

New Roles for Educational Service Agencies In Rural Education Reform

The top priorities of current school reform efforts often include developing content standards, aligning performance assessments with the new standards, training teachers to respond to changes in curriculum and assessment, and involving a broader spectrum of stakeholders in the management of schools. Rural schools are, as they should be, full partners in these processes.

Although recent studies have fostered an understanding and appreciation of the particular strengths of rural schools and communities, it is important to note that educators in rural places also face major infrastructural and organizational challenges as they implement reforms. These challenges cannot be ignored if states intend to succeed in meeting their school improvement goals because, even in some of the most urbanized states, substantial segments of the total school population attend rural schools. However, help for rural districts may be as close as the nearest educational service agency (ESA).

These agencies were formed in the 1950s to support rural school districts undergoing reorganization. Since state departments of

education are typically located in urban centers, ESAs provided remote, rural school districts with access to the same resources available to city schools. In a new book published by AEL's Rural Center, *Expanding the Vision: New Roles for Educational Service Agencies in Rural School District Improvement*, author E. Robert Stephens says the agencies can serve an essential role today to rural districts as they face the challenges of systemic school reform.

Statewide networks of such agencies exist in nearly half of the 50 states, while various similar agencies—collaboratives, consortia, cooperatives, and clusters that serve two or more neighboring districts—exist in most other states.

The Rural School District Improvement Agenda

In his book, Stephens details the forces that are shaping current expectations of rural public education. The national and state reform movements have provoked a variety of policy initiatives—some grounded in the school effectiveness research of the

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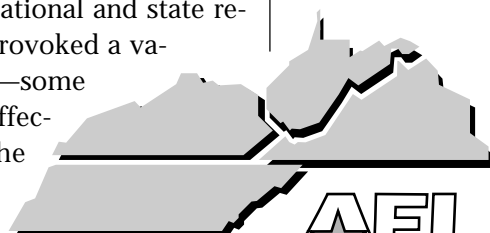
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more than
30 YEARS
OF SERVICE
to educators in
Kentucky,
Tennessee,
Virginia, and
West Virginia

1960s and 1970s, and others in response to court decisions—that have expanded the concept of equal educational opportunity. Additionally, global economic forces have affected local economies by putting pressure on rural schools to become partners in rural efforts to revitalize local economies. Taken together, these forces have shaped an ambitious and demanding rural education reform agenda. In most states, it includes the following components:

- providing equal access to educational opportunity,
- achievement of high standards,
- site-based management
- parental involvement and choice,
- promotion of education partnerships,
- promotion of the use of technology,
- school as community learning center,
- use of community to enrich curriculum, and
- school involvement in community development.

Agencies Serve Rural Districts

Educational service agencies across the country approach their mission of providing services to rural school districts in both common and divergent ways. By first describing some commonalities in current programming, Stephens lays the groundwork for considering future possibilities for agency programs and services.

The prominent role of ESAs in assisting rural districts in school reform was confirmed in a large study recently conducted by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, (Friedman & VanderPloeg, 1993) in its eight-state region. Educational service agencies were the most frequently cited external provider of basic services (e.g., student services and a range of school management and operations services) and capacity-building services (e.g., professional development, curriculum development, student assessment, technology acquisition and support, and school improvement planning). However, the same study found that

89 percent of rural principals thought they were not getting all of the services they needed to keep pace with reform initiatives undertaken in their respective states. This finding has implications for service providers and for the future of state education reform.

What Educational Service Agencies Must Do in the Future

The current school improvement agenda places great demands on educational service agencies. Though challenging, the demands present an unparalleled opportunity for the agencies to demonstrate to policy and local communities that they can be an indispensable, responsive, and accountable first-line support system for rural districts.

To meet these challenges, the service providers will need to reconsider fundamental ideas about their missions, overarching goals, and core objectives. The new pressures on rural districts, and those on public education generally, require that more service agencies pursue the twin goals of excellence and equity in a disciplined, systemic way. These conditions suggest that the agencies accept such challenges and begin exercising a leadership role they are uniquely positioned to play in their regions and in the larger policy arena.

An educational service agency, of course, cannot alone stem the ongoing socioeconomic and political forces affecting rural communities and their school districts. However, they can and must fully exercise their potential to help ensure that the playing field is level—as the transformation in rural America continues.

The apparent convergence of several circumstances suggests that a leadership role for ESAs would not only be well received, but enthusiastically welcomed. These circumstances include the apparent long-term downsizing of both federal and state governments, as well as greater acceptance that many school districts—urban, suburban, and rural alike—cannot and should not go it alone and therefore must reach out and seek

collaboration with others. The window of opportunity available to ESAs to step forward is wide for those willing to accept the challenge.

To Order: *Expanding the Vision: New Roles for Educational Service Agencies in Rural*

School District Improvement, by E. Robert Stephens, is available from the Distribution Center at AEL (ISBN 1-891677-00-4, 172 pages, 1998, \$15). See the order form that accompanies this issue.

Schools Prepare to Submit E-Rate Applications

The 75-day window for submitting the first round of E-Rate applications for telecommunication discounts to schools should now be open. Visit the Schools and Libraries Corporation website (<http://www.skfund.org>) for the latest information available.

The Snowe-Rockefeller-Exon-Kerrey Amendment to the Telecommunications Act of 1996 provided first-time-ever school discounts on telecommunications services. In May 1996, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued regulations implementing the Act, and this past summer two corporations were formed to process applications for the discounts and to administer the funds: the Schools and Libraries Corporation is responsible for the application process, a website for posting applications, and public education, while the Universal Service Administrative Company handles billing, collection, and disbursement of funds. Ever since the FCC ruling in May, school personnel have waited expectantly for application forms and for the website to become operational.

The following locations can help schools answer last-minute questions and attend to final details as they complete the application process for Internet discounts.

Schools and Libraries Corporation Hotline
<http://www.sclfund.org>
888/203-8100

Education and Library Networks Coalition (EdLiNC) Hotline
<http://www.eratehotline.org>
800/733-6860 (available Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m., EST)

Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

<http://www.fcc.gov/learnnet/>
<http://www.fcc.gov/formpage.html>
888/CALL-FCC

National Exchange Carrier Association (NECA)

<http://www.universalservice.org>
<http://www.neca.org>
800/228-8597

U. S. Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/Technology/erateforms/>
(E-Rate forms available)
800/USA-LEARN

Kentucky Department of Education

<http://www.kde.state.ky.us/>
Don Coffman 502/564-6900
dcoffman@kde.state.ky.us

Tennessee Department of Education

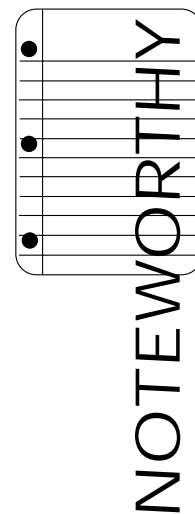
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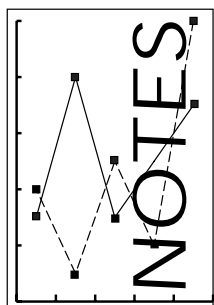
Virginia Department of Education

<http://www.pen.k12.va.us/Anthology/VDOE/>
Greg Weisiger 804/692-0335
gweisige@pen.k12.va.us

West Virginia Department of Education

<http://wvde.state.wv.us/>
Brenda Williams 304/558-7880
BrendaW@access.k12.wv.us





RESEARCH

Districts, Educators Need More Support in Implementing Standards-Based Reform

Standards-based reform may be here to stay, but districts and teachers alike need additional support from their states if they are to properly implement the standards, finds a report by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Examining standards-based reform efforts in nine states, researchers Diane Massell, Michael Kirst, and Margaret Hoppe found that the states have made slow but steady progress in implementing standards. Most states have crafted their standards quite broadly to allow districts discretion in adapting standards to their local circumstances.

Many districts have welcomed this flexibility and have elaborated on the state standards, the researchers note. Indeed, some have turned to community members, national standards groups, and other districts to round out the standards and generate matching curricula. However, most district educators want the state to provide more support than it has to help them implement the standards, the researchers explain.

“The most frequent complaint about state standards centered on their broad, general

nature and the implicit or explicit assumption that district and school staff would have the capacity, resources, time, and expertise to flesh them out into a local curriculum,” the researchers continue.

States also need to support central offices so that they, in turn, can support teachers as they change their classroom practices, the researchers add. “But some policymakers have ignored the role of district administrators and local boards, frequently conceiving of them as impediments to be bypassed rather than partners in the change effort,” they write.

The researchers also discuss other issues related to standards-based reform, including content standards, assessment, and equity.

To Order: *Persistence and Change: Standards-Based Reform in Nine States* is available from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, 3440 Market St., Suite 560, Philadelphia, PA 19104-3325; 215/573-0700 (cite report no. 37, 72 pages, \$10 prepaid).

To Learn More About Portfolio Assessment, Teachers Can Consult Annotated List of Articles

For teachers eager to learn about portfolio assessments but hard-pressed to find the time to sift through the flood of research about the topic, the Assessment Resource Library at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory offers an annotated bibliography to keep them informed.

Portfolios are a form of alternative assessment in which teachers evaluate student performance based on actual samples of a student’s work—from class worksheets to journal entries to art projects. Portfolios also allow for students’ reflection on their progress and quality of work.

The bibliography references relevant articles and papers that library staff have col-

lected and reviewed for inclusion. The alphabetical listing of articles (by primary author) includes complete ordering information and one-paragraph descriptions. Following the listing is an index, coded according to a set of descriptors developed to distinguish the diverse kinds of portfolios and the distinct emphases of the articles.

Using the descriptors, the bibliography’s compilers classify and cross-reference articles according to primary focus, assessment purpose, subject area, grade level, type, and special features.

For example, a teacher looking for information on grading math in elementary grades using portfolios could reference en-

tries that correspond to specific purpose (grading), subject (math), and/or grade level (elementary) categories.

Another classification distinguishes professional portfolios—those used for evaluating teachers, principals, or even schools and districts—from student-developed portfolios. The bibliography also directs readers

to Internet bulletin boards and discussion groups dealing with portfolios.

To Order: *Bibliography of Assessment Alternatives: Portfolios* is available from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Office of Marketing, 101 S.W. Main St., Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204; 503/275-9500 (cite order no. NL-997-AL, 113 pages, \$12.95 prepaid).

Action Teams Help Baltimore Schools Expand Partnerships in All Directions

For two weeks, faculty at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in Baltimore conducted a “media blitz” of newsletter mailings, flyers, and phone calls inviting parents to the school to talk with teachers and pick up their children’s report. Their coordinated, collaborative effort to communicate with parents resulted in a well-attended and successful inaugural “Parents Night Out.”

Those involved in the effort attribute the success to the school’s action team, a committee of teachers, parents, community members, administrators, and students charged with developing and nurturing partnerships among the school, families, and the community. Action team members from Benjamin Franklin and five other elementary and middle schools in Baltimore recount their experiences with the action team approach in a publication by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk.

These Baltimore schools, participating in a program to identify and implement successful partnership practices, follow a research-based framework identifying six types of family and community involvement: parenting, communicating, volun-

teering, learning at home, decisionmaking, and collaborating with the community. As researcher Mavis G. Sanders describes, the creation of an action team at each of these schools ensured that the workload was shared by many committed individuals. Team members noted that the framework helped them organize and expand their partnership efforts.

For example, in meeting the challenge of community involvement, the team at Curtis Bay Elementary School was able to initiate not just one activity with local business SCM Chemicals, but several. The company sponsors a recycling program at the school and promotes school attendance by rewarding students and families with trips to Hershey Park. Employees also volunteer as tutors or mentors for some students.

To Order: *Building Effective School-Family-Community Partnerships in a Large Urban School District* is available from the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, Johns Hopkins and Howard Universities, 3003 N. Charles St., Suite 200, Baltimore, MD 21218; (410)516-8808 (cite report no. 13, 29 pages, \$6.75 prepaid).

Investing in Teaching Profession Pays Off In Student Achievement, School Improvement

With a projected two million teachers entering the workforce in the next decade, now is the time for investing in high-quality teaching. That won’t happen without drastic changes to current teacher educa-

tion programs, teaching standards, recruitment, and professional development, assert researchers Linda Darling-Hammond and El-lalinda Rustique-Forrester.

(continued on page 8)

Marshmuckers Wraps Several Curriculum Areas Into One Exciting Program

by Nancy Balow



FOCUS ON INSTRUCTION

Featuring articles
about teachers in
the four AEL
states—this issue,
Virginia

Where would you start if you had to design an across-the-curriculum project for a group of 21 first through third grade students with whom you could spend only two hours a week?

Ruth Grillo of Accomack County Schools in Virginia asked herself that question last year. She wanted a project that would incorporate many subject areas and put students in touch with their environment. Her students, identified as potentially gifted, are scattered among the county's five elementary schools, each of which she visits one day a week.

Grillo wanted to wrap science, Spanish, math, creative writing, local history, and computer skills into one all-encompassing, exciting program. She came up with Marshmuckers. This original, interactive, bilingual, multimedia, virtual field trip and guide to the salt marshes of Virginia's Eastern Shore delivers everything but the taste of the salt-wort, the smell of low tide, and wet feet.

While the Marshmuckers main product was the computerized field trip, the project spawned several extensions, including a book of poetry, a web site, and original graphics, which were used by the local Nature Conservancy office and also printed onto fabric, then sewn into a quilt. All this from a project that began in October 1996 and finished in January 1997.

A collaboration between the schools and community organizations, the Marshmuckers earned Ruth Grillo the 1997 Conservation Education Primary Teacher of the Year designation from the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

"It's easier to do than it looks," says Grillo. She broke the project into segments, one of which involved identifying and obtaining the necessary equipment. The schools already had basic Macintosh computers, so grants were written to add a scanner, a dig-

ital camera, and a laptop computer. The only software Grillo and students needed was HyperStudio, a multimedia presentation program.

Grillo found funding from the Virginia Environmental Endowment, the Eastern Shore Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Virginia Society for Technology in Education. Scientific and volunteer support came from The Nature Conservancy/Virginia Coast Reserve, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, and the National Park Service, mainly through its Chincoteague and Assateague parks, but also via e-mail from rangers around the country and in Puerto Rico.

The classroom process began with research. Each student chose a topic—crustaceans, bats, insects, Indian history, whatever seemed most interesting—and developed a report using both print and electronic sources. When facts from all reports were gathered and entered into a computer database, the students actually went to a salt marsh for a tour guided by a Nature Conservancy volunteer.

"We took a boat to Parramore Island, a barrier island," Grillo explained. "When we got there, the students started asking each other questions, because each of them knew a lot about one particular aspect. It was great to see them teaching one another."

During the field trip, organisms and habitats were examined and digital photos were taken. These were edited and became part of the final product.

As work progressed, the students needed to get accurate translations of plant or animal names from English to Spanish. They sent e-mail requests to the National Park Service and got responses from around the country, which prompted them to say, "You mean scientists all over the country are doing work for us?" They began to under-

stand that they were doing something important and relevant.

In addition to the initial research report, each student also produced a poem; a sound file of his or her own voice (to be used on the soundtrack); an original chart, graph or map; an original graphic for animation; and an edited digital photo of him/herself, with the background removed so the child could become part of the scene. The students literally put themselves into the production, with one hanging upside down in a tree with bats and another flying in a "V" of migrating geese. As one child said, "We liked putting ourselves into the computers, where we could do things like hide in a hermit crab shell."

The students mastered many computer skills to create the Marshmuckers, skills they're now sharing with their classmates. That's how she planned it, Ruth Grillo says. "Many of our teachers don't have the time or skills to do this themselves, so my kids have essentially become their multimedia teaching assistants."

Between the community organizations involved in the project and Grillo's ideas for promotion, the Marshmuckers has attracted a lot of attention. The Nature Conservancy used some of the student-created graphics in its brochures. The Marshmuckers quilt, made from fabric printed with project graphics, has toured public buildings in the county and traveled to education conferences. "The brochures and quilt present the project in a way that adults who aren't familiar with computer technology can understand," says Grillo.

Disk copies of the computer tour have gone to many other Virginia schools, and the company that makes HyperStudio has been using the Marshmuckers as a demo to sell the software. The students bask in the local and national publicity resulting from the project. "These kids live in an isolated area, and the recognition has helped them feel 'famous' and given them a belief that what they do in school is important," Grillo thinks. "And it tells people that school children do more than game playing on com-

puters. This demonstrates pretty sophisticated skills."

How do you top a project like this one? According to Ruth Grillo, you build on it. "Last year we looked at the area's biological history. This year we're moving on to the social and cultural history—what the Eastern Shore was like during the Civil War, the history of lighthouses, things like that. We plan to add this to the Marshmuckers to complete an overall picture. I hope we can then find funding to produce compact disks and make our virtual tour available to everyone who wants it."

Grillo and her students would encourage other classes to take on a project like theirs. "I think the most effective technique was having each child become an expert on one thing at the beginning of the project," says the teacher. "Because they could choose something they were interested in, they were really motivated from the start. Then it was easy to keep them going. Every one of them would tell you the hard work was worth it. They're really proud of what they did."

Grillo's message to others: "Marshmuckers didn't happen just because these are gifted kids, you can do this in a regular classroom. Never underestimate what kids are capable of doing. Get them to stretch and you'll be amazed at their abilities."

For more information about Marshmuckers, contact Ruth Grillo at Accomack County Public Schools, 757/787-5754 or by e-mail: rgrillo@pen.k12.va.us.

Nancy Balow is a writer and graphic designer with Mother Wit in Charleston, WV.

A marsh poem

I used to hate the marsh because it was muddy
But now I like marshmucking.
I used to be afraid of holding a sea urchin
But now I am not afraid of its pricklies.
I used to think that marshes weren't important
But now I know that's where the animals' shelter is.
I used to not care about litter
But now I pick it up.

(continued from page 5)

In a paper distributed by the Education Commission of the States, Darling-Hammond and Rustique-Forrester argue that improving teacher qualifications is crucial to improving schools and raising student achievement.

"The critical starting place to improve the caliber of teaching is creating a viable system of standards that promote high-quality preparation, ensure that every entering teacher is equipped to succeed with students, and guide ongoing professional development," Darling-Hammond writes. Recent efforts have established coherent guidelines on accreditation for schools of education, teacher licensing, and advanced certification based on nationally established standards and benchmarks.

Concurrently, teacher education programs should incorporate new knowledge about teaching and learning. The authors offer strategies for improving teacher prep-

aration that include expanded clinical training, internships at professional development schools, and mentoring programs for beginning teachers.

Proactive and streamlined recruitment policies also help to ensure that teaching shortages are met by new teachers who are qualified. State incentives, such as scholarships or higher pay, can target individuals committed to teaching in hard-to-staff fields or locations, or teachers with dual licenses. Furthermore, the authors recommend creating professional development opportunities that support a "career continuum" to reward qualified teachers and keep them in the profession.

To Order: *Investing in Quality Teaching: State-Level Strategies* is available from the Education Commission of the States, 707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427; (303)299-3600 (cite order no. TE-97-1, 4 pages, \$4 prepaid, postage and handling included).



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