REDEFINING RELEVANCY: THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE REDESIGN OF THE AEA STATE SYSTEM AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

It was late 2010 and the Iowa Area Education Agency (AEA) Chief Administrators knew some things needed to change if the AEA system was to remain relevant. There was universal recognition that the primary reason for creating the AEAs back in 1974, that is, to serve the educational needs of children with disabilities, still held true. However, the AEA system was increasingly being asked to support local districts to raise achievement levels for all learners, help local education agencies (LEAs) be more accountable for student success, and guide LEA staff to learn how to take advantage of new technologies to raise learning for all, a much expanded mission from its original one. Historically each AEA had operated fairly autonomously from the others, developing programs for the local schools and serving parents and youngsters from a regional perspective, not necessarily considering how their programs might impact or be impacted by programs in other AEAs. There seemingly was only occasional recognition that the individual agencies were part of a broader statewide and perhaps more strategic network of educational service agencies (ESAs).

BACKGROUND

This paper features excerpts of the final report of the essential actions undertaken by the

AEA State System over the last two-year period (2011-2013) to redesign itself as a more effective statewide network. As the title of the report suggests, the series of steps undertaken had as its primary goal positioning the network to be an even more valuable partner with accredited local districts and nonpublic schools and the Department of Education in the planning and implementation of the recent broad-based initiatives launched by the state to improve the quality of elementary-secondary education, with a particular emphasis on raising student academic achievement.

The two <u>objectives</u> established to achieve the goal were:

(1)		(2)
To strengthen how the State System conducts its work in order to capitalize on its full potential as a well-functioning, effective community of practice	<u>in order that it</u>	would be successful in undertaking a bold, unprecedented role of assuming co-ownership of the academic achievement of all students

The system of AEAs had outgrown its current structure and, while in the enviable position of being asked to do more for their various constituents, also found itself in the challenging position of not having the culture and reinforcing structures and processes in place to act as a cohesive system. It was time for a remodel. This is the story of how IOWA AEAs voluntarily decided to transform their practice, beginning in 2011.

The relevancy of the state system needed to be re-defined and become more targeted. In essence, the system would need to answer the question: "To what extent does the state network contribute to the state priority of raising the quality of elementary-secondary education, with a particular emphasis on improving student academic achievement?"

In his highly acclaimed 2004 book, *The Eighth Habit*, Stephen Covey suggests that if leadership of an organization "wants to make minor, incremental changes … work on practice, behavior, or attitudes." However, he cautions that if one desires to make "significant, quantum

improvements, work on paradigms" that he defines to be work on "perception, assumptions,…

frames of references, or lenses through which you view the world" (p. 19). As will be shown, to

the credit of the Chief Administrators they rejected Covey's suggestion and chose rather to work

both on minor incremental changes as well as perception, assumptions, and lens through which

they view the world. They did so on a correct assessment that existing practices can negatively

impact or impede a focus on how and in what ways a state system can continue to be an

indispensable part of the state's infrastructure for elementary-secondary education.

THE REDESIGN STRATEGY

The strategy used to achieve the previously cited objectives for the first two years of the

initiative consisted of taking three steps: (1) adoption of a set of guiding principles; (2) the

selection of an organizational change model that would facilitate, not inhibit, honoring the

guiding principles; and, (3) structuring the redesign effort into a series of manageable activities.

Highlights of each of the steps are discussed below.

Adoption of Guiding Principles: The initiative was guided by a set of seven guiding

principles that served to inform and provide direction for what the state network was to do, why

it was critical to achieve what it intended to do, and how it was to accomplish what it set out to

do. Successfully honoring the guiding principles that were to provide direction was recognized at

the outset as difficult in that while some were relatively easy to implement, others were not. In

the end, a consensus in the AEA community was reached on all major implementation issues.

It was agreed that any redesign process must:

(1) Strengthen the state system so that it functions as a state network and thus be
    more able to devote its collective organizational capacity to address state
    priorities as intended by the legislature when it created the system in 1974, and
    preserve the core values and purpose of the AEA system.

(2) Result in a fundamental change in how the state system conducts its planning and
    decision-making activities by building on existing strengths of how its work is

accomplished, while eliminating those existing practices that are counterproductive or inhibit in other ways the effectiveness and accountability of the network. In other words, create the conditions for the state system to be a learning organization.

(3) Preserve the discretionary authority of individual AEAs in order for them to be effective in responding to the differing needs and capacities of their local clientele/customers.

(4) Protect and nourish the discretionary authority of an individual AEA to foster innovation leading to new or improved processes, programs, and evaluation practices that can then be shared across the system, and potentially impact all accredited districts and nonpublic schools.

(5) Expand involvement of the Joint Directors and the licensed staff of the nine AEAs in the planning and decision-making activities made on behalf of the state network. The approximately 2,100 licensed staff of the AEAs represents the greatest concentration of human capital assets in the state system, and it is essential that the rich content expertise of this group be maximized.

(6) Continue the steadfast, long-term prioritized commitment to giving a priority to providing support services for special needs students.

(7) Develop a reciprocal accountability process with accredited local school districts and nonpublic schools and the Department of Education whereby the state system will assume an unprecedented role, co-ownership of student learning outcomes.

The Change Strategy. There certainly is no shortage of theories on how best to affect organizational change, whether the unit of analysis is a single organization or a network of like organizations, such as the nine nonhierarchical agencies that comprise the AEA State System. The dominant perspective used for the redesign of the state network as a community of practice placed an emphasis on the need to change the *culture* of the system in fundamental ways if it were to remain relevant. This meant reinforcing the shared values and achieving clarity on the mission, goals and objectives of the state system.

There are of course numerous definitions of the construct organizational culture. The one used here was first introduced by E. H. Schein in 1985. Schein argues that while part of the culture of an organization is revealed by its artifacts and creations, "the term 'culture' should be reserved for the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that defines in a basic 'taken for granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment". (p. 6). Schein elaborates further with the assertion that "'these assumptions are learned responses to a group's problem of survival in its extended environment and its problems of internal integration" (p. 6).

The two-year action plan also incorporated a number of commonly recognized best practices concerning the successful establishment, execution, monitoring, and evaluation of a change effort. Foremost, this involved securing the support of the key leadership group of the state system, the nine Chief Administrators. Six of the nine assumed their positions during the last four-year period, each bringing a commitment and ideas on how to revamp whatever was needed to be changed in order to maximize the full potential of the state system, and in many cases, by extension in their own agencies. The rapid development of trust and professional respect between the new Chief Administrators and the seasoned leadership of the experienced Chief Administrators changed the dynamics of how the group engaged in its work. This development set the prerequisite conditions critical for the change strategy that was used. The commitment of the Chief Administrators to work together at every stage of the project was a beautiful thing to witness.

Two key practices were built into the strategy: The first was to contract with a process facilitator to manage the roll out of the strategy, work with various groups involved in planning for their specific task of reaching consensus on various proposals for change, and, write drafts and the final products that were developed. In working with different groups, it was also

necessary to constantly reinforce the need for clarity of the mission, goals, and objectives of the state system, remind the participants about the expected improvements to be realized by adoption of a recommended change, and plan for and provide timely communication of the progress of each feature of the strategy. The second was the need to develop an "early win," the timely completion of a major initiative that would serve to demonstrate that good things would be accomplished when there was a commitment to do so.

The Two-Year Redesign Actions: Five specific parts were completed. Highlights of each are provided below.

Part 1: Restructuring how the nine Chief Administrators engaged in planning and decision-making that would support the objective of strengthening the state system of AEAs by honoring the tenets of a community of practice.

Part 2: Realigning the work of the Joint Directors from the nine AEAs to ensure that this group was deeply involved in the planning and decision-making activities with the Chief Administrators. The Joint Directors include the AEA Special Education Directors, Education Service Directors and the Education Media and Technology Directors.

Part 3: Redesigning the relationship between the AEA State System and the Department of Education to ensure that both partners supported the work of both in achieving common goals.

Part 4: Developing a position paper that connected the AEA State System to the co-ownership of student learning through a process of reciprocal accountability.

Part 5: Designing a comprehensive governance system that aligned and strengthened the actions taken in the preceding four parts of the redesign initiative.

MAJOR STRENGTHS OF THE STATE SYSTEM THAT MUST BE PRESERVED AND WEAKNESS THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED

Several of the guiding principles adopted for the first two years of the redesign project relate to the need to retain the existing strengths of the state network while eliminating or greatly reducing the impact of features that inhibit the successful achievement of the two objectives established for the initial phase of the exercise.

One useful way to summarize a number of the major strengths and weaknesses of the current network is to make use of a visual shown in Figure 1 that identifies the five pillars and two supports that the state in its wisdom put in place to insure its successful operation. The five pillars have been in place from the earliest years of operation of the system. The two supports were added in 1997.

FIGURE 1

ONE VIEW OF THE ESSENTIAL STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF THE IOWA AEA NETWORK: ONE MORE TIME

The Five "Old" Pillars and the Two "New" Supports

The AEA State Network				
1 a relatively clear mission statement and role responsibilities that are codified	2 a complete statewide network that includes all LEAs that is codified	3 a relatively definite source of funding that is aligned with mission and role that is codified	4 a relatively close working relationship with LEAs, nonpublic schools, and the SEA that is in part codified	5 a relatively substantial degree of discretionary authority to set policy governing both external and internal workings that is in part codified
New Supports				
6 An accountability system that, in addition to fiscal and legal measures, has been broadened to include the expectations that the state will also provide over-sight of the processes, procedures, and outcomes of an AEA's efforts				
7 An accreditation system that is intended to demonstrate that an AEA is honoring some valued practice concerning the processes and procedures it uses, as well as meets, exceeds or fails to satisfy desired outcomes				

Source: Stephens, E.R. and Good, K. (1998, p. 219)

Strengths of the system. Four strengths are singled-out:

1.   Pillar #2 that assures that all accredited local districts and nonpublic schools have access to the services and programs offered by their individual AEA and by the state system;

2.   Pillar #4 that facilitates access to accredited districts and nonpublic schools and promotes an understanding of local and regional educational norms, a necessary prerequisite for any successful external support system.

3.   Support #6, the state's action some 15 years ago in establishing a relatively comprehensive accountability system that included a set of standards, and Support #7, conditions that must be met in order to be accredited. Some of the standards need to be revised and others added to be more closely aligned with what the state system now does, as well as what it is committed to do. Nonetheless, a significant precedent has been established. The need for changes in the standards is again addressed in a later section of the article.

4.   The five pillars and two supports that describe the underpinnings of the AEA State System serve two other important functions. They strengthen the position that the AEA network is a system, that as Ackoff and Rovin (2005) note: "are understood by understanding the interaction of their parts, not the parts taken separately." (p. 17). They also stress that "because systems are defined by the interactions of the parts, it follows that when a system is taken apart, it loses its defining functions" (p. 17).
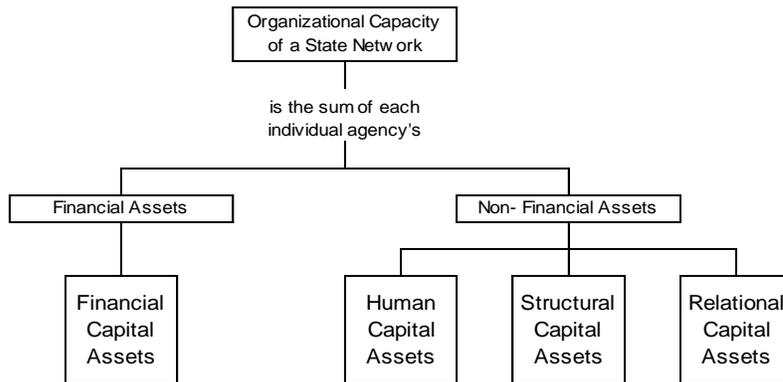
The inclusion of the five pillars and two supports in the design of the state network resulted in a number of extremely important benefits of the state, and for the AEA State System. Most importantly, it potentially greatly enhanced the organizational capacity of the state network, and by extension added significantly to the strength of the state infrastructure in support of elementary-secondary education.

A Weakness in This System. One major weakness was cited. Pillar #3 that, aside from the issue of the adequacy of state/federal funding, there is a growing disconnect between what the state, districts and nonpublic schools want and need from the state system and how the network can respond, and the revenue available to the agencies to respond. Approximately 75 to

80 percent of the budgets of the agencies are devoted to providing support services and programs for special needs students. It is to be recalled that another guiding principle takes the position that the priority of serving special needs student is non-negotiable. Yet, local agencies want and need, for example, greater professional development and instructional and curriculum support services to enhance general education efforts as well as they had in the past, a need that is likely to continue to grow.

Organizational Capacity of the State System. The second approach used to summarize major strengths that need to be sustained and weaknesses that need to be addressed makes use of the construct "organizational capacity of the state network." The organizational capacity of the system is defined as the sum of each of the nine individual agencies, which consists, as shown in Figure 2, of the financial assets and the three types of non-financial assets. The human capital asset of the approximately 2,100 licensed staff of the nine units represents a huge resource. The nine agencies and the state network are essentially knowledge organizations possessing both explicit and tacit insights on school improvement matters, broadly defined. The tacit knowledge is of two types, the technical dimension (the know how) and the cognitive dimension (the beliefs and values held by members that are part of the culture of the state system). Both represent an indispensable resource that must be preserved and continually strengthened.

Figure 2

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              ┌─────────────────────┐
              │ Organizational Capacity │
              │   of a State Network   │
              └──────────┬──────────┘
                         │
                  is the sum of each
                  individual agency's
                         │
          ┌──────────────┴──────────────────────┐
  ┌───────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
  │ Financial Assets │                  │ Non- Financial Assets │
  └───────┬───────┘                    └─────────┬────────┘
          │                       ┌──────────────┼──────────────┐
  ┌───────────────┐       ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐
  │   Financial   │       │  Human   │   │ Structural│   │ Relational│
  │   Capital     │       │ Capital  │   │  Capital  │   │  Capital  │
  │   Assets      │       │  Assets  │   │  Assets   │   │  Assets   │
  └───────────────┘       └──────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘
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Source: Stephens, E.R., Keane, W.G. & Talbott, B.L. (2005, p.12)

The strengths of each of the three components that together comprise the intellectual

capacity of the network are described below:

Human Capital Assets: The combined individual knowledge, competencies and
experiences that the professional and support staff members of each agency in the
network takes home with them at the end of their work day, as well as the individual and
collective knowledge, competencies, and experiences of leadership and governing board
members for the development, production, delivery, and evaluation of programs and
service expectations held for them can all be marshaled for the collective effort to
improve student learning outcomes.

Structural Capital Assets: The combined knowledge that is owned and remains at each
individual agency, as well as the combined infrastructure and organizational processes of
each to produce, develop, deliver, and evaluate programs and service expectations held
for them is a huge strength of the system upon which it can capitalize as it engages in
continuing redesign efforts.

Relational Capital Assets: The combined individual knowledge, competencies and
experiences of each individual service agency with regard to its relationships with schools
and school districts, with other AEAs in the state network, and with other local, state, and
national stakeholders and partners for the development, production, delivery, and
evaluation of programs and service expectations held for them can have a synergistic
impact. More than any other group, they know each school's strengths, challenges,
personnel, and unique contexts.

Each of these three non-financial assets represents huge strengths for the system.

MAJOR IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES OF THE REDESIGN PROCESS

The successful implementation of the two-year objectives and the honoring of the guiding principles required that these be addressed in one or more of the previously cited five parts of the exercise that together represented the initial phase of the redesign. Some of the recommendations contained in the reports required addressing long-standing issues in the state network. Still others surfaced as a result of new issues introduced or recommendations made in the reports. Implementation challenges that were of particular note included in this summary are cited below.

The redesign must assure that:

1.   The AEA State Board of Directors must assume primacy for having final approval for all statewide program policies, major contracts involving a financial commitment of the state network, and the approval of contracts and the evaluation of senior staff employed by the network.

2.   The Chief Administrators as a group have responsibility for recommending policies for consideration by the AEA State Board of Directors, and provide leadership in setting direction for strategic planning for the network, the identification of goals and objectives and how best to achieve these, monitor progress, and move the network toward a more performance-based, results-oriented culture.

3.   The source of much of the intellectual capital of the state network, the professional staff of the agencies, must be deeply engaged in program planning and evaluation of statewide services and programs.

4.   The state network assumes a new, groundbreaking role in having greater responsibility for student academic performance. In conjunction with this new commitment, a reciprocal accountability process, jointly planned with local districts must be successfully put in place. These plans must be focused on statewide priorities.

5.   Other consequences that must be addressed are that the state system cannot be engaged in every proposal put before it, no matter how meritorious these might be. Closely related, individual AEAs will have to practice Drucker's concept of "planned abandonment" quoted by Hesselbein and Johnston (1999) in a report issued by the Drucker Foundation (p. 1). Drucker's advice is close to one of the findings Collins observed in his best-selling study *Good to Great* which notes that those who were good "did not focus principally on what to do to become great; they focused equally on what not to do and what to stop doing" (p. 11).

PART 1: BECOMING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The Chief Administrators agreed upon five, non-sequential parts of the work of redesigning the system, and wisely chose to begin with themselves and how their collective vision for improving student learning could be maximized through their meetings, their working relationships, and their initiatives. They also acknowledged that the quality of their working relationships and intellectual focus directly impacted the work of division directors and other leaders in the system. Early on, some described this first phase as "getting our house in order." It might be more accurate to call their efforts a significant remodel.

Establishment of Guiding Principles, Vision, Mission and Values. As previously noted the Chief Administrators identified seven guiding principles to drive the redesign efforts. These became the "true north" throughout the process.

Taking cues from Simon Sinek's work on high performing organizations *(Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone To Take Action, 2009)* they started with identifying the "why" of their work, developing their vision, mission and core values for the redesigned system that resulted in the following delineations:

The **vision** of the Iowa Association of Area Education Agencies is that every Iowa learner will achieve success in life as a result of our services.

The **mission** of the Iowa Association of Area Education Agencies is to ensure that all Iowa learners are provided with effective, efficient, and equitable educational services that prepare them for success.

Values of the association are four in number:

- Unrelenting focus on student achievement and co-ownership of and reciprocal accountability for student learning results with local districts and nonpublic schools

- Provision of excellent, equitable, efficient and cohesive statewide services

- Creation of synergistic results through collective efforts, combined intellectual capital, and entrepreneurial programming

- Preservation of necessary individual AEA autonomy

Community of Practice as an Organizational Construct. Next, they identified what areas of the system were functioning in ways that promoted learning and where improvements needed to occur, based on an analysis of survey data solicited from each other and by asking other stakeholders within the system how they were viewed. Based on that analysis they committed to becoming a Community of Practice whenever they met and honoring the seven standards that distinguish communities of practice (Wenger and Strayer, 2002) from people simply coming together to hold a meeting:

1. A compelling, clear value for all involved (actionable results and accountability)

2. A dedicated, skilled facilitator and/or leader

3. A coherent, comprehensive knowledge map for the core content of the Community of Practice

4. An outlined, easy-to-follow knowledge sharing process (including agenda and meeting record templates and consistent protocols for meetings)

5. An appropriate technology medium that facilitates knowledge exchange, retrieval and collaboration

6. Communication and training plans for members and others outside the Community of Practice

7. Several key metrics of success to show results

Operationalizing the Community of Practice. In order to ensure that they would move from embracing the theory of a community of practice to actually performing as one, the Chief Administrators endorsed a number of protocols and developed different templates that would hold themselves accountable to their commitment as well as provide documentation of their progress.

- Meeting norms were established to minimize distractions and to increase the amount

and quality of meeting time spent on improving student achievement;

- Meeting protocols and templates were created that actually structured meeting time for maximum efficiency and accountability;

- A dormant executive committee, comprised of the officers of the Chief Administrators and the system executive director was re-activated and given responsibilities for advance planning of monthly agendas, evaluating previous meetings, and designing monthly "learning together" segments;

- An "Issues Alert" protocol was developed as a way to improve communication within the system about proposed actions that could either enhance system effectiveness or lead to negative unintended consequences if not addressed as a system; and

- A new Chief Administrators/Joint Directors Council was operationalized to meet prior to the system's monthly meetings to promote better communications between the Chief Administrators and the systems' division directors.

In essence the Chief Administrators dedicated themselves to learning with and from each other in order to maximize the intellectual and human capital that existed in each AEA so that the entire AEA system would become more integral to educational improvement statewide. However, as Carl Glickman noted years ago in his research about organizational change (Glickman, 1990, *The Seven Ironies of School Empowerment*), "the more an organization improves, the more it sees there is to improve." And thus began Part 2.

PART 2: MAXIMIZING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE JOINT DIRECTORS

<u>Using Data to Chart Direction</u>. In March 2012, both the Chief Administrators and the Joint Directors were asked how the system could be improved so that a more cohesive approach to AEA services could be realized. Comments were distributed across eight categories (listed by frequency mentioned): "(1) We need goal and role clarity around issues of vision, policy and practice; (2) We need to meet together more regularly and address issues of substance when we meet; (3) We need to be clearer on lines of authority; (4) We need to build more consistency across AEAs;(5) We've got to figure out our relationship with the DE; (6) We need to build trust between the different groups; (7) We need to use data more to make our decisions; and (8) We

need to build our collective capacity to improve."

As follow-up, in June of 2012 the Chief Administrators asked each of the directors of the three divisions (Educational Services, Information and Technology, and Special Education) to answer the following questions via an anonymous survey: (1) What it would take to have the director meetings be characterized as highly effective and productive communities of practice?; (2) What would you like to retain from their current structures and practices?; and (3) What do you need from the Chief Administrators to help you function as a community of practice?

Four primary themes emerged from the responses:

• There was a desire to have clearer goals and success measures established and addressed at each level of the system (Chief Administrators, Joint Directors, and Director groups)

• There was a need to develop and adhere to meeting structures and protocols that included intended outcomes, meeting norms, data used to make decisions and, between the meetings, agreed-upon communication protocols and follow-up actions.

• There was a need for more clarity about lines of authority, which entity (or entities) establishes goals, "tight" areas where all are expected to deliver services, areas of autonomy, and where there is freedom to innovate.

• Rigorous feedback and communication loops amongst the director groups, between the director groups, and between the directors and the Chief Administrators needed to be established and honored.

PART 3: RE-DEFINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE DE (COLLABORATING FOR KIDS-C4K)

<u>Using Systems Thinking to Frame the Conversation</u>. At the same time the Chief Administrators and Directors were redesigning how they interacted and made decisions, they were also initiating an intense series of conversations with leaders from the Department of Education about respective roles and responsibilities, lines of authority, and how to systematically align the educational entities for PreK-12 student achievement. This effort soon became known as "Collaborating for Kids (C4K)" and started in 2011 by studying a systems thinking approach to better serve students and schools.

One of the seminal learnings from that year of study was how the "accidental adversaries" archetype was playing out in the relationships between the AEA system and the DE. These two groups had historically worked together, committed to supporting each other's successes. Problems arose when either or both parties was not satisfied with its level of success and took corrective measures that unintentionally obstructed their partner's success.

From this year of study by all the Chief Administrators, directors and nearly a dozen DE leaders came four outcomes:

1. A collective commitment across AEAs and the DE to work as a unified system;

2. An agreement that the role of the DE with the AEAs is to set direction and the role of the AEAs is to implement;

3. An agreement that LEAs are integral, and need to be included in C4K; and

4. A commitment to focus efforts and resources on selected priorities, beginning with improving literacy rates.

Creating a New Structure to Improve Literacy. In August 2012, more Department of Education personnel joined the C4K effort, and in December 40 LEA leaders were added. The group selected as its priority effort the goal of having every third grader in Iowa literate by third grade by 2018. A cohesive structure for implementing the goals of C4K was created (see references for complete descriptions and reports of the C4K process) and in April 2013 10 percent of elementary school buildings were selected (through a rigorous qualification process) to receive intensive supports to improve their literacy outcomes for all students (through the use of the Response to Intervention procedures) by the end of third grade. In August and September participating LEA teams received training in the new Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDI) and Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers (FAST) assessments and implementation work for the phase one schools continues in the 2013-14 school year. Subsequent phases will eventually include all other elementary schools in the state.

PART 4: INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY TO LEAs

Concurrently to the efforts internally to redesign the system and the efforts to re-define the working relationship with the Department of Education, the Chief Administrators were also challenging themselves to think about how much accountability the AEA system actually bore for student learning results. They admitted that historically the AEAs served a support function, providing professional development, special education services and consultants, and advice on using expanding technologies to increase learning. However, they also acknowledged that when student learning results were published, LEAs were the ones on which the spotlight shown.

An Unprecedented Promise. While AEAs worked hard to support LEAs and nonpublic schools in their efforts to improve student learning, they did not co-own student learning with their LEA partners. They sincerely wanted all the children to achieve at high levels and they provided services to support LEA effort, but when push came to shove, they escaped mutual accountability for results. Clearly this situation was not a clear partnership between AEAs and their constituents. The Chief Administrators knew that it would be critical to their efforts to redefine relevancy that this situation change, so in August 2012, they made this bold commitment:

> "We pledge to accomplish the following overarching goal: By 2018 every child who graduates from an Iowa PreK-12 public or non-public accredited school will be prepared for success in post-secondary studies, a career, and citizenship. This pledge will be achieved by establishing agreed-upon *commitments with our partners. It will also require mutual accountability and reciprocity.*"

"We will assess our progress using these 'vital few' measures":

1. Every Iowa child will be proficient in reading by the end of third grade by 2018.

2. A numeracy goal will be determined after sufficient progress has been made in

reaching the literacy goal identified above.

3. The learning gaps between students with IEPs and those without, as well as for those students in disaggregated sub-groups, will be reduced by half by 2018.

4. A post-secondary readiness goal will be established by 2014 that most accurately identifies and tracks post-secondary success. "

They charged the Joint Directors to prepare a design for a reciprocal accountability agreement to be signed by representatives of both the LEA and the AEA that detailed each other's commitments if each party was to co-own student literacy results. (As the work of C4K matured, that agreement was amended to delineate the responsibilities of the Department of Education and focused specifically on those schools participating in phase one of the literacy effort). One Chief Administrator articulated the moral purpose for co-ownership this way: "If we are ready to take credit for our contributions to improving student learning through the provision of AEA services, we must also be willing to bleed with the LEAs when student achievement is lower than desired."

PART 5: CREATING A NEW GOVERANCE MODEL

As conversations evolved and decisions were made to improve how the AEAs operated as a system of supports to LEAs, it became apparent that the old by-laws that governed the system needed to be updated. Much had changed since their inception in 1974 and as the system grew more interdependent, policies needed to be changed or written that could accurately give guidance and provide consistency of practice into the future. Central to these changes was the entire issue of governance. The State Board of Directors historically met only two times per year, and much of its business was focused on ancillary services and receiving items of an informational nature. By default, many policy issues were actually being decided by the Chief Administrators, not the Board of Directors. This practice certainly had some advantages for the Chief Administrators, including a high level of autonomy and a faster turnaround time for

decisions and implementation of those decisions. However, there was also acknowledgment that a Board of Directors, to be truly a board, needed to be more actively involved in policy, fiduciary, and accountability functions.

The evolution of roles and relationships with the Department of Education, as defined by the Collaborating for Kids (C4K), the pledge by the system to co-own student learning results through a system of mutual reciprocity with LEAs, as articulated in The New Compact, and the maturing efforts of the AEA Chief Administrators to provide a more cohesive system of supports to LEAs and nonpublic schools statewide, as well as the growth in ancillary services, all worked to create a more sophisticated system, one that called for more oversight by a board that met more regularly.

The process for developing a new governance model as embodied in a policy manual began in August 2013 and continued through January 2014 with a monthly examination of iterative drafts. The Chief Administrators held robust discussions about the proposed changes throughout the process and presented a preliminary draft to the Association's Board of Directors for their review in November 2013. Their suggestions were incorporated in the December review and a final draft was sent to legal counsel in January 2014.

Policy Manual Discussions. Consistent with the recognition that the AEA system was needing to redesign itself, many discussions occurred about (1) the need for a more robust governance structure and organizational chart; (2) expanding the responsibilities of the Executive Director; (3) enacting a more cohesive approach for ancillary services; and (4) consolidating many of the system contracts under the umbrella of one 28E agreement. The 28E agreements allow AEAs under state statute to share programs and services. These discussions, it should be noted, were at times difficult. Yet the commitment to the guiding principles continued to anchor the conversations and agreement was reached that resulted in a policy manual that provided

guidance about how to conduct the business in which the state association would engage.

NEXT STEPS

Immediate Steps. The next immediate work on the redesign exercise will be making whatever modifications are required to the policies and processes enacted in the first two years. Of particular interest is the effectiveness of:

- How the Chief Administrators conduct their work

- A similar emphasis on how the Joint Directors conduct their work

- The interaction between these two groups of key leadership staff

- The pilot reciprocal accountability agreements (being conducted by a third party, the Hanover Group out of Washington, D.C.)

- The totally revised governance policies and procedures

A related next step is to determine the needs of the system to invest in their human capital resources in order to equip the licensed personnel with the skills they need to be able to successfully accomplish the goals of the redesign effort. Given that, the great majority of resources in the AEA system (estimated between 75-80 percent) is devoted to serve special education populations (currently about 14 percent of the total student population, many of whom require intensive support services). Some resource allocation decisions consistent with Response to Intervention practices and the expanded role of AEAs to increase *all* students' academic achievement must be made to address this reality. The AEA State System will not, however, compromise on its long-standing commitment to serve special education students as is required by state and federal law.

A third step will be to collaborate with the Department of Education in the revision of the accreditation standards for AEAs so that the standards more accurately reflect current expectations of AEAs. It will be important to capitalize on the opportunity to use these individual

AEA accreditation standards to further develop system coherency. Also under consideration is a two-part assessment of the organizational capacity of the state network. Phase I of this project would consist of taking an inventory of selected features of each of the nine AEAs' human capital assets, structural capital assets, and relational capital assets. The features of each of these types of assets to be concentrated on would be those that can potentially contribute to the intent of the state network to assume co-ownership of student academic achievement. However, a major long-standing issue in the state system is the wide discrepancy in the organizational capacity of the nine agencies. Phase II would use the data to develop an assessment of the collective organizational capacity of the system and then using this information to establish what potentially is the most effective and efficient way to address the priorities of the state network. That is, can a priority be best met by an AEA acting alone, in a consortium of AEAs, by the state network, or through a partnership with other public or private providers?

LESSONS LEARNED

Completions of the five parts of the redesign exercise in a relatively short period of time was due primarily by the adoption of a number of best practices drawn from the huge body of literature now available to those engaged in an organizational change effort. The redesign exercise provided another reinforcing case study of several best practices. Those that were especially helpful were the following:

- Securing the commitment of the leadership group of the state system, the nine Chief Administrators. The Chief Administrators provided essential leadership for the change to occur, especially those calling for significant cultural changes in the roles of the Chief Administrators and Joint Directors, joint planning between the two, the vertical and horizontal communication practices used by each group, and the governance structure of the state system.

- Once the top leadership committed to act as a system, a ripple effect created efforts by each of the director groups and the communication specialist to act more as a state system as well. These respective groups continue to work on significant redesign efforts linked to system goals.

- The importance of regularly reinforcing and clarifying the mission, goals, and objectives of the state network, and the significant collective organizational capacity that will be released, should help solve many of the most complex issues in the state's goal to improve the state system of elementary secondary education.

- Embracing the strategy that the ways to improve the people, the structure and the organization of the AEA system is through focusing on the culture of that state system, thus insuring lasting improvement.

- Securing the assistance of a process facilitator who possessed high levels of both content knowledge and group process skills to guide the redesign process, provide timely communication, write both numerous drafts and the final version of the reports that were produced, ask different questions of the key leadership group, and, constantly reinforce the vision and mission of the state system.

- Identifying an "early win," the successful completion of a report that detailed the Chief Administrators' commitment to acting as a community of practice that had the effect of demonstrating that good things can happen when the commitment exists to change the culture of the state system.

- Planning for and scheduling timely feedback and assessments of the contents of the reports that emanated from each phase of the redesign process.

- Reminding the participants that they can expect the process to be messy, non-linear, iterative, yet "worth it" in the long run provided a much-needed optimizing function.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Changing the culture of an organization is best viewed as an unending and endless task. That is, there is no finish line in the process, and with good reason. For a service organization that seeks to redefine relevancy by definition requires that it engage in a constant assessment of how its role must be aligned with the changes that occur in the environment in which it functions. The recently completed five-part redesign project represents a significant effort by the AEA State System to redefine relevancy. Though the journey is not over, there nonetheless is now much to celebrate. The voluntary commitment of the Chief Administrators drove this effort, not the need to respond to a directive of some higher authority. By starting with themselves and their willingness to use data to improve the state system, the Chief Administrators set the tone for all parts of the redesign process. Moreover, and importantly, it is rare to have a group who has

historically enjoyed relative autonomy give some of that up for the good of the state system, but that is what the Chief Administrators did. They were willing to ask difficult questions about their work as stewards of the state system even when knowing the responses would not be easy to hear.

Without question, the most important outcome of the exercise was the commitment by the AEA State System to co-own, with accredited districts and nonpublic schools, student academic achievement. This voluntary, unprecedented action stands as indisputable evidence of the commitment to "redefine relevancy" and, not to be ignored, it imposes a new rigorous accountability measure on the state system. The AEA State System has taken important action to unleash its significant, but historically reserved, leadership role in the state system of elementary-secondary education. One additional area where it is strategically positioned to do so is to help provide leadership to two major national trends that are of particular significance for largely non-metropolitan states like Iowa: an advocacy for cross-sector alliances for the delivery of public services; and the implementation of forms of network government. The advantages the state network and its nine components bring to these developments include: they have a charter to provide regional leadership, their collective intellectual capital, their regional perspective, a tradition as a regional advocate, a boundary-spanning tradition, and a tradition as a coalition builder. In the end, it is clear that the AEA system is more than just an intermediary support system tangential to the success of the state's system of public education, rather, the AEAs are a valued integral partner with shared responsibility in insuring high quality educational opportunities for all students of all abilities regardless of where they live and attend school.

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