



ESAs Meet the COVID Challenge

This series of articles feature the many ways AESA's members have helped their local partners meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Power of Nine

There is power in numbers. And in Washington State, the number is nine.

Specifically, the state's nine educational service districts (ESDs) that work together as a network known as the Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD). In conjunction with the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, AESD provides services to public and private school districts throughout the state on a regional basis. Although the network is a crucial link all the time, never was the power of its collaboration more apparent than in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

AESD's members, in conjunction with the state, were able to provide a range of resources to districts statewide that helped them weather the challenges of the pandemic and prepare them for the continuing challenges ahead. The network's impact was so important that the Washington legislature approved an additional \$9 million in funding per year for the ESDs and their network in its just approved budget for 2021-23.

Jessica Vavrus, Executive Director of the AESD/OSPI Network, said the increased funding was due to the legislature's recognition of the work the network had done during the pandemic.

"We did not go into this session advocating for anything," Vavrus said. "The legislators trust us. We have good relationships. They know that a state department can't do it all. It's about supporting those who can."

The specific allocations include one-time funding of \$3.3 million to reimburse the ESDs for unanticipated COVID costs; new funding of \$1.3 million to support regional school safety

centers; an increase of \$5.5 million per year (double the previous amount) to support school nursing services, especially in the state's smallest districts; and \$2.1 million per year to provide educational technology consultation, training and procurement.

The AESD had several major initiatives to assist districts during the pandemic. As uncertainty mounted during the early weeks, the network collected questions from individual districts using an online survey and forwarded them to the state Superintendent of Public Instruction's Office so they could be answered in a timely manner. The network also helped set up a biweekly webinar with the state superintendent and individual districts to facilitate communication between the districts and the state. The webinars have been so successful that the superintendent plans to continue them, Vavrus said.

As districts scrambled to find personal protective equipment and supplies during the first months of the pandemic, the network used its collaborative clout to purchase \$8 million in supplies and distribute them to districts.

"We would rather not be in this business," Vavrus said. "But there was a need. We filled a gap."

When schools across the state closed in spring 2020, another immediate need was to figure out how to move instruction online. AESD again stepped up by partnering with experts to offer seminars on virtual instruction – how to set it up and keep it going, how to engage students and how to modify curriculum. Last summer, the network also put together presentations on virtual learning management systems and how to select the best one to fit individual districts.

AESD will use some of its increased state funding to continue that initiative and create more detailed, intensive learning experiences for educators, focused on "deep dives" into best practices in virtual instruction. The funding comes as the state has recognized the network's ability to help individual districts within a region improve instruction and curriculum, Vavrus said.

In addition, the legislature provided significant additional funds to recognize and support work that is not directly tied to the pandemic. Part of the new funding will help AESD continue to work with districts on school safety, invest in more school nursing services and also support the network's work with students transitioning from juvenile detention facilities back into public education. The increased funding reflects the state's realization that the nine (9) ESDs are doing "such good work" and want to see them continue it, Vavrus said.