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Perspectives

A Journal of Research and Opinion About Educational Service Agencies

IMPROVING ESAs FROM WITHIN

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Preface

by
Brian L. Talbott
Executive Director, AESA

This is a special year in that AESA not only has another stellar issue of *Perspectives*, but is well on its way to having a permanent home for all the past, current and future research about Educational Service Agencies (ESAs). The AESA Foundation has set for its highest priority the development of the Institute for the Advancement of Educational Service Agencies. One of the first steps in the development of this Institute is the establishment of a digital library. Through AESA's partnership with Grace Global Corporation and its Grace Global Foundation, we have a partner who has committed the necessary resources to develop and maintain the library today and into the future. AESA will work with Grace Global this year to incorporate all the research that has been completed by researchers like Dr. E. Robert Stephens, Dr. Hobart Harmon and Dr. Bill Keane, as well as the many individual research projects conducted by agencies and individuals on ESAs.

This new digital library will hold the history of the development of ESAs on a national basis and will include materials on the development of ESAs within the member states. It is because of the past, current and future research work on ESAs that AESA has been able to take a step forward with the assistance and support of the AESA Foundation and the Grace Foundation in the establishment of the AESA Online Digital Library.

A special thank you for the continued hard work of the Research and Development Committee and to all of the contributors to this year's outstanding issue of *Perspectives*. Our thanks go out to our Editor, Bill Keane, and our editorial board: Wayne Bell – NE; Craig Burford – OH; Rita Cook – KS; Ed Frye – PA; J. Gary Hayden – AZ; and E. Robert Stephens – IA.

With a circulation of over 7,000, our readers include not only member ESAs but State Departments of Education, numerous universities, libraries, other educational associations, as well as our business members and partners. Please submit your research during 2009-2010 so that it can be considered for the 2010 edition of *Perspectives* and for the online digital library.

Introduction

Educational service agencies have been proving their worth to public officials of all stripes since the 1960s and have been largely successful at that task. Though there have been cases of reduction in the number of centers in some states, the major motivation for these actions has usually been to strengthen the system of ESAs. The economic problems that have faced the United States and school districts almost everywhere since September, 2008 provide an environment where the value of ESAs has become obvious to legislators, state department officials and, most importantly, local school district staff and board members.

Another trend that has accompanied the increasing use of service agencies has been the universal call for accountability for all government agencies. This trend has impacted ESAs as well. The Learning Point study of accreditation and accountability that resides on the AESA web page shows clearly that there are increasing efforts to assure quality services offered by ESAs. A positive finding of that study is the growing recognition among ESA leaders that more accountability is a good thing that will assure public recognition of the value of these agencies.

This year's edition of *Perspectives* highlights some self-initiated efforts by service agencies to improve their ability to deliver high quality services (Kari Arfstrom and Jeanette McGreevy) as well as providing some guidance for gathering user feedback as part of the self-improvement process (Hobart Harmon).

There used to be an old canard that if your grandfather rose from the dead, every institution in American society would be totally different from his experience except schools. If that assertion was ever true, it surely no longer is. Presentation software such as Moodle that enables even young students to use pictures, movies, recordings and other media to enhance reports has created an environment in which most districts need to work hard to assure that teachers, especially older teachers, stay even if not ahead of the technical abilities of their students. The article by Joanne Hopper and Terry Harrington describes a very ambitious program by a relatively small service agency to bring the latest in technology training to its districts.

The article by Robert Martin, Robert Wiggins, and Tresa Zumsteg summarizes a relatively unique partnership between an area's service agency, the local university, and the 28 school districts in the service area to reduce the disparity in achievement among majority and minority students. In fact, this issue is so important to everyone in that environment that a staff member from the service agency and a professor at the local university organized and conducted the superintendents' summer retreat that looked further into this issue. Service agency and university faculty also attended this retreat.

Finally Carrie Cate-Clements, James Kurth, Robert McDermott, and Lawrence Veracco illustrate an effort by a service agency to coordinate recruiting efforts, thereby offering local districts a chance to improve candidate availability and lower costs.

I have increasingly been gratified to see *Perspectives* articles cited in the research of those who aspire to write knowledgeably about service agencies. We encourage more ESA leaders and staff to join the ranks of those telling the ESA story in this journal to school districts, legislators, and state officials. A success story in one state can encourage leaders in other states to understand the unrecognized valuable contributions that can be made by their own ESAs. Now that more and more ESAs are attempting to be accountable for their work, it is inevitable that they will be collecting more and more data. Therefore telling a story that is replicable by other agencies is assisted by data-based articles.

We look forward to more and more articles by the official deadline of April 1. If we know an article is on the way there is flexibility in that deadline.

Bill Keane, Editor
Perspectives
September, 2009

Can Entrepreneurship be Learned?

by
Kari Arfstrom

Introduction

Like most taxpayer-funded entities, educational service agencies (ESAs) are being asked to do more with less, yet the need for services, programming and money-saving, innovative ideas is increasing. Superintendents, staff and board members of ESAs are in a position to lead entrepreneurial efforts in their regions. In a recent dissertation study, the idea of whether or not entrepreneurial skills can be learned within an ESA environment was explored. Using survey and case study data, this researcher asked ESA superintendents throughout the United States how they ranked their innovative efforts on a continuum as either an emerging or established entrepreneurial entity. They were also asked which groups were innovative within the ESA, how they generated their new ideas, and how they implemented them. An in-depth case study of these questions was conducted with an emerging ESA as well as an established ESA.

This study asked if entrepreneurship can be learned by personnel within ESAs. It also attempted to share best practices and innovative suggestions on how ESAs can become or remain entrepreneurial in these tight economic times. Achieving economy of scale, fostering shared services, working with end-user clients, and seeking new sources of funding are all options to consider. This article is the basis for discussion for ESAs to think about and hopefully become more successful in their entrepreneurial efforts.

The full text of this dissertation, along with the entire reference list and survey instruments, can be found at http://www.aesa.us/Research/Arfstrom_Kari_2009_Dissertation.pdf

Background

American society has long depended on the business sector for entrepreneurial activities, meaning for-profit entities that see an opportunity and are willing to take on risk while increasing cost efficiencies (Drucker, 1985). Because of the historic divide between the capitalist ideals of entrepreneurship and the democratic ideals of social welfare, entities such as schools and other human service organizations have not had much experience in entrepreneurship (Brown & Cornwall, 2000; Hess, 2006). Entrepreneurship is a relatively new term in the nonprofit realm and a fairly new concept for public educational entities. The study of entrepreneurship in the education sector is being examined from both external and internal educational forces; authors from the traditional educational sector (such as Brown & Cornwall, 2000; Flam & Keane, 2002; Hess, 2006; Kohn, 1997; Kopp, 2003; Stephens & Keane, 2005; Whittle, 2005) and those from the business sector (such as Eggers, Wavra, Snell & Moore, 2005; Reich, 2007; Schramm, 2006) have written about this topic.

While researchers, journalists and business writers offer various definitions of the term entrepreneurship, most sources cited Peter F. Drucker's definition as authoritative. Drucker first used the term *educational entrepreneurship* in his book *Innovation and Entrepreneurship* (1985), which is considered the classic text for this subject. His definition of educational entrepreneurship is:

> A process of purposeful innovation directed toward improving educational productivity, efficiency, and quality. By pioneering or applying new management techniques, delivery systems, processes, and tools, entrepreneurs--for-profit and nonprofit--work to improve cost-effectiveness and address new needs, and then grow those new solutions to scale. (p. 27)

Today public schools are being asked to take on more programs, services, and reform efforts with less money; hence the actions of entrepreneurs within public education systems need to be reviewed (Hess, 2006). Educators in local schools and districts are focusing on pedagogy and curriculum, while the staff of regional educational entities have increasingly worked in collaborative efforts with the local entities to promote entrepreneurial efforts (Stephens & Keane, 2005). Such regional public educational systems are referred to as Educational Service Agencies (ESAs) both in federal law and this paper.

"Today public schools are being asked to take on more programs, services, and reform efforts with less money; hence the actions of entrepreneurs within public education systems need to be reviewed."

According to a brochure titled *Questions Asked About Educational Service Agencies* published by the Association for Educational Service Agencies (AESA, n.d.), ESAs are governed and named differently in the 40 states where they exist. The common underlying function of ESAs is to provide cost-efficient, effective, and responsive programs and services. Educational services performed by ESAs vary state by state, and it is possible to have a variety of services offered among the ESAs within a state. Stephens (1997) noted that the "common language found in each state's authorization of these agencies requires that they provide programs and services requested by local school districts in their service region accounting for much of the programming diversity among ESAs, even those within a single state" (p. 14). The ESA superintendent, governing board, and staff collaborate and partner with the end-user clients to determine which products and services to offer. For the sake of brevity, the term "superintendent" will be used herein to reference the person who serves as the chief executive officer of the ESA. (Other titles that are used include executive director/director, CEO, or chief administrator/administrator.) The end-user clients of ESAs are schools, school districts, private schools, and other entities where educators teach students (such as in juvenile detention centers and for home- and hospital-bound youth), as well as learners of all ages, including participants in early childhood programs, colleges and universities, and other adult programming. Research done by Stephens (1997) concludes:

> ESAs carry with them a high degree of specialization of staff, facilities, equipment, and/or substantial start-up and operating costs that generally are beyond the means of an individual local district when acting alone, or could be more efficiently offered by the pooling of resources of two or more local systems. (p. 14)

Local schools and districts provide educational opportunities for the children they serve. Those entities are being asked by federal, state and local governments to do more with less support and funding (Eggers, Wavra, Snell & Moore, 2005; Hess, 2006; Kohn, 1997). In some states, ESAs are stepping forward to supplement these opportunities for local schools and districts by providing economies of scale for purchasing, offering services and programs at lower costs, or taking on certain roles that schools can no longer perform (Brown & Cornwall, 2000; Flam & Keane, 2002; Stephens & Keane, 2005). This form of educational entrepreneurship is a growing phenomenon. The purpose of this essay is to offer evidence that entrepreneurship can be learned.

According to the AESA 2007 Membership Directory, there are 560 ESAs in 40 states; on average each ESA serves approximately 26 school districts and other end-user clients per catchment area. These catchment areas are either determined by state law or though membership of end-user clients joining an ESA. In some states the boundaries are very specific, usually contingent upon county boundaries, while in other states the delineations are less formal (Stephens & Keane, 2005). Each state where ESAs exist has a different formula for supporting and funding ESAs. Primary sources of funding for ESAs are state and local dollars, including direct funds from the state educational agency (SEA), membership fees from the local educational agencies (LEAs) and other end-user clients, fees-for-services, grants, or local taxing authority (Stanley, 2005). ESAs may also receive either direct federal funds from the U.S. Education Department (USED), or federal pass-through dollars from the SEA. Some states encourage ESAs to be or become entrepreneurial, while others do not (Stephens & Keane). This creates a continuum of entrepreneurial activities within ESAs.

According to the brochure called Questions Asked About Educational Service Agencies (n.d.) on the website for AESA, typical educational programs offered by ESAs include services for students with disabilities, career and technical education, professional development for teachers and other school personnel, and technology services.

Not all for-profit companies are thought to be entrepreneurial in nature, but there are many innovative companies that see an opportunity and a market, find a solution, are willing to invest capital, and take risks. For educational entities this has not always been the case. Seeking opportunities and finding solutions are fairly common for educational entities to perform, but investing capital and taking on financial and public risk is not as common (Drucker, 1985).

Many for-profit companies, both established and start-ups, have initiated new business ventures with schools as one of their potential customer bases or the sole customer focus. Educational entities, such as traditional nonprofits, larger metropolitan school districts, and ESAs have also examined the financial information and are exploring entrepreneurial activities (Eggers, Wavra, Snell & Moore, 2005).

While educational entrepreneurship is seemingly a new concept, review and analysis of the literature identifies four factors that contributed to the significance in recognition, determination, and processes of educational entrepreneurial activities: (a) reauthorization of federal laws; (b) enhanced recognition by the USED; (c) amendments to state laws, in particular in the chartered schools movement; and finally (d) court decisions regarding school finance litigation and adequacy lawsuits. These four factors are more fully addressed in the full study referenced earlier.

"It is important to note that while entrepreneurial ESAs are categorized in this study as either emerging or established, these are not two distinct categories, but a continuum that exists throughout these categories."

Methodology

To answer the questions as to whether entrepreneurship can be learned, data for this study were collected using two different methods. The first was an online questionnaire developed and sent to an ESA superintendent in each state who was identified by the state ESA leader as having an entrepreneurial ESA. Following that process, two face-to-face case study interviews and document reviews were conducted. Upon reviewing the data collected through the online questionnaire, two distinct categories developed: either an *emerging* or *established* ESA in regard to entrepreneurial activities as self-identified by ESAs.

It is important to note that while entrepreneurial ESAs are categorized in this study as either emerging or established, these are not two distinct categories, but a continuum that exists throughout these categories. Some ESA superintendents may not consider themselves entrepreneurial at all and are therefore not included in this study, while an emerging ESA might be at the beginning stages, or on the verge of tipping from emerging to established, or firmly established and competing with profit making companies.

Questionnaire

Of the 34 ESA superintendents who filled out the online questionnaire, 16 identified their ESA as an emerging entrepreneurial agency and 18 identified theirs as an established entrepreneurial agency. This distinction within the continuum of entrepreneurial activities proved very useful in the interpretation of the rest of the data and helped distinguish the differences to be studied.

ESA superintendents were asked whether they as superintendents actively encouraged and engaged in entrepreneurial efforts. All 34 superintendents said "yes"; they were engaged in these activities. The same number of respondents (34) answered "yes" when asked whether they encouraged their staff to engage in these entrepreneurial efforts. When superintendents were asked if they believed their governing board was actively engaging in these efforts, all but one superintendent responded affirmatively. The one respondent who said that the governing board was not involved in entrepreneurial efforts works in a state where ESAs do not have governing boards. Overall, the answers to these questions indicate that ESA superintendents not only believe that they play an important role in encouraging and engaging innovative efforts at their agencies, but they also encourage and engage staff and board to be entrepreneurial in their roles.

An emerging ESA superintendent wrote in the open-ended response section that he "employs high energy, grant-seeking, creative employees." An established superintendent wrote: "Find a CEO who sees entrepreneurial possibilities and is willing to support them. Be sure that your board supports entrepreneurial initiatives. Be willing to take risks. Be willing to act, not wait to be asked. Don't depend on just the requests or needs of your member districts."

When ESA superintendents were asked if their ESA had a written statement or documents supporting the educational entrepreneurial efforts in the form of a mission or vision statement, the responses were less distinct. Superintendents of 13 emerging ESAs said that they did have written documentation in the mission or vision statements to validate entrepreneurial activities, while three said they did not. Likewise, 16 CEOs of established ESAs indicated they had written documentation for these activities, while two noted they did not. Twenty-three percent of emerging ESAs reported that they do not have written documentation. This may be an indication that the entrepreneurial efforts may be too new to have written or rewritten their mission or vision statements to include these activities. Compare this to 12.5% of established ESAs that do not have written references to entrepreneurial efforts in their mission or vision statements.

All 34 superintendents identified their ESAs as recognizing entrepreneurial opportunities quickly and then acting upon them. When asked who usually recognized those opportunities first, the feedback was divided. The respondents could pick more than one answer for this question so numbers do not add up equally. For instance, one superintendent each from the emerging and the established category said that he or she was not usually the first to recognize an entrepreneurial effort. The superintendents identified the majority of their staff as the first to act and recognize opportunities: 14 emerging ESA staff and 15 established staff. The numbers dropped sharply when the superintendents responded about the governing board being the first to recognize entrepreneurial efforts. Of those superintendents who identified their agency as emerging, five boards were identified as assisting in these efforts, yet only three boards reportedly played a role in the established category. Numbers increased when superintendents were asked if the end-user client (for instance, someone at a local school or district) recognized entrepreneurial activities. Eight emerging ESA superintendents said end-user clients were involved in recognizing opportunities while nine established ESA superintendents had the same response. Finally, five emerging and seven established ESAs said other agencies or entities brought ideas to them.

To further illustrate this discussion, an emerging superintendent wrote this in the open-ended response section of the questionnaire: “Be in a constant state of ‘eyes and ears’ open for opportunities.” Another wrote: “Be creative and think outside the box.” An established superintendent wrote: “Think outside the box. Look at opportunities that make sense for your ESA.” Yet another stated, “You have to have an attitude in your agency that you have to be entrepreneurial to help districts and students.” The following statement was offered from an established entrepreneurial ESA superintendent in the response section:

> Decide what your agency is about. Establish a risk-taking culture that is fun. Do an autopsy on every failure and learn from it. Think BIG. Work on the system. Hire a futurist or become one. Lead the organization to a place it has never been before. Look for grants that fund the things you are going to do anyway...don't go after grants just because it is a big pot of money. Develop a charter school as a place to experiment with your new ideas. Train your board that you are a nonprofit business, but you are not in favor of a loss! Boards must think like entrepreneurs and business people.

The superintendents were asked about standard operating procedures (SOPs) or evaluation processes for ESA employees once an entrepreneurial opportunity had been identified, as well as about human resources and funding resources. Respondents reported that nine of the emerging ESAs had SOPs or evaluation processes in place for new opportunities, seven did not. There were 14 established ESAs with written SOPs and evaluation procedures with four established ESAs that did not have SOPs.

The next set of questions asked the respondents if new and innovative entrepreneurial practices came from internal sources within the ESA. Of the 34 superintendents who responded, 13 superintendents from the emerging ESAs and 17 from the established ESAs said “yes.” Respondents indicated that 16 staffers within each type of ESA contributed entrepreneurial ideas internally. Six superintendents at emerging ESAs indicated the governing board contributed ideas, whereas five established ESAs received ideas from their governing board. As for ideas coming from end-user clients, meaning a school or district within the ESAs catchment area, eight emerging ESAs got ideas from this group, with nine established ESAs receiving such recommendations.

Some of the open-ended statements received from emerging ESA superintendents included: "First and foremost…be willing to think with risk and not entitlement." Another wrote: "Be astute, flexible, a risk taker with a flat governing structure. Network to receive and share ideas." Yet another wrote: "Develop a network of people to discuss, explore, and refine ideas. Be proactive legislatively for resources. Our governance policy allows us to be flexible and to be able to respond to opportunities quickly. Be accountable for results in your entrepreneurial efforts…."

The next question asked about external sources and what external entities contributed to new ideas within the ESA. Interestingly, 15 emerging ESAs said that new and innovative entrepreneurial practices come from external sources outside the ESA, with one indicating that ideas did not come from outside entities. Of the established ESAs, 15 said they got entrepreneurial ideas from external sources, while three indicated that they did not receive new ideas from external sources.

Those 30 superintendents who responded in the affirmative to the initial question were then asked to identify what external sources contributed to new and innovative entrepreneurial practices. They could pick more than one option from the following: educational companies; educational policy or think tank groups; other nonprofit educational groups, local chambers of commerce, state or national groups, institution of higher education (IHEs), or through requests for proposals (RFPs). Superintendents of emerging ESAs indicated they sought ideas from external sources more so than established ESAs: educational companies, chambers of commerce, state or national groups, and IHEs. An equal number of emerging and established ESAs sought external ideas from educational policy or think tank groups and through RFPs. Established ESAs more often looked to other nonprofit educational groups for external ideas.

The two categories with the greatest percentage difference between established and emerging ESAs were the nonprofit educational groups and IHEs. Established ESAs looked to other nonprofits 14% more than emerging ESAs, while emerging ESAs sought external ideas from institutions of higher education 17% more often than the established ESAs did.

Questionnaire respondents had the opportunity to specify where other external ideas may come from in the open text box of this question. Respondents wrote the following comments: "From other ESAs," "Local economic development corporation," "World Future Society," "Hearing world thought leaders," "Attending national and state conferences," "Through technology," and "Reading futurists' books."

Table ***Generation of new and innovative entrepreneurial practices and ideas***

Question	Category	Extremely important	Somewhat important	Not at all important	N/A
Attending education-related conferences	Emerging	14	0	0	0
	Established	12	4	0	0
Attending non-education related conferences	Emerging	1	10	2	1
	Established	6	9	0	1
Reading/scanning education-related material	Emerging	9	5	0	0
	Established	8	7	1	0
Reading/scanning noneducation related materials	Emerging	1	9	3	1
	Established	7	8	1	0
Talking with our end-user clients	Emerging	14	0	0	0
	Established	13	2	1	0
Talking with others at other ESAs	Emerging	10	4	0	0
	Established	14	1	1	0
Talking with business people, noneducators	Emerging	8	6	0	0
	Established	9	7	0	0

The respondents were asked from what sources they seek new and innovative practices. See Table 1. Of the 34 respondents, 30 superintendents from emerging and established ESAs filled in this question. Superintendents from emerging and established ESAs reported that the three areas of importance where they look for new ideas are talking with their end-user clients (27), attending educational conferences (26), and talking with other ESAs (24). To put this in perspective, three respondents said that talking with their end-user clients was either somewhat important or of no importance; four indicated that it was only somewhat important to attend educational conferences; and six indicated that talking with other ESAs was somewhat or not important to them for generating new ideas.

The notion of reading and scanning educational materials for new ideas was divided amongst the respondents: 17 superintendents said it was *extremely important*, 12 said it was *somewhat important*, and one reported that it was *not at all important*. When asked if they read or scanned noneducational materials, 8 indicated *extremely important*, with 17 saying it was *somewhat important*, 4 saying it was *not at all important*, and one checking the box *not applicable (N/A)*. Attending noneducational conferences was somewhat important to them with seven indicating *extremely important*, 19 saying *somewhat important*, two indicating *not at all important*, and two checking the box for *not applicable (N/A)*. Finally, the respondents were mixed on whether or not talking with businesses was of importance when seeking new and innovative practices. Of those indicating *extremely important*, 17 said "yes" to talking to others in the business sector, and 13 said *somewhat important*.

This last section discussed replication of entrepreneurial activities at an ESA. The online questionnaire asked the ESA superintendent to agree or disagree with the following statement: "I believe that what I do at this ESA can be replicated at other ESAs that want to be more entrepreneurial." Within the emerging category, 15 superintendents said "yes," with one indicating "no." All 18 established superintendents replied affirmatively.

In the initial conclusions of this section analyzing the online questionnaire, an emerging superintendent wrote, "Survival over the long haul is dependent on an ESA's ability to be entrepreneurial." Superintendents of ESAs, whether from an emerging or established agency, are eager to share their lessons, wisdom and stories, as well as to learn from each other.

Case Studies

Upon review of the results obtained from the online questionnaire, a distinct pattern emerged between those ESA superintendents who identified themselves as either an emerging or established ESA based on their entrepreneurial activities. To follow up on the data collected through the online questionnaire and through document and website reviews, two entrepreneurial ESA superintendents were selected for case study interviews. Each of these superintendents represented either an emerging ESA or an established ESA. Both ESA superintendents agreed to be identified for this section of the study and forgo their anonymity.

Cliff Carmody, the superintendent of an ESA in Minnesota, was interviewed as a representative of an emerging entity, while Robert Witten, the superintendent in an ESA in Pennsylvania, was interviewed as a representative of an established entity. These two entities represent the ends of their categories within the continuum of entrepreneurial activities in ESAs in the United States.

Background on an emerging ESA. Cliff Carmody discussed the emerging entrepreneurial activities within his ESA, the Southwest/West Central Educational Service Cooperative in Marshall, Minnesota. The Co-op has 243 employees and an operating budget of $22,000,000. Its governing board is made up of 14 members, 12 of whom are local school district board members while two others are community representatives. Carmody also has an informal advisory committee of local superintendents who provide planning and evaluation input to the Co-op. The Co-op serves 54 school districts in the catchment area that make up the bulk of their end-user clients, but other public entities may purchase services from the Co-op, such as nonprofit organizations, cities, counties, and other governmental agencies.

"Survival over the long haul is dependent on an ESA's ability to be entrepreneurial."

As the Co-op's website states, "We are customer driven, cost effective, and entrepreneurial! We value and practice initiative, ingenuity, and creativity!" Its mission is to "support members in their efforts to provide quality education and governmental services for children, families, and communities." Their vision is "to become a pathfinder in facilitating access to all services that support and enhance the health, safety, growth, and learning of children, families, and community members."

Background on an established ESA. Robert Witten discussed established entrepreneurial activities within his ESA, the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (IU) in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. The IU employs over 1,100 staff members and has fiscal oversight and annual responsibility of $152,000,000.

The IU serves 17 school districts within their catchment area, as well as numerous other end-users, including three technical schools, 73 nonpublic schools, regional businesses, communities, and nonprofit organizations. Through various contracts CSIU offers a variety of educational programming and technical assistance for schools statewide. It also runs a national purchasing program. The IU has a 17-member governing board, which is comprised of one representative from each of the constituent district school boards. The board's main role is to approve operational measures. CSIU also has an informal superintendents' advisory council made up of local superintendents from the catchment area who provide advice on programs and services.

According to its website, the IU is governed by a "Marketplace Philosophy where clients determine program participation." Witten stated, "Everything at our IU is based on a fee for service; it is a marketplace mentality. We would go out of business if our clients [didn't] purchase our services." Their mission statement reads that the IU "builds partnerships with schools and communities; serves established and emerging constituencies; inspires individuals and organizations to reach their highest potential; encourages teamwork, cooperation and diversity; and strives for innovation and excellence to create the future." The stated goals are "excellence in education and leadership; lifelong learning and development opportunities for clients and staff; a broad range of quality services for diverse constituencies; an organizational structure that enables staff to anticipate and respond effectively to constituent needs; and an organizational culture that supports and enhances the knowledge, skills and leadership capabilities of all staff."

Similar and distinct themes between the emerging and established ESAs. After the case studies were completed, distinct themes emerged to support the theory that entrepreneurship can be a learned trait by ESA superintendents. Some of the themes that emerged were the difference in roles of the superintendent and staff, dedicated funding, and the culture of the ESA.

Role of the superintendent and staff. The theme of the role of the superintendent and staff in an entrepreneurial ESA was prevalent in both interviews. As an emerging entrepreneurial ESA, Carmody is very hands-on as an emerging entrepreneurial superintendent. During the interview it became apparent that he was currently the main instigator for new entrepreneurial activities at the Co-op. While he recently hired a new staff member to assist in this emerging area, Carmody stated that he was currently the initial generator of innovative ideas. He emphasized that currently any staff member can submit a proposal, but at the moment "most ideas come from me. It is usually me proposing them." His staff was not yet fully engaged in the entrepreneurial process and he spent a lot of time leading by example. "Today we are not very good at it," Carmody said, speaking of becoming entrepreneurial, "but over time we will get good and with more time we will get even better." Carmody actively encouraged staff and board members to act and think in an entrepreneurial manner and is writing internal documentation for establishing standard processes.

In his leadership role, Carmody said he "need[ed] to be engaged and listen to the members, to hear what the trends are in my region, in the state, nationally. New ideas that come from listening and attending AESA [conferences] are a good example." He stated he was better suited to talk to and learn from other people, taking the information necessary and bringing it back to his Co-op. He went on to say this about his entrepreneurial style:

> I find the majority of ideas by listening. I try to figure out what others are doing, look to see if they fit or don't fit with our Co-op. I try to be in places where superintendents and other city and county staff members are at. I listen to the governmental folks and being able to figure out what they are doing. Where are their new ideas are coming from? Does it fit with the agency? I spend a lot of my time in places listening, to figure out where things are at.

In contrast, Witten stated multiple times during the interview that he relies on his staff for most innovative ideas at the IU. With formal SOPs and processes in place and a staff he hired because of his longevity at the IU, he was confident in his staff to generate new and innovative practices. Witten acknowledged, "Most ideas come internally." At the established ESA, Witten's situation is unlike Carmody's situation as a relatively new leader. The IU has a stable budget, written formal procedures, and over a decade of practice of in-depth entrepreneurial activities. The staff of the IU understands how to be an entrepreneurial agency. Whitten noted:

> Most ideas come through the staff; it is a two way street. They read, I read, and every week we sit down and talk about the usual stuff or about what we've read and look into it. Maybe it's something I've read and want to know more about. Maybe they read about it and tell me it is bogus and isn't going to happen; I understand that too. These meetings are not even close to being one way--I value their opinions. They are leaders, they have the freedom to create and design. They are rewarded for efforts, financial rewards, and our work environment is relaxed. We don't punch clocks; they know what needs to get done. They provide their own accountability, and they are probably harder on themselves than I would be.

At the IU all services were offered for fees. Witten called it "a marketplace mentality." The IU has a healthy respect for risk and can attempt riskier endeavors because it has built this element into its practices. With eight internal divisions and diversified assets, it "won't bleed to death" like a smaller ESA if a program or project was eliminated or failed, according to Witten. All of the projects the IU embarks upon have a built-in exit strategy written into the business plan, if needed.

Witten does not allow for "entitlement thinking," but expects everyone at the IU to participate in the process. He quoted text from a plaque that hangs in the office that states, "We don't look for people who have never failed, but we look for people who have never given up." He was adamant that he didn't want staff whose expectations were just to expect a paycheck, but staff who anticipate their constituents' needs. Staff at the IU were rewarded when they tried, regardless of success. "If we did anything less than that," Witten said, "it would deter people from trying." He said that prospective employees "may have all the credentials, things that look good [on paper], they may be a great person, but they aren't going to be a team member if they don't have the 'fire in the belly'; that is another of my favorite saying!"

" 'We don't look for people who have never failed, but we look for people who have never given up.' "

In regard to hiring entrepreneurial staff, Witten stated:

> Be sure you have the right people on the right bus, in the right seat. Anything other than that doesn't really matter. I have really good people, but if I don't have the right people, if they aren't in the right seat, they can't do what needs to be done. They may be still a great person, but they can't get it done. People first and strategies second. I agree with [business researcher/author] Jim Collins 100 % on that. I need people who think creatively, see better ways of doing things.

Dedicated funding. Another theme that emerged during the analytical review was the need for internal dedicated funding at the two entrepreneurial ESAs. For the first time, Carmody's emerging Co-op implemented a line item in its 2009 budget for innovative entrepreneurial practices. These reserved dollars will be used for start-up costs for new programs and services. The initial budget was between $50,000 and $75,000. Carmody stated that "because we have this bureaucracy-based governmental model, with entrenched thinking, it is hard for us to find innovative ways to do the R & D work." These new dollars allow the Co-op to fund new and innovative programs. Carmody said these dedicated funds will:

> ...allow for new projects where the staff will put together a business plan. They must know about needs in the marketplace; and these terms are foreign to most staff members. The need to put together a budget, figure out how to generate dollars, and how to get out of if it doesn't work. Then we can talk if and when and how we put up some of the new money.

From the time he was hired 14 years ago, Witten at the established IU has had a specific line item in the budget for new and innovative projects. These annual budgeted dollars act as a revolving loan fund, referred to as Millennium Money (MM). Originally funded with operational dollars, the seed money was available to any staffer who had an innovative idea. The MM revolving fund allowed a staffer with a new idea to write a business plan based on established rubrics and present it to one of the division heads. If approved, the concept was taken to the entire senior staff for review and possible implementation. For example, Academy PA, a program offering courses online, was initially started with MM funds and has since started to pay the fund back. "This way," said Witten, "the money we have available encourages and supports other initiatives. There is the expectation to pay it back if [the program] is successful over a period of years. That gives them an incentive to try to give it a shot."

Entrepreneurial Culture of the ESA. The final theme that emerged upon coding the interviews was the culture of the entrepreneurial ESAs. Both Carmody and Witten used popular phrases from mainstream movies when describing their respective entrepreneurial ESAs. Carmody quoted from *Ghostbusters*, saying "Who you going to call?" Witten paraphrased from the movie *Field of Dreams* saying, "Build it and they will come." The phrases they quoted were interesting because they help to explain the differences between the two cultures of their respective emerging and established organizations.

Carmody's Co-op has started to alter its internal culture and is becoming more entrepreneurial: "The growing pains have started already," he said. The staff of the Co-op were reacting to the board and end-user clients, anticipating that they will purchase the services offered by the Co-op. When Carmody talked about bringing new ideas and innovative practices to his Co-op, he readily admits that a wholesale cultural change was going to be difficult to implement:

> Most of my ideas I have stolen from someone else, just tweaking them, mulling them over, thinking about them. I am still fighting the culture. How do I change the perspective of who we are with almost 250 staff members. How do you get them going in one direction and understand what that means? But I think all ESAs are working on this. Entrepreneurship is providing a service that your membership needs and wants and is willing to pay for. This is different than any school finance model I am aware of. Usually it's, "Here is the money and now go generate the money."

In contrast, there were mature cultural practices in place at Witten's IU. The entrepreneurial culture was entrenched and practiced on a daily basis by the superintendent, staff and board alike. Because of the innovative and proactive products and services offered by the IU, it was expected that the end-user client would purchase from the IU. Experiences from the superintendent, staff, and governing board, along with formal protocols, significant funding, and a mature culture made this established ESA possible. Witten stated that "our culture is to enhance all staff." He went on to say:

> The culture within the IU is important, particularly in regards to challenges and opportunities. Sometimes it is easier to say, "Don't rock the boat." I say, "Color outside

the lines," but that is both a challenge and an opportunity. We need to work throughout the organization and across the organization.

Findings

The basic similarities and differences along the continuum of emerging and established ESAs were evidenced by the level of involvement of the superintendent and staff. As reported by the ESA superintendents in the questionnaire and confirmed in the case study interviews, emerging ESAs rely on their board members and end-user clients for recognizing these opportunities more than the established ESAs, which rely more on their leadership and staff. While the vision and mission statements of both entities had written statements and documentation about their entrepreneurial efforts, the established ESAs had more formal processes in place than emerging ESAs. This is certainly an area where sharing evidence in a collaborative fashion would benefit those ESAs that do not have documentation.

Adequate staffing and financing for new and innovative efforts were concerns of both emerging and established ESAs. Emerging ESAs had more need for staff to implement new practices, while both entities noted the need for additional funding to develop new and innovative entrepreneurial practices. Similar patterns played a role when ESA superintendents sought information from internal and external sources.

As evidenced by the responses from the questionnaire and validated in the case study interviews, a majority of emerging and established ESAs have documentation in the form of mission or vision statements and had SOPs in place to address entrepreneurial efforts. This institutionalization strengthens the roles of the superintendent and staff in becoming or remaining a strong entrepreneurial entity in the education field. Data suggested that established ESAs tend to have more operational procedures in place than emerging ESAs. This is an area where emerging ESA superintendents may want to team with established ESA superintendents to review and share mission statements, vision statements and other SOPs in a formal or informal exchange of information. The institutionalization process of becoming and remaining entrepreneurial can be shared amongst ESA superintendents and staff.

Generalizing from the two case studies and the questionnaire data, it appears that ESAs are poised to work collaboratively with competing entities, or to move beyond them and create a new niche in the educational entrepreneurial marketplace. By watching trends, seeking both internal and external sources, listening externally to others (as the emerging superintendent commonly does) or listening internally (as does the established leader), the role of ESAs likely will grow exponentially in this entrepreneurial educational marketplace. For example, the emerging ESA superintendent from the case study has yet to fully employ staff who think like intraprenuers, but are acting as traditional educators as they are. Implementing formal professional learning communities, with input from staff of an established ESA, may assist in this matter. New technologies will allow this to happen seamlessly and inexpensively.

Consequences. Possible downsides for ESAs attempting to become entrepreneurial, or to become more entrepreneurial, include competition from other ESAs or other entities (both for-profits and nonprofits) as referenced in each interview. While competition is not inherently bad, and is necessary to create marketplaces, other entities may undermine the newness factor of emerging ESAs and attempt to pre-empt these new initiatives. Also, the initial start-up costs associated with new projects or services could prove damaging if not addressed properly and if fiscal returns were not realized. ESAs are after all accountable to the general public for their budgets and must act as sound fiscal stewards.

Another possible downside is that an ESA superintendent could go into this venture without attempting to engage the governing board or staff regarding the efforts that need to occur (proper documentation, processes, cultural changes). A lack of public support for engaging in these new efforts could also prove to have negative effects. Having an exit plan is as important as the business plan itself, according to the interviewees. Finally, any new products or services ESAs wish to create must be wanted or needed by their end-user clients. As was evidenced above, ESAs can either be reactive or proactive in their efforts, but the end result is still the same: the end-user clients must want to buy it.

Conclusions

ESA leaders need to seek out external sources of information and evaluation options. Emerging and established superintendents, staff and governing boards need to attend both education and noneducation related conferences, read and scan a multitude of materials, and talk with their end-user clients, peers and others in the business sector to continue to develop and explore new innovative practices. As collaboration with competitors increases, ESAs need to be in a position to have access to successful practices in order to provide new and improved programs and services to all of their end-users, both the traditional ones most often thought of, and to develop the need for new clients. Not only are ESAs competing with their own end-user clients, but increasingly with other ESAs, other nonprofits, and local and national companies. This notion of an entity assisting the continuum of ESAs in the quest to become or remain entrepreneurial is worthy of being explored more fully.

An entity like AESA could play a role in identifying ESAs along the emerging/established continuum and then conduct such activities as forming learning communities for superintendents, staff and board members to learn from each other. Identifying risk takers, sharing best practices, and forming mentoring relationships would assist in moving other ESAs along the continuum of practice – from lower to higher.

Finally, state and federal laws and regulations need to reflect the expanding roles of ESAs and their ongoing place in the educational system. ESAs cannot remain the "invisible partner" any longer, as Stephens and Keane (2005) referred to them, but must enter the dialogue and debate through their entrepreneurial efforts. Local schools and districts are being asked to do more for student and professional and administrative staff thus allowing ESAs to act as collaborators, consolidators, researchers, and entrepreneurs on behalf of their end-user clients. As regional public entities, the range of programs and services that ESAs offer could be expanded, as well as the number and type of end-user clients could expand. States would be wise to consider the expansion of programs and services offered. When the economy is down, end-user client increasingly turn to ESAs for current and expanded programs and services. In this economic downturn, ESAs would be wise to take the lessons of their peers and share with each other.

An intrapreneur within an entrepreneurial educational entity–be it the ESA superintendent or staff member–is positioned to remain innovative or on the verge of becoming innovative. As their end-user clients ask for new products and services, ESAs are responding with flexibility and creativity, and they are making cultural changes to ensure that needs are being met. With fewer dollars available for education and shifting funds, using economies of scale and creating internal direct funding sources will allow ESAs to remain a viable entrepreneurial educational entity.

This study found that whether part of an emerging or established entity, entrepreneurial ESA superintendents recognize, determine and address new innovations. They use internal and external factors to obtain information and resources and develop new processes. These traits can be replicated by other entities wanting to grow and prosper. Superintendents of ESAs are leading the educational sector in entrepreneurial efforts.

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Kari M. Arfstrom, Ph.D., formerly worked for the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA) before returning to her home state of Minnesota. She continues to work in the field of education leadership and policy at the state and national levels as a vice president for the National Youth Leadership Council.

She can be reached by phone at 703-399-6608 and by email at karfstrom@gmail.com.

Comprehensive Improvement System (CIS): A Web-based Framework to Make Agency Vision a Reality

by
Jeanette McGreevy

John Wooden, former UCLA coach with 10 unequaled NCAA championships to his team's credit, speaks a collective but often plowed-under truth: "Don't mistake activity for achievement" (Wooden & Jamison, 2005, p. 158). Educational classroom practitioners, service providers, managers, administrators, and policy makers can be bombarded by reform "activities," but to enjoy Wooden's unrivaled success status, albeit in another arena, an educational service agency should consider using its own, voluntary comprehensive improvement system. Why? External demands to meet expanded legal responsibilities and produce evidence-based educational results are prolific, politically popular, and narrowly summative (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009; Huffman, Thomas & Lawrence, 2008; Schwandt, 2005). However, an agency with a self-regulated, internal comprehensive improvement system has the potential not only to improve the quality of state and federal compliance services that agencies must provide and provide well, but also to build the capacity of agency staff in proactive, on-going program/service improvement through more collaborative formative action research to better serve constituents' needs.

Collaborative Culture of Quality

Why should an educational agency develop and sustain a voluntary, internal comprehensive improvement system? The issue is expecting, nurturing, and sustaining a workplace culture of quality that an external, regulatory system may try to stimulate, but ultimately cannot "do" on a day-to-day basis for an organization. Area education agency staff must be intrinsically compelled to answer the "so what" questions about the impact of the daily services they provide. So what difference do agency services make for those who participate in them? To that end, the following Comprehensive Improvement System (CIS) purposes (adapted from Hansson, 2003, for area education agencies) delineate the agency stakeholder "should knows." It is reasonable that. . .

A. As a client, user, or customer of AEA services you should know more about the outcomes or effects of proposed help and activities that you are offered.

B. As citizens and taxpayers you should know more about the quality and effectiveness of the collective resources that you put into AEA services.

C. As a professional you should know more about the outcome and effects of different methods you use in your day-to-day work.

D. We all would like to know more about what actually works in the different areas of AEA service practices.

"...the CIS focuses participants' time on self-reflection, self-regulation (evaluation), and continuous improvement in constant conversations that can continue long-term while at the same time adjusting to external state and federal policy changes."

Are the purposes reasonable? Yes, and that is why Great Prairie, an area education agency that provides services to 35 school districts and 6 accredited nonpublic schools in southeast Iowa with over 6,000 miles of service delivery area, is beginning the third year of development of its own web-based CIS. The CIS is an internal organizational framework that has the potential to address all four purposes by creating a culture of quality that "encourages people to embrace change and seek the highest performance levels" (Creating a Culture of Quality, 2008, p. 10). External accountability systems place great demands on area education agencies, but external systems cannot build an internal culture of quality. As Kegan and Lahey (2009) state, "Throughout the world—and this is as true in the United States and Europe as it is in China and India—human capability will be the critical variable in the new century" (p. 11). The CIS holds the promise of helping dedicated agency service deliverers, like those in Great Prairie area education agency, reach even higher levels of service quality.

What value does the internal, voluntary CIS bring to an AEA that external regulations do not? The state legislation (Iowa Code 1172) that created area education agencies took effect July 1, 1975, but Iowa legislators did not require AEA accountability for accreditation pursuant to 281—IAC Chapter 72 until the late 1990s, with revisions in 2008 (Iowa Department of Education, 2008). The value of the CIS, however, is that while the framework content allows the AEA to show evidence of meeting 281—IAC Chapter 72 state standards for area education agencies (which is critical), the CIS goes beyond minimum legal compliance by providing the current 13 participating agency service delivery teams opportunities to set their own discipline-specific, long-term performance targets directed at solving the problems the teams face every day in service delivery. While state indicators require measurement of the customers as a "whole" whether they participate in AEA services or not (which is important for an overall regional picture), the CIS teams measure effectiveness with the populations who participate in their services, which can be more meaningful measures of effectiveness for service providers' day-to-day practice.

Regardless of the cyclical changes in state and federal regulatory requirements, which all service agencies must and should meet well, the CIS focuses participants' time on self-reflection, self-regulation (evaluation), and continuous improvement in constant conversations that can continue long-term, while at the same time adjusting to external state and federal policy changes:

a) What do we want to be?

b) What do data tell us about our schools' student (learner) performance needs and agency service quality?

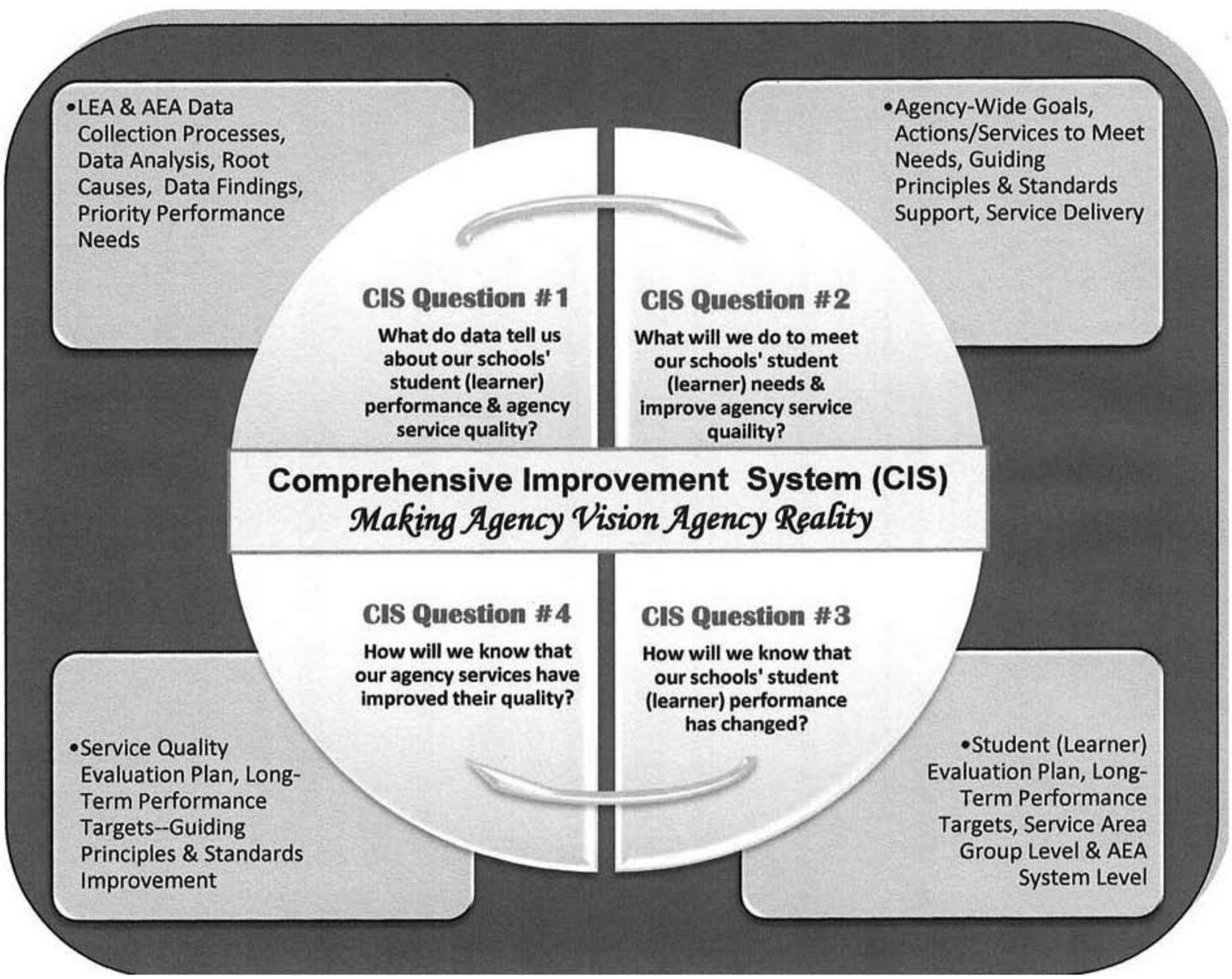
c) What will we do to meet our schools' student (learner) performance needs and improve agency service quality?

d) How will we know that our schools' student (learner) performance has changed?

e) How will we know that our agency services have improved their quality? (Note: In a February 2009 CIS team member internal staff survey, answering this question was indicated as the highest need area.)

Opportunity for solving chronic day-to-day service delivery problems lies within these constant conversations through a culture that says "quality is truly everyone's responsibility" (Kenney, p. 44). (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1



Collective Self-Regulation, Self-Efficacy, and Professionalism

Since the top-down model of decision-making has not resulted in the reform of practice and comprehensive educational improvements to the extent demanded by current stakeholder scrutiny (Copland, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2009), the CIS makes several assumptions about the keys to excellent service.

Assumption 1: The important work of improving agency services must occur with distributed leadership at the service delivery level (Copland, 2003; Rummler & Brache, 1995). Leadership at the group level has the potential to build self-efficacy; that is the belief that service deliverers have control to make improvements through their own persistent efforts (Fuller, et al., 1982; Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2004; Kontoghiorghes & Gudgel, 2002; Mosley, Boyar, Carson & Pearson, 2008; Washington, 2000; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Assumption 2: Self-regulation, to determine and police some of the rules of the individuals' own service area (Darling-Hammond, 2009, chap. 2; Ray & Elder, 2007; Thomson, 2007), promotes behaviors more likely to transform day-to-day practice than do external regulations.

Assumption 3: Professionalism requires from people a "commitment to a standard of performance far above the ordinary" (Stanley, 2008, p. 9) and "holding themselves accountable for producing the best possible outcomes" (Sagor, 2009, p. 9). Great Prairie CIS participants are building upon their own dedicated service and expertise to make agency vision a reality: Great Prairie will be the recognized leader in services that improve service performance.

"The process embedded within the CIS for all 13 service area teams (and most critical to the web-based system doing what it is intended to do) is the ongoing practice of action research, inquiry that focuses practitioners on systematically improving the quality of their own practices in the workplace."

These three assumptions live in the agency's day-to-day practices in meeting external regulatory demands efficiently and effectively and transforming internal agency practices through self-identified urgent service discipline-specific areas of improvement. Agency service deliverers must decide, as Kegan and Lahey (2009) state, "Is it important to us to get better at this? Are there big payoffs if we do" (p. 288)? As a result of the three assumptions, participation in the CIS has the potential to serve the following functions at high levels:

a. Provides a framework whereby agency employees identify and solve their own problems through a collaborative action research process.

b. Provides organization learning and job-embedded application of continuous improvement/transformation.

c. Helps individuals see how their work is part of a larger scheme—numerous initiatives can build purposefully toward making agency-wide goal progress.

d. Integrates agency-wide information for service area quality improvement/transformation.

e. Provides a self-regulatory tool for multiple discipline areas to contribute to progress toward agency-wide goals.

f. Provides a dynamic, on-time, easy access tool for employee dialogue and discussion.

g. Aligns service area actions with agency-wide goals.

h. Provides public, transparent accountability for continuous improvement/transformation.

i. Provides a common language for agency employees.

j. Exceeds minimum AEA accreditation standards pursuant to IAC—281 Chapter 72.

k. Holds evidence of meeting AEA accreditation standards IAC—281 Chapter 72.

These CIS functions support the idea that "autonomous, self-directed, and self-confident learners can realistically and constructively judge the merits and shortcomings of their own efforts and productions" (Costa & Kallick, 1995). Self-directed learning and constructively judging the results of that learning are the work of the CIS.

Collaborative Action Research

The process embedded within the CIS for all 13 service area teams (and most critical to the web-based system doing what it is intended to do) is the ongoing practice of action research, inquiry that focuses practitioners on systematically improving the quality of their own practices in the workplace (Center for Collaborative Action Research, 2009; Donato, 2003; NCREL, 2009; Sagor, 2009; Wadsworth, 1998). Within the CIS dialogue, groups of service deliverers work as communities of investigators (Argyrus, Putnam & McLaire-Smith, 1985-2000) to analyze data, define service-specific problems, identify root causes, develop study questions, determine appropriate actions, study the implementation of those actions, and cycle back to defining specific problems again with collegial support; hence, the work is collaborative in nature (Rowell, 2008; Sagor, 2009). The CIS provides a structured way by which agency service deliverers can determine the most important questions to ask (Wagner, 2008) about urgent problems to solve in service delivery and taking the best-approach steps to solve those problems.

In addition, service area team members (the "investigators") select and focus on areas of inquiry that are important to them (Sagor, 1992) based upon customer results data and their own expertise. Agency staff participating in the CIS also incorporate their team's self-study findings with other information and their own experiences (Reineke, 1991), acting as implementers and researchers (Taut, 2007) to collectively make team decisions in the best interests of their customers.

Change

"No one ever wants to make deep change because it means letting go of control" (Quinn, 2004, p. viii) and that is hard for people used to being in control (Wagner, 2008). Bureaucracies such as educational organizations are designed to protect themselves from any kind of change, let alone the rapid changes needed to maintain relevant system, group, and individual contributions in a now-globally competitive world (Wagner, 2008; Washington, 2000). As a result, transforming complex organizations into new ways of doing business requires deliberate and long-term expectations and commitments intended to disturb the status quo (Smith & Freeman, 2002). Disturbing an agency's "business as usual" to meet customers' needs for the 21st century has implications with regard to setting control aside.

CIS Assessment Plan

How, then, will Great Prairie Area Education Agency know if the CIS is ultimately doing what it is intended to do, that is, to disturb business as usual in smart ways to improve customer performance and service quality? An area education agency needs general "change" target areas: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and action plans (adapted from Lippitt, 1987) in order to manage change successfully as well as accompanying agency-determined long-term performance targets for both improving customer results and transforming service quality if it is to judge the degree to which the changes occur over time. The following are examples of long-term performance targets aligned with Great Prairie's two agency-wide goals: 1) All students will improve their performance, and, 2) All agency services will improve their quality.

The following components of the CIS process all start from the premise that CIS PARTICIPATION IMPROVES THE ABILITIES OF 100% OF SERVICE AREA TEAM MEMBERS TO….

A. Vision

1. Customer Performance
   transform their day-to-day practices in order to make the service area visions defined for customers the reality.

2. Service Quality
   transform their day-to-day practices in order to make their service area visions defined for service deliverers the reality.

B. Skills

1. Customer Performance
   a. collect timely customer performance data for people participating in their services.
   b. analyze timely customer performance data for people participating in their services.
   c. identify prioritized customer performance needs/problems.
   d. identify the root cause(s) of the customer performance problem over which the service area has some measure of influence/control.
   e. identify the critical success factors that must be in place and working in order for the customer performance problem to be solved.
   f. develop relevant customer performance study questions for which their teams will seek the answers.
   g. write relevant long-term performance targets and indicators to improve customer performance.
   h. integrate with other service areas to improve customer performance.

2. Service Quality
   a. collect timely service quality performance data.
   b. analyze timely service quality performance data.
   c. identify prioritized service quality needs/problems.

d. identify the root cause(s) of the service quality problem over which the service area has some measure of influence/control.

e. identify the critical success factors that must be in place and working in order for the service quality problem to be solved.

f. develop relevant service quality study questions for which their teams will seek the answers.

g. write relevant long-term performance targets and indicators to improve service quality.

C. Incentives

1. demonstrate self-efficacy (intangible).

2. demonstrate self-regulation (intangible).

3. see improved customer performance results (tangible).

4. see improved service quality (tangible).

D. Resources

1. access the resources they need to make progress with long-term customer performance targets.

2. make progress with long-term service quality long-term performance targets.

E. Action Plan

1. Customer Performance

a. identify their team's current practices that support the long-term customer performance targets.

b. identify the relevant research/literature base that indicates what should be in place to make progress with the long-term customer performance targets.

c. determine the major actions that the team will take to make progress with the customer performance targets.

2. Service Quality

a. identify their team's current practices that support the long-term service quality performance targets.

b. identify the relevant research/literature base that indicates what should be in place to make progress with the long-term service quality performance targets.

c. determine the major actions that the team will take to make progress with the service quality performance targets.

The potential impact that the web-based CIS can have on Great Prairie Area Education Agency's ability to make its vision its reality is that the agency will be the recognized leader in services that improve student performance; is it "true to the spirit of the learning organization with its emphasis on continuous innovation, experimentation, feedback, and adaptation in the organization" (Fry & Griswold, 2003, p. 312). The tension between the rapid changes needed to offer relevant contributions in a now-globally competitive world (Wagner, 2008; Washington, 2000) and the slow, long-term, day-to-day hard work of creating and sustaining an agency work culture that is purposeful, collaborative, and hence more effective, is crucial for CIS success.

“Learning is not workshops and courses and strategic retreats. It is not . . . improvement plans or individual leadership development. These are inputs. Rather, learning is developing the organization, day after day, within the culture” (Fullan, 2008, p.36).

Area education agency staff members deliver services in the “messy world of concrete human dilemmas” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 99). It is intentionally designed that an agency’s proactive, internal, self-regulatory improvement system is best suited to build on-going evaluation capacity and to be flexible enough to meet the needs of those ever-changing human challenges. It is intentionally designed that the CIS assist service deliverers in making sense of the often fragmentation and incoherence of ever-shifting, ever-urgent “magic-bullet” policies (Hennessy & Sullivan, 1989) so that agency staff members can craft their own policy/service coherence (Honig & Hatch, 2004). CIS participants have a valuable leadership opportunity, as Fullan (1998) states:

> Leaders for change get involved as learners in real reform situations. They craft their own theories of change, consistently testing them against new situations. They become critical consumers of management theories, able to sort out promising ideas from empty ones. They become less vulnerable to and less dependent upon external answers. They stop looking for solutions in the wrong places. (p. 8)

Great Prairie Area Education Agency staff members, like those in all educational service agencies, can expand the mission and influence of their agency (Weiss, 1993), demonstrate and market that agency activities do make important contributions to improved customer performance, and look for solutions in the all the right places—beginning with themselves.

John Wooden would be proud of all those who take on this challenge.

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Jeanette McGreevy, Ph.D., is the Assessment Services Coordinator for the Great Prairie Area Education Agency in Burlington, Iowa. She may be reached by phone at 641-682-8592, ext. 5226, and by email at jeanette.mcgreevy@gpaea.k12.ia.us.

Measuring Customer Satisfaction

by
Hobart Harmon

Have you noticed the intense marketing efforts of for-profit and nonprofit organizations since the recession took hold of the bottom line? Competition is fierce as businesses and organizations try to exist in an environment of growing unemployment and less disposable income among citizens. School districts are bracing for great budget stress in the 2010-2011 school year when federal stimulus funds end. What will be the circumstance for ESAs that have assumed rather than verified customer loyalty and really have not promoted their services well? Are ESA leadership and staff members doing enough to measure customer satisfaction, like their job depends on it?

In preparing a presentation for the 2008 ESA Annual Conference, I was surprised in what I learned in a review of over 125 randomly selected ESA web sites. It was more common to find a weather report on the front page of ESA web sites than any mention of ESA accomplishments, or how satisfied school districts were with ESA services and programs. This article first examines why customer satisfaction is important then presents results of the web site analysis. Included in the analysis are example quotations of well-intended ESA leadership that suggest the need for measuring customer satisfaction. Last, best practices are presented for conducting a customer satisfaction survey, with a sample survey appended.

Why Measure Customer Satisfaction

There may be many reasons an ESA might neglect to conduct customer satisfaction. Arguably, some reasons may be similar to the top 10 that Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001, p. 17) note in explaining why evaluation is neglected in organizations. Previously in an article in *Perspectives* (Harmon, 2006), I addressed the issues of building evaluation capacity in ESAs and listed the top 10 reasons organizations neglect evaluation, in rank order (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001, p. 17):

1. No one has asked for it.
2. Previous experiences with evaluation have been either a disaster or disappointing.
3. Organizational leaders think they already know what does and does not work.
4. Perceived costs of evaluation outweigh the perceived benefits of evaluation.

5. Organization members view evaluation as a time-consuming and laborious task.
6. Organization members don't believe the results will be used; data are collected and not analyzed on used.
7. Evaluation is considered an add-on activity.
8. There is a real or perceived lack of evaluation skills.
9. Organization members fear the impact of evaluation findings.
10. Organization members misunderstand evaluation's purpose and role.

Substitute the word "customer satisfaction" in any of the reasons where "evaluation" appears and a similarity seems logical. Conducting a survey is a technique for collecting evaluative data and information. Perhaps too many ESA leaders have also found that poorly focused "customer surveys" are not customer "satisfaction" surveys and may generate low response rates and unusable information unless well designed. Measuring customer satisfaction requires a mixed-methods evaluation design for most useful results in the ESA. Otherwise, Frye's (2008) warning about making ESA decisions based solely on survey results, to exercise caution, seems warranted and wise advice.

"...many reasons already exist for the ESA to measure customer satisfaction."

Doing nothing, however, in determining customer satisfaction seems to allow the recession and relentless search for saving dollars in school district budgets to place the ESA in a perilous situation. Many leading economists are also forecasting that the behaviors of customers and clients (and consumers) brought on by the recession may be the new way of doing business in the future. Regardless, many reasons already exist for the ESA to measure customer satisfaction:

1. To understand customer quality expectations (i.e., those who receive the program or service).
2. To improve existing programs and services.
3. To foster a climate of continuous improvement in the ESA.
4. To create customer loyalty (e.g., relationships).
5. To provide evidence for funding entities.
6. To substantiate claims of success in marketing programs and services.
7. To gain recognition of excellence (e.g., Baldridge Award).

ESA Web Page Study Results

The purpose of the web page study was to determine if ESAs are evaluating programs and services and/or measuring customer satisfaction. Based on the 2007 AESA membership directory listing of 467 ESAs, a simple random sample of 129 ESAs was selected using the random numbers generator in the Statistical Package for the Social Services (SPSS). This represented a 27.6 percent sample.

The web page of each ESA was examined to answer five questions:

1. Are the terms “evaluation” and “customer satisfaction” mentioned on the front page?
2. Are the terms “evaluation” and “customer satisfaction” mentioned in the mission statement?
3. Are the terms “evaluation” and “customer satisfaction” mentioned in the programs or services offered?
4. Are the terms “evaluation” and “customer satisfaction” mentioned in the annual report?
5. Are the terms “evaluation” and “customer satisfaction” mentioned in the strategic plan?

A rating scale was used for recording data into the SPSS system for analysis, as follows: 1 = Term “evaluation” mentioned; 2 = Term “customer satisfaction” mentioned; 3 = Both terms mentioned; 4 = Neither term mentioned; and 5 = Source of information “Not Available” (NA).

Table 1 shows the number of ESAs in the sample by state. Thirty two states were represented, with the largest number of ESAs in the sample from Michigan (14), California (12), Pennsylvania (12), Illinois (9), New Your (9), and Ohio (9).

Table 1. No. ESAs Representation in Sample by State (n=129)

State	**#**	**State**	**#**	**State**	**#**
AZ	3	MD	1	PA	12
CA	12	MI	14	RI	1
CO	6	MN	3	SD	2
CT	1	MS	1	TX	3
FL	1	NC	1	UT	1
GA	2	NE	2	VA	1
IA	4	NJ	2	VT	2
IL	9	NM	1	WA	4
IN	3	NY	9	WI	4
KY	1	OH	9	WV	2
MA	7	OR	4		

Table 2 reveals that almost 90 percent of the ESA web sites contained neither term “evaluation” nor “customer satisfaction” on the front page.

Table 2. Number and Percentage of ESAs with Terms on Front Page of ESA Web Site

Rating Choice	No.	%
“Evaluation” term only	8	6.2
“Customer Satisfaction” term only	7	5.4
Both Terms	0	0
Neither Term	114	88.4
Not Available	0	0
Totals	129	100.0

Table 3 reveals neither term was mentioned in the mission statement for over two-thirds (71%) of the ESAs. The mission statement, however, could not be found on the ESA web site for almost one-fourth (23.3%) of the ESAs.

Table 3. Number and Percentage of ESA Web Sites with Terms in Mission Statement

Rating Choice	No.	%
"Evaluation" term only	4	3.1
"Customer Satisfaction" term only	2	1.6
Both Terms	1	.8
Neither Term	92	71.3
Not Available	30	23.3
Totals	129	100.0

Table 4 reveals that almost 90 percent of the ESA web sites contained neither the term "evaluation" nor "customer satisfaction" in programs or services offered.

Table 4. Number and Percentage of ESA Web Sites with Terms in Programs or Services Offered

Rating Choice	No.	%
"Evaluation" term only	12	9.3
"Customer Satisfaction" term only	1	.8
Both Terms	1	.8
Neither Term	115	89.1
Not Available	0	0
Totals	129	100.0

The term "evaluation" was found in the annual report on 10 percent of the ESA web pages (see Table 5). In almost three-fourths (74.4%), however, the ESA's annual report could not be found on the ESA web site.

Table 5. Number and Percentage of ESA Web Sites with Terms in Annual Report

Rating Choice	No.	%
"Evaluation" term only	13	10.1
"Customer Satisfaction" term only	0	0
Both Terms	2	1.6
Neither Term	18	14.0
Not Available	96	74.4
Totals	129	100.0

Table 6 shows that the term “evaluation” was found in the strategic plan on approximately nine percent of the ESA web pages. The ESA’s strategic plan, however, could not be found on over four-fifths (83.7%) percent of the ESA web sites.

Table 6. Number and Percentage of ESA Web Sites with Terms in Strategic Plan

Rating Choice	No.	%
“Evaluation” term only	11	8.5
“Customer Satisfaction” term only	1	.8
Both Terms	3	2.3
Neither Term	6	4.7
Not Available	108	83.7
Totals	129	100.0

Numerous examples of statements by the ESA director or important documents on the ESA web site provided exemplary reasons or intentions to conduct an evaluation focused on the end user (customer or client) of a program or service. In “looking ahead to 2008-2009,”a Michigan RESA superintendent noted in the annual report:

> The challenges posed by these difficult economic times have prompted us to expand our forward thinking, comprehensive planning, and effective implementation…. To investigate and pilot entrepreneurial ventures, the RESA will carefully monitor social and educational changes, explore new initiatives, and design research-based pilot programs which exhibit potential for providing greater opportunities to the clients we serve.

Among the goals reported in an Oregon ESD strategic plan was a “thoughtful process” that included evaluation of the implementation process. Goal 3 noted:

Design a thoughtful process for developing and/or changing services or programs. The process shall include:

- How an idea or service suggestion is presented.
- Who makes the decision?
- Is there an advisory process?
- Define roles and responsibilities of each department.
- Identify the project manager.
- Establish timelines.
- Define communication patterns.
- Evaluate the implementation process.
- Define the impact on the user.

An Intermediate Unit's web site in Pennsylvania included a strategic plan and elements of the business plan. A rather comprehensive evaluation framework was noted as part of the business plan's components:

> Business Plan- Develop and implement a comprehensive business plan that results in: competitive pricing of irresistible services; a framework for evaluating programs and delivery systems, pricing and marketing services; a strong financial position; increased revenue streams to support research and development, new initiatives, and strategic priorities; entrepreneurial/joint ventures; and strategic allocation and deployment of resources.

The strategic plan of a New York BOCES described the organizations as:

> An innovative educational service organization driven by customer needs and a commitment to excellence, whose mission is to ensure the success of our diverse learners, parents, community members, schools and businesses by providing collaboratively inspired, cost-effective, quality programs in an atmosphere that is safe and supportive.

Objectives of the BOCES further defined expectations regarding services provided customers, as follows:

- 100 percent of our customer needs will be met 100 percent of the time.
- 100 percent of the schools in the GST BOCES region will receive the necessary BOCES support to ensure that their students meet the NYS Learning Standards and diploma requirements.
- 100 percent of the learners who come to GST BOCES for educational programs will acquire their desired certificate, marketable occupational skills and effective life skills.
- 100 percent of our employees will rate the BOCES climate as satisfactory and collaborative.

A New Mexico cooperative noted in its mission statement:

> The mission of (the cooperative) is to research and implement sound educational practices in order to be responsive to client needs. We do this by engaging in research-based practices, developing relationships, and implementing systems to transform education. We do this so that all our clients are successful and effective.

An annual report of a Minnesota cooperative included among its priorities the following:

> Develop a process for evaluating and developing services that incorporates a continuous assessment of our members' needs. Identify new partnership opportunities and evaluate current partner relationships, in an effort to develop new services, as well as, to enhance and make more efficient our current services.

Lastly, a new Oregon ESD superintendent noted how little school districts knew about services of the ESD:

> As the new Superintendent of ---- ESD I have come to realize that I was under the misconception that most people knew what an Education Service District does. I have realized over the last four months that many people do not have an understanding of our role and what we do for the schools.... I believe that the schools value our services and see the

ESD as a necessary partner in educating the students in their districts. I hope that I can help the people living in … counties to understand a little better how we help in the education of their children.

Best Practice Guidelines: Process

In the current economic environment for school districts and other customers, forward thinking ESAs are systematically taking actions to understand and serve changing needs of their customers. The following list of guidelines will help the ESA follow a process that ensures useable results.

1. Define clearly who is the "customer." While a school district may be the ultimate customer for the ESA, for some programs it may teachers or principals or parents. The more specific the customer focus, the better the survey can be designed, and the more useful the results for making programmatic decisions.

2. Determine how customer satisfaction results will be used. Go no further in the process unless you can create a list of how results of the customer satisfaction data collection effort will be used for making decisions and by whom.

3. Designate capable person and/or team to lead the ESA's effort in evaluating customer satisfaction. While the tendency may be to add this responsibility to the person with responsibility for professional development, special education, or to some other programmatic person in the ESA, consider first if it is possible to designate a team of personnel to lead the effort. This will help share the load, as well as build evaluation capacity in the organization. Even if the ESA is fortunate enough to have a trained evaluator on staff, a team approach may be most productive in the long run, particularly in planning the data collection effort and interpreting results.

4. Consider mixed-methods approach to evaluating customer satisfaction. Don't assume that a "survey" is the only way to collect valuable information. Consider also focus groups, observations, personal face-to-face and telephone interviews, internal ESA documents or reports, and external documents or data bases with information on the ESA customer or client.

5. Identify customer requirements or quality dimensions. Follow a process that will enable the ESA evaluation team to identify the most important customer dimensions or requirements about the ESA program or service. The dimensions must have meaningful value to the customer if results are to have value for making prudent ESA decisions regarding customer satisfaction and expectations.

6. Specify the plan for collecting customer satisfaction data and information. This may be the difficult part initially, as too often a meeting is quickly held, with little time available, or without the appropriate set of expertise at the table to create a viable data collection plan. The plan must be in writing and describe the most feasible way to collect quantitative and/or qualitative data on each of the customer satisfaction dimensions, when data will be collected, and by whom. How the data is to be analyzed and used should also influence the data collection plan. A search of the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) data base might provide useful survey instruments (see http://www.eric.ed.gov). Resources on the American Evaluation Association web site (see www.eval.org) and sample evaluation surveys on the Association of Educational Service Agencies (see www.aesa.us) are also useful places to look for instruments.

7. Design valid and reliable data/information collection instruments. Before spending a lot of time drafting a customer satisfaction survey, spend a little time to determine if one already exists that might fit your ESA's needs. However, do not use a survey simply because it is available. Determine if it has been used with a target population like your defined customer. Does the survey measure the right dimensions (construct validity) and does it do it consistently (reliability)? If such information is not available, it is wise to talk with personnel in an ESA that used the survey or data collection protocol. Avoid simply picking one or two questions from multiple surveys because they seem useful. Pick only items or questions that are known to be associated with the customer satisfaction dimensions you wish to measure. High levels of frustration result when trying to analyze and draw conclusions from a poorly designed set of data or information collection instruments.

8. Develop most efficient and effective (credible) process for administering the data and information collection instruments. Pilot test the instrument with an audience like those that will be your actual participants. Ask for suggestions for improving the clarity and ease of completion. This may be where you must really decide what is the most essential information needed. Revise the information collection process if the pilot test reveals the survey is too long, the focus group questions are too many, or class schedules hinder observation of teacher classroom practices. If you promise respondents confidentiality and anonymity to increase response rate, determine the steps necessary to keep the promise.

9. Identify expertise needed to analyze the data and information collected. This issue should be addressed when creating team membership and in determining the plan for measuring customer satisfaction. Outside consultant expertise may be necessary. Consider also if objectivity of the results will be an issue in making good decisions, or if "customer perception" is likely to place the results under great suspicion, if a certain person or persons analyze the data and draw conclusions. A goal should be to build capacity and expectations within the ESA for all data collection efforts to be highly credible. A nearby university or an ESA that has expertise in measuring customer satisfaction can be a valuable partner in analyzing data and information collected. Leadership of AESA also could be consulted for recommendations regarding individuals or companies that have evaluation expertise and understanding of ESAs.

10. Determine communication products for reporting results of customer satisfaction evaluation. Different kinds of communication pieces are likely to be needed by an ESA today. Long gone are the text laden reports that few busy policymakers have time to read. While a technical report may be valuable for some audiences, short summative briefs or pamphlets that are highly illustrated and made available electronically may be more appropriate for other audiences. Again, communication methods will be highly influenced by the decisions made earlier in the process regarding end users for the customer satisfaction results.

11. Subject each communication product to quality review process. If the ESA has a quality review process for organizational communications, this may be appropriate for the customer satisfaction report, evaluation brief, or related product. Consistent with the end use of the communication product, selected top level professionals in the ESA and/or an outside consultant may need to be included in the process, and or a panel of "customer practitioners" may be desired to review the communication product. The quality review process should reinforce the high quality reputation of ESA services and products. Poorly edited documents or those with false conclusions or language that misleads should be improved in the quality review process before final release and or posting on the ESA web site.

12. Disseminate accurate and consistent message in reporting results to end users. A plan may be necessary for reporting customer satisfaction results. Information found on the ESA web page should be the same factual information presented in a somewhat different communiqué from the ESA. A Power Point presentation of results may be necessary if multiple persons from the ESA will be sharing the customer satisfaction results with leadership personnel in different school districts, state policymakers, or others who need to now about the ESA's performance. Of course, customer satisfaction results should be accurately portrayed if disseminated in ESA marketing materials.

13. Commit adequate resources to measure customer satisfaction and use results. Because low quality results from the customer satisfaction effort have limited value, or can harm the reputation of the ESA, adequate resources are needed. A highly focused effort to collect data on one or two quality dimensions of the ESA, a program, or a service is most practical if funds are greatly limited. Some programs or services may be well served by an alternating year approach for measuring customer satisfaction. Measuring customer satisfaction may be supported in externally funded programs or services that require an evaluation.

14. Determine impact of results from evaluating customer satisfaction on ESA culture and improvement. The decision to measure customer satisfaction is closely aligned with the end use of results. High quality customer satisfaction results can help build an ESA culture of continuous improvement. Are the end uses of customer satisfaction results being achieved? Are more ESA personnel becoming comfortable and competent in using customer satisfaction results to improve programs and services they deliver to school districts? In other words, are they becoming more responsive to customer needs? Moreover, are school district leaders (customers) complimentary of ESA changes in programs or services that are more effectively meeting their needs? Is the ESA increasing customer loyalty, becoming more responsive and getting better results?

15. Revise process for evaluating customer satisfaction if warranted to meet needs of ESA and customers. If organizational impact from measuring customer satisfaction is less than anticipated, it may be time to revise the process. Of course, in a continuous improvement culture, the ESA would periodically evaluate the process for measuring customer satisfaction. Perhaps a starting place is to ask the teams who have "lived" with the process to recommend improvements. It is essential, however, to weigh recommended improvements in the process against the anticipated growth in ESA customer relationships, customer responsiveness, and customer results.

"A good process is essential. But even the best process will produce inadequate information about ESA customers unless certain guidelines are followed in preparing the satisfaction survey."

Best Practice Guidelines: Satisfaction Survey

A good process is essential. But even the best process will produce inadequate information about ESA customers unless certain guidelines are followed in preparing the satisfaction survey. The following set of guidelines can serve as a valuable checklist. The Appendix includes a customer satisfaction survey for the ESA that is striving to emphasize the 3Rs of ESA performance (see Harmon, 2006).

1. Items on questionnaire measure customer satisfaction dimensions.
2. Item statements are concise.
3. Item statements are unambiguous.
4. Item statements contain one thought (not double-barreled questions).

5. Item statements do not contain a double negative (e.g., ESA staff was never not professional).
6. Item statements have appropriate response format (e.g., Likert scale).
7. Total number of item statements is appropriate (i.e., consider impact on response rate).
8. Survey includes "additional comment" item as last item.
9. Survey is organized for easy response.
10. Customer loyalty (relationship) items are asked first.
11. Demographic information is asked last (if respondents are likely to discard survey when asked to first provide personal demographic information about themselves or organization).
12. Introduction describes purpose of survey, builds importance, and promises confidentiality and anonymity of response.
13. Instructions indicate how to respond to each part of survey.
14. Response due date is specified.
15. Instructions on submitting completed survey are provided.
16. Gratitude or thanks is expressed to respondent.

Conclusion

Measuring customer satisfaction is an essential task. Yet, few ESAs appear to perform this evaluative function, or at least do not mention it on their web sites. Adapting to changing customer (client) needs and purchasing behaviors is of paramount importance today, particularly in a recession of historic proportions. ESA leaders must Ask, Listen and Act.

A wise leader chooses not to "defend" the program and service when receiving customer criticisms. Instead, the CEO or appropriate person asks the customer (or client) "Why" the problem exists and "What" the ESA should consider in addressing the problem. Clearly understanding the customer's perspective will go a long way in helping ESA leadership decide "How" to take action that fosters positive customer relationships, responsiveness and results.

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Appendix: ESA Customer Satisfaction Survey

As a valued customer of the ESA, we need a few minutes of your time to help us know how satisfied you are with our programs and services. Your response will help us best meet your expectations in the future. Please know that survey results will be analyzed as composite data and no individual responses will be reported. Please submit the survey by December 31, 2009. Thank you!

1. Did you receive a service and or product offered by the ESA during the previous 12 months? "Yes" or "No." If answer is "No," you do not need to complete the remainder of the survey. Please return the survey with only this item completed.

Part A. Customer Relationships

For each item, please circle the number that best represents your rating. Mark "Not Applicable" (NA) when appropriate.

2. Overall, how satisfied are you with programs and services of the ESA?

Extremely Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Extremely Satisfied		Not Applicable
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	NA

3. How likely would you be to recommend programs and services of the ESA to friends or colleagues?

Highly Unlikely		Rather Unlikely		Neutral		Likely		Highly Likely		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	NA

4. How likely would you be to continue selecting the same product or service from the ESA?

Highly Unlikely		Rather Unlikely		Neutral		Likely		Highly Likely		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	NA

5. If you were selecting a provider of an educational program or service for the first time, how likely is it that you would choose the ESA?

Highly Unlikely		Rather Unlikely		Neutral		Likely		Highly Likely		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	NA

Part B. Customer Responsiveness

For each item, please circle the number that best represents your rating. Use the rating scale of 1 (Extremely Dissatisfied) to 10 (Extremely Satisfied). Circle "Not Applicable" (NA) when appropriate.

Responsiveness Item	**Satisfaction Rating Choice** Extremely-------------------------- Extremely Dissatisfied Satisfied
6. Professionalism of ESA personnel	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
7. Competence of ESA personnel	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
8. Reliability of ESA personnel	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
9. Accessibility of ESA personnel	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
10. Attentiveness of ESA personnel	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
11. Timeliness of ESA program/service	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
12. Convenience of ESA program/service (location)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
13. Efficiency (costs) of ESA program or service	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
14. Feasibility of implementing ESA program	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
15. Accuracy of ESA communications	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Part C. Customer Results

For each item, please circle the number that best represents your degree of satisfaction in receiving the anticipated end result of the ESA programs and or services. Circle "Not Applicable" (NA) when appropriate.

Results Item	**Satisfaction Rating Choice** Extremely ------------------------ Extremely Dissatisfied Satisfied
16. Saved school district money	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
17. Made services available in district	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
18. Increased personal knowledge and skills	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
19. Improved classroom instructional practices	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
20. Increased student learning	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
21. Enabled school to achieve accreditation status	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
22. Increased technology capacity of district or school(s)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
23. Increased administrative efficiency of district	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
24. Enabled school or district to meet state mandate	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA
25. Enabled school or district to meet federal mandate	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NA

Part D. Additional Important Information

26. What is your primary professional job role? (Mark only one.)

___Chief Executive (e.g., Superintendent) ___District/Central Office Administrator
___School Administrator ___Teacher
___Other Professional Staff (specify) ______________________________
___Paraprofessional ___Secretarial/Clerical/Support Staff
___Other (specify) ______________________________

27. List in rank order the 3 ESA programs and or services that you valued most during last 12 months:

1.________________________________

2.________________________________

3. ________________________________

28. What is the single most important action the ESA should take to increase your satisfaction with the programs and or services offered?

29. Any additional comments you would like to make about the ESA regarding customer satisfaction?

Thank you for taking time to complete and submit this valuable survey.

Hobart L. Harmon, Ph.D., an independent education consultant living in Timberville, VA, is an adjunct Associate Professor of Education Leadership in the Department of Education Policy Studies at Penn State University. He can be reached by phone at 540-901-9932, or by email at hharmon@shentel.net.

Learning Achievement Coalition-Oakland: A Three Institution Approach to Eliminating Achievement Disparities

by
Robert A. Martin
Robert A. Wiggins
Tresa Zumsteg

This article describes the efforts of three groups – a regional service agency, a university and the 28 school districts in one county – to work together to attempt to close the achievement gap in our schools. This introduction provides a brief explanation of what we mean by the achievement gap and why it has become an issue in our county. We then move to the heart of our story, the process we used to bring people together to ameliorate this problem. We close by reporting the steps we have taken so far, the successes we have experienced and our plans for future work.

The Challenge of Achievement Disparities

The disparities in school performance tied to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, known as achievement gaps, have relentlessly persisted despite decades of effort to reduce or eliminate them. During the 1970s and 1980s, African Americans made strides in narrowing the achievement disparity separating them from their white counterparts. But by 1980 even test score improvements had seemingly come to a halt, and continue to exist. Critical factors in analyzing and understanding the persistence of achievement gaps include teacher quality, teacher-student relationships, teacher expectations, and the persistence of racism in American society.

Proponents of the theory that the achievement gap is only a by-product of socio-economic status (SES) conflict with a considerable body of research. Hedges and Nowell (1999) find little evidence supporting this proposition. Duncan and Magnuson (2005) argued that if poverty and income gaps were eliminated, educators still would need to contend with and eliminate achievement gaps. In many cases the achievement gap is greater among black and white students when both groups are from high SES homes (Fashola, 2006; Ferguson, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Noguera, 2001: National Center for Research Educational Laboratory [NCREL], 2004; Morris, 2004; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Steele, 1997). Singham (2005) reported that black students from families with annual income over $100,000 score on average 142 points lower on SAT exams than their white counterparts at similar SES levels.

In low SES communities the gap may not be as large, but it is more difficult to eradicate. One unintended consequence of No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB) has been to harm most of the students it purportedly intends to help, while threatening to undermine the public education system (Darling-Hammond, 2007). In effect, NCLB institutionalizes a "diversity penalty" (p.247) for schools serving the poorest and neediest students, who are the first to be identified and penalized under the law. This penalty holds true for Oakland County, Michigan. It is the Oakland County districts with the highest percentage of minorities and Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) population that currently struggle with meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provision under NCLB.

Overview of Oakland County

Oakland Schools (OS), the intermediate school district (ESA), services 28 school districts in Oakland County, just north of Detroit. The schools span a spectrum of urban, suburban and rural populations. Most of the districts are experiencing shifting student demographics. Predominantly white and homogenous schools are transitioning to serve a more diverse student body as African American and Latino American families move from the central city to Oakland County. There is also a demographic pattern with families of color moving from the older inner-ring suburbs to newer outer ring communities. This transition is acutely felt by the overwhelmingly white teaching and administrative cadre.

Many of the districts in Oakland County have a reputation of achieving high standardized test scores, especially in the aggregate. With the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, districts are now required to disaggregate their scores by student groups. This is giving transparency to the inadequate achievement of students of color, students from lower SES homes, and students with disabilities throughout the county. Particularly perplexed and frustrated with persistent achievement disparities between black and white students throughout the county, the 28 school districts, Oakland University (OU), and Oakland Schools formed the Learning Achievement Coalition-Oakland (LACO) in the fall of 2007.

The superintendents of all 28 districts serve as the LACO governing body with a Steering Committee coordinating the annual goals and activities. The Steering Committee is facilitated by the OS deputy superintendent, and its members consist of four superintendents, three OS Directors, one OU professor, and one OS consultant. Each district recommended names of teachers and administrators to serve on the LACO Task Force, charged with developing and implementing strategies and recommendations throughout the county. The Task Force researched and chose four goal areas: (1) teacher/student relationships, (2) math competency, (3) school culture/climate, and (4) literacy proficiency.

The LACO Task Force Participants

We envision the achievement gap as a compelling problem that needs attention from multiple sources. It is not solely the responsibility of the individual districts that have the greatest discrepancies in their scores; it is not simply a K-12 problem, and it is not a problem that can be solved by authoritarian mandates. Closing the gap will require a culture change by schools and universities if there is to be an achievement change for the students. Thus it required the involvement of multiple stakeholders. Their stories follow.

Oakland Schools

Some would argue that closing the achievement gap is a moral imperative for all of society. Many different voices have argued this imperative from various segments of our society. The question we dealt with at Oakland Schools was, "What role could we as a service agency play in effort with our local school districts?" Since our intermediate school district has no formal authority, much of our role is of a persuasive nature when sharing effective research-based information and influencing change at the local level.

To understand why we selected the method we chose, one needs to understand the diversity of our county. Based on per capita income, Oakland County is currently the fourth wealthiest county of its size in the United States. (This could be changing rapidly due to the demise of the automobile companies.) However, within Oakland County, our school districts include some of the wealthiest districts with wide-ranging resources such as Bloomfield Hills, as well as the most impoverished school districts such as Pontiac with a 90% free and reduced lunch clientele. We have had more than 230,000 students in rural, suburban, and urban districts. Additionally, within the past two years we have had more than half our superintendents retire or leave their positions. This backdrop of diversity, superintendent turnover, political pressure in the form of NCLB and most importantly, our moral imperative to find a way to close the achievement gap provided our ISD with an interesting challenge.

Our journey began in the summer of 2005, when the 28 local superintendents unanimously agreed that we needed to focus more of our time on issues surrounding teaching and learning. Specifically, our Oakland County Superintendents' Association wanted our ISD to help them study best practices for raising academic performance and closing the achievement gap. During the 2005/2006 school year the superintendents heard from national experts regarding the topic of improving student achievement. They also read books, researched articles, met in study groups and generated critical questions for further study for the following year. During this time, Oakland Schools instituted the national speakers program which brought such well-respected researchers as Robert Marzano, Douglas Reeves and Eric Smith to our county. The ISD also brought in Rossi Ray-Taylor from the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) to share MSAN's promising practices, strategies and structure. All of our superintendents appreciated these initiatives and felt good about the ISD's support; however, we were only making slight progress in the county with increasing achievement for nontraditional learners and children of color.

From our various guest lecturers, particularly Doug Reeves, we knew our organization would need to focus on five areas: quality teachers, effective leaders, quality information (data), policies and practice that foster and sustain improvement, and resources and support systems such as professional development, technology, research, etc. With these five areas in mind, we invited Oakland University to partner with us. Oakland University, with its teacher education program and access to research, had been simultaneously working on some similar topics and felt the partnership would have a synergistic effect. Once Oakland University committed to be our partner, a structure to implement our goal was put in place.

Oakland University

Currently, a number of Oakland University personnel are involved in the LACO efforts. Typically, three to five faculty members regularly attend the task force meetings. Our Director of Professional Development has been active, an associate dean has attended somewhat sporadically and, at the institutional level, the University and the ISD have worked together to sponsor guest speakers for both organizations. University personnel have become involved for both personal and professional reasons – a female African American faculty member teaches courses in cultural diversity and is a former assistant superintendent in the county; an African American woman who is the mother of school age children in the county also works extensively with local school districts as part of her job responsibilities; two white male faculty members have conducted research connected to multicultural issues in the schools; one of whom was a white male faculty member who was formerly a K-12 superintendent in the county.

However, individual motivations aside, from a more generalizable perspective, there are two questions that should be answered by any group that aspires to form a coalition such as this: Why would a university feel compelled to become involved in such a potentially controversial effort that faces obstacles that may well be insurmountable, and why would a regional service agency seek and embrace the involvement of a university? These two questions get at the heart of the subtle differences in mission that sometimes create more competition than cooperation between higher education institutions and regional service agencies.

So, let's begin with what's in it for the university? To answer that question, we talked with four university employees who are active in LACO. For teacher educators, the answer is almost self-evident. It is as much, if not more about Task Force Goals 1 & 3 above (teacher/student relationships and school culture and climate) than about achievement scores (Goals 2 & 4). Teacher education graduates are being prepared for the increasingly diverse classrooms that are becoming characteristic in our county. We can discuss the implications as part of our coursework; we can even require our pre-service teachers to experience it in real life through their field placements. But, until we delve into the cultural differences between teachers and students and what they really mean to K-12 pupils, we cannot hope to prepare future teachers who truly understand their future pupils. Much as it does for the K-12 district personnel involved, LACO offers the opportunity for teacher educators to move beyond teaching about the students in the classroom to really understanding who those students are.

"Why would a university feel compelled to become involved in such a potentially controversial effort that faces obstacles that may well be insurmountable, and why would a regional service agency seek and embrace the involvement of a university?"

For example, one construct LACO is pursuing is a better understanding of what it means to be a caring teacher in a culturally diverse classroom. As one university participant pointed out, K-12 students often ask the question, "Does the teacher really care about me?" In her dissertation, an Oakland University doctoral candidate investigated what caring means to students (Tosolt, 2008). She found that discrepancies between teachers' and students' perceptions of caring behaviors often divided along cultural lines. LACO has the potential to clarify these discrepancies and OU's involvement may mean that our graduates are better prepared to be caring teachers in all settings.

There are also advantages to the university as a whole from being involved in LACO. First, to put it kindly, the higher education retention and graduation rate is not at all what it should be and, it is even more deplorable for students of color. For both ethical and economic reasons, colleges and universities have a vested interest in improving that situation. There are those who think that such change will come once K-12 institutions do a better job of preparing all students for post-secondary education; thus, they do not see the achievement gap as a higher education concern. As one of our participants put it, "We are so steeped in meritocracy that many faculty believe that they do not need to adjust." Fortunately, there are those who realize that our system of meritocracy is grounded in a racially and ethnically biased perspective (See, for example, Freedle, 2003). As a result, we are moving away from the elitist presuppositions that have been predominant in higher education institutions. If higher education institutions can learn from K-12 schools how to be more inclusive, how to meet the needs of our students, and how to recognize the skills and abilities already possessed by students' from other cultural norms, we not only have more successful post-secondary institutions, but we are also better able to serve the local community and society as a whole.

The remaining question is what the university brings to this effort that enhances the work of the 28 school districts and the regional service agency. One suggestion was that a university is a scholarly institution that is comprised of researchers who are skilled in investigating complex questions. That may be advantageous for some service agencies but, in our case, the Oakland ISD has highly competent researchers on their own staff, with some who teach courses at the university level. In addition, it has been suggested that K-12 practitioners who work as action researchers (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Ponte, 2005) or act as reflective practitioners (Clift, Houston, & Pugach, 1990; Schön, 1991; Wiggins, 1995) are actually better equipped to bring meaning to their own practice. One participant suggested that the university is fulfilling its mission as a public university by offering the analytical tools we have at our disposal – a noble sentiment but more of an advantage for the university than the regional service agency. Finally, Oakland University would like to think that its brand name lends credibility to this entire endeavor but those of us who have worked in both arenas know that is not always the case.

The reason a regional service agency embarking on a project such as this should make every effort to involve a higher education institution is not necessarily research expertise or heightened prestige but rather a research perspective and modesty. Let us elaborate. Universities can offer a research perspective that differs from whatever perspective dominates the K-12 mindset at any given time. For example, during the 1970's the deficit perspective as an explanation of the research gap dominated the thinking of most practitioners (See, for example, Bereiter and Englemann, 1966). That mindset was countered by a professor of linguistics (LaBov, 1969), who essentially debunked the myths of the mainstream assumptions about how students of color learn. K-12 practices are often driven by trends that have a tendency to become universally accepted; collaboration with university researchers can reveal misconceptions and change the prevailing thinking. A similar shift occurred in approaches to teaching writing when the Weehawken method, which was developed in a public school setting and predominated in the 1980s, was countered by the Writers Workshop approach, which was developed through a university/public school partnership.

This is not meant to diminish the curriculum development that takes place in K-12 settings. Rather it is intended to encourage a level of modesty on the part of both groups. As one of our participants put it, "[the university] has the ability to disrupt the dominant narrative that exists in a group that is as homogeneous as a K-12 task force." The same could be said for the "high level think tanks" that sometimes are brought together in elite institutions, causing participants to believe they can solve practical problems in a cloistered environment.

The truth is, higher education and regional service agencies need each other. We do our best work when each of us humbly seeks input and genuine involvement from the other. This has been a practice modeled by the Oakland ISD in response to a number of pressing issues, and it is what has occurred in LACO. We find it to be advantageous and encourage others to follow this example of collaborative work. It is the way both entities can best work with, and serve the school districts in our communities and, ultimately, their K-12 pupils.

District Responses

In addition to the coordinated LACO response, districts are taking individual steps to address their achievement disparities. One district has created a district LACO committee to coordinate the district implementation of the LACO recommendations. The internal LACO facilitators are members of the regional LACO coalition and part of their charge is to keep the district committee aware of regional initiatives.

"...higher education and regional service agencies need each other. We do our best work when each of us humbly seeks input and genuine involvement from the other."

Six districts are taking proactive step of reaching out to black parents with the goal of embracing them as partners. This is new territory for many white administrators with the potential for anxiety and controversy; it also offers the opportunity for a wealth of new resources and knowledge. Oakland Schools collaborates with these districts through coordinating efforts and attempting to connect the initiatives with a network.

Four districts dedicated administrative professional development time for a book study on Singleton and Linton's *Courageous Conversations about Race* (2006), with the intention of having the building administrator facilitate similar dialogue with their faculty.

One district solicited students to offer input and advice about learning in a diverse environment. The students gave their honest appraisals and recommendations to their teachers and administrators. This idea led LACO to invite two student groups to participate in one task force and one superintendent meeting to keep their voices as a priority in our work.

Next Steps

The LACO Task Force sponsors the annual Best Practices conferences with the theme of closing achievement disparities. Each task force has gathered data for analysis, interpretation, and to guide the LACO recommendations.

- The teacher/student relationship subcommittee surveyed 2400 eighth grade students from 13 districts with recommendations to implement two fall 2009 pilot interventions: 1) Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a program originating in San Diego, California; designed to increase minority student participation in honor courses, and, 2) Capturing Kids' Hearts/Teen Leadership, a program originating in Saledo, Texas with the Flippen Group based on the premise that it is necessary to capture the students hearts before stretching their minds. Four districts in Oakland County are at various stages of implementation of these two programs;
- The math subcommittee assembled the eighth and ninth grade status of all 28 districts for algebra proficiency with plans to schedule a series of instructional strategies workshops;
- The school culture/climate subcommittee surveyed 139 eighth grade teachers from 13 districts;
- The Literacy subcommittee is surveying the status of early literacy throughout the county.

For the 2009-2010 school year LACO intends to: 1) Monitor the effectiveness of the pilot interventions, 2) Schedule a Superintendents' Summit focused on case studies with national superintendents who have had success in closing achievement disparities, and 3) Narrow the work of the Task Force subcommittees. During this period of declining funding for education, it makes sense to have regional coalitions form to optimize resources to tackle difficult challenges. We encourage educational leaders from around the country to consider establishing similar coalitions. The potential positive outcome overshadows traditional struggles between institutions for control and direction. Ultimately, our students will benefit from an environment of synergy, collaboration, and leadership courage in attempting to eradicate achievement disparities.

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Robert A. Martin, Ph.D., is a former Leadership Consultant at Oakland Schools and current Deputy Superintendent for the Pontiac Schools. He may reached by phone at 248-802-7691 and by email at ramarti3@oakland.edu.

Robert A. Wiggins, Ph.D., is Assistant Dean at Oakland University's School of Education and Human Services. He can be reached by phone at 248-370-3095 and by email at wiggins@oakland.edu.

Tresa Zumsteg, Ph.D., is Deputy Superintendent at the Oakland Schools intermediate school district. She may be reached by phone at 248-209-2141 and by email at Tresa.Zumsteg@oakland.k12.mi.us.

Empowering 21st Century Learning: The Role of a RESA in Supporting Digital Transformation

by
Joanne Hopper
Terry Harrington

We envision a day when all learners are connected through technology-rich environments to learning that prepares them to be confident, creative problem solvers, and global citizens who care about their culture.

The children currently in kindergarten will be graduating in 2021. What should these kindergartners and their upper classmates reasonably expect from their educational system – of you and me – over the next 13 years? Looking back the same length of time to 1996, dramatic changes are evident in the way we communicate, network, and conduct business – including banking, shopping, and traveling. Learners are changing significantly too. How and where they acquire information has changed. They have discovered new ways to interact with friends in the "nearly now" (Heppell, 2008) through texting, twittering and Facebook. And there are dramatic changes in how students engage their world, especially after 3:00 PM when they leave the schoolhouse doors.

What is the role of an ESA (Educational Service Agency) in educational innovation? "Doing business today means the ESA must be a learning organization, with the capacity to evaluate and continuously improve services and products" (Harmon, 2006). Over the past two years, a team of St. Clair Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) colleagues committed to learning more about how schools can respond to the changing world and changing learners. RESA, one of 57 Intermediate/Regional Service Agencies in Michigan, serves seven local school districts ranging in size from 1,000 to 10,000 students. The RESA team's commitment has resulted in changes in the way the organization plans and delivers programs and services. The collaboration began with an invitation extended to RESA colleagues to join in a Technology Think Tank. Fifteen people attended a retreat in July 2007, representing five departments: career and technical education, education technology, general education, information technology and special education. The group shared highlights of department initiatives, identified common interests in digital learning, and engaged in a collective learning

"The collaboration began with an invitation extended to RESA colleagues to join in a Technology Think Tank."

experience Skyping with Dr. Troy Hicks, connected from his location at the Red Cedar Writing Project conference in California. That distance connection was reflective of the groups' commitment to working and learning together. At the close of the day, attendees agreed to meet regularly to learn from one another, from research, and exemplary practices across the country and around the world. Now, two years later, the impact is evident. This article chronicles the journey and shares RESA's story about the effect on students, teachers and administrators.

Setting the Stage

The original vision for technology innovation at St. Clair RESA started over 10 years ago as then superintendent, Joe Cami, led efforts to install a fiber network connecting every public school building and public library branch in St. Clair County as well as the local community college. The fiber network also extended to ISD partners in the Thumb region of Michigan. This foresight enabled RESA's Learning Net to emerge as one of Michigan's leaders in videoconferencing and distance learning. Today, RESA supports videoconferencing events in Michigan such as the Court Room to Classroom Project with the 72nd District Court, national projects like Read Across the Planet, and international events like Megaconference Junior. RESA has been involved with such notables as Dr. Robert Ballard's Jason Project, and actress and mathematician, Danica McKellar's national math outreach to middle school girls.

RESA is also fortunate to employ content consultants who work every day in school buildings supporting teachers, modeling in classrooms, and assisting school leaders. Members of the consultant teams joined the Technology Think Tank, while a recently-formed RESA Universal Design for Learning (UDL) team, with experience in assistive technology, also signed on. The IT group brought vast experience and knowledge of solutions to the table. At each meeting, the group studied articles and videos about digital learners, shared knowledge and pushed each other to try new technologies. After engaging in learning together, the first task was to co-plan two multi-day learning seminars for teachers: a Literacy Learning Community and a Middle School Math Academy. Together the group contributed ideas for embedding technology tools within the core instruction. Examining the goals from different perspectives across all departments allowed the team to design sessions to deliver technology-infused learning that met key UDL components: multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement (Rose & Meyer, 2006). The team agreed to support the literacy and math seminars by piloting two online learning platforms, BlackBoard for one and Moodle for the other.

The powerful result of the Technology Think Tank collaboration was the support teachers received during the seminars from people representing each of RESA's departments. While math teachers learned how to use graphing calculators, they corresponded with teachers in a neighboring ISD who were also taking part in the series via live video conference connection. Technology and real-world applications came to life when a RESA Technology Center teacher shared math applications used in electronics. The demonstration was a hit with the middle school teachers who often have to answer the question, "How will I use this in real life?"

RESA's Technology Think Tank leveraged opportunities to learn from others equally as passionate about bringing 21st century learning and technology innovation to schools. Colleague, Dr. Elaine Weber, from Macomb ISD, introduced members of the team to digital tools she was using successfully in her work with students and teachers. Soon, Protopages became a standard in the education services department and teachers across the county began using them to support their own classrooms. Kurzweil software, digital tools, and UDL resources from C.A.S.T. (Center for Applied Special Technologies) enhanced RESA staff development sessions.

Dr. Weber also shared how she was reaching at-risk learners in her summer school with inexpensive digital cameras. When RESA provided digital cameras to participants of the Literacy Learning Community, the impact was unanticipated. An elementary teacher took the camera back to her room and decided to try it out with a student who struggled with writing. "If you write me a story," she bargained, "I'll let you tape it on this video camera." Dylon's Story was shared at the Literacy Learning Community and the Technology Think Tank the following month. It brought tears to eyes as the groups watched the cute little boy with big, bright eyes and a tentative smile reading his story into the little camera. The story captured the tale of Dylon's dad fishing for a big catch that they shared at night upon his father's return home. Though scrawled in an emergent writer's penmanship, Dylon's index finger followed the words scrawled across the page as he read his two-page story with delight. For three months, his teacher had tried to encourage Dylon to write, to no avail. Yet a $90 digital camera caused him to take the risk and commit his story to print.

The reality of the situation hit hard. What if we hadn't acted? What if Dylon didn't have access to the relatively inexpensive tool that gave him the incentive to write? His story would most likely have remained penned up inside him, and his teacher would not have known where to begin helping him grow as a writer. Dylon's story and other videos viewed together provided inspiration and created the motivation to press on. RESA's Education Technology Department collected this and other examples in a video entitled Capturing the Possibilities: Reaching All Learners.

"What if Dylon didn't have access to the relatively inexpensive tool that gave him the incentive to write? His story would most likely have remained penned up inside him...."

Turning Point

In April 2008, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm's Education Summit focused on 21st century learning featuring Yong Zhao and Alan November. The Summit provided a framework for extending the vision in St. Clair County. With the support of RESA Superintendent Dan DeGrow and local district superintendents, RESA hosted a similar regional 21st Century Learning Symposium in August of 2008. Nearly every administrator in the county, along with teachers, university professors, business leaders, and board members attended. Keynotes and breakout sessions focused on global challenges, the changing digital learners, and innovative resources to reach them. A key component of the symposium was the student exhibition. Kids dazzled audiences with what they could do. In breakout sessions, a four-year-old demonstrated building an animated graphic using a Linux platform. A middle schooler shared his impressive knowledge of social studies – acquired in part through Civilization, a video game. A five-year-old brought an armload of stuffed Webkins and presented his personal timeline of technology learning, starting with computer touch screen games as a baby, and culminating with sophisticated consumer and social skill building activities with Webkins. A group of middle school students tested a health curriculum delivered in a gaming format. The product was developed through a National Science Foundation grant by a research team led by Dr. Reese Midgley, University of Michigan. An after-school robotics club demonstrated skills that earned them top honors at a national competition in their first year. The students added a vital element to the purpose of the day: expanding the vision for learning.

The symposium concluded with a panel discussion facilitated by Alan November. He challenged participants to implement at least one strategy they learned at the conference in the coming year. Just before he closed the session, November called upon a student in the back of the theater hall who raised his hand to comment. "We could get further if students and teachers just worked together to design learning [opportunities]," the student stated. In the audience of over 200 K-12 educators, heads nodded, people began to whisper to one another, and the sound of clapping erupted.

In a recent article, "Young Minds, Fast Times: The Twenty-First Century Digital Learner," Mark Prensky (http://www.edutopia.org/ikid-digital-learner-technology-2008) challenges educators to listen to the students. He testifies to the fact that across the country, the make-up of educational audiences before whom he speaks is missing a critical element – students. "Unlike the corporate world, where businesses spend tens of millions researching what their consumers really want," Prensky states, "when it comes to how we structure and organize our kids' education, we generally don't make the slightest attempt to listen to, or even care, what students think about how they are taught." Why? Why would educators, whose goal it is to reach and teach young minds, think they have the answers and, in most cases, neglect to engage students in the process of planning their own learning? Prensky has a point. Educators have approached their work by identifying what student should know and be able to do, typically defining the measure of learning as the score on a test. The reality is students have their own opinions about what is important, and what they care about. They can be extremely creative in demonstrating what they have learned if given the chance.

Seeking Virtual Solutions

Following the symposium, a concerted attempt to support failing and struggling students in the county resulted in the establishment of a task force to explore online options. Representatives from local districts worked together to identify criteria for an online learning tool, invited vendors to demonstrate products, piloted solutions and made recommendations for a collaborative purchase. The efforts resulted in the adoption of Education 2020 (E2020), an online tool that provides course content in a variety of curricular areas. Schools are using E2020 to provide credit recovery solutions as well as support for classroom instruction. In feedback surveys, responses from students have been positive. Students like the format of online learning where they have access 24/7. Currently, over 1100 St. Clair County students have taken part in this program.

Taking online learning further, RESA initiated steps to establish a virtual high school for expelled and dropout youth. In a partnership with Michigan Virtual University, RESA pursued a seat time waiver from the Michigan Department of Education to offer a program where 100% of the high school course content is delivered online with onsite and online support for students. State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Michael Flanagan, is supportive of such innovative attempts to reach disenfranchised students. Currently, 27 students are successfully engaged in RESA's pilot project and interest is growing. With both onsite and online mentors, the virtual environment is meeting the needs of this at risk population who willingly share examples of disengagement from traditional school. RESA Superintendent, Dan DeGrow, former majority leader of the Michigan Senate, believes the program is vital to the livelihood of the community. "If there is one thing history has taught us," DeGrow states, "it is that technology advances will be utilized. Public education can either embrace new technology, including online learning, or watch itself become less and less relevant over time."

Making an Impact

Significant changes have occurred in the short time since RESA's first 21st Century Symposium. One local principal called shortly after the symposium to ask how RESA could support him in leading

21st century learning in his school. Now, one of his staff meetings each month is devoted to helping his teachers learn a new technology tool. Recently, he hosted a Saturday learning session where participating teachers received digital tools and learned how to create podcasts to support their classroom instruction. A regional superintendent's group devoted a Friday afternoon session to learning how to Skype and connect via DimDim. At a recent statewide MACUL (Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning) conference, several of the student exhibits came from St. Clair County. Teachers at RESA's Academic Transition Academy have embraced 21st century learning to reach their at risk population. They host lesson podcasts on Moodle and embed UDL tools in their instruction. Their goal is to make classroom resources accessible to students 24/7.

The November 2008 county professional development day focused on technology integration. National IT consultant, Howie DiBlasi, shared his expertise before packed audiences. RESA consultants taught teachers how to blog and create podcasts, design Protopages, and create digital stories. Extending their learning to the classrooms, teachers now utilize interactive white boards, classroom responders, and tablet PCs to engage students. At a recent staff development day, a principal and his staff created a pbwiki, blog and podcast to share their learning, while their students used digital media to capture their learning in a science lesson about meal worms.

Leveraging Resources

RESA staff works closely with local districts to leverage funding for technology innovation. RESA funds supported technology integration workshops at the county professional development day, and provided follow-up consultant support. A middle school mathematics grant from DTE Energy Foundation helped infuse technology into middle school classrooms across the county. A Math Science Partnership Grant provided teacher leadership training embedded with technology integration, and a St. Clair County Community Foundation grant provided another source to acquire technology for middle school mathematics classrooms. Consortium pricing is allowing districts to provide online courses and instructional solutions, along with a county wide data warehouse to monitor gains in student achievement and support data-informed instruction. RESA is hopeful that ARRA (American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009) funds hit their mark, creating reform and innovation in schools.

"RESA staff works closely with local districts to leverage funding for technology innovation."

Pushing the Limits

If we want students to be equipped for success in a digital world, we need to push our own limits of technology expertise – to test and try, to explore and learn what it can do. Only then can we be credible when we encourage administrators to develop their own skills, and teachers to integrate technology into their classroom learning environments. RESA's Technology Think Tank members have pushed the limits. We are using Ning as a social networking platform, Skype to communicate with others, DimDim to conference without travel. We are blogging about digital learning and hosting web pages providing curriculum and instruction resources. We are LinkedIn to other educators and technology innovators to extend our learning beyond our borders, and Twittering to capture current trends. Launching into these new Web 2.0 tools, putting ourselves "out there" feels, at times, like dipping our toes into the cold early June waters of Lake

Huron, or jumping off the rocks at Mackinaw Island in northern Michigan. It's scary, but we believe we must take the risks in order to grow. The alternative – staying in safe waters and not rocking the boat – would not serve our students well.

Students are relying on us to create learning opportunities that engage them in becoming contributing members of the 21st century global community. We cannot wait to be told what 21st century learning looks like. "We know," asserts Stephen Heppell (2009), and "a little bit better doesn't begin to do." Heppell believes students already have what it takes to be "collaborative, ingenious" (2009) learners 24/7. What is more, Heppell contends, the kind of learning required cannot be legislated. The first step is to listen to the learners themselves, and then take the necessary risks involved to join them in crafting what promises to be an incredible story.

St. Clair RESA is reaching out to help create the transformation.

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Other Resources

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Education 2020, http://www.e2020inc.com/

International Association for K-12 Online Learning, http://www.inacol.org/

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Joanne E. Hopper, Ed.D., is Director of Education Services at the St. Clair County RESA in Marysville, MI. She may be reached by phone at 810-364-8990, by fax at 810-364-7474 and by email at hopper.joanne@sccresa.org.

Terry Harrington is Assistant Director of Education Technology at the St. Clair County RESA in Marysville, MI. He may be reached by phone at 810-364-8990, by fax at 810-364-7474 and by email at Harrington.terry@sccresa.org.

Identifying the Best Candidates for Employment at a Centralized Job Fair

by
Carrie Cate-Clements
James Kurth
Robert McDermott
Lawrence Veracco

The Northwest Indiana Education Service Center (NWIESC) located in Highland, Indiana, serves a membership of 24 public school districts, nine charter schools, six private schools, and four higher education associate members. The NWIESC is one of nine Education Service Centers operating throughout the state of Indiana. The nine regions cover 92 counties and school corporations may voluntarily participate. Over 90% of Indiana's schools belong to a regional Education Service Center. The NWIESC is committed to the academic, social, and emotional growth and success of the 96,923 students it serves in K-12 districts spanning five counties (Jasper, Newton, LaPorte, Lake and Porter) in the northwest corner of the state. When staffing their respective districts, all schools seek to effectively recruit highly qualified and licensed teachers, administrators with an agenda for enhancing student achievement, substitute teachers who are determined to maintain consistency in the absence of the classroom teacher, bus drivers committed to safety first, food service staff who are stanch advocates of healthy lifestyle choices, and other school related personnel devoted to providing an exceptionally relevant, meaningful, and positive educational experience for all students.

A group of NWIESC personnel directors began meeting in November 2007 on a monthly basis to network, share policies and ideas, interpret state law and update one another on changes to the laws, compare recruitment procedures, and most of all, to form a noncompetitive, collegial, and supportive bond between and among school corporations within the Service Center's membership. Topics and invited presenters were defined collectively by the group. An immediate concern was generated by the conversations in each of the meetings: "What can we do, as a cohesive group, to bring statewide awareness to the jobs that we have available within our districts? Isn't there something that we can do in our part of the state to attract skilled candidates who represent a spectrum of age, gender, ethnicity, culture, and religion?"

From that point forward, the personnel directors, under the leadership of the NWIESC's Professional Development Coordinator, embarked on the first NWIESC Education Job Fair, which was held on March 8, 2008. There was much to be done in preparation for the Job Fair as this was something that was a new service to the member schools and was an exciting opportunity to bring together job seekers from across the state and neighboring states to meet with a multitude of districts and schools under one roof in an environment that was supportive, collaborative, collegial, and full of opportunity. From December 2007 through March 2008, a marketing plan was strategically developed to include invitations to 45 university/college Departments of Education in Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan; partnering with and advertising in local newspapers and workforce development (unemployment) offices; radio, television, announcements on member districts' personnel websites' and endless emails to a multitude of list serves so as not to leave any stone unturned.

One of the member districts that is centrally located, generously donated the use of its facility for the Job Fair. Custodial staff from the district were on-site during the event, and tables and chairs were set-up for the schools and job fair registrants. Service Center staff welcomed the school representatives and job seekers.

Since this was the first Job Fair that was pulled together rather quickly, an online registration form was uploaded to the NWIESC's website, and the web address was included on all literature and advertising sources. For those candidates not comfortable with the process of uploading their personal information to the website, hard copy files were accepted and the NWIESC support staff entered the information into the website (to maintain one centralized database of job seekers). The number of resumes, cover letters, and advanced registrations began to flow in by the dozens by the second week of January. In the early planning stages (December 2007), the personnel directors requested hard copies of the candidate's credentials (resume, cover letter, copy of certification/license) along with the advanced registration for the Job Fair. The materials (reams and reams of printed paper) were delivered to personnel directors two weeks prior to the event. The amount of copying based on the number of candidates was extraordinary by the end of February 2008. This was a lesson learned for future Job Fairs: collect data from candidates in an electronic format. The personnel directors have supported this notion for the next Job Fair.

"...three nonmember schools and one university inquired about participation in the Job Fair and were told that they were unable to participate unless they chose to become members of the NWIESC."

Twenty-one of the NWIESC districts and schools participated in the event, and interestingly enough, three nonmember schools and one university inquired about participation in the Job Fair and were told that they were unable to participate unless they chose to become members of the NWIESC. Without hesitation those educational entities immediately became members.

The first Job Fair was held on Saturday, March 8, 2008. The goal was to bring together 80-100 diverse candidates for employment under one roof from across the tri-state region (Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan). Unlike college job fairs that require schools to travel hundreds of miles to market their districts and schools only to graduates (or future graduates) of that college or university, candidates from all colleges and universities throughout the region were invited to participate at one site. Local school corporations favored this format because, unlike recruiting around the state, candidates who attended this fair were likely to want to live in the area. The advertised time for the Job Fair was 9:00 AM-12:00 PM. At 7:30 AM, lines of candidates extended beyond the front doors of the schools and were eager to meet with the school representatives. The displays varied from district to district; some tables were draped with school-embroidered tablecloths, others had running PowerPoint presentations, and others had laptop computers available for candidates to make immediate application to the district. The energy among the candidates, the school representatives, and the NWIESC staff available onsite was captivating. Newspaper reporters captured the Job Fair's success, which was included in several local newspapers on the following day. The question had come up in several planning meetings leading up to the Job Fair: How do we measure the success of this activity? With over 183 candidates in attendance for the first Job Fair, those representing diverse walks of life, eager to work in districts in northwest Indiana, some of who were offered employment on the spot, defined the measure of success that we were looking for.

Following the 2008 Job Fair, evaluations were extended to the candidates and school representatives to determine the next steps to make the 2009 Job Fair an even greater success. The feedback was constructive, upbeat, and informative.

The planning for the March 7, 2009 Job Fair began in September 2008. With months to plan, the evaluative data from the previous Job Fair proved to be fruitful. Registration was advertised beginning in December 2008. With the downward turn of the economy and continued increase in unemployment rates, the number of preregistrations in just the month of December alone exceeded the number of actual attendees (N=183) at the March 2008 Job Fair.

Personnel directors elected to continue with the use of the same school facility and with the effective planning and consideration of the personnel director for this district; new locations throughout the school were utilized to accommodate the growing number of applicants as well as the growing number of participating schools. The NWIESC experienced the same phenomenon as it did during the first year of the Job Fair: schools that were previously nonmembers of the NWIESC inquired about participation in the Job Fair. Once these nonmembers were informed of the requirement, without hesitation they chose to join the NWIESC in an effort to be able to participate in the 2009 Job Fair. The NWIESC gained two new school members weeks prior to the 2009 Job Fair!

By the time of the Job Fair on March 6, 2009, 540 candidates were pre-registered and 65 candidates registered on-site. A more efficient manner in which to register the candidates onsite was developed, frequent communication between the schools and the NWIESC to inform the schools of the number of candidates in the various teaching or support positions was provided weeks leading up to the Job Fair, and ongoing collaboration to ensure the success of the Job Fair was evident in each of the personnel directors' meetings.

All participants involved in the planning of the first two years of the Job Fairs regard what has been accomplished with pride and an appreciation for the noncompetitive partnerships established by the member districts. There were many lessons learned in planning an event on such a large scale with so many key players, but above all, we look forward to the third annual Job Fair knowing that the project improves with each iteration.

Carrie Cate-Clements, Ed.D., is the Professional Development Coordinator at the Northwest Indiana Education Service Center in Highland, Indiana. She may be reached by phone at 219-922-0900, by fax at 219-922-1246, and by email at carriecate@comcast.net.

James C. Kurth is the Director of Personnel for the Merrillville Community School Corporation in Merrillville, Indiana. He can be reached by phone at 219-650-5300, by fax at 219-650-5300, and by email at jckurth@mvsc.k12.in.us.

Robert McDermott is the Director of Personnel, Pupil Services, and Labor Relations for the School Town of Highland in Highland, Indiana. He can be reached by phone at 219-924-7400, by fax at 219-922-5637, and by email at rmcdermo@highland.k12.in.us.

Lawrence Veracco, Ph.D., is the Assistant Superintendent for the Lake Central School Corporation in St. John, Indiana. He can be reached by phone at 219-365-2705, by fax at 219-365-6406, and by email at lveracco@lcscmail.com.

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