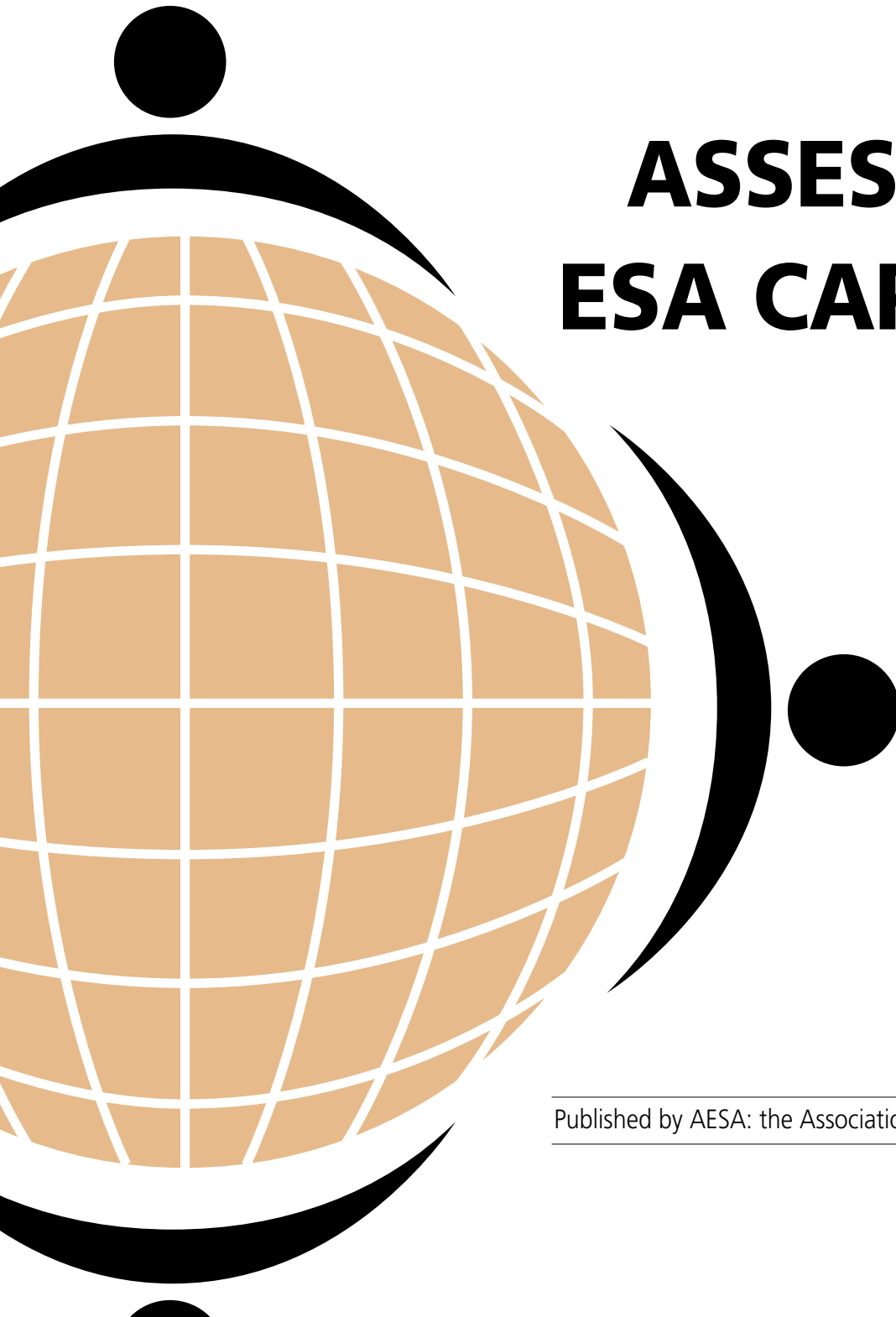


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Perspectives

A Journal of Research and Opinion About Educational Service Agencies



ASSESSING ESA CAPACITY

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

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Preface

by
Brian L. Talbott
Executive Director, AESA

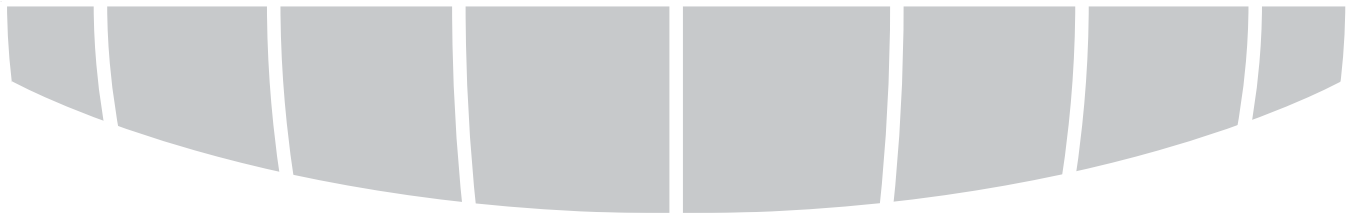
We all recognize that research is one of the cornerstones of successful continuous improvement. To this end AESA is committed to bringing the best research about ESAs to our members through *Perspectives A Journal of Research and Opinion About Educational Service Agencies* and special studies like the two exemplified in this issue.

AESA feels so strongly about this commitment that we have a Standing Committee for Research and Development (R&D). The goal of this committee is to initiate and collaborate in research and development efforts on behalf of AESA and member ESAs and to provide for technical assistance to the membership. The R&D Committee is chaired by Joan Schuman, Massachusetts. Mike Cook, Kansas serves as vice chair. The committee members include: Donna Durno – Pennsylvania; Ron Fielder – Iowa; Anne McKenzie – Massachusetts; Ron Nanney – North Carolina; Norman Ronell – Nebraska; Donald Spencer – Michigan; and Ed VanderTook – Colorado.

I mention these active committee members because they guide and help identify research projects about ESAs. If you know of research efforts going on in your agency, state or region, please let one of us know. We are anxious to include quality research in our future publications.

This year is another outstanding issue of *Perspectives* thanks to the effort of our editor, Bill Keane, and our Editorial Board: Wayne Bell – Nebraska; Rita Cook – Kansas; Ed Frye – Pennsylvania; J. Gary Hayden – Arizona; E. Robert Stephens, Iowa; and Craig Burford, Ohio.

As your Executive Director I want to thank those of you who contributed to this issue. With a circulation of over 7,000 copies, our readers include not only member ESAs, but every State Department of Education, numerous universities, libraries, other educational associations, as well as our business members and partners.



Introduction

This edition of *Perspectives* looks a little different than previous ones. Though it offers four excellent articles by ESA-related staff, a substantial component of this issue looks at studies done by others about service agencies. That may be both a good and a worrisome development.

The positive aspect of this phenomenon is that service agency contributions to education are being recognized by leadership groups and individuals throughout the country, and there is a growing interest in learning about what ESAs are doing to improve education in the several states. The more troubling aspect of the reduction this year in articles by service agency personnel is that ESA staffs know best what is making a difference for young people in our regions. It would be unfortunate if outside groups become the major purveyors of information and research about ESAs lest our most significant contributions get lost in studies by contracted groups, however competent, about “hot” topics.

The first half of this edition documents studies that have been done about ESAs under contract with highly reputable researchers. Randal Peters, a doctoral student at Drake University, and Asta Svedkauskaite, a staff member at Learning Point Associates, responded to a request from *Perspectives* for a summary of their study of five states (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin) regarding ESA capacity in each state to contribute to improving education in local districts. (The Tomlonovitch article, discussed later, actually fleshes out some of the generalizations in the Learning Point study.) The study by the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd was asked to provide a descriptive study of service agencies in five states – Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Texas – as to their regional capacity-building strategies and to identify common characteristics. (Readers will be interested in the conclusions about the Illinois and Ohio systems of service agencies since they were included in both the Learning Point and California Comprehensive Center studies.) The third study looks at the role of service agencies in fostering alternative teacher certification. It was commissioned by AESA and supported by Walden University.

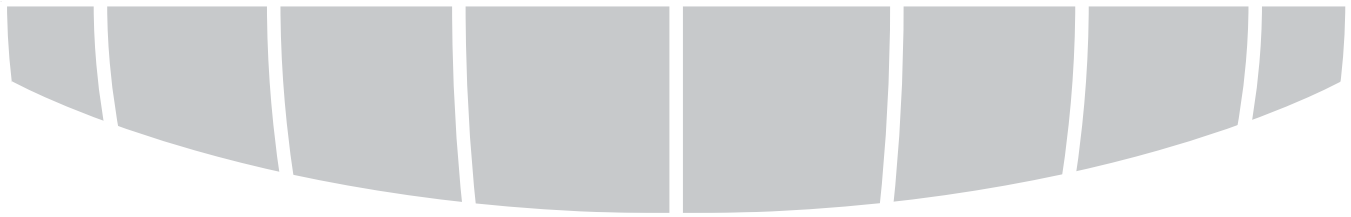
There are four articles in this edition that represent the work of present or retired members of the ESA family. Ed Frye, retired superintendent from Pennsylvania, continues to challenge service agency leaders to avoid comfortable and conventional thinking and calls on them to reconceptualize the best ways to grow and improve relationships with local district staff. There are two articles from Michigan. Jon Tomlonovitch, executive director of the organization of 57 service agencies in Michigan (MAISA) offers a detailed portrait of how service agencies are partnering with the state department of education and local districts to help struggling school districts make significant improvements in student achievement. Michigan colleagues Wendy L. Tackett and Carol L. Westjohn describe how a service agency serving a lot of economically and socially deprived school districts set up a program currently serving 13 schools in three school districts

to provide after-school educational, enrichment, and recreation opportunities for young people under the direction of the service agency. Sandra Nolan, an expert in quality improvement strategies such as ISO and TQM, shares information about ESC 12 in Waco, Texas, which is both the purveyor of information about these quality methods as well as an exemplar of how these techniques can improve the ESC itself.

This has been the year of the “big” study. We look forward to a revisiting next year of more works from individual ESAs.

Also, this year it have been our intention to begin a standard feature in *Perspectives* of summarizing key trends from annual reports from ESAs around the country. Unfortunately, at the time of printing there were not enough reports to permit accurate generalizations. Hopefully next year we will have a more complete data base of annual reports from which to draw meaningful conclusions.

Bill Keane, Editor
Perspectives
September, 2008



A Network For Change: ESAs From a Systems Perspective in The Great Lakes Region

by
Randal E. Peters
Asta Svedkauskaite

Local education agencies (LEAs) are increasingly finding that they have limited resources available to commit to large-scale change, such as meeting the requirements to improve schools as outlined in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. State education agencies (SEAs) have been similarly resource-challenged, particularly in the availability of staff with the expertise and credibility to assist districts in the effort to improve their schools. This limitation of resources for LEAs and the downsizing of SEAs have “brought to the forefront limitations in the infrastructure of the state system of elementary-secondary education” (Stephens & Keane, 2005, p. 86).

In this current educational climate of radically increasing expectations for states to assist districts and schools in meeting accountability requirements, some states are building relationships with other entities in the broader statewide systems of support, such as with institutions of higher education, educational service agencies (ESAs), and private organizations. Building such relationships is necessary in order for SEAs to more effectively transition from their traditional role of oversight to that of capacity-building.

The concept of statewide systems of support may not be entirely new, but the process of developing and nurturing effective ones poses multiple challenges that have yet to be fully addressed. What does a successful statewide system of support look like? Which areas are in greatest need? Who is best qualified and best positioned to provide necessary services? How will the services be funded and monitored for effectiveness? More importantly, how can it be demonstrated that the statewide system of support is functioning properly and is affecting student achievement?

A new comprehensive center network, recently established by the U.S. Department of Education and consisting of 16 regional comprehensive centers and five content centers, has charged the regional centers to work with SEAs to build state capacity in helping states meet the requirements of NCLB. This new network replaced the former Regional Comprehensive Assistance Centers, the Regional Technology in Education

Consortia, the Eisenhower National Clearinghouse for Mathematics and Science Education, and the Regional Mathematics and Science Education Consortia. Two regional comprehensive centers operated by Learning Point Associates—the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center and the Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center—have been working with the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin for several years. Through the centers’ work with their SEAs, it has become evident that the SEAs are indeed trying to develop larger systems of support within their states.

To increase regional knowledge about the systems of support, Great Lakes East and Great Lakes West have undertaken a survey research task to more closely examine the capacity and positioning of ESAs in the five-state Great Lakes region. The centers worked in close collaboration with the Association of Educational Service Agencies to conduct the survey in each state. Identified state ESA leaders (a mix of executive directors and agency administrators) were surveyed regarding their ESAs’ structure, services, policies, and staffing. The data were self-reported, although much corroborating data also exist in the literature. Although an effort was made to create an element of consistency, there is an obvious limitation in any attempt to project commonality among state systems, given broad variance in historical constructs, definitions of terms, service matrices, staff roles, accessibility to funding, and accountability mechanisms. Still, the overall responses provided an overview of the capacity and roles of the ESAs within the context of the broader statewide systems of support for school improvement.

Nationwide, the number of states with ESAs has nearly doubled within the last two decades; currently, there are 45 states that have established ESA systems. This development is strong evidence that ESAs are emerging as critical components within the larger fabric of statewide systems of support to bring about district and school improvement and educational change. In this regard, ESAs also verify Stephens and Keane’s (2005) assertion that state ESA networks are particularly “well positioned to provide needed support” (p. 86). ESAs have existed throughout the Great Lakes region for at least 30 years, with the Ohio system dating back as far as 1914 and the Illinois system as far as 1865 (see Table 1). Given that ESAs in the region predate the current major educational reforms, it is timely to ask what transitions must take place in the roles these entities play in order for them to take their proper place within larger statewide educational systems.

Redding (2007) argues that from a statewide systems of support perspective, American education “is far more complex than a trichotomy of federal, state, and district organization may suggest” (p. 71). This complexity derives from multiple subsidiaries of the SEAs within the statewide systems of support, which may include autonomous and semiautonomous regional organizations, university-based programs and consultants, private and commercial organizations, various professional associations, and family advocacy groups. For any healthy functioning support system, “an effective interplay among these units is critical, as [...] relationships evolve in response to new stresses and opportunities that arise,” argues Redding (p. 71).

“ESAs are ‘the main player [...] and a necessary and valuable component in the statewide system of support’ and that they serve as ‘the first level of enforcement of state laws, rules, and regulations.’ ”

The survey responses from the ESAs within the Great Lakes region illustrate a range of roles that these agencies play in their state’s system of support. Typically, these ESAs serve as a regional extension of their SEAs as well as service providers to the SEA but with strong linkages to local districts, or cooperative entities of districts (McIver, 2002, as cited in Morando Rhim, Hassel, & Redding, 2007). Most have had some degree of formal or informal training and involvement in the statewide systems of support and, as per

Wisconsin's response in the survey, "are able to assist districts if they are officially designated by the state as needing improvement." In certain cases, they are actually a fundamental contributor to the process of "dramatically reinventing the role and structure of ESAs" in their respective states (Hunter, 1996, p. 2). The survey responses provide broader perspectives as to how different sets of ESAs are positioning themselves in their respective statewide systems of support.

Five Systems of Support

Illinois. The survey responses indicate that ESAs are "the main player [...] and a necessary and valuable component in the statewide system of support" and that they serve as "the first level of enforcement of state laws, rules, and regulations." In a case of complaint, ESAs become the first responder before the SEA and the court system. From a policy perspective, ESAs define policy where the SEA or the General Assembly does not provide sufficient supplementation and monitor school district policy through technical assistance visits to school districts. This technical assistance scope can include delivering the services specified by NCLB and helping districts and schools develop improvement plans as well as the provision by the regional service providers of the coaching necessary to develop and implement the plans and a system to monitor the implementation.

Indiana. As reported in the survey, "Governor [Mitch] Daniels has been instrumental in assisting the Indiana ESCs to better address cooperative efforts in the areas of insurance risk management trusts, natural gas cooperatives, and other cooperative purchasing." The House Enrolled Act No. 1006 (2006) specifically authorized and encouraged schools and ESAs to consolidate cooperative purchasing services for utilities, transportation, and risk management insurance. This consolidation of school district business functions through the ESAs has been a common theme, moving the ESAs into further cooperative efforts. As stated by the Indiana respondent on the survey, surveys "conducted by the Division of Finance of the IDOE indicate that ESCs provide significantly more opportunities for schools to cooperatively purchase or share services than schools do on their own volition."

Michigan. ESAs concentrate most of their efforts on improving the performance of high-priority schools as they "work in close collaboration with the SEA" (survey response). One noteworthy statewide initiative to improve Michigan's statewide system of support has involved multiple collaborators from around the state, including a core team composed of the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan Association of Intermediate Administrators, along with other partners. The project aims to provide statewide professional development to build the capacity of educators in order to address instructional needs and improve student achievement. The 18 ESAs involved employ four key components of the current system—leadership coaches, auditors, consultants, and process mentors—to assist districts and schools. [See the following article for a more complete discussion of the Michigan collaboration between service agencies and the SEA.]

The core team members meet to build a common understanding of Michigan's statewide system of support, to build a communication system that ensures partners are informed regarding all initiatives and get feedback as they make decisions related to their individual services, and to implement an evaluation system that showcases the accomplishments of Michigan's statewide system of support for high-priority schools and indicates areas in need of improvement. In January 2008, Michigan's 2007–09 federal grant request for school improvement was approved, which will add an additional statewide system of support components such as state-level positions, data analysts, academic coaches, and others to support high-priority schools. Also, online school improvement portals and templates are available for teams to develop and implement district- and school-level plans. These collaborative initiatives demonstrate the state's efforts to continually improve its statewide system of support and make a concerted effort to "darken ... the dotted lines"—as

described by Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael P. Flanagan—and strengthen the relationship between the Michigan Department of Education and the state’s ESAs (Michigan State Board of Education, 2007).

Ohio. Ohio has taken a significant legislative step to connect the components necessary to have an impact on regional delivery of state school improvement and administrative and educational services. Referred to as regionalization, the process is designed to create greater alignment and efficiencies among more than 140 regions—separate and uncoordinated heretofore—which had been the victims of redundancy of services. This recently established network is called the Educational Regional Service System, and it maintains existing, independent regional service providers, such as the ESAs. The amended Substitute House Bill 115 clarified the roles and responsibilities of these entities under the new system. ESAs, in particular, play a significant role by providing mandated services and also entering into collaborative agreements for the provision of any of the following services:

- Assistance in improving student performance
- Services to enable a school district or school to operate more efficiently or economically
- Professional development for teachers or administrators
- Assistance in the recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators
- Any other educational, administrative, or operational services

In addition, under the new law, ESAs also implement state-funded or federally funded initiatives assigned to the service centers by the General Assembly or the Ohio Department of Education.

Wisconsin. The state’s system of support has taken a collaborative approach to provide assistance to districts with Title I schools in improvement. A noteworthy initiative in Wisconsin—the statewide system of support pilot—began in August 2005, which involved seven districts charged with developing a self-assessment rubric and peer review process of the statewide system of support, which later were piloted by the districts. As stated on the survey, Wisconsin’s ESAs play a significant role in the support system by providing continuous improvement support and training to all districts, “regardless [of whether] they are identified by the state for being a school in need of improvement.” They conduct regular meetings involving representatives from the SEA. A noteworthy ESA practice of facilitating statewide communication and collaboration among stakeholders is a collaborative council, consisting of the key education stakeholders at the state level, which aims to provide advice and direction to the state superintendent and guide leadership on educational improvement and student performance in Wisconsin. All 12 ESA administrators serve on this council.

Common Findings

Despite a broad diversity of organizational cultures in each state, several common findings emerged in the survey data regarding capacity of ESAs. Perhaps the most repetitive strand to come through the literature and the survey data was the support for the potential of ESAs to make a difference in statewide systems of support. NCLB authorizes utilization of ESAs in the provision of professional development services, school improvement activities, and development of partnerships to enhance education through technology (Stephens & Keane, 2005). The rapid growth of ESAs as a formalized component of school improvement systems has shifted from one state initiative more than a decade ago to a “consensus that ESAs must play an enabling

role in school improvement” (Mickler, 1995, p. 36). Furthermore, the national attention to ESAs’ inclusion in school support teams is growing, as “states and SEAs are compelled to figure out how they can scale up improvement efforts” (Lane, 2007, p. 11). This capacity appears to extend well beyond support for schools and districts in corrective action per NCLB.

To reinforce their potential, ESAs continue building a network of support through exemplary local, regional, and statewide programs and services. These best practices, as the survey revealed, can be found throughout the Great Lakes region in

the form of professional development programs, innovative involvement in school support teams, leadership in technology, and school improvement consulting and serve as catalysts for collaboration. Concerns were voiced, however, that consistent accessibility to such programs and services often can be limited by distance, discrepancies in revenue sources, state and regional structures, and limited staff availability. Initiatives that emphasize multiregion collaboration, creativity, and technology-based solutions have been particularly effective.

Another frequently stated concern among state network representatives was the lack of formalized agreements regarding the roles and responsibilities of ESAs. As evidenced on the survey, they advocate that a clearer definition of ESAs is needed, along with the “genuine support of the state board of education and state department of education,” in order to better develop “quality delivery standards, effective systems of technical assistance to ensure quality, and capacity to deliver needed programs and services.”

The observation that resources available to ESAs for educational improvement are not adequate is a common theme across educational systems, and in ESAs this situation often compromises the ability to hire and train quality staff and limits the availability of necessary programs. This information indicates that the funding may not have kept pace with the increased expectations.

Finally, it is clear that standardized evaluation and accountability processes are emerging, but remain

“Although all ESA networks expressed confidence in their regional members’ ability to have a positive impact on district and school improvement through the services they provide, they also acknowledge that ‘no formal, aligned, and consistently applied process of evaluation exists, linking these services to student achievement.’ ”

sporadic. Although all ESA networks expressed confidence in their regional members’ ability to have a positive impact on district and school improvement through the services they provide, they also acknowledge that “no formal, aligned, and consistently applied process of evaluation exists, linking these services to student achievement” (survey response). In this regard, it seems logical that systemic approaches to ensure evaluation and accountability that link services and programs—particularly in the professional development arena—to district and school improvement goals should intensify. ESAs soon may need to take a more active role in promoting and developing such statewide systems, particularly given the climate of heightened accountability, which is likely to remain a part of the educational landscape.

The findings of this survey study bear out assertions that ESAs—which have doubled in number in the last 20 years, are present in some iteration in nearly every state, and have worked closely with local districts for a long time—are well positioned to provide much-needed support in district and school improvement efforts. The study shows that ESAs can and do have the potential to play a significant role in statewide systems of support, a concept verified repeatedly in the accounts of exemplary programs and services throughout the region. These findings illustrate the potential for ESAs—working with other partners—to assist in building capacity to reach student achievement and school improvement targets. This endeavor is increasingly important, given an era of remarkable change and daunting challenges in the field of education, which has demanded of its institutions an unprecedented degree of understanding, collaboration, and accountability.

Given what has been documented about current capacities of SEAs and LEAs, district and school improvement will likely continue to have slow growth unless ESAs—“the least expensive, most readily available infrastructure available” (Hunter, 1996, p. 6)—can better be utilized and mobilized.

The complete report “A Network for Educational Change in the Great Lakes Region: A View Through the Lens of Educational Service Agencies” can be downloaded from Learning Point Associates’ website at www.learningpt.org/pdfs/GreatLakesESAreport.pdf

Table 1. Number and Titles of ESAs in the Great Lakes Region

State	Year Established	Total Number of Agencies			Common ESA Titles in the Great Lakes Region
		Original Units	1994-1995	2008	
Illinois ^a	1865	102	45	45	Regional offices of education (ROEs)
Indiana	1976	4	9	9	Educational service centers (ESCs)
Michigan	1962	60	57	57	Intermediate school districts (ISDs) ^b
Ohio	1914	87 ^c	72	58 ^d	Educational service centers (ESCs)
Wisconsin	1963	19	12	12	Cooperative educational service agencies (CESAs)

Data sources: Association of Educational Service Agencies website; Stephens & Christiansen (1995); Ohio Educational Service Center Association website; Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools website; Wisconsin Association of CESA Administrators website.

^aIllinois’s 102 county superintendents had their numbers reduced to 78 and became regional superintendents. Due to further consolidation, the number was reduced to 57 in 1977 and 45 in 1994.

^bESAs are also identified as Michigan Regional Educational Service Agencies and Regional Educational Service Districts.

^cEstablished through an act of the Ohio General Assembly and formerly called County School Districts.

^dThe Sandusky County ESC is closed as of June 30, 2008, making the total ESC number 58.

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Michigan's Statewide System of Support for High Priority Schools: The MDE/MAISA Partnership

by
Jon Tomlanovich

The Michigan State Board of Education has identified the following as one of its continuing strategic goals:

“Attain substantial and meaningful improvement in academic achievement for all students/children with primary emphasis on high priority schools and students.”

In June, 2006, Michigan's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Michael P. Flanagan, issued a challenge to the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) and its ISD/RESA leaders to join the State Board of Education and the Michigan Department of Education in their vision for a new partnership that he titled “Darkening the Dotted Lines.” (Some Michigan ESAs use the traditional name for their organizations: namely, intermediate school districts, and others define themselves as regional service agencies or districts.) The goal of such a partnership was to expand the capacity of both organizations to serve Michigan students and districts, avoid duplication of effort and resources and to strengthen informal partnerships already in place. The MAISA Executive Board accepted that challenge and in November, 2006 signed a formal action plan that would fully implement this partnership.

A major focus area of this partnership agreement was working with high priority schools and the development of a statewide system of support (SSOS) to identified high priority schools with ISD/RESAs playing a key part in this system. High priority schools are those schools that have failed to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for at least two consecutive years. AYP is the measure used to hold schools and districts responsible for student achievement in English language arts and mathematics. In Michigan, AYP is a measure of year-to-year student achievement on state-wide assessments such as the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) test, and the new Michigan Merit Exam (MME) for high school students. Other indicators, such as the number of students that participate in the assessments and, for high schools, graduation rate, are also considered in the calculation.

MAISA was identified by the Michigan Department of Education as the grant administrator of the Title I Technical Assistance funds with the grant's purpose being the provision of intensive, ongoing assistance to Michigan Title I schools most in need of improvement. Currently, 17 of the 57 ISD/RESAs are involved in the initiative.

Participation of an ESA is driven by the presence of "identified" high priority schools in their service region. For the purposes of this partnership focus, "identified" high priority schools refers to Title I funded schools that are subject to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) sanctions under Title I for not making AYP and are at Phase 3 or higher.

In using the Title I School Improvement funds to support this statewide system of support, resources

"MAISA's resources are designated to fund the development of statewide support strategies, the training for implementation of those support strategies and administrative costs associated with that work."

are divided into two "streams." MAISA's resources are designated to fund the development of state-wide support strategies, the training for implementation of those support strategies and administrative costs associated with that work. The other funding resources go directly to the ISD/RESAs with identified Title I high priority schools to be used to employ the needed staff/consultants (as described later) to work with the high priority schools and implement the school improvement strategies of the statewide system of support. To assure clarity and understanding of the elements of the Statewide System of Support, there are a number of entities and processes unique to Michigan that need additional explanation:

- 1) Michigan School Improvement Framework (MSIF)– Since 1990, Michigan schools and districts have been required to develop 3-5 year school improvement plans. To provide schools and districts with a comprehensive framework based on current research and best practice, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), in conjunction with school improvement specialists and educators across the state, developed the Michigan School Improvement Framework (www.mi.gov/schoolimprovement).
- 2) Michigan School Improvement Facilitator's Network (SIFN)– This network is made up of school improvement consultants/facilitators from each of the Michigan ISD/RESAs and Michigan Department of Education representatives who work to assist their constituents to implement the MSIF, and apply continuous improvement principles to the process as well as provide input to MDE.
- 3) AdvancED-NCA/MDE Online School Improvement Resource– MDE and Michigan ISD/RESAs work together in the development of a Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CAN) to be used as a tool to assist a school or district staff in determining the strengths and challenges of their organizations. To make this tool readily available and accessible, MDE and ISD/RESAs worked with AdvancED/North Central Accreditation to develop an online portal that facilitates the completion of a comprehensive needs assessment (www.advanc-ed.org/mde).

As noted previously, a portion of the state's Title I School Improvement Technical Assistance grant funds are directed to identified ISD/RESAs.

The ISD/RESAs serving high priority schools are responsible to employ a cadre of individuals serving as coaches, auditors, consultants, and mentors to assist the identified schools and their districts. The roles these various individuals and processes play in the support of high priority schools are described below:

- Leadership Coaches are trained by Michigan State University (MSU) to work with principals of high priority schools for 100 days. They are responsible for helping lead staff through the School Improvement Framework (MSIF). Coaches were chosen through ISD/RESA nominations or through a statewide selection process.
- Process Mentors are three-person teams trained by Michigan’s School Improvement Facilitators Network (SIFN) to facilitate change by making sure the School Improvement Plan is being implemented by removing barriers and coordinating services at the district and state level. The teams are made up of a district level leader, an ISD/RESA district facilitator and a Michigan Department of Education representative.
- Auditors are trained by the Advanced Ed/North Central Accreditation Association to identify why schools did not make annual yearly progress, identify steps schools are taking to increase student achievement, increase awareness of sanction status, and provide an independent snapshot of school strengths and challenges.
- An online School Improvement portal is available for school improvement teams to develop and implement district and school level plans. ISD/RESA and state-level school improvement plans are in the process of being developed.

These partnership efforts are given direction and oversight through two groups: 1) A High Priority Advisory Committee, composed of ISD/RESA superintendents, MDE representatives and MAISA staff. 2) The Project Core Team, composed of MDE and MAISA staff and partners (MSU, SIFN, Advanced Ed/ NCA). These groups have the goal of building a common understanding of the Michigan SSOS; building a communication system that ensures partners are informed regarding all initiatives and feedback as they make decisions; and to implement an evaluation system that showcases the accomplishments of Michigan’s statewide system of support for high priority schools and indicates areas in need of improvement. It will be the intent of this partnership to provide statewide professional development to help build the capacity of educators to address instructional needs and improve student achievement.

In practice, these four noted elements of the SSOS (Leadership Coaches, Process Mentors, Auditors

“...the establishment and implementation of the MDE/MAISA partnership creates greater opportunities for successful support systems for Michigan’s high priority schools. The challenge will be to sustain, expand and improve current partnership activities as more high priority schools are likely to be identified for involvement in the statewide system of support.”

and the online Comprehensive Needs Assessment) work in concert to address the challenges of improving student achievement. For example, once a Title I eligible high priority school is identified for assistance, a trained Leadership Coach is assigned to the building principal in the high priority school. This coach is the most consistent element of the effort in that he or she is with the building principal for upwards of 100 days. The next step is for the AdvanceED/NCA trained auditor to visit the identified building to identify why the building failed to meet AYP and assess strengths and challenges. Following the audit, the Process Mentor team (LEA District, MDE and ISD/RESA representatives) meets with the principal and Leadership Coach to review the audit and determine needed actions to remove barriers and give needed support to

improve student achievement results. This group also meets with the building school improvement team to discuss and share the audit, strategize on interventions and garner input. The online MDE/AdvancED/NCA Comprehensive Needs Assessment is a key tool in building awareness and understanding of the status of current school improvement efforts and provides a “gap analysis” for consideration and focus in the efforts to improve student achievement. The Leadership Coach, building principal and the building school improvement team (along with periodic involvement by the Process Mentors) are then charged to implement the strategies and approaches needed to improve student achievement and ultimately meet AYP standards.

While there is much more to do, the establishment and implementation of the MDE/MAISA partnership creates greater opportunities for successful support systems for Michigan’s high priority schools. The challenge will be to sustain, expand and improve current partnership activities as more high priority schools are likely to be identified for involvement in the statewide system of support. The involvement of Michigan’s ISD/RESAs in this statewide system is a natural outgrowth of the commitment to service and sharing of expertise to the districts and students of Michigan.

In addition, the role of Michigan’s ISD/RESAs in school improvement efforts illustrates the state’s recognition of service agencies as powerful tools for making substantial improvements in education.

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Building Regional Capacity to Support Schools and Districts in Need of Improvement Under NCLB

by

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Introduction

The American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, identified five states with comprehensive regional systems for supporting districts and schools in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. We then interviewed selected state education agency (SEA) staff in the five states — Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Texas — to learn about their regional capacity-building strategies and to identify common system characteristics.¹

The intent of this report is purely descriptive. That is, we have not attempted to evaluate the states' regional systems in any way. Consequently, we do not know how effective these systems are in improving schools and districts, nor the extent to which the systems are implemented as intended.

In this summary we first describe how we selected the states for our sample. Next, we summarize the five states' demographics, regional structures, funding sources, service models, and staffing. Finally, we describe strategies and processes for building capacity at the regional level from the point of view of SEA staff

State Selection

We selected states that have comprehensive regional systems for supporting schools and districts in need of improvement under NCLB. We defined the key elements of a comprehensive regional system as follows:

1. A mission statement or a set of goals related to school and district improvement;
2. Funded with the aim of providing services to schools and districts in need of improvement;
3. Provision of specific school and district improvement services; and
4. Designated staff to carry out these services.

Through expert nominations, web searches and literature reviews, we selected a sample of five states — Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Texas. While other states have regional systems in place, the states in our sample appeared to have the most comprehensive regional systems for supporting districts and schools in need of improvement under NCLB.

We initially created state profiles that summarized each of the five states’ structure and organization, funding sources, service models, and regional staffing. We then conducted interviews with SEA staff to confirm the information in the state profiles and learn about each state’s strategies for building the capacity of regional support staff and providers. The information in the interviews was analyzed across the states to identify common system characteristics and strategies to build regional capacity.

State Demographics

We provide an overview of each state’s demographics in terms of its size and the percentages of schools and districts in need of improvement. This information provides the context for understanding each state’s regional system of district and school support.

As shown in the table below, the demographics of the five states vary widely. In 2006-07, Georgia had the smallest number of students, with about 1.6 million students, and Texas had the most, with approximately 4.6 million students. States also varied in the percentage of schools and districts that had been identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under NCLB. Only four percent of schools in Texas were in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in 2006-07, compared with almost one-fifth (19 percent) of schools in Ohio. In 2006-07, Texas also had the lowest percentage of districts in improvement or corrective action (5 percent), and Illinois had the highest percentage (17 percent).

State	Number of Students in State*	Number of Schools in State**	Number/Percentage of Schools in Improvement, Corrective Action, or Restructuring 2006-07**	Number of Districts in State**	Number/Percentage of Districts in Improvement or Corrective Action 2006-07**
Georgia	1,598,461	2,100	186 (9%)	180	18 (10%)
Ohio	1,839,683	3,599	669 (19%)	613	69 (11%)
Illinois	2,111,706	3,888	509 (13%)	871	150 (17%)
New York	2,815,581	4,669	506 (11%)	794	56 (7%)
Texas***	4,576,933	8,061	286 (4%)	1,222	58 (5%)

* Data retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.schooldatairect.org/>

** Data retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.centerii.org/centerIIPublic/>

*** Data provided by the Texas Education Agency in May 2008

Structures of Regional Systems

There is significant variation in the structure of regional systems across states. Broadly speaking, four of the five states (Georgia, Illinois, New York, and Texas) have two-layered regional structures, with a new layer added on top of an older regional layer. Ohio recently integrated all of its regional pieces into one overall system. Below, we describe these regional structures in more detail.

Georgia, Illinois, New York, and Texas all have two layers of regional support; New York's newer layer was added in 2000, prior to NCLB, whereas the other three states added a second layer in response to NCLB. In Georgia, the original layer is the 16 Regional Education Services Agencies (RESAs), and the newer layer is composed of five Regional Support Teams (RSTs). Both layers provide school and district improvement services.

In Illinois, the original layer consists of 45 Regional Offices of Education (ROEs), which are grouped by counties across Illinois. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) created the Regional Service Provider (RESPRO) system in 2002-2003 in response to the large number of schools designated as in need of improvement under NCLB. Ten RESPROs work in collaboration with the 45 ROEs.

In New York, the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) system has existed since the 1940s, with 38 BOCES that provide shared educational programs and services to school districts.² New York created seven Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs) in 2000. These centers work collaboratively with three other statewide networks—Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRCs), Bilingual ESL Technical Assistance Centers (BETACs), and the Statewide Student Support Network (SSSNs)—to support schools and districts in need of improvement. Most of the RSSCs are operated by BOCES.

Texas has 20 Educational Service Centers (ESCs) that were established in the 1970's. All 20 ESCs provide general and special education support to the schools and districts in their service areas. In addition, two ESCs (Region 13 and Region 16) host statewide initiatives focusing on school improvement and operate independently from the hosting ESCs. Region 13 houses the School Improvement Resource Center (SIRC). This center focuses on providing assistance to all schools in Needs Improvement status in the state. Region 16 hosts another statewide initiative that focuses on all Potential schools—those that have missed Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for one year. In addition, Region 16 oversees professional development for Title I schools and coordinates parent involvement efforts statewide. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) considers these two statewide initiatives and the Texas Comprehensive Center to be partners in their statewide system of school support.

Ohio's integrated system came into existence in July of 2007. At this time, Ohio changed its system of regional support from separate Regional School Improvement Teams (RSITs) and Centers of Special Education to a combined network of 16 State Support Teams (SSTs) in order to consolidate services and to encourage communication among these previously disconnected but related school and district improvement efforts.³

Funding of Regional Systems

The source of funding to regional school and district improvement systems also varies significantly from state to state. Regional systems are funded with a combination of federal, state, and local funds. Illinois, New York, and Texas use mainly federal funds for their school and district improvement efforts. A larger proportion of these funds (approximate \$3 million) are allocated to the two regional offices in Texas (in particular Region 13) that serve statewide functions.⁴ In Illinois and New York, the RESPRO and RSSC systems are each funded using about \$20 million of federal money (e.g., Title I and III, Reading First, IDEA funds). Conversely, the five Regional Support Teams in Georgia have \$11 million in state funds, and the 16 RESAs receive about \$12 million in local funds. Finally, Ohio has been able to pool all of its funding (about \$50 million) from a combination of approximately \$30 million in state funding (school improvement and literacy funds) and about \$20 million in federal funding (from IDEA) to pay for its integrated system.

In all five states, the funding level in each region is determined by school and district improvement needs.⁵ Three states—Ohio (SSTs), Illinois (RESPROs), and New York (RSSCs)—use a competitive RFP process by region to fund agencies to administer their regional services on two- to five-year contracts.

Regional Service Models

All of these states' regional systems provide services to both schools and districts in improvement (with an emphasis on the school level in most of the states) and use similar overall improvement processes. These processes usually include data analysis and identification of school and district needs, development of goals and creation of school and district improvement plans, targeted professional development and technical assistance in the areas identified for improvement, and progress monitoring. In addition, all five regional systems have some degree of autonomy from the SEA. As mentioned, Ohio, Illinois, and New York issue RFPs for agencies

“Once agencies are contracted to the states, they have a high degree of autonomy in how they implement school improvement strategies as long as they are meeting the specific deliverables set out in their contracts.”

to provide regional services on two- to five-year contracts. In these states, the SEA works with the regional levels to determine deliverables and performance standards, and provides some monitoring and professional development. Once agencies are contracted to the states, they have a high degree of autonomy in how they implement school improvement strategies as long as they are meeting the specific deliverables set out in their contracts. Texas has a grant application process for its ESCs with predetermined performance measures that are monitored annually. Georgia appears to provide the most oversight of their regional system since SEA staff serve on each of the state's five Regional Support Teams.

Finally, three states (Georgia, Ohio, and Texas) use a tiered approach to providing school and district improvement services. They all prioritize the schools and districts with the greatest needs, but do so in different ways. In Georgia, the 16 RESAs focus on schools and districts in their first and second years of improvement, whereas the five state Regional Support Teams address schools and districts that have been in improvement for three years or longer. Similarly, the SIRC, located in Region 13 in Texas, is specifically designated to serve all schools in Needs Improvement status, whereas the Title I Statewide School Support/Parental Involvement Initiative located within Region 16 focuses on Potential schools—those that have missed AYP for one year. In addition, Region 13 provides schools in Stage 1 of school improvement with an administrative mentor and schools in Stage 2 with intensive technical assistance provider support focusing on implementing an effective school reform strategy. In Ohio, funding is prioritized by district need: 80 percent of the funding goes to priority districts, 15 percent to districts at risk, and 5 percent to region-wide professional development and technical assistance for all districts.

Staffing at Regional Levels

Across the five states, most staffing decisions are made at the regional level. In four of the states (Georgia, New York, Ohio, and Texas), regional leadership (e.g., Executive Directors in Texas) are appointed by regional-level boards. Only in Illinois is the regional leadership, in the form of Regional Superintendents, elected.

Most states have few staff members devoted to school and district improvement at the state level. In Illinois, for example, five state-level staff oversee the overall process, but it is the 10 RESPROs that carry out the work. Each RESPRO includes up to 10 part-time staff members, and all RESPROs hire experienced educators.

Similarly, Texas has four full-time staff dedicated to school and district improvement at the state level. Most school improvement work takes place in the SIRC and the Title I Statewide School Support/Parental Involvement Initiative located within two of the ESCs, with about 12 and six staff members, respectively, as well as through hired administrative mentors, site visit specialists, and technical assistance providers.

In Ohio, six regional managers at the state level oversee two to three regions each. At the regional level, the 16 State Support Teams employ about 300 staff across the state. In contrast to Illinois, Texas, and Ohio, Georgia's School Improvement Division employs 96 staff, most of whom work in the field. Three SEA staff serve on each of the five Regional Support Teams, and other staff members serve as leadership facilitators in schools that have been in improvement for three years or longer.

“In Ohio, funding is prioritized by district need: 80 percent of the funding goes to priority districts, 15 percent to districts at risk, and 5 percent to region-wide professional development and technical assistance for all districts.”

Strategies for Building Regional Capacity

Regional capacity building is defined here by the overall strategies that the five states reported using for building capacity at the regional level to assist districts and schools in need of improvement. Each state was asked which specific steps it had undertaken to build capacity at regional levels. These steps included coordinating and aligning services, building relationships, and engaging stakeholders, as described below.

Georgia's overarching regional capacity building strategy, as described by the Georgia SEA representative, is based on “the three Cs—Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration.” As an example, each of the five Regional Support Teams holds monthly meetings with the Regional Education Support Services Agencies in its region. In addition, the School Improvement Division meets five times a year with the 16 RESAs and other state school improvement agencies (e.g., Georgia Learning Resources Systems, Educational Technology Training Centers, colleges and universities) to coordinate school improvement efforts and align support, language used, and resources in the field.

Related to the communication, coordination, and collaboration strategy is an emphasis on developing a common language and ensuring uniformity so that everyone speaks with the same voice and implements processes the same way. The Georgia state representative explained it this way: “If a state school improvement person were to go into a school and RESA went into the school, everybody uses the same language.”

“If a state school improvement person were to go into a school and RESA went into the school, everybody uses the same language.”

To enhance communication, Illinois holds monthly meetings between SEA staff, RESPROs, and state associations (e.g., Association of School Boards and Association of School Administrators). Ohio holds an annual school improvement leadership conference, which entails four days of professional development, focusing on coordination and integration of improvement efforts. Texas also holds an annual conference focusing on technical assistance for schools in improvement, as well as three-day quarterly meetings to provide school support team staff with updates and trainings on the latest research-based strategies for school improvement. Finally, New York conducts quarterly reviews of Regional School Support Centers. As the New York state representative noted, “You have to make sure that, if they are an extension of the State Education Agency, you have to keep them close and work with them in partnership and give them credibility.”

State representatives also noted the importance of breaking down silos within state departments (i.e., working collaboratively across departments) and avoiding competition between SEAs and regional offices. Again, increasing the communication, coordination, and collaboration both within and across agencies and levels can decrease competition and break down silos.

Building trust and ensuring buy-in was another capacity building strategy noted by some state representatives. Ensuring buy-in and building trust is important at all levels. In particular, districts and schools must come to trust the providers; one way to do this is to ensure that districts and schools have some input in developing the process and choosing who their providers are. Central to building trust and ensuring buy-in is an effort to engage stakeholders—including regional and local stakeholders and others (such as state associations and universities). As noted above, both Illinois and Georgia are engaging these types of stakeholders in the process.

Because some state departments have very few staff dedicated to school and district improvement efforts, it becomes important for them to rely on regional providers and even more important for them to retain them. Increasing communication, coordination, and collaboration between the state and regional levels is a way to increase providers' knowledge and ownership of the process as well as their retention.

Conclusion

We found significant variation in the structure of regional systems and funding sources across states. There is more uniformity in the service models and staffing in the five states. All states' regional systems provide services to both schools and districts in improvement and use similar overall improvement processes. In addition, in all five states, most staffing decisions are made at the regional level. The overarching regional capacity building strategy noted by Georgia is predicated on what they describe as the three Cs—Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration. Most strategies identified through the five SEA interviews fell under this general theme. For example, the five state representatives all reported holding regular meetings and training as a way to enhance communication, coordination, and collaboration. In addition, some SEA staff emphasized the importance of using common language and ensuring uniformity, breaking down silos and avoiding competition, building trust and ensuring process buy-in, engaging all stakeholders in the process, and, finally, relying on providers and retaining them.

Endnotes

¹ We initially interviewed and reported on Iowa as well. However, although Iowa has a regional system of support, its main purpose is not to provide support to schools and districts in need of improvement under NCLB, partly because Iowa has relatively few schools and districts in need of improvement (1 percent and 4 percent, respectively, in 2006-07). We therefore chose not to include Iowa as an example of a state with a comprehensive regional system of support for the purpose of this report.

² <http://www.monroe2boces.org/about.cfm>

³ Ohio still has Information Technology Centers (ITCs), but Regional Advisory Councils coordinate all efforts in each region.

⁴ Other Texas ESC services not related to school and district improvement are funded by the state.

⁵ Ohio also takes into consideration the needs of students with disabilities in addition to school and district improvement needs.

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The Role of Educational Service Agencies in Supporting Alternative Teacher Certification Programs

by
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Jean M. Williams

Introduction

Since the 1980s, the United States has faced the possibility that there would not be enough teachers to meet the needs of our nation's children. As the teaching population ages and teachers retire, new teachers are leaving the profession before they reach their fifth year of teaching, and many more teachers who receive university degrees and teaching credentials never accept a teaching position. At one point, the projected teacher shortage was 2.2 million (Feistritzer, 2005). While we now know that number to be inflated, the fact remains that many of our classrooms are staffed by teachers who are working under emergency or temporary certificates. This is particularly true in urban and rural areas and in hard-to-staff subjects such as science, mathematics, and special education.

In response to the teacher shortage, states have had to find creative ways of bringing highly qualified teachers into the classroom. Generally referred to as Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification, these programs have had varied success in terms of the number and quality of their graduates. Teach for America, Troops to Teachers, and The New Teacher Project are three of the better known programs. In 2005 there were, "115 alternative routes to teacher certification being implemented by 485 providers in 43 states and the District of Columbia" (Feistritzer, 2005). According to the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) every state has an alternative certification program, and it estimates that nearly a third of all new teachers come from such programs (Feistritzer, Haar, Henry, & Ulf, 2006).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and subsequent state laws requiring certified teachers in every school, have led to the need for more teachers, and the need for more efficient and effective programs to provide them to our schools. This in turn has catalyzed many school districts to address the need for highly qualified teachers by employing the new crop of teachers coming out of alternative certification programs. These programs shorten the time from coursework to teaching, in order to bring more teachers into the profession when and where they are needed most.

In some quarters, there has been a push to bring people into teaching from various, diverse backgrounds, who possess little or no professional teaching experience, and to enable them to enter the profession without going through the traditional, higher-education-based route that has been the established and accepted path for many years. The director of NCEI, Emily Feistritzer, has stated that such programs deserve the credit for bringing more minority and male teachers into the profession (Feistritzer, 2005).

Focus and Design of the Study

While there are many avenues to certification, through alternative means as well as traditional higher education-based programs, there is little research literature addressing the role of educational service agencies (ESAs) in the move toward providing and implementing alternative certification in the school districts they serve. The focus of this study is to determine the role of ESAs in providing services to, or being providers of, alternative certification programs for school districts throughout the country. Further, the study provides information about the nature of alternative certification services typically requested of ESAs and the types of alternative certification programs for which they are being requested.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do educational service agencies receive requests for assistance from districts to address issues surrounding the implementation of alternative certification programs?
2. What is the nature of such requests, and how have ESAs responded?
3. What types of alternative certification programs are being implemented?
4. Do ESA staff members have the tools, materials, and skills they need to adequately respond to these requests?
5. What are the greatest needs of ESAs in order to support alternative certification programs?

Data were collected via an online questionnaire (Appendix), offered to a sample of the 23 respondents listed in Table 1 on the following page, selected by the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA). Twenty-one AESA member ESAs, along with two AESA institutional members, responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to answer the research questions through a series of targeted questions addressing the following general topics:

- Program funding
- Mode of delivery of alternative certification program
- Program overview
- Applicant qualifications
- Requirements for certification
- State approval of alternative certification programs
- Value of alternative certification programs for member districts
- Cost of alternative certification program vs. revenue it produces
- Instructional staff for alternative certification programs
- Alternative certification programs offered by higher education
- Hiring opportunities for program completers
- Recruitment/placement services for program completers

- Barriers and challenges to providing alternative certification programs or support services to districts with alternative certification programs. All 23 respondents completed the questionnaire regarding their experiences with alternative certification programs – regardless of their program offerings on alternative certification.

Table 1: Respondents Surveyed and Location

State	Respondents
Colorado	Mountain BOCES
Connecticut	Capitol Region Education Council
Georgia	Central Savannah River Area RESA Middle Georgia RESA Northwest Georgia RESA
Iowa	Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency
Louisiana	Louisiana Resource Center for Educators*
Massachusetts	Cape Cod Collaborative Hampshire Educational Collaborative Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative Merrimack Special Education Collaborative READS Collaborative South Shore Educational Collaborative Shore Educational Collaborative South Coast Educational Collaborative
Ohio	Ashtabula County Educational Service Center Educational Service Center of Franklin County Northwest Ohio Educational Service Center
Texas	Harris County Department of Education Region 4 ESC
Wisconsin	Cooperative Educational Services Agency #1 Cooperative Educational Services Agency #6 Cooperative Educational Services Agency #7

* Institutional member of AESA, not an ESA

Findings

The number of districts served by each ESA varied widely, ranging from a low of seven to a high of 84. In addition, 15 respondents indicated they provide services to districts outside of their catchment areas. Nine also provide services statewide, one provides services nationally, and one provides services internationally in Mexico and Puerto Rico.

Some of the agencies reported providing services to combinations of these groups or to all of them. Besides serving local education agencies (LEAs), 13 respondents said they provide services to private schools and 14 indicated they serve charter schools within their catchment areas.

Information used to answer each research question is discussed below.

1. Do Educational Service Agencies receive requests for assistance from districts to address issues surrounding the implementation of alternative certification programs?

Of the 23 participating agencies, only two, the Shore Educational Collaborative in Massachusetts and the Northwest Ohio Educational Service Center, indicated they are not direct providers of alternative certification programs. However, both of these programs work with other ESAs in their areas as well as with school districts, universities, and other providers to assist in providing space for classes and getting information out to districts about the programs.

Table 2. Types of Certification Provided

Respondent*	Teacher Certification	Principal Certification	Superintendent Certification	School Business Administrator Certification
Mountain BOCES (CO)	◆			
Capitol Regional Education Council (CT)	◆			
Central Savannah River Area RESA (GA)	◆			
Middle Georgia RESA (GA)	◆			
Northwest Georgia RESA (GA)	◆			
Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency (IA)		◆		
** Louisiana Resource Center for Educators (LA)	◆			
Cape Cod Collaborative (MA)	◆			
Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆	◆	
Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (MA)	◆			◆
Merrimack Special Education Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆	◆	
READS Collaborative (MA)	◆		◆	
South Coast Educational Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆		
Ashtabula County Educational Service Center (OH)	◆			
Educational Service Center of Franklin County (OH)	◆			
** Harris County Department of Education (TX)	◆	◆		
Region 4 ESC (TX)	◆	◆	◆	
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #1 (WI)	◆			
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #6 (WI)	◆			
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #7 (WI)	◆			

*Two ESAs (Shore Educational Collaborative and Northwest Ohio Educational Services Center) are not direct providers of Alternative Certification programs. One ESA (South Shore Educational Collaborative) did not respond to this question.

** Institutional member of AESA, not an ESA.

2. What is the nature of such requests, and how have ESAs responded?

Twenty-one respondents (19 ESAs and both institutional members) indicated they are direct providers of alternative certification services and were asked about the types of alternative certification programs they currently provide.

As shown in Table 2, 19 respondents indicated they provide teacher certification,

Six provide principal certification, and four provide superintendent certification. In addition, one respondent certifies school business administrators.

3. What types of alternative certification programs are being implemented?

In outlining the alternative certification programs within the ESAs surveyed, study respondents were asked to check a series of nine statements regarding their applicability to their programs. As shown in Table 3 below, 17 respondents (16 ESAs and one institutional member) indicated that their alternative certification program is available to employees of all districts within their catchment area; three indicated that their program is only available through an arrangement with specified school districts. Fourteen respondents (12 ESAs and both institutional members) said their program is available for a fee to anyone who wishes to participate.

Table 3: Alternative Certification Program Information

Which of the following statements apply to your Alternative Certification program?	# of responses
a. Our alternative certification program is available to employees of the districts within our catchment area.	17
b. Our alternative certification program is available only through an arrangement with specific school districts.	3
c. Our alternative certification program is available on a fee basis to anyone who seeks to participate.	14
d. Our alternative certification program provides placement services (recruitment support) for program completers.	5
e. We limit our placement/recruitment efforts to our program completers from districts in our catchment area.	2
f. Our alternative certification program offers courses at school districts when requested.	5
g. Our alternative certification program creates new programs at the request of member districts.	6
h. Our alternative certification program is allowed to operate independent of any connection with an institution of higher education.	13
i. Our alternative certification program can operate only if it is approved by our State Department of Education or other agency.	19

Five respondents (four ESAs and one institutional member) indicated they offer placement services to participants after they complete their programs, while two indicated they limit their placement services to those participants who complete the program from within their catchment area. Five of the ESAs indicated they provide alternative certification programs to schools when requested, and six of the ESAs indicated they create new alternative certification programs for their member districts as requested.

When asked about connections with institutions of higher education (IHEs), 13 respondents indicated they are able to operate independently of any connection with a higher-education entity, while the remaining 10 respondents indicated they have partnerships in place with institutions of higher education within their state in order to offer alternative certification courses.

When asked if their alternative certification programs were similar to or different from those offered by institutions of higher education, 16 respondents said their programs are “very different” from those offered in a higher education setting.

State Approval for Alternative Certification Programs

Nineteen respondents said they can only operate their alternative certification programs with approval from their state’s department of education or other accrediting agency. All respondents indicated they are required to have approval either from their state’s department of education, professional standards board, and/or board of education in order to operate alternative certification programs.

The ease by which respondents indicated they are able to obtain state approval varied. Nine indicated that state approval was easily obtained, while 10 respondents indicated that the approval process was difficult. Four respondents chose not to respond to this question.

In some instances, organizations from the same state provided opposite answers, and one responded that state approval was both easy and difficult to obtain. Further contact will be made for clarification on this response.

Delivery Method of Alternative Certification Courses

Education service centers provide alternative certification courses using a variety of methods, such as face-to-face training, online training, digital/independent training, and video conferencing. As shown in Table 4, four respondents provided face-to-face training only, while 10 provided both face-to-face and online training. Three others also offered face-to-face as well as video conferencing. Only one provided digital/independent training.

Table 4. Method of Course Delivery

Respondent*	Face-to-face training	Online Training	Video Conferencing	Other: Digital/Independent
Mountain BOCES (CO)	◆	◆	◆	
Capitol Regional Education Council (CT)	◆	◆		
Central Savannah River Area RESA (GA)	◆	◆		◆
Middle Georgia RESA (GA)	◆	◆		
Northwest Georgia RESA (GA)	◆			
Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency (IA)	◆			
** Louisiana Resource Center for Educators (LA)	◆		◆	
Cape Cod Collaborative (MA)	◆			
Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)	◆		◆	
Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆		
Merrimack Special Education Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆		
READS Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆		
South Coast Educational Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆		
Ashtabula County Educational Service Center (OH)	◆	◆	◆	
Educational Service Center of Franklin County (OH)	◆	◆		
** Harris County Department of Education (TX)	◆			
Region 4 ESC (TX)	◆	◆		
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #1 (WI)	◆	◆		
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #6 (WI)	◆	◆		
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #7 (WI)	◆		◆	

*Two ESAs (Shore Educational Collaborative and Northwest Ohio Educational Services Center) are not direct providers of Alternative Certification programs. One ESA (South Shore Educational Collaborative) did not respond to this question.

**Institutional member of AESA, not an ESA.

Requirements for Certification

For the most part, program participants are required to have a bachelor’s degree in the content area for which they are applying for alternative certification. Only seven respondents indicated they do not have such a requirement.

Most of the program participants are required to complete some type of field experience prior to certification. These experiences come in the form of internships, practica, or student/clinical teaching programs. As indicated in Table 5 below, two respondents require all three of these experiences. The other respondents require various combinations of these experiences prior to awarding a teaching certificate.

Table 5: Additional Certification Requirements

Respondent	Internship	Practicum	Student/ Clinical Teaching
Ashtabula County Educational Service Center (OH)	◆	◆	◆
Cape Cod Collaborative (MA)	◆		
Capitol Regional Education Council (CT)	◆		◆
Central Savannah River Area RESA (GA)	◆		
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #1 (WI)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #6 (WI)			◆
Cooperative Educational Service Agency #7 (WI)			◆
Educational Service Center of Franklin County (OH)		◆	◆
Hampshire Educational Collaborative (MA)		◆	
*Harris County Department of Education (TX)	◆	◆	
Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆	
*Louisiana Resource Center for Educators (LA)			◆
Merrimack Special Education Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆	
Middle Georgia RESA (GA)	◆	◆	
Mountain BOCES (CO)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Northwest Georgia RESA (GA)	◆	◆	
Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency (IA)		◆	
READS Collaborative (MA)	◆	◆	
Region 4 ESC (TX)	◆	◆	◆
South Coast Educational Collaborative (MA)		◆	◆

*Institutional member of AESA, not an ESA

Recruitment/Placement Services

Respondents were asked if they provide recruitment and/or placement services to schools and districts that they serve in hiring educators from alternative certification programs. Eight indicated that they do provide these services, including job fairs, providing districts with a list of eligible candidates, providing resumés to districts and schools, prescreening applicants for districts, and providing an annual report of program graduates and their practicum placements to the superintendents of the districts they serve. One respondent has a website where it posts program participant e-folios and credentials. Fifteen responded that they do not provide any placement services.

Twenty-two of the 23 respondents indicated that the districts and schools they serve hire educators who have completed alternative certification programs. In addition, 17 respondents indicated that they hire

educators for their organizations who have come through their own alternative certification program, from another program, or from one offered by an IHE.

4. Do ESA staff members have the tools, materials, and skills they need to adequately respond to these requests?

Nineteen respondents reported it is easy to find instructors for their programs. Two agencies that said they provide alternative certification programs did not respond to this question. This may be because most of the respondents indicated they use their own employees to teach alternative certification courses. However, all who responded to this question indicated they use their own employees to teach at least some of the required courses.

5. What are the greatest needs of ESAs in order to support alternative certification programs?

By far the most frequent response about program needs related to financial support. Funding sources for alternative certification programs vary. Respondents were asked to check all sources of funding that apply to their program. Only one (Hampshire Educational Collaborative) indicated it receives 50% of its funds from a federal source. Three said they received state funding, with two Ohio respondents indicating they receive 100% of their funding from their state.

One agency indicated it receives local funding, and one said a portion of its funding is part of a higher education partnership. However, the majority (18) of respondents indicated that their primary funding source is fee based (paid for by the client), and eight are funded by the school district(s) they serve (fee-for-service). One respondent, an institutional member of AESA, indicated it receives approximately 20% of its funding through community donations.

Respondents were asked to reply to a set of statements regarding the cost of the program and whether it is covered by the revenue it generates. Of the 20 that responded to these statements, 11 said the program breaks even on the cost vs. the revenue the program generates. Five said their programs generate revenue and four indicated that their programs operate at a loss.

Twenty respondents, all providers of alternative certification programs, answered the question addressing the reaction of member districts to their offering of these programs. Seventeen said that their districts were “very pleased” to have these programs available. Three indicated that their districts were “somewhat pleased” regarding the availability of the alternative certification program. One did not respond.

Barriers and Challenges for ESAs Regarding Alternative Certification Programs

An open-ended question was asked regarding barriers and challenges faced in providing alternative certification programs or support services to schools and/or districts that use such programs.

Several themes that emerged from these responses are briefly discussed below:

- **Program Funding:** Lack of funding was frequently cited as a barrier to sustaining high-quality alternative certification programs. Respondents indicated that positions and programs are being

eliminated both locally and at the state level. This reduction in positions and programs in the context of increasing need for teachers stretches resources as these agencies attempt to respond to greater and greater district and school needs with fewer and fewer resources. One respondent indicated that long-term funding from the State Education Agency would resolve many of the funding issues.

- **Relationships with Other Agencies:** A number of respondents expressed concerns that some agencies with which they collaborate put up roadblocks to the successful implementation of alternative certification programs. For example, some districts are hesitant to hire “uncertified” staff members because they are concerned that they are unqualified or that their certification by alternative means is not compliant with state teacher licensure rules. One respondent indicated that the SEA only allows ESAs to accept students once a year. The result of this policy is that many excellent candidates miss the annual deadline and ask the ESA to counsel them about other possibilities for obtaining certification. In addition, some school districts do not follow through with the required mentoring/induction programs, leaving new teachers to fend for themselves rather than receiving the district support that can help make them successful in their early years and ultimately assure that they stay in the teaching profession for a longer period of time.
- **Difficulty in Partnering with Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs):** All of the respondents indicated they work with IHEs in some fashion, and almost all of them expressed frustration in doing so. For example, one respondent stated that the IHEs find alternative certification programs to be a threat, or in competition with them. This makes collaboration difficult as some information may not be shared under these circumstances, and respondents find themselves in the dark about changes in IHE programs and requirements.
- **Difficulty Obtaining Higher Education Credit:** Another issue that causes frustration on the part of respondents is the lack of responsiveness of IHEs to get the alternative certification program courses vetted so students are able to obtain college credit. In addition, respondents indicated they are frequently unable to provide courses leading to a major, which is sometimes required by larger school districts. Traditional IHE programs typically offer class schedules offering these courses when students are available, such as in late afternoon or early evening. Similarly, when students are able to obtain college credit for the work with the ESAs, the IHEs sometimes request per-credit-hour rates that are far above what most would consider reasonable.
- **Communication About the Program:** Respondents expressed concern that they sometimes do not have access to potential students to provide them with information about alternative certification programs, even when school districts cooperate with them and help provide such information. In those situations, they are dependent on word of mouth recommendations about their programs.

Conclusions

Of the 21 Educational Service Agencies (ESAs) and two AESA institutional members who participated in this study, all agree there is an ongoing need for alternative certification programs, whether they address the certification of teachers, principals, superintendents, or other education staff. The greatest need for sustaining the viability of these programs is a steady and reliable source of sufficient funding to maintain the programs over time. Similarly, respondents expressed the desire to strengthen collaborations with institutions of higher education and frustration that such collaborations have been so difficult to establish.

Because of the issues cited above, students are frequently put into the position of having to choose between obtaining a teaching certificate in an efficient manner and getting college or university credit for their coursework, including work in their stated majors. Unless ESAs are able to resolve these issues, the

growth of their programs will be stunted as they will be able to accept only the students who are not seeking college credit for their work and who want to teach in locations that do not require majors other than an education major.

The results of this exploratory study indicate that Educational Service Agencies across the nation face similar problems and are addressing these problems in similar ways. There is a need for more research in this area in order to determine whether there are different practices that can inform program leaders and encourage them to make program modifications in light of the successes of their peers.

In addition, the impact of alternative certification programs, either offered and/or supported by ESAs, on the quality of teaching and the level of learning that takes place in their classrooms has not been established through scientifically sound research. Such a study would greatly benefit the entire education community.

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- Robyn J. Alsop, M.A., is Research Associate for Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). She may be reached by phone at 303-632-5539 and by email at ralsop@mcrel.org.
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APPENDIX A

Alternative Certification Questionnaire

AUGUST 2007

Please complete the general information below. You may be contacted by phone as a result of your responses to this questionnaire. We thank you for your input! REMINDER: THIS INFORMATION WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL.

ESA Name: _____
City: _____
State: _____
Zip Code: _____
Contact Name: _____
Contact Phone: _____
Contact E-mail: _____

1. How many public school districts do you currently serve within your ESA's catchment area?
2. Do you serve "private" schools within your catchment?
 Yes - If YES, how many?
 No
3. Do you serve "charter" schools within your catchment area?
 Yes
 No
4. Do you serve any schools outside of your catchment area? (check all that apply)
 Outside of catchment area
 Statewide
 National
 Other (please specify)
5. Does your ESA provide an Alternative Certification* Program? (See definition below)
 No (please proceed to question #6)
 Yes (please proceed to question #7)

* An alternative certification program is defined as one that provides an alternative to the traditional "state-approved, college-based, teacher education program route for certifying teachers." It can also include certification programs for administrators, principals, specialty teachers (e.g., special education) subject area certification (e.g., science, math, etc.). It can include state-developed/monitored programs, emergency certification programs to alleviate teacher shortages, and university-based programs toward certification for those individuals with a bachelor's degree but not a teaching background.

6. If your ESA does NOT offer an Alternative Certification program, do you assist schools/districts in working with such programs offered by other entities?
 Yes
 No

If yes, please explain what these other entities are that offer these services and how you work with them to offer these services.

7. As an Alternative Certification program provider, in what year did you begin providing such services?

8. What types of Alternative Certification programs does your ESA offer? (Check all that apply.)

- Teacher certification
- Principal certification
- Superintendent certification
- Other (Please specify)

9. How is your ESA's Alternative Certification program currently funded? (Please check all that apply.)

- Federal funding
- State funding
- Local funding
- As part of higher education partnership
- Fee-of-service (paid by district)
- Fee paid by applicant
- Other funding (please specify)

9.a. What percentage of your funding comes from the sources you check above? (Please indicate %)

- Federal Funding
- State Funding
- Local Funding
- Fee-for-service (paid by district)
- Fee paid by applicant
- Other
- Higher-education partnership

10. By what means are your Alternative Certification courses provided? (Please check all that apply.)

- Face-to-face training
- Video conferencing
- Online training
- Other (please specify)

11. Which of the following statements apply to your Alternative Certification program?

- a. Our Alternative Certification Program is available to employees of districts within our catchment area.
- b. Our Alternative Certification Program is available only through an arrangement with specific school districts.
- c. Our Alternative Certification Program is available of a fee basis to anyone who seeks to participate
- d. Our Alternative Certification Program provides placement services (recruitment support) for program completers.
- e. We limit our placement/recruitment efforts to our program completers from districts in our catchment area
- f. Our Alternative Certification Program offers course at school districts when requested
- g. Our Alternative Certification Program creates new programs at the request of member districts
- h. Our Alternative Certification Program is allowed to operate independent of any university connection.
- i. Our Alternative Certification Program can operate only if it is approved by our State Department of Education of other agency.

12. If you check 11.i., please indicate the accrediting body(ies) that provide approval for your Alternative Certification Program. (Please list)

13. Does your Alternative Certification Program REQUIRE a connection with an institution of higher education.
- Yes
 - No

If YES, please list the institution of higher education program with which you are affiliated.

14. Do you require a bachelor's degree in the content area for which applicants are applying for alternative certification.
- Yes
 - No

15. Does your Alternative Certification Program require the following to be completed in order for participants to receive final certification?

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 15.a. Internship | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 15.b. Practicum | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 15.c. Student/Clinical Teaching Program | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

16. For each of the following, please respond to how each statement applies to your ESA's Alternative Certification program.

- 16.a. We have found it relatively easy to obtain state approval for this program.

- Yes
- No

- 16.b We have found it relatively difficult to obtain state approval for this program.

- Yes
- No

- 16.c. By having this program, our member districts are...(check only one)

- Very pleased
- Somewhat pleased
- Not pleased

- 16.d. Our alternative certification program...(check only one)

- costs more to run than the revenue it produces.
- generates more revenue than the cost to provide
- breaks even on revenue vs. cost

- 16.e. The participants in this program have particularly LIKED the following elements of the program. (Please list if applicable.)

- 16.f. The participants in this program have particularly DISLIKED the following elements of the program. (Please list if applicable.)

- 16.g. Have you found it easy to find instructors for this program?

- Yes
- No

- 16.h. We use current ESA employees as instructors...(check only one)

- for most courses
- for some courses
- for a few courses
- not applicable

- 16.i. Our Alternative Certification Program, in relation to most programs offered by institutions of higher education, is ... (Check only one)

- Similar
- Very different

17. Do the schools/districts you serve hire educators who have completed Alternative Certification programs?

Yes

No

18. Does your ESA provide recruitment/placement services to schools/districts to assist them in hiring educators for Alternative Certification programs?

Yes

No

If YES, please explain these services.

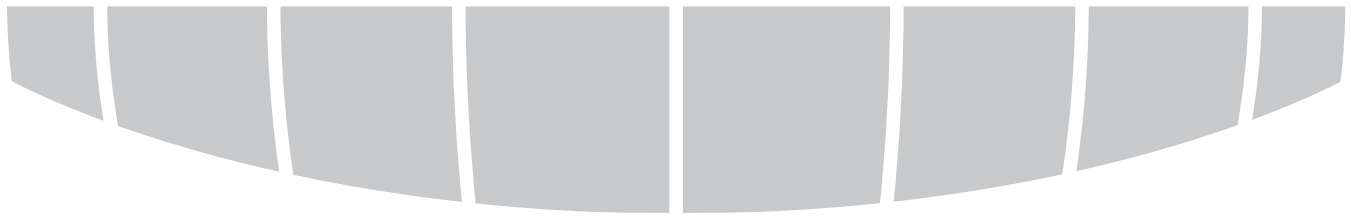
19. As an ESA, do you hire educators who have been alternatively certified through your own program, another ESA's program, or through a program sponsored by an institution of higher education?

Yes

No

20. What additional barriers or challenges does your ESA experience while trying to provide Alternative Certification programs or support services to your schools/districts. (Please list.)

21. Do you have additional comments about Alternative Certification programs and your ability to provide or support them that you wish to share?



A 21st Century Community Learning Center Program: A Success Story

by
Wendy L. Tackett
Carol L. Westjohn

Background

Ten years ago, in 1998, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the first 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grants. The primary focus of the original funding was to provide safe environments for students to play and learn in after school and during the summer. With the introduction of No Child Left Behind, the focus of the 21st CCLC programs became more academic in nature, working to integrate education, enrichment, and recreation in a safe, caring environment with the intention of improving student academic achievement. The U.S. Department of Education defined the purpose the 21st CCLC program:

This program supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children. (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html>, ¶1)

The U.S. Department of Education also handed over the administration of these grants to the state departments of education, and annual funding of these projects to local education agencies and nonprofit organizations serving youth is still available. The federal legislation for 21st CCLCs states that the following types of organizations can apply for funding from the state allocation:

For this program, eligible entity means a local educational agency, community-based organization, another public or private entity, or a consortium of two or more of such agencies, organizations, or entities. States must give priority to applications that are jointly submitted by a local educational agency and a community-based organization or other public or private entity. (21st Century Community Learning Centers, 2008)

With 10 years of 21st CCLCs completed and years of community education programming, there is a wealth of knowledge about what works and what doesn't work. One program in northern rural Michigan used that existing research integrated with what would work for their school districts to develop an exemplary 21st CCLC program. The S.P.A.R.K.S. (Students Participating in Academics and Recreation for Knowledge and Success) program is unique in that it was designed and operated by the local ESA, and the Clare-Gladwin Regional Education Service District (Clare-Gladwin RESD). Because the ESA enjoys a positive relationship with all school districts in the region, it was a natural fit for this organization to accept responsibility for the program and broker the relationships between the three participating school districts. The Clare-Gladwin RESD has taken its role very seriously, not only serving as the primary connector and communicator between districts, but also taking evaluation data that has been collected and analyzed by the external evaluator, iEval, to make significant program improvements. This article will explore the relationship between the program design, program communication, and program evaluation, how that relationship supports continuous improvement, and how the S.P.A.R.K.S. program is able to use those connections to achieve its outcomes.

“One program in northern rural Michigan used that existing research integrated with what would work for their school districts to develop an exemplary 21st CCLC program.”

What is S.P.A.R.K.S.?

In January 2003, the Clare-Gladwin RESD partnered with three local school districts to develop S.P.A.R.K.S., which was created due to the significant needs of the youth and their families in the two counties. Clare and Gladwin counties are approved Renaissance Zones with some of the worst economic and social indicators in the state.

The S.P.A.R.K.S. program originally served four elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school, and it was expanded to include an additional high school and school district, for a total of 13 school buildings in July 2008. Staff members at the Clare-Gladwin RESD administer the program but work closely with the local districts and the external evaluator. The S.P.A.R.K.S. program was created to address many different needs including: economic (providing quality free afterschool care with transportation), social (varying the interactive experiences), isolation (providing experiences not available in our area normally), academic (ensuring certified teachers provide one-on-one and group tutoring for students), enrichment (engaging in disguised learning opportunities), and recreation (creating time to just have fun).

Program Design

The S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members are employed by the Clare-Gladwin RESD but are located at the local school buildings. Critical components of the program design include the staffing structure, the staff roles, and the daily schedule.

Staffing Structure

The S.P.A.R.K.S. program relies on a small staffing structure to provide for strong communication, consistency in program delivery, efficient flow of data, and constant review of practice to provide quality programming. One full-time program director and one full-time administrative assistant handle the logistics of running the program. Eight different sites serve students in two counties, each staffed with a full-time site coordinator and direct service staff.

Staff Roles

While the eight program sites have some autonomy of scheduling, student recruitment, and other program design features, there must be consistency in staff responsibilities to help ensure program quality, which is the primary role the Clare-Gladwin RESD provides. The program director and site coordinators meet formally every three weeks, informally daily through phone calls and emails, and monthly through site visits by the program director. The site coordinators also meet with their site staff each week.

Daily Schedule

All program participants attend two sessions per week in both math and language arts to ensure that critical academic components from the regular school day are reinforced. The next priority for students is recreation, followed by technology, community service, and a variety of enrichment offerings. Student choice is viewed as an important part of quality programming. Different ages have different degrees of input ranging from choice of activities to designing the activities.

Program Communication

It is essential to ensure constant and clear communication on many levels in order to create a successful program. The Clare-Gladwin RESD was perfectly poised to take on this role.

Program Director as Leader

The program director, an administrative role at Clare-Gladwin RESD, is in constant communication with the site coordinators, the program evaluator, school representatives, community members, and funders. She holds regular formal meetings and constant informal communication (e.g., phone, email) with site coordinators to discuss budgets, licensing, evaluation, etc. She conducts professional development, gives presentations at local community groups and school board meetings, develops a community annual report about program progress toward success, seeks additional funding, and works in a participatory way with the external evaluator. Site coordinators are provided an evaluation timeline that gives monthly assignments for disseminating current evaluation data and processes that need to be followed to obtain new data.

Site Coordinators as Leaders

The site coordinators conduct weekly staff meetings at their own sites because constant attention to all direct staff is vital. Staff meetings focus on professional development, review of evaluation findings, Youth Program Quality Assessment data, program design elements, field trips, and creating action plans based on data to improve programming. Site coordinators also communicate regularly with parents through newsletters, a website, phone calls, positive postcards, and visits as the children are being picked up. Communication with the regular school day staff can include messages in school mailboxes and email, conferences during teacher preparatory time, observations during academic sessions, building staff meetings, and district professional development.

Program Evaluation

The Michigan Department of Education mandates that each grantee have a local evaluator. This decision to require a local evaluator is state-based and not part of the federal legislation. Based on a highly regarded

recommendation from a local superintendent and member of the initial 21st CCLC advisory committee, Clare-Gladwin RESD chose Dr. Wendy Tackett, founder of the iEval firm, to lead the local evaluation for all 21st CCLC grants administered by Clare-Gladwin RESD. The local evaluator, in turn, works closely with the state evaluation team to provide necessary data for the statewide annual performance report provided to the U.S. Department of Education.

“There are many sources of data, and the external evaluator needs the ability to access data in a timely fashion in order to provide appropriate reports back to the local programs to make improvements, which is why the cooperative partnership is so important. And, because the Clare-Gladwin RESD has a respected relationship with the local school districts, the sharing of data is seamless.”

While the concept of evaluation as a way to determine value or make program improvements is generally accepted, the use of evaluation varies dramatically based on the person/organization using the data. For example, the U.S. Department of Education is interested in using summative evaluation data to determine if 21st CCLC impacts student academic outcomes such as grades and test scores. The Michigan Department of Education is interested in those same student academic outcomes, but also wants to know about outcomes associated with youth development (e.g., career exploration, cultural enrichment) and characteristics of successful programs. The local programs are interested in all of the previous outcome data, but they are most significantly concerned with formative evaluation that will help with continuous program improvement. The Clare-Gladwin RESD has taken the evaluation data provided, made substantial changes to programming based on that data, and seen success in students, school partnerships, and parent satisfaction. The rest of the article will focus on the data collected, how it was analyzed, and what changes resulted from the use of this data.

In order for the local programs to be able to use data to make continuous program improvements, it is critical that the evaluation process is a partnership between the local program, the local school districts, and the external evaluator, with cooperation from the state evaluation team. It is a vital role that provides an external perspective to the data and the ability to process data at a more sophisticated level than most internal evaluation teams.

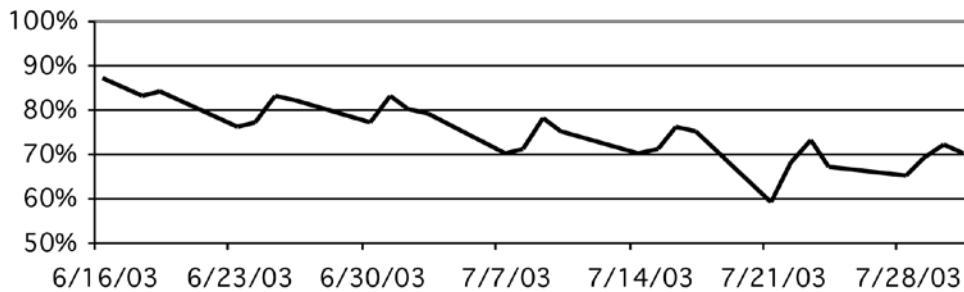
There are many sources of data, and the external evaluator needs the ability to access data in a timely fashion in order to provide appropriate reports back to the local programs to make improvements, which is why the cooperative partnership is so important. And, because the Clare-Gladwin RESD has a respected relationship with the local school districts, the sharing of data is seamless. The evaluation plan for S.P.A.R.K.S. focuses on many types of data including program attendance and activities; Youth Program Quality Assessment; surveys and interviews of parents, students, regular school day staff, and S.P.A.R.K.S. staff; regular school day attendance, behavior data, quarterly grades, and other academic scores; state standardized test results; social emotional surveys; and program observations. Below are several examples of how the S.P.A.R.K.S. program, in partnership with iEval, uses the various sources of data to make programmatic decisions.

Program Attendance

In 2003, the program attendance data made it clear that attendance was significantly dropping off after the third week of summer programming and again after the fifth week.

Once the program staff knew that, they were able to look closely at what incentives could be offered later in the program to encourage students to keep coming. The local sites began offering field trips at the end of the week, building up to a larger field trip at the end of the program that students could only participate in if they were keeping up with regular attendance.

S.P.A.R.K.S. Daily Attendance Rates: Overall Summer 2003



Youth Program Quality Assessment

The Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) is required for use by Michigan 21st CCLC programs as part of the evaluation process. The High Scope Educational Research Foundation developed the YPQA instrument. The Michigan Department of Education contracted with High Scope to provide training to all 21st CCLC programs in the state. The local 21st CCLC staff conduct program observations, and the external evaluator is involved in helping to analyze the data.

The YPQA is a validated instrument designed to evaluate the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. It has been used in community organizations, schools, camps, and other places where youth have fun, work, and learn with adults. The YPQA evaluates the quality of youth experiences as youth attend workshops and classes, complete group projects, and participate in meetings and regular program activities. For staff, the YPQA process is a great way to see what is really happening in their programs and to build professional competencies. (Youth Program Quality Assessment, 2008)

Program staff members conduct observations at their own site and other sites using a set of scorable standards for best practices in after-school programs. Observations focus on a safe and supportive environment, student and staff interaction, and engagement. Staff members are able to envision optimal quality youth programming using a shared language and scoring rubric that can be used for comparison and assessment of progress over time. The immediate feedback empowers site staff members to create action plans and make changes for program improvement. For example, staff members at one of the sites during the fall 2007 observation found that they scored lower in the area of children developing a sense of belonging, so they were able to create activities designed to encourage students get to know each other better, identify more closely with the program, and develop stronger relationships. Staff, in real time, administers the YPQA instrument, bringing the user directly into the process and providing immediate results.

Parent Surveys at Events

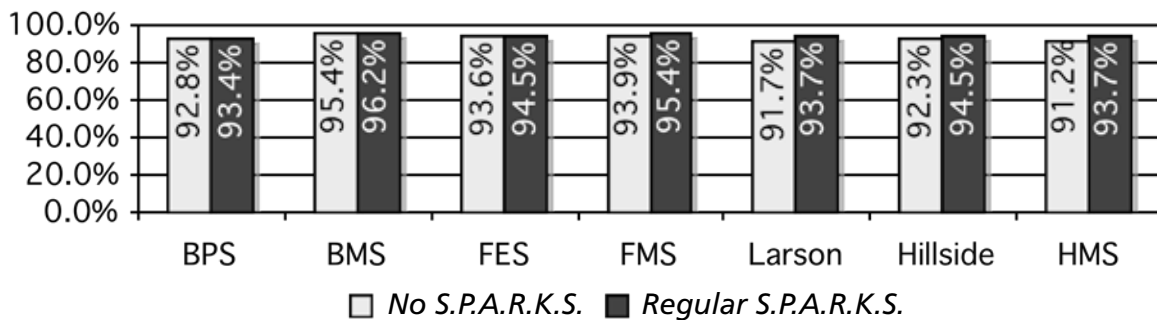
In 2007, parents/guardians were given an informal survey at several events where parents were invited to be part of S.P.A.R.K.S. activities. It was determined that parents/guardians wanted their children to go to S.P.A.R.K.S. because it provides time to complete homework and opportunities to play with other children, but they also wanted more individualized homework help for their kids. This information helped S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members prioritize future programming, ensuring that sufficient help was available during homework time.

Regular School Day Attendance

One of the premises of after-school programming is that if students enjoy the program, their regular school day attendance will increase. Having local data to support that hypothesis is extremely helpful in convincing school leaders about the positive impact of the program. Because data is collected by the local evaluator on all students, then comparisons are done between those students participating in S.P.A.R.K.S. compared to the rest of the student population, the S.P.A.R.K.S. programs have been able to show that regular attendance in the program significantly increases school day attendance.

State Standardized Tests

Building Average Daily Attendance: 2006-2007

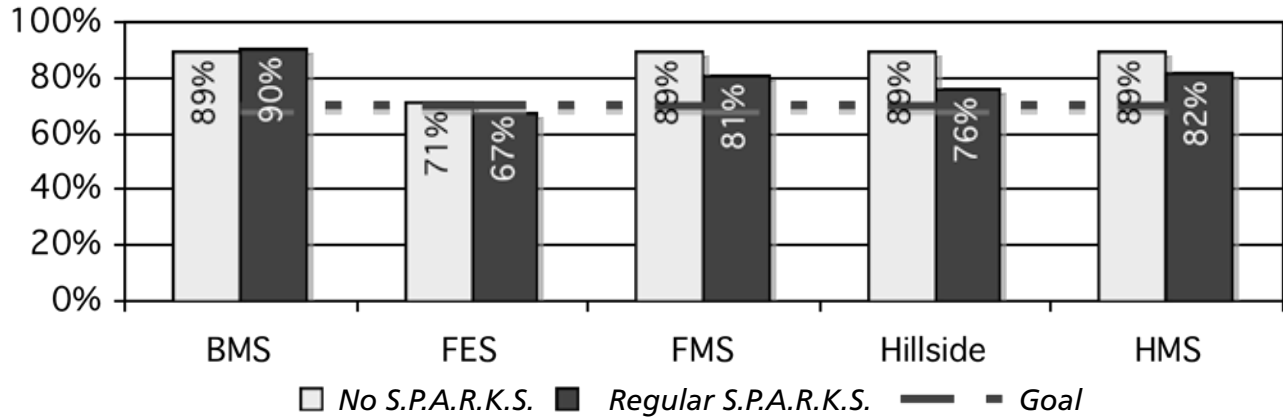


The state test in Michigan is the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). The MEAP reading and math tests are used for general comparisons between regular S.P.A.R.K.S. participants and the rest of the student population, and they are also used on an individual student basis to target instruction during the summer program that focuses primarily on academics. From the graph below, the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members were able to see that the regular participants, while mostly meeting the program goal of 70% maintaining/improving, were performing at a lower level than the rest of the students.

This indicates that the S.P.A.R.K.S. program was indeed targeting the students at highest risk of academic failure at most sites and more detailed analysis helped determine areas to focus on during academic enrichment and homework help.

Social Emotional Surveys

Maintained/Improved on MEAP Reading 2006



In the early years for the S.P.A.R.K.S. program, the evaluator used a short survey focusing on the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets. Data from 2003 were used to provide evidence to school boards and community organizations of the need for the S.P.A.R.K.S. program based on issues of safety. Students felt safest at S.P.A.R.K.S.; i.e., 78% of students always felt safe at S.P.A.R.K.S., 74% always felt safe at home, and 68% always felt safe during the school day. This data was extremely helpful because the program had only been in existence for a few months, so there weren't any other data (e.g., academic or behavior) that could prove the value of the program. The value could only be determined at this point based on participant, parent, and teacher perceptions.

Other Academic Scores

If the local schools use another measure of academic achievement, it is helpful to the evaluator to be able to triangulate actual achievement between grades, state tests, and other academic tests. An exciting finding in 2007 has helped the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff prove the value of their program. It has been assumed that after-school programs continue to benefit students even after they have ended participation. Data indicated that students who were regular S.P.A.R.K.S. participants in 2004-05 had steady growth in reading, based on the STAR reading test and running records, throughout the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years even if they were no longer in S.P.A.R.K.S. The percentage of students reading at or above grade level continued to increase, closing the gap with the rest of the student population from -17% to +1%.

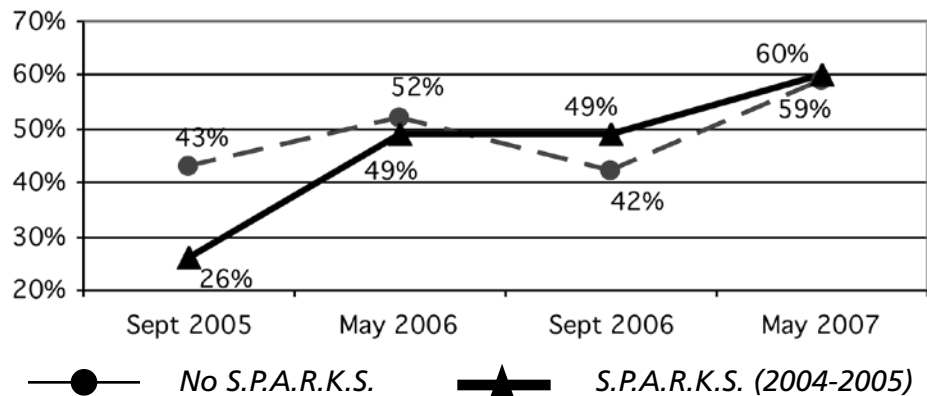
Survey of Afterschool Staff

The state evaluation team sends out an annual survey to all after-school staff. A total of 46 staff members across all S.P.A.R.K.S. sites responded to the survey. The survey results are divided into 20 scales based on 84 questions. A selection of the average responses is listed below with higher numbers indicating better scores (with 5 the top and 1 the lowest).

Table 1. Staff survey scale

Scale	Average Response
Supervisor quality focus	4.6
Supervisor support	4.6
Staff-shared values	4.5
Adult modeling	4.5
Emphasis on relationships	4.5
Professional efficacy – management	4.2
Shared control – position	4.2
Role overload	1.5
Quality of staff meetings	1.0
Quality of planning for youth program sessions	.9
Exposure to evaluation data	.8
Involvement in data collection & use	.7

Percentage of Students Reading At or Above Grade Level



The survey confirmed for S.P.A.R.K.S. staff that the intentional focus on hiring quality staff was making an impact on staff perceptions, with supervisor quality focus, supervisor support, staff-shared values, adult modeling, and emphasis on relationships all receiving the highest scores. The lowest scales focused on quality of staff meetings, quality of planning for youth program sessions, exposure to evaluation data, and involvement in data collection and use. This allowed S.P.A.R.K.S. site coordinators to redesign staff meetings, using more input from staff members as they continue. Interestingly, data suggested that the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members felt they were not involved in or sometimes aware of the evaluation, when in fact they were critically involved and bombarded with evaluation data at every meeting. However, because evaluation is so integrated into the “way they do business,” the S.P.A.R.K.S. staff members did not identify it as evaluation work. This provided the site coordinators with an opportunity to better educate the staff on when they are actually doing evaluation tasks and using evaluation data.

Conclusion

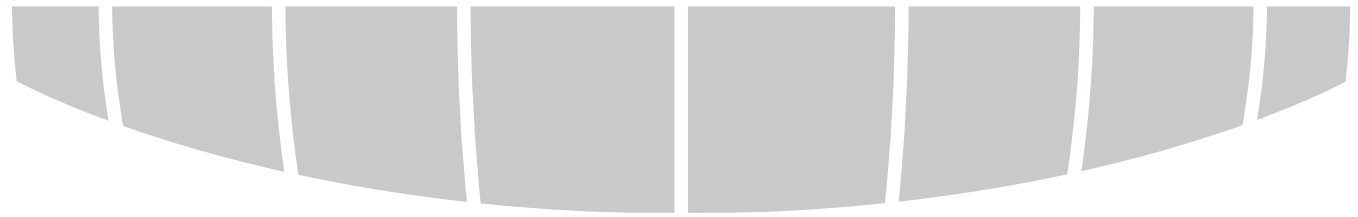
The key elements that have made the S.P.A.R.K.S. program so successful in improving student academic and behavioral outcomes, creating meaningful partnerships, treating staff members as professionals, and satisfying participants and their parents include the quality program design, constant communication, and embedded evaluation. The program design was based on national research of what works in afterschool programs, but then was personalized to meet the needs of the students and local school districts. Communication was identified as a priority from program inception, and the high level of constant communication has evolved over the past five years. Evaluation was also determined to be a priority at the beginning of the program – the program director was given a phone and the number of the external evaluator on her first day of work! This could not have been accomplished without the respect the Clare-Gladwin RESD has with local districts, the competence of Clare-Gladwin RESD staff, and the integral use of an external evaluator.

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The Role Of Performance Excellence in Focusing Education Service Agencies on Customers

by
Sandra L. Nolan

Being focused on customers is one of the driving forces behind the quest for performance excellence at the Education Service Center Region 12 in Waco, Texas. Dr. Tom Norris, Executive Director, started the ESC 12 journey toward performance excellence in 2000 by introducing continuous improvement, an effort that led to the ESC 12's present vision: To be the provider of choice for education services and solutions.

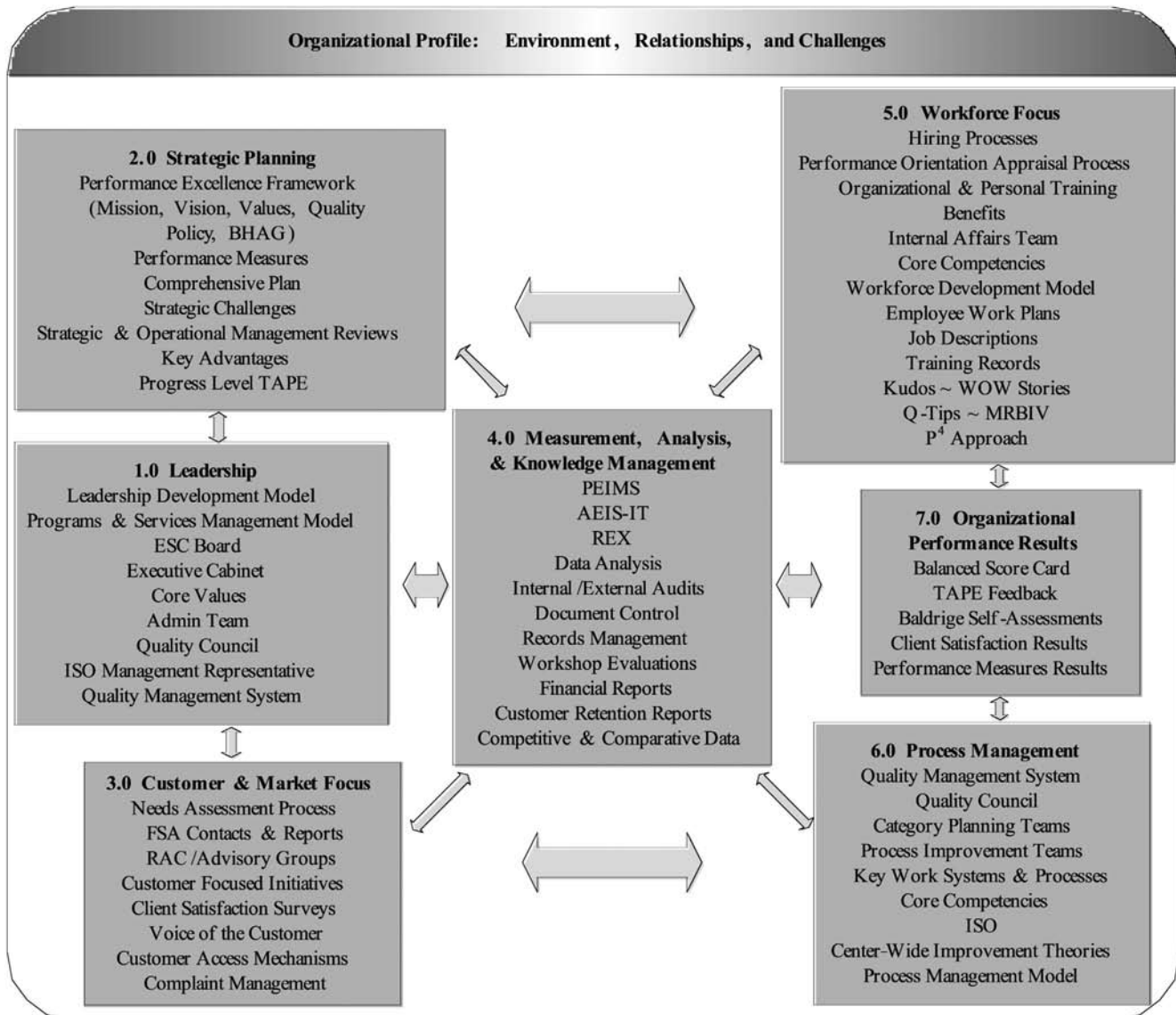
The Performance Excellence Management System

From this beginning, ESC 12 has become an organization in which performance excellence provides the framework for ESC 12 to operate from a systems perspective, including an intentional management system to integrate customer requirements, planning, and program and service delivery. ESC 12 uses a Performance Excellence Management System (PEMS) as its approach to drive customer-focused quality in the organization (Figure 1). The ESC 12 PEMS includes utilization of the Criteria for

“Each of these components is intentionally managed and produces work and organizational learning aligned to customer needs and expectations.”

Performance Excellence Framework (National Institute of Performance and Technology, 2008) from the Baldrige National Quality Foundation and is based on the seven categories of the Baldrige Criteria, which are Leadership; Strategic Planning; Customer and Market Focus; Measurement, Analysis and Knowledge Management; Workforce Focus; Process Management and Results. Within each category, ESC 12 identifies critical components that play key roles in the deployment of the ESC 12 PEMS. Each of these components is intentionally managed and produces work and organizational learning aligned to customer needs and expectations.

Figure 1. ESC 12 Performance Excellence Management System



At the operational level, ESC 12 uses the Baldrige Framework as an overall management strategy to focus on customers as we move into a market-driven operating mode and rely less on state and federal appropriations. Critical processes in deploying this strategy include utilizing process improvement and project design processes, learning and studying from recognized experts, becoming certified to ISO standards, and benchmarking best practices (in particular, Baldrige award winners).

Process Improvement

First and foremost, the staff members of ESC 12 are engaged in process improvement and project design processes. Staff study, analyze, and utilize the Baldrige Criteria in the context of the ESC 12's operating environment as a continuous means of understanding and meeting customer requirements. Logistically, each staff member (approximately 135) is a member of one of the seven Category Planning Teams (CPTs), based on the seven categories of the Baldrige Framework, that meet monthly to address cross-functional opportunities for improvement resulting in process improvement or project design. These teams are led by a specially trained lead facilitator who helps organize the work of his/her particular CPT, including ensuring

that all staff members have a rich understanding of the category criteria. Lead facilitators subdivide their CPT into small work groups called Process Improvement Teams, or PITs, that use a customized storyboard process to manage and capture their work. One recent team made the recommendation to gauge customer's perception of the climate of the ESC 12 facility. During the day, visitors to the center are handed a small survey card that they drop off at the end of the day upon leaving. The card asks questions such as:

- Were you greeted as you entered the building?
- Did someone offer to assist you?
- Is there something about your visit that you would like to share with us?
- Did any person go above and beyond your expectations?
- Would you consider the ESC a friendly place?
- How would you rate your overall experience today?

Survey data are gathered monthly and reported to all staff. Our target is for 100% of those filling out the survey to rate their experience excellent...a target that has been reached many times!

Opportunities for improvement are assigned to CPTs based on alignment with the Baldrige Criteria and are managed by a center-wide 15-member Quality Council. Examples of their work are included in the following table:

Table 1. Process Improvement Team Recommendations

PIT Action Plan Recommendation	Performance Measure(s)	Target/Results
Develop a process for enhancing the collection of data that will capture customer satisfaction with Programs and Services for the purpose of improvement	% of customers responding to Customer Satisfaction Survey	65% / 39% response rate
Improve the process by which the annual marketing book for superintendent is aligned/developed to meet customer needs	% of superintendents who will have an advanced copy of the Programs and Services book prior to FSA visits	100% / 100%
Develop a vehicle for customers to have convenient input into ESC improvements	Baseline data regarding 2008 usage of the Customer Suggestion Web page	Customer suggestion page in place.
Develop a process for ensuring that training rooms have appropriate workshop supplies	% of time meeting rooms will have essential consumable supplies	100% / 100%
Determine customer needs for systemic communication from the ESC	% of ESC 12 public listservs organized by and readily accessible to each appropriate customer group	100% / 100%
Design a process by which departments determine and align individual Programs and Services based upon customer needs	% of professional staff participating in the Collaborative Planning Retreat % of customer needs per Customer Needs Assessment being addressed	100% / 100% 100% / 100%
Develop a way to gauge building climate through the use of a survey	Customers' perception of ESC 12 climate using Experience Cards	15-20 / 15-20 cards every two weeks

Using Experts in the Field

A second approach used for ESC 12's quality journey includes the utilization of experts in the field and tapping into state and national organizations such as Quality Texas, the American Society for Quality, and the Baldrige National Quality Program. In 2005, ESC 12 submitted an application for a Texas Award for Performance Excellence at the Progress Level (www.texas-quality.org). Valuable feedback from trained examiners provided many opportunities for improvement. For example, based on feedback, ESC 12 is much more consistent in the selection, collection and analysis of data to monitor our work resulting in the development of the ESC 12 Balanced Scorecard.

Networking, attending conferences and workshops, and utilizing web-based information, surveys and tools have all proven to be beneficial in developing our capacity to move toward performance excellence. Recently, the leadership team of ESC 12 participated in the Baldrige "Are We Making Progress as Leaders?" survey located on the Baldrige National Quality Program website (<http://www.quality.nist.gov>). Based on the results of the survey, the ESC reorganized personnel and priorities to facilitate the development of an ESC dashboard for administrators to utilize in decision-making.

Furthermore, we have chosen to work with one particular expert over the past seven years who has been invaluable in continuing to mature our organization in meeting and exceeding customer requirements. A consistent message from a national expert has turned out to be a best practice for us.

Managing Processes

Another approach used that has proven to be a value-added to our quality processes is the accomplishment of ISO certification. We consider ISO certification as a strong precursor to more fully implementing Baldrige criteria.

"Another approach used that has proven to be a value-add to our quality processes is the accomplishment of ISO certification. We consider ISO certification as a strong precursor to more fully implementing Baldrige criteria."

According to Lawrence and Blazey (2007), "...a great many organizations choose ISO 9001 because their customers require them to do so. However, once certified, some go beyond ISO 9001, using the Baldrige Criteria in order to achieve market leadership characterized by competitive

advantage and consistently increasing profitability, market growth, and employee security" (p. 2). ISO certification helps us to accomplish critical elements of quality, particularly in process management and work flow, which we did not seem to be able to get done before. Now we are positioned to achieve "market leadership" as evidenced by increasing client satisfaction (from 93% in 2007 to 98% in 2008 for Quality of Services) as well as increases in our general revenue fund (an increase of 22% from 2005-2006 to 2006-2007).

Benchmarking Best Practices

A relatively recent process adopted by ESC 12 to bolster our quality processes includes benchmarking best practices, particularly from Baldrige Award winners such as The Ritz-Carlton, Richland College, and Park Place Lexus. ESC 12 administrators and staff have made several trips to visit, listen and learn from these great companies resulting in significant value-added changes to our organization. For example, based on The Ritz-Carlton concept of "Line-up," a daily meeting of their staff members for focusing on the culture

of the organization, ESC 12 created “Rally.” Rally occurs every Monday morning and is a 15-minute stand-up meeting of all staff. During the meeting we focus on such things as:

“...based on The Ritz-Carlton concept of “Line-up,” a daily meeting of their staff members for focusing on the culture of the organization, ESC 12 created “Rally.” Rally occurs every Monday morning and is a 15-minute stand-up meeting of all staff.”

- Which and how many customers will be in the facilities for the week; e.g., administrators, teachers, support staff,
- An examination of one of our 10 core values, including what it means and how it is exemplified in our actions,
- Customer breakdowns or inefficiencies and what we need to do to correct mistakes, and
- Success stories that exemplify the great things we have done for customers.

Rally is just one example of the many initiatives developed based on our benchmarking experiences. Others include “Morning Welcome,” in which all administrators are scheduled on a rotating basis to be at the front door every morning to greet customers as they arrive; a new shuttle bus to carry our customers from the parking lot to the front door in inclement weather; and adopting a new, in-depth approach to “owning the customer’s problem” from beginning to end.

The Journey

Imagine the small child in the back seat of the car on the long journey who consistently asks the question, “Are we there yet?” ESC 12 realizes that there will never be a final answer to that question. We know, in the pursuit of excellence, we will never arrive. Our next step is to obtain feedback from the National Baldrige Program by submitting an application to be scored by Baldrige examiners. We will consider this feedback critical for filling the gaps and maturing our systems, and hopefully, moving us forward on the rewarding journey to performance excellence for our customers.

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Don't Take Yes For An Answer

by
Edward T. Frye

“Yes, we will contract with you.” Oh, happy day! Getting a Yes from a client shouts success, whether it seals a first time agreement or the renewal for the 20th time. That closing meeting is welcome validation of how good we are, how much the client appreciates us, how adequately we are fulfilling our mission.

I don't mean to rain on your parade. But it may not quite be all that. The next time around you may be like the British officer in Boston Harbor who asked, too late, “What is wrong with these colonists? They were okay at the dance last night.”

I will consider two notions related to this self-actualized moment in your client/provider relationship. First, I will suggest that this closing meeting might be more than a successful conclusion. It can be a springboard to the next contract. Second, the closing meeting is the perfect setting to conduct a reliable, useable, and agency-specific client evaluation of your current service levels so you might improve them.

Notion One: The distance between a current Yes and a future No is your growth zone.

Good salespeople already know this. During my yearly purchase of lawn fertilizer, the cashier asked me if I had a spreader, and did I need any grub control. Already having a Yes on the fertilizer, she was gently “reminding” me of some additional and related products.

It is an axiom in the sales world that the second sale starts immediately after the first one is completed. ESA leaders can take direction from this.

I suggest that we use the point of sale to expand sales. Getting someone to Yes is the critical event of any closing, but it need not be the single purpose. We can pursue some growth. Inflationary increases in the status quo, usually related to number of students served and the subsequent costs, are not growth. It is market share maintenance. Growth is the expansion of new products, new services, new markets, different ESA involvements.

If timing is everything, the closing meeting is the time. An ESA leader is sitting face-to-face with a client who is already sold on something. Both the tone and ambience of the meeting have been positive enough

to reach an agreement. The client's Yes indicates some level of trust in you and yours. You, obviously, have shown real commitment in your service offering. Ideas germinate well in such fertile and nurturing environments. Now is the time to push the envelope. Until we enter the territory between Yes now and No later, we have not really discovered our growth zone.

As an executive director of a large ESA, I failed to exploit this venue for several years. I blithely floated new ideas by my 24 superintendents, en masse, during their budget building season. It was the wrong forum. Usually these great thoughts – good for kids, good for the districts, good for us – were met with stony silence or just one objection that nobody else felt moved to pursue or to question. Good things died without the light of day. ESA growth didn't occur until I quit throwing up jump balls and began using district-by-district "closing" meetings as our "opening" meetings.

This approach worked better for us than home-brewed surveys seeking concept interest from sometimes anonymous clients (see appendix for more on surveys.) The closing meeting worked better than holding "new venture" think tank meetings with various educators, which resulted in the same problems as the superintendent meetings. It worked better than attempts to insert our ESA into every district's already-completed long-range plans. This agreement arena worked better because it focused on one district and one decision-maker at a time. This provided expansive, considered discussion and more customization of our services to individual situations.

Four examples from my own organization represent several other initiatives that surfaced in closing meetings. Our organization provided transportation services to many special needs youngsters for most of our districts. We began asking each district – at contract renewal meetings – if we could use our available fleet for their school day field trips. Turns out we could.

During one of our closing meetings, a superintendent was bemoaning his inability to find and fund a driver education teacher for his small program. I told him we could solve his problem; he should just let us do it. That fall we provided his district with a part-time, contracted instructor for just eight students. In a few years that program grew to serve about a dozen districts, more than 400 students, with 10 or so instructors provided by us. This scenario repeated itself with another superintendent and his federal program needs. That one grew into a new, designated staff function for us that eventually included several districts.

We were heavily involved with the local branch of a national non-profit organization. We provided some services to them, they provided some to us. We just kept expanding those relationships – in both directions – over several years. The possibilities for these expansions magically revealed themselves at the closing meeting. We would sign a huge contract and start enlarging it before we left the room. Yep, the second sale begins at the close of the first.

Style matters. Our staff did not want to be viewed as high pressure sales people, constantly testing client tolerance of our voracious appetites.

Rather than launch into a hard-sell "sales pitch" for the next new thing, we sought a conversational and personalized tone that reflected the professional and fellow traveler partnership we enjoyed with our clients. We knew this relationship was our value proposition, our point of difference from any other vendor. We built on it.

"Rather than launch into a hard-sell 'sales pitch' for the next new thing, we sought a conversational and personalized tone that reflected the professional and fellow traveler partnership we enjoyed with our clients."

Our “closers” tried to arrive with our new contract in one hand and a new “what if” in the other. We had a prepared rationale for that “what if” and some general indicators of size, scope, and estimated costs. And, we had clearly defined client benefits. Even with all this, we tried to get more information than we gave. We were not intent on closing new business this day. We just wanted to get an oar in the water, perhaps an agreement for further exploration. We were cruising for a No.

However, you just never know what will happen. Recently, I met with a landscaper for an estimate on my mulching needs – cost of product and his price to spread it. That is all I thought I wanted. By the time we finished walking the property, he had a contract for all of that plus the re-edging of all beds, removal of twelve bushes, the replacement of same, the removal of several junk trees and the planting of three nice evergreens. We also agreed to some pruning and the application of some wondrous weed control. Whose ideas were all of those? Mostly mine; he was just there at the right time, asking gentle questions. One personal visit, and he left with a contract that was three times what either of us had originally envisioned.

Your clients will not be surprised to hear you to ask. They certainly expect the well-trained order-taker in the fast food restaurant to ask customers if they want to “super-size” their orders. Sales enhancement efforts are natural throughout the business world. That’s where we live.

Building on the “buzz” of a previous agreement offered something of value to both parties. Our client benefited from hearing of new ventures from someone willing to do most of the heavy lifting. Meanwhile, we were in the growth zone. We developed insight into when No really meant No and how to repackage a new idea the next time we brought it out of the box. Time-worthy outcomes, these.

Moving program expansion discussions to the closing meeting may violate some established cycle of program proposal and development that the ESA and the districts have used for years. Past protocols may call for new programs to be identified all at one appropriate time, allowing districts to discuss them in-house, plan for them, budget for them, and obtain board approval. The closing meeting might challenge those protocols.

Personally, I have never found the right time for a good idea. Most seem to have a life of their own. Bad timing may kill them, but sitting on them almost certainly will. Creative problem-solving seldom follows a pristine, linear sequence of proposal, planning, costing, offering, and implementing. We should not allow some stifling past practice to dictate when we are going to send up a trial balloon. A committed client can solve all that other stuff. If you can pique that commitment, out of phase or not, a new venture may fly.

For heaven’s sake – no, for your sake – don’t be too satisfied with your next Yes. Remember, nobody ever stole second base with a foot still on first.

We should never stop with a Yes. The closing meeting is an intersection of two agencies coming together. A Yes is a green light, not a red one. It says “keep moving.” So, develop an innovative approach and take a shot at it. A faint heart never won the fair maiden.

Notion Two: One swallow doeth not a spring make.

Most closing meetings are necessary but perfunctory ceremonies; all the work has been done beforehand. (You don’t just mail out a \$1 million contract and ask the client to sign and return it, do you?) But signing duplicates requires only minutes, leaving you with both time and a captive audience. The first notion

suggests that we press those advantages to pursue future services. This second one proposes that another discussion be added to the Yes agenda – the gathering and pursuit of candid client opinions of your present efforts.

This will keep us grounded. Successful closings may seduce us into the perception that we have created a client for life. We conclude that this Yes shows how highly the client values our package of price, quality, and service. We assume that if we continue to do what we have always done, we can expect love and loyalty forever. Such an assumption can be a fatal flaw. Personal experience tells me there is seldom a “forever” in one Yes from a client, even after a 20th straight renewal.

“We assume that if we continue to do what we have always done, we can expect love and loyalty forever. Such an assumption can be a fatal flaw.”

Consumers often buy products/services for reasons other than love or loyalty. Sometimes, districts simply cannot provide a specialized service cheaper than we can. Or, they simply don’t want to do it, don’t have the horses to do it, or can’t find anyone to do it but us. There is simply a lack of better options. Should any of these conditions change in the future, the ESA is vulnerable. So, one swallow doeth not a spring make.

Your own personal consumer history probably reflects this Hobson’s choice. You had to choose a less than pleasing option because nothing better was available. You reluctantly selected “the best of a bad litter.” Your satisfaction with the purchase was tepid, at best. What if this is how your clients truly feel about contracting with your ESA? This level of acceptance is certainly not why we want to be asked to the dance, but it is reason enough to seek constant improvement in both our services and client opinion of them. Satisfied customers often leave for greener pastures; delighted ones seldom do.

This harsh reality requires ESAs to identify and to address district dissatisfaction with any ESA service. Where we can do those two things, we create delighted clients. The closing meeting creates a “teachable moment” for both parties, but for the ESA especially. We can use it to learn where the client believes we are hitting or missing desired service expectations. Further, it allows us to solidify our long-term relationship with each district, one at a time, right before their very eyes. We just have to be willing to hear No.

At closing meetings our organization’s representatives got to No by asking some typical, general, and open-ended questions:

1. In what ways are we serving you best? (We build on success.)
2. In what areas are we failing to meet your contractual or personal service expectations?
3. How important/how large/how frustrating are these failings to you?
4. Which of these failings could cause you to seek another provider?
5. What suggestions for service improvement should we pursue?

We probed those comments with follow-up, clarifying questions, asking for examples and what they thought we did poorly in particular instances. We took notes with great flair and restated their comments to demonstrate that we clearly understood their pain. We promised to turn their objections into our objectives. We labored to get a No early so we could avoid it in the future.

It was surprisingly easy to generate fiercely candid, robust, and certainly negative client responses far more insightful and applicable than simple data collected from those ubiquitous questionnaires or surveys. Clients, we found, give truthful, candid, and useful responses when given time to expand upon them. They liked to talk about what made them happy, and even more, to vent heretofore hidden irritations, resentments, and problems. That was really true when they believed we were really listening and intended to address these issues. It was especially true when they were revisited with follow-up meetings that reported significant changes we were making. The very act of even asking nudged client acceptance upward. They said so later, and increases in agreements proved it.

I think our clients were typical of how most consumers anywhere would respond, given a quality opportunity.

In his wonderful book, *What Customers Really Want*, (a quick, must read for providers of all enterprises) Scott McKain succinctly identifies six “disconnects” between what customers desire and what providers usually offer. Three of them are germane to this discussion. Customers wish long-term relationships with providers who:

1. Offer compelling experiences,
2. Are personally focused on client needs,
3. Demonstrate a reciprocal loyalty.

We need to ask our clients how we are doing in these areas. Is our value added compelling enough to keep them in the fold? Do we act as if we are compelled? A friend of mine refers to this as “The Wow Factor,” a self-explanatory concept. Do our clients believe that we are responsive to specific needs and wants, to specific district dynamics? Are we nimble, quick with our follow-up and feedback? Is our loyalty demonstrable in word and deed over the long haul? How?

We don’t need to hear wonderful, ego-inflating affirmations of our worth. We need to know why the client, for whatever real or imagined reasons, would say No. We are seeking complaints, because complaints are our friends. This may sound familiar, even trite. However, a study I read some time ago, but cannot footnote, offered interesting findings about complaints.

The author(s) concluded that only about one of four dissatisfied customers actually complain. The other three don’t because they are too timid, they don’t have an appropriate forum to do so, they just are not vested enough to bother, or, worst of all, they think nothing will change anyway. So, they just leave. If one complaint really speaks for four client experiences, we would do well not to dismiss it lightly.

Conversely, the study reported that almost all dissatisfied clients stay in the fold if they see genuine responsiveness from the provider, whether or not that response is in their favor. And, remember, that decision is multiplied by four again. These client reactions to negative experiences behoove us to change those experiences.

In presentations I often review some service provider attributes that consumers value. Their absence is more likely to cause client defection than factors of price or quality. This compilation reflects both actual client responses and current literature from the sales world. I list here just eight of my favorites from that list. Your clients are likely to mention some of these elements along with responsiveness, commitment, and loyalty. You may want to be ready to receive them, and later, to address them.

Features of Quality Service

Accessibility	Flexibility
Convenience	Reliability
Efficiency	Simplicity
Durability	Timeliness

Sometimes, these service elements are invisible to the leader who signs the agreement and check. Sadly, negative client perceptions are often based on ignorance. They simply do not really know what we do for them, or how we do it. Many decision-makers do not see our daily work. How do they know they are getting what they are paying for? How can their support and product/service loyalty grow if they are unaware of the cost savings, the quality of our work, or our Herculean service efforts on their behalf?

And, whose fault is that? The closing meeting is a first effort to making the invisible clearly visible, either immediately or immediately thereafter. We always seized any timely opening to share some good news, some indicators of our value. We trotted out our student test performance studies, workshop participant evaluations, cost effectiveness studies, and any other data we had. After all, it is a poor dog that won't wag its own tail.

But we resisted the natural tendency to defend ourselves with explanations or excuses to the peppering we sometimes took. That is always a challenge. Still, our ability to take bad news quietly, graciously, and professionally is our ticket to the growth zone.

Effective use of the closing meeting insulates our market position. Any new vendor entering our marketplace will have to compete with our lock on long-term, open discussion, our highly accepted service provision, and our commitment to constant improvement. New vendors will have to compete not with the "best of a bad litter," but with the "best in show."

Until we get a No, our work isn't finished. Whoever said, "Never take no for an answer," may have had it backwards.

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Appendix: A Few Thoughts About Surveys

I'm often asked to complete consumer surveys from other enterprises – after my car is serviced, after an appliance purchase, when my school district is in the midst of long-range planning, during calls to any customer service department. I expect you do too. Do you complete them? If so, are you diligent, thoughtful, candid, and expansive in your responses? Do you fill in any of the “other comments” spaces, or just flash through the usual 1-5 Likert Scale? Do you expect any follow-up? Have you ever received any? Is the effort a gratifying and positive experience for you? I'm guessing the answer to most or all these questions is No. If so, these surveys probably were counterproductive, causing as much annoyance and alienation as support. We call that an “unintended consequence.” Or “collateral damage.”

The historically low percentage of responses supports my growing sense that the survey world is super-saturated. Worse, I fear that many of those who do respond are often disinterested, strongly positive, or strongly negative, skewing the survey's validity. Heavy reliance on their input requires more faith than I can muster.

Here are four other reasons why survey-driven decision-making worries me:

1. Many organizations lack in-house talent to create, administer, and analyze quality survey programs.
2. Busy and/or non-vested respondents do not answer surveys honestly.
3. Many surveys address areas of interest to the provider, not client-critical issues. (Why does the bank ask if the tellers are polite/professional, ignoring queries about their managers and policies? Actually, I think I know the answer to this one.)
4. Few organizations implement meaningful responses based on survey results (Given the above problems, this is actually good, but it renders the survey useless.)

Written (electronic or mailed) surveys, like increased student testing, have become accepted tools in our quest for data-driven decision-making. My skepticism goes against the grain of conventional, academic, or research thinking. I just think surveys are a pale substitute for acquiring interview-evoked responses from personally engaged clients, one or a few at a time. The amount of data will be smaller, but probably more useful.

So, if you use surveys, exercise caution. If you do not have someone in your employ who has been trained in all phases of this arena, consider outsourcing your efforts.

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