ESAs LEADING SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION
AESA extends special thanks to the staff of the Oakland Schools Intermediate School District in Waterford, Michigan, for their invaluable assistance in producing this seventeenth issue of Perspectives.
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Preface

by
Lee Warne
Executive Director, AESA

During these times of educational transformation, we all focus on using good data because we know its use can result in effective decision-making. Perspectives has provided a solid base of good research and information for many years. This issue is no exception.

The information provided in this issue of Perspectives is available online at www.aesa.org. At that site you will find past issues of the journal available for you to download or search through. There are many fine examples of innovation and research available on many topics to help our members, state departments of education personnel, university faculty and students, libraries, other educational associations, and our business members.

This focus on good information is one of the cornerstones of AESA – helping each other by sharing what we know. To Perspectives editor, Bill Keane and the members of the Editorial Board: Wayne Bell (Nebraska), Craig Burford (Ohio), Joan Schuman (Massachusetts), and retired members of AESA Edward Frye, Gary Hayden, and Bob Stephens, we want to say thank you for your time and expertise. By the way, one or two members of the board will be retiring this year after many years on the board, and we are interested in identifying AESA members who might be interested in carrying on the work of our journal. Editorial board members only need to read manuscript drafts and recommend to the editor whether the article contains information important to our members and should be published. Suggestions for improvement are welcome but no editing is expected of board members. Please contact me if you are interested.

We also want to say “Thank You” to our executive director emeritus, Brian Talbott, for the leadership he has provided AESA. Brian, we are glad you will be available to help us during our transition.

AESA offers its appreciation to Brian and Anita for all they have done for AESA!
Introduction

ESAs are like a new organism within the educational ecosystem. Though their origins can be traced back to the 1930s and the creation of various forms of mid-level offices of the state department of education, their general development as quasi-independent entities occurred as recently as the late 1960s and early 1970s (Stephens and Keane, 2005).

Though it was once fashionable to describe public education as the one public service that would be recognizable as unchanged to your great grandfather if he came back from the grave, that is no longer true. Changes in policy (charter schools, vouchers), technology (computers et al.), theory (teacher as guide on the side, not sage on the stage) and other factors have introduced considerable differentiation in the way P-12 education is delivered. To no small extent these rapid changes in education have been advanced through the leadership and support of educational service agencies.

This rapid pace of change continues unabated, now also impacted significantly by the nation’s economic troubles played out most conspicuously in state budget deficits. Policy makers are struggling to find ways to reduce costs in education without causing rebellion among citizens, especially parents, who have become believers in the concept of “local control,” though this concept has had a dwindling reality for decades. Rather than go into wholesale school district consolidation, the legislative preference (at least at the moment) seems to be in favor of shared services. Of course readers know that the concept of improved services for all students in a cost efficient manner gave rise to ESAs at their initiation. They continue to be the best opportunity to bring cost effectiveness to education while still maintaining some degree of autonomy for local schools and school districts. It continues to be the challenge for ESA leaders to preach this reality to citizens and legislators.

This edition of Perspectives is designed to share information about ESA work around the country and the continuously evolving role of ESAs in a time of high pressure accountability.

We begin with an account of New Hampshire’s state board of education initiatives to “unfreeze” the requirement for conducting school effectively that go back to the beginning of the 20th century. This account by state board member Fred Bramante also speaks glowingly of the work of CESA #1 in Wisconsin and its 45 local superintendents to redesign some basic concepts of how to deliver effective education. Perspectives therefore called on CESA #1 to tell its own story, here presented in the words of James Rickabaugh.

Ohio is a good example of a state where elected leaders are struggling to create a cost effective, truly efficient system of service agencies. Craig Burford describes the efforts of designers of the system to meet
many criteria of excellence. (They can be congratulated for recognizing that approaching this problem from a state perspective may maximize the development of a system that will be fair to all across the state.)

One of the most difficult challenges in redesigning public education occurs in rural areas. Since each rural district educates a relatively small number of students compared to urban and suburban districts and each district educates a paucity of students compared to a big city, the rural story is seldom told to a larger audience. This edition contains the substance of a study of rural schools in Colorado by Fox and Van Sant and details how the state department of education, often in trying to help rural schools, only makes their problems worse. Though the article refers only infrequently to ESAs as a particular entity, it points to all the ways that service agencies could take a leadership role in helping rural areas.

Colf and Harmon summarize such a self-help effort by rural schools in a section of Pennsylvania, led by an Intermediate Unit (IU). The IU assists and enhances efforts by local school districts to marshal their strengths and to work together more effectively in pressing the state department of education to have a clearer focus on rural challenges.

Improving student learning has always been a key task of ESAs, and we continue their stories in this edition. Two previous issues have summarized the work of 28 school districts, one service agency, and a university in Michigan to design and deliver a program for minority students that will significantly improve student achievement. In this issue leaders of the project, in their last report for *Perspectives*, share data about what has been achieved. Three additional techniques to improve instructional delivery are summarized by Ann Burns (using instructional rounds), coaching school leadership to achieve better results (Lisette Estrella-Henderson and Sandy Jessop), and ESA leadership in using data to improve language instruction for English learners (Debbie Zacarian). Finally in this section we offer the executive summary of a study to ascertain how widely ESAs are using online techniques for professional development (Hobart Harmon).

Anita Talbott concludes this edition of *Perspectives* with a summing up of what is was like to play “The Good Wife” and crucial administrative assistant to executive director, Brian Talbott, for the past 14 years. It goes without saying that as a team they were invaluable and individually essential partners for the work of the other. We also want to thank Brian for his unflagging commitment to a publication about and for ESAs and to promote research findings that prove their effectiveness.

Welcome, Lee.

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Will AESA be a Key Player in School Transformation

by
Fred J. Bramante, Jr.

I had the privilege of keynoting the AESA National Conference in Savannah, GA last December. My message was the transformation of public education. At first glance I would say the overall mindset of AESA members was open-minded, yet skeptical. By the end of my one-hour presentation, and my two breakout sessions during the conference, I sensed an enthusiastic belief in new possibilities - in a sense, a virtual epiphany. My presentation was intended to deliver an “epiphany” type of message. My hope with this article is for another epiphany, one that leads AESA members to conclude that they may become the key players in the transformation of America’s schools.

Near the beginning of my Savannah presentation, I spoke of my work with AESA member CESA #1 in Wisconsin. Earlier in the year, they had invited me to keynote their conference entitled, “Our Defining Moment: The Deconstruction and Transformation of Public Education.” I used their title in my power point and spoke of CESA #1’s courage in using the word “deconstruction.” I told the Savannah audience that while I wouldn’t have had the courage to frame it as they did, I didn’t disagree with their word choice. A companion piece from CESA #1 accompanies this article.

With the assistance of Promethean’s Mike Horan, a Promethean white board and their personal responders (i.e., clickers, remote controls) on every table, I asked the AESA audience to vote on whether or not they agreed with me and CESA #1 that it will take a deconstruction in order to really have a transformation. The AESA members armed with the Promethean responders voted using a 1-5 scale with one being a total disagreement that public education needs to be deconstructed in order to be transformed, and a 5 meaning a full agreement that a deconstruction needs to take place. The AESA members voted. The largest response was a 4. The second largest, a 5. The third largest was a 3 (not sure), the smallest, only 5% totally disagreed. Overall, two-thirds of the AESA audience voted either a 4 or 5, in essence, agreeing that a deconstruction of public education was necessary in order for a real transformation to take place.

The next question that I asked was for the audience to respond to the statement, “I know what the future of public education looks like.” In this case, the ASEA members voted either “yes” or “no”; 39% voted yes. 61% voted no.
So, the logical conclusion that one would come to is that although the preponderance of AESA members believe that a deconstruction of public education is necessary before a transformation can take place, they really didn’t know what the transformed system would look like.

I then stated to them that my job was to paint a picture that was logical, reasonable and achievable in order for them to more clearly see the future of public education, and, ultimately, to enlist them in the army that will cause this transformation to happen. I then proceeded to paint the picture.

The primary change that New Hampshire made was to eliminate the Carnegie Unit, that unit of time that ties students to schools for 180 days. While CESA#1 has not yet caused this change to happen in Wisconsin’s regulations, they came to the same conclusion and have been given permission by their commissioner to move away from time-based standards.

“Do you agree that public education needs to be deconstructed to be transformed?”

The Carnegie Unit was developed in 1906 as a way to define what a course was and ultimately to standardize a way to pay teachers. States set time requirements between 120-150 hours of classroom instruction in order for students to receive one Carnegie Credit. In New Hampshire a credit was defined as 135 hours of instruction. The math is simple: 45 minutes of instruction per day for 180 days equals 135 instructional hours. And, as with any other state, students could receive an A, B, C, or D and still get their credit. In New Hampshire, with 20 (or more) of these credits, a student can graduate from high school.

So, I have a simple question: if students receive 20 Cs and Ds, did they really learn what they needed to learn in order to prepare them for success in their next stages of life. For too many students, the answer is “no,” even for those who actually graduated. The system is irreparably broken. We need to change it to a system where time is the variable and learning is the constant. We need to bless learning any time, any place, any way. We need to enable our students to own their learning, doing school their way, not the system’s way. If we make that monumental change, students will say “yes” to higher standards than ever before.

My two subsequent sessions at the Savannah conference were very well attended and in my last session once again I used a Promethean Board with the personal responders. I stated to the audience, “You’ve now heard me two or three times. So, I’m going to ask you the same question that I asked at the beginning of my keynote.” Once again I asked the AESA audience to respond to the statement, “I know what the future of public education will look like.” The results were amazing. Over 80% of AESA members present said “yes.” From 30+ percent in the opening session to 80+ percent after listening to my presentations, the picture had been painted.

Although, I’m very proud of what we’ve done in New Hampshire, in many ways I’m actually jealous of what CESA #1 in Wisconsin is doing. First of all CESA #1, led by their Executive Director, Tim Gavigan, and his team of professional educators, including the 45 superintendents of schools in the CESA #1 region, came to virtually identical conclusions as did New Hampshire. They weren’t looking over our shoulders. They simply challenged the logic of the model that America has had in place for over a century, challenging many of its tenets and then bringing forward logical solutions. While I see no real difference in New Hampshire’s and CESA #1’s conclusions, I see a significant difference in the strategy for moving the vision forward.
The CESA #1 team includes 45 education CEO’s (superintendents) overseeing the learning of 200,000 students, basically, the same number of students as the entire state of New Hampshire. These leaders participated in the crafting of CESA #1’s document on transformation. Their names are in the document and their fingerprints are on the document. They have, through the leadership of CESA #1’s in-house team, made a huge statement that says that the old system, the system that pays their wages, is too expensive, is irreparably flawed, and needs to be changed. They have gone so far as to lay out a believable, achievable vision for what that new system needs to look like. Tim Gavigan and his team are pioneers in school transformation. They have played a key role in defining the essence of the new model that needs to emerge in order to turn around this giant aircraft carrier we call public education.

While New Hampshire may have come to the same conclusions as CESA #1 before CESA #1, the concept of having the local superintendents as direct participants in not only the development of the vision but also the on-the-ground implementation on the front lines of this “change America” effort is a very different implementation strategy from how we approached it in New Hampshire where the changes were led from the top (State Board of Education and Department of Education).

Ultimately, both top down and bottom up efforts need to happen. From the top, the state regulations needed to change to allow transformation to happen. What New Hampshire did was, in essence, to mandate flexibility; that is, to make the rules so flexible that we would take away most of the excuses for why real change could not happen. From the bottom, you need on the ground leadership who will take ownership of transformation.

The stakes are too high and the possibilities for our students are too great to ignore. For example, when New Hampshire first started down this path, the New Hampshire Center for Public Policy conducted a study called “One in Four.” In essence, it concluded that 25% of New Hampshire students drop out of high school. In presentation after presentation, I would refer to this study and state that if we gave students the opportunity to own their timetable and own their learning, they will not drop out of high school. I would go on to say that we shouldn’t talk about lowering the dropout rate; we should be looking to eliminate it. This statement caught on. Our former Commissioner, Lyonel Tracy, started saying it. Then New Hampshire Governor John Lynch started saying it. In 2006, the Governor, Commissioner, and State Board of Education made a public statement setting the goal to eliminate dropouts by 2012. Today, New Hampshire’s dropout rate is below 4%.

I could go on and on about the benefits of this new model or make it easier to understand by asking you to go to the AESA website to view my Savannah presentation. Also, you can go to the CESA #1 (Wisconsin) website and see more details of their plan and read the next article for a summary of their work. Frankly, I would suggest doing both. Ultimately my strong belief is that AESA and its individual service agencies around the country may be the most logical organization to take on this vision and actually cause it to be implemented throughout the country. AESA members already have skilled teams in place at the grass roots level. Each education service agency will learn from other AESA members as they move transformation forward. They will share successes and challenges and, coordinated by AESA, will forge a new future for America’s public schools.
I loved my experience in Savannah. Everyone was friendly and seemed excited about new possibilities. Now I ask an important question: should I translate that positive response into the conclusion that AESA members want to play a significant role in school transformation or did they just like my presentations and want to be nice to me? If there are readers who are serious about helping to build the army necessary for one of the most honorable challenges that has ever faced our nation, please let me know. I want to be a part of it.

Fred J. Bramante, Jr., is currently a member and past chairman of the State Board of Education in New Hampshire. He can be reached by phone at 603-231-2708 and by email at fredbramante@daddys.com.
Personalized Learning:
Powered by Regional Networks

by
James Rickabaugh

In a companion article about fundamental change in schools, Fred Bramante presents the question, “Will AESA Be a Key Player in School Transformation?” He described the New Hampshire experience in redesigning schools and offered Cooperative Education Service Agency #1 (CESA #1) in Wisconsin as an example of a regional service agency that has taken on the challenge and is making important progress in school transformation. This companion article opens the book on the CESA #1 experience a little wider and proposes not just that regional service agencies have the opportunity to be players in the redesign of America’s schools, but that they are the best bet for making true transformation of our education system a reality.

First, some context. Two years ago, school districts in Southeastern Wisconsin, like school districts in most parts of the nation, were facing growing demands for improved performance in the face of shrinking resources. For almost a decade, superintendents had faced the prospect of cutting programs, reducing services and in other ways, seemingly deconstructing the educational institutions they were leading due to forces beyond their control. Meanwhile, educators were working harder than ever to meet the learning needs of an increasingly diverse and challenging student population without achieving the hoped-for academic results for all students that their effort investment should have produced.

Under the leadership and with the support of CESA #1, the superintendents decided to stop behaving as victims of a system that could not be changed and do something about the situation. There is not enough money in the pipeline to sustain the current system, but we knew that simply asking for more money would not work. After months of study, consultation with national experts and review of current and emerging research, the superintendents concluded that the current education system, which is based on the antiquated assumption that all children should learn the same things at the same time, is no longer adequate and that a fundamental redesign of the system itself was necessary.
review of current and emerging research, the superintendents concluded that the current education system, which is based on the antiquated assumption that all children should learn the same things at the same time, is no longer adequate and that a fundamental redesign of the system itself was necessary.

The CESA #1 Board of Control responded by unanimously approving a Call to Action for a Regional Public Education Transformation Initiative on behalf of its member districts. This unprecedented action signaled a commitment by the region’s K-12 public school districts to work together to reinvent themselves. As a sign of further commitment, The Institute @ CESA #1 was formed to facilitate and support a plan to move the region toward what has become known as CESA #1’s Personalized Learning Initiative with the vision to get learning right the first time, every time, for learners.

Three key elements serve as the framework for the CESA #1 Personalized Learning Initiative:

1. Learner profiles that provide a deep, rich and shared understanding of the student as a learner;
2. A flexible, customized learning path based on the unique needs, interests, strengths, learning style and readiness of the student and, to the extent possible, one that includes the active participation of the student;
3. Progress toward meeting rigorous standards that are measured by demonstrated proficiency rather than seat time and traditional credits.

The components of personalized learning may sound simple, but the implications associated with them represent a fundamental challenge to the way education has been done in this country for more than a century. Yet, if done well, this approach promises to dramatically increase the productivity of schools by building learner engagement and readiness, calibrated learning challenges and rigorous learning progressions from the beginning rather than waiting for students to fail repeatedly before offering support and assistance. Further, by getting learning right the first time we reduce the number of students who require remedial instruction and in some cases the number of students who must be served in expensive special education programs. As a result, scarce funds now being spent to “fix” learning problems and students can be reallocated to support a personalized learning approach and lessen the need for additional funds to sustain the educational system. Best of all, this approach avoids the human costs associated with repeated failures, reduces the number of students who see themselves as flawed learners and builds within students the sense of efficacy so important for learning success.

As noted in the Bramante article, many of the issues on which we are focused -- measuring progress based on learning rather than seat time and credits, valuing learning regardless of where it occurs and creating a system with students and their learning at the center -- are shared with the New Hampshire experience. However, our approach is embedded in and powered by a regional action network while impetus for New Hampshire’s initiative was the State Board of Education. Our experience has shown us that state level policy support is important, but the greatest leverage for change comes when support is provided to local educational leaders to collaborate in pursuit of transforming the schools we have into the schools we really need.

Regional service agencies are uniquely positioned to lead in this new era. The compliance driven systems of the past -- too often characteristic of state and federal level agencies -- are no longer adequate to meet today’s and tomorrow’s challenges. Regional networks can synerizes the work, harvest and share the best ideas and strategies, provide a level of protection for local educators to try new approaches and pool scarce resources to allow large scale initiatives to emerge. Best of all, fostering collaboration and cooperation, convening regional groups and focusing on “big picture” opportunities are among the strengths regional
service agencies have built and honed over the years. Now it is time to lead in a new way to meet what may be the most important educational challenge our nation and local educational leaders have ever faced. Forming and facilitating regional networks to transform our approach to nurturing learning and dramatically improving education represents not only a natural extension of the work of regional service agencies; it may be the greatest opportunity to create new and more effective and efficient ways to educate our youth.

As a regional convener and facilitator, CESA #1 documents, nurtures and aligns promising practices that emerge from the constant development cycle occurring in dozens of project sites throughout the region. This enables individual efforts to have a collective impact and ensures that effective practices will be shared and replicated. By deliberately applying strategies to increase connectivity and leverage regional diversity we have been able to create synergy that enables people to translate ideas into action and increase stakeholder engagement and ownership, which in turn fosters innovation, produces faster results and increases sustainability.

Although the CESA #1 Personalized Learning Initiative continues to evolve, significant progress has been made over the past year. The Institute has worked with local educational leaders to create an awareness of the need to transform public education along with a sense of urgency that now is the time to act. A coalition of 22 districts is actively engaged in the work and more than 30 projects addressing aspects of personalized learning are in various stages of development and implementation.

To successfully transform public education, we must harness the power of regional networks to facilitate continuous action, learn from experience, share with others, and build on results. This unique approach to transforming public education represents a promising practice that holds the potential to effect change at a scale and speed never before realized. By documenting and sharing experiences from the early phases of its Personalized Learning Initiative, CESA #1 hopes to encourage other regions to create similar action networks that will transcend current practice and enable student-centered learning to grow and thrive.


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Transforming Regional Shared Services in Ohio: An Interview with Representatives of the Kasich Administration

by Craig E. Burford

Introduction

Ohio’s network of 56 Educational Service Centers has a 97-year history of operating cooperative programs and services on behalf of Ohio’s school districts. This system has evolved significantly since 1914 from a regulatory agency to a full-scale service provider. The evolution continued with the passage of Am. Sub. H.B. 153, Ohio’s FY 2012-2013 biennial state operating budget, on June 30, 2011. The budget bill included a mandated study of Ohio’s regional education delivery system and recommendations for the integration of existing providers into a new Regional Shared Service Center System.

This article provides a brief introduction and contextual background information on system redesign efforts, which are followed by the interview of two representatives from Governor John Kasich’s administration: Randy Cole, Controlling Board President and Policy Director for the Office of Budget and Management, and Robert Sommers, Director of the Governor’s Office of 21st Century Education.

Background

Ohio, like many Midwestern states, has struggled mightily in the transition from its traditional manufacturing and agribusiness focused economy to a new knowledge-based, service driven economy
reflective of the 21st century global marketplace. These and related challenges have led to Ohio’s 47th place ranking in economic momentum among the 50 states. Why is this important? It’s important because a lagging economy means lagging state revenues and the related economic stressors. These challenges, coupled with the recent economic recession and other related issues, resulted in a projected $8.5 billion biennial budget deficit for fiscal years FY 2012-2013 and increased pressure on state and local governments to streamline operations while maintaining essential public services.

Spurred by these emerging realities and calls to reorganize state and local government, including over 3,700 local political subdivisions, several statewide public policy organizations stepped forward with recommendations to balance the state’s budget. These organizations included, but were not limited to the Buckeye Institute, the Ohio Chambers of Commerce, Greater Ohio and the Brookings Institute, the Ohio Society of CPAs, and KnowledgeWorks Foundation (Benson & Brinker, 2010). Among the recommendations of these groups was the call for increased utilization of shared services between and among public sector agencies including school districts and other local political subdivisions.

In Redesigning Ohio, authors Osborne and Browning stated, “Ohio’s local government infrastructure encourages independence (‘local control’) and costly redundancies in an era that increasingly needs the value-added efficiencies and effectiveness that can emerge from intergovernmental collaboration, focused on common goals.... Despite increasing evidence that a cooperative approach using ‘shared services’ is a win-win for local political subdivisions, far too little of it is taking place in Ohio” (Browning & Osborne, 2010, p.47).

This is also true in K-12 education according to some sources. Restoring Prosperity (Brachman, Bradley & Katz, 2110) revealed that Ohio ranks 47th in the nation in the share of elementary and secondary education spending that goes to instruction and ninth in the share that goes to administration. These findings were reinforced by the subsequent release of a KnowledgeWorks Foundation report that found about one-third of every public education dollar spent in Ohio does not make it into the classroom (Benson & Brinker, 2010). Each of the reports make the case that, based on projections in other states and from actual experience in Ohio, more aggressive shared services agreements could free up money for classrooms.

The term “shared services” entered the business lexicon more than 20 years ago. The shared services model, as defined by Bergeron in Essentials of Shared Services (2003), is a collaborative strategy that is fundamentally about optimizing people, capital, time and other corporate resources. This approach, because of its highly regarded suggestions in the areas of cost reduction, improved services and increased efficiencies quickly gained attention and support from newly-elected Republican Governor John Kasich and Republican majorities in both houses of the Ohio General Assembly.

In February 2011, Governor John Kasich unveiled his first Executive Budget proposal, which sought to fill the $8.5 billion budget gap and streamline state and local government. Among his proposals was
the creation of Regional Shared Service Centers as well as the elimination of Ohio statutes that inhibit
government entities from working together to cut costs. According to the Governor’s Jobs Ohio budget plan, “It is envisioned that Regional Shared Services Centers will be created by merging the various regional education service providers. These centers will be given the authority to work with local government entities as well as school districts.” Ohio’s current regional education delivery system currently includes 56 Educational Service Centers (ESCs), 23 Information Technology Centers (ITCs), 7 Area Media Centers (AMCs) and 8 Education Technology Centers.

Am. Sub. H.B. 153, the FY 2012-2013 biennial state operating budget for Ohio, was passed and enacted in June 2011 and included several shared services initiatives. For example, under the new law Ohio’s ESCs may now enter into contracts with any local political subdivision in the state. Political subdivisions as defined in ORC 2733.01(F) include, but are not limited to, municipal corporations, townships, counties, school districts, regional planning commissions, joint planning councils, port authorities, and emergency planning districts, the governing boards of community-based correctional facilities, or other body, corporate and political, responsible for governmental activities in a geographic area smaller than that of the state. Educational service centers and state institutions of higher education may also participate in joint projects with a joint recreation district and other contracting subdivisions including joint acquisition, construction, operation, and maintenance of facilities (ORC 755.16).

Additionally, the budget bill under a temporary law section requires the Director of the Governor’s Office of 21st Century Education to conduct a shared services survey of Ohio’s school districts, community schools, STEM schools, chartered nonpublic schools, joint vocational school districts, and other educational service providers and local political subdivisions by October 15, 2011 (Section 267.50.90). This survey will be utilized to collect baseline data on existing shared services arrangements as well as to identify where there may be opportunities to do more.

The survey will also serve to inform a study of Ohio’s regional delivery system. The budget also requires the Director of the Governor’s Office of 21st Century Education to study the regional system and make legislative recommendations on the integration of existing providers into a new Regional Shared Service Center System (Am. Sub. H.B. 153). “The Director shall recommend educational support organizations to be considered for integration into the new Regional Shared Service Center system including, but not limited to, educational service centers, education technology centers, information technology centers, area media centers, Ohio’s statewide system of support, the education regional service system, regional advisory boards, and regional staff from the Department of Education providing direct support to school districts” (Section 267.50.90).

In the course of this study, the Director must also include an examination of services offered and recommendations for integration of services into a shared services model including, but not limited to general instruction, special education, gifted education, academic leadership, technology, fiscal management, transportation, food services, human resources, employee benefits, pooled purchasing, professional development, and non-instructional support. The legislatively mandated recommendations must be submitted to the Governor and General Assembly no later than January 1, 2012 (Section 267.50.90).
Interview

With much of the work related to shared services still under review and subject to legislative approval, Craig Burford, Ohio ESC Association Executive Director, separately interviewed Randy Cole (Interview, July 29, 2011) and Robert Sommers (Interview, July 27, 2011) of the Kasich Administration in an effort to gain a clearer understanding of the primary policy goals of the Kasich Administration as they relate to shared services and the pending survey and study of Ohio’s educational service providers. Prior to his current position as State Controlling Board President and Policy Director for the Office of Budget and Management, Mr. Cole oversaw performance audits for Auditor of State Mary Taylor. Dr. Sommers is the former Director of Butler Tech in Butler County, Ohio and former CEO at Cornerstone Charter Schools. Each of these individuals brings a unique skill set and perspective to the shared services policy and program development efforts. The interview, in question and answer format, follows below.

Burford: What are the primary policy goals of the Kasich Administration as they relate to the Regional Shared Service Center System? Are they fiscal, operational or academic?

Sommers: The policy goals are all of the above: improved fiscal, operational and academic performance. Ultimately, the overarching policy goal is to increase academic performance at lower costs by allowing free markets to drive improvement as much as they are allowed to operate. The regional shared service centers are a viable option to drive improvement and efficiencies for school districts without forcing school district consolidation. The administration believes that local decision making is better than the state imposing its will on school districts and local governments. The proposed shared services model provides that flexibility.

Cole: The primary policy goal, as it relates to shared services specifically, is more on the fiscal and operational side of the equation. The proposed integration of service providers is a process to look at service delivery differently and achieve a reduction in some of what has been identified as bureaucratic excess in school districts and local governments. Ultimately, we need to change policy, processes, and people to drive meaningful change that benefits Ohioans. This initiative will definitely change policy and process, which will either change behaviors or service providers are simply going to go away. This approach will drive quality of service and create gains in efficiencies.

Burford: Several state and national reports have identified shared services as the preferred new service delivery model for primary and secondary education. To what do you attribute the increased focus on shared services in the public sector?

Sommers: The increased focus on shared services in the public sector, and certainly in education, is primarily about fiscal issues, the financial challenges facing state and local governments, and a demand for higher taxpayer value for the services they receive from state and local governments.

Cole: Fiscal challenges and a call for increased taxpayer value drive these discussions.

There have been significant changes in the dynamics of state government from a fiscal and economic policy standpoint due to the recent recession. It is simply not possible to continue to recreate policies and practices within the same budgetary boundaries; we cannot do what has been done in the past the same way it has always been done. The state needs to explore how to meet core service needs better and how to do that more cost-effectively and efficiently through strategic partnerships.
Burford: What do you see as the real promise of shared services for Ohio’s school districts?

Sommers: The real promise is not fiscal; that is a side benefit. The real promise is in getting districts to focus on our young people and minimize the energy we spend on those things not directly tied to student instruction. Through shared services we can free up district resources to provide more opportunities for young people.

Cole: The real promise for schools is cost savings. Cost savings that can be redirected from administrative to instructional purposes. The larger promise is the development of relationships across districts and communities that can facilitate change and progress down the road. Beyond the shared services model itself, it takes people to make things happen. The stronger the relationships across districts, the more likely beneficial change will happen that will drive operational efficiencies and, ideally, improved student outcomes.

Burford: What are the potential cost savings for shared services between and among Ohio’s school districts and local political subdivisions? To what degree will shared services generate actual savings versus mitigating recent federal and/or state financial reductions?

Sommers: It is hard to gauge what the possible cost savings may be, but they could be significant. Again, the benefit will be in our efforts to focus our energy on what matters most - educating kids.

Cole: Shared services can generate efficiencies resulting in cost savings. In the short-term, these may offset budget reductions. But in the long term it will be mean real savings and more funding going to instructional services and a better return on taxpayer investment.

Burford: As we design a new regional shared service system, how do we strike a balance between an open, free market system that drives price and quality and the legal requirement for the state to have a stable statewide system of support and a regional special education support system outlined in the state’s special education performance plan?

Sommers: The design will need to be flexible enough to follow two paths. The first path must focus on the needs of school districts and local governments and the second on meeting the demands of state government. School districts and local governments will have a choice of providers, and free market competition will drive quality and lower costs. Meanwhile, the work that has to be deployed on behalf of the state will likely require a more systemic approach that could require defined boundaries or service territories in which the state would issue a competitive RFP for the deployment of statewide initiatives. In the design process we need to question the legal requirements versus the aspirational goals and strike an appropriate balance. This is the work that will need to be figured out as we study the regional system in advance of issuing legislative recommendations by January 1, 2012.

Cole: It is important for Ohio to have a clear understanding of the existing environment. We essentially have two tiers or types of services today - state required and locally-driven. We need to evaluate what is working and what is not. Some parts of the existing system are part of the statewide system of support. We need to delineate these services and resource them properly. For the locally-determined, free market services we need to ensure they stay that way and aren’t overregulated. Which are free market services and which are part of a system of support (core services) need to be defined. It is important that we make sure that a lack of activity on the “free market side” is not subsidized by the state system of support side of the system.
Burford: How important is it to engage the customers in the systems design process? How should customers be identified?

Sommers: This is a critical part of the process beginning with passage of the state budget and continuing through the legislative recommendations that are due to the General Assembly by January 1, 2012. Stakeholder engagement is category 3 in the Baldrige Process: customer-focused performance results. The Baldrige framework has key questions that need to be asked relative to meeting customer needs. It is important to define who the customers are and to understand their needs. As a service provider it is important that we understand our customers. And, we need to understand our customers’ customer better than they do. We need to know our customers so well that we can provide solutions to problems they didn’t even know they had. This was a philosophy that guided our work when I was CEO of Butler Technology and Career Development Schools.

Cole: Customer engagement is essential to the success of the effort. It will require the need to review the current system, analyze data and develop an integration plan. We cannot just be working with high level decision makers and association staff. We need to hear from people in the field; innovative ideas will come from people on the ground. For this reason, we set a policy direction and process that will engage end users and guide implementation.

Burford: What do you consider to be the most important characteristics of a regional shared services governance structure?

Sommers: The ideal regional shared governance structure will be one that is highly focused on competing in the free market and interested in meeting customer needs. The governance structure should be responsible for providing fiduciary oversight, measuring performance and hiring the top executive. Board members should have the knowledge and experience to guide strategy and not tactics.

Cole: There are three essential characteristics for an effective shared services governance structure: 1) simplicity – understand who is responsible and how the governing body operates; 2) inclusive – representative of the entities served; and 3) flexible – governance should reflect local needs and priorities.

Burford: Which functions and processes do you think are most readily transferrable to a shared services delivery model?

Sommers: There are two primary areas readily transferrable to a shared services delivery model: 1) anything that is not the core, mainline business of an organization and 2) those limited core business functions that can be delivered with higher quality at a lower cost through a shared services model.

The identification of what services can best be deployed through shared services has less to do with the services themselves and more to do with the customer base and its needs. Small, rural communities have different needs than larger suburban and urban communities. The system must respect and reflect these differences.

The standardized part of the emerging regional shared services system will be focused on understanding customer needs and creating value-add services. There will be no place for standardized core services in this conversation.

Cole: Functions and processes most readily transferrable to a shared services delivery model include: purchasing, technology, payroll and benefits administration, facilities management, and human resources. These functions have enough similarities across public sector organizations (including schools and local government) that they could be easily transferrable.
Burford: What performance measures or other evaluative tools should be utilized to help us to define success?

Sommers: The leading performance measure should be the cost per successful student. This is an examination of the total funds expended divided by the number of successful students (success is typically defined in terms of successful learning such as a year’s worth of growth in a subject area). Performance units could include academic as well as other learning areas such as foreign languages, career-technical skills, character development, etc. Some accommodation is often given to account for disadvantage students, students with disabilities and other appropriate adjustment factors. It needs to be a student success driven evaluation. Another way to evaluate would be to use the classic return on investment (ROI) analysis; examine the question of what the value and/or outcome achieved is for the funds invested.

Any evaluative process should include a definition of process quality and look at both leading measures (percentage of program capacity filled, IT repair time, etc.) and lagging measures (e.g., student achievement). These in-process quality measures will drive student success.

Ultimately, the customers will define success. The transition will be difficult. Initially, people will be tempted to go for the cheapest provider when they should be looking for the best value – quality and effectiveness at the best (though maybe not lowest) price. Schools will be more focused on quality and cost effectiveness instead of lowest price because they will be ranked on performance (both academic and operational). This will require schools to strike the appropriate balance between quality and cost.

The focus should not just be on compliance. Ranking quality and performance will be important to move educators from a minimum compliance focus to a high performance focus.

Cole: We should be able to define success in three ways: 1) immediate benchmarking and data capture to see where we are; 2) gauge customer satisfaction in the delivery of services – ask parents, teachers, taxpayers if they are satisfied and are seeing value; and 3) develop “big” metrics to determine if the associated tax burden or share of expense that goes to bureaucracy is being reduced. We should be able to show over time if more education expenditures are going to instruction rather than operations.

Too often, savings get lost; avoided costs that get lost in future analysis include planning. It will be vital for the state to track the accumulation of savings over time. This type of benchmarking, data collection and analysis is critical. Without this information we will continue to throw funding at problems without asking if there is a better way to do business and achieve results. If people are satisfied with their services and we have shifted more money to the classroom, we have achieved success.

Burford: The shared services proposal calls for the integration of several different types of intermediary agencies into a new system. What do you anticipate being the biggest challenges related to this integration?

Sommers: One of the biggest challenges will be the “language barrier.” School districts, county commissioners, township trustees all speak a different language. There are different IT platforms, different accounting packages and different delivery systems. For all of the complaints leveled at education, school districts and school personnel are highly sophisticated. This expertise can be shared with other public sector agencies.

Cole: Turf protection may be the biggest challenge. Different intermediary organizations see themselves in silos. As a result, they may not see how similar they are to others and how strategic partnerships will allow them to focus more on their core missions. We need to help intermediate agencies and other organizations to maximize their relationships to support what they need to do to drive positive change.
Burford: What challenges do you think exist related to local political subdivisions and school districts sharing services in ways they haven’t prior to this initiative?

Sommers: Challenges will include turf and a general lack of understanding about each sector’s core business and where there are opportunities for partnership. In the end, we all serve the same shareholder – the taxpayers of Ohio.

Cole: Focusing on results, beyond parochial interests, will be challenge. People often only focus on what has worked or not worked in the past. Too often schools and local governments work on a joint project that works and then they get to the next project that doesn’t work and they stop looking for partnership opportunities. We need to get past that and get to the deepest point of integration allowed under the law and keep moving forward. We cannot just go after the “low hanging fruit.”

Burford: What role do you envision ESCs playing in the newly proposed Regional Shared Service Center system?

Sommers: ESCs are the regional shared service center system with an enhanced role of service to local political subdivisions.

Cole: I see the ESCs as a facilitator of change and a coordinator of services. They will likely play this role perhaps greater than the other service providers being integrated into the proposed Regional Shared Service Center system. This is not a takeover of the ESCs. It is about building on provider strengths and utilizing the “best in class.” ESCs will be charged with ensuring that best practices are implemented, not just developing them all themselves.

We need to be more strategic in identifying needs and aligning services and then coordinating the deployment of those services using the most appropriate providers which may not be the ESCs in all cases. We need to leverage the expertise of the individual providers across the system and stop trying to be all things to all people. This is how we eliminate unnecessary and costly duplication and redundancies.

Burford: What policy levers will be or should be in place to encourage school districts and other local political subdivisions to engage in more shared services? Are economic pressures and academic rankings alone enough to change behaviors?

Sommers: Pressure for better results from the public will generate the necessary leverage to advance shared services. The pressure to change will come. School districts, local governments and the trade associations that represent them need to accept it and adopt a new way of doing business. We need to identify and share best practices and use this effort as an opportunity to make changes that improve outcomes (operational, fiscal and academic).

We want to think that everyone is already good at what they do and doing everything they can to achieve effectiveness and improve outcomes. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Everyone may be good but not everyone is great. Once we get clear about who is really the best in class, there will be a learning opportunity for others. My father used to show cattle and often wouldn’t win. So he would look at the cattle that won and talk with the owners to learn how he could improve. He always told me we never disparage winners; go learn from them and get better.
Burford: How do we best insure that essential services are not lost in the transition to a new system?

Sommers: It is important to focus in on what some of the essential services are based on the customer-identified needs as well as the services that the state needs to be deployed statewide in some uniform and consistent way. The state services need to be separated from the free market locally-determined services. I envision some regionalized deployment of services that will require a defined service or sales territory and include a competitive RFP process to identify which regional shared service centers have the capacity and expertise to deploy services in the most efficient and effective way.

Cole: This is important. ESCs, school districts, local governments and other stakeholders have to be active and engaged participants in the development of the regional shared service center model. Stakeholders also have to be advocates over time. ESCs have to be advocates for the necessary and critical services and promote communication with parents, community members and policymakers in Columbus.

“The state services need to be separated from the free market locally-determined services. I envision some regionalized deployment of services that will require a defined service or sales territory and include a competitive RFP process to identify which regional shared service centers have the capacity and expertise to deploy services in the most efficient and effective way.”

Conclusion

Typically, the activities or processes selected for deployment through shared services are non-strategic and outside the core competencies of the parent corporation or, in the case of public education, the school districts. It is also the case, however, that certain instructional services, such as low incidence special education, gifted coordination and other instructional services are outsourced to create greater economies of scale and reduce personnel and operational costs across multiple school districts. It will be important as the process advances to design a system that is responsive to the needs of the end users and strikes an appropriate balance between these separate but related system demands.

The Regional Shared Service Center system, which will likely evolve from the current ESC structure, is expected to become operationalized on July 1, 2012. Ohio’s Educational Service Centers are expected to continue to play an integral part in the delivery of quality educational products and services, and operational support services, to Ohio’s school districts as well as new local government partners.
References


Ohio Revised Code 2744.01(F).

Ohio Revised Code 755.16

Am. Sub. H.B. 154, Section 267.50.90

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A Rural Needs Study: Improving Colorado Department of Education Services to Rural School Districts

by

Phil Fox
and David Van Sant

Editor’s note: The following text is a slightly abbreviated version of a study presented to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE).

Introduction

The state of Colorado has 178 school districts dispersed across 104,000 square miles, with 142 of those districts – 80 percent – recognized as rural. Surprisingly, those rural districts are responsible for just 20 percent of the student population in the state, which means that the rural school districts in Colorado generally have comparatively small student populations, teacher ranks, and per-pupil operating revenue. Despite the small percentage of students served, rural districts are essential and inviolate components of Colorado’s education heritage. Indeed, like most states in the country, Colorado’s rural schools and districts created and nurtured the state education system, and they continue to ably serve rural communities in the face of severe economic constraints, significant population shifts and increased compliance requirements.

In the summer of 2010, Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones asked researchers Phil Fox and David Van Sant to conduct a study of the rural school districts in Colorado, specifically to determine if rural districts were satisfied with the assistance provided by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), what additional assistance the department could provide and also to determine how turnaround schools in rural districts were faring.

While the Colorado Department of Education serves and regulates all school districts in the state, there has never been a single strong, institutionalized entity – governmental or otherwise – that represents and advocates explicitly for the 80 percent of districts that are rural and the particular concerns of rural schools.
Moreover, those concerns are significant. In addition to providing a high-quality education to all students, rural districts must comply – and submit evidence of that compliance – with state and federal funding and accountability requirements, and implement policy and rule changes, and do so with fewer dollars, fewer staff and across greater distances. These circumstances create both moral and fiscal imperatives for education and government leaders to work together with rural school districts to make wise decisions to address problems, to give a voice to rural education, and to honor rural students throughout the state. The purpose of this study is to identify the concerns and priorities of rural school districts and demonstrate how CDE addresses these concerns. The study’s recommendations are intended to assist CDE in better serving the rural constituency of Colorado.

**Study Methodology**

As a first step in this project, we developed questionnaires (see appendix) targeted at district superintendents and school board members to be used for interviews and focus groups. Between August 1 and December 15, 2010, we traveled over 4,000 miles around the state to speak personally with rural superintendents and school board members, either individually or as part of focus groups set up by the Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) that served the area. We also solicited information via telephone interviews and e-mail communications. Interview and focus group participants also were given the opportunity to provide additional information in written form. Additionally, new superintendents were encouraged to respond in writing so as to help us discern individual differences from responses of veteran superintendents. In all, we contacted and/or interviewed all but two rural superintendents. More than 41 school board members of rural districts were contacted, and 10 responded.

**Limitations of this Study**

Any qualitative study such as this one is only as valid as the responses that are provided by the individuals interviewed. In several instances, we felt that respondents were more forthcoming in written responses compared to sometimes “politically correct” responses during personal interviews. Also, the number of responses from board members does not constitute a large enough sample to be reliable, primarily because most board members do not work directly with nor are as knowledgeable about CDE. In hindsight, board members probably should have been eliminated from the original study proposal.

Some of the recommendations proposed in this study are our own conclusions based on our experience and expertise, and were not necessarily discussed or vetted with all interviewees. Before any of these recommendations can be accepted, follow-up discussions with rural superintendents and CDE leaders should take place to determine if the proposed solutions are viable and appropriate.

This report consists of four main parts. The first is a brief review of the recent literature on rural education. The second section reviews what is happening in rural areas in the United States followed by a section that defines “rural” in Colorado. The final part discusses the findings drawn from all interviews, focus groups and written responses and offers possible solutions.
Brief Review of the Literature on Rural Education

Rural areas are in a period of transition, a condition that has had a profound impact on rural schools and districts. In the November 2010 issue of *Educational Leadership*, author James A. Bryant, Jr. presents a comprehensive -- and alarming -- picture of rural communities and the challenges faced by rural schools. Bryant reports that 35 percent of residents in rural areas live below the poverty level, 26.3 percent live just above the poverty line, and 38 percent qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Bryant cites data from the Center on Education Policy that reports achievement gaps in mathematics, language arts and English by students with disabilities and without disabilities in 68 percent of rural schools. Bryant concludes, “The quaint image of the little red school house that many Americans cling to is, sadly, fantasy.”

Because so many rural residents live just above or just below the poverty line, they have been hit especially hard by the current economic recession. Bryant notes that “federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind have forced rural schools to choose whether to spend money where it may be most needed – for example, to improve deteriorating facilities or attract more qualified teachers – or spend it complying with government regulations to meet less urgent needs.” Furthermore, research indicates that federal funds covered nine percent of rural district budgets compared to 11 percent in urban areas (Roellke, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007)

Much has also been written about the low salaries and geographic isolation that teachers encounter in rural areas. Rural districts face a constant challenge to attract and retain quality teachers. Superintendents and building administrators report that it is difficult to attract teachers to rural areas that often lack social and cultural opportunities. He cites a March 2010 *New York Times* article that discusses the growing concerns among local, state and federal lawmakers that education policy is out of touch with the needs of rural educators and children, which Bryant referred to as “urban bias in federal policy.” The attempt to standardize everything in education has led to “the laughable notion that one size fits all.”

A 2009 report from the Rural School and Community Trust, *Why Rural Matters*, by Jerry Johnson and Marty Strange, described the problems of rural schools in Colorado as well as the rest of the country and maintained that rural districts were not receiving comparable allocations of operating funds. This was particularly significant when “providing equal educational opportunities for impoverished children.” The report ranked Colorado in the top quartile of states with inequitable distribution of revenue.

So What is “Rural?”

One of the conditions for validly examining rural schools and districts is to have an appropriate definition of “rural.” The federal government, through the Department of Agriculture, uses an elaborate system called the Beale Codes, which calculate GPS coordinates and relative distances from urban centers to define “rural.” Two designations are used for rural: one for areas outside an incorporated area, and one for a rural

| The attempt to standardize everything in education has led to “the laughable notion that one size fits all.” |

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area inside an incorporated area. Consideration also is given to how far each rural area is from a metropolitan center. In Colorado this system is often inaccurate and extremely misleading. A school district designated as non-rural may be completely surrounded by districts designated as rural. (The map of Colorado’s district designations, Changes in School District Rural Locale Status, is available at http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/PDF/states/CO.pdfsdistricts.)

At odds with the Beale Codes designation is the Colorado State Finance Act, which has identified 86 districts as “rural” and 47 districts as “outlying towns,” a total of 133 school districts in the state, or 74 percent of the total number of districts. Adding to the confusion, during the course of this study we learned that CDE has an informal definition of rural: school districts with less than 3,000 students. The number of school districts that meet this definition is 146, or 82 percent of all districts in the state. It is also worth noting that, according to the Rural School and Community Trust, Colorado rural districts serve a very diverse student population, the 10th highest percentage in the country. A breakdown of Colorado school districts by number of students is presented in the table below:

### Colorado School Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Number of Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 300</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 300, less than 1,200</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1,201, less than 6,000</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 6,001</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Colorado Department of Education

Defining rural districts in Colorado is even more problematic for three additional reasons. Some districts in rural areas known as exurbs more accurately can be considered suburban; for example, Elizabeth, Fort Lupton, Johnstown – cases in which urban areas expanded into terrain that was previously agricultural. The mountain resort communities such as Aspen, Vail, Steamboat Springs, and Summit County create a similar designation problem. They are in rural areas, i.e., non-urban areas, but they do not really serve a rural constituency. Lastly, a number of districts have exceeded the 3,000-pupil threshold set by CDE, but district leaders deemed that they were rural and not urban. Examples include Pueblo County School District 70, Montrose School District RE-1J and Mesa County School District 51 in Grand Junction.

We have concluded that districts themselves should decide if the designation of rural is appropriate for their school district. A definition offered by Marty Strange of The Rural School and Community Trust captures the haphazard nature of defining rural: “Rural is any place that is smaller than the place that I live.”

Even when we acknowledge the difficulty in defining rural, it is indisputable that approximately three-fourths of the school districts in Colorado are rural. The findings and recommendations in this report reflect the challenges these districts face. By any definition, these districts represent most of the communities in Colorado and more than 150,000 Colorado students. The needs and the challenges of these communities and their schools must be considered by our state institutions.
Other State Models

As part of this study we contacted various individuals with expertise, experience and knowledge of rural schools. These included Marty Strange, Policy Director, The Rural School and Community Trust; Dr. Brian Talbot, Executive Director, Association of Educational Service Agencies; Dr. Jim Johnson, Professor, Ohio University; Dr. Rich McBride, Superintendent’s Office, North Central Educational Services (Washington); Dr. Andrea Lawrence, Professor, American University; and Noelle Ellerson, Assistant Director, Policy Analysis and Advocacy, American Association of School Administrators.

We also examined rural school district structures and practices in other states. Most states have a dedicated plan of regional services, especially where education is state-controlled and not locally controlled. Most western states have regional service models of local control with the state providing services to rural districts. Washington leads the way in trying to equalize services throughout the state, with an expanded BOCES programs in which resources are shared across the state. As a result, all BOCES, i.e., schools and districts, have received additional state resources.

Ohio has completed a major reorganization of service units, and the Department of Rural Studies at Ohio University provides valuable support to rural school districts. Northeastern states have plans to work with rural districts, although these districts are not comparable to the large geographical area that Colorado covers. We learned that several service centers assist rural districts in the Ozark area of Arkansas, largely without the support of the state but with the assistance of a university.

Colorado has a model that is neither fish nor fowl. No one has examined the BOCES structure in 50 years to determine if the BOCES agencies adequately serve the needs of the communities or if a new model is needed. Moreover, the rural districts lost a huge source of support in 2008 when the number of regional service managers at the Colorado Department of Education serving rural districts was reduced from 12 to two. Up until that time these regional services unit had provided consistent and personal assistance to rural superintendents throughout the state.

Researching state models for rural outreach did not identify any structure or strategic plan that would fit seamlessly into Colorado. Rather, Colorado requires a model that is tailored to the needs of it’s rural school districts, one that takes into consideration the state’s geography, history of local control and statewide capabilities.

Findings and Recommendations

Through interviews, focus groups and research, we developed a number of recommendations and possible solutions to the problems and concerns of the rural districts in Colorado, which are presented below. A number of the solutions that can be considered “no cost” are indicated as such. Others will require additional state or local dollars to implement and manage.

The chief recommendation of this report is that education and government leaders in Colorado, with the full support and command of the Governor’s Office, State Board of Education, and General Assembly, create a Rural Council to oversee, support, conduct research, and advocate for the needs, concerns and particular problems of rural education districts. The Rural Council would be the state entity to provide resources, information and assistance to rural school districts related to reviewing legislation, partnerships,
brokerage of services, and communication. The Council would represent all the rural school districts in
Colorado, advocate for their needs and concerns, and foster collaboration among the districts, professional
associations and the Colorado Department of Education to advance education reform in the state. The Rural
Council would oversee the creation of a state plan on rural education that is developed cooperatively by rural
superintendents with input from the BOCES, professional associations and CDE.

Findings

1. Initiative Fatigue

Many rural superintendents described watching the reform movement over the last 10 years as like
watching the battle between Godzilla and Mothra. Often they felt the effects of the dispute between reform
and anti-reform, but seldom have they been asked to participate in the creation of new initiatives. The
perception is that reforms come directly from the State Board and the legislature, even though they are often
the result of federal mandates. Indeed, rural superintendents feel the federal government understands “rural”
even less than state government officials.

Superintendents feel that the reform initiatives coming from Denver and Washington, D.C., one after
another, have not really addressed the needs or concerns of rural schools. Moreover, some districts reported
that while they are still trying to implement initiatives from the past three years, the state has added
additional programs or mandates. This churn of new initiatives and reform efforts has lead to considerable
frustration and distrust. One such initiative cited by several superintendents is Response to Intervention
(RTI), which seemed very promising in its initial implementation. Now, however, in the fourth or fifth
year of implementation, superintendents report having received very little assistance or in-service from the
state. Two other examples are the new core standards and the new teacher evaluation system (SB 10-191).
Superintendents expressed feeling disconnected from the process of developing the standards and evaluation
system, and were not fully aware of where and how to access information on the process. Particularly
because of the small number of staff in rural districts, clear and frequent communication from CDE is
crucial.

“Many interviewees expressed the feeling that no one in Denver – at the State Board, CDE or in the legislature – truly
understands what rural administrators must do in a day, or the
time commitment required to operate the district, implement
programs, manage staff, and meet compliance requirements.”

Proposed Solutions

• Institute a two-year moratorium on new initiatives to allow time for implementation of existing
  mandates and the new academic standards. (No monetary cost)

• Create policy that requires funding for staff development for all new mandates.

• Increase and improve communication to rural school districts to ensure clarity on several fronts:
differences between state and federal mandates; where to find information, and how superintendents
can contribute to and/or participate in new initiatives and reform strategies.
2. Reporting and Data Overload: One Size Does Not Fit All

Many rural district superintendents expressed weariness and anger at the notion that their districts have the same resources as the large districts, particularly staff and dollars. Leadership staffing varies considerably in rural districts, and the superintendent very often wears at least five different hats within the administration. Twenty-seven school districts have only a single administrator, the superintendent, who also serves as the instructional leader, transportation director, and athletic director. Needless to say, rural districts have limited support positions as well. Many interviewees expressed the feeling that no one in Denver – at the State Board, CDE or in the legislature – truly understands what rural administrators must do in a day, or the time commitment required to operate the district, implement programs, manage staff, and meet compliance requirements.

State and federal reporting requirements, as well as the mandatory trainings by CDE, add significantly to rural superintendents’ plates and stress levels, but the requirements do not come with any extra resources. In this study we tried to get our arms around just how much data districts are being asked to submit. The 2006 report from the Colorado Association of School Executives, State Data Reporting Requirements, documents every report and indicator that districts are required to provide to CDE, the State Board of Education, parents, county commissioners, the general public and others on a myriad of issues: accreditation, at-risk students, grants, immigrant students, finance, building and facilities, indigent students, online learning – the list goes on for 59 pages. Very often, the same information is requested multiple times. Rural administrators also expressed frustration that CDE sometimes requests certain information on short notice without regard to the time of the year or what is happening in a district – although they also recognize that state legislators or the U. S. Department of Education often make these last-minute requests. Even so, data reporting is an enormous burden on rural districts, which very often lack expertise in technology and statistics. One group of superintendents reviewed the FTE (full time staff equivalent) required to complete all reports and determined it to be at least 1.5 staff members. This issue is one that illustrates how out of touch CDE can sometimes seem with the workload and day-to-day operations of rural districts.

Proposed Solutions:

- Streamline data requests to match rural capacities. As decided cooperatively by rural superintendents and the Commissioner of Education, eliminate or exempt some of the required reporting for districts under 1,500 students, particularly reports/data that do not provide useful information to rural administrators and/or communities. (No monetary cost)

- Streamline the reporting process; use a format where default information on each district is included in all reports. Publish a yearly calendar of all reporting requirements for school districts, detailing the reports and data required each month. Extend the “shelf-life” of selected reports to an agreed-upon term before new data are required. Allow the use of one password for users to submit all data rather than the multiple passwords currently used for each program. (No monetary cost)

- As part of the data improvement efforts underway at CDE, include a strategic plan for rural districts, and engage support from the BOCES agencies (for example, employ a regional data person, hired by the BOCES, to be in charge of data collection and submission for several small districts).

- Allow districts to send a representative in place of the superintendent to CDE trainings, and use webinars or podcasts instead of in-person training, with training offered on multiple dates. (No monetary cost)

- In order to discuss and develop all of these ideas, convene regional meetings of rural superintendents and CDE staff in several areas of the state. Also, provide opportunities for rural superintendents to meet with each other and CDE staff at other state and regional meetings of CDE, CASB (Colorado Association of School Boards) and CASE (Colorado Association of School Executives).
3. State Consolidation Is Feared and Will Be Fought

Among Colorado superintendents, nothing evokes more fear, loathing and hostility than the word “consolidation.” Memories of consolidation efforts in the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s are yet a part of school administration folklore embedded in superintendents’ collective psyches. The operative expression here is “forced” or “mandatory” consolidation. But even attempts at voluntary consolidation in the past decade (for example, Julesburg) failed or were abandoned because the current process is costly, lengthy and very complex.

Proposed Solution:

We strongly recommend modification of the 1992 Act to allow voluntary consolidation of districts below a certain pupil size (for example, 1,000 students) subject to “approval of the local boards of education.” For two or more districts that may elect to consolidate, the per-pupil revenue would be averaged over a set period of time (five years, for example). This modification to the 1992 Act would affect approximately 50 school districts in Colorado, many of which have seriously declining enrollments. Voluntary consolidation could, at a minimum, give rural districts a viable option to keep operating in a positive arrangement and avoid the significant time and effort required of involuntary consolidation (planning committees, multiple elections, attorney fees, or district closure.)

4. No Rural Voice at CDE

In July 2008, the field service unit at the Department of Education was effectively decimated due to a correction in the allocation of federal funds. Until that time the regional services office had provided personal and targeted services to rural districts whereby one regional services representative would spend a week visiting rural districts in each of the 12 regional service areas to provide assistance on compliance, data and generally to stay informed about the district. The staffing change reduced the number of regional services people from 12 to two to cover the whole state. To say that there has been some confusion and difficulty with this decision in the rural areas cannot be overstated. Some rural leaders still do not know why there was a change, while others wish that there would be no CDE contact with rural schools.

While the efforts of the two regional service managers are highly appreciated and widely respected, there is a commonly held opinion that the concerns of small rural districts do not have a voice within the upper echelon of CDE. Moreover, there is a sentiment that services to rural districts have declined in the past five years. As one rural superintendent stated, “While some things have improved, overall services are worse. Five years ago the regional representatives actually knew what was going on in my district and the CDE team often provided a level of meaningful support to our schools. That is no longer the case.”

Proposed Solution

The goals of CDE and rural districts would be well served by creating a new position, Assistant Commissioner for Rural Districts, who would report to the Commissioner and oversee or at least work closely with current staff of regional services. In addition, the regional services unit should be expanded. To think that two staff members can provide adequate service to almost 140 rural districts is sheer folly. In addition, Colorado very much needs a coordinated plan to serve rural areas on all issues - education, employment, health care, etc. All areas of the government need to develop one integrated plan to provide needed services to rural areas on a consistent basis.
5. Improving Staff Development

All school districts in Colorado have suffered under the fiscal constraints of the past two years, but one area that has been most affected is staff development. Many of the superintendents we met are overwhelmed by the requirements added over the past several years. The changes in the teacher evaluation component alone were mentioned numerous times as items that need staff support on regional levels. Also, as noted earlier, RTI was cited as an example of a program that started right but had gone sour. Superintendents reported that initially there was great support from CDE to inform and assist districts on RTI, but now with the difficult part of implementing the RTI program into the mainstream, very few resources and support have been forthcoming.

The orientation seminars for rural superintendents held in the past were immensely valuable in building relationships, disseminating information and forging an understanding of the roles and priorities of both CDE and the rural districts. This kind of regular event that brings educators and CDE staff together was an excellent vehicle for strengthening and sustaining professional development in the rural districts.

Proposed Solutions:

• BOCES should have an expanded state role in staff training and receive funding to support that role.
• All new rules or legislative mandates should include a three-year implementation model with funding.
• Frequent and clear communication from CDE is essential, especially in advance of rule changes and new requirements, with models and sample implementation plans for districts of all sizes made available to districts on the CDE Web site. (No monetary cost)
• Staff development and required training should be provided through online resources, webinars, podcasts and other types of distance learning that do not require individuals to leave their districts.
• The annual orientation seminars for rural superintendents should be resurrected; secure sponsorship from local businesses and/or foundations.

6. Challenges of Staff Recruitment and Retention

A number of rural superintendents described the problems associated with employing and retaining qualified staff, particularly NCLB-mandated “highly qualified” teachers, and how difficult this requirement is for remote and revenue-poor rural districts. Administrator turnover is major concern in rural areas as well. Superintendents and BOCES directors also reported that special education is a constant problem in that present law mandates services that for all practical purposes most rural areas are not able to offer.

Proposed Solutions:

• Provide incentives to and assist rural districts in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators. Develop a statewide plan that encourages partnerships with Colorado colleges and universities to educate and graduate teacher candidates for placement in rural districts, and to offer course instruction in hard-to-fill areas and subjects, including the arts, special education and mathematics.
• Provide incentives to and assist the BOCES organizations to employ staff on a regional basis to help districts with special education services (occupational therapy, physical therapy, and hard-of-hearing curriculum/classes).

• Consider legislation that would allow rural districts to pass mill levies for staff housing.

7. Need for Inter-District Cooperation

As we began this study, we assumed that smaller districts would be heavily involved in cost-sharing efforts with either nearby districts and or other local government entities. We were wrong. Colorado’s budget crisis of the past two years has not resulted in cost-sharing efforts between small districts. As we examined the results of our many conversations, the reason became clear: there is virtually no fiscal reason for cooperation that is not quickly overridden by parochial concerns. For example, many small rural districts could easily merge transportation services until they realize that such a change might result in the loss of jobs – which in small communities can cause a major political upheaval. In our interviews with superintendents across Colorado, we became painfully aware of district parochialism. Many of the interviewees accentuated how “unique” his or her district is – just like those interviewed in every other district. We found this provincialism and disinclination to cooperate to be a considerable obstacle to rural districts operating more effectively – even though their objectives were based on a sense of protection and concern for the welfare of the community.

Proposed Solutions:

• Inter-district cooperation must be directed and championed by the highest levels of state government. The Governor, Commissioner of Education and State Board of Education must lead in this area. (No monetary cost)

• The State Finance Act and other state and district rules should be examined to identify disincentives to inter-district cooperation, and determine if revisions are needed and viable. (No monetary cost)

• A stable system of regional service centers must be created. Participation of local districts should be voluntary, and every effort should be made to build on the existing BOCES. However, the state should create a rational structure and financial incentives that encourage participation of districts in that regional service structure.

Conclusion

The concerns and problems facing rural school districts present a challenge not just for the Colorado Department of Education but for all government and education leaders in the state to devise new strategies and solutions to increase student achievement and ensure that all students in Colorado have equal access to high quality education. Improving communication and strengthening personal relationships between rural districts and CDE are essential steps. Good and committed people are working in an unwieldy and complex system that needs to be streamlined in order to better serve the rural constituency. A review and possible restructuring of both the BOCES organizations and Administrative Units should be undertaken to find ways to strengthen partnerships and to empower change toward a more effective and efficient system. Colorado has a new governor and will soon have a new Commissioner of Education. Capitalize on this opportunity to revitalize the department to reclaim rural school districts.
References


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APPENDIX

Superintendent Interview

Name __________________________   School District _________________________

1. What are your impressions of CDE and its role in the state?
2. Are CDE services to rural districts better or worse than they were five years ago?
3. Do you have an “achievement gap” in your district? If yes, can you describe it?
4. How could CDE help you with closing the achievement gap?
5. What are the most important tasks or responsibilities that a rural superintendent/BOCES director does not have the capacity/manpower to do?
6. What would assistance from CDE look like to you?
7. What are your greatest needs for improving student achievement?
8. Do you have a staff retention problem? Do you know the reasons?
9. Do you have cooperative agreements with other school districts? If yes, what is the purpose of the agreements and do they work?
10. Do you have cooperative agreements with city and county governments?
11. How do you handle English language learner services?
12. Do you have the workforce necessary to apply for competitive grants?
13. How do you provide professional development?
14. What do you lack in online/technological resources?
15. Is declining enrollment a problem for you? If yes, how so?
16. What are the two biggest things CDE could do to assist your district?
17. Is there a question we should have asked or any other insights that you might provide to us?

Board Member Questions

Name __________________________   School District _________________________

1. What are your impressions of CDE and its role in the state?
2. What are the biggest challenges you face as a rural district?
3. What are the biggest opportunities?
4. What cooperative agreements do you have with other school districts?
5. Are there other cooperative agreements that you would like to develop?
6. Do you have cooperative agreements with city and county governments?
7. What are the biggest obstacles to developing cooperative agreements?
8. Do you have declining enrollment? If yes, explain the effects.
9. What are the two biggest things that CDE could do to assist your district?
10. Is there a question we should have asked or any other insights that you might provide to us?
Serving Rural School Districts and Communities: Rethinking the ESA Commitment

by
Mary Colf
and Hobart Harmon

ESAs have a long history of serving rural school districts. In many states, ESAs were primarily formed to increase the capacity of small rural school districts by providing essential services through collaborative efforts of several districts. Examples include essential special education services, high-quality teacher professional development opportunities and instructional materials, cost-savings through cooperative purchasing of school supplies, efficient administrative operations, and quality legal services commonly available in urban or larger, more wealthy school districts (Stephens & Keane, 2009).

Do ESAs that serve predominantly rural school districts and their communities have a future? Maybe, if they can act now to rethink priorities amidst the new realities of dwindling resources. This article reveals how Pennsylvania’s Seneca Highlands Intermediate Unit Nine (IU9) seeks to embrace a new strategy that more directly aligns with the unique needs and circumstances of school districts and communities in rural areas.

The Challenge

Seneca Highlands Intermediate Unit Nine is an educational service agency in North Central Pennsylvania that serves 14 school districts, all small and rural. IU9’s largest district enrolls 2,543 students in grades K through 12. The smallest IU9 district, also the smallest in Pennsylvania, enrolls only 192 students in grades K through 12. In 12 of the 14 districts, the schools serve as the center of their communities. The residents of the small towns are, for the most part, dependent upon their schools to be the focal point of activities, both educational and social. The IU9 region is typical of other rural intermediate units in Pennsylvania, in serving a region that is geographically large. IU9’s region covers approximately 3,400 square miles. The distance issue alone presents many challenges in traveling to essential meetings and delivering services to all 14 school districts.
Rethinking how an Intermediate Unit (IU) meets the needs of small rural school districts and their communities is critical today. State fiscal deficits and declining school budgets threaten an IU’s ability to sustain and improve traditional services. As important, IU services must also address the needs of rural schools that are more than ever being expected to serve economic and community development needs. Increasingly, school and community leaders must question how the investing of scarce and dwindling resources contribute to student and community well-being. A recent study and subsequent book on a small rural town in Iowa clearly documents what has occurred for too long in many rural communities across the nation (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Preparing the best and brightest students to leave the community while under-investing in those students who choose to stay is “hollowing out” the human capital of rural America. Sustainability of communities, school, and ESAs is in jeopardy.

New Strategy for a New Time

Since the establishment of Intermediate Units in Pennsylvania some 40 years ago, school districts in the IU9 region have come to depend upon the ESA for cooperative purchasing, special education services, federal programs, non-public school services, management services, curriculum and instructional materials, technology services, and many other services. In the past 11 years, however, the IU has been the center for teacher and administrator professional development as never before. This began with legislative passage in January 2000 of Act 48. The Act requires that, in order to retain a professional certificate, educators must earn a minimum of 180 professional development hours over a period of five years.

Act 48 emphasized a focus on the types of training and awareness that teachers needed in order to increase knowledge and strategies associated with effective instruction; that is, those with evidence for improving student performance as measured by the Pennsylvania System of Statewide Assessment (PSSA).

Consequently, IU9 staff members have consistently traveled to Harrisburg, the state’s capital city, and other far-away training centers in Pennsylvania to bring back information for delivery to teachers and administrators in school districts of the IU9 region.

This strategy is no longer feasible and must change. Realities of the current fiscal crisis require a new approach as to how IU9 staff members receive training and deliver professional development services. School districts no longer can afford mileage costs for their personnel to travel to the IU for training or to cover costs for substitute teachers. Providers of staff development at IU9 now realize that they likely will no longer be working 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. They will work hours such as 12 p.m. to 8 p.m., which will enable them to more conveniently and efficiently meet the needs of the districts whose budgets have been drastically cut. Life will no longer be the same for educators in the school districts or for personnel in the IU.
Meeting Act 48 requirements is only one example of the challenge of rural IUs in Pennsylvania. IU9’s existence has been dependent upon offering the same programs each year, assuming that school districts would always need and could afford these traditional basic services. IU9 became somewhat complacent in believing current services could be sustained even as the needs of educators and school systems changed. IU9 has not always been creative, but rather myopic, in defining and redesigning the services delivered to school districts. IU9, perhaps like some other ESAs in rural areas, must take action now that reflects state budget limitations. Entrepreneurial efforts must expand, which larger PA IUs did in the 1990s -- another time when state funding to IUs was drastically reduced. The bottom line is, if ESAs like IU9 do not respond in new ways to the needs of districts, there is a real possibility the ESAs will not survive. It is critical that we determine a new survival plan because state budget allocations may not be able to guarantee annual basic subsidy for general operations.

All paradigms have shifted. IUs that serve rural districts must be ready to take risks and deliver a specific menu of select services, and, most important, become completely transparent in sharing budgets and strategies. During these difficult times of fiscal accountability, there is increased risk of distrust of an intermediate unit by constituent school districts. In IU9, the level of transparency provides a totally new perspective in working with districts. So, transparency becomes essential in rethinking a new strategy. In addition, it is more important than ever that the information provided districts be cutting-edge, cost-saving, customer-driven, and results-focused.

Over the past two years, Commitment to Rural Education Leadership has become the mantra at Seneca Highlands Intermediate Unit Nine. Perspectives from a new executive director in 2008 with a passion for “rural and small,” and recognition of the interdependence between schools and their rural communities made clear the critical need to rethink “rural and small.” As an educator for more than 39 years in Pennsylvania, the executive director witnessed how being rural had become IU9’s excuse for not being recognized, for not receiving grants and for not being appreciated. The obvious challenge was rethinking how IU9 might turn those excuses into opportunities. How could IU9 capitalize upon the realities of serving rural constituents and leveraging the benefits of being rural? How could IU9 secure the necessary attention and potential funding streams to help school districts provide all students with an equal opportunity for success in the 21st century?

The first step in rethinking the issues and gaining critical attention was to address the future direction of IU9. Consequently, IU9 embarked upon a formalized strategic planning committee and process, that ultimately created the backbone for the IU9 Rural Leadership Initiative. Formulation of a new mission and vision was necessary. It was critical to relay the new mission and vision as an intense commitment to the rural culture that existed in the IU9 region. The new mission and vision also had to reflect the IU9 commitment to become a Center of Excellence for rural education leadership and the sincere desire to work collaboratively with numerous partners.

These commitments served as a driving force to enlist support of the IU9 board, IU9 employees, district superintendents, and key community leaders. IU9’s executive director solicited input from persons with

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demonstrated knowledge, passion and empathy for the needs of rural schools and communities. These persons included Dr. Hobart Harmon, a national expert on rural education; Dr. Kai Schafft, Director of the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Penn State University; Joseph Bard, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS); Dr. Thomas Butler, superintendent of an IU9 school district, whose doctoral dissertation, *Rural Schools and Communities: How Globalization Influences Rural School and Community Collaboration* (2008) explores the rural condition; Dr. Patrick Carr, co-author of the book *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America* (2009); and Philip Eberl of St. Bonaventure University, who offered invaluable perspective relative to higher education and also on issues that define the rural culture.

These persons have helped IU9 leadership frame possibilities for the IU9 Rural Leadership Initiative. Potential areas of emphasis include creating entrepreneurial opportunities, reaching out to communities, training and retraining adults who have lost jobs, focusing upon keeping kids and families who wish to live and work in their home communities, and seeking partnerships with public schools, higher education institutions, and communities.

**Early Efforts**

In early 2009, after receiving board approval, IU9 employed a consultant to facilitate the strategic planning process, which took 13 months to complete. After all that time, many meetings, and much collaboration, the Steering Committee unanimously voted on the new IU9 mission statement: *The Mission of Seneca Highlands Intermediate Unit Nine – the epitome of rural school leadership – is to provide high-quality and equitable instructional, financial, and technological services to all learners through innovative leadership.*

The mission statement set the conditions for several early efforts, including acquiring a greater voice through a consortium of rural IUs, an annual Rural Education Leadership Conference with essential follow-up activities, and an IU9 Rural Think Tank as an innovative support group. After providing awareness of the need for an IU9 Rural Leadership Initiative to employees, board members, and superintendents, the executive director shared the new vision and needs of rural IUs with key Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) leaders. Although the PDE officials were sympathetic and understanding, it was obvious that one voice was not powerful enough to achieve the desired impact for IUs to effectively meet needs of rural and small school districts. So, new thinking about the most effective approach was necessary.

**Consortium of Rural IUs**

In the fall of 2009, the IU9 executive director contacted Joseph Bard, Executive Director of Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS), to explore how to make a greater impact in garnering support for IUs that served predominantly rural school districts. Several IU9 school districts were members of PARSS. Frustration was mounting as the rural IUs witnessed a declining capacity in their organizations to meet the changing needs of rural districts. State funding was inadequate to meet these needs. Rural IUs were seldom able to win competitive grants or to lead state initiatives. Greater capacity for winning grants and accessing funding streams seemed to routinely be in the larger, more urban IUs. Unique capacity needs of rural IUs did not appear to be a priority. Consequently, the IU9 executive director contacted executive directors of other IUs that were PARSS members and who were likely facing similar frustrations and capacity limitations.
PARSS leadership strongly supported increasing the voice of rural IUs. Giving rural IUs a stronger and more competitive voice for rural schools and communities was viewed as essential if rural students were to have adequate educational opportunities in a time of dwindling state and local resources. The partnership with PARSS served to define other rural colleagues; that is, those IUs with a strong commitment to address the needs of rural schools and communities.

On April 15, 2010, six executive directors and one assistant executive director of rural IUs, along with PARSS leadership, held a meeting to explore concerns regarding issues around equity of opportunity for rural IUs and school districts, and to determine if the IU representatives shared similar concerns. The group wholeheartedly lent its support to formalizing a Pennsylvania Rural IU Consortium. As of May 2011, 16 of the 29 IUs were members of the Consortium, which represents:

- 79.2% of Pennsylvania’s land mass
- 57.3% of Pennsylvania school districts
- 34.6% of Pennsylvania’s public school students
- 48.2% of Pennsylvania state legislators

The IU9 Rural Leadership Initiative was underway. The effort also seemed consistent with recommendations of Stephens (1998), who advocated a greater leadership role for ESAs in their regions that could support improvements in rural school districts. But the initiative needed to be formalized to increase understanding and recognition about the new IU9 commitment and direction. A structured forum was necessary to facilitate the sharing of viable ideas for addressing rural contextual issues.

Rural Leadership Conference and Follow-up Activities

IU9 decided to convene people representing education and community entities that shared opinions and challenges around specific rural issues. In July 2010, the first annual IU9 Rural Leadership Conference was convened. The two-day conference was held at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford. Selection of the venue for the conference was an easy decision. A long-standing successful partnership between IU9 and Pitt-Bradford, the only four-year institution of higher education in the IU9 region, resulted in the university being considered a “diamond in the rough.”

The 2010 Rural Leadership Conference was a great success. The agenda facilitated framing “rural” through a presentation and subsequent break-out sessions facilitated by a co-author of this article (Harmon) and Barry Denk, Executive Director of The Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Five emerging trends in rural education and communities were addressed: (1) regional partnerships, (2) teacher development strategies, (3) technology advancements, (4) rural student characteristics, and, (5) transfer of wealth in rural communities. These trends constituted the framework for follow-up activities to conference participants. IU9 guaranteed conference follow-up as a key support feature for participants. Conference content was too important to be left with no further conversation among participants until the next year’s conference.

Follow-up activities offered by IU9 included a summary list of participant comments for each trend during the facilitated break-out sessions. For example, participants in the break-out sessions were asked to describe the likely features of two kinds of rural schools in 2020: (1) rural schools that adapted to the trends, and (2) rural schools that did not adapt to the trends. Table 1 reveals the defining features offered by session participants of a rural school in 2020 if it is able to adapt to the trends.
### Trend One: Regional Partnerships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter-district focus groups to identify needs and respond</td>
<td>Higher graduation rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive decisions based on data</td>
<td>More customer-focused/responsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionalization</td>
<td>Education more individualized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionally-based services</td>
<td>Inter-generational classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consortia members collaboration to acquire electricity, fuel, and school supplies</td>
<td>“Clusters” of districts (maybe IUs) collaborating to provide services such as transportation, maintenance, enrichment, specialized services, athletic facilities, educational programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective engagement of the communities – demonstrate benefits of sharing resources/working collaboratively</td>
<td>Community, business and industry included in school planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronger communities – more involvement</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Trend Two: Teacher Development Strategies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evidence and research-based teaching practices</td>
<td>Effective teachers in high-need areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers embrace technology</td>
<td>Increased student performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation of instruction depending on individual student needs</td>
<td>Role model for all teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiating teacher professional development</td>
<td>Low teacher burn-out rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration between universities and schools</td>
<td>Refocus or redesign of mediocre schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School collaboration for teachers, directors, coaches, etc.</td>
<td>Web-based communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives for teachers to achieve better student outcomes</td>
<td>More teachers have access to quality professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effective teachers sharing strategies across school districts using web-based technology</td>
<td>Offer teachers more leadership opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal empowers teachers to “coach”</td>
<td>Cost-effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-based pay</td>
<td>Increased collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change evaluation process and forms</td>
<td>Generation Y accommodated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class rosters developed “equally”</td>
<td>Teachers use of multimedia routinely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in union role in teacher contracts</td>
<td>Information presented in multiple ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher turnover rates addressed</td>
<td>Teacher multi-tasking becomes routine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1. Defining Features of Rural Schools Able to Adapt to the Emerging Trends
## Trend Three: Technology Advancements

| Online learning dominant over traditional classrooms | Anytime/anywhere learning |
| Integration of technology into instruction – more tech devices and fewer books | Different look of the school day/schedule: Hybrid/Blended; Face-to-Face/Online |
| Increased collaboration among LEAs | High schoolers off-site |
| Maintenance or attraction of students, compared to continuing decline in school student population | Multiple providers working together (K-12 schools, community colleges, colleges/ universities, tech schools, private and public providers of credit recovery programs and tutoring groups) |
| Technologically-equipped “Smart” classrooms | Real-world experiences in class |
| Brick and mortar schools as we know them “non-existent”/changed | Competition for students |
| Changing role of teachers | Handles information overload |
| Increased student attention | Concern for developing student social skills |
| Virtual learning | Concern for Intergenerational alienation |
| Hi-Tech classrooms that encourage kids to stay in school | See ted.com for new ideas worth spreading |
| Funding opportunities more available | Increased Advanced Placement course opportunities for students |

## Trend Four: Rural Student Characteristics

| Students with vested interest in community | Creative scheduling |
| Creative thinkers | Tech-savvy |
| Willing to take a chance | Access to a variety of technical schools |
| Real-world, high-level technology skills | Specialization of curriculum that meets individual interests and needs of students |
| Real-life experiences in mentoring, job shadowing, internships | Ongoing global classrooms |
| Collaborative learners (school and community) | No time frame |
| Schools without walls or “time frames” | Continuous learning |
| Decreased drop-out rate | Independent, risk-takers |
| Individualized instruction | |

## Trend Five: Transfer of Wealth in Rural Communities

| Increasing resources | More community involvement in schools |
| Partnership–building with/in community | More community use of schools |
| Investment in the community by the community | More use of volunteers |
| Pride | Expanded body of coursework |
| Ability to diversify | |
During the break-out sessions, participants were asked to briefly profile characteristics of a “partnership” that might lead to the kind of schools and communities that have the capacity to adapt to the trends. Audience participants also were challenged to describe the kinds of leaders required in schools, districts and communities that could adapt to change successfully, including how to collaborate with non-traditional or new kinds of partners. {Note: Readers interested in receiving the summary of participants comments in defining “partnership characteristics” and “leader characteristics” should send an e-mail to Mary Colf [see contact information at end of article]}.

As a Rural Conference follow-up activity, IU9 also offered a six-week online book study opportunity on the book *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (2009), facilitated by the book’s co-authors Dr. Patrick Carr and his wife, Dr. Maria Kefalas. Dr. Carr, who presented book highlights at the conference, also visited IU9 and held a conference follow-up session to explain his family’s experiences and research activities during their several months of residing in the small rural town in Iowa that resulted in the book.

**IU9 Rural Think Tank**

Another follow-up activity to the July 2010 Rural Leadership Conference was creation of the IU9 Rural Think Tank, introduced on March 2, 2011. The Think Tank is driven by data that emerged from the conference and ongoing analysis of regional data. Among the goals of the Think Tank is to foster innovative ideas and useful research-based tools on instructional leadership in rural schools. Initial Think Tank conversations focused upon identifying and responding to specific needs of rural schools and their communities. For example, Generational Poverty was added as a sixth trend because it is a critical contextual issue for rural schools in the region. The continuous generational cycle of the culture of poverty cannot be ignored.

One concept of the Think Tank was that selected building principals in the region would comprise a pilot group who would consent to making their day-to-day leadership decisions by considering the Six Emerging Trends. Six principals were selected who now have collected baseline data and are in a phase of informing their decisions through the “lenses” of the Six Trends. When asked if they would participate in this project, the school leaders were emphatic regarding the need for such lenses through which they could make their decisions. In initial meetings, each principal acknowledged the need to maximize student learning. No structure or relevant protocol existed, however, that linked student and school needs to important development needs of the rural communities served by the school. The Think Tank helped give principals a voice, ideas, and support in making decisions that bridged the necessary link between a public school and its rural community.

Think Tank membership, comprised of 24 representatives of school districts, IUs, the state legislature, local rural community leaders, and article co-author Harmon developed guiding questions for the pilot school principals. The data gathered through experiences of the principals will help move toward the ultimate goal of a “grow-your-own” school leaders model, uniquely designed for the rural region. Research reveals the “grow-your-own” approach is one of three promising strategies for recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas (Beesley, Atwill, Blair, & Barley, 2010). Moreover, research consistently reveals a strong positive correlation between location of current teaching position and location of hometown, high school or college (Beesley, Atwill, Blair, & Barley). Studies reveal that those who enjoyed their rural lifestyle as children and young adults value the benefits that smaller rural schools and communities offer, such as strong student-teacher relationships, fewer discipline problems, increased individual attention, increased parental involvement, and lack of crime.
Efforts to build rural leadership through the “grow-your-own” approach are gaining steam nationally. Schulken (2010) reports in an Education Week article that “Increasingly, money and attention are turning toward programs that hand-pick promising rural teaching candidates and school leaders and equip them to thrive in a geographically-isolated environment where resources are limited, poverty can be high, and academic achievement often lags.” A key concept is to identify local talent and build on it. Growing skilled school leaders from within seeks to permanently strengthen rural schools in ways that address the complexities and unique needs of communities, rather than relying on “fix-it” strategies from outsiders with limited knowledge and experience in a rural context.

The IU9 pilot principal efforts and Think Tank will be invaluable in: (1) defining characteristics of a rural school leader; (2) identifying potential rural school leaders; (3) defining professional development for emerging school leaders that considers the Six Emerging Trends; and (4) creating a support group for emerging public school leaders within the rural, geographically-large, and somewhat isolated IU9 service region. Think Tank members from other IUs hope to evolve a similar “grow-our-own” leadership development effort in their respective rural regions.

School leaders are defined to include building principals, department chairpersons, lead teachers, instructional coaches, and instructional technology integrators. The “grow-our-own” philosophy seeks to better serve the majority of students and communities by preventing the “hollowing-out” phenomenon documented by Carr and Kefalas in their book. The book serves as an invaluable resource in framing rural culture realities and what can be done to address the “hollowing-out” phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

The IU9 executive director has involved board members and district superintendents in each step of the rural leadership initiative. At this point, it is unknown how quickly support for the “rural leadership initiative” will evolve. But this is a work in progress. There has been little negativity from important stakeholders, but more an air of passive support and acceptance. Curiosity and interest in the rural leadership activities are growing. Key IU9 stakeholders are beginning to recognize that new thinking and commitments are critical in these times of drastic change and tight budgets. The old strategy of “doing more with less” in rural areas is unsustainable, even counterproductive, for both students and local communities. How the IU9 Rural Leadership Initiative begins to show evidence in achieving benefits for students, schools, and communities in the rural areas will likely produce more active curiosity and involvement.

IU9 Rural Leadership Conference Two was scheduled for July 2011. The content for the conference was determined by analyzing emerging trends in the rural culture of the region. Focus sessions scheduled for the 2011 conference included:

- Generational poverty
- The power of belief systems
- Early childhood issues in rural Pennsylvania
- New leadership for rural teaching and learning
- Rural health issues
- Overview of IU9 rural leadership initiatives
- Impact of the Marcellus Shale on rural Pennsylvania
- Technology in rural education
The Rural Education Leadership Initiative is beginning to evolve new possibilities and partners for IU9. For example, the IU9 Executive Director was approached by key personnel of the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) for the Mid-Atlantic Region to explore how IU9 might serve the role of a rural “research alliance” in its next application to operate the Mid-Atlantic laboratory. This role could potentially enhance and fast-track new ventures considerably. It presents opportunities for innovation that could benefit all rural Pennsylvania IUs and rural schools throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.

Does IU9 have some lofty goals for its own organization and for other rural ESAs? You bet. The goals are especially challenging for those who view student success on a state assessment as the only characteristic of a successful school in rural communities. Good public schools are vital to the future of viable rural communities across the nation. IU9 recognizes, and is grateful for, the contributions of teachers and administrators in the IU9 region who exemplify high levels of professionalism and passion for education. IU9 is rethinking its commitment regarding how to best serve these professionals, their rural schools, and their communities. The new vision strives to create a rich legacy of services that will benefit future generations who choose to live and think “rural and small.”

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The Learning Achievement Coalition-Oakland Confronts the Achievement Gap in Mathematics

by
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Michael Yocum
Valerie Mills

Introduction

This is the third in a series of articles documenting the progress of The Learning Achievement Coalition – Oakland (LAC-O). This remarkable collaborative effort involves a regional service agency, a university, and 28 school districts in Oakland County, Michigan. LAC-O’s purpose is to improve achievement for all students, especially students of color, students suffering the effects of poverty, and non-traditional learners.

The first of the two articles (Martin, Wiggins, & Zumsteg, 2009) described the dynamics of the collaborative effort leading to the establishment of LAC-O and the decision to align its work with three major goals involving student engagement, mathematics and literacy. The second (Maxfield, Thomas, & Turpin, 2010) focused on the successful efforts to engage students and parents in the effort to identify and address achievement disparities.

During the time period spanned by these two articles LAC-O has become a major priority for the participating local school districts, the intermediate school district and Oakland University. Examples of progress include the following:

- Prior to the 2010-11 school year, the superintendents of the 28 local districts developed and unanimously ratified a set of 10 commitments intended to advance the work of LAC-O collectively across the county and individually in each district.
- The administration of the intermediate school district (ISD) further supported this effort by aligning the ISD’s priorities with the commitments embraced by the superintendents.
In October 2010, administrators and teachers from Oakland County high schools convened at the ISD to review the needs identified and commitments made by students who attended the first annual student conference held toward the end of the 2009-10 school year.

In April 2011, the second annual LAC-O Student Leadership Conference again took place on the Oakland University campus. Almost 400 10th and 11th grade students from approximately 45 high schools participated.

The 2010-11 school year also saw the establishment of new African American Parent Networks in local districts bringing the total across the county to 13. During the past year these groups have hosted four county-wide events featuring nationally known speakers and highlighting promising local initiatives.

While the accomplishments noted above are significant because they demonstrate a regional commitment and engagement of educators, parents and students in a common effort, LAC-O’s success ultimately depends on identifying and closing achievement gaps involving targeted students. This article will focus on the mathematics goal with particular attention to high school algebra.

In 2005 the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) issued the following position on closing achievement gaps in mathematics:

“Every student should have equitable and optimal opportunities to learn mathematics free from bias – intentional and unintentional – based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, or language. In order to close the achievement gap, all students need the opportunity to learn challenging mathematics from well-qualified teachers who will make connections to the background, needs, and cultures of all learners.” (NCTM, 2005)

The NCTM position reflected the harsh reality presented by the persistent achievement gaps found throughout American education. It has been argued that the achievement gap in mathematics is “the most significant problem facing African American students in American schools (Johnson and Krilsonis, 2007). More than 10 years ago, Kati Haycock (2001) reported that:

- Only one in 50 Latinos and one in 100 African Americans can comfortably do multistep problem solving and elementary algebra, compared to one in 10 white students.
- Only three in 10 African American and four in 10 Latino 17 year-olds have mastered the usage and computation of fractions, commonly used percents, and averages, compared to seven in 10 white students.

During the first decade of the 21st century considerable attention was given to improving student achievement to meet requirements of the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation. For the most part this raised expectations for the academic progress of all students and called attention to the persistent achievement gaps based on race, economic status and a variety of other factors. Sadly, after 10 years, while student achievement has improved across all groups, the gaps persist across the nation as well as in Oakland County, Michigan.

The LAC-O Task Force created three committees to work on its three priorities: Student engagement, mathematics and literacy. The mathematics committee consisted of teachers, administrators, university faculty and intermediate school district personnel. The committee began its work by reviewing data from the statewide assessments, and classroom level achievement data, as well as conducting a review of the literature on achievement gaps in mathematics and effective strategies for closing those gaps.
Not only was it clear from the review of the grading and assessment data in the county that there was a gap in achievement in mathematics across different groups, there was also concern that overall achievement was low. Only 65% of all students received a C- or better in algebra by the end of grade nine. For economically disadvantaged youth and African American students, however, the data was far worse. For that group, less than half (46%) of the students received a C- or better in algebra by the end of grade nine. In addition, the scores for students on the 2007 mathematics portion of the statewide assessment (Michigan Merit Examination) showed an even more disturbing pattern with only 26.2% of economically disadvantaged students meeting state expectations. The scores for African American students were far lower. In the three districts in the county with predominately African American student populations, passing rates on the mathematics portion of the statewide assessment were 6.0%, 7.8% and 14.7%. Overall, only 17.7% of African Americans passed the mathematics portion of the statewide high school assessment in 2007 compared to 62.8% of all other students in the county, a difference of 45.1 percentage points. Clearly there was a need for increased mathematics achievement overall, but the gap between groups was unsettling. Based on these reviews, the committee identified algebra as the focal point for its work and set as its goal that all students will successfully complete Algebra I by the end of grade 9.

The focus on algebra was due to the belief that it serves as a gatekeeper to academic success in high school. The gap between African American students and other students in the county at the high school level was significant. By the time students reached grade eight, African-American students were falling significantly behind their peers in the number of students taking algebra at the middle school level as well as the number of students passing Algebra I by the end of ninth grade. The committee worked closely with Oakland Schools ISD mathematics consultants Valerie Mills, Dana Gosen and Gerri Devine to devise strategies designed to meet the identified objectives.

The Leadership Team initiated its work by establishing a county-wide mathematics leadership team who sponsored a Mathematics Summit focused on the achievement gap and invited speakers from the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) to address the group. SRI had developed, based on a review of the literature and input from mathematics education experts, a conceptual framework for organizing mathematics interventions. The Framework is based on five categories that need to be addressed comprehensively. Exclusive attention to one or two of the areas is insufficient to bring about meaningful, sustained change in mathematics achievement. The five categories of the framework include: 1) organizational and social climate, 2) curriculum materials, 3) pedagogy, 4) teacher characteristics, and 5) intensification strategy. Each of these categories has multiple “levers.” Based on this initial work, a four-pronged strategy was developed to attack achievement gaps in mathematics in the county specifically focusing on algebra and grant funding was pursued to support the efforts.

Each of the prongs represented a category in the SRI Conceptual Framework, but combined teacher characteristics with each, thus encompassing the idea of teacher expectations with pedagogy. Drawing upon some existing professional development programs and devising a number of others, the mathematics team at Oakland Schools ISD designed an extensive professional development series that included face-to-face traditional professional development sessions with in-classroom coaching for teachers based on a modified lesson study approach.

Rather than attempting to pursue numerous aspects of teacher professional knowledge and skills, the professional development was targeted to assist teachers in understanding a functions-based approach to algebra in both course content and pedagogical approach. At the heart of the professional development was a series of tools and routines intended to support teacher growth and teacher leadership. Central among these was the Mathematical Tasks Framework (Stein & Smith, 1998) shown on page 44 and a lesson planning protocol that supports the enactment of high demand tasks (Smith, Bill, & Hughes, 2008).
The lesson planning protocol helps teachers analyze and design lessons taking into account the steps identified in the Mathematics Tasks Framework. It is an important tool to support teachers in thinking about a mathematics lesson differently. It takes them through the process of first considering the task students will be asked to undertake in a lesson, how to structure the task to make it cognitively demanding, how to launch the task, and how to elicit and make visible student thinking during and after the task.

The use of high quality instructional and assessment tasks with the lesson planning protocol became central to the work because it helped connect for the teachers each of the categories of the SRI Conceptual Framework. The reason for this is simple - tasks matter. If the hope is to raise student achievement in mathematics and close achievement gaps then opportunity to learn is critical. The quality of the tasks students are assigned in a mathematics class defines their opportunity to learn (Stein, Grover, & Henningsen, 1996). But equally important for the students’ opportunity to learn is the teacher’s ability to utilize those tasks to stimulate learning. Not only did it help deepen teachers’ understanding of their practice, the use of meaningful high quality mathematical tasks aided teachers in thinking about designing lessons that would build greater coherence across grade levels and thereby a curriculum that would work toward student understanding of important algebraic ideas and skill.

The use of the lesson planning protocol was critical in assisting teachers in introducing more demanding mathematical tasks effectively. Tasks that allow for multiple solutions that are carefully crafted and skillfully introduced to students provide teachers an opportunity to both engage students in conversation about the mathematical content and gain an inroad into student thinking about the mathematics concepts. When teachers understand how to enter into students’ thinking about the mathematics content, they also have a better opportunity to apply appropriate interventions.

Understanding students’ thinking as they solve a demanding mathematical task is critical but insufficient. A major part of the LAC-O project involved giving teachers the resources to implement successful intervention strategies during core instruction. A wide variety of resources were made available to teachers to use in helping students understand the mathematics behind these tasks. These resources include devices such as graphing calculators, smart boards, mathematical manipulatives, and interactive websites and appropriate software.

The tools described above represent an important cadre of useful devices utilized in the LAC-O project to build teacher capacity by building teacher knowledge and skills while improving curriculum and assessment, providing teachers useful tools to use intervention strategies with students and the knowledge to know when and how to effectively apply them. But in order for mathematical achievement to increase, the project still needed to attend to organizational factors identified in the SRI Conceptual Framework. The project team chose to do this by building local district leadership capacity.
One of the key tools utilized in the project was to provide in-school coaching through local district employees rather than use external coaches. The coaches attend all of the professional development sessions provided through the ISD as well as sessions designed specifically to increase their skills as instructional leaders in mathematics. The second key decision was to deepen the time and obligations of the county-wide mathematics leadership team. They began to meet more regularly and took on heightened responsibilities. As the project moved forward, the State Common Core Standards were adopted by the Michigan State Board of Education. It was decided that the Oakland Schools Mathematics Leadership Team would take a lead role in developing an ISD-wide common core mathematics curriculum. Since many of the members of that team were involved in the LAC-O work already, they were well positioned for their new responsibilities. The professional development work, by focusing on meaningful and demanding academic tasks, provided a smooth entrée to understanding the eight mathematical practices in the State Common Core Standards in Mathematics.

The LAC-O project in mathematics has been extensive and student passing rates on Algebra I have increased. The passing rate for Algebra I for students in the class of 2011 was 65%. The passing rate for students in the class of 2013 had climbed to 74%. Even more encouraging, the passing rate for African American students in the class of 2011 was 45% and for the class of 2013 it was 58%. Economically disadvantaged students showed an even greater gain with the passing rate for the class of 2011 at 45% and 63% for the class of 2013. Data from the state assessment in mathematics at the high school level has not been as encouraging. While the passing rate for African American students has increased from 17% in 2009 to 24% in 2011, the gap between African American and all other students has stayed constant at 45%.

While the work of LAC-O in mathematics has been impressive, it would be too early to say it was those efforts that have led to greater numbers of students successfully completing algebra by the end of grade nine. Nevertheless, it is clear the project has been highly successful at targeting the resources of the ISD, the university and the local districts on a common mission. And, it has clearly laid the groundwork for continued collaborative efforts aimed at increasing student achievement in mathematics while reducing achievement gaps between groups.

Looking ahead

On August 16, 2011 at their annual retreat, the ISD superintendent and the 28 local school district superintendent renewed their commitment to continue their collaborative efforts in literacy and student engagement as well as mathematics. For the next year the focus of the literacy goal will be the improvement of non-fiction writing at all levels. The ISD staff will support this initiative through extensive professional development and sharing of “best practices” between local districts. Efforts to advance the student engagement goal will include an expanded student voice project coordinated by the University of Michigan, a county-wide dialogue on culturally responsive teaching, a third annual student leadership conference, and a follow-up survey of students and teachers.

In addition to the continuation of these three goals, the ISD staff is working with local districts on instructional reform efforts organized around the Common Core and the Visible Thinking initiative promoted by Project Zero at Harvard University. It is the heartfelt belief of everyone involved in LAC-O that simply eliminating achievement gaps on traditional academic measures is not sufficient. Learning at a higher level is necessary to ensure that students are competitive with their counterparts throughout the United States and across the world. This commitment will influence the work of LAC-O next year and beyond.
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The Learning Achievement Coalition Website may be accessed at LAC-O.org.
Coaching to Lead: Getting Results

by
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and Sandy Jessop

Introduction

The Solano County Office of Education provides technical assistance, support and leadership services to six school districts in northern California serving 66,674 students in 100 schools, K-12. This article describes how our educational service agency effectively implemented a leadership coaching model throughout the county, in 40 schools across five school districts. Our ESA supported the school districts by providing leadership coaching to site and district administrators and their leadership teams with a specific focus on improving student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. Our work is grounded in the principle that schools need administrators and other leaders who are able to build communities of practice that will enable all students to succeed.

In this article, we begin by providing a framework for the coaching model that we implemented. We then describe the signature practices that we found had the greatest impact on improved student achievement. We end with a summary of student achievement data that supports the relationship between leadership coaching and its potential long term effects on the administrator’s ability to develop and sustain a school-wide culture of efficacy.

Background

Why the urgency for leadership coaching? In March of 2010, the blueprint for revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was released as The Blueprint for Reform. The plan focuses on ensuring that students are prepared to succeed in college and the workplace and asks states to create accountability systems that recognize student growth and school progress toward meeting that goal. Central to the core mission of the Solano County Office of Education (SCOE) is the belief that it is our role to provide effective leadership and services that support our districts in their effort to ensure a positive outcome for every Solano County student. As stated by Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, “…we owe it to our children to act now.”
The Blueprint for Reform additionally asks that states and districts develop meaningful ways of measuring teacher and principal effectiveness in order to provide better support for educators, enhance the profession through recognizing and rewarding excellence, and ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader. According to Jay Speck, Solano County Superintendent of Schools, “Leadership coaching can be a tipping point that supports school and district leaders who endeavor to improve achievement for all students.” The SCOE leadership coaching model, aligned with the Blueprint for Reform and our core mission, supports the notion that our schools need administrators who can effectively build positive relationships with key stakeholders while at the same time leading improvement efforts sustainable for the long term.

Coaching Framework

The SCOE launched the L.E.A.D. (Leadership, Equity, Accountability, and Data Driven Dialogue) Initiative in 2006. This was the initial framework for providing professional development for administrators throughout our county. We found that although the professional development was well received, it did not provide the basis for transforming instructional practice at the school site level, a process that we know to be the greatest variable to improving student achievement. This influenced our decision to provide more focused and targeted support for site and district administrators.

Research shows that it is essential that principals and school leaders effectively lead school improvement efforts, and that they benefit significantly from intensive, contextualized support from a coach to support these efforts (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). Therefore, in 2007, in partnership with the Association of California School Administrators, we implemented a coaching model explicitly tied to the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSELs). We became Certified School Leadership Coaches approved by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing through the New Teacher Center at UC Santa Cruz and the Association of California School Administrators. We then formed the Solano CLASS (Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success) Coaching Network.

Our initial coaching model focused solely on facilitative and instructional approaches in our practice. Since most of the site and district level administrators we coach are working in the program improvement context and this often necessitates them moving into action in a decisive manner in a very short time, we have since added an “urgent coaching” approach. This leadership coaching approach is often the most appropriate under these challenging circumstances. Critical to the success of the coaching support has been our use of a two-pronged process as necessary: Coaching of the principal individually, and coaching of the principal and his or her leadership teams when appropriate.

The coaching support is brokered through each school district’s superintendent’s office with the recognition that the superintendent plays a critical role in supporting site and district administrators in this era of high stakes accountability. After establishing the working relationship with the superintendent’s office, we then work either with the superintendent’s office or the participant’s supervisor to collaboratively establish goals related to coaching outcomes and identify the instructional leadership skills needed that will result in systemic change and
improved student achievement. The coach and the participant meet monthly, aligning coaching support activities with the goals established. This process guides the design of an individual development plan is monitored as a measure of progress in the growth of the instructional leadership skills identified by the participant of the program, his/her supervisor, and the coach. Central to the coaching process is the notion that the entire process is entirely confidential and not used as part of the evaluation process, thereby promoting a willingness for risk-taking on the part of the participant.

Our coaching model is centered on the following core principles:

• We are bold in moving the coaching process in a direction that will build effective instructional leadership, even when that movement may be uncomfortable.

• We adhere to the code of ethics for professional school leadership coaches.

• We insist upon rigor and consistency focused upon issues that impact student achievement.

• We seek feedback from coaches, colleagues, and others as we work to improve our own coaching practice.

• We support the development and use of tools that support our practice.

Supporting Instructional Leadership Skill Development

The role of an instructional leader differs from that of traditional school administrators in a number of meaningful ways. Whereas a conventional principal spends the majority of his/her time dealing strictly with administrative duties, a principal who is an instructional leader is charged with redefining his/her role to become the primary learner in a community striving for excellence in education. Instructional leadership can be defined as, “Those actions that a principal takes, or delegates to others, to promote growth in student learning.” In practice, this means that the principal encourages educational achievement by making instructional quality the top priority of the school and brings that vision to realization.

Our coaching is centered on the development of key instructional leadership variables that research has shown contribute to the long term sustainability of improved student achievement. The first is the ability to exhibit benevolence.” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004)
Another key effective leadership variable is honesty and openness (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Accepting responsibility, having integrity, honoring agreements, and sharing decision making are the foundation on which professionalism is built. Leaders must be able to engage others through the creation of a shared vision; this takes a willingness to be open and honest. We coach school leaders and their teams around the notion that if they expect individuals to act in a professional manner, they need to be able to exhibit that behavior themselves. Teachers, students, and parents need to know that they can trust the principal to lead, especially in times of crisis and concern.

Competence and reliability are also important variables that lead to student success (Tschannen-Moran and Bass, 2004). Engaging in problem solving for results, fostering conflict resolution, being flexible while handling difficult situations, being consistent, and demonstrating commitment are key skills exhibited by effective instructional leaders. Leaders must have the ability to adapt to the relentless pressure to change. This takes the development of an understanding of the change process, the skills of effectively sharing their knowledge and the ability to ensure instructional coherence. We coach school leaders around these critical skills encompassing competence and reliability, because they contribute to building trust between the leader and key stakeholders. The culture of trust with a focus on collaboration and shared instructional practices is the premise under which improved student achievement is grounded – trust between students and teachers, between teachers and parents, between teachers and the leader, and between the schools and the community.

Our Instructional Leadership Coaching is further influenced around high leverage variables of leadership that impact student achievement, and assist school leaders in developing a mental model for prioritizing the challenges of instructional leadership. We have found through our work that effective instructional leadership involves developing a common vision of good instruction: building relationships, empowering staff to be innovative and engaging with instruction, giving one another feedback, and sharing best practices.

Our quest to achieve success and provide targeted improvement is attained by working with school leaders to build a culture of efficacy that supports quality instruction. We further help the instructional leaders to work carefully with staff as they craft strategic actions based on identified student needs, ensure instructional coherence by engaging in classroom walk-throughs, reinforce expectations and accountability, and create

L.E.A.D Initiative Instructional Leadership Framework
opportunities to engage and support staff and build positive relationships through effective communication. As one participant expressed, “…my coach has been an excellent resource when I had questions, was always willing to provide feedback on what I was doing and most importantly, provided support and advice when I had problems to solve.” She further adds “it was really an advantage to have an outside objective person to get perspective.”

**Improved Student Achievement Data**

The current re-authorization of the ESEA emphasizes equal access to education and establishes high standards and accountability with a lens highly focused on the underachievement of significant groups of students. In addition to the federal accountability system that requires states to establish Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks, California schools also have state level accountability measured by the Academic Performance Index (API). The API is a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1,000 that reflects a school’s, a district’s or a subgroup of students’ performance level, based on the results of statewide testing. Its purpose is to measure the academic performance and growth and is based on an improvement model. Each school has an annual target, and the API from one year is compared to the API from the prior year to measure improvement.

**Student Demographics**

**Average Point Gain in Academic Performance Index (API) for all 7 Schools**

**2-Year Average Growth in Academic Performance Index for all 7 Schools**

**Percentage of Schools with 10 or More Point Gain in Academic Performance Index for all 7 Schools**

**Note:** EL=English Learner, SED=Socio Economically Disadvantaged, SWD=Students with Disabilities
For the purposes of this article, we focused on the growth in API for seven identified schools that had received coaching support for at least a two year period. These schools were engaged in multiple school improvement efforts over the last two years, with instructional leadership coaching influencing and supporting those endeavors along the way. All of the schools were identified to be in various stages of Program Improvement (PI) and 70% of the schools were in PI districts. Demographically, in 71% of the schools, 40% or more of the student population was socio-economically disadvantaged (SED); and in 57% of the schools, the English Learner (EL) student population was 20% or higher. We found that from 2008-2010 the schools combined averaged a schoolwide 16 point growth on their API, with 43% of the schools gaining over 10 points or more over the two years. In the same two year period, 43% of the seven schools met both their API targets school wide as well as the benchmark established for their significant subgroups. The API data for the 2009-2010 school year further indicates that 43% of the seven schools increased their API by an average of ninepoints. In addition they all met the school-wide API target as well as the target established for their significant subgroups. Furthermore, four of the seven schools that had a significant subgroup of SED students increased their API by 10 points or greater over the two year period. There was an average 17 point gain for the subgroup of students with disabilities (SWD) over the same two year period for all seven schools. Additionally, two of the schools showed an average 60 point gain for this SWD subgroup on their API in 2009-2010.

Reflections on the Journey

One of the participants, when asked to reflect on the impact of the coaching experience, summed up her journey this way: “I feel that I have benefited from having a coach for these past two years; the coaching has helped me build my resiliency in this demanding job placement. My instructional leadership coach allowed me to share my work, challenges and project outcomes. The process of this coaching enabled me to move forward in my own learning and reflecting on my needs and that of my teachers and students. Additionally, this coaching process helped me not feel so isolated in the decisions that I was making to move this school forward. After these two years, I feel stronger in my belief that I belong in this position. I realize that this is a job with embedded learning, and I don’t always have to have all the answers; my coach reassured me that this was a process. I feel that as a result of this experience, I am better able to bounce back when things don’t seem to work out the way I planned and that I am able to face the barriers and challenges with new eyes. I’ve enjoyed this relationship. It has helped me in my professional development and given me support in my personal development as well…” This individual’s experience speaks to how she was effectively enabled to grow as a leader with a focus on building the strategies and skills that would have the greatest impact on improved student achievement.

Summary

Our work as coaches in our ESA’s instructional leadership coaching network is about making a difference for all students. In order to effect and sustain a lasting impact on student achievement, coaches help their assigned clientele, school and district leaders look beneath and beyond immediate challenges to identify systemic causes and opportunities to improve student achievement for all learners. We have found that school leadership positions can be isolated and emotionally challenging; therefore, the instructional leadership coach provides encouragement and support to help the school and district leaders maintain focus and motivation. The positive outcomes of regular and effective instructional leadership coaching over a two year period has allowed school and district leaders an opportunity for ongoing professional development. This one-on-one instructional coaching has helped the participants find opportunities for growth and action, and has led them to establish goals, make plans to achieve them, and identify, discuss and debrief actions to be taken. According to one, “…
participating in coaching has impacted my instructional leadership practice by providing a trusted relationship in which to discuss my contemplated actions as a principal, to receive personal and confidential feedback, to set goals, and be encouraged by someone who has practical experience in ‘walking in my shoes.’”

The result of leadership coaching is the development of skills that enable the participants to build a collaborative learning environment where learning is not confined to the classroom. Responsibility for student learning is identified as the objective of all educators. The program works to create an environment in which there is a clear sense of direction, and where the priority and focus is on the things that really matter in terms of student learning and growth. In addition, those who learn to be effective instructional leaders acquire many characteristics that are beneficial to their larger community as well as their schools. We believe that this coaching model supports instructional leaders in transforming their practice, thereby increasing student achievement for all students sustainable for the long term.

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The building principal checks her schedule one last time before the day begins. Today, a group of 15 education professionals led by staff from the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation, one of eight Kentucky educational cooperatives, will meet and observe in her building. The goal for the group is to participate fully in a new form of professional learning for educators that incorporates observation, analysis of teaching and learning and discussion. The group will look at a specific school issue, defined as the school “problem of practice,” and develop next steps for the school to implement for academic improvement. The process, known as Instructional Rounds, is based on the medical rounds model as applied to K-12 education and provides a community of practice among educational professionals committed to improving instruction. Two of Kentucky’s education cooperatives had the opportunity to study the Instructional Rounds process at Harvard University and implement the process in Kentucky school districts.

**Instructional Rounds**

*Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, by Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sara Fiarman, and Lee Teitel (2009) outlines a learning process for educators to develop their individual performance while offering suggestions to participating schools to improve their professional practice. The process of Instructional Rounds touches on three current popular approaches for improvement of teaching and learning: Classroom walkthroughs, professional learning communities and school improvement plans. While all of these are useful for school improvement, instructional rounds focuses improvement on a very narrow problem. Walkthroughs are typically used to evaluate individual teachers, teacher focus and check for compliance, while instructional rounds look at one problem, using a lens that is focused on the task and the instructional core as participants visit each classroom. Popular walkthrough models that collect data and measure teacher effectiveness include district created documents and standardized forms like “The Pittsburgh Walkthrough Model” and “The Three Minute
Walkthrough” or iObservation. Professional Learning Communities also serve a wide variety of purposes within schools. They can be both long or short term in nature, and either connected to school improvement or not. Instructional Rounds PLCs meet regularly to engage in and develop a common professional practice together, developing a professional community over time that supports improvement of instruction, improvement of the work, and improvement of our practice.

Having a stated school-wide improvement strategy is a precondition for instructional rounds work. The process of rounds requires participants to focus on a common problem of practice that cuts across all levels of the school. This problem of practice usually stems from a larger school improvement plan. School improvement plans are mandated by the Kentucky Department of Education for every Kentucky school. A typical school improvement document will include at least three major areas for the school to improve with multiple objectives within those three areas. The problem of practice is easily extracted from this document.

Instructional Rounds superintendent cohort groups were developed and are facilitated in Kentucky through the work of the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation (KEDC) and Green River Region Educational Cooperative (GRREC) after participating in Harvard’s Instructional Rounds Institute. KEDC and GRREC are two of the eight regional education cooperatives in Kentucky. The process is grounded in a specific set of protocols, with a learning theory based on how student achievement can be improved at the district level. As our district superintendents have developed their professional practice, they have begun using the process of instructional rounds at the district and school levels to improve student achievement.

“The Instructional Core

The instructional core is defined as “teachers and students working together in the presence of content” (Elmore, 2006). KEDC and GRREC support the belief that what happens in this triangle is the most significant piece of school improvement.
The Instructional Core

By using the instructional core as the context for our work, participants are forced to look at the actual task assigned to the student by the teacher as it relates to the content. This is the center of the instructional core (Doyle, 1983). We begin each school visit by reviewing established protocols, group norms, and fine tuning the question “What are the actual interactions between the teacher, the student, and the instructional task that has been assigned (the content)?” By framing the work at the core level, participants are then free to explore any preconceptions or misconceptions relating to what is seen in the classrooms. Educators can develop their understanding of what they see by using the ladder of inference (Senge, 1994) to clarify their own thought processes and reasoning, making their thoughts clearer for others to see, and developing skills of inquiry to understand the thinking of others (Ross, n.d.). The group begins to process their thinking in terms of “How do we help this school get to the next level?” rather than “Is this good/bad work I am seeing?” A critical piece of the discussion is that the focal point of conversation is strictly on the school, not the teachers in the classrooms. Within that learning context, participants are free to look at the evidence and how it relates to student performance and accountability, while focusing on a common issue during the instructional rounds in a professionally safe environment. A specific example might be to explore if there is evidence of teachers using a variety of strategies to make content concepts clear; i.e., modeling, visuals, hands-on, gestures, body language, support of assistants, etc. If this idea is improved and monitored and the outcomes show an increase in student learning, this could lead to improvement in teacher autonomy, collegiality, and professional collaboration. Teachers will then have increased commitment to the process and improve the instructional core, instructional practice and student achievement.

“The group begins to process their thinking in terms of ‘How do we help this school get to the next level?’ rather than ‘Is this good/bad work I am seeing?’”

Instructional Rounds Process

The instructional rounds process includes four specific steps that begin with the development of the problem of practice. The problem of practice is essentially a question that helps the group frame classroom observations to a single item and assist with determining patterns in the observation phase. The problem of practice is based on a current issue facing the host school and is used to focus the participants on a common issue during the observations and debriefings. The problem of practice can be developed by the principal and school leadership team, with input from the district and KEDC or GRREC facilitator. This problem statement and related context must be grounded in school data and current work the school is focused on. It is related to evidence that is already present within the school’s context. The problem of practice should follow these guidelines: Focuses on the instructional core, is directly observable, is actionable, connects the work to a broader strategy of school improvement, and has high leverage for the school if they can resolve the problem (City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel, 2009).

The problem of practice, once developed by the host school, is presented to the group once they all arrive for the scheduled school visit. The participants have an opportunity at this time to ask clarifying questions regarding the problem of practice, review their established norms and reflect on their observational skills before the classroom observations begin for the morning.
SAMPLE PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE USED IN KENTUCKY SCHOOLS

What evidence do you see of high expectations in the kinds of tasks students are asked to do, and in the work they produce?

How are groups working? Are students helping each other to learn? Is learning a mutual endeavor in groups? What evidence of significant learning do we see (group or individual)?

What is the evidence (through questions, teacher/student interaction, student/student interaction, assigned tasks, or routine procedures) that differentiation of students’ academic needs are being addressed in the classrooms?

Is there evidence that the student activity (task) demonstrates student understanding of stated learning goal? Can students demonstrate understanding with student products and/or student responses?

How do teachers engage students in critical thinking regarding the content presented? What questioning techniques/strategies are utilized to check comprehension of all students?

The participants begin the observation phase by spending the remainder of the morning visiting and observing in classrooms throughout the school. Everyone is scheduled into specific classrooms in small groups of three or four people. Participants are gathering first person data with each classroom they visit. The work is focused directly on what is observable and related to the stated problem of practice. The goal in the classroom observations step is to improve the system of support at the school level in a way that will make highly effective teaching more commonplace throughout the school (Teitel, 2010). It is important for the participants to look at what the students are actually doing at this point, not what the teacher thinks the assignment is, or what the stated curriculum says the assignment is, but the task that is on the desk. Traditional classroom observation training makes this a different perspective for educators, at first. But, like a muscle, the more this skill is used and developed, the better each participant will become.

SAMPLE CLASSROOM OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time/Team</th>
<th>Elaine Evelyn Stan</th>
<th>Stu Mary John Ann</th>
<th>Don A Jack Meredith</th>
<th>Don S H.M. Pam</th>
<th>Jan Chuck Meribeth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:25</td>
<td>Stager-4th Room C1</td>
<td>Smith-4th Room C2</td>
<td>Mayfield-K Room A2</td>
<td>Taylor-K Room A3</td>
<td>Miller-1st Room A5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:50-10:15</td>
<td>Coleman-2nd Room B1</td>
<td>Plummer-1st Room A4</td>
<td>Murphy-3rd Room B3</td>
<td>Payne-5th Room D1</td>
<td>Jackman-5th Room C6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15-10:40</td>
<td>White-2nd Room A8</td>
<td>Wilcox-4th Room C3</td>
<td>Crowe-PE Gym</td>
<td>Lester-Art Room D4</td>
<td>Vaca-Spanish Room B7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:40-11:05</td>
<td>Miller-1st Room A5</td>
<td>Coleman-2nd Room B1</td>
<td>Payne-5th Room D1</td>
<td>Stager-4th Room C1</td>
<td>Asher-3rd Room B6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third step is observation debrief, which follows a structured protocol. The use of a protocol takes the teacher out of the discussion. It is not a personal evaluation and the participants are not trying to “fix” the teacher (City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel, 2009). The discussion is centered on what was observed.
Using the collected evidence as a springboard for the conversation, each participant states what was observed. There is no questioning or judging, just statements of facts that were observable in the classroom. The role of the group facilitator during this step is critical to developing conversations based on the evidence collected and keeping the group moving up the ladder of inference slowly, instead of jumping from description directly to evaluative statements. Once the evidence is collected, the group begins to analyze the picture they collectively see. What is the highest level of thinking going on in this school? One of the most important norms of the group is the ability to speak freely about what was seen. The rule of confidentiality with regard to the discussion is vital to the development of trust within the group. The participants will ask questions about the patterns they may see, or teaching strategies they may see, but not about specific teachers.

Based on the preceding steps, the group can finally make predictions regarding the teaching practice within the frame of what they saw. The final step is Next Level of Work. The step is focused on developing clarity for all participants and the host school regarding good instructional practice. The participants are focused on moving instructional practice across classrooms consistently within the school’s improvement plan and the related suggestions will support that movement. The suggestions are about developing clarity and commonality about what good instructional practice looks like and what leadership and organizational practices are needed to support high level instruction. This alone is a great source of learning for the cohort because often it involves ideas that can be used in multiple school districts across the state. Facilitating this work has provided the cooperatives with a more developed idea of how to support our host schools and school districts, as well as a culture of stronger academic relationships among the cohort group. The best ideas are often ones that are developed collaboratively by the group and then applied to individual contexts of the district representatives and the education cooperative.

**Learning the Work by Doing the Work**

For superintendents, district level leaders and educational cooperatives to achieve large scale, system-wide improvement they must participate in the work. Our work, as educational cooperatives, is defined by the success of our districts. One learns the work by doing the work, not by making more policies about the work, or spending more money on a new product supporting the work, and not sending in substitutes to do the work (City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel, 2009). The effectiveness of the process lies in the interactions among the participants as they work through the process, develop a common language for the profession, build a culture of trust, and develop a focus on the interaction at the instructional core level to improve our collective professional practice. The group discusses how to help the school, not fix the teacher. The process is focused strictly on moving the school forward toward common language and student achievement. It is not about evaluation of specific teachers within the school. If the next level of work suggests that the school needs additional professional development in using a variety of formative assessments for student achievement, and it is noticed that a single teacher is outstanding at this skill, then the next level of work might recommend allowing this teacher to model for others to improve the practice of the school community. In the end, this type of shared learning makes us better at our individual and collective educational practice.
References


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Making Data-Driven Decisions Based on Effective Measures of English Learner Performance: How ESAs can Provide Support

by
Debbie Zacarian

Background

Improving student outcomes is an important goal for all school leaders and teachers. This is especially true for educators of English learners [ELs] as our nation’s schools have not been successful with this growing population of students. Many are failing, while others are being over-identified or under-identified as having special education needs (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez- Lopez, & Damico, 2007), and are dropping out of school at an alarming rate (Zacarian, 2011). Their scores on the National Report Card point to the significant gaps that are occurring between their performances on state mandated tests and that of their English-fluent peers. English learners scored 38.2% in reading versus the general population score of 70.5% and only 43.8% scored proficient in math versus 67.4% of the general population of students (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008). Whether schools measure their achievement by the high stakes tests that each state administers to its students, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, or by the national report card known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the achievement gap between the nation’s English learners and the general population is alarming.

These outcomes speak to the urgent need for ESAs to support schools to think of more responsive ways for leading schools with and teaching ELs.

The necessity of this work is also punctuated by the rapid growth of this population. Between 1990 and 2000, according to Fix & Passel (2003), the population of English learners increased from 14 million to 21.3 million. While this dramatic growth has been occurring, the nation’s total student population has remained relatively unchanged. Indeed, between 1990-2000, the population of ELs grew by 52% while the total population of the nation’s students basically flat-lined (Fix & Passel, 2003). Urban schools that had once been dominated by monolingual American speakers of English have dramatically shifted to being much more linguistically diverse. Rural and suburban schools that had no experience working with English learners have begun to notice their presence. While most of the nation’s English learners are
concentrated in California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwantoro, 2005), over 50% attend schools where they represent less than 1% of their district’s total population and it is likely, given the rate of growth, that these percentages are also increasing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Thus, while schools are not growing in their total number of students, they are becoming more and more populated with English learners.

**Who are English Learners?**

English learners are not a monolithic group. They represent over 350 different language groups. Some schools or districts may be heavily dominated with students representing a particular language group while a neighboring district’s ELs represent a wide range. While close to 70% of the total population of ELs in the nation is Latino (A Distinct Population, 2009), the primary language that students speak is only one means of describing them. There are other factors that are important to consider. Students who speak Spanish, for example, have distinct cultures and represent many different geographic regions including Central and South America, the Caribbean, Spain, and the United States. Indeed, most of the population of English Learners is born in the United States, including nearly 75% of elementary school-aged ELs (Capps, et al., 2005). In addition, many ELs come from collectivistic cultures where working collaboratively and duty to one’s family, clan, ethnic group, or nation are far more important than is individualism. This is quite distinct from dominant U.S. culture where one’s capacity to think and judge independently is not only expected, it is highly valued and rewarded (Zacarian & Haynes, in press).

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“English learners are not a monolithic group. They represent over 350 different language groups. Some schools or districts may be heavily dominated with students representing a particular language group while a neighboring district’s ELs represent a wide range.... Poverty is also a major concern for many of our nation’s ELs. Close to 66% come from families whose income is 200% below the poverty level.”

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In addition, some of the nation’s English learners have had rich prior literacy and schooling experiences and their parents have strong literacy and educational backgrounds. They draw from their prior schooling and their home experiences and learn English more rapidly than do many of their English learning peers. Many wonder why certain groups of ELs seem to learn English more rapidly than others, especially because we are most concerned and even impatient about the speed at which some students learn English. At the same time, others are concerned about their populations of ELs who never seem to become fluent in English (Calderon & Minaye-Rowe, 2010). These concerns are not unreasonable as there is a large group of students who have not had much in the way of prior literacy and schooling experiences, and their parents are much less educated. These include: (1) English learners from countries where schooling is not mandated, (2) ELs enrolled in U.S. schools who travel with their families back and forth to their home countries spending several months, if not years, straddling their time between the two school environments, (3) ELs who begin school in one place and continually move, as is the case for many children of migrant workers, and (4) ELs who have attended school regularly in their native countries, but because the quality of that education was significantly less than that of a U.S. education, they are several years behind their U.S. peers (De Capua & Marshall, 2011). There are also significant numbers of ELs who have experienced trauma due to war, natural disasters, dramatic poverty, or another highly impacting stressor (Zacarian & Haynes, in press). Many
educators are not sure what to do with these significant populations of English learners who do not have the grade-level English or content skills to perform successfully in school.

Poverty is also a major concern for many of our nation’s ELs. Close to 66% come from families whose income is 200% below the poverty level (A Distinct Population, 2009; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). Indeed, students who are learning English are among the poorest students in our nation’s public and public charter schools.

Each of these factors is important for making decisions about instructional programming for ELs and partnering with parents in their child’s education. At the same time, it is critical to consider the preparation of teachers and others who work with this growing population.

**Who are Teachers of English Learners?**

Most of the nation’s teachers and administrators have had no training or experience working with English learners. Courses in key areas such as bilingual education, second language acquisition, and methods for teaching ELs and culturally and linguistically diverse populations are often taken as electives, if at all, in teacher preparation programs (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Sadly, federal law does not require teachers to be highly qualified to teach English learners (Honawar, 2009). This is particularly true for teachers working in general education, including elementary classroom and secondary subject matter teachers (A Distinct Population, 2009), as well as specialists, such as speech and language pathologists and special educators.

While professional development, including licensure programming, is an obvious solution and ESAs have a critical role to play in this work, keeping pace with the continuous growth of ELs is an extraordinary challenge. It is predicted, for example, that 56,000 English as a Second Language, commonly referred to as ESL, teachers will be needed during the next five years (EPE Research Center, 2009). While some schools do have teachers who are trained to work with ELs, many are members of the same minority groups as their students and report feeling marginalized by their colleagues (Cummins, 2001; Zacarian, 2011). Fortunately, others who have been trained are valued as rich resources and assets by their district (Zacarian, 2011). However, many are finding themselves overwhelmed by the volume of ELs enrolled in their schools and the volume of work that they are given because of the lack of human resources.

**How Can We Make Data-driven Decisions on Behalf of This Dynamically Changing Population?**

The advent of the No Child Left Behind Act required that all students, including ELs, be held to the same standards (Abeldi & Dietel, 2004). While this helped some schools to pay attention to EL students, it also led to a fair amount of criticism about the efficacy of the testing. Some argue that the tests are culturally and linguistically biased, unfair for students who are not proficient in English to be required to take, as well as difficult for educators to interpret, regarding the testing outcomes for this population of learners (Abeldi & Dietel, 2004; Coltrane, 2002; Zacarian, 2011). In addition, student performance on these tests is commonly disaggregated in two ways, by language group and the total number of ELs. These two characteristics do not provide educators with enough information to make solid data-driven decisions based on ELs outcomes on state testing.
The addition of the Common Core States Initiative (2010) should provide us with even more information about what we want students to know and to be able to do during their K-12 education to be prepared for a college education. It should also bolster our resolve, as ESAs, to support schools to think more seriously about better ways for making data-driven decisions based on effective measures of English learner performance.

An important approach to doing this is to have a more effective means for looking at the learning environments that are likely to yield the best outcomes for ELs and their parents in partnering in their child’s schooling. Whether ESAs help schools to better determine the success of the delivery of a lesson, unit of study, parent conference, or school community events, a good ESA approach for assessing effectiveness is to look closely at four interdependent processes of what it is that learners must do to be successful- learn English and subject matters such as math, science, and social studies- as well as what a school must do for their students and families to be actively engaged in their school communities.

The four interdependent processes for language and content learning include:

- Learning is a sociocultural process. Learning must be built on and connected to our students’ and their families’ personal, social, cultural and world knowledge. It must also be meaningful and compelling so that students and families are invested in being participants. In addition, using collaborative learning and teamwork is highly important since these processes reflect many of the collectivist cultures of ELs and are an important means to engage in a high level and quantity of interactions.

- Learning is a developmental process. Making data-based decisions must be targeted to the development stages of English learning in four key areas: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

- Learning is an academic process. Learning involves building on prior academic knowledge to understand key content concepts as well as communicating in the language of content effectively. High quality learning environments must have clearly defined learning objectives and activities that are intentionally targeted to what students will do to learn the content concepts and use the language of content.

- Learning is a cognitive process. Learning involves developing a high level of thinking skills. These higher order cognitive thinking skills must be explicitly taught and visually displayed, and students must be given intentional practice opportunities to use specific thinking skills so that they may learn them successfully.

Using protocols for monitoring learning as well as school and parent engagement environments that draw from this four-pronged framework, such as the ones included in Transforming Schools for English Learners: A Comprehensive Framework for School Leaders (Zacarian, 2011), can be a highly effective means for ESAs to provide professional development and support of school-based collaborative teams, coaches, peers, and supervisors to improve and strengthen their students’ outcomes. These monitoring protocols should include the tools needed to check that learning is connected to socially relevant issues, that it is relevant to ELs’ personal, cultural, language, and world experiences, and that it is a collaborative process. Figure 1 provides a sample of a protocol for examining some elements of collaborative work.

The protocols should also include ways for examining whether instruction and school activities reflect the developmental process of language learning. For example, as a means for strengthening parent involvement, translators should be provided for parents who do not speak English. At the same time,
supporting the implementation of adult English classes may also help. In addition, protocols should be used to see whether key concepts, learning goals, and vocabulary are explicitly taught and learned. For example, observing that key unit and the day’s learning goals are continuously displayed in student-friendly language can be an important means for ensuring that students understand what they are expected to learn. Finally, protocols should include the means to see that cognitive higher order thinking skills are explicitly taught at all grade levels.

When ESAs provide professional development and support to ensure that these protocols are used routinely at the point of delivery, they can create, implement, and sustain school environments where English learners and all students flourish, families are more engaged in their child’s education, and our practices are transformed to meet the needs of our dynamically changing student populations.

### References


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**Point Values**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point</th>
<th>Not Observed</th>
<th>Rarely Observed</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>Frequently Observed</th>
</tr>
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<td>1. Students have been instructed about the process of pair and group work</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>2. Students examine their paired or group process</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Zacarian, D., 2011, p. 167*


Debbie Zacarian, Ed.D., is the director of the Center for English Language Education at the Collaborative for Educational Services in Northhampton, Massachusetts. She can be reached by phone at 413-586-4900 and by email at dzacarian@collaborative.org.
An evolution in providing teachers with online professional development (PD) is occurring in this era of educational improvement and accountability with numerous models and methods under exploration. New knowledge in social network theory and educational change also holds promise for rapidly expanding online professional development opportunities for teachers.

Research about online professional development for educators is evolving and much more investigation is necessary to guide future advancements in offerings and delivery practices. Generally, research thus far conducted finds that high-quality professional development and online professional development can have positive effects on teacher knowledge and can influence instructional practices.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine the status of online professional development in educational service agencies (ESAs) in the United States. Providing professional development for teachers is one of the most prominent functions of ESAs. Yet, little is known about how ESAs are responding to the evolving online professional development movement. Consequently, a national survey was conducted in collaboration with Dr. Brian Talbott, Executive Director of the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA), and with financial support from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) as part of AIR’s work for the Intel Teach program.
Methods

The population for the study included all chief executive officers (CEOs) of ESAs in an e-mail listing compiled and maintained by the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA). A total of 553 ESAs located across the country were included in the listing. After a review of the literature, the researcher developed a survey instrument with the assistance of Dr. Brain Talbott, AESA executive director; Dr. E. Robert Stephens, nationally prominent researcher of ESAs; and Dr. Pamela Jacobs, Director of the Intel(R) Teach National Training Agency.

The web-based survey instrument included five parts: (Part A) Demographics, (Part B) Online PD Offerings, (Part C) Delivery of Online PD for Teachers, (Part D) Evaluation of Online PD, and (Part E) Future Plans. The survey instrument was pilot tested by the CEO or professional development coordinator of an ESA in the states of Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Based on the pilot test, slight revisions were made in the survey, primarily to include or exclude types of online technology platforms and supportive technology tools. Also, survey instructions were clarified for potential respondents in an ESA that did not offer or make online PD available to teachers.

On February 24, 2011, Dr. Talbott sent an e-mail to the 553 names of CEOs in the AESA data base announcing the survey and inviting completion within 10 days. The Zoomerang survey closed on March 23, 2011. Only one person could respond on behalf of the ESA- the CEO, the professional development coordinator or an appropriate person designed by the CEO. Follow-up efforts by Dr. Talbott and the researcher to encourage survey completion by ESAs resulted in 226 useable responses, or a response rate of 42.4 percent. A Windows version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to import the Excel data file from Zoomerang and analyze the data.

Findings: ESA Offering Online PD

ESAs across the U.S. are making online professional development opportunities available to educators. This section highlights a few of the many important findings for ESAs who offered or made available online PD during the last three years.

Demographics

Survey respondents who offered online PD (n=160; 70.8%) were located in 34 states. The states with the greatest percentage of respondents included Michigan (13.1%), Pennsylvania (10.6%), Ohio (8.1%), Illinois (7.5%), Minnesota (5%), and Nebraska (5%). Among the schools that respondents indicate the ESA serves, almost three-fourths (71.9%) of ESAs serve non-public schools and over half (55%) serve charter schools.

Online PD Offerings

Almost all (96.9%) ESAs that offer online PD target public school teachers as the primary audience. Almost two-thirds (64.4%) also target public school administrators. Less than half (43%) of the ESAs target central office administrators and less than three percent target parents of students in public schools.
Types of Teacher Online PD

Type of online PD offered by the greatest percentage (70%) of ESAs is “online courses approved for continuing professional education and/or re-certification credit.” Table B reveals the type of online PD offered or made available by ESAs. More than two-thirds (76.5%) offer “online webinars on educational topics.” Half offer “online access to pedagogical and/or subject matter content,” with slightly less than half of the ESAs offering “Online courses for university graduate credit” (48.8%) and “Online access to videos of best teaching practices” (48.8%). Only about 16 percent of the ESAs offer an “online mentor teacher program for beginning teachers” or “online instructional coach for teachers.”

Source of Online PD

Almost two-thirds (62.7%) of 158 respondents indicate ESA staff designs the content of online PD offerings (see Figure A). Half of 148 ESA respondents indicate they use PD content that is obtained by the ESA at no cost. Slightly more than one-third (38.7%) of 150 respondents reveal the ESA purchases online content. Less than one-fourth (23.2%) of 155 respondents indicate the ESA does not directly offer online PD but negotiates with a third party to provide the PD to teachers and/or administrators.

Figure A. How ESA Obtains Online PD Content

Teacher Participation Incentives

Based on combined ratings of “great extent” and “very great extent,” the incentives selected by the highest percentage of respondents as most effective for increasing teacher participation in online PD were:

- “Teacher receives online PD that directly assists the teacher in his/her classroom practice” (67.3%).
- “Teacher receives free continuing education credits (CEUs) or professional development hours that count toward license/certification renewal” (53.6%).
- “Teacher receives opportunity to network with role-alike peer teachers in online PD” (46.3%).
- “Teacher receives free materials related to online PD for use in classroom” (35.1%).
Delivery of Teacher Online PD

Two-thirds of the respondents indicate an online blended or hybrid approach is the most common delivery method of teacher online PD. Almost equal percentages of ESAs, more than half respectively, also indicate using online asynchronous that is facilitated and online asynchronous that is not facilitated. Slightly more than one in 10 ESAs use online synchronous with face-to-face interaction only.

Facilitator Acquisition

More than half of ESAs use a facilitator in the delivery of online PD. Two-thirds (66.9%) of the 160 ESAs train their own personnel as the facilitator (see Figure B).

Figure B. How ESA Routinely Acquires Facilitator for Online PD

Technology Platforms, Systems and Support Tools

Of the 160 respondents, half indicate that Moodle is used most often as the technology platform; slightly more than one-fifth (22.5%) of the ESAs use Blackboard. Fifty-four, or one-third (33.8%) indicate using Skype as the technology tool to support online PD, followed by Illuminate (26.3%) and Adobe Connect (21.3%).
Funding Teacher Online PD

Based on the 160 respondents who could select all possibilities that apply when indicating a funding source, it is clear that ESAs fund teacher online PD offerings most often in the following ways:

- Individual teacher pays full fee for participation (41.9%)
- School district pays full fee for teacher participation (36.3%)
- ESA pays from operating funds and charges no fee for teacher participation (32.5%)
- Other entity pays full fee for teacher participation (e.g. state funding, federal grant, private business) (26.4%).

Evaluation of Online PD

Slightly more than half (54.4%) of the 160 ESAs use degree of participant satisfaction as one of the measures to evaluate effectiveness of online PD offerings; half also use level of participation as one of the measures. On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), about one-fifth of 120 respondents rate their satisfaction with the quality of online PD opportunities currently offered or made available to teachers by the ESA as a 5; another fifth rate a 7. The mean rating for the 120 respondents was 6.04 with a standard deviation of 1.84.

Barriers to Expanding Teacher Online PD

When combining “great extent” and “very great extent” ratings, “Attracting necessary funding” was selected by the greatest percentage of respondents (n=121; 62%) as a barrier to expanding online PD offerings for teachers, followed by “Overcoming teacher perceptions of no time to participate during school day” (n=119; 50.4%) and “Building interest among teachers who want traditional PD (e.g., face-to-face workshop)” (n=120; 49.2%).

Sustained Teacher Online PD

In addressing the issue of providing high quality PD that is embedded and “sustained” over a time period adequate for teachers to increase knowledge and skills, rather than simply being a one-shot event, 69 of the 160 respondents provided explanations. Five themes emerge from the analysis of comments: (1) direct follow-up assistance to participants, (2) technology applications, (3) extended time period, (4) teacher grouping, and (5) job-embedded improvements.

Offering sustained online PD for teachers is a great challenge for some ESAs, as one ESA respondent notes:

“This is a constant struggle. State initiatives change and grant or federal funding used for the PD has specific guidelines on how to spend funds. We would benefit from any great insight on how to do this with fidelity and with low cost to the ESA.”
ESA Plans

Of the 160 ESA respondents who offer online PD, 98.3 percent of the 118 who answered the question indicate the ESA plans to offer or continue offering online PD to teachers.

Approximately two-thirds (65.3%) of the 118 ESA do not have a formal process for identifying what online PD to offer. Of the 160 ESAs who offer online PD, 112 indicate the best way they learn about a new online PD opportunity that is eventually offered to teachers. Analysis of respondent comments reveals seven approaches: (1) ESA staff, (2) district requests, (3) networking, (4) state initiatives, (5) vendor communications, (6) formal needs assessments, and (7) conference attendance.

Viable Business Models

In explaining the most viable business model or strategy the ESA has found to sustain online PD offerings, comments of respondents reflect no one business model exists. Based on respondent comments, five themes reflect the models in use by ESAs: nonexistent or evolving, district cost-savings, shared capacity building, grant funding, and entrepreneurial marketing.

Findings: ESAs Not Offering Online PD

This section of the summary highlights findings for the respondents in ESAs who did not offer or make available online PD during the last three years. Of the 226 respondents, 66, or 29.2 percent indicate that the ESA did not offer or make available any type of online professional development (PD) in the last three years. Respondents represent ESAs located in 20 states. One fifth (21.2%) of the respondents represent ESAs in Massachusetts and New York. Of the 66 ESAs, four in 10 (43.9%) serve non-public schools; four in 10 (40.9%) indicate serving charter schools.

Future Plans

More than half (57.7%) of the 45 respondents in ESAs that did not offer online PD in the last three years plan to offer online PD to teachers in the future. Ten of the 45 respondents, or about one-fifth (22.2%), indicate the ESA has a process to follow if they decide to offer online PD in the future. Comments of several respondents in ESAs who did not offer online PD reveal the ESA is supportive of offering online PD to teachers. Examples of comments include:

- This is an area we need to move in.
- I think they’re necessary and a good way to preserve scarce resources.
- We are working on it; online PD offers a timely nature of information.
- We are currently looking at online PD for future opportunities.
- We are in the initial stages of developing online PD to offer to our districts.
- We are still in the baby-stages of offerings...we are not even sure of the questions to ask, but are looking at ‘Moodle’ as a possible place to start.
Comments of some respondents also reveal issues or limitations of the ESA in offering online PD for teachers that must be addressed, such as:

- Lack of stable connectivity with our districts is a very limiting factor. We do not have capacity to offer courses.
- We are a relatively small, rural ESA. Staff capacity to develop offerings is an issue.
- We need someone to manage any online PD we would offer.
- Many teachers aren’t used to the technology.
- There are concerns about the delivery method and who is actually participating. It seems that any time discussion centers around on-line PD the general consensus is that participants still prefer face-to-face (PD).
- Our component districts have not yet indicated a need for it.
- We are not going to be looking into this until it is requested by our school districts.

Conclusions

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine the status of online professional development (PD) in educational service agencies (ESAs) across the United States. The response rate of 42.4 percent from the universe of all CEOs in a database compiled and maintained by the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA) is among the highest ever achieved for a national web-based survey of ESAs. The researcher draws 12 conclusions regarding the status of online professional development (PD) in ESAs.

1. Although ESAs may offer online professional development opportunities to administrators and teachers in public schools, charter schools and non-public schools are the primary audience for online professional development currently offered by ESAs in the U.S.

2. ESAs offer a large variety of online professional development opportunities for teachers, which predominantly include online courses approved for continuing professional education and/or recertification credit, online webinars on various educational topics and online access to pedagogical and/or subject matter content and videos of best teaching practices.

3. Generally, ESAs obtain online professional development content from a variety of sources. Important sources include content designed by staff or free from providers such as state departments of education, public broadcasting, or other ESAs. Generally, no one private provider is common among ESAs who purchase online PD offerings for teachers.

4. ESAs commonly use a variety of incentives to encourage teacher participation in online professional development, particularly those that are perceived of value for enhancing teacher classroom practices and renewing the teaching license or certification.

5. ESAs commonly use the “online blended or hybrid approach” in delivering online PD. ESAs show no preference currently for facilitated online asynchronous versus non-facilitated online asynchronous delivery methods. Generally, ESAs train their own personnel for the facilitator role.

6. Most often ESAs prefer Moodle as the technology platform to offer online PD to school districts, used more than twice as often as Blackboard. Although ESAs may use a large variety of online...
technology tools to support online professional development offerings, common tools include Skype, Illuminate, and Adobe Connect.

7. Generally, ESAs use a large assortment of funding streams to make online professional development opportunities available. ESAs commonly fund online professional development opportunities by charging a participation fee that is paid in total or part by the teacher, the school district or other entity (e.g. state funding, federal grant, private business). No one business model prevails in ESAs for supporting online PD offerings. More accurately, combinations of models may be at work in many ESAs, if a business model exists at all.

8. Generally, ESAs are somewhat satisfied with the online professional development opportunities they offer or make available for teachers. ESAs most typically rely on degree of participant satisfaction and level of participation as common evaluation measures.

9. ESAs face numerous barriers in expanding online professional development opportunities for teachers. Among the most common barriers are (1) attracting necessary funding, (2) overcoming teacher perceptions of no time to participate during school day, and (3) building interest among teachers who want traditional PD (e.g., face-to-face workshop).

10. Providing high quality online professional development that is embedded and “sustained” over a time period adequate for teachers to increase knowledge and skills is a major challenge for ESAs. Numerous strategies are used to address the issue, including (1) direct follow-up assistance, (2) technology applications, (3) extended time period of online PD offering, (4) teacher grouping, and (5) online PD linked to job-embedded improvements.

11. ESAs that provide online PD generally view it as “the future” in offering teachers professional development, with many advantages over the traditional approaches. Comments of respondents indicate generally ESAs are in early stages in offering online PD and have numerous needs for capacity-building assistance to support this new ESA initiative, including how to identify, select and sustain quality online PD. Developing ESA personnel, networking with other ESAs, and forming partnerships are possible capacity-building practices.

12. ESAs that did not provide online PD in the last three years are generally supportive of online PD. Respondent comments indicate a major issue in numerous ESAs is limited organizational capacity to offer online PD. Lack of demand for online PD and inadequate teacher skills with technology may also be key issues.

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From a Wife’s Perspective: Living With the Executive Director of AAESA/AESA, Brian L. Talbott, aka “THE BLUR”

by
Anita Talbott

About six years ago Dr. Bob Stephens asked me to write an article about my experiences being the wife of the executive director of the AESA. I never had any intention of writing an article for an educational journal. This spring, Bob called and asked again. I have great respect for Bob and didn’t want to disappoint him. I told him I wasn’t comfortable writing something that would be published. I had absolutely no idea what to say that would be of value from my point of view about someone who is already so highly regarded. Bob assured me that my story would be valuable so I promised him I would attempt to write something. So, here goes, Bob.

This article is being written in hopes of providing a few insights and glimpses of my supporting role living and working with THE BLUR.

Prior to my deep working involvement with THE BLUR and being an official “non-educator,” my role in education has been as a wife, mother and observer. I have formed many strong opinions through these roles. As a mother I watched the wonders of our three children’s educations; as a wife I supported my husband’s educational career. I came to believe and coined a term: There are two types of educators (spelled the same but pronounced differently). There are edUcators and educators. The difference is that edUcators bring YOU in and educators leave YOU out. We have attended many educational conferences, and I always came away from the AESA conferences knowing the attendees were edUcators – sharing, caring networking, and being very genuine!!
Pre-AESA Executive Director

Brian’s first job as an ESA superintendent was for Educational Service District 105 in Yakima, Washington from 1976-1982. I can remember the many challenges he faced while working hard for the agency, his staff, the community, and the children they served. One of his greatest challenges was the fight to keep his ESD from being eliminated as an entity. At times it was a very hard fight won by the skin of the ESD’s teeth. Anyone who knows Brian knows he is true to his commitments; he is a futurist, a builder, a believer in service and he shares that service among his many peers. Brian is also a fierce fighter for doing what is right for education.

In 1982 he was recruited by ESD 101 in Spokane, Washington and became its superintendent. Brian is a creative thinker regarding future educational opportunities and the STEP-Star Network became one of his “babies.” It blossomed and became a national entity. ESAs continued to fight for their proper place in education; the battle was slow but gaining strength. In 1997 he worked part time as the executive director of AAESA. In 1998 Brian officially retired from ESD 101. Our daughter Dawne appropriately said at his retirement party, “Dad, you can’t retire until you tire!” Soon after, he was hired as the full time executive director of AAESA.

The AESA Journey Begins

Through the years Brian has been a very strong advocate of AAESA and what it stood for, not only for ESAs but also the LEAs and the children served. Brian became a member of AAESA during its founding years, a Council member in 1991, Council President in 1994 and Past President in 1995. Brian firmly believed in AAESA’s importance to ESAs as did his predecessors Walt Turner, Lee Christiansen and Bruce Hunter. As a former ESA superintendent, he knew the extreme importance of sharing best practices, as well as conflicts, concerns and challenges. He admired the dedication of his forbearers who were the “engineers” of so many needed services. Some non-ESA educators didn’t understand that ESAs were the best kept secret of excellent educational services. He wanted to be a part of keeping the importance of AAESA alive. As I continued to work in my own business arena (non-education), I watched as Brian became more drawn to AAESA’s services, its members, and peers and settled into his new executive director position.

In 1999 Brian asked me if I would like to assist him at AAESA. I retired from the career I had held and decided to help in any way I could. I am not “educated” in education. It had been more than 15 years since I had been a secretary (before computers were around). However, I accepted his request and volunteered to help in any way I could. I believed him when he leaned back in his chair at the east coast office and said something like, “This is going to be one of the easiest and most enjoyable jobs you have ever had!” That temporarily made me more comfortable with my decision. Brian’s definition of “easy” is vastly different from mine. I soon learned that being THE BLUR’s assistant was not always going to be trouble-free, effortless, uncomplicated, undemanding, insignificant, or simple!

One of the good things about assisting him was that I had recently lost my identical twin. I was in deep grief, losing not only my twin/best friend but also my own identity (I needed to learn how to be me and not we). I needed to have something to distract me. Well, over time it helped; I didn’t have a lot of time to stay in anguish (not that I didn’t slip in and out of it at times).

When I started assisting Brian, I honestly didn’t even know how to turn on a computer. I learned and learned and learned. I was absolutely amazed with spell check, grammar check, etc. WOW, what a hoot!
One Friday at 4:00 p.m. Brian told me he needed a PowerPoint presentation by Monday. Remember, I had just advanced to Word. Luckily, Bruce Hunter’s administrative assistant, Karen Vandewater, was still at her desk. Knowing she was ready to go home, I reluctantly asked her if she could tell me how to use PowerPoint. She guided me through the basics reminding me to always “SSS” - SAVE, SAVE, SAVE! I was so excited to have acquired a new skill and adventure. The presentation contained 27 slides and I was able to finish it sitting alongside Brian over the weekend. Off he went to show it at his upcoming presentation about AAESA. Another learning curve mastered!

For THE BLUR there is no such thing as a 15 minute break, eight hour work days, weekends, or time off when there is work to be done! With THE BLUR, there was always work to be done!

First Annual AAESA Conference as Executive Director

The 1998 AAESA Annual Conference was held in Phoenix, AZ and hosted by Ohio’s Hamilton County ESC. It was Brian’s first annual conference as executive director. He worked the conference hard. He was here, there and everywhere. He had so many meetings with so many people, I never knew where he was (this was before we both had cell phones). If he had a written schedule of his meetings and had given it to me, it would have been obsolete five minutes into the conference. Brian’s schedule changes constantly because he wants to be available when needed. When/if he had a spare moment he would add another meeting to his already overflowing agenda and that’s when I started calling him THE BLUR. That first year being the official volunteer “gopher,” I didn’t stop running (most times in circles). At that time I didn’t know a whole lot about educational conference expectations, break-out sessions, meetings, etc. I only knew what I had experienced as a spouse and observer. I did, however have expertise in one aspect of the conference. Having been an exhibitor myself for 15 years, I headed to the exhibitor floor. I introduced myself to as many exhibitors as I could and asked if they were pleased with the conference, the traffic, getting leads, and their booth location. If they commented that they would have liked to have been placed in a higher traffic area I suggested that if they signed up for the next conference right away they would have a better opportunity to be assigned a choice location at next year’s conference. Outside the exhibit area I was on my own again trying to do the best I could for THE BLUR as well as our attendees.

Expansion of Staff

From 1998-2001 the AAESA in-house staff consisted of Brian and myself, thankfully with a number of volunteers and hired consultants doing various jobs. Speaking of volunteers, I can’t say enough about Dr. William (Bill) Keane’s commitment as editor of Perspectives: A Journal of Research and Opinion about Educational Service Agencies. Bill and his editorial staff have diligently volunteered their services since the first publication 1995.

Having worked alone with Brian, I was thrilled when Kari Arfstrom became Associate Executive Director and Peter Young signed on to keep our financials. After Peter’s retirement from Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) in 2002, he was hired as AESA,s Chief Financial Officer (CFO). Peter not only worked the financials but was, among many other things, a very important liaison for Brian, having been a very successful ESA Superintendent. They say two heads work better than one, and for AESA this was definitely true. THE BLUR bounced ideas off Peter and together they (along with the Council) came up with “jobs” AESA could take inside and not outsource. The year 2002 was a defining one as
the AESA Foundation provided the resources to contract with Integrated Software Systems to design and develop AESA’s database software solutions. This allowed AESA the ability to handle its membership directory, conference registrations and offered numerous benefits to increase our ability to serve our growing membership.

**Growth of AESA**

Brian, Peter and the Council continued to serve and seek growth: forming the AESA Foundation, encouraging membership, building business members/partners/sponsors, seeking grants. In July of 1999 the first annual Summer CEO Conference was held in La Crosse, Wisconsin with over 40 CEOs in attendance. This conference’s success has continued and attendance reached a high of 134 attendees. In the fall of 1999, AASA chose to discontinue the We Care Conference. AESA took over and that is what we now know as the Educators’ Call to Action: Federal Advocacy Conference (ECA). What started out as a small group has grown, with attendees hovering around 100. The conferences continued to build from small groups to large crowds. AESA has built a reputation for having “Working Conferences.” They are not vacations for the attendees but rather opportunities for colleagues to meet, brainstorm and learn from each other. I worked the registration desk and was able to personally interact with the attendees. The feedback forms always mentioned the importance of the conferences and how vital the sharing process is. Yes, renewing friendships is a large part of the attendees’ reason for being there, but it’s considered a side benefit. Also, from my little “perch” I got to watch the fruition of a year’s hard work by the Council, planning committee and many volunteers. I had the pleasure of watching the enormous movement of people coming and going with smiles on their faces as they participated in the conferences. I must also mention the growth of exhibitors at the AESA Annual Conference. AESA went from working hard to get exhibitors to attend the conference to turning exhibitors away due to the fact that there was not enough room at some of the conference sites to house all of them. We went from a very small exhibit hall with maybe 30 exhibitors to over 90 exhibitors depending on the space available.

**Progression of AESA on the Home Front**

After working with Brian over the many years I have observed his countless activities and the scores of hats he wears. He can switch between different tasks with the snap of a finger and stay right on course. It’s like watching a professional juggler on stage spinning the many plates (some almost at a stand-still), running to keep them going. One of the many plates was his obsession to return all calls/e-mails and follow-ups and requests immediately. Not surprisingly, this made AESA more successful. We are a SERVICE organization.

As you might surmise our hours got longer, the load larger and heavier. I have a love hate relationship with the computer as it is a 24/7/365 (timeless) workstation. When I would overhear Brian say “sure, no problem,” to someone/anyone on the phone agreeing to fulfill whatever task/request was being made, I would hide under my desk, knowing that dribble of work would grow to a trickle, splatter, spray, splash, and often a waterfall.

Brian believes that once off his plate and onto my desk the task is complete. Little did he know that as I crawled out from under my desk to try to fathom the workload, I could/would spend hours assembling and figuring out priorities, categories and meeting deadlines. Things came to me in bountiful multiplicity, variety, diversity and, of course, always needed to be organized in a timely fashion. Brian is a perfectionist,
expecting more from himself than anyone else. Not being a perfectionist myself (opposites attract), there were times he either wanted to fire me and/or I wanted to quit. One time, facing a difficult job that had a deadline close at hand, he was trying to be as tactful as he could with me and said, “I’m talking to my executive assistant right now, not my wife.” To which I replied, “Yeah, but your wife is listening!”

Staff Attrition

In 2007 Kari earned her doctorate and, as part of her professional plan, left AESA. Dick Moody joined the AESA Staff in 2007 as Director of Business Services, and eventually Associate Executive Director. Dick also was very familiar with the workings of AESA, having been a consultant on many occasions. When Dick left to form his own consulting company, we again reorganized to meet the needs of our members. I mention these changes because each time a change was made everyone’s workload changed in order to keep all the plates spinning. Dawne Talbott-Lloyd (our oldest daughter) agreed to help. Her teaching and legal backgrounds came in very handy when her services were needed. She actually replaced me at last year’s annual conference registration when I had some health issues. She continues to help where she can since I officially retired in June of 2010.

Summary

I can’t even begin to name all of the positive experiences I have had working with Brian over these last 14 years. I have gained knowledge in so many ways that I would never have been able to obtain elsewhere. I absolutely loved many characteristics of my job. When working registration I came to know the attendees whose names I had typed many times over the years. I learned the many ins and outs of the computer. I now love working with graphics. Another huge benefit of working with Brian and AESA is having gained valuable friendships (we call our family of friends) that I know we will maintain. We also enjoy a close relationship with all former and current AESA staff as well as former and current Council members.

Brian and I have been married for over 48 years. I really only saw and realized the working side of his personality while working with him, and AESA, these past 14 years. As each of those years passed my respect for him has multiplied immeasurably! It has been a rewarding opportunity for me assist THE BLUR and to serve AESA and our members.

Would I do it again? Absolutely! And I’ve no doubt THE BLUR and I will cross your paths again soon!
Invitation to Authors

*Perspectives* welcomes manuscripts from all those interested in the work of service agencies in the United States. The journal publishes articles of research as well as opinion. Interviews with public officials (legislators, chief state school officials, business leaders, etc.) regarding their positive views of the work of service agencies are also welcome since they can be helpful to colleagues in other states where the environment for ESAs might not be so friendly.

For further information about how to prepare a manuscript, please contact the editor by email at keanewg@aol.com or by phone at 248-320-3702. A flexible deadline for submissions is April 1 of each year. Any necessary editorial assistance will be provided.