

Could Intermediate Education Agencies Rise to a New Challenge?

The COVID-19 pandemic could bring a new purpose for an old concept in delivering education services

An intermediate school unit (sometimes called Education Service Agencies) works with local school districts to coordinate and collaborate shared services to benefit students. These agencies present an opportunity for schools that need to share resources – such as professional development, apprenticeship programs, mental health services. This short review of the literature shows the many different types of units. Not surprising is that the most effective are those with a clear purpose that is matched to their resources. Those that are ineffective are the ones that try to cover a wide and disparate range of initiatives.

As school districts deal with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Learning First Alliance examined their roles to determine if they could better assist schools as they manage issues related to reopening. We know that school leaders will be challenged to reopen their buildings and keep their building operating in the midst of any subsequent outbreaks. Even in their behind-the-scenes work, some intermediate units have been instrumental in taking leadership roles on key issues and bringing together partnerships that will be needed when schools reopen. In the immediate future, these units could be structured by local schools to help coordinate services from cleaning buses and classrooms to community mental health services for students and staff experiencing trauma. This paper outlines the many types of intermediate school units and the roles they play in their respective states.

Educational Service Agencies

What is an Education Service Agency? ¹

- An Educational Service Agency (ESA) is a “regional public multiservice agency (not a private organization) that is authorized by state law to develop, manage, and provide services or programs to Local Education Agencies (LEAs), such as public school districts.”²
- ESAs are an integral part of both the public elementary and secondary education systems
- ESAs are known by many names including regional education units, educational service centers, educational service districts, intermediate school districts, intermediate units, regional education service agencies, or regional service centers.
- The meaning of an ESA is different across the country because each state is responsible for deciding what types of entities will be determined ESAs.
- Additionally, their forms and roles may vary greatly between states and within a state
- The ESA comes under two major federal statutes, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which provide a significant amount of money for delivery of services to students (instructional and otherwise).

¹ Information in this section comes from Ahearn, E. (2006).

² U.S. Department of Education. (2019).

- The services provided by individual ESAs and their funding sources vary widely. Funding often is a combination of member fees, state, or federal funding from member districts' entitlements and/or competitive grants.
- Special education is often provided either as a single component of or the sole focus of many ESAs.

Typology of ESAs:³

Special District

- Established by state legislation and/or regulation, or the State Education Agency (SEA) together with a collective of local districts.
- Highly structured component of a state's education system
- An intermediary unit of school government between the SEA and local school districts.
- Normally operated by member districts with the state's participation. They normally utilize lay boards or governing structures and their particular legal structure is dictated.
- Financial support for special districts tends to come from a mix of regional, state, state/federal, and local funding.
- Provides services to the SEA and local districts.
- Examples: New York's Bureau of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES: acronym also used in Colorado and Wyoming): established by state law, which provide a variety of services to districts that choose to join, and which agree to cooperate in decision-making about services that the agency will provide to schools. BOCES also ensure both the implementation of states' standards and improvement.
- Pennsylvania's Intermediate School Districts and Iowa's Area Education Agencies were created by state laws which effectively assigned an ESA to each school district

Regional Branch of a State Agency⁴

- Component of state education agency
- Orientation is almost exclusively advisory rather than service-delivery
- Budget reductions have caused some states to abandon this type of model (ex. Massachusetts)

Cooperatives

- Usually formed under permissive state legislation
- Provides single or multi-purpose services to school districts
- Includes structures that have a variety of attributes
- Differ in legal status from informal to formal incorporated entities
- Vary in size, function, types of programs and services, administration, relationship to other areas of the education system and where their funding comes from
- Voluntary-type ESAs tend to vary more widely, due to the fact they are created and controlled by membership rather than state-mandated functions

³ Information in this section was found in Ahearn, E. (2006) and Enerson, L. (2009).

⁴ Information in this section comes from Ahearn, E. (2006).

⁵ Information in Regional Branch of State Agency and Cooperative sections comes from Ahearn, E. (2006) and Enerson, L. (2009).

- Usually have written agreement which specifies both the function and design of the organization
- Most are governed by board of directors who represent member districts. Participating districts have delegates that form the agency’s governing board.
- Although many cooperative ESAs began with a focus on a single type of focus, many have become agencies offering multiple services. Many have expanded their funding base from local and state/federal to include grants from private sources and fee-for-service.
- Engage in cost-sharing educational and support services and implement educational initiatives across states as directed by their SEA.
- Each ESD develops a wide range of services that are designed to meet the needs of specific schools and their communities.

ESAs that are different from the standard three forms⁶

Regional Discretionary projects

- Provide support to local school district personnel and families
- Ex: Florida

Other types of cooperatives

- Two varieties in addition to those formed by a school district
- Ex: Minnesota

Joint Power Agreements (JPAs)

- Contracts among units of local government to do “what any one of those units in local government is authorized to do.”
- Permits school districts to meet both their own goals and those of the state
- Ex: North Dakota and California

Regional services

- Regional services provided by specific schools, i.e. the School for the Deaf and Blind
- Ex: South Carolina

Table 1: Types of ESAs⁷

Type of ESA	Number*	States
None	4	Alabama, Delaware, Nevada, Oklahoma
Regional branch of state agency	1	Wisconsin
Intermediate School District	6	Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin

⁶ Information in this section comes from Ahearn, E. (2006).

⁷ This table was taken from Ahearn, E. (2006) and modified with new information from Enerson, L. (2009) and Education Commission of the States. (2019). States may have changed their types of ESAs since 2006- this is the best table I could create with available information.

⁸This table was taken directly from Ahearn, E. (2006).

State-created agency/network of service units	16	<i>Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin</i>
Cooperative formed by school districts	21	<i>Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming</i>
Other	4	<i>Florida, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Carolina, New Jersey, Tennessee, Louisiana</i>

***Note:** Some states have more than one type of ESA.

Table 2: Source of ESA Fundings

Sources of Funding	Number	States
Fees for programs or services charged for specific events/services	18	<i>Alaska, Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin</i>
District special education funds from members (state or local)	17	<i>Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Washington</i>
Federal special education funds from members	15	<i>Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Wisconsin</i>
Membership fees	13	<i>Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Texas, Wisconsin</i>
Fees for programs or services based on per-pupil use of programs or related services	12	<i>Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin</i>
Fees for programs or services calculated on the basis of population	9	<i>Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington</i>
Other	7	<i>Arkansas (IDEA discretionary funds) Connecticut (state fund and grants) Florida (IDEA discretionary funds) Texas (federal funds from the state agency). Washington (state operating budget foundation funding) Missouri (each cooperative is funded on basis of its membership agreement—there is no standard protocol)</i>

		<i>North Carolina</i> (regionally-based university positions supported by IDEA funds)
--	--	---

Services provided by ESAs⁹

May be broken down into large categories such as: professional development, products, direct services, and technical assistance. Some examples of services provided are below.

- Early childhood services
- Family services
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Professional Development
- Educational Technologies
- Special Education Services
- Non-Public School and Behavioral Health Services
- Reading/Literacy Training and Support
- Student Assessment Results Training and Support
- Grant Writing and Support
- Career and Technical Education

ESA Focus areas:

- Teaching and learning
- College access and readiness
- Developing partnerships

Benefits of tapping into ESAs¹⁰

- Key resource for working successfully within a particular local or regional education landscape
- Knowledgeable about programming and activities that are being undertaken at the local school district level, they are able to help match those who are looking to partner with these school districts (notably colleges and universities)
- Neutral party to bring together meetings around issues that would be able to set an agenda for non-profits, higher education and LEAs to support.
- Although they have a smaller amount of staff and administration, ESAs take leadership roles on key issues, in ways that “an individual LEA could not, and in ways that outsiders to the system, such as colleges or non-profits, would not have the credibility to do.”

⁹ Information from Stephens, E. R. & Keane, W.G. (2005).

¹⁰ Ahearn, E. (2006).

Challenges Posed by ESAs¹¹

- “Getting state funds appropriated and/or federal funds granted to cover the costs of the specialized programs, services and training provided by ESAs
- Gaps, uneven services and difficulty planning when there is not a network of ESAs covering all districts across a state
- Variable levels of expertise among staff of ESAs
- Management problems arising from differing perceptions by ESAs and their members about levels and types of services to be provided by the ESA
- Variation in the level of authority that voluntary ESAs are given by their member districts
- Inconsistent coordination and oversight
- Holding ESAs accountable in appropriate ways
- SEA problems in statewide planning when separate entities accountable to member districts have their own priorities and agendas”

Stronger and Growing models of ESAs

*Stronger*¹²

Washington, Iowa, California, Pennsylvania, Texas, Michigan and New York.

Growing stronger

Massachusetts

- Massachusetts’ ESAs “are multi-service, entrepreneurial organizations, governed by representatives from member district school committees. Their organization is less integral to the infrastructure of the SEA than is the organization of New York’s BOCES.”¹³

Table 3: Profiles of selected ESAs

State	Number of ESAs	Districts served	Schools	Teachers	Students	Focus
Michigan ¹⁴	56 ISDs	554	5,450	99,662	1,500,000 +	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching and learning • Specialized student services • Shared operational services • Developing partnerships • Technology services • School improvement, assessment and mandates

¹¹ Ahearn, E. (2006).

¹² Opinions of which are stronger and growing stronger models come from The Rural School and Community Trust. (2003).

¹³ Enerson, L. (2009).

¹⁴ Data from Garcia, A. N., Shimmel, L., Wraight, S. (2011) and MOEC: Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives. (2019).

Massachusetts ¹⁵	25 Collaboratives	300		16,000	8,400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction (examples: Special education, early childhood, adult programming, vocational and after school programs), professional learning, operations and cost savings
New York ¹⁶	37 BOCES	687			1,402,698	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional (examples: vocational-technical programs, occupational therapy, literacy programs) and support services (examples: staff development, computer centers, bus maintenance, etc.)
Iowa ¹⁷	9 Area Education Agencies	327		38,844	519,112	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special education services • Educational Services (examples: Literacy, professional development, instructional technology, media services)
Washington ¹⁸	9 ESDs	295	2,393	63,541	1,091,982	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction, professional development (teacher and staff training) • Direct services (special needs, early childhood education) • Cooperative services, information services (technology and network integration) • Student safety • Early learning

References

¹⁵Data from MOEC: Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives. (2019).

¹⁶ Data taken from New York State Education Department. (2018).

¹⁷ Data from AEA: Iowa's Area Education Agencies. (2019) and AEA: Iowa's Area Education Agencies. (n.d.).

¹⁸ Data from AESD: Association of Educational Service Districts. (2020) and AESD: Association of Educational Service Districts. (2020).

- AEA: Iowa's Area Education Agencies. (n.d.). *AEA services*. Retrieved from <http://www.iowaaea.org/about/aea-services/>
- AEA: Iowa's Area Education Agencies. (2019). *The playbook for Iowa's AEAs*. Retrieved from http://www.iowaaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/AEA_Iowa_Playbook_2019-20_100419.pdf
- AESD: Association of Educational Service Districts. (2020). *About AESD*. Retrieved from <https://www.waesd.org/about-us/>
- AESD: Association of Educational Service Districts. (2020). *2020 AESD legislative agenda*. Retrieved from https://www.waesd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/AESD-Legislative-Priorities-2020.FINAL_ac_.pdf
- Ahearn, E. (2006). *Educational Service Agencies: Their role in special education (inForum brief policy analysis)*. Project Forum at NASDSE. Retrieved from https://www.aesa.us/Archives/research_archives/ESAs_Role_in_Special_Education.pdf
- Education Commission of the States. (2019). *50-state analysis: Regional boards*. Retrieved from <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestU?SID=a0i7000000009vZE&rep=K12G5&Q=Q0644>
- Enerson, L. (2009). *Educational service agencies in Massachusetts: Building capacity in small school districts*. Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives. Retrieved from <http://moecnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/esasinma-moec-jan2009-1.pdf>
- Federal student aid: An office of the U.S. department of education. (2015). *Educational Service Agency*. Retrieved from https://studentaidhelp.ed.gov/app/answers/detail/a_id/272/~-/educational-service-agency
- Garcia, A. N., Shimmel, L., Wraight, S. (2011). *Characteristics of state educational service agencies*. REL Midwest. Retrieved from https://www.aesa.us/Archives/research_archives/char_midwest_ed_agencies_030512.pdf
- Geverdt, D. (2018). *2012 census of governments, state descriptions: School district governments and public school systems*. National Center for Educational Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/data/School_District_Descriptions_from_Census_of_Governments.pdf
- Madison-Oneida BOCES. (2011). *Ed management services*. New York State Education Department. Retrieved from <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/boces/primer.html>

- MOEC: Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives. (2019). *MOEC- Brochure*. Retrieved from <http://moecnet.org>
- Moran, J., & Sullivan, M. (n.d.). *Regional and statewide special education service delivery in selected states (OLR research report)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2015/rpt/2015-R-0013.htm>
- New York State Education Department. (2018). *2018-19 member of BOCES: 2018-19 enrollments*. Retrieved from http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/documents/ComponentDistrict-2018-19_Enrollment.pdf
- The Rural School and Community Trust. (2003). *The re-invention of regional service co-ops in Arkansas*. Retrieved from <https://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2040>
- Stephens, E. R. & Keane, W.G. (2005). *The Educational Service Agency: American Education's Invisible Partner*. University Press of America. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=WM-tGz0a17QC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=%22successful%22+Educational+service+agencies&source=bl&ots=aO1nB1SDwQ&sig=ACfU3U1OR9jKittH7O54K6X2zd3tGMzNhw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiA0czi7MfpAhXeIXIEHaLyCZ4Q6AEwBXoECAoQAQ#v=onepage&q=%22successful%22%20Educational%20service%20agencies&f=false>
- USAC: Universal Service Administrative Company. (2015). Eligibility table for Educational Service Agencies (ESAs). Retrieved from <https://www.usac.org/wp-content/uploads/erate/documents/Tools/ESA-Eligibility-Table.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2019). *Section 1401: Definitions*. IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-i/1401>
- Wisconsin CESAs. (n.d.). *CESAs in Wisconsin: Sharing resources, supporting educators, serving students*. Retrieved from https://www.cesa9.org/about/CSN%20BRO_1215final.pdf