

*Educational Service Agencies: Public Infrastructure to Solve Capacity Challenges*  
Excerpts from a forthcoming paper by The Center for Learner Equity

### I. What are Educational Service Agencies?

Educational Service Agencies (ESA) are widely utilized, quietly embedded regional public entities that support the implementation of public education in states nationwide. Specifically, an Educational Service Agency “is a regional public education agency authorized by state statute that **exists primarily to provide instructional support, management, and planning programs and services**” to school districts. “The primary role of the ESA is service to its constituent districts and schools, not their regulation.” (Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA)). They are also recognized and defined in federal law (ESSA and IDEA).

ESAs operate in 82% of states. There are at least 553 ESAs, ranging in size from five employees to 4,000. ESAs date back to the 1930s as a mechanism to build capacity and economies of scale within public education. ESAs are creatures of their respective states and go by various names.

<i>Sample ESA Terminology</i>	<i>Corresponding States</i>
Education Service Cooperatives	Arkansas & West Virginia
Education Cooperatives	Kentucky, Montana, & Tennessee
Educational Collaboratives	Massachusetts & Rhode Island
Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs)	Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, & Utah
Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs)	North Dakota & Wisconsin
Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs)	Connecticut & Texas
Education Service Centers (ESCs)	Indiana, New Hampshire, & Ohio
Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)	Colorado, New York, & Wyoming
Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA)	California
Area Education Agency (AEA)	Iowa

### II. What kinds of educational services and programming do they offer?

ESAs host a wide array of service offerings relevant to the needs of schools in their regions. **Most ESAs maintain a portfolio of offerings that span the breadth of what a modern school district might need for its operations.** Focusing on special education, a 2006 survey

of state special education directors noted the following range of special education services provided by ESAs:

Professional development	Conduct evaluations
Consultation services	Manage joint purchasing of supplies
Disseminating information from the SEA to LEAs	Provide special education transportation
Record keeping, statistics, and reporting requirements	Provide all special education services
Related services and/or itinerant special education teachers	Monitor special education compliance on behalf of the state
Write and manage federal grant applications	Provide media and technology services

### III. How are they funded?

Most ESAs are funded through a mix of direct or indirect allocations of state and federal funds and fee-for-service revenue from participating member schools. While an outdated practice, some ESAs are entirely state-funded; others are entirely fee-for-service and solely reliant on their local districts.

### IV. How are they governed?

ESA governance typically features leadership from an executive director with oversight from a dedicated governing board. ESA Executive Directors are often homegrown educational leaders within their regions, and ESA governing boards are typically empowered with their hiring. State statute dictates the composition and size of ESA governing boards, which tend to be comprised of representatives from member districts and schools.

### V. What does a successful ESA look like?

A successful ESA is appropriately and judiciously entrepreneurial: it maintains close ties with its member districts and schools and stays responsive and proactive to their needs through curated service offerings. A successful ESA maintains a diverse funding model that includes fee-for-service revenue and public allocations, ensuring a blend of financial sustainability balanced with some fiscal responsiveness to member needs.

## Conclusion

Educational Service Agencies enable better leveraging of resources to procure necessary services and staffing amongst participating schools, without disrupting autonomy. With a long legacy of operating as a fixture within traditional public education administration, the ESA model is an “old meets new” opportunity to create infrastructure for autonomous charter schools.