

# The Underappreciation of Educational Service Agencies

Intermediate agencies, operating in 44 states, deliver support of unmet needs in component school districts

BY JOAN WADE

**T**he Perry Community School District, nestled in the heart of Iowa, serves a vibrant and culturally diverse community of 7,800 residents, including approximately 1,700 students. For years, the district was celebrated for fostering inclusivity and embracing its rich cultural diversity.

However, in January 2024, Perry faced an unimaginable tragedy when it became the site of a devastating school shooting by a 17-year-old student. In the wake of the heartbreaking event, the district's partnership with Heartland Area Education Agency became a lifeline, laying the groundwork for recovery, resilience and hope for the Perry community.

Within the critical first 72 hours, Heartland AEA's leadership team mobilized to coordinate an organized, effective response. The intermediate agency's primary focus was helping the district reunite students and families and deliver essential social-emotional and behavioral health services to those affected by the trauma, including grief support.

Efforts then shifted toward long-term recovery. District administrators, mental health professionals, crisis communication experts, human resources personnel and members of the Heartland AEA's team formed a multidisciplinary recovery leadership group to address the evolving needs of students, staff, families and the Perry community.

## Decoding ESAs

Heartland AEA's actions following the Perry crisis highlight the significant but sometimes under-recognized or underappreciated role of educational service agencies. They bolster schools and communities during and after traumatic events and serve unmet education and support needs in their component districts.

Despite their pivotal role in connecting local schools and districts to vital resources, services and expertise, intermediate agencies are among the best-kept secrets in the K-12 education system.



Currently, 553 such agencies operate across 44 states, according to the Association of Educational Service Agencies. They operate under a variety of names, including educational service units, boards of cooperative educational services, regional education service agencies and education cooperatives. Yet they share a common mission: enabling schools, regardless of size, to collaborate, share resources, decrease costs and extend educational opportunities to students in the states where the intermediate agencies exist.

ESAs provide a remarkable range of services, providing a backbone of support for schools and districts:

► **Professional development for educators.** ESAs deliver workshops, coaching and professional learning programs that help teachers refine their

skills, implement effective teaching practices and stay current with evolving research, education standards and technologies.

For example, CESA University is an annual event in Wisconsin that brings together professional learning providers from the state's 12 cooperative educational service agencies for two days of sharing and professional growth. CESA leaders and staff members address the implementation of state initiatives, professional learning standards and technology integration, carrying this momentum back to the districts and communities they serve.

► **Technology integration and IT support.** From building digital learning infrastructures to providing IT support, ESAs ensure schools are equipped for 21st-century learners by helping schools and

communities gain valuable connectivity and ensuring that students, educators and families stay connected in an increasingly digital world.

For over two decades, the California K-12 High-Speed Network has been advancing digital access in education in California, providing network connectivity, network support, Direct Denial of Service mitigation services, K-12 school connectivity data and E-rate filing support. These services ensure schools have the infrastructure to support modern education needs and protect against cyber threats.

Administered by the California Department of Education, with the Imperial County Office of Education as the lead educational agency, the

high-speed network gives local districts connectivity, internet services and coordination of teaching and learning applications.

► **Administrative and operational services.** ESAs relieve schools of administrative burdens by managing human resources, payroll, financial services and grant writing, enabling districts to direct more resources toward students' classroom needs.

One challenge many districts have faced since the pandemic is teacher shortages. In Michigan, the Talent Together program, an innovative partnership involving all 56 Michigan intermediate school districts, unites the statewide expertise and resources to offer flexible, cost-free pathways

## The Enduring Partnership of AESA and AASA

BY NOELLE ELLERSON NG

AASA's relationship with the Association of Educational Service Agencies began nearly 60 years ago with the inception of the National Organization of County, Intermediate and Educational Service Agencies back in the 1970s. Initially, it was a division of AASA.

The early roots of AESA date back to a letter, jointly signed by leaders of AASA and what is now known as the National Rural Education Association. The September 1967 letter, addressed to Robert Stephens, a professor of education at the University of Iowa, stated in part: "As you know, effective and economical provision of a comprehensive program of services for children is beyond the capability of many local school districts."

It was this joint letter that designated AASA and NREA in their commitment and work to cooperatively undertake ways in which local school districts could be strengthened and enhanced through the appropriate establishment and utilization of regional service agencies.

The group grew in the 1980s, with significant membership gains and program development taking place in the '90s. In 1994, the group formally and legally separated from AASA by obtaining its own articles of incorporation and became a 501(c)(6) nonprofit corporation.

The first four individuals to serve as the association's executive director — Walter Turner, Lee Christiansen, Bruce Hunter and Brian Talbott — operated at times out of AASA office space in Arlington, Va., with some of them concurrently holding assistant director titles with AASA.

After shortening its name from the American Association of Educational Service Agencies, AESA continued along its path of growth with AASA until 2010. Along the way, after AESA hired Talbott as executive director in 1997, the organization expanded its operations and established its own mission in 1999.

### Joint Strength

The backbone of today's relationship between AASA and AESA — which has operated as a fully remote association



As AASA's head of advocacy, Noelle Ellerson Ng has seen significant value in the long-running relationship with the Association of Educational Service Agencies.

since 2010 — remains the two groups' collective efforts around federal advocacy for preK-12 education.

AESA contracts with AASA's advocacy department staff to handle most of its federal advocacy work. This establishes a strength in numbers, with the collective weight of voices solely focused on advancing federal policy that supports public education.

Now, more than ever, at a time when politics seems to be a zero-sum game and educational opportunity falls victim to policy and positioning, it is indeed a breath of fresh air to be operating at the nexus of such a healthy, clear and impassioned call to action, centered on federal advocacy.

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Last year's annual conference for members of the Association for Educational Services Agencies in Orlando, Fla., provided professional development and opportunities to network.

for individuals to become certified teachers while earning an income.

The program is open to Michigan residents with at least a high school diploma, including paraeducators, substitute teachers seeking certification and career changers. Accepted applicants enroll in a degree or certification program through a partnering college or university. While completing the coursework, participants gain paid, full-time experience working in local schools.

A key component of Talent Together is its apprenticeship model. Candidates spend a year working alongside an experienced mentor teacher, receiving practical, hands-on training that ensures they are ready for classroom duty.

► **Community partnerships.** Through collaborations with local businesses, nonprofits and community organizations, ESAs build bridges that connect students with real-world career opportunities.

To address a shortage of semi-truck drivers in its expansive region, the Northeast Colorado Board of Cooperative Educational Services, in collaboration with its 12 member school districts and two Colorado-based consulting agencies,

launched a new commercial driver's license training program as part of a larger effort to create career pathways that align with the specific needs of local employers, ensuring access to a skilled workforce in high-demand fields.

Northeast Colorado BOCES provides funding and support for students participating in the program. Northeastern Junior College supplies the instructor and curriculum, with in-person classes at area high schools. The first CDL training classes began in January 2024, with 16 students graduating in the spring. The fall session kicked off last August with about 20 students.

► **Data analysis and accountability support.** ESAs help schools and districts use data effectively by offering tools for assessment analysis, program evaluations and compliance with state and federal accountability measures.

In Kentucky, two educational service agencies — the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation and the Western Kentucky Educational Cooperative — teamed up with the Ed-Fi Alliance to create the Kentucky Data Exchange. This platform is built specifically to give Kentucky educators practical tools and guidance. With the



**Joan Wade works with more than 450 intermediate education agencies nationwide in her capacity as executive director of the Association of Educational Services Agencies.**

data-based insights provided by the Kentucky Data Exchange, educators can offer targeted support to keep students engaged in their studies.

► **Crisis management and safety planning.** As illustrated in Perry, Iowa, ESAs help districts develop crisis response plans, implement safety measures and provide mental health and emergency preparedness resources. In times of natural disasters, school shootings and other crises, ESAs offer support and resources to district leaders.

► **Special education and student services.** ESAs support students with diverse needs by offering speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavioral interventions and coordination of individualized education programs. In some states, the agencies also provide resources for gifted and talented programs in their member districts.

► **Instructional support and curriculum development.** Learning specialists with ESAs support schools by enhancing teaching practices, implementing state and national standards effectively and integrating evidence-based plans. The specialists work with district staff to incorporate innovative instructional strategies.

► **Student transportation and food services.** Some ESAs coordinate transportation logistics and support school meal programs, ensuring students

have access to safe transit and nutritious meals, especially in rural and underserved areas.

In addition to these initiatives, ESAs provide early childhood and family support programs and resource centers; promote professional networks and collaboration for school leaders, technology directors, media specialists and other professionals; and leverage the buying power of multiple districts through cooperative purchasing agreements.

ESAs can transform rural and marginalized communities, bridging educational access and equity gaps. By addressing regional challenges with tailored solutions, the agencies strengthen schools and empower entire communities.

### **Raising Awareness**

Despite their broad contributions, the lack of awareness of their important berth in K-12 education leads to underutilization of their services and insufficient funding, limiting their ability to serve all schools and communities.

Increasing awareness of their value and strategically advocating at both state and federal levels enables ESAs to secure the resources essential for continued success. A key opportunity lies in deepening collaboration with state and local governments.

Working closely with policymakers and education stakeholders enables ESAs to co-create sustainable, flexible models that address critical issues such as educational equity, teacher shortages and technology integration. Strengthening these partnerships positions ESAs to be allies in advancing educational opportunities and improving educational outcomes nationwide.

In addition to advocacy and collaboration, many ESAs embrace entrepreneurial practices. AESA teaches its members a business strategy framework model that equips them with tools to diversify funding streams and elevate service delivery. These approaches foster innovation, encouraging the creation of revenue-generating initiatives, the formation of public-private partnerships and the development of customized programs tailored to the unique needs of local school districts.

By leveraging these opportunities, ESAs can overcome challenges, expand their impact and sustain their role as transformative agents. These connections and resources enhance their ability to support schools and communities, fostering growth and development nationwide. ■

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