

Shared Services in Rural School Communities: Examples from the Field

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Introduction

In 2017, the Wyoming Legislature commissioned a study aimed at identifying ways to increase efficiencies in Wyoming’s government and public services. The study included recommendations for increasing the fiscal and operational efficiencies of Wyoming’s Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) programs. In response to the study, the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) partnered with the Region 11 Comprehensive Center, a U.S. Department of Education technical assistance center, in fall 2019 on a project to develop recommendations for a shared services model that might be piloted by one of the state’s BOCES programs. This report was developed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), under a contract with the Region 11 Comprehensive Center, as a resource for the project team. This document provides examples of different shared services models operating in other states, and identifies promising practices for optimizing the delivery of high-quality resources, services, and opportunities for underserved and low-income students in Wyoming, especially in rural and remote school communities. The examples in this report are intended to help inform the recommendations for a shared services pilot model or other ideas to increase the efficiency of and access to shared services. Based on topics of interest identified during a project team needs-sensing discussion, findings in this report have been organized into the following sections:

- Shared Services Models, State Examples, and Cost Benefits
- Direct Student Services for Special Education
- Teachers and Classroom Instruction
- Shared Administrative Personnel
- Infrastructure
- Implementation and Sustainability

Methodology and Limitations

AIR staff conducted an independent search for shared service research and resources using EBSCO, Google Scholar, and a broad Google search. The following search terms were used for each search engine/database: shared services OR collaborative OR regional education center OR Boards of Cooperative Educational Services OR inter-district sharing AND rural schools OR districts OR special education OR specialized services OR direct services OR behavioral disorders OR behavioral management OR classroom instruction OR itinerant teachers OR teacher recruitment OR teacher retention OR shared instruction OR distance learning OR classroom curriculum OR professional development OR school building maintenance OR transportation OR meal/food services OR technology OR administration OR implementation OR cost benefits.

The body of literature and resources provide examples of governance and operational structures of various shared services models as well as examples of service delivery within the models. However, the literature provides very limited, if any, information that explores or studies the advantages of one model over another, or information that compares and contrasts the operational or fiscal efficiencies of different approaches. The literature and resources dedicated to providing an analysis of the unique characteristics, challenges, and approaches of shared services models specifically in *rural* school communities is even more limited. Finally, the demographics, geography, funding, and other contextual factors of rural school communities differ significantly from region to region, state to state, and even between regions in a state. Therefore, it is not appropriate to make assumptions about the potential ease of implementation or efficacy of a specific state's or region's shared services model for any other region.

Although this report focuses mostly on examples from rural school communities, a few examples from nonrural school communities are included for consideration.

Shared Services Models, State Examples, and Cost Benefits

There is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to educational shared services models, which have varying structures, systems of governance, and focus areas. Differences aside, all models share the primary goal of reducing school district spending, especially in the areas of special education, school infrastructure, classroom instruction, and administration. Common shared services models include:¹

- *Cooperative*. This shared services model is the most common and includes multiple school districts banding together to share functions and create economies of scale.
- *Regional Educational Service Agency*. In this model, shared services are governed by a separate board that collaborates with school district members for support.
- *Educational Service District*. This model is comprised of local school district members within a specific geographic area and derives most of its funding from grants and self-directed initiatives.
- *Cooperative Educational Service Agency*. In this model, two or more districts with similar needs come together to share services. This model is governed by a board of education comprised of members from local school districts.

In addition, shared services models may be *centralized* (the decision-making process is entrusted to a few key individuals such as superintendent and board members) or *decentralized* (the decision-making process is spread across participating districts).

Below are examples of each of the shared services models from different states.

Shared Services Model: Cooperative

Ohio

The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC) includes 27 school districts comprising grades 6–12. OAC was founded in 2010 when districts in southeastern Ohio banded together to help address specific rural challenges, such as staff recruitment and college readiness.² Member districts share resources, such as curricular and instructional resources (i.e., lesson plans and materials); influence regional and state policy; and emphasize community building. To create a unified mission, OAC has placed college and career readiness at the forefront of its agenda.³ OAC had no outside funding when it was established but quickly managed to find both public and private investments.⁴ For example, OAC was awarded a Race to the Top and Teacher Incentive Fund grant.⁵ Additional funding comes from organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and AT&T.⁶ Utilizing both grants and contributions from large organizations helps member districts save on costs. In terms of governance, OAC uses a centralized approach in which member superintendents meet in sessions facilitated by Battelle for Kids.⁷

Source: [Rural Education Collaboratives: A Closer Look: The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative](#)

Shared Services Model: Regional Educational Service Agency

Georgia

Georgia has 16 Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs) serving 180 school systems across the state.⁸ Georgia's RESAs support local school systems by designing research-based professional learning opportunities for educators, developing data-driven school improvement efforts, and fostering collaboration with other agencies to maximize the impact of statewide initiatives.⁹ Georgia's RESAs offer a number of services to the school systems they serve, including professional development, curriculum and instruction, and school improvement.¹⁰ The RESAs are funded by the Georgia State Board of Education as part of the total annual education budget.¹¹ Local school systems also contribute funds to the RESAs based on their full-time equivalent enrollment.¹² It is estimated that Georgia's RESAs have saved school systems across the state nearly \$80 million per year.¹³ The RESAs are governed by a centralized board of control consisting of the superintendent from each member school, the president of each member college, and a regional library director appointed by the Office of Public Library Services.¹⁴

Sources: [Georgia Regional Educational Service Agencies](#), [North Georgia Regional Educational Service Agency](#)

North Dakota

North Dakota has eight Regional Education Associations (REAs) that provide services to schools clustered by region. For example, the Northeast Education Services Cooperative (NESC) has 20 member school districts, including a school for the deaf as well as tribal schools and a special education unit.¹⁵ NESC has three full-time and three part-time staff to help with the coordination of education services¹⁶ which include professional learning, technology support, school improvement, data collection and analysis, and curriculum enrichment.¹⁷ REAs also support events such as college and career fairs and academic summer camps.¹⁸ NESC governance is centralized and is overseen by a governing board and an administrative board that make policy decisions on behalf of member districts.¹⁹ The governing board members are elected whereas the administrative board members consist of the chief administrator of each school district.²⁰

Sources: [Northeast Education Services Cooperative](#), [Succeed 2020](#)

Montana

Montana's RESAs serve five regions throughout the state with a mission focused on optimizing school resources, improving the efficiency of school operations, professional development, and interdistrict collaboration.²¹ For instance, to increase efficiency, the Montana RESAs offer collective purchasing agreements, such as a food purchasing program.²² Professional development topics have included technology, Indian Education for All, gifted education, and Common Core subjects.²³ The Montana RESAs are governed by a board of directors and funded by Montana's Office of Public Instruction.

Source: [Montana RESAs](#)

South Dakota

In 2004, the South Dakota Department of Education created seven regional education service agencies (ESAs) that were selected from proposals submitted to the department.²⁴ Each ESA in South Dakota provides a range of services to help schools and communities meet the needs of students.²⁵ For example, Education Service Agency Region 2 (ESA2) provides professional development opportunities through both on-site and regionally based programs.²⁶ Professional learning topics have included data analysis, curriculum enhancement, instructional strategies, Common Core standards alignment, positive behavioral interventions and supports, school improvement planning, and technology.²⁷ ESA2 also customizes services to meet the unique needs of different school communities.²⁸ Recently, ESAs in South Dakota have struggled with the termination of state funding ending and inconsistent demand for services.²⁹ South Dakota appears to be moving toward a cooperative approach for delivering shared services to rural school communities. Cooperatives in South Dakota have broad authority to implement education services at the request of member school districts, nonmember school districts, or the state.³⁰

Sources: [South Dakota Education Service Agencies](#), [Educational Service Agency Region 2](#), [Bill would eliminate education service agencies \(Rapid City Journal\)](#)

Utah

Utah's Educational Development Service Centers are comprised of four regional centers serving 26 schools, and were created to help rural school districts receive equitable and cost-effective services.³¹ They provide special education, grant support, printing services, computer repair, data analysis, autism specialists, reading specialists, distance education, administrative training conferences, and more.³² The centers were created by statute and are governed by a board of directors comprised of the district superintendents and charter schools in their region.³³ Each service center has an executive director, an administrative assistant, a network engineer, and a technology trainer; other positions may be added as needed.³⁴ The four centers are funded by the Utah State Board of Education, member districts, grants, student program fees, educator tuition fees, and donations.³⁵

Sources: [Southwest Educational Development Center](#), [Utah's Regional Service Center](#)

Shared Services Model: Educational Service District

Washington

Washington has nine educational service districts (ESDs), which were established by state statute to help public and private schools provide cost-effective services, offer state-required local programs, and act as liaisons between districts and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.³⁶ The ESDs offer several services and programs to client districts, including content and instruction, early learning, educator effectiveness, financial management, and information technology.³⁷ State funding accounts for about 1% of the ESDs' budgets. Most of the ESDs use that 1% to secure collaborative grants and manage fee-for-service partnerships.³⁸ For every dollar provided by the state, the ESDs provide nearly \$100 in services to districts.³⁹ They use a centralized approach to governance in which seven citizens are elected by school board members from participating regions to create a board of directors.⁴⁰

Sources: [ESD 112](#), [ESD 123](#)

Nebraska

In Nebraska, 17 educational service units (ESUs) provide educational services and bulk rate purchasing to the state's 272 school districts in four teacher-focused areas: (1) professional development for educators; (2) infrastructure for and access to technology for distance learning; (3) instructional materials; and (4) other services as requested. Funding for the ESUs is secured through a levy of one cent per \$100 of property taxes and a percentage of core service dollars provided by member districts. ESUs were created by state statute in 1965. Each one operates autonomously. Ten years ago, legislation was passed to create an ESU Coordinating Council with a required representative from each ESU. The council meets monthly and meetings are open to the public. ESUs are required to meet with the Nebraska Department of Education twice a year to mutually identify priority areas for the coming year. The council creates memoranda of understanding to collaboratively provide statewide services, such as a statewide student record system, and more recently, blended education professional development. Council activities also include services and training for ESU staff, e.g., train-the-trainer models to build capacity of ESU staff to serve the field.

Source: Direct communication with Deb Paulman, Educational Service Unit 16 Administrator, July 17, 2020.

Shared Services Model: Cooperative Educational Service Agency

New Mexico

New Mexico has 10 regional education cooperatives that support 68 districts and other school configurations (most New Mexico school districts are considered rural).⁴¹ The cooperatives are members of the Regional Education Cooperative Association (RECA), which maintains a common reporting structure for all cooperatives, works with the state department of education on statewide initiatives, and liaises with the legislature. The cooperatives, considered state agencies, were authorized by New Mexico statute in 1984 and are required to have an executive director, business manager, and annual audit.⁴² The legislature appropriates \$1.1 million in annual support to the 10 cooperatives. Additional funding must be independently secured by each cooperative.⁴³ Each cooperative is governed by the superintendents in the region served.

Sources: [New Mexico Regional Education Cooperatives Association](#), [New Mexico Regional Education Cooperatives Association legislative proposal](#), [Regional Education Cooperatives Association Constitution and By-Laws](#)

Wisconsin

Wisconsin's Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs) act as a link between school districts and the state, and provide services such as instruction, technology, special education, alternative or vocational education, student programs, and professional development.⁴⁴ The 12 CESAs serve 427 of Wisconsin's 446 school districts.⁴⁵ The state provides up to \$25,000 in funding to each of the CESAs.⁴⁶ School districts served by the CESAs must match the state's contribution corresponding to their percentage of state aid and average daily membership.⁴⁷ In addition to the state funding, the majority of funding for the CESAs comes from state and federal grants.⁴⁸ The governance structure is centralized and includes a board for each of the 12 CESAs.⁴⁹ Members of the board are elected by delegates from school boards of the districts served by the CESAs.⁵⁰ The board approves expenditures, determines agency policy, and establishes the local share of the funding.⁵¹

Source: [Characteristics of State Educational Service Agencies](#)

Colorado

Colorado's Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) are an extension of local member school districts and exist at the discretion of their members.⁵² Colorado BOCES only provide programs and services approved by their members.⁵³ There are three types of BOCES in Colorado: (1) special education administrative units; (2) specialized BOCES that provide professional development, operate an alternative school, or provide digital learning; or (3) a blend of the first two types.⁵⁴ BOCES have helped member districts reduce costs through collaborative funding, made educational opportunities more equitable, provided skilled personnel on a cost-efficient basis, and promoted interdistrict cooperation.⁵⁵ Unique to rural school communities is the Colorado Rural Education Collaborative, which consists of 65 rural school districts and their supporting BOCES.⁵⁶ The Colorado Rural Education Collaborative has numerous focus areas, including teacher and leader efficacy, teacher recruitment and retention, college and career pathways, social and emotional learning, and STEM.⁵⁷ Colorado's BOCES were created by statute and are each governed by an appointed board of directors.⁵⁸ Each BOCES also has an advisory council comprised of the superintendent or the superintendent's designee.⁵⁹ Colorado BOCES are financed through participating member districts and receive \$10,000 annually from the state.⁶⁰

Sources: [Colorado BOCES Association](#), [Colorado Rural Education Collaborative, 2020](#)

Shared Services Model: Statewide Educational Service Agency

Alaska

In 1976, the Alaska State Legislature authorized the creation of six regional resource centers to provide support services to districts and schools.⁶¹ As regional resource centers began to close due to financial challenges, the Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERCC) incorporated in 1981 and came to be considered Alaska's statewide educational resource center.⁶² In the same year, Alaska's State Board of Education officially charged SERCC with offering services to all of the state's 53 school districts.⁶³ According to SERCC's 2019 annual report, the center secured a total of \$5,790,961 in funding in 2019.⁶⁴ The 2019 annual budget was supported by: grants (\$2,101,515), district contracts (\$3,114,313), state and other contracts (\$448,127), E-Rate (\$48,763), and other funding (\$78,243).⁶⁵ SERCC's 60 employees provide services focused on teaching and learning support to strengthen instruction, student achievement, and operations expertise to increase management efficiency.⁶⁶ SERCC offers a broad range of services to Alaska school districts, including business services, facilities management, and special education services. The center is governed by a board of directors comprised of superintendents from Alaska's southeast school districts.⁶⁷ In 2019, SERCC created a regional partnership with Oregon and Washington to enhance professional development offerings to educators in the Northwest region of the country.⁶⁸

Sources: [Southeast Regional Resource Center](#), [FY2019 SERRC Annual Report](#)

Key Takeaways

These examples have several things in common. In terms of *governance*, each uses a centralized rather than a decentralized approach. This is not surprising given that shared services models generally operate by centralizing services across school districts that are normally performed by individual school districts. Although a decentralized shared services model is less common, the literature reveals that some models do use this approach (e.g., the Indiana example in the following section). The shared services models in this section also share similar *funding* strategies; they are primarily financed by state funding, grants, membership fees, or a blend of all three. These examples all provide similar *services*, including curriculum and instruction, professional development opportunities, technology support, and school improvement. Lastly, three of these state examples underscore the *cost saving advantages* of shared services. For example, the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative leverages both grants and contributions from large organizations to help reduce shared service expenditures.⁶⁹ In Georgia, it is estimated that RESAs save an average of \$48.54 per FTE for all school systems across the state.⁷⁰ With a total FTE count of 1,630,672, that adds up to a savings of nearly \$80 million.⁷¹ For Washington, it is estimated that ESDs provide nearly \$100 in services to districts for every dollar invested by the state.⁷²

Direct Student Services for Special Education

Providing special education services to students in rural school districts can often be a challenge. Most rural school districts operate with smaller budgets due to lower tax bases.⁷³ Because of this, rural districts frequently have limited resources to provide the services that students with special needs require.⁷⁴ Special education is one area where a shared services model may help rural districts reduce costs and build efficiencies, especially in terms of classroom instruction, counseling, and occupational therapy. This section provides examples of how states have leveraged cost-effective shared services models to provide special education services to students.

Alaska: Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERCC)

SERCC, Alaska's statewide education service agency, is the state's largest provider of contracted services for special education.⁷⁵ In 2019, SERCC deployed 25 itinerant specialists to provide services to more than 700 students with disabilities in 24 districts across the state. SERCC's itinerant specialists travel widely throughout Alaska's uniquely rural and remote areas. Specialists include occupational therapists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and school psychologists.⁷⁶ SERCC provides a shared cost model to participating schools, and offers related administrative services, professional development, and legal and technical expertise. SERCC also provides transition services, such as camps and planning assistance, to support students with disabilities in the transition from school to employment and independent living.⁷⁷

Sources: [FY2019 SERRC Annual Report](#), [Southeast Regional Resource Center](#)

Arizona: Navajo County Special Services Consortium

The Navajo County Education Service Agency, one of Arizona's 15 education service agencies, operates the Navajo County Special Services Consortium, which employs speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school psychologists, and other special service providers to serve exceptional children in Navajo and Apache Counties through a membership agreement. Specialists may serve multiple schools.⁷⁸

Source: [Navajo County Special Services Consortium](#)

Iowa: Area Education Agencies (AEAs)

In 1974, the Iowa Legislature created AEAs to effectively, efficiently, and economically identify and serve students requiring special education services.⁷⁹ Today, special education services comprise approximately 80% of the budget of the AEAs. Nine regional AEAs directly provide special services to students, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological services, and speech, hearing, and vision services.⁸⁰ AEA services extend to children in shelters, detention, jails, and prisons, and support services also are provided to families of children with special needs.⁸¹ Funding for Iowa's AEAs comes from three sources: school foundation aid formula, which includes a combination of property tax and state aid; federal funds, such as IDEA and Title I funding; and state categorical funding.⁸²

Sources: [Iowa's Area Education Agencies](#), [The Playbook for Iowa's AEAs](#)

New Jersey: Educational Services Commission (ESCNJ)

ESCNJ operates seven schools for students with disabilities and at-risk behaviors that districts may utilize for special education services.⁸³ Special education programs provided by ESCNJ are designed to accommodate full-time, shared-time, and self-contained students. ESCNJ also customizes its services to meet district education requirements and budgetary restrictions, and present a viable alternative to expensive private schools.⁸⁴ Some of the specific services provided by the seven schools include speech therapy, occupational therapy, functional academic skills, and consumer skills. ESCNJ programs help districts reduce costs by eliminating the need for them to use their own facilities and staff to provide these services.⁸⁵

Source: [Shared Services Resource Guide: 2018–2019](#)

Maine: The Southern Penobscot Regional Program for Children With Exceptionalities (SPRPCE)

In Maine, SPRPCE uses interlocal agreements to provide special education services, and includes 19 school administrative units (i.e., school districts).⁸⁶ Participating districts contribute funding to the administrative units for shared services. SPRPCE provides several programs for students with special needs, including a day treatment program for students with behavior impairments and emotional disabilities, which offers instruction on social skills and clinical counseling; a multiple disabilities program, which serves students with severe cognitive delays and physical disabilities; and an innovation school, which is a program designed for academically at-risk students.⁸⁷ Although each of these programs employs specialists, such as a social worker, an occupational therapist, and a speech therapist, they share one director of special services.⁸⁸ One SPRPCE program administrator estimated that districts save \$10,000 per student per year by pooling their resources and sharing the costs of hiring specialized staff.⁸⁹

Source: [Study of a Regional Approach for Delivering Special Education Programs and Services in Maine](#)

Indiana: The Cooperative School Services (CSS)

In Indiana, special education planning districts have delivered educational services to students with disabilities since 1973. The CSS planning district in Indiana does not provide instructional classroom services but instead offers specialized services, such as psychological services and occupational therapy, to students in its member districts.⁹⁰ CSS uses a decentralized approach in part because paraprofessionals are hired and managed at the school level independently of CSS. It also serves five counties in two time zones, making establishing a board that can meet regularly especially challenging.⁹¹

Source: [Special Education Service Delivery in Indiana: Year 2 Study](#)

Connecticut: The Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative (the Co-op)

In Connecticut, the Co-op is a state program that permits local governments to share the cost of special education through a model based on actuarial principles designed to improve the stability and predictability of special education funding.⁹² Local governments make annual contributions for the Co-op's services and are reimbursed 100% of their special education costs by the state in the current year.⁹³ The Co-op ensures that all community contributions are lower than their actual special education expenditures and that service delivery decisions remain local.⁹⁴ To ensure the Co-op is financially viable, it (1) uses a base community contribution to cover total expected special education costs for the coming year; (2) has a reserve fund to cover special education costs that exceed collected community contributions; (3) offers a contribution refund that gives back any excess contributions to individual school districts; and (4) uses an equity adjustment that provides a discount to the community contribution based on the wealth and needs of the district.⁹⁵ The Co-op is governed by a board of directors.

Source: [An Answer to Connecticut's Special Education Funding Challenges](#)

Montana: Special Education Cooperative

To help rural districts reduce special education costs, Montana has 21 special education cooperatives across the state.⁹⁶ Special education cooperatives were created by statute and are subsidized by federal funds under IDEA.⁹⁷ Participation in the cooperatives is voluntary except for districts receiving less than \$7,500 in IDEA funds, which must join the cooperative.⁹⁸ The special education cooperatives allow school districts to pool resources to employ special education staff that provide services on an itinerant basis.⁹⁹ Special education staff typically include a special education director, school psychologist, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, and physical therapist.¹⁰⁰ The special education cooperatives are governed by a management board consisting of trustees from the participating districts.¹⁰¹

Sources: [Special Education Cooperatives in Montana](#), [Administrative Rules of Montana](#)

Key Takeaways

Each of these state examples offers a different approach to help districts save on special education costs. For example, ESCNJ, which is a statewide program, uses its own facilities and staff to help districts save on costs. ESCNJ also provides services to universities, housing authorities, libraries, and other public entities.¹⁰² Although SPRPCE also has its own facilities, such as the day treatment program, it is region-specific and does not serve entities beyond schools and school districts. In addition, SPRPCE shares one director of special services across its special education programs to reduce expenditures.¹⁰³ Three of the state examples—New Jersey, Maine, and Indiana—emphasize how services such as occupational and speech therapy are offered through their shared services

models. In Maine, these services are provided on-site at the locations of their respective programs, which are all located in the region. Likewise, ESCNJ offers these services on-site at its facilities. Before the Co-op, Connecticut did not have a statewide system for funding special education services.¹⁰⁴ The Co-op serves as an example of how a state can create a cooperative model for equitably distributing special education funds to districts.¹⁰⁵

Teachers and Classroom Instruction

Due to budget shortfalls, rural schools and districts often lack adequate funding for classroom instruction, especially for classroom resources and professional development for educators. Professional development opportunities are especially important for rural educators as such opportunities not only improve classroom instruction but may help retain high-quality teachers.¹⁰⁶ Shared services models may help improve classroom instruction in rural districts by providing opportunities for peer networking and professional development. The state examples provided below showcase how rural districts have leveraged shared services to improve classroom instruction through teacher learning opportunities.

Peer Networking/Professional Learning Communities

Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington: The Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) Network

Developed in 2014, the NW RISE Network comprises 18 rural school districts and state education agencies (SEAs) from Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, and is based at the Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development.¹⁰⁷ The NW RISE Network was a response to requests from SEAs for meeting the needs of rural districts that often have limited resources.¹⁰⁸ The primary goal of the NW RISE Network is to improve instruction in member rural schools through networking opportunities in which teachers and leaders come together, both virtually and in person, to share resources and best practices.¹⁰⁹ The NW RISE Network also offers an online professional learning community for its members.¹¹⁰ The NW RISE Network uses the essential elements of successful networking to drive its success. These elements include developing shared goals, identifying resources, creating incentives to participate, and establishing norms of good networking.¹¹¹ In terms of funding, the NW RISE Network started with funds from the Northwest Comprehensive Center.¹¹² Since then, member districts have made contributions and also received funding from partner organizations.¹¹³

Source: [Generating Opportunity and Prosperity: The Promise of Rural Education Collaboratives](#)

Professional Development

Arizona: The Southern Arizona Regional Education Center (SAREC)

SAREC is one of Arizona's two regionally based service centers that provide services to schools and districts in multiple counties to address high-priority statewide and regional initiatives determined collaboratively with the state department of education.¹¹⁴ SAREC, which serves three large districts in the southernmost region of Arizona, partners with the University of Arizona, several community colleges, and local business partners to create a network of professional development opportunities, especially in Arizona standards and assessments, data analysis, STEM instruction, and school safety and wellness.¹¹⁵ SAREC also offers district educators college and career readiness professional development through targeted English/language arts and mathematics workshops.¹¹⁶

Resource: [Southern Arizona Regional Education Center](#)

Maryland: The Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium (ESMEC)

ESMEC serves nine rural Maryland school districts with most shared service activities focused on operational effectiveness, professional development, and collective advocacy.¹¹⁷ ESMEC hosts an annual leadership conference, which offers school staff professional development workshops. In addition, ESMEC developed the Aspiring Leadership Institute in which teacher leaders and administrative leaders share and learn from each other's experiences.¹¹⁸ ESMEC also has implemented an online curriculum repository to help teachers share and plan lessons across districts.¹¹⁹

Source: [Rural Education Collaboratives: A Closer Look: Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium](#)

Minnesota: The Area Special Education Cooperative (ASEC)

ASEC serves 12 school districts in northwestern Minnesota with the goal of providing support services to teachers, administrators, parents, and students with disabilities.¹²⁰ ASEC offers training to paraprofessionals in the form of in-services, web-based instruction, and one-on-one support.¹²¹ ASEC also offers annual professional training opportunities to help paraprofessionals develop the skills necessary to support students with disabilities in their academic pursuits—skills that include following lesson plans and implementing instructional procedures and activities.¹²²

Sources: [Area Special Education Cooperative](#), [Special Education Paraprofessional Handbook](#)

Maine: The Southern Penobscot Regional Program for Children With Exceptionalities (SPRPCE)

SPRPCE offers an array of professional development opportunities to its teachers, special education teachers, and educational technicians.¹²³ Professional development topics have included how to be an effective educational technician, supporting students with autism, administering functional behavioral assessments, occupational therapy, and managing student anxiety at home and at school.¹²⁴ In addition, SPRPCE provides on-site professional development each month as well as brief trainings before and after school.¹²⁵

Source: [Study of a Regional Approach for Delivering Special Education Programs and Services in Maine](#)

Key Takeaways

The NW RISE Network is an example of how shared services do not have to be limited to districts in one state but can be a collaborative opportunity among multiple states, especially when it comes to building peer networks. Professional development opportunities are a common feature of shared services models and are offered through a variety of methods. For instance, both ASEC and ESMEC offer annual professional development opportunities and workshops to teachers and school leaders, whereas SPRPCE offers on-site professional development and training to school staff. Two of these examples are specific to special education, which is important given the limited resources that rural districts have available for special education services. In addition, each of these state examples offers support across different professional learning topics, which may indicate that shared services models can tailor professional development to the needs of local school communities.

Shared Administrative Personnel

Because rural school districts are smaller than their urban counterparts, they can have more difficulty achieving economies of scale. Rural districts typically have a lower tax base, which means they often must operate with less local funding than larger districts.¹²⁶ Furthermore, rural districts have much smaller class sizes, leading to higher per pupil expenditures.¹²⁷ Sharing a principal, superintendent, or other administrative position (e.g., director of special education) may help rural schools save on administrative costs. This section highlights state examples of how shared services models may help achieve economies of scale through sharing administrative personnel.

New York: Hudson Valley

The Roscoe School District and the Downsville School District in the Hudson Valley share one superintendent between them, saving each district \$40,000 per year.¹²⁸ These savings add up to roughly 1% of the budget for the two districts, which may be reinvested to make teacher salaries more competitive, leading to reduced turnover.¹²⁹ Moreover, having one superintendent between two districts may allow for additional collaborative opportunities.¹³⁰ For example, if one district needs a Spanish teacher and the other district has a Spanish teacher, the superintendent may recommend that both districts share the Spanish teacher.¹³¹

Source: [Shared Superintendent: A New Experiment in Certain NYS Districts](#)

Colorado: The Northeast Board of Cooperative Educational Services (NEBOCES)

The NEBOCES in Colorado, which consists of 12 Colorado school districts, has one director of special education.¹³² This removes the need for each member district to hire and employ an individual at this position.¹³³

Source: [Implementation of an Inter-District Curriculum Consortium Among Ten Rural School Districts in Colorado: A Case Study](#)

Maine: The Southern Penobscot Regional Program for Children With Exceptionalities (SPRPCE)

SPRPCE shares one director of special services among 19 school administrative units to save on costs.¹³⁴

Source: [Study of a Regional Approach for Delivering Special Education Programs and Services in Maine](#)

Pennsylvania: Cornwall-Lebanon School District and Northern Lebanon School District

The Cornwall-Lebanon School District and the Northern Lebanon School District have established a shared food service arrangement to save on costs.¹³⁵ The two districts share a food service director and a supervisor of food and nutrition who purchases food for both.¹³⁶ This arrangement has resulted in a savings of \$100,000 between the two school districts.¹³⁷

Source: [Driving More Money into the Classroom: The Promise of Shared Services](#)

Key Takeaways

As these state examples illustrate, school districts can save on costs by sharing administrative personnel at a variety of positions, from superintendents to food service directors. Though this may be an effective cost-saving measure, there are risks concerning burnout for individuals managing dual responsibilities. For shared superintendents, the 2014 *Patterns for Progress* report states that burnout is a real concern that must be addressed.¹³⁸ Burnout is a possibility for all kinds of shared administrative positions, not just shared superintendents. So when considering sharing administrative personnel, the challenges of an increased workload must be weighed against building efficiencies, reducing district expenditures, and creating economies of scale.

Infrastructure

Due to budget constraints, rural school districts often struggle to maintain the infrastructure of their schools, which include facility services, office supplies, transportation, food services, and technology. Shared services may help rural districts save on infrastructure-related expenditures through cooperative purchasing programs, energy management plans, transportation systems, and technology support that allows for blended and dual learning opportunities. This section provides examples of how several states and districts across the country have leveraged shared services to build efficiencies into different aspects of their infrastructure and reduce expenditures.

Operational Costs

Massachusetts: The Educational Cooperative (TEC)

To help its 58-member school districts save on operational costs, TEC offers a range of competitively bid savings opportunities through a locally managed cooperative purchasing program and has helped member districts save on athletic equipment, cafeteria food, and custodial equipment.¹³⁹ In 2008, member districts saved \$300,000 alone in office supplies.¹⁴⁰

Sources: [Educational Service Agencies in Massachusetts: Building Capacity in Small School Districts](#), [About The Education Cooperative](#)

Wisconsin: Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) 10

CESA 10 provides facility services to 29 school districts in northwestern Wisconsin in four areas: (1) technology investments, which help districts invest in the best technologies available; (2) energy management, which helps schools maximize efficiency; (3) project management, including facilities planning; and (4) environmental health and safety, which focuses on the management of environmental projects.¹⁴¹ CESA 10 has saved districts up to \$32,000 in energy costs.¹⁴²

Resource: [CESA 10 Facilities & Energy Services](#)

Transportation

Massachusetts: The Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (LPVEC)

LPVEC is an educational collaborative that includes seven school districts.¹⁴³ The collaborative has developed a shared transportation system for students and special education students. LPVEC has 235 drivers and operates more than 200 transportation vehicles.¹⁴⁴ Bus drivers are regularly updated on safety and training.¹⁴⁵ LPVEC members saved a collective \$2.1 million in 2008 when compared with the lowest bids of private contractors of districts with approximately the same number of students.¹⁴⁶

Sources: [Educational Service Agencies in Massachusetts: Building Capacity in Small School Districts](#), [Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative: Comprehensive Annual Financial Report](#)

New Jersey: : Educational Services Commission (ESCNJ)

ESCNJ works with 50 districts to provide transportation for special, public, and vocational students.¹⁴⁷ Every year, ESCNJ hosts a transportation meeting to review any changes to transportation laws and to share best practices for safely transporting students with special needs.¹⁴⁸ ESCNJ estimates that participating districts saved a collective \$22 million in transportation costs from 2010 to 2017.¹⁴⁹

Source: [Shared Services Resource Guide: 2018-2019](#)

Food/Meals

Pennsylvania: Cornwall-Lebanon School District and Northern Lebanon School District

The Cornwall-Lebanon School District and the Northern Lebanon School District have established a shared food service arrangement to save on costs.¹⁵⁰ As presented in the section above, this arrangement has saved the two districts a combined \$100,000.¹⁵¹ These savings created an improved work environment for all food service employees, resulting in less employee turnover.¹⁵² In addition, the combined purchasing helps make food costs more affordable.¹⁵³ Both districts also share ideas on common health practices in food service.¹⁵⁴

Source: [Driving More Money into the Classroom: The Promise of Shared Services](#)

Technology

Ohio: The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC)

To increase student achievement, OAC developed the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative-Personalized Learning Network (OAC-PLN), which serves 27 school districts in eastern and southern Ohio.¹⁵⁵ The OAC-PLN provides grades 6–12 with blended learning and dual enrollment opportunities.¹⁵⁶ The OAC-PLN has helped address student equity issues, learning environments, and student access to computing devices, and it has helped students achieve their academic goals.¹⁵⁷ OAC has a pooled purchasing arrangement for acquiring technology equipment, which has increased its capacity for online learning and improved its technology infrastructure.¹⁵⁸ This arrangement has saved OAC districts \$260,000 in technology equipment.¹⁵⁹

Sources: [Ohio Appalachian Collaborative: Personalized Learning Network Outcome Evaluation](#), [Rural Education Collaboratives: A Closer Look: The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative](#)

Colorado: The San Luis BOCES

The San Luis BOCES, which includes 14 rural school districts, was awarded a grant from the Colorado Education Initiative to purchase iPads and other devices to pilot a blended learning initiative.¹⁶⁰ Because districts in the San Luis BOCES are isolated and often lack access to resources, especially teachers, implementing a blended learning model helps students access the instruction they need to improve outcomes and enhances the districts' technology infrastructure.¹⁶¹ For example, many students in these rural districts do not have internet access and having iPads with preloaded lessons has allowed them to work on assignments from home. Teachers and students also use the iPads to access Edmodo, a website for sharing assignments and collaborating online.¹⁶²

Source: [School District Partnerships Help Colorado K-12 Blended Learning Take Flight](#)

Nebraska: Educational Service Units Coordinating Council

The ESU Coordinating Council, consisting of Nebraska’s 17 educational service units, provides cost-saving statewide technology support through a memorandum of understanding. The support includes the infrastructure for a statewide virtual network, virtual reality equipment to be used in instructional lessons, and other technology hardware and resources. Other technology-based statewide services provided by the council include upgrading of firewalls, training on using Zoom, and trainings on cybersecurity.

Source: Direct communication with Deb Paulman, Educational Service Unit 16 Administrator, July 17, 2020.

Key Takeaways

As these state examples demonstrate, shared services models can help districts save on a variety of school infrastructure costs. Locally managed cooperative purchasing programs may help districts save on items such as office supplies, athletic and custodial equipment, and energy. Districts also may combine purchasing power to save on the costs of student meals. For school districts struggling with transportation costs, a shared services model with a transportation system may be a viable option. Benefits can extend beyond cost-sharing; both transportation examples in this section regularly update their drivers on safety standards. Shared services also may help districts save on costs associated with technology infrastructure, which may allow for blended learning and other distance learning opportunities for students in remote areas.

Implementation and Sustainability

Although a shared services model may help rural districts ease financial distress, provide educational services, and distribute resources, the model’s success largely depends on how districts and states implement and sustain their efforts. The resources reviewed in this section highlight several themes on the steps that rural districts and states may take to implement and sustain a shared services model. These themes include:

- Establishing an accountability/data system
- Involving community/support organizations
- Identifying champions/leaders
- Creating a common agenda
- Starting small and scaling up
- Reviewing district rules and regulations

Establishing an Accountability/Data System

Four articles discussed establishing an accountability and/or data system in relation to the implementation and sustainability of shared services. For instance, Broton and colleagues (2009) conducted a literature review examining strategies that rural school districts in Minnesota may leverage to help address rural-specific challenges. In terms of strategies for a shared services model, the authors state that an accountability framework that sufficiently documents activities and conducts periodic assessments is essential to the future planning of collaborative efforts.¹⁶³ Enerson (2009) discusses the steps the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives took to make their collaborative efforts across the state more effective. One step highlighted is the need to establish a system of accountability that is not only consistent, but also has the capacity to effectively evaluate cost-sharing efforts.¹⁶⁴ For the accountability system to be successful, Enerson further states that SEA officials must have some level of involvement with benchmarking exercises, setting criteria, and deciding how cost-sharing efforts will be evaluated. OAC uses a shared measurement system to assess collective impact.¹⁶⁵ Its shared metrics include college and career readiness, highly effective teachers, and student achievement.¹⁶⁶ In a report from Policy Analysis for California Education, Timar and colleagues (2018) describe the outcomes of a successful rural collaborative learning network trial in California. For rural districts interested in establishing a collaborative network, the authors recommend developing a common, data-driven improvement process to help resolve shared problems of practice.¹⁶⁷

Involving Community/Support Organizations

Involving community members and support organizations was another common theme identified in this review, with three articles discussing the topic in terms of implementation and sustainability. In their literature review, Broton and colleagues (2009) state that seeking out potential sources of support is essential to the collaboration process. The authors recommend reaching out to local colleges, the SEA, or outside social service agencies to help provide technical support.¹⁶⁸ The authors also warn that it is imperative for these outside agencies to empower districts rather than create dependency.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, a report from Battelle for Kids (2016a) states that it is crucial to have the support of third-party organizations that can guide shared services and help make day-to-day decisions.¹⁷⁰ The Vermont Rural Partnership (VRP), which includes 17 member schools, also maintains that building strong relationships outside their member organization is essential.¹⁷¹ To build these community relationships, leadership must be open to the thoughts and concerns of their community, and develop ways for the community to connect to member schools, both in person and remotely.¹⁷²

Identifying Champions/Leaders

Identifying champions and leaders was a theme found across three articles. For instance, in VRP, school leaders are vital to the collaborative process and play a key role in how collaborative efforts are translated into the classroom.¹⁷³ Likewise, Broton and colleagues (2009) state that each district involved in a shared service program needs to identify a leader capable of earning the support of the faculty, school board, and community in the collaboration process.¹⁷⁴ The authors further state that these leaders are required to make a significant time commitment and must be willing to work with leaders from other districts.¹⁷⁵ Fox and Van Sant (2011) conducted focus groups with rural district superintendents and school board members in Colorado to determine their satisfaction level with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE).¹⁷⁶ In terms of interdistrict collaboration, the study found that cost-sharing efforts in the state were not as robust as CDE initially believed. One recommendation offered by the study is for interdistrict cooperation to be championed and led by the highest levels of state government, including the governor, commissioner of education, and state board of education.¹⁷⁷

Creating a Common Agenda

Creating a common agenda among member districts was a theme found across two articles. Broton and colleagues (2009) state that member districts must agree upon a common purpose for their shared services model, which may include addressing a specific problem shared by each district.¹⁷⁸ The OAC has created a common agenda by emphasizing college and career readiness, allowing them to stay focused and organized around a central goal.¹⁷⁹

Starting Small and Scaling Up

When implementing a shared services model, two articles recommend starting small and scaling up. For example, Peed and Wyant (2007) surveyed school district finance officers in North Carolina to better understand their various job functions.¹⁸⁰ The survey revealed that finance officers in smaller districts felt overworked and understaffed. To lessen this burden, the authors recommend that smaller districts share services to achieve economies of scale. The authors suggest starting with smaller operations, such as infrastructure support and purchasing, to show the benefits of shared services and get stakeholders on board.¹⁸¹ Similarly, VRP found that starting with small, high-need projects was a useful approach for showing stakeholders the impact of district collaboration and attaining buy-in.¹⁸²

Reviewing District Rules and Regulations

Reviewing district rules and regulations to identify whether they include impediments to interdistrict collaboration was a theme found in two articles. Fox and Van Sant (2011) state that districts interested in a shared services model should review district rules to identify potential

barriers to district cooperation.¹⁸³ Likewise, Deloitte (2005) reveals that states may have laws and regulations that inhibit the ability of districts to share resources.¹⁸⁴ In these cases, Deloitte (2005) recommends states consider legislative action to remove barriers to make shared services easier to achieve.¹⁸⁵

Recommendations for Next Steps

The Wyoming project team expressed interest in learning additional details about the structure, operations, services, and finances of shared services models in geographically and demographically similar states. Therefore, three follow-up steps are recommended to build on the information provided in this report:

1. Based on the information provided herein, the project team should identify states with geographic features and demographics similar to those of Wyoming for which additional exploration of shared services models should be conducted.
2. The project team should identify a set of probing questions related to structure, operations, services, and finances of shared services models, including questions specific to the models of the states selected for additional exploration.
3. In Year 2 of the Wyoming shared services pilot project (2020–21), the Region 11 Comprehensive Center should conduct interviews and additional information-gathering activities to better understand the structure, operations, services, and finances of shared services models in states of interest to the planning team.

The exploration activities proposed above, in combination with other project activities, will further inform the development of recommendations for a shared services pilot or other ideas to increase the efficiency of and access to shared services in Wyoming.

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