

## **EDUCATION SERVICE AGENCIES:**

### ***Initiating, Sustaining, and Advancing School Improvement***

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## INTRODUCTION

*In a nation obsessed with education accountability, the [education service agency] can demonstrate accountability both to its constituents and to the state education agency. In times of declining enrollments and resources, the [education service agency] can provide cost effective programs and services. It is the agency leading the search for a better education for all people. Finally, the education service agency is flexible at a time when radically new demands are being made on all levels of the education system. (Levis, 1983, p. 11)*

Although this quote is 20 years old, it could have been written today. As Stephens (1998) explains, education service agencies (ESAs) can provide leadership and services to districts facing the challenges of systemic education reform. Given the No Child Left Behind Act's requirements to ensure the academic success of all students, these agencies may be more important today than they were 20 years ago. And, for low-performing schools, the services provided by ESAs may be the lifeline they need to make the transformation to high-performing learning communities.

Because support to low-performing schools is so critical to ensuring that all students have the opportunities they need to meet high standards, McREL conducted a study to capture the types of services that education service agencies provide to low-performing schools in the Central Region and nationwide. This document reports the findings of that study. The intended audience for this report is intermediate service agency staff, state education department personnel, and state and local policymakers. This report can be used (1) to stimulate conversation about how best to use the services of education service agencies; (2) to begin to understand the range of services agencies currently provide; and (3) to glean ideas for making changes to current services or for providing additional services to schools or districts.

This report begins with a brief history and overview of education service agencies, including how they are structured and the services they traditionally have provided. In the next section methodology and findings of this study are presented. The report concludes with a discussion of issues for education service agencies — and those who use their services — to consider.

## BACKGROUND

Given the complexity of educating youth, schools have relied on ancillary support systems almost since the inception of public education. Education service agencies have played an important role in this endeavor.

### **Creation of Education Service Agencies**

Historically, smaller school districts, and rural districts in particular, resisted being included in larger school districts, which often failed to understand their unique rural needs.

ESAs offered a feasible alternative for addressing this particular challenge. As Stephens (1998) explains:

Much of the initial support in the education community was based on the face validity of the argument that many rural districts do not have the capacity, when acting alone, to offer needed programs and services to their students, especially disabled students. Moreover, support in state policy communities stemmed from the argument that creating a delivery system to provide needed services to rural districts was an attractive policy option to another popular, but highly controversial, alternative—mandated school redistrict organization. (p. 53)

With an education service agency as a viable partner, rural and small districts could maintain their independence while continuing to meet the diverse needs of their students. Still, even this service-provider design was not without problems. Although it was cost effective to collaborate with other districts to hire special education teachers or provide instruction for students with disabilities, finding the personnel to provide these services over time was, and still is, an ongoing challenge for many intermediate agencies.

Like rural districts, urban districts found the benefits of accessing a cooperative network equally compelling. From an economic standpoint, it was more efficient for metropolitan school districts to purchase services from a cooperative than it was for each of them to purchase services separately. But urban districts have an added layer of complexity — their own diversity. Rural districts may be remote and have limited resources, but in general they are small and serve homogeneous student populations (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). Urban districts, on the other hand, are not only large, but they have diverse student populations that frequently have high needs. With numerous limited-English students, lower parent involvement, and untrained teaching staff (see e.g., Kozol, 1992), many urban districts have been desperate for the resources provided by their regional intermediate agencies.

Most of the nation's 800 ESAs (number estimated by Stephens, 2002) were established by law in the 1960s and 1970s. States that organized networks of intermediate agencies through legislative mandates did so to encourage collaboration among local school districts, to communicate state education agency policies, or both (Stephens, 1998). States without legislative mandates often fostered collaborative efforts among local school districts or opted to coordinate services through the state education agency.

### **Types of Education Service Agencies**

Education service agencies differ not only in how they were established but also in their structure. Stephens Associates (1980) identifies three categories of education service agencies: (1) regionalized, (2) special district, and (3) cooperative. A brief description of each category follows.

- *Regionalized ESAs* — This type of intermediate agency operates as an integral part of the state education agency. Regionalized ESAs reviewed in this study include those in Florida.

- *Special District ESAs* — Although usually established by the state or by the state in collaboration with local school districts, these organizations provide services to the state education agency and to school districts within their region. States included in this study that have ESAs organized in this fashion are California, Michigan, New York, Oregon, and Washington.
- *Cooperative ESAs* — These agencies are usually established through less formal arrangements among several local education agencies developed to meet the particular needs of their constituent schools. Intermediate agencies in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri are considered Cooperative ESAs.

The category of an ESA can result in different organizational structures and governance arrangements that affect the type and amount of support that agencies can provide to the school districts in their service areas. Regardless of the structure, however, the principal role of most intermediate agencies has been to provide educational assistance to districts and schools.

### **Services Provided by Education Service Agencies**

The types of services ESAs traditionally have offered tend to fall into three categories: (1) instructional services, (2) staff development and curriculum support, and (3) general office and management support (Stephens, 1998). A description of each of these services follows.

*Instructional Services.* One of the primary ways in which education service agencies traditionally have provided assistance to their constituent districts has been by helping them educate their disabled students. In fact, this has been the requirement mandated most frequently by states for their ESAs (Stephens, 1998). Although education for students with disabilities has been a primary function of intermediate agencies, the instructional services they have provided also include bilingual education, vocational experiences for high school students, and adult education for the local community.

*Staff Development and Curriculum Support.* Programs associated with this goal have traditionally focused on providing information to schools and districts that enabled them to better instruct their students. Through such programs, education service agencies have offered content-related workshops for teachers, maintained professional lending libraries, and consulted with individual schools or districts on an as-needed basis. More often than not, these services have been provided through traditional “one-shot” workshops offered away from classrooms and geared toward a broad audience with a variety of instructional experience.

*General Office and Management Support Services.* The final area of service provided by ESAs is general office and managerial. Typically, this function has included administrative services such as data processing, transportation including bus driver training, and cooperative purchasing. Finding that it has been more cost effective to purchase supplies for multiple districts rather than on an individual basis, many school districts have participated in cooperatives to acquire paper, technology goods, and even energy (B. McKinney, personal communication, September 10, 2002).

## METHODS

This section reviews the research questions that guided this study and the process used to develop the survey questions. In addition, it explains how the agencies were selected and which ones were interviewed. The section concludes with a description of the sample including service area characteristics, student ethnicity, and funding sources.

### Research Questions

Public schools are responsible for educating all children, but meeting this goal is a challenge. Education service agencies play an important role in this endeavor. ESAs coordinate school improvement activities, sponsor professional development opportunities, and interpret complex state and federal regulations for school personnel — often in collaboration with state education agencies and local school districts. Because an education service agency can impact the work of schools and local districts in significant ways, it is important to distinguish how these agencies interact with their customers. This study investigates the extent to which ESAs provide assistance to schools with an emphasis on how these agencies support low-performing schools. The following questions guided this study:

1. What is the range of services that education service agencies provide to low-performing schools? Do these services differ from the assistance provided to higher performing schools?
2. To what extent do these services and the way they are delivered reflect current research regarding effective professional development?
3. To what extent has the No Child Left Behind Act caused intermediate service agencies to think differently about the services they provide or could provide?

### Survey Development

McREL staff reviewed the literature on intermediate service agencies and effective professional development and developed a questionnaire (see Appendix) to collect information from intermediate agency staff in selected states.

Survey items inquired about the number of students and the composition of the student population across the districts served by the intermediate agency, agency funding sources, to what extent the agency assisted schools in improvement activities, and how frequently they engaged in specific types of professional development. Other questions focused on the methods ESAs use to evaluate their work, the extent to which specific outcomes are measured, and the various methods used. Also included were questions about challenges ESA staff face in their work and the extent to which agencies are adding or expanding services in light of the No Child Left Behind Act.

## Agency Selection

McREL staff contacted individuals in state education departments in California, Colorado, Florida, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Oregon, and Washington. Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska are Central Region states served by McREL that have ESAs; the other states were selected in order to ensure that the sample included states from different regions of the country. The individuals contacted in each state were selected because they were familiar with the education service agencies in their state and the range of services these agencies provide. The purpose of interviewing these SEA staff was to develop a list of agencies that serve low-performing schools in a range of ways and to learn more about the services they provide.

By design, the sample size used in this study was small. The small sample size was accomplished by asking each state contact to provide the names of two or three agencies that provided different levels of assistance. When there was very little differentiation in the range of services provided by the intermediate agencies in the state, state contacts provided names of a representative sample from across the state (up to 10 agencies). In most cases, if the total number of agencies in the state was less than 20, names of 50 percent of the agencies were provided.

## Interviews

Once the list of intermediate agencies was compiled, agency directors and staff development coordinators were contacted. These individuals were offered the option of completing the questionnaire electronically or during a phone interview. The overall response rate was 37 percent; the response rate for the Central Region states was 46 percent. Exhibit 1 shows the number of contacts made and the number of completed questionnaires received for each state.

**Exhibit 1. Education Service Agency Contacts and Responses by State**

State	Number of ESAs	Number of Agencies Contacted	Number of Completed Questionnaires
California	58	3	2
Colorado	22	9	4
Florida	6	3	1
Kansas	9	5	4
Michigan	57	11	1
Missouri	9	5	2
Nebraska	19	7	2
New York	38	11	3
Oregon	21	8	4
Washington	8	3	1
<b>Total</b>	247	65	24

## Sample Characteristics

Responses to the first and second survey questions describe the districts and students served by the participating education service agencies and the range of agency funding sources.

**Service Area Description.** As Exhibit 2 shows, the service areas supported by education service agencies reviewed in this report are diverse, both in terms of the number of districts served and the size of the student population. The number of districts each intermediate agency serves ranges from as few as 4 to as many as 100. Student enrollment is equally varied across regions, ranging from 1,000 to more than 300,000 students. Average enrollment in each district suggests that many of the service areas for the agencies included in this report are rural.

**Exhibit 2. Education Service Agency Regional Demographics**

Education Service Agency	Number of Districts	Student Enrollment*	Average District Enrollment
<b>California</b>	#1	23	330,000
	#2	27	100,000+
<b>Colorado</b>	#1	21	54,000
	#2	20	50,000
	#3	17	6,000
	#4	4	6,148
<b>Florida</b>	15	N/A	N/A
<b>Kansas</b>	#1	117	193,000
	#2	7	4,435
	#3	40	45,000
	#4	37	25,000
<b>Michigan</b>	4	15,000	3,750
<b>Missouri</b>	#1	75	N/A
	#2	89	111,404
<b>Nebraska</b>	#1	39	2,000
	#2	12	3,500
<b>New York</b>	#1	100	100,000+
	#2	25	44,000
	#3	9	19,800
<b>Oregon</b>	#1	5	7,000
	#2	6	1,000
	#3	5	1,350
	#4	13	52,000
<b>Washington</b>	35	162,849	4,653

*Note:* N/A indicates that the data were not available.

\* Some of student enrollment numbers provided are estimates.

**Student Ethnicity.** Although many of the responses to the question about ethnicity are estimates, they show that many of the districts included in this study are made up predominately of White students. Several agency representatives indicated that their agencies serve a sizeable Hispanic population as well, however the agencies in California reported the greatest diversity.

**Exhibit 3. Ethnic Distribution of Student Population (Percentage)**

Student Ethnicity	African American	Asian	Hispanic	Native American	White	Other
<b>Education Service Agency</b>						
<b>California</b> #1	8	2	45	2	43	0
#2	8	8	42	0	38	4
<b>Colorado</b> #1	1	Trace	21	1	77	0
#2	Districts are too small to report student ethnicity.					
#3	0	0	5	0	95	0
#4	.5	1	33	.5	65	0
<b>Florida</b>	Specific data on student ethnicity were not available.					
<b>Kansas</b> #1	Specific data on student ethnicity were not available.					
#2	2	1	1	1	95	0
#3	1	0	2	0	97	0
#4	5	1	35	1	58	0
<b>Michigan</b>	1	3	1	0	95	0
<b>Missouri</b> #1	Specific data on student ethnicity were not available.					
#2	Specific data on student ethnicity were not available.					
<b>Nebraska</b> #1	0	0	0	2	98	0
#2	0	2	0	0	98	0
<b>New York</b> #1	20	0	5	2	73	0
#2	Specific data on student ethnicity were not available.					
#3	3	2*	1	0	94	0
<b>Oregon</b> #1	2	5	30	2	61	0
#2	1	0	5	1	93	0
#3	1	1	1	1	96	0
#4	1	5	20	4	69	0
<b>Washington</b>	2	5	8	3	82	0

\*Includes Native American students

**Funding Sources.** Just as the regions served by the ESAs studied are diverse, so are their sources for funding. This funding difference is apparent at both the inter- and intra-state levels. Some agencies are fully funded by the state; others receive little to no state support.

**Exhibit 4. Education Service Agency Funding Sources**

Education Service Agency	Student Enrollment	Total State Dollars	State Dollars (%)	Local Member District Dues (%)	Fees for Service (%)	Grants (%) (Federal and Other)	Other (%)
Colorado #1	54,000	10 million	10	0	55	35	0
Colorado #3	6,000	10,000	0	60	10	30	0
Colorado #4	6,148	145,000	7	22	0	71	0
Florida	N/A	1.1 million	100	0	0	0	0
Kansas #2	4,435	0	0	50	25	25	0
Kansas #3	45,000	0	0	4	92	4	0
Kansas #4	25,000	0	0	70	0	30	0
Michigan	15,000	2.5 million	21	12	0	22	38*
Missouri #2	111,404	266,325	75	11	12	0	2
New York #3	19,800	3.3 million	7	84	2	6.9	.1
Oregon #2	1,000	2.5 million	68	0	0	5	27*
Oregon #3	1,350	1.9 million	76	1	0	5	18
Oregon #4	52,000	13.5 million	70	5	9	15	1

\*The Michigan ESA and the Oregon #2 ESA indicated that their “other” funding came from local taxes.

Exhibit 4 shows the levels of funding reported by education service agency representatives. In some instances, individuals responding to the questionnaire did not complete the percentage and/or dollar amount of funding; others did not have immediate access to funding information and could provide only estimates. This exhibit, which only includes information from surveys with complete information, indicates that support varies.

Regardless of the amount and source of agency funding, almost all of the respondents indicated that their funding was insufficient to finance the broad range of services they provide. This issue is addressed in greater depth in the next section.

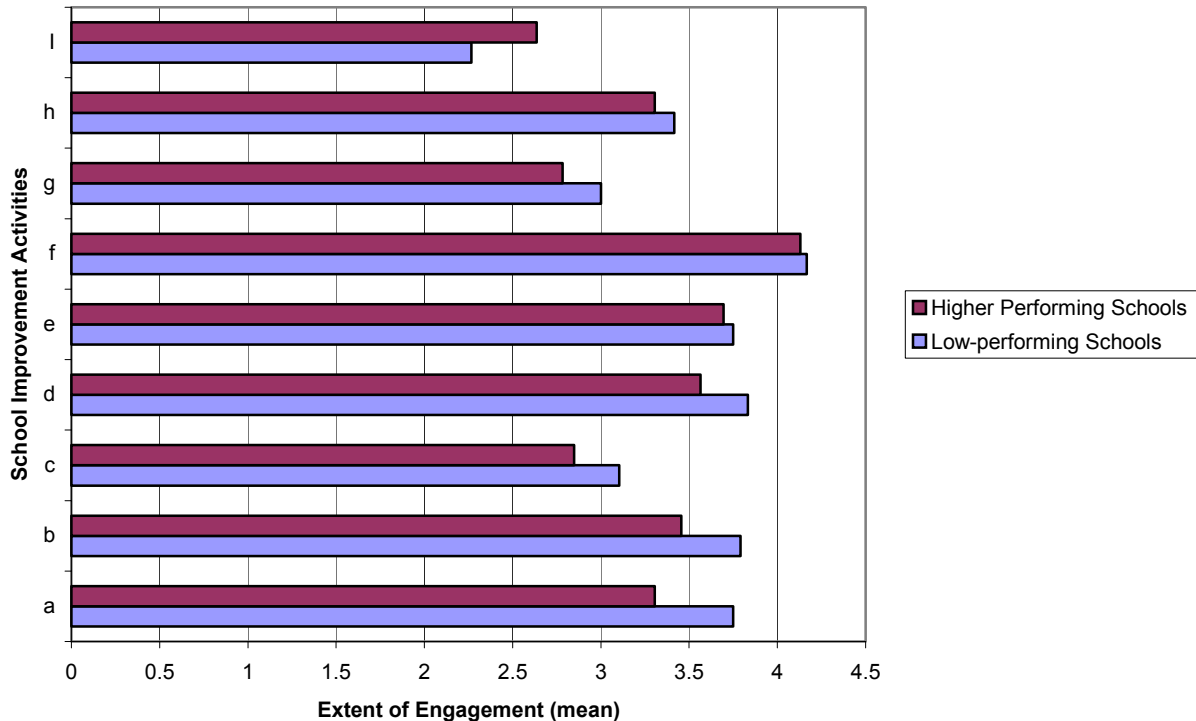
**FINDINGS**

According to Newmann, King, and Youngs (2000), a school’s capacity to effectively educate all of its students depends on a number of factors. These include teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions, the existence of a healthy professional community, the availability of technical resources, the extent of program coherence, and the effectiveness of principal leadership. In low-performing schools, the lack of such capacity is often the most prevalent obstacle to improvement. This section describes the services provided by ESAs to schools that are trying to improve, regardless of whether those schools have been identified as low performing. These services include those that help schools and districts develop the knowledge and skills needed to initiate school improvement efforts, sustain those efforts, and advance education policy and reform.

## Initiating School Improvement

Exhibit 5 shows the extent to which agencies in this study engage in school improvement activities with low-performing and higher performing schools. A five-point scale was used for this question, where one represented “not at all” and five signified “extensively.”

**Exhibit 5. Type and Extent of Assistance Provided by ESAs to Schools**



- a. Review or analyze test data with staff
- b. Explain how test data can guide instruction
- c. Observe classroom instruction and offer feedback
- d. Assist with school improvement planning
- e. Assist with curriculum alignment
- f. Offer subject-matter professional development
- g. Develop or analyze district-level assessments
- h. Assist with grant writing
- i. Guide lesson planning

The activity with the greatest mean for low-performing and higher performing schools is offering subject-matter professional development; the activity with the lowest mean is guiding lesson planning.

Although most of the agency staff questioned did not indicate that the assistance provided to low-performing schools was greater than that provided to higher performing schools, Exhibit 5 suggests that these agencies are working slightly more in those schools with the greatest need.

Further, this exhibit shows that ESAs are more involved with low-performing schools in all activities, with the exception of guidance regarding lesson planning.

Activities *a* and *b*, which relate to data analysis, are where the greatest difference between assistance to low-performing and higher performing schools is apparent. Discussions with education service agency directors during the initial stages of this study confirmed that data analysis is crucial to successful school improvement. Bill McKinney, director of Texas' Regional Education Service Center (RESC) IV, stated that regardless of where a school might want to start in terms of its own improvement process, his agency would begin with an analysis of the data. He further explained that Region IV RESC "customizes" its technical assistance based on a school or district's needs. This customization, however, hinges on what the data convey about needs. McKinney emphasized that Region IV RESC would not provide any professional development or other instructional assistance that was not supported by the data. For example, if a school requested a workshop or seminar on guided reading, service center representatives would examine the test data and decide if this type of training was appropriate.

Some of the agency staff contacted were working with schools or districts considered to be low performing based on the provision for adequate yearly progress (AYP) established in the No Child Left Behind Act. Others were working with schools or districts considered to be low performing based on an internally developed instrument designed to identify schools failing to demonstrate sufficient progress in student achievement. Further, many of the districts that the intermediate agencies worked with recognized that although their progress toward student proficiency is currently acceptable, as the target for AYP moves toward 100 percent proficiency in 2012, success will be more difficult to achieve. Regardless of the method used to label a school or district as low performing, most of the agency representatives said that their work with schools or districts would differ little whether those schools and districts were low performing or not.

Another major activity leading toward improvement is curriculum alignment. All of the ESA staff interviewed acknowledged that a major component of their work with schools and districts has involved aligning the curriculum so that teachers know the specific aspects of the content they are responsible for teaching at any given grade level. Curriculum, aligned with the content standards, clarifies what teachers need to cover in order to adequately prepare students for assessments and for learning in higher grade levels.

### **Sustaining School Improvement**

When schools have a clear understanding of student achievement based on data analysis and an aligned curriculum in place, ESAs are able to help those schools sustain their school improvement. Here, professional development is key. The intermediate agency staff interviewed and surveyed indicated that professional development activities related to sustaining school improvement has represented the majority of the services they provide to both their low-performing and higher performing schools. In fact, one respondent said, "That's what we do!"

Exhibit 7 shows activities related to professional development and how frequently agency staff indicated their participation in each activity.

**Exhibit 7. Frequency of Professional Development Activities**

Activity	How Often? (number of responses)				
	Never	Once or Twice a Year	Monthly	Weekly	As Needed
a. Organize short-term workshops	2	1	6	8	7
b. Pay for school or district personnel to attend short-term workshops	5	5	5	1	6
c. Organize conferences	3	8	4	0	5
d. Pay for staff to attend local and national conferences	5	5	2	0	11
e. Organize long-term learning opportunities	1	7	5	4	6
f. Pay for staff to attend long-term learning opportunities	5	2	2	1	11
g. Invite nationally-known trainers	4	14	3	1	2
h. Train in-school trainers (coaches)	0	5	7	1	10
i. Offer classes through local universities or colleges	4	9	3	3	3
j. Coordinate classes or workshops with other intermediate agencies	3	6	3	2	10
k. Coordinate distance learning opportunities (e.g., via interactive television)	5	4	5	2	7
l. Design distance learning opportunities	5	3	7	2	4
m. Maintain a professional lending library	1	1	3	13	6
n. Mentor beginning teachers	4	5	5	4	6

Professional learning opportunities have not been limited to the major content areas. Although teacher content knowledge is recognized as essential to student learning, many of the agencies have provided the type of professional development that supports systemic change, such as leadership training for teachers and principals or review sessions to explain the many requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Indeed, most of the education service agency staff interviewed acknowledged that they view professional development differently than they did several years, and even months, before. Instead of offering workshops that are unconnected to specific groups of students (e.g., second language learners), teachers (e.g., mathematics), schools, or districts, intermediate agency staff are developing classes, providing on-site assistance, and coordinating distance-learning

opportunities that are targeted toward identified needs. In this sense, professional development offered by ESAs is much more aligned with the professional development traits Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, and Birman (2002) found to be most effective over time. For example, by identifying gaps in instruction through a review of assessment data and designing classes to augment teachers' professional learning to fill these gaps, education service agencies are fostering the development of coherent learning programs for teachers.

The professional development that education service agencies currently are designing is not only more coherent, but it is longer in duration, another characteristic of successful teacher learning opportunities (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Those interviewed said that they have found one-day meetings or stand-alone workshops to be unproductive. They acknowledged, however, that individual professional development days connected over a long-term period of time, sometimes as long as six years, have proven to be effective ways to sustain instructional change and to continue building capacity. Ongoing training better positioned schools to continue their school improvement processes, especially given the mobility of school staff in many of the urban locations served by some ESAs.

Most of the ESA staff contacted said it has been a challenge to visit schools as often as they would prefer. Distance has been an impediment, but the sheer number of schools in need of, or desiring, assistance also has made it impossible for ESA staff to be in the schools in contact with teachers, students, and administrators at the level needed to sustain improvement. One way that ESAs have addressed this challenge has been by using a train-the-trainer model. Also referred to as coaching, this model of professional development fosters collaborative relationships between lead or master teachers and other teaching professionals. Robb (2000) describes coaching as a method of supporting teachers by "listening, observing, posing questions, conversing, and suggesting books and journal articles that can enlarge and extend the teacher's knowledge" (p. 60). This type of active learning (Garet et al., 2001) promotes opportunities for feedback and discussion focused on instructional techniques. All of the agency staff interviewed indicated some level of engagement in this model. As school and district staff begin to acquire the skills needed to sustain school improvement in their local contexts, these staff members can address the needs of their organizations in a more timely way than can an external agency.

Not surprisingly, a lack of sufficient resources is another challenge intermediate agencies continue to battle. Regardless of the funding formula, almost all of the ESA personnel contacted do not believe that they have adequate budgets to provide sustained assistance to their low-performing schools. Not only have their financial resources been limited, but the number of support staff also has been insufficient. As one BOCES director from New York stated, the personnel are "too thinly stretched" among the schools in need of assistance. This director thought that with more human resources, the agency's school assistance could be more targeted and more schools could achieve the goals outlined in their school improvement plans. In the absence of additional resources, many ESAs are reallocating their staff and financial resources, making the work they do with low-performing schools a priority.

In addition to reallocating resources, ESAs have had to devise other innovative approaches to providing services to meet the challenge of insufficient resources. For example,

many ESAs are adding or enhancing their use of technology to deliver professional development, specifically video conferencing and online course work. Investments in technology are not only building infrastructure, they are creating unique opportunities for agencies to collaborate with one another. For example, several New York BOCES established a consortium known as Accelerate U. Among its many services, Accelerate U creates and maintains professional development classes that are accessible online.

### Advancing Education Policy and Reform

Education service agencies are uniquely positioned to influence how local school districts view and implement state and federal initiatives. Equally important, the familiarity these agencies have with districts and schools puts them in an ideal position to inform state and federal decision makers regarding education. In short, the education service agency can advance education policy and reform by helping schools understand and meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which their agencies were adding or increasing their involvement in particular services directly or indirectly related to the No Child Left Behind Act (see Exhibits 8 and 9). Chief among these were additions and/or increases in developing instruction for paraprofessionals, grant-writing assistance, and leadership training for teachers and administrators.

**Exhibit 8. Number of ESAs Adding Services**

Services	Not At All 1	2	Moderate 3	4	Extensively 5
a. Grant-writing assistance	3	0	3	2	4
b. Developing instruction for paraprofessionals	0	2	2	4	2
c. Providing leadership training for teachers and principals	0	1	0	1	2
d. Organizing and offering family literacy programs	8	3	2	3	0
e. Initiate (maintain) partnerships with community-based programs	2	2	4	1	0
f. Facilitate assistance for eligible private school children	6	5	3	0	0

Agency staff who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they were increasingly involved in providing education for paraprofessionals. Agency representatives, however, were less clear about how they might provide paraprofessional training.

Grant writing was another area education service agencies recognized as having potential for growth. In fact, one Colorado BOCES is hiring a grant writer to assist them in their endeavor to increase grant funding. In addition, the grant writer could serve as a resource to schools and districts preparing proposals for competitive grants. Colorado BOCES, for example, depend heavily on district member fees and fees for service. This reliance on and attention to grant writing may account for the difference between Colorado agencies' attention to grant writing and agencies in states such as California and Florida. Agencies in these two states, for example, receive the majority of their funding from the state.

**Exhibit 9. Number of ESAs Increasing Services**

<b>Services</b>	<b>Not At All 1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Moderate 3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Extensively 5</b>
a. Grant-writing assistance	1	2	1	5	3
b. Developing instruction for paraprofessionals	1	1	2	2	8
c. Providing leadership training for teachers and principals	1	2	3	8	6
d. Organizing and offering family literacy programs	1	1	3	2	1
e. Initiate (maintain) partnerships with community-based programs	2	3	5	4	1
f. Facilitate assistance for eligible private school children	3	6	0	1	0

Activity *c* in Exhibits 8 and 9, providing leadership training for teachers and principals, ranked high as well. Agency staff recognize the importance of leadership training and are increasing this service. One of the challenges that some respondents faced during their field visits, however, was a lack of school and district leadership — and, in some cases, opposition from local leadership. Many ESA staff expressed great interest in pursuing the use of No Child Left Behind funds to foster effective leadership. Nevertheless, some intermediate agency staff were dismayed by the lack of willingness of schools or districts to access this service. As one Nebraska director lamented, “We’ve offered, but no one is interested.”

The lowest ratings were given to organizing family literacy programs and assisting private schools. Although minimal attention to private school children was not surprising, the perceived lack of attention to family literacy programs was initially puzzling. Many of the ESAs had early childhood programs in place, which staff representatives believed could sustain the family literacy aspect of school improvement until more pressing issues such as curriculum alignment and data analysis were better in place. Those agencies that have family literacy programs in place, however, indicated a desire to increase this service using funding available

from the No Child Left Behind Act. Even though family literacy is not “high on the radar,” many intermediate agencies are considering how they might expand their support of literacy needs.

Another way that education service agencies advance education policy and reform is by evaluating their services. The viability of education service agencies, like many other organizations, is increasingly dependent on the degree to which services offered impact classroom instruction and student learning. All of the agency staff contacted indicated that they evaluate their work in some way. Much of the evaluation has depended on participants completing surveys following training sessions, but some agencies have supplemented these surveys by interviewing participants. A few of the agencies have hired outside evaluators to assess the effectiveness of their programs. One might expect states that provide significant funding for their ESAs to require or conduct evaluations of the services these agencies provide. This was not always the case; however, the absence of state evaluations often was a function of financial resources. As one director explained, the states simply cannot afford to do systematic evaluations.

Almost all of the agencies acknowledged that they have relied on student assessment data as the ultimate barometer of the efficacy of their work. As one respondent noted, student achievement on formal assessments is the “final judgment.” Exhibit 10 identifies the items agency staff evaluate most extensively.

**Exhibit 10. Degree to Which Items Are Evaluated**

<b>Items Evaluated</b>	<b>Not At All 1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Moderate 3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Extensively 5</b>
a. Student performance based on formal assessments	1	2	4	6	11
b. Student performance based on informal assessments	4	4	5	3	7
c. Teachers’ attitudes toward students	11	5	6	1	1
d. Teachers’ attitudes about their own learning	4	7	6	6	1
e. Change in teacher instructional practice	1	7	6	7	3
f. Change in the use of assessment data	3	2	5	6	6

## DISCUSSION

Education is awash with accountability. This study addressed how intermediate service agencies assist low-performing schools in the improvement process, not only for accountability purposes but to reach the goal of success for all students. Results of the study indicate that intermediate service agencies provide a variety of services to low-performing and higher performing schools, including instructional support for students with special needs, professional development for educators, and managerial and cooperative purchasing services. They serve as a lifeline of support, particularly for those schools most in need.

Not surprisingly, the agency staff contacted for this study believe that their level of funding is insufficient for the growing range or extent of services they are responsible for providing. Whether an agency receives the majority of its funding from the state or from local membership and service fees makes little difference in the range of services provided, but the funding level of many agencies makes it difficult for them to adequately assist their constituent districts.

Intermediate agencies that are fully financed by a state offer many of the same services and face the same challenges as do those that are more entrepreneurial in nature. One possible drawback to the fee-for-service model is an agency's constant need to seek new business. This model has the advantage of enabling intermediate agencies to stay on the cutting edge of direct instructional support, professional training, and managerial services. But the ongoing need to find new venues for their services results in less time available for maintaining relationships — an essential element of successful school improvement.

Not long after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Association of Education Service Agencies commissioned a study about the Act. The Association sought to identify new or expanded opportunities that education service agencies could pursue using federal funds and ways they could collaborate with state or local education agencies. The findings from this study are summarized in Graber's (2002) report *The "No Child Left Behind" Act: Opportunities for America's Education Service Agencies*. McREL staff found that most of the service agency directors interviewed were in the early stages of understanding how they could collaborate with local and state education agencies.

Although agency directors were beginning to think about how they might collaborate with local school districts, many were interested in joining forces with local districts to pursue No Child Left Behind funding. But there may be obstacles to their efforts. For example, one Nebraska Education Service Unit director admitted that some local school districts were pursuing funding through the No Child Left Behind Act on their own, especially those dollars set aside for professional development. Given the knowledge base of intermediate agencies and the organizational structures they already have, it is unfortunate that more coalitions are not being created. Clearly, collaborating to pursue funding is one way that education service agencies can build more collaborative relationships with local school districts and other community-based programs to improve education for all students.

Agency staff indicated that paraprofessional training is another service they would like to enhance. Given that the No Child Left Behind Act stipulates that only “highly qualified” paraprofessionals work directly with students, training paraprofessionals is an important avenue for education service agencies to pursue. And, the heightened need for this type of service and the support mechanisms that most education service agencies already have in place (e.g., professional development classes, technology for distance learning, and collaborative efforts with local colleges and universities) place them in a prime position to be a leader in paraprofessional training.

Although many agency staff admitted that teachers’ attitudes toward their students were important to acknowledge, most were not evaluating or addressing these beliefs. This seems to be a significant omission given that much of the research on teacher beliefs illustrates the importance of recognizing and highlighting these viewpoints. Because teachers and administrators bring their beliefs to professional development opportunities, any learning situation that fails to at least recognize these preconceived ideas runs the risk of completely missing the mark. Richardson (1994) addresses this issue:

If beliefs are related to practices, and more particularly, if beliefs drive practices, staff development that focuses solely on teaching practices may not be successful in effecting change, unless the teachers’ beliefs and the theories underlying the practices are also explored. (p. 90)

Service agency staff want their work with school and district personnel to result in improved practice over time. Incorporating discussions about beliefs may enable teachers and administrators to understand and appreciate their instructional choices for students at a deeper level.

Many intermediate agencies are considering using technology-based learning as a solution to the problems presented by shrinking education budgets and the high level of assistance schools need. There are problems with this approach, however. Building relationships is an essential component of effective schools (see e.g., Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1992, 1996), and using technology as an intermediary may not enable education service agencies to build the types of interpersonal connections necessary for sustainable change. As Sizer (1996) notes, “The relationship of each of us to the other is always crucial, particularly so if the school is taking on tough reforms” (p. 92). Many low-performing schools are taking on tough reforms. Teachers and administrators who build strong relationships with external agency staff may be better prepared to tackle difficult work. If school and service agency staff must rely on technology alone to sustain their working relationship, their school improvement efforts may not be as successful.

Technology is not a panacea for budget problems either. The ability to coordinate even this type of professional development depends on a sizeable investment from either the state or the local school districts for technical equipment and manpower. Nonetheless, for rural and outlying school districts, using technology to deliver professional development is essential. Already at the forefront of technology-based learning for students, many rural districts are prepared to meet this challenge for school- and district-level personnel as well. By creating viable but adaptive professional development opportunities for individual districts and making

these available through the Internet and other technological means, ESAs can meet an industry need without expending additional resources for staff.

Another marketing opportunity for education service agencies involves a direct connection to a well-recognized relationship — the impact of effective professional development on student achievement. In the past decade, ESAs have become increasingly involved in carrying out state and federal initiatives, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, at the local level. As a result, ESAs are finding that their work at the district level is much more focused on ensuring that instruction is standards based and content focused and that it is guided by analyses of assessment data. Professional development also has advanced. One-size-fits-all workshops are becoming a thing of the past. Today, ESAs provide staff development that is more focused on an actual need and that is adjusted for particular districts, schools, and even grade-level clientele.

In a previous report, McREL highlighted the dismay many states education agencies experience when policymakers do not know the characteristics of high-quality professional development (Dean, 2001). Policymakers, the author notes

need to see [high-quality professional development] in action preferably in districts and schools in their own state. They need to understand the connection between professional development and student achievement and how professional development fits into the school improvement process. (p. 23)

In short, policymakers need to experience effective professional development in much the same way that teachers do. They need to see it in action. Education service agencies are in an ideal situation to make these learning opportunities a reality.

The results of this study indicate that many states do not require much, if any, evaluative data from their intermediate agencies. Yet, regularly scheduled state evaluations may create a mechanism for policymakers to examine the broad range of assistance intermediate agencies provide, including professional development opportunities. Although evaluation of this type might be considered intrusive and cumbersome for intermediate agencies, the payoff could be enormous. Increased exposure and the possibility of additional financial resources for needed work are two potential benefits of opening agency doors to policymakers' evaluation.

McREL found that service agency staff routinely ask schools and districts to evaluate the assistance provided. These evaluations indicate that schools and districts are generally receptive to agency interventions. But successful transformation is largely dependent on the culture of an organization whether at the school or district level. Wehlage, Osthoff, and Porter (1996) found that schools had to be “predisposed to consider or already focused on” systemic reform in order to transform (p. 265). An external agency, in this case an education service agency, cannot impose long-term change. Rather, this is a goal that must grow from within a school or district. An external agency can only assist in this endeavor.

The agencies represented in this study face many challenges, but they meet these challenges by delivering a wide range of services to their constituents. In addition, the work these agency staff do is driven by current research coupled with their clients' needs. Reaching

the goal of success for all students requires cooperation at many levels. Individual teachers, schools, districts, and states must work together to make this goal a reality. Clearly, education service agencies also have an integral role to play as schools strive to meet the instructional needs of their students.

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