



SPECIAL NEWS EDITION

WHEN DONE RIGHT, STATE NETWORKS CAN DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

The circumstances may be unique and the paths to completion might be different, but the goal of every education service agency is the same: provide service to students and staff in the most efficient way possible.

It's no wonder then that state consortiums of ESAs would function in much the same way. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, at the state level ESA organizations work to achieve member goals in ways that suit that state the best.

Two good examples lie on the north and south shores of the mighty Columbia River. Washington and Oregon both have found different but successful ways to help ESAs collaborate amongst one another.

In Washington, nine educational service districts were established in 1967 to provide financial oversight and a film strip library. While the demands on ESDs have changed in the last 50 years, the overall structure has not, said Rich McBride, the superintendent of Washington's North Central ESD in Wenatchee. The nine ESDs work together with a rotating chair (McBride's in the seat at the moment), but they still maintain an independent, entrepreneurial spirit.

McBride sees a lot of benefits in having that flexibility. The ESDs can work together on large, statewide issues like teacher evaluation or common core, but remain nimble enough so that if three small districts want to put together a cooperative effort to share costs of, say, a school nurse, an ESD can set something like that up.

"The Network alliance allows us to serve both the very large and the very small districts alike," McBride said. "When a smaller district decides to build a

school, they'll ultimately need a construction manager. Urban districts are building new facilities all the time but smaller ones may need construction management once every five or 10 years. They can call us up and ask if we know of anyone. My ESD may not have a construction manager on our staff, but I can put them in contact with someone within our ESD Network right away."

Only between 2 percent and 4 percent of the ESD funding comes from the state, so for many years ESDs competed with one another for grant money from the state, corporations and non-profits like the Gates Foundation.

In the mid-2000s, it became clear to the ESDs that they could get more done with collaboration than through competition when trying to find money for their various initiatives.

At about this same time, No Child Left Behind was ratcheting up the punishment on districts and the state department of education came to understand that, with 295 districts, they could use help in managing NCLB's requirements of teacher training and evaluation. The state's ESDs were ready to fill the void.

McBride said there was a third element that also became apparent at about this time: The state's ESDs realized that they were habitually reacting to events and they wondered if there was a way they could be more proactive in partnering, planning and leading initiatives at the state policy level.

"We realized the solution was to network," McBride said. "By creating a network among the ESDs, we could handle big issues (like NCLB) and services (like teacher training, Common Core, special education, and financial oversight) while remaining agile enough to the needs of districts like Seattle, with 40,000 students, and our one-room school district that has 12 students."

"Our partnership with our State Superintendent's office has grown to include a "shared" coordinator to help with the numerous initiatives we now share," but McBride knows what the future holds. The demands on the ESD network will grow and the "deep need we have for working together" will likely require the employment of full-time staff to help guide and coordinate the work of the Network.

Which is where Jim Mabbott and the Oregon Association of Educational Service Districts currently find themselves. They had an informal alliance like Washington's for years, but then some member ESDs felt slighted and one ESD dropped out of the association. To fix the problem, the ESDs formed a firm set of ground rules and a clear set of goals with equal participation among

themselves.

Their first goal is to speak about the issues facing ESDs with one voice. That required a director (Mabbott) who conducts highly inclusive monthly meetings with superintendents, school board members and any other groups that are appropriate to the issues of the day.

When this group has decided what that one voice should say, the association begins its lobbying efforts in Salem.

"I know we've been successful because for years the legislature debated and threatened to cut funding for ESDs or just to get rid of them all together. Now those issues aren't even on the table," Mabbott said.

The association also now sponsors summer meetings between superintendents and legislators. "It's a much more positive organization now that members aren't fighting one another," Mabbott said.

One unforeseen bonus to the strong central network of ESDs is that the state department of education can count on the association to field statewide programs such as a statewide testing initiative. "It's a high-profile initiative and the state wouldn't have chosen us if we weren't a solid organization," Mabbott said.

The association has signed on their first corporate partner - Pemco Insurance Co. - and plans to expand into professional development seminars for superintendents and new member workshops for new school board members.

"A big part of our success is because superintendents and board members are very involved. Our officers are not just decorative - they have to work," Mabbott said.

Two states, two sets of needs, two ways of achieving those needs. ESDs allow each of these states the flexibility to meet those needs in an efficient way.

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