



SPECIAL NEWS EDITION

THE SPIRIT OF COOPERATION

It's no secret that education service agencies work best when they work together - that's their reason for being.

But ESAs, when they comprise a united front, can be effective not only among themselves but also in bigger venues. Several ESAs have state directors that have developed excellent relationships with their state departments of education and use that relationship to not only benefit the ESAs, but the state and ultimately the students as well.

There are many of these relationships across the country, and we chose to look at two: Colorado and Wisconsin.

Dr. Dale McCall is the executive director of Colorado's Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, or BOCES. He knows what all good managers know: Subject knowledge and work ethic are important, but the key to success is building relationships. That's what he has done with the state Commissioner of Education and the seven-member state Board of Education.

McCall speaks to the commissioner at least once a month. Sometimes they meet over lunch, sometimes it's just a phone call but they are always exchanging ideas and opinions. McCall also attends most state Board of Education meetings to provide input if necessary and to understand the board's thinking on the issues that affect BOCES.

McCall has been appointed to several task forces and standing committees by the Commissioner that benefit from BOCES viewpoints, such as the Online Task Force, the Rural Education Council, and the Commissioner's Advisory Council.

To do this, McCall has registered as a lobbyist so that there is no legal hindrance to what he can provide to the state. It's a step other executive directors are leery of making, but in Colorado's situation, it works.

"It's important to expand our presence and let people know what services BOCES offers," McCall said.

One area of collaboration between BOCES and the state was the creation of the Colorado Rural Education Council. "We have more than 100 school districts with less than 3,000 students," McCall said. Their voice is hard to hear in the state capitol, so the BOCES requested funds from the State Legislature to operate the Rural Education Council, and then the Commissioner appoints the members. "The Rural Education Council has been able to give the Commissioner lot of good advice," McCall said.

Robert Hammond, the state's Commissioner of Education, agrees. Colorado has such a large number of small, rural districts that they could easily fail if not given the support they need.

"They need to have someone to help them work together. That's their survivability in some cases," he said. The Rural Education Council, working through BOCES, "optimizes instruction and funding for these districts."

Hammond said he promotes a culture of service and support from the Board of Education throughout his staff. Even when the department has to play a purely regulatory role, they come at it with an attitude of service and support. Hammond said that the relationship between the department and BOCES has been crucial to the success of that philosophy.

The state and BOCES don't always agree, but when that happens, McCall said they agree to disagree and move along. Hammond said the benefits outweigh any problems: "The people we're here to help are the kids, especially when rural districts have a hard time getting money and support. BOCES is uniquely situated to support the districts."

The situation is different in Wisconsin. There, the existence of the Cooperative Educational Service Agencies are written into law, so it makes sense that when the state Department of Public Instruction has a statewide program to roll out, it works with CESA as an intermediary.

Jesse Harness, the commissioner of the CESA Statewide Network, says his organization does not get involved in political advocacy. When asked to testify before the state legislature, as he did last summer on Common Core standards, Harness said it's with the understanding that he's representing the 12 CESA members and not working as a lobbyist.

From the state standpoint, CESA is the perfect intermediary. The agencies are

on the ground and in each school district. "When they ask us for help rolling out a statewide project, it really is a two-way conversation," Harness said. "It's not top down. They say what needs to be done and we all work out a way to do it. It's more of a partnership."

Of course, it helps when the State Superintendent is a former CESA administrator. Tony Evers worked as CESA administrator in Oshkosh for many years and not only understands the benefits of the organization, but communicates that value to his staff, Harness said.

"The superintendent often talks to his staff about how CESAs are the link between the department and the local agencies. He reinforces this and expects his staff to work with us and call on us for assistance," Harness said.

Harness offered an example of how CESA has helped in Wisconsin in an area that has been sticky in other states: teacher effectiveness measurements and implementation. Since CESA already has teacher improvement coaches in each district, it wasn't too difficult to expand that program.

In fact, Harness said, this setup has allowed teachers and the state to avoid some of the headaches that have cropped up in other states. For example, when the CESA improvement coaches see a problem with the time involved or the money available for teacher improvement, the issue can be negotiated before it becomes a problem that could grind the entire process to a halt.

"We talk about it on the front end and make changes that are comfortable to everyone, or determine why an issue can't be addressed and everyone understands ... The CESAs exist to reach every department in the state."

When state's education departments work hand in hand with ESA's, good things happen.

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