



Educational Service Agencies are Essential to Improve Student Achievement

by
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Iowa has long educational service essential role in ensuring efficiency through collaboration among districts. Now other

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known that regional agencies play an greater economy or cooperation and schools and school states and the federal

government are recognizing this as well, with the conclusion that ESAs are likely to be one of the most critical assets available in building the capacity needed to significantly improve student achievement.

There was a day when educational leaders – like many business leaders – would have been satisfied to simply reduce costs to gain greater efficiencies. But just as business cannot “save its way to prosperity,” neither can educators save their way to higher learning. Today our advocacy for students means that we must find ways to dramatically improve the productivity of our education system so that we are more effective with more students. The “No Child Left Behind” legislation is only the current manifestation of this need, and although it is an imperfect solution, the law has served as a catalyst for awareness and understanding of a basic principle: If we are truly advocates for the academic needs of young people, then we must be committed to high standards and goals, though without the threat of sanctions and with immunity from the current political rhetoric.

The harsh reality that threatens our idealism is perhaps most difficult because of its simplicity. Our centuries-old educational system was not designed for all young people to succeed at the levels that we expect today, and no amount of raucous accountability will force that transformation without meaningful, fundamental changes. And before that can happen, we must find ways to redistribute our resources and to find new resources so that we can build the capacity in our educational system to support higher levels of success for a broader range of students.

The basic elements of success in the new system are not that difficult to describe, but they are costly and time-consuming to implement. Some important preliminary work already has begun, primarily in that the

educational system has become more research-based and results-oriented. Thus, we have sharpened the focus on student learning by identifying clear indicators of student needs. This step has allowed us as student advocates to monitor and record results. But such a results focus will only accelerate frustrations if we do not support it with initiatives to build the capacity to help more students succeed.

The research and results also show us that the central ingredient to improving student achievement is improved *instruction*. The most effective way to improve instruction is through extensive professional development that helps teachers acquire, continuously, a broader repertoire of proven teaching strategies.

Providing this type of professional development is very difficult given the limitations of most school districts today. The assumptions of both staff and patrons are that once teachers have completed a higher education training program and are then licensed, they can be presumed to be competent for the remainder of their careers. That might have been acceptable when we expected teachers to prepare only a narrow range of students for college, but an educational program lasting no more than four or five years no longer meets society's growing expectations for schools. Today, teachers need intensive, ongoing professional development that goes far beyond an initial exposure to new teaching methods. We must now be committed to identifying the best teaching practices from research, to allow for their demonstration, and to allow time for practice of these new strategies in current classrooms in a way that enables teachers to gain feedback from their colleagues.

Educational service agencies are ideally suited to provide this kind of systemic support for the improvement of teaching. Enlarging professional development to a scale that continuously supports all teachers throughout their careers will be one of the greatest challenges faced by education if we are to even approach success in meeting our national educational goals. Being able to direct the resources of educational service agencies toward this cause will be an essential prerequisite to our success.

There are three necessary system elements needed to integrate quality professional development into today's schools:

- We must gather a stronger base of research regarding effective teaching strategies, tools and technologies that can target specific learning needs.
- Teachers must be allotted the time to acquire these new strategies.
- Teachers must have access to these new strategies – and this is where ESAs can fulfill a critical need. Federal and state governments must partner with higher education and the private sector to develop the needed research and development. States and school districts must partner to find ways to provide educators paid access to professional development. This task involves both additional financial resources and creative scheduling of such programs. ESAs will need to partner with local districts in order to provide teachers with the expertise and knowledge necessary to be successful with all students.

Is this a possibility, or just more idealism? Can ESAs move to such a pivotal role? Several states already have moved in this direction. Iowa is a good example.

In Iowa, educational service agencies are called Area Education Agencies (AEAs). Each AEA serves a designated region, and all districts are obligated to access services (such as professional development, technology assistance, special education assistance) through their assigned AEA. Every AEA receives state and federal funding through a formula based on the number of students served.

Iowa's AEAs began in 1976 as a means to providing equity in education, and the services of each evolved over time in response to local needs. In 1988, the Iowa General Assembly mandated a study to determine the efficacy of AEAs and whether the number should be reduced. One important result of this study was a recommendation that Iowa establish uniform standards for a core set of services that every AEA would provide, and several years later an accreditation process was also added to the system. The result is that today AEAs are an essential component of Iowa's educational system in which all levels – local, regional, and the state – work cooperatively and are accountable for providing the myriad essential services to schools, teachers and students.

Today it is hard to imagine how we would provide support to teachers without our Area Education Agencies. Several years ago, we asked for and received permission and funding to develop and implement a two-year mentoring and induction program. Because the passage of state laws can be a protracted process, we had just several months to complete and launch the program, which involved identifying and training hundreds of mentors (as well as developing the evaluation criteria to assess the program). We didn't want to sacrifice quality just because we were on a fast track. We achieved our goals through a responsive system of AEAs.

The same legislation that brought about the induction and mentoring program provided three additional challenges as well: it established a statewide set of performance standards for beginning teachers, it required that the Iowa Department of Education establish consistent evaluation procedures for all districts across the state, and required that all supervisors be trained in the new system. How did Iowa provide for 10 days of training for these administrators? Again the best and most cost-effective solutions were to work through our Area Education Agencies. The expertise of their staff and ready access they have to local districts are increasingly important because it has never been practical for a state education agency to directly provide training on this scale, but it is even more difficult today with severely diminished state resources.

Today we are working with our AEAs and with the higher education community to develop a stronger base of research on proven teaching strategies in reading, math and science. Networks in each subject area will provide the knowledge base for the design of professional development strategies that will serve teachers at all grade levels. The content standard model already has shown success in Iowa; we have used it to implement a statewide program to improve instructional strategies in reading in grades K-3. Statewide reading scores have now improved significantly for three consecutive years.

Area Education Agencies in Iowa recognize that they have a responsibility to help improve student learning in their client schools. In addition to being accountable for indicators such as customer satisfaction, AEAs in Iowa are also accountable for student performance. It is a clear message to their schools that they have a shared sense of responsibility for student learning.

Given the need to build the capacity in our educational system to help more students to succeed, educational service agencies will play an increasingly important role in complementing the work of local schools and state education agencies.

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