major improvements: on average, reading proficiency increased by 5.33 points, reading scores increased by 13 points for all grade cohorts over four years, and value-added growth exceeded expected growth and either met or exceeded reading targets in all grade levels.

Ohio Reading Corps: Providing tutoring to at-risk students

The ESC administers the Ohio Reading Corps, a statewide program that trains and deploys volunteers to support K-3 students become proficient at reading. In 2014-15, the program placed 120 corps members in 75 schools across Ohio, where they provided over 2,000 at-risk students with an average of 55 reading tutoring sessions per student. By the end of the school year, nearly 1,300 students achieved more than one year's worth of progress and/or met grade-level reading benchmarks.



Defining the ESC-ODE Partnership

Fully realizing the potential of ESCs as the state’s “go-to” local and regional service providers requires forging a stronger partnership between ESCs and ODE. This partnership should be rooted in a joint commitment to open communications, transparency, trust and mutual support.

Recommendation 5 Establish a revitalized working relationship between ODE and ESCs that includes clear communications, well-defined expectations, and active and continuous collaboration.

ODE and ESCs should collaboratively consider actions to create a stronger, more impactful partnership:

- **Reimagine the parallel support structures of ESCs and the Statewide System of Support for School Improvement (state support teams or SSTs) to ensure maximum impact and responsiveness to state, district and school goals.** This must be done carefully to avoid disrupting any of the high-quality work being accomplished by SST or ESC staff currently deployed to support improvement activities. At a minimum, the state should consider aligning SST boundaries to encompass the client districts of one or more complete ESCs to better align service provision.
- **Revisit the school improvement performance agreement structure to ensure that all performance agreements are specific and enforceable.** The state must be able to hold ESCs accountable for the agreed upon scope of work and deliverables and take appropriate action if obligations are not being met.
- **Revisit the methods for allocating school improvement funding to ensure a clear rationale for all allocation decisions.** Every rationale must define how the resources provided align to the educational challenges to be addressed and the scope of services to be provided.
- **Leverage ESC expertise for school improvement planning.** ESCs currently have two major streams of work: partnering with ODE to deliver supports related to statewide initiatives and efforts, and providing direct services to schools and districts. Drawing on this diverse work, ESCs can contribute to the state’s planning process for school improvement, including the use of data from schools and districts to develop specific targets and goals.

Putnam County ESC Helps Districts Transition to Ohio's New Standards and Assessments

Three strategies show how Putnam County ESC supported local districts in rolling out new college and career ready standards.

Offering targeted supports to successfully administer computer-based tests

The data from one district showed that students did not have the technology skills to adapt to computer-based assessments. The ESC developed a new resource website and conducted trainings over one year to help teachers cultivate these skills in their students. After the first year, teachers reported greater confidence in their students' technology skills. The ESC then expanded the resources available to help teachers leverage student technology skills for improved understanding of content knowledge in the assessments.

Facilitating collaboration among districts to share knowledge

The ESC convened teachers from nine districts for grade and subject area meetings focused on standards implementation, enabling them to collaborate and share best practices. The ESC also created a website for teachers to access locally-created resources and professional development on demand.

Using data and policy expertise to inform decision-making

The ESC partners with districts to analyze student data, identify challenges and develop improvement plans. Simultaneously, the ESC provides advice and support to enhance local policy implementation, especially in small rural districts, to comply with statewide and federal policy initiatives.

- **Revisit two-way communication between ODE and ESCs to further strengthen alignment.** ESCs can gather ideas and innovations from districts and schools to inform state strategy, while the state can convey information through ESCs regarding goals, objectives and state initiatives to guide local actions. ODE and ESC leadership should participate in regular quarterly status meetings to maintain open communication, identify challenges, develop solutions and refine strategies to accomplish state goals. An ESC liaison, paid for by the ESCs, can be embedded within ODE to regularly attend senior staff meetings. This person would serve as the liaison between ODE and ESCs and would have a deep understanding of how ESCs support districts.
- **Position ESCs to serve as critical thought partners to ODE, helping to identify and elevate the evidence-based approaches and interventions most successful for achieving strong student outcomes in schools and districts.** ESCs can leverage their relationships across the state to create multiple Networked Improvement Communities that facilitate information-sharing and ensure ongoing learning focused on improvement strategies.

Iowa's Area Education Agencies Reinvigorate their Partnership with the State

Starting in 2010, Iowa's nine Area Education Agencies (AEAs) set out to jointly rearticulate their role in the state's ongoing efforts to improve student achievement. The AEAs worked with the Iowa Department of Education to revisit their purpose and outline a comprehensive vision for their contribution to public education in Iowa. In short, they worked to "redefine their relevancy" in the face of 21st century challenges and needs.

The result: a new compact between AEAs and schools, districts and the state to co-own student outcomes. The partners would share accountability for preparing every child who graduates from an Iowa pre-K-12 public or non-public accredited school for success in postsecondary studies, a career and citizenship. They aimed to set specific goals for reading proficiency by third grade, mathematics proficiency, closing learning gaps for students in Individualized Education Programs and in disaggregated subgroups, and postsecondary readiness.

The compact positioned the AEAs as key partners in school improvement state-wide. Currently, the AEAs are involved in the Iowa Department of Education's policy planning process and meet with department staff monthly to coordinate activities. Select AEA staff roles are also placed on site at the department to facilitate close collaboration and ensure continuous communication. As the department develops the Iowa ESSA plan, AEAs and the department have established a structure for ongoing partnership and communication.

AEAs and the department are still working through some areas where the relationship is not working perfectly, but the overall impact has been to create a more effective mechanism to enable higher student achievement.

Sources:

Troyce L. Fisher and E. Robert Stephens, "Redefining Relevancy: The First Two Years of the Redesign of the AEA State System as a Community of Practice," *Perspectives* 20 (2014): 1-25, http://www.aesa.us/resources/Perspectives/perspectives_2014/Redefining_Relevancy_5_2_14.pdf

Iowa Area Education Agencies, *A New Compact with Iowa's Schools and The Department of Education On Behalf All Our Learners* (October 2012), https://www.mbaea.org/documents/filelibrary/AEA_Compact_Executive_Summary_ABA7B64C-CA30A.pdf

Iowa Area Education Agencies, "Our Goals," http://www.iowaaea.org/about_aea/our-goals/

- **Involve ESCs in the development and implementation of the new state ESSA plan and its broader vision for educational improvement.** ESCs can provide ODE with concepts, feedback and resources to insure effective, efficient implementation of strategies within the state's new plan. ESCs should be tasked with serving as the locus for supports and initiatives designed to have impact at the local level. ESCs have the capacity to advance the components of Ohio's strategic plan and vision consistent with state priorities.

In addition to the actions noted above, ESCs have a unique role to play in continuously building knowledge of school improvement strategies and their capacity to support client districts in an ever-evolving policy, technology and socio-economic landscape. ESCs can partner with ODE and Ohio's higher education institutions to develop a research and learning agenda. Concurrently, ESCs should be better connected and integrated into other state research projects (such as projects led by the Ohio Education Research Center). They can also lead the dissemination of promising practices that emerge from the state's Straight A Fund investments. Due to their significant local reach, ESCs can quickly respond to emerging issues that merit close attention and in turn share practices that successfully address these issues. For example, ESCs are currently engaged in exploring and developing services and supports in these key areas:

- **Supporting the digital convergence**, including personalized learning, by enabling the use of technology to enhance student outcomes.
- **Addressing the needs of diverse students** through specialized services for the increasing number of ELLs in the state and cultural competency training for teachers to improve capacity to appropriately serve large immigrant communities.
- **Developing education leadership** by growing the knowledge and skills of principals, teacher leaders, and other school and district leaders.

Specific Opportunities in ESSA to Leverage ESC Capacity

The Ohio ESSA plan should address new and continuing flexibilities in the federal law by deploying ESCs strategically to catalyze, bolster and sustain improvement efforts in all schools and districts.

Recommendation 6 Utilize ESCs as key partners in the various opportunities created by ESSA to drive educational and school improvement.

There are several areas in ESSA where ESCs can play a more significant role. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

Opportunity	Requirement in ESSA ⁵	Role for ESCs
School Improvement Activities in Title I, Part A (Section 1003)	States must set aside 7% of their Title I, Part A grant to support school improvement activities. This funding enables states to replace the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds, which will be discontinued.	ESCs should support the facilitation, design and implementation of school improvement activities funded with this reserve.
Direct Student Services in Title I, Part A (Section 1003A)	States may reserve up to 3% of their Title I, Part A allocation to award grants to LEAs to pay for direct student services.	If Ohio elects to pay for direct student services, ESCs should be included as eligible providers of direct student services, assuming qualifications are met.
School Improvement Plans in Title I, Part A (Sections 1005 & 1009)	States are required to have a plan to improve the lowest-performing 5% of schools.	ESCs, in collaboration with SSTs, should be involved in all activities addressing the unique needs of Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools (lowest-performing 5% of Title I schools and high schools with graduation rates below 67%) and Targeted Support and Improvement Schools (schools with one or more subgroups consistently underperforming on all state indicators).
District Planning (Section 1006)	LEAs must develop comprehensive support and improvement plans for schools.	ESCs can provide effective technical assistance to districts and schools creating plans for these federal funds.
Principal or School Leader Training in Title II, Part A (Section 2002)	States must sub-grant 95% of the Title II, Part A allocation to LEAs. In addition to this 95%, states may reserve no more than 3% for activities targeting principals or school leaders.	ESCs should ensure the effective use of these funds to train and support principals and school leaders, and align these efforts to other school improvement activities.

⁵Council of Chief State School Officers, Summary of Significant Spending and Fiscal Rules in the Every Student Succeeds Act, <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/Summary%20of%20Significant%20Spending%20and%20Fiscal%20Rules%20in%20ESSA%20-%2003092016.pdf>

Opportunity	Requirement in ESSA ⁵	Role for ESCs
Educator and School Leader Development Academies in Title II, Part A (Section 2101)	States may retain 5% of the Title II, Part A allocation. Up to 1% may be used for administration; the remaining funds (4% or more) must be used for state activities. Permissible activities include establishing or expanding teacher or school leader academies.	ESCs should be essential partners in helping the state determine how to best use the 5-8% state reserve, which it can leverage for educator improvement. The state should work through ESCs to create new educator development academies, drawing on their expertise in professional development.
Student Support and Enrichment Grants in Title IV, Part A (Section 4101)	States must sub-grant 95% of the Title IV, Part A allocation to LEAs. They may retain 5%, where up to 1% may be used for administration and the remainder (4% or more) for state activities. Permissible activities include monitoring, training, technical assistance, and capacity building.	ESCs should be eligible for Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant funding. Given their track record of success with districts, ESCs should also be the vehicles for providing permissible state activities to support districts as they use these grants.
Resources for Evidence-Based Models	Interventions funded by nearly every major ESSA program must be “evidence-based.” Broadly, these interventions must either “demonstrate a statistically significant effect” on student outcomes or be informed by “high quality research findings or positive evaluation.”	ESCs are best positioned to identify evidence-based models and disseminate information to the state, districts and schools. As conveners, ESCs are ideally suited to bring researchers together—including institutions of higher education and research organizations such as the Ohio Education Research Center—to determine the most appropriate models for implementation. The ESC role is to connect this research to local practice for educational improvement in all districts and schools in Ohio. Collaborative efforts between the State Department of Education, University of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin network of CESAs could serve as a model. ⁷⁸⁹

Although ESSA has a particular focus on the lowest-performing 5% of schools, school improvement in Ohio must go beyond this requirement in ESSA if the state is to truly excel. Ohio must strive for improvement in all schools on a continuing basis.

⁶ Penn Hill Group and Council of Chief State School Officers, Evidence-based and its use in ESEA, <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/ESSA/ESSAEvidenceBasedSummaryAndAnalysis.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/about/>

⁸ <https://wcernetwork.org>

⁹ <https://www.wceps.org>

ESC Accountability

We have a shared commitment to accountability in the ESSA era. Like other components in the state's education system, ESCs should be accountable for results and transparent in reporting their own accomplishments. ESCs are already held accountable for outcomes in fee-for-service agreements with schools and districts. A new accountability system should address ESSA as well as the full range of state or federally funded work delivered by ESCs. The purpose of this accountability system would be to assess progress and help drive continuous improvement. This requires clarity about expectations, deliverables and outcomes, which can be measured regularly over time. We believe the accountability system should be fair, reasonable and aligned to the defined roles and responsibilities carried out by ESCs to support educational improvement in the state within a collaborative statewide system of support. This accountability system should also reflect ESCs' dedication to implementing best practices, providing the highest quality of service and promoting educational improvement within a collaborative statewide system of support. Any accountability system should take into consideration and be aligned to existing accountability measures for ESCs including the high performing ESC performance measures enacted in HB 64 (131st General Assembly).

Recommendation 7 Commit to developing and adopting a flexible, but meaningful, system of ESC accountability in partnership with the state.

This accountability system for ESCs could start by being flexible, incorporating a small number of meaningful metrics—particularly input and leading indicators—defined individually by each ESC. Over time, ESCs would need to include metrics directly aligned to the state's overall vision to help them chart the course to success.¹⁰ The intent is to keep the accountability precise, efficient, meaningful and transparent. The system could be improved and refined over time as common approaches emerge that link specific activities to improvement outcomes. Ultimately, schools, districts and the public should have uniform and consistent information that allows them to gauge the accomplishments of all ESCs.

Good data and measures are key to supporting a continuous improvement culture. An accountability system should include the following components:

- a. **Outcomes for directly-served students:** To the extent that the ESC is providing instructional services to certain students (most often special education students), the actual performance of these students on key indicators of absolute performance, value added and other metrics should be reported.
- b. **Building-based improvement activities:** When ESCs are specifically and substantially involved in working to improve outcomes in particular buildings, and the conditions exist for a successful partnership, measures of school improvement should be reported.

¹⁰ In December 2015, the Ohio State Board of Education passed rules defining a high-performing ESC (Section 263.390. of HB 64 of the 131st GA). An ESC may apply to ODE to be designated a high-performing ESC based on meeting a series of financial and cost-saving metrics. High-performing ESCs receive more in per-pupil funding from the state than other ESCs. For more information, see <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Finance-and-Funding/School-Payment-Reports/State-Funding-For-Schools/Educational-Service-Centers-ESC-Funding/FY2017-High-Performing-ESC-Application>.

c. Other program measures: Every ESC should exercise flexibility to determine a small number of measures of progress and success for each program or service offered. Each program could present measures that may include input measures (e.g., number of participants), process measures (e.g., hours of professional development provided), participant satisfaction (e.g., participant responses to surveys about the impact of professional development), and outcome measures (as appropriate and feasible) that reflect changes in practice and other improvements.

New York and Texas have led the country in developing performance measures for their educational service centers.¹¹ ODE and ESCs may explore these measures as they jointly develop an accountability approach best suited for the Ohio context.

ESC of Cuyahoga County Links At-Risk Youth to Social Services

The ESC of Cuyahoga County has a robust partnership with Cuyahoga Family and Children First Council (FCFC) to connect local districts to state social agencies and channel their combined efforts to meet the non-academic needs of students. Cuyahoga County FCFC was one of 88 councils developed by Ohio Family and Children First, known as the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet, in 1993 to streamline and coordinate government services for children and families. The ESC and FCFC meet with stakeholders monthly—including the four largest districts surrounding Cleveland Metropolitan School District—to identify and jointly address gaps in the delivery of youth supports. The ESC facilitates data-sharing between schools and social agencies, and has begun developing an early warning system monitoring real-time outcomes across schools and agencies to coordinate services for at-risk youth.

¹¹ New York State Department of Education, “2013-14 BOCES Report Cards,” http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/boces/reportcard/2013_2014.html;

Texas Education Agency, “Regional Education Service Center Performance Standards and Indicators Manual,” http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter053/19_0053_1021-1.pdf

ESC Funding

As LEAs, ESCs are eligible to receive state and federal funding to provide services and resources that support the critical work of the state, including through consortia models. Currently, ESCs receive approximately \$600 million from cooperative purchasing agreements, shared insurance pools and other operational and collaborative administrative functions. An additional \$600 million is comprised of funded services and supports from multiple sources, including state, federal and local funds. These funding sources include:

- **State subsidy:** In FY 2016, ESCs are provided with \$41.6 million in state subsidy funding. This amounts to approximately \$27.00 per pupil. The state subsidy has been reduced in recent years from the peak of \$52 million reached in FY 2008 (\$37.00/pupil for single county ESCs, \$40.52/pupil for merged).
- **Local support:** State law allows ESCs to receive a \$6.50 deduction from state foundation payments to local school districts to support ESC services. Districts are allowed to negotiate higher deductions at their discretion. The \$6.50 deduction generates approximately \$12 million. Optional additional deductions generate substantially more.
- **Local contracts:** State law allows ESCs to contract with school districts to provide a variety of services and support ranging from special education services to professional development. These local contracts total approximately \$200 million.
- **Federal funding for SSTs:** In FY 2016, approximately \$25 million of federal IDEA and early childhood funding was used to support the school improvement activities of SSTs operated by selected ESCs. The state is also providing an additional \$3.5 million in general revenue funds (GRF) to support these activities.

Recommendation 8 Fund ESCs at appropriate levels of state and federal funding commensurate with the expectations for their levels of service as defined by state law and the state ESSA plan.

The state should align this funding distribution beginning in FY 2018 consistent with implementation of the next biennial state operating budget and the ESSA state plan.

ESCs are eager to play an enhanced role in the continuous improvement of Ohio's education system and to serve as a partner to ODE in this effort. As the state and ESCs begin to define the new responsibilities previously outlined in this report, the state should ensure ESCs and SSTs have the funding levels needed to do their expanded work in schools and districts. ODE should reallocate existing state resources and leverage federal funds provided by ESSA to enable ESCs to perform their enhanced role effectively. **We are committed to helping the state make the best use of available resources and new funding opportunities at the federal level to support implementation of educational improvement strategies as part of ESSA.**

We encourage the state to articulate clear expectations for the use of resources provided to the ESC and SST systems. To accompany these expectations, the state should also establish a minimum funding threshold for ESCs to allow them to maintain basic operations to carry out their enhanced role. The state might consider creating performance agreements for ESC funding to increase transparency and establish clear priorities, specific uses of funding and expected outcomes.

Conclusion

Ohio's ESCs have a long history of providing valuable and needed support to districts and schools throughout the state. They are trusted partners, and their reputation and expertise are well-regarded. As Ohio enters a period where it has more flexibility to chart a course to significantly improving student outcomes, it makes tremendous sense to engage ESCs as strong partners and leverage their capability to accomplish this important work. By working together, the students of Ohio—our future—can emerge as informed citizens, successful participants in the state's economic growth and prosperity, and contributors to meeting Ohio's opportunities and challenges.



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