

Chaos to Clarity: The ESA's Role in Sustainable School Improvement

by

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The Context

The annual AESA Conference gives executives from the country's educational service agencies a rare and much needed opportunity to network with colleagues from many different states. It is a chance to "compare notes," on national trends and the services that are being brought to bear by these unique organizations to support the school districts they serve. There are always many takeaways from a conference such as this; however, this year, one takeaway was abundantly clear: Chaos reigns everywhere.

Most ESA executives we spoke with, no matter what state they were from, reported increased stress and anxiety in the districts they serve. It would be a big deal to roll out new standards for one subject area in a year. Try doing that for two major subject areas (Common Core English Language Arts and Mathematics), changing the teacher evaluation system, and implementing new assessments all at the same time. This increase in stress and anxiety seems to be driven by aggressive implementation timelines, pressure from diverse and often diametrically opposed stakeholder groups, and limitations on resources. Taken together, initiative fatigue is starting to set in.

The current educational reform movement rivals healthcare reform as the defining, divisive issue across the country. This is especially true for educators, parents, politicians, and other parties who have chosen to take an interest. The issues surrounding educational reform have produced a troubling dichotomy of extremist perspectives. For many who are willing to comment publicly (or blog or tweet endlessly), there seems to be no middle ground. It is either that the current reforms are the only solution to our alleged failing public education system or they are the root of all educational evil and hold no merit whatsoever. You are either a “true believer” or a “total sell out.” What complicates matters further is that the terms are interchangeable depending on the user’s perspective. Our system of democracy is predicated on compromise – not unbridled brinksmanship. What happened to the middle ground? Each side uses the results to legitimize their positions/perspective, and to refute the other side. It is politics at its very worst, and it has placed superintendents, board members, principals, teachers, parents, and students right in the unfortunate, unproductive middle. But there is a middle ground as Dwight Eisenhower said in a 1963 interview:

People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable. Actually, all human problems, excepting morals, come into the gray areas. Things are not all black and white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, right and left, are in the gutters (Stringer, 1963).

While this current landscape in education presents a number of unique challenges for school districts, ESAs can help find that middle ground.

First, ESAs across the nation are already scrambling to fill needs and to plug holes that have developed in districts because of resource constrictions. Additionally, for districts in Race to the Top (RttT) states, any grant money received for implementation will dry up in the near future. Given the current political environment, additional funding does not seem likely. The

functional challenge of a lack of sufficient time and money coupled with unfinished implementation makes the prospect of sustainability tenuous. It's like running out of propane when your steak is half cooked. If you don't have another way to cook it, you might as well have ordered pizza. Even districts not in RttT states are likely facing the same implementation concerns and resource constrictions.

Second, what if there is a significant reversal in educational policy that renders moot all the work to date? More likely, what if the quasi-political pressure simply continues to perpetuate an environment that makes it even more difficult to move the ball instructionally on the Common Core? The refrain we have heard often from school leaders is that their parents, and sometimes staff and boards, are unable to differentiate among the multitude of controversial issues. The push back on testing and aspects of the evaluation system has caused many to rail against the Core standards. This makes the necessary curricular and contextual adjustments that come with any changes in standards much more difficult.

Finally, school district leaders themselves have come under fire from all angles. There is clear pressure from the USDOE, state departments of education, and the accountability structures they propagate. Similarly, push back from various anti-reform groups manifests itself at the local level. Staff and boards of education are stressed and anxious over changes, and business leaders want a better prepared future workforce. These often opposing forces create an atmosphere where local school leaders must walk a tightrope, trying simultaneously to balance the perspectives of stakeholders, while attempting a massive implementation. All of this is to occur in an environment of diminished resources. Here again, school leaders find themselves backed into a corner by very loud, almost extremist perspectives that demand adherence to and

action on their entire ideology. It is the proverbial no-win situation, and many high quality school leaders have paid with their jobs.

The Role of ESAs

As ESAs it is our mission to support and serve school districts. To those ends, what can we bring to the table to help the work of education move forward in this environment? How can we maximize limited resources to focus on what is right and good about the work? More to the point, what can we offer to help create greater clarity for districts amid the current chaos? The answer is simple but not easy. First, be conduits of accurate information at the regional and local levels. Second, prioritize what is important, and focus on what works.

ESAs Must be Conduits of Accurate Information

Education is not a public relations endeavor, nor is it a social media campaign. A few pro Common Core Op-Eds in the local paper and a brief foray into social media are not going to help change the context to a more productive local conversation. School districts must engage stakeholders in multiple and meaningful ways at the local level with high quality information. ESAs can help coordinate and facilitate this at a regional level. Examples of effective Common Core-aligned instruction in the local context will do the most to show that higher standards may, in many cases, better reflect the quality work that teachers and school leaders are already doing.

ESAs should consider engaging their component school districts in developing a series of simple and logical talking points on the Common Core tailored to the regional context. School districts can then use the talking points in multiple communications with parents and staff to help counter some of the sensational and inaccurate rhetoric that stakeholders may be hearing.

Additionally, ESAs can facilitate regional informational events on behalf of multiple districts.

These must be well structured to allow for appropriate discourse and information sharing. Most people in a community still respect those who work at their local school district and are much more likely to come away feeling involved and informed from a discussion geared to their locality. “A majority of Americans give the public schools in their community an A or B...,but fewer than one in five would give the schools nationally a B or better” (Bushaw & Lopez, 2013, p. 10). The simple fact is people tend to trust their local principal or superintendent more than a state or national educational leader.

Districts that have engaged in these types of local communications initiatives have informally reported a better understanding on the part of parents of the Common Core Standards, how their respective district is implementing them, and the actual requirements that districts have to meet by law. Additionally, this seems to have created a more open local dialogue about the difficult issues of standardized testing and data. School districts and school district leaders rightfully need to be seen as responsive to concerns, as well as good communicators. They also need to be viewed as the source for accurate, un-manipulated information. That is a necessity now more than ever. ESAs must play an integral part in helping districts communicate factual information, not hyperbole. To paraphrase the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “everyone is entitled to their own opinion, not their own facts.”

ESAs Help Districts Prioritize What is Important and Focus on What Works

Professional Development

A common refrain among teachers in the wake of the reform initiatives is a lack of time and professional development to implement the changes. High quality professional development is expensive. In the current fiscal climate, it is more important than ever to leverage economies

of scale to deliver research-based professional learning opportunities. Professional development is an area where ESAs have historically been effective in supporting districts. Hattie (2009) identified four methods of professional development as the most effective in altering the knowledge and behavior of teachers: “observation of actual classroom methods; microteaching; video/audio feedback; and practice” (Hattie, 2009, p. 120). These approaches are very staff-intensive. Districts might not have the resources for full time employees in positions to support this type of work. ESAs can support this work with shared staff members and shared experiences. Our ESA has realized success with highly trained and content-specific instructional specialists who work directly with teachers in component school districts. These specialists can deliver messages and encourage change in ways that district employees might find difficult or unpopular.

Beyond helping districts share expenses, ESAs are also poised to help districts weed out more costly and ineffective forms of professional development in favor of more effective and cost efficient methods. It is no secret that it can be difficult to be a prophet in your own land. ESAs can act as the “outside experts” to help local leaders overcome the inertia of stale, costly, and ineffective professional development traditions.

Curriculum

In this environment, districts simply do not have the time or resources to do everything themselves, and teachers need high quality support now. The argument could be made that it is fiscally irresponsible to knowingly duplicate efforts. Consider writing curriculum at the local school district level. Should multiple, and often contiguous, school districts each spend upwards of \$50,000 annually aligning their local curriculum to the Common Core Learning Standards

when the work could be done once on a regional level with knowledgeable representatives from the respective districts? In this case the whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts. The top 10% of math teachers from 13 school districts is likely to create a high quality product that can be shared among participating districts. A more focused and streamlined effort could then take place at the local district and building level to individualize the curricula. ESAs are perfectly positioned to facilitate and moderate this type of work. More to the point, ESAs need to exert leadership in their region to challenge the notion of what it means to do something “locally.” How much different is third grade ELA in elementary schools that are within 50 miles of each other, in the same state or county? When the heavy lifting has been done regionally, any true differences can be addressed in a more nuanced, limited, and focused local process. Leveraging expertise and resources on a regional level is more than an exercise in cost effectiveness. It has the potential to elevate the quality of the work beyond what could be produced by one district in isolation. This must be central to the mission of ESAs now and into the foreseeable future. It’s time to expand the notion of “local.”

Conclusions

There is little question that the current context in education presents many challenges to school districts and school district leaders who are trying to successfully implement a massive set of reforms. The risks for districts and leaders of continuing to be reactive to the ethos of the moment run as deeply as the abandonment of progressive momentum in favor of a cloistering of practices to what is comfortable. Now more than ever it is essential for ESAs to strike the balance between leadership and responsiveness. While ESAs should not be expected to solve all of the issues in the current educational landscape, they can help bring clarity to the chaos. Providing and facilitating the communication of accurate, non-sensationalized information and

helping districts to focus limited resources on effective and cost efficient best practices will aid in the current implementation and put districts on track for sustainable school improvement.

References

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