

Preliminary Report to the North Dakota School Boards Association

Strengthening Regional Education Associations

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ABSTRACT

This document is an early and abbreviated report of the emerging findings and recommendations of the PKR, Inc., study of North Dakota's Regional Education Associations. It is intended to provide information for policymakers considering legislative and other changes with potential to help the REAs to become a critical infrastructure element in the North Dakota public education system. The full report will be available by the end of September, 2008.

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Preliminary Report To the North Dakota School Boards Association: *Strengthening the Regional Education Associations* ---

Background

In the summer of 2008 the North Dakota School Boards Association (NSBA) contracted with PKR, Inc., of Bozeman MT to conduct a study of the Regional Education Associations (REAs) and to make recommendations for strengthening them. This document is an early and abbreviated report of the emerging findings and recommendations of that study, which will be completed by the end of September 2008. It is intended to provide information for policymakers considering legislative and other changes that have potential to help the REAs to become a critical infrastructure element in the North Dakota public education system.

With the joining of two REAs in the east side of the state this summer, North Dakota's REAs now number eight. They were created to encourage efficiencies through cooperation by North Dakota statute through Joint Powers Agreements among school districts consenting to participate. (In fact, the agencies are still sometimes referred to in conversation as "JPAs," although their status changed in statute in 2005 and 2007 to Regional Education Associations.) As REAs have evolved, questions have surfaced about how best to develop a strong regional education services delivery system that makes good on the North Dakota constitutional promise for an education system that is "uniform throughout the state." REAs have demonstrated their viability in the early years, but in the next legislative session, North Dakota lawmakers have the opportunity to make a dramatic contribution to the next generation of these agencies. Now is the time. More than 40 states now have some form of comprehensive regional education service agencies. These states have fully accepted the fact that the education service agency model is a necessary part of the public school infrastructure.

Unique North Dakota Context

Like all states, North Dakota exhibits unique features—some of which are challenges to the provision of an adequate education to the children of the state and some of which are advantages. Here are some of the most evident features with their implications.

- The **shifting demographics** of the state are characterized by steady annual declines in student enrollment overall and by population migration from rural areas to larger towns

and urban centers, producing decline of student enrollment in the one and growth of enrollment in the other. These trends create challenges of providing the right kinds of support to educators in both situations against a backdrop of fewer students in total.

- The **extreme small size** of many of the school districts in the state poses both challenges and an opportunity. On the challenge side, such schools are extremely vulnerable to variations in teacher quality and teacher availability, they have a hard time providing enriched educational opportunities for students, and they are hard to get to, especially in North Dakota winters. Further, they are vulnerable to pressure to consolidate even when distances make such arrangements untenable. On the opportunity side, technology that allows real-time communications among teachers, administrators, and service providers seems ready-made for addressing many of the challenges of size.
- The strong cultural **value of local control** throughout the state challenges statewide and even regional coordinated support solutions. This value, while admirable when it leads to self-reliance and independence, poses challenges when it creates suspicion that any addition of service support infrastructure is, in the words of many of those interviewed for this study, “just another layer of bureaucracy.”
- The **current financial support** provided for the REAs in North Dakota does not match the expectations for their impact nor the potential they hold as a critical element of the infrastructure of the state’s public education system. To supplement their resources and to their credit, REA coordinators have sought grants to support a variety of programs and services. Yet there appears to be little or no strategic guidance across the state to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of such projects when taken as a whole.
- Regardless of the current level of support, the **REAs have been able to provide professional development and student services that have been of value**, according to almost all of the people interviewed for this study, whether current or past REA staff, North Dakota Education Department and Higher Education personnel, policymakers, union, or school district representatives. This fact is a strong indication that already the young REAs are making the most of the slim resources they have and suggests that policymakers can entrust more funding to them with the assurance that the money will be well spent. The ability to do a lot with a little is a significant advantage on which to build.

Preliminary Recommendations

1. **Develop policy, plans, and funding for REA development in conjunction with policy, plans, and funding for the *Adequacy Report*.** Authors of that report (formally entitled *Funding Schools Adequately in North Dakota: Resources to Double Student Performance*) repeatedly refer to the role and responsibility of regional service delivery agencies to fulfill their recommendations for assuring a high-quality state education system. As changes are made based on the *Adequacy Report*, policymakers should ask, "How could the REAs help? And what do they need to be able to provide that help?" Here is a sampling of the REA references and implications in the final draft of the *Adequacy Report*:

- Number 10 on the list of strategies for improving student achievement is to "bring external professional knowledge into the school...working with regional education service agencies...." (P. 68)
- Instructional coaches are recommended, in addition to mentoring programs. (P. 84)
- "There is increasing discussion of using Regional Service Agencies as a mechanism for delivering effective professional development services." (P. 118)
- "...professional development could become a major feature of enhanced Regional Education Service Agencies." (P. 121)

These quotations implicitly (and in the last case, explicitly) call for stronger roles and responsibilities for the REAs. Taken collectively, the Nation's education service agencies are already providing the majority of professional development to teachers and administrators in our schools. North Dakota could benefit from this model and association with professionals in these organizations.

2. **Increase funding to the REAs as a critical infrastructure element within the North Dakota public education system.** REAs represent the way for State lawmakers to assure that both the administrative functions and student services defined by statute are delivered close to the school districts and with the districts' direct participation in programming and service decisions. In this way, the advantages of local control can be coupled with the financial and policy support of the State to ensure high quality, efficiency, and equity of service access and results. In today's education environment, where "world class education" is more than a campaign slogan and where the gap between what local school districts can do and what the public expects, districts absolutely must have a substantial level of competent assistance.

At a minimum, REAs should be funded at a base level without contingencies to provide support to districts in curriculum development, data, school improvement, professional development (beyond large-scale events to include mentoring and in-the-classroom coaching), and technology support. They should have the latitude and resources to add other staff to respond to the needs of the districts in their regions. Finally, like other education service agencies in America, they should have a fulltime executive director with strong leadership credentials and skills to manage multiple programs that are customized to meet the needs of district clients. Over half the people interviewed for this study have used the phrase, "wearing too many hats to be effective at any one of them." It is reasonable to conclude that North Dakota is getting as much as it is going to get out of the current REA configuration and funding level. One or two people to serve 27 statutorily required functions or services is not enough, and the turnover among REA coordinators in the past few months adds credence to the argument. To draw an analogy, failure to build the REA infrastructure that connects district capacity, state initiatives, and public expectations for education is similar to failure to build bridges that are the infrastructure that connects the roadbed on one side of a river to the other. We seldom hesitate to adequately fund traditional infrastructure such as snow removal, emergency management, highway patrol services, etc. In many states education service agencies are considered as vitally "traditional" as these other services.

3. Invest in technology solutions to improve services, increase quality of education outcomes, and increase professional exchange among educators in the State.

Several REAs are already offering substantial levels of support service to districts in the acquisition, use, and maintenance of technology under their statutory requirements for technology support. Within their requirement for supporting distance-learning classes, some are extending their services to include management of online courses for students, a trend that should be encouraged. Clayton Christensen, Harvard Business School professor and author of the 2008 book *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, has subjected the adoption of computer-based and online learning to the same science of innovation he uses for business applications. He concludes that "computer-based solutions can take root [in] ... Advanced Placement (AP) and other specialized courses; small, rural, and urban schools that are unable to offer breadth; 'credit recovery' for students who must retake courses in order to

graduate; home-schooled students and those who can't keep up with the schedule of regular school; students needing special tutoring, and prekindergartners.”¹ He also observes that smaller schools are often the “perfect places for computer-based learning” because of staffing challenges and reports that by the fall of 2007, 43 percent of rural schools were already providing students with online courses where no alternative was available. Virtual science labs, while not perfect, can substitute where no science teacher and no lab can be provided. Online math courses can strengthen North Dakota's core curriculum. Gifted students can study anywhere anytime under the tutelage of excellent teachers. With more funding, REAs can organize, manage, staff, and support such offerings to a greater and better degree than they do today, dramatically enriching student learning opportunities while reducing cost for participating school districts. Management of computer-based learning opportunities is only one role of many in the technology arena that the REAs are uniquely positioned to fulfill.

4. **Support the development of the REAs as a statewide delivery system.** Across the nation, this is the most critical and pressing issue facing education leaders as they try to make the most of their existing regional service delivery systems. In North Dakota, the genesis of the REAs as cooperative structures made up of *districts working on local and regional issues* may complicate the transition to better ways of working cooperatively as *regional entities on behalf of statewide issues*. Nonetheless, wise policymakers will take this REA history into account as they think on behalf of the State. The most successful regional service delivery systems nationwide have carefully preserved as primary the relationship between service agency and local school districts at the same time they have defined processes and structures for working together and with state departments of education to accomplish statewide objectives.

Specifically, North Dakota policymakers should consider the following:

- define a structural link between the REAs and the Department of Public Instruction to facilitate better communications about State initiatives and the definition of the REA role in them;
- support the development of an REA measurement system that will inform managers about improvement opportunities and that will inform policymakers and participating

¹ Clayton Christenson (2008). *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. New York: McGraw Hill. P. 91, ff.

school districts about the impact REAs are having through the administrative functions and student services they are charged to provide;

- support the regular interaction of the REA managers as a group and charge them with developing a collective strategic plan for the REAs;
- support the participation of the REA managers in the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESAs) to raise their awareness and knowledge of how similar organizations operate across the nation and in other countries;
- encourage the merger of other educational services such as special education cooperatives with REAs to increase efficiencies, promote synergy, and simplify planning for school districts. This has been done in many states, so North Dakota would be following strong precedent.

5. **Increase the role of school district superintendents in program and service planning while retaining the current composition of REA governing boards.** Again speaking from other states' experiences with an eye to preventing possible future troubles in North Dakota, it is important to differentiate the appropriate roles of school superintendents and school board members relative to the REAs. Although there is no definitive research that has tested one model of service agency governance against another, some states that have allowed a mixture of both groups on service agency boards (Massachusetts, for instance) are currently experiencing conflict between the two. By giving superintendents a strong role in deciding what programs and services the REA will provide across the region and for their own districts, North Dakota's system can capitalize on the intelligence superintendents have about school districts' needs for support in both administrative functions and student services. In many states, the superintendents in a region meet monthly and sometimes elect a smaller "advisory council" to provide frequent input to the REA superintendent and board.

School board members, by virtue of their elected roles, have an equally important but different contribution to make. They maintain the tie with the public and provide the public oversight and policy development that will be increasingly more important as the REAs grow in size, role, and influence.