Working Together:
How ESAs Help Small Districts Meet Their Technology and Service Needs

By K. David Weidner

Small school districts in rural America are well acquainted with hard times. To address them, they have learned to work together, with assitance from regional cooperatives.

Long ago, a tough economy taught small school districts a simple lesson: they were much better off if they worked together. As a consequence, the districts became students of a model of cooperation that characterized large agricultural cooperatives such as the Farmers Union and the Farm Bureau.

To address adversity, farmers and ranchers had pulled together in cooperatives to help each other. Together, they benefited from advances in commerce, technology, and transportation. Years later, rural districts also began to realize the advantages of collaboration to help them overcome the inherent disadvantages associated with small size, limited resources, and geographic isolation.

Consequently, today across the United States most small rural school districts have an opportunity to be members of a cooperative public agency frequently referred to as an Educational Service Agency (ESA). A total of 553 nonprofit ESAs are authorized in states all over the country. Many of these organizations began as grassroots efforts by district leaders in a particular region to pool resources for a particular purpose. Over time, however, state governments recognized the value of such regional cooperatives as cost-effective providers of state-mandated services and began establishing statewide networks of authorized ESAs.

Today 45 states (all but Delaware, Oklahoma, Nevada, Maine and Tennessee) use ESAs to deliver key services. The ESAs employ roughly 180,000 educators, specialists, and support staff. Collectively, they are in a position to provide services to about 80 percent of the public school districts in the country, along with 83 percent of all the private schools.

ESAs vary in size, structure, and purpose. They go by different names in different states – Education Service Units (ESUs) in Nebraska, Intermediate Units (IUs) in Pennsylvania, Education Service Centers (ESCs) in Kansas, Texas and Ohio, Area Education Agencies (AEAs) in Iowa, and so on. Some receive a substantial portion of their funding from the state, while others raise money almost entirely through membership fees, products and services. Although the purpose of such agencies is to address the needs of all member districts in their region, regardless of size, administrators in small districts are among the first to realize the value provided by ESAs, which can offer the kind of professional staff a small district might have trouble attracting or funding -- for example, special education teachers and related specialists such as speech pathologists and occupational and physical therapists. The ESAs hire these specialists and then share their talents among the collaborating districts on a fee-for-service basis.

The collaboration extends beyond the sharing of staff. Cooperatives also enable their members to combine their purchasing power to obtain better prices for the wide assortment of materials and equipment needed to operate K-12 school districts. In addition, ESAs can run off-site business services for small districts, such as payroll and purchasing.

By working through their ESAs, the small districts can also arrange for their professional development needs. An ESA can retain on its staff the talent required to provide training for school personnel. This training can be provided at the ESA site or its staff can go to districts and provide onsite mentoring.

Brian Talbott, executive director of the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA), the Arlington Virginia-based national organization representing ESAs, provides backup to this far-flung network of cooperatives. The association provides the ESAs with staff-development opportunities, publications for obtaining information and sharing ideas, and strategy sessions for planning ways to improve their performance.

According to Talbott, ESAs have long been popular with small districts because of their need to stretch every dollar as far as possible. "Collaboration increases the small districts' buying power and enables it to provide essential services to its students that it individually may not be able to afford," he said. "But now, as the economy worsens, the need for the ESAs becomes even more apparent. States that might have taken their ESAs for granted are going to be developing a whole new appreciation for them."

ESAs and Technology Support

In recent years ESAs have proved indispensable to small districts seeking access to modern-day technology. In some cases – as with the California Technology Assistance Program (CTAP), the Regional Information Centers (RICs) in New York, the Educational Technology Support Centers (ETSCs) in Washington State, or the Regional Educational Media Centers (REMCs) in Michigan – the state has established a separate, technology-focused network with centers that typically reside at the ESA sites. In other cases, technology services are part of ESAs regular offerings.

Regardless of the exact approach taken, many regional co-ops are able to purchase computers at bulk prices, train educators in their use, and then provide districts with the technical support they need to maintain their systems. Frequently, they also offer a variety of technology services ranging from data management to affordable Internet access. Consequently, many small districts have the opportunity to function just as efficiently and cost-effectively as their larger, more affluent cousins.

What are some of the ways that ESAs can help schools with their technology needs? Why might you, as a CTO or other K12 technology leader in a small district, want to pay closer attention to your options for collaboration? Why might you want to lobby hard within your state for continued funding for your local ESA? Here is a look at three key areas where ESAs can help.

Getting the Best Price

When it comes to small and rural districts cooperating, R. Stephen Aguirre could write a book on the topic. As executive director of the High Plains Regional Educational Cooperative in Raton, New Mexico (*www. hprec.com*), Aguirre works for a board of directors made up of the superintendents from the eight districts he serves. Those districts range in size from 1,300 to 37 students, the latter being the smallest district in the state.

The eight districts are located in the northeast corner of New Mexico, smack up against the Colorado border. That puts them approximately 300 miles away from what anyone would call a major metropolitan area. As such, they have found it advantageous to work cooperatively to serve their students.

The High Plains REC is one of nine Regional Educational Cooperatives in New Mexico. Altogether, the RECs work with 59 of the state's 89 districts – essentially all of the state's small districts. High Plains, which has been in business since 1982, has a staff of 30. It runs a highly sophisticated cooperative purchasing network for schools across New Mexico and Colorado.

The REC's Cooperative Purchasing Network negotiates directly with manufacturers the price of everything from paper to playground equipment to district-provided cars. Computer hardware and software are among the products offered by the purchasing network.

According to Aguirre, "The prices we get are as good as or better than any urban district in the country can get." Once the price has been negotiated, any district, city, county, university and hospital in the cooperative can buy the goods at the quoted figure. "We get the companies to agree that they will deliver, too," says Aguirre. "The price in most cases includes the cost of shipping the product to rural America."

COMPARING ESAS IN FIVE STATES

How do ESAs differ from state to state in terms of name, structure, funding sources and services provided? Learning Point Associates recently posed these questions, among others, to ESA leaders in five Great Lakes states. The resulting publication, *A Network for Educational Change in the Great Lakes Region: A View Through the Lens of Educational Service Agencies*, offers a snapshot of how ESAs in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin operate. While the report focuses on one geographic area, the sorts of similarities and differences it highlights apply to ESAs in many parts of the U.S.

This table offers an overview of some of the information provided to report authors Randal E. Peters and Asta Svedkauskaite by the ESAs they surveyed:

STATE	Illinois	Indiana	Michigan	Ohio	Wisconsin
YEAR ESAS WERE ESTABLISHED	1865	1976	1962	1914	1963
TITLE FOR THE ESAS	Regional offices of education (ROEs)	Educational service centers (ESCs)	Intermediate school districts (ISDs)	Educational service centers (ESCs)	Cooperative educational service agencies (CESAs)
NUMBER IN THE STATE (AS OF 2008)	45	9	57	58	12
FUNDING SOURCES					
LOCAL	16%	21%–48% (flow-through/ fee for service)	52%	64.61%	40%–82% (fees for service)
STATE	45%	20%–40% (appropriated budget, grants)	22%	23.51%	5%–27% (state funding formula, grants)
FEDERAL	31%	0%	19%	8.75%	1%–39% (grants)
OTHER	8%	8%–57%	7%	3.13%	1%–4%

SOURCE: A Network for Educational Change in the Great Lakes Region: A View Through the Lens of Educational Service Agencies, July 2008, Learning Point Associates, pages 7, 12 – 31.

The primary question addressed by Peters and Svedkauskaite was, "What is the capacity of ESAs in the Great Lakes states to play a more prominent role in their respective statewide systems of support to assist districts and schools in the work of educational improvement that will positively impact student performance?" Although the report does not specifically focus on technology, several of the ESAs did cite their technology services as crucial to the ways in which they support schools in their region.

In Michigan, for example, the ESAs reported that:

Numerous fiber systems have been cooperatively established throughout the state with ESAs facilitating the agreements. A number of ESAs are involved in data warehousing. They house and oversee the 13 regional educational media centers, which provide training, cooperative purchasing, and networking opportunities.

As part of Ohio's educational regional service system (ERSS), the 58 educational service centers have been supplemented by 23 Information Technology Centers (ITCs), 23 Area Media Centers (AMCs), and eight Education Technology Corporations (Ed Techs) – in addition to 16 Special Education Regional Resource Centers (SERRCs) and 12 Regional School Improvement Teams (RSITs).

And in Wisconsin the report indicates that ESAs "have attempted to lead the way in utilizing technology to deliver services" including: online learning/registration, list servs, webinars, Moodle, distance learning, webcasting/podcasting, SMART Boards, portal

technologies, communications and content management systems from CESA 6, and the Wisconsin Virtual School hosted by CESA 9.

Overall, the report concludes that:

• Literature supports the potential of ESAs to make a difference in the statewide systems of support.

• ESAs continue building a network of support through exemplary programs and services, although accessibility to such initiatives and programs can often be limited by distance, discrepancies in revenue sources, state and regional structures, and limited staff available to provide training for new programs.

• Formalized agreements between SEAs, LEAs, and legislatures regarding the roles and responsibilities of the ESAs are needed in order to better develop "quality delivery standards" and "effective systems of technical assistance … to support student learning for all [students] in all school buildings and districts."

• Resources available to ESAs in their educational improvement work are not adequate.

• ESAs' standardized evaluation and accountability processes are emerging but remain sporadic.

The complete report, which includes an historical look at the role of ESAs and their increased importance in today's education environment can be found at www2.learningpt.org.

The South West/West Central (SW/WC) Service Cooperative (*www.swsc.org*) in Marshall, Minnesota, is another ESA that offers small districts big buying power. Executive director Cliff Carmody, who serves 59 small districts with an average size of about 700 students, is pleased with the prices he is able to obtain for the small districts in his region through his organization's buying cooperative. Every spring he assesses their purchasing needs and then works with corporate vendors to obtain the best pricing. By purchasing in large quantities, the co-op is able to drive the price down for small districts, even though individually they may be buying just a few products.

When trying to get the best price, Carmody isn't opposed to working with the larger districts in his part of the state either. He will frequently pool planned small-district purchases with those of the city districts to obtain an even better price. "Even if my small districts cannot afford to buy at the price I get for them, sometimes they can use our bid to bargain for a better price for themselves with another vendor. That's okay with us. We're in the business of getting the small districts the best price they can get."

In the state of Washington, one ESA has extended its buying power beyond its own region – and even beyond its state borders. ESD 112, one of Washington's nine Educational Service Districts, established the DigitalEdge service (*digitaledge.esd112.org*) to help school district technology directors and AV specialists purchase instructional technology equipment at a competitive price. Districts throughout the state – as well as in Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Wyoming – can participate.

ESC-20, one of the 20 Education Service Centers in the state of Texas, also offers a statewide buying program – this one for online resources. Digital Knowledge Central (*dkc.esc20.net*) exists to "provide participating Texas public and non public schools with a comprehensive collection of current, relevant online resources that supplement and enhance K-12 instruction and digital literacy." Districts can subscribe, at prices negotiated statewide, to online encyclopedias, magazines, primary source materials, and more.

Providing Services

According to Cliff Carmody, the small districts he works for know the advantages of working together. They've been doing it for a long time – not just to pool their buying power but also to share resources and services. Today, for example, the South West/West Central Service Cooperative keeps about 14 full-time staff members working to help these districts with their technology needs. "One of the major things we do for them is process all of their payroll, HR, and financial records," Carmody explains. "For about 50 of the districts, we are their business operation. We manage all of their business data and ensure its security."

In fact, the co-op has become so proficient at providing this service, its board – made up of 12 school board members from among sponsoring school districts and two representatives from county and city agencies – has asked it to expand into non-education arenas. The board thinks the cooperative could be a valuable asset to counties and cities within its region that face cutbacks due to the economy and might be looking to outsource critical services.

In the meantime, Carmody has his hands full meeting the needs of participating school districts. In Minnesota, unlike most other states, the Educational Service Agencies receive no government funding. In the SW/WC co-op's case, the districts pay a modest fee to belong, but not enough to keep the ESA's doors open. The way the cooperative stays in business is by selling additional services to members. A substantial share of the SW/WC Service Cooperative's revenue comes from supporting the districts' technology needs. "We provide a lot of our technology support to the districts from our headquarters here in Marshall," says Carmody, "but we still need a lot of windshield time," which is how a Midwesterner describes the hours spent driving to the far-flung schools within the co-op's service region.

Ideas for additional services sometimes come from the districts themselves. For example, recently a group of 15-20 superintendents asked the co-op to facilitate their weekly meetings. They wanted to figure out a way that their districts could move toward adopting a common calendar and a similar curriculum so that teachers could be shared and their courses offered across multiple districts. "This is huge for small school districts," said Carmody. "If they can get their infrastructures aligned, the possibilities are enormous for what they might do to eliminate barriers and introduce innovate ways of sharing across districts."

The High Plains Regional Educational Cooperative offers a similarly wide range of services. Rural districts have the same needs as urban districts but frequently lack the manpower and sophisticated equipment to meet the challenge. "That's where we come in," says R. Stephen Aguirre, who is proud of the High Plains REC's responsiveness to districts' needs. For example, the REC

SMALL DISTRICT RESOURCES FROM COSN

CoSN's own research reaffirms that small districts frequently lack the resources, time, and expertise to address all their technology needs. Administrators in small districts and schools wear many hats and have a seemingly never-ending list of roles and responsibilities to carry out. Consequently, while technology is frequently seen as a necessity, it is often difficult to implement effectively.

To address the challenges faced by smaller school districts, CoSN has launched an initiative geared especially to this audience. The goal is to provide valuable information and foster an exchange among those administrators who know small school districts best.. To access the small district section of the website, visit *www. cosn.org* and select "CoSN Small

District Leadership Wiki" from the "Communities" menu. Members will find a variety of resources provided and have the opportunity to collaborate and share best practices with peers. The small-district members also receive an electronic newsletter catering to their specific issues.

Sean McDonough, previously the acting director of the Bureau of Educational Technology for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and now director of information technology for the Harrisburg City Schools, recently commented: "CoSN provides our smaller districts in Pennsylvania with a virtual community of best ways to use information technology to improve education. Since Pennsylvania has many small districts with less than 5,000 pupils, we value our relationship with

CoSN. It enables us to share the best of Pennsylvania schools while at the same time learning lessons from other CoSN small-district members about how best to use technology to deliver services and programs."

In addition, CoSN has sponsors that are contributing information and resources to help small district technology leaders improve what they do. David Bator, director of partnerships and alliances for Info-Tech Research Group, a silver sponsor, describes his company's commitment this way: "Info-Tech Research Group is proud to be involved with CoSN to help their members face the IT challenges of today. We are offering small district IT departments the same tools, research and best practices that the larger shops have access to. CoSN members will now be

able to take our expert analysis along with our pre-developed working templates to approach new projects. This will not only give them a head start, but it will give them the ability to execute in less time and with less risk."

To join CoSN, visit *www.COSN.org* and click on the "Membership" tab. Small Districts (less than 2,500 students) can join at a significant discount. Current CoSN members can elect to become part of the Small District Leadership Initiative by letting CoSN know when they register at the national conference. Regularly scheduled networking and best-practice conference calls, webcasts, e-news letters, regional conferences, and the CoSN annual conference are all ways members gain value by participating.

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developed its own software to support special education and other staff members who provide assistance to the districts. The software enables the districts to track the movement of their students across districts, ensure the right forms are being used consistently, stay in compliance with all the federal and state requirements, and document the services provided.

The REC is currently developing an online training program for district bus drivers – a cost-effective way of responding to a state law that requires the drivers to receive eight hours of in-service instruction a semester. In addition, the cooperative recently installed a large data center that the school districts – as well as regional hospitals and city and county governments – can use to store their electronic files off site in the event of the need for a disaster-related recovery. "We also are working so that we can have a server up and operating in 45 minutes for any of our clients who need it in the case of an emergency," says Aguirre. Given the economic times, he foresees some of his districts asking the REC to maintain and store all of their records and oversee their data management needs.

The REC's services have attracted the attention of districts far beyond the eight within its cooperative and the board allows it to sell services, nationally, for a fee.

For example, it holds national conferences annually around such topics as early literacy assessment and special education law. In addition, the REC has staff in its eight cooperating school districts daily to mentor, coach, and train teachers. Aguirre is proud of his REC. "I guess you could say I'm trying to disprove the belief that you can't run a successful business in rural America. It shouldn't be all that hard; rural schools have been doing it for years."

Organizing for Legislation

One of the greatest challenges facing small and rural districts is getting their voice heard by those who make the laws and set the policies governing schools. Many smaller districts believe that education policy tends to be dictated by the needs of large urban and suburban districts. This is why Florida's Small School District Council Consortium (www.ssdcc.com) was formed 25 years ago, in order to "implement a coordinated legislative effort by and for small school districts." Among the members of the consortium are three ESAs that represent Florida's smaller school districts.

Thanks to the Minnesota Rural Education Association, small districts in the "Land of 10,000 Lakes" also have an advocate. Executive director Lee Warne is a registered lobbyist representing 150 rural districts –

one third of Minnesota's public school districts – that belong to his association. Warne is the former director of the South West/West Central Service Cooperative, the position now held by Cliff Carmody, and he continues to work closely with his colleagues in the ESAs in his new job.

PARTNERING WITH ESAS TO DELIVER RESOURCES TO DISTRICTS

Recognizing the importance of education service agencies to small districts and others in need of technology support, CoSN is reaching out to ESAs with a special membership offer. ESAs are eligible to join CoSN at the "large district" membership rate and then pass along a 20% membership discount to all districts in their region. Substantial discounts are

also being offered on CoSN's professional development offerings, which ESAs can deliver to school district technology leaders.

ESA leaders interested in learning more about this program should contact info@ cosn.org or call 866-267-8747.

Every summer the Minnesota Rural Education Association holds 9-10 meetings around the state to gather the memberships' views about pressing issues affecting their districts. These then go before the association's political action committee for consideration. Eventually its board of directors selects the most critical ones and refers them to be voted on by the entire association at its annual conference. Once priorities are determined, Warne has his legislative marching orders.

Issues range from big to small. This year, for example, the membership wants the association to get the legislature to address the burden imposed on rural districts by requiring an ever-growing percent of the

cost of schooling to be paid for by local assessments. Minnesota has an equalization formula that takes into account such things as a district's wealth and geographic isolation, which historically has tended to benefit rural districts. But lately, the increase in the value of farmland has resulted in lower state payments and consequently higher local taxation. The equalization formula, Warne argues, ignores this reality that rural districts are frequently made up of land-rich but income-poor residents.

Warne is also trying to get Minnesota to address the technological needs of its rural schools. In areas of the state where the technology grid is already in place, the public schools are generally well served by electronic bandwidth. But the "pipe" doesn't extend to the geographically isolated regions of the state. As a result, schools in those sections have limited access to the technology so readily available to schools in more populous areas.

Rural small districts have their challenges, to be sure, and when the economy is bad, schools at the end of the road can generally expect hard times. The ESA directors certainly don't sugarcoat what cutbacks in state spending will mean to their small school districts. But the agencies are determined to use all the skill they've gained over the years to help their districts get through whatever rough patches they face. One thing is for sure: with an ESA in the region, a small school district does not have to go it alone. ∎