



ESA Spotlight Series

Perspectives

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Strategic Partnerships

In July 2017, AESA members that attended AESA's Summer Leadership Conference investigated the value of strategic partnerships. As a follow-up on this topic, this Perspectives, we asked AESA writer, John Fitzgerald, to dig a little deeper into ESA Partnerships that have an established track record of success.

We are spotlighting two ESAs in this article: Grant Wood Area Education Agency, Cedar Rapids, IA and East Bay Educational Collaborative, Warren, RI.

Agencies find benefit in strategic partnerships

Some partnerships are better than others, and a strategic partnership between a service agency and a provider that has a focused goal and clearly stated expectations can benefit everyone involved.

Such partnerships were the focus of the 2017 AESA Summer Leadership Conference. Several agencies, such as the Grant Wood Area Education Agency in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and the East Bay Educational Collaborative in Warren, Rhode Island, have entered into extremely beneficial partnerships.

Grant Wood Area Education Agency, Cedar Rapids, IA

Twelve years ago, GWAEA partnered with the New Teacher Center at the University of California-Santa Cruz "to create a comprehensive system to support a new teacher mentoring program," wrote Lisa Wilson, Programs Services Administrator at GWAEA in an email.

While GWAEA offers mentoring and induction support for new teachers, Wilson said, NTC's mission is to improve student learning by improving the effectiveness of new and experienced teachers as well as school leaders.

What started as a simple partnership now has evolved, Wilson said, to benefit both partners. Not only does GWAEA buy NTC's services, it also provides a learning lab for NTC to test tools and processes with NTC providing ongoing consultation, research and development.

The partnership has also brought connections to organizations and national foundations that support the work through grants. For example, this year GWAEA is working with the Oak Foundation Grant Pilot Study around Learner Variability to create "optimal learning environments" for students. Oak Foundation staff will be onsite at GWAEA three times this year to lead induction coaches in professional development.

Because of the NTC partnership, GWAEA also has access to large foundations interested in getting cutting edge research into the classroom, Wilson said. For example, we had the opportunity to receive training from experts in the field such as NeuroTeach training from Stanford University.

East Bay Educational Collaborative, Warren, RI.

Meanwhile, the East Bay Educational Collaborative has partnered with the Office of Naval Research to provide Essential Physics, a state-of-the-art STEM physics program that incorporates engineering and technology into teaching high school physics in schools supported by EBEC in Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts over the next three years.

The program provides each school with lab equipment as well as a complete curriculum, said Ronald Kahn, Director of Client Services and Science Specialist at EBEC. “We also train one teacher at each high school in how to use the curriculum and equipment, as well as another teacher so that when the physics teacher isn’t using the equipment, then the algebra or chemistry teacher can also use it,” Kahn said. The program is in 36 high schools, affecting 72 teachers.

While the program’s main goal is to get students interested in STEM careers and get them into college, Kahn added that the program has attracted the interest of many area businesses that are members of the Southeastern New England Defense Contractors Alliance (SENEDIA).

Attributes both partnerships have in common

Both Kahn and Wilson say their success can be replicated by other ESAs. It’s a sentiment shared by Susan Leddick, the president of PKR, Inc., and member of the AESA Foundation Board of Directors. She coordinated the summer conference program and has assisted many ESAs with strategic decisions.

Leddick said the key is for ESAs to be specific about their needs, each party’s responsibility and who is going to pay for what. “If you’re not clear, then expectations can get out of whack and the partnership can fall apart,” she said.

The first goal is for the agency to identify a real school or district need. There are times when vendors approach ESAs with a solution looking for a problem, Leddick said, which doesn’t create a sound basis for a successful partnership.

Specifying mutual responsibilities and clarifying a financial agreement are crucial as well, she said. “Sometimes agencies won’t understand the resource drain required for the partnership,” she said. ESAs need to make sure the partnership matches their business model.

Leddick added that it’s a good idea to research a potential partner to see if the organization has successfully partnered with an ESA similar in makeup to yours – for example, if it has worked only with large urban ESAs, then it might not be such a good match for a small rural ESA.

Success breeds success, and both these programs are growing.

“Broadening our sphere of influence and inviting in other partners to the work supports our goal of long-term sustainability,” Wilson said.