

AESA grows in "Year of the Phoenix"

by Bob Witten



The AESA has come a long way since 1976, when 82 Educational Service Agencies from 18 states formed the National Organization of County, Intermediate, and Educational Service Agencies. Although NOCIESA functioned under the umbrella of AASA, this step nonetheless marked the official beginning of our organization.

Since then, the role of ESAs has become increasingly important because of the challenges faced by local schools in delivering on the promise of a quality education for all children. As the mission of ESAs was more clearly defined and better understood, the need for a stronger organization to advocate on their behalf was obvious.

It's not a stretch to suggest that our history parallels that of the phoenix, the mythical bird that provided the name for the city we will visit this year for our national conference. The phoenix emerged from a spectacular fire in a dazzling rebirth. Although AESA's evolution was more gradual, it has been no less dramatic. From its modest beginnings under AASA, AESA has become a major player on the field of public education.

Our growth has been impressive, and now, so is our reach. AESA today represents more than 550 agencies in 45 states, advocating policies, forging partnerships, and creating exciting new initiatives that have a positive impact on more than 80 percent of the nation's educational community. AESA and its member agencies are respected as "come to ... can do" organizations.

It's important to remember that this growth and our current prominence in public education did not happen by accident. Visionary leaders like Justus Prentice, Walter G. Turner, and E. Robert Stephens steered our progress and taught us to treat challenges as opportunities. Effective leadership has been demonstrated throughout our history, not only at the national level, but in every region of the country, in every state, and in individual ESAs. And, of course, much credit goes to our accomplished AESA staff, led by Brian Talbott, executive director.

Our success derives from our commitment of service to our clients. Whether a member agency serves fewer than 10 school districts, more than 50, or any number in between, our focus has been, is and always will be, helping students reach their highest potential. It is this shared commitment and our proud record of achievement that continually reinforces our mission of service. We have the expertise to anticipate, and then respond to, the changes that are occurring in our educational system.

AESA's standing committees do an outstanding job in advancing our mission, and their efforts enhance our culture of innovation. I have proposed that AESA focus this year on five key initiatives that will better position our organization to meet the needs of all ESAs. These initiatives build on the exciting work already being done by the committees, our organization and key partners.

Initiative #1: AESA to develop strong and dynamic partnerships with businesses that value and support public education.

The Business Relations Committee, led by Dee Alarcon, chair, and John Bass, vice chair, forges partnerships between our organization and the private sector that foster greater cooperation and continued innovation. Our educational system cannot succeed without the support of the business community. By recruiting more business partners, business members, and sponsors, AESA continues to strengthen those dynamic relationships between the educational community and private sector.

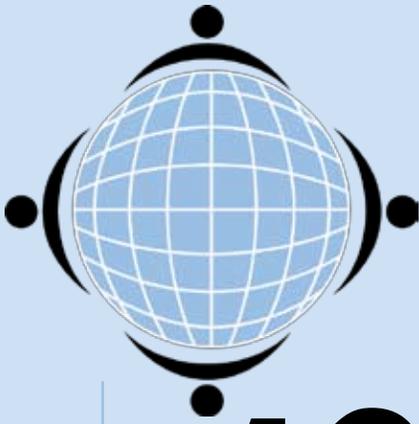
Initiative #2: AESA to explore professional development opportunities at the annual conference for critical ESA staff members, such as special education directors, curriculum directors, public relations directors, and human resource directors.

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Association of
Educational Service Agencies

Volume 29, Number 3; August 2008

AESA NEWS



AESA News is published by the Association of Educational Service Agencies, 801 N. Quincy Street, Suite 750, Arlington, VA 22203-1730; phone: (703) 875-0739; FAX: (703) 807-1849; (info@aesa.us). Editor: Kelly LaGrutta
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Our Membership Services Committee, with Linda Lowe as chair and Mick Loughran as vice chair, advances effective programs to develop the talents of ESA leaders and staff members. AESA's conferences and regional meetings provide excellent opportunities to learn from our peers. In addition, the Executives in Residence program, with Twyla Barnes and Ron Hitchcock as facilitators, continues to provide valuable leadership and mentoring experiences for the next generation of CEOs. The National Association of Media and Technology Centers (NAMTC) will hold its annual leadership summit this year as a pre-conference to our national conference in Phoenix, creating additional opportunities for networking.

Initiative #3: AESA to be a fully interactive network connected between/among ESAs across the United States.

NAMTC, led by Geoff Craven, president; Susan Richard, president-elect; and Gary Ross, immediate past president, is urging individual ESAs to include links to AESA on their organizational web sites. At the same time, NAMTC is actively encouraging ESAs to provide or confirm the necessary information so they can be linked from the AESA site. These links will strengthen our opportunities for working together in pursuit of common goals.

Initiative #4: AESA to be recognized as the influential professional education organization with federal legislators and administrators.

The Governmental Relations Committee, under the leadership of John Hough, chair, and Jim Baldwin, vice chair, oversees the Educators' Call to Action Conference, strategically timed in September, and the January Governmental Relations meeting. These efforts are extremely important for AESA to remain a primary player in advocating for sound federal education policy.

Initiative #5: AESA to develop a professional educational relationship with AESA counterparts in other countries on world educational issues.

Just as ESAs in the United States can learn from each other, so too can we benefit from dialogue with educational service organizations in other countries. An ad hoc committee chaired by Mike Cook, with Vickie Markavitch as vice chair, is exploring how we can expand AESA's global

relationships. These efforts cannot help but benefit our organization and, ultimately, the schools that we serve. The town square is now without physical boundaries, and the lives of today's students will be influenced to an even greater degree by people, events and economic and educational developments beyond our shores.

Other important and ongoing initiatives keep AESA in the forefront of emerging educational trends while helping ESAs fulfill their mission of service to schools and communities:

- Research projects undertaken by the Research and Development Committee, chaired by Joan Schuman, with Mike Cook as vice chair, will position AESA, and all ESAs, to better respond to educational challenges and adapt to trends.
- The AESA Educational Foundation, chaired by Ron Fielder, offers exciting initiatives and resources that help ESAs reach higher levels of success in developing and managing programs that meet their communities' needs.
- The work of Vickie Markavitch, chair, Rich McBride, vice chair, and other members of the Awards Committee ensures that outstanding contributions to ESA programs will be recognized through the presentation of our three prestigious national awards, which are named in honor of those three "founding fathers" mentioned earlier – Justus Prentice, Walter G. Turner, and E. Robert Stephens.

As you know, the theme for our "Year of the Phoenix" is "Preparing Students ... Delivering Success." Thanks to you and your predecessors, the discerning educators who founded and nurtured AESA, we have been delivering on its promise of educational accomplishment for many years. I am proud to be the president of an organization whose members give so much of themselves every day to make a real and lasting difference in children's lives. Thank you for your support of AESA and ESAs, and special thanks for all you do to turn children's best dreams into reality.

Bob Witten is AESA president and executive director of the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit 16 in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

2008 annual conference registration and room reservations available online

Registration for the 2008 AESA Annual Conference is available online at www.aesa.us. The current registration for an AESA employee, board member, or non-exhibiting AESA Business Member is \$695 online with a credit card, or \$750 by check, purchase order, mail, or fax. The rates go to \$795 and \$850 respectively on November 1.

AESA members may also register for the preconference event hosted by the National Association of Media and Technology Centers (NAMTC) for \$150.

Hotel reservations for the 2008 AESA Annual Conference at the J.W. Marriott Desert Ridge Resort, Phoenix, Arizona, are tied to the online registration process. Because the AESA conference block of rooms has filled the hotel, it will not be taking reservations by phone or through its website.

When you complete your online registration for the conference, you will then be referred to an online hotel reservation page linked to the registration. You can access the online registration at www.aesa.us/AnnConf2008.html.

The theme for this year's conference is "Preparing Students ... Delivering Success." The conference will feature keynote speakers and ESA peer-to-peer presentations on the theme in strands that include: Demonstrating Results, Delivering Success, Technology – Transforming Learning, Tools for Collaboration, and Measuring Success.

Upcoming nomination deadlines

AESA National Awards nominations due August 29

Nominations for AESA's three national awards to recognize individuals for outstanding contributions to educational service agency programs at the regional, state, and national levels will close on August 29. The nomination information, guidelines, and annual awards cover sheet are available from the AESA website at: www.aesa.us/About/2008AwardsPacket_final.pdf.

The three awards are: Justus A. Prentice Award, given to an individual for contributions through executive leadership in the advancement of educational service agency programs at the regional, state, and national levels. Walter G. Turner Award, given to an individual citizen who has made outstanding contributions in the advancement of educational service agency programs at the regional, state, and/or national levels. E. Robert Stevens Award, given to an individual for research, writing, and/or publishing of information that advances the understanding of educational service agency programs at the regional, state, and/or national levels. The work(s) may include, but is (are) not limited to, articles, monographs, dissertations, a book chapter, or a book.

AESA Executive Council nominations due September 12

Nominations for AESA Executive Council members from the Eastern, Central, and Southern Regions are now open and will close on September 12. Each year three Council members are elected to a four year term, with one region having a bye. This year the Western Region does not elect a new member.

The AESA Executive Council is the governing body of the association. It meets four times annually in the spring, summer at the CEO Summer Conference, fall at the Educators' Call to Action Conference, and winter at the AESA Annual Conference. Newly elected Council members will begin their term at the spring 2009 meeting. Ending their terms on the Council are: Doug Garman of Ohio, Eastern Region; Vickie Markavitch of Michigan, Central Region; and, Linda Lowe of North Carolina, Southern Region.

The nomination packet is available from the AESA website at: www.aesa.us/About/2008-2009_Call_for_Nominations_Executive_Council.pdf.

Call to Action Conference focuses on federal advocacy

Anticipated changes in federal legislation with a new administration and Congress next year will be a major topic of discussion at the September 15-17 Educators' Call to Action: Federal Advocacy Conference.

This year the conference will be headquartered at the Arlington Residence Court Hotel, 1200 N Courthouse Road, Arlington, VA. It is conveniently located near the Metro, allowing easy transportation from the conference to appointments set up by ESAs to meet with their federal legislators.

Among the changes advocated by AESA will be making permanent the Medicaid reimbursement that was extended again on a year-by-year basis. That extension, along with the inclusion of ESA teachers in the Higher Education Act loan forgiveness program, are two recent successes of grass roots ESA advocacy.

"The loan forgiveness program is very important for ESAs, not only for their current teachers but also for future teacher recruitment," said Brian Talbott, AESA executive director. "The loan forgiveness program is a direct result of the hard work of ESAs across the country, led by the efforts of Roberta Stanley in Michigan, Cynthia Woodside in New York, and by Bruce Hunter and Mary Kusler in Washington, DC," Talbott said.

John Hough, chair of the AESA Governmental Relations Committee, suggests that ESAs invite local school district superintendents to register, attend, and participate in the conference. "It is very effective when your Senator, Congresswoman, or Congressman sees the ESA and local school district together talking about the same issue," he said.

For information about concurrent sessions and the conference schedule, and to register for the conference, log onto the AESA website www.aesa.us.

Relations Committee and Educators' Call to Action Conference

Advocating for federal legislation that benefits ESAs, schools, and children has for several decades been at the forefront of AESA's mission. Attending the Educators' Call to Action Conference is always a worthwhile endeavor, but it is especially important that we have a high turnout for this year's conference, September 15-17.

There will be many changes in federal education policy with a new administration and Congress. It is vital that AESA and ESAs are proactive by promoting our legislative agenda. We must work on promoting our agenda with Congress and presidential nominees now.

Mary Kusler, AASA's assistant director of governmental relations and AESA's contact for its Governmental Relations Committee expects the new president and Congress to begin moving quickly on federal education issues. According to Mary there is little time for AESA to maximize its impact. Mary often tells us that no one can tell the story of services agencies better than the service agencies themselves. Telling our stories and sharing the AESA legislative agenda are important reasons for attending the September Call to Action Conference.

Mary Kusler provided me with what she sees as the "big" issues for this year of transition. The first issue is Medicaid. The current Medicaid moratorium expires on April 1, 2009 (this is an extension that was attached in the emergency supplemental). We all need to work on a permanent solution so the Protecting Children's Health in Schools Act needs to become a priority (HR 107 and S 578).

Mary also believes that appropriations will be messy this year. The appropriation bills probably will not be completed until a new administration is in place. It is expected that Congress will be working on the temporary Continuing Resolution when we are gathered for the Educators' Call to Action Conference. Contacts with your Congressional members, particularly those on the Appropria-

tions Committee, are critical to ensure they know the effectiveness of impacted federal programs at the local level in their states and districts.

We also know that at some point after a new administration takes office, the serious discussions about reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) will occur, including a likely change of the short title now known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Advocating for ESEA changes that benefit our local schools, ESAs, and advocating for the highest funding level possible for those programs are additional reasons for attending this year's conference.

The current effectiveness of the Governmental Relations Committee and the Call to Action Conference has a deep history, which goes back to the early beginnings of AESA as an Association. AESA Executive Director Brian Talbott said the earliest reference of what we know today as the Governmental Relations Committee is traced to the July 1978 meeting of the National Organization of County Intermediate and Educational Service Agencies (NOCIESA), which became our national organization in February 1977. We became the American Association of Educational Service Agencies (AAESA) in 1979. In 1999 the name was changed from AAESA to the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA) as we started working with ESAs in Canada, Europe, and Australia.

In the early 1980s the AAESA established the September I-Care Conference to focus on the national AESA legislative agenda. It was during the AAESA period that federal advocacy reestablished itself as an integral part of the association's focus with the renamed We-Care Conference becoming a major national program.

The name was subsequently changed 2001 to the "Educators' Call to Action: Federal Advocacy Conference." The purpose of this conference was to work the Hill during the time that appropriations are being set and the opportunity to promote

AESA's federal legislative agenda.

During the '90s AAESA program expansion included national ESA legislation through the outstanding efforts of Bruce Hunter, then AESA executive director and currently AASA's associate executive director for advocacy and policy, a long-time ESA supporter. Through Bruce's leadership, AAESA became a known entity to Congress and the administration, an active professional association, and ESAs became an important part of the national educational legislative agenda. To enhance the governmental relations activities, the AESA Council established a strategic initiative on federal advocacy as part of its first strategic plan in 1998. Joe Marinelli from Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES (NY) and Joe Lagana from Allegheny Intermediate Unit (PA) co-chaired a task force to develop the initiative.

Today the Governmental Relations Committee is made up of one representative from each state. In January it develops the AESA Legislative Agenda, which is published on the AESA website for easy access by ESAs that use it when meeting with their federal legislators locally or in Washington, DC to advocate the association's positions.

As you can see, the AESA's Federal Relations Committee and the Educators' Call to Action Conference have a rich history and demonstrated record of success in appropriations and policy issues. This advocacy is made possible by the strong network of ESAs facilitated by the national association. We all need to work together during this year of change and hope to secure legislation and policies that will benefit all children.



John Hough is chairman of the AESA Governmental Relations Committee and executive director of RESA VIII in Martinsburg, West Virginia.