

## **Education Leaders Meeting (ELM) V**

Wednesday, November 12, 2008

Bismarck, ND

### ***“Charting the Future of Public Education in North Dakota Through Regional Education Associations II”***

#### ***Meeting Summary***

##### **Proposed Meeting Goals:**

- To receive and discuss information presented by legislators, governmental officials and others on the studies, reports and recommendations of the various consultants, task forces, commissions and legislative committees on their work regarding issues affecting REAs;
- To review and update the ND REA Strategic Plan and Vision;
- To discuss the current educational and political environment in North Dakota as it may affect the future role of REAs; and
- To identify the priorities of REAs that focus their future role in providing quality education services to the citizens of North Dakota.

##### **Proposed Meeting Products:**

- A shared knowledge and understanding of the studies, reports and recommendations of the various consultants, task forces, commissions and legislative committees on their work regarding issues affecting REAs;
- A shared agreement on the current status of the ND REA Strategic Plan and Vision;
- A shared understanding of the current educational and political environment in North Dakota as it may affect the future role of REAs: and
- An inventory of the priorities that will focus REAs for their future role in providing quality education services to the citizens of North Dakota.

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##### **Participants**

Jodi Arndorfer, Kyle Christensen, David Richter, David King, Steven Peters, Myron Jury, Jennifer Carlson, Dean Rummel, Lois Myran, Roger Abbe, Jennifer Johnson, Kathy Ellingson, Mike Kraft, Wilfred Volesky, Brad Rinas, Mark Fleck, Tom Conlon, Cynthia Jelleberg, Steven Heim, Jeff Lind, Kyle Davison, Sandy Zahn, Mike Campbell, and Bob Marthaller.

*Note – All of the REAs had representatives present with the exception of the Mid-Dakota Education Association (MDEC), and Bob Marthaller attended as the non-voting liaison for the ND Department of Public Instruction.*

##### **Facilitated by**

The Consensus Council, Inc.

##### **Welcome and Introductions**

The participants were welcomed, and a brief round of self-introductions was completed.

## **Review of the Decision-making Process and Ground Rules**

The consensus-based decision-making process was reviewed and affirmed for use during the meeting. Additionally, the following list of ground rules were identified, discussed and adopted:

- It's your show.
- Everyone is equal.
- Respect each other's opinions and the time.
- Silence on decisions is agreement.

## **Review of Proposed Agenda and Meeting Materials**

The meeting agenda and materials were reviewed and accepted as presented.

Copies of the most recent iteration of the REA map (attached), prepared by the Department of Public Instruction, were distributed, and the participants were asked to review it and provide any feedback or corrections to Bob Marthaller.

The REA Contact Information Sheet was circulated, and participants were asked to review their information and make any necessary edits. An updated list will be included with the draft summary of this meeting.

### **The Current Environment and Perceptions:**

The participants received reports on the ND School Board Association's Consultant's report on REAs, the work of the REA Legislative Issues Committee (that included an update on the ND Legislature's Interim Education Committee), and the Commission on Education Improvement. The presenters and participants engaged in a questions-and-answer/discussion period following each presentation. Copies of all handouts accompany this summary.

### **The NDSBA REA Consultant's Report** - Jon Martinson, Executive Director, ND School Boards Association

Jon Martinson provided a printed copy of the final report to representatives of each REA present. He noted that the report is finalized and provides some very astute observations and recommendations regarding the current status and future potential of the REAs. Jon highlighted the following areas from the consultant's report:

- There are three (3) reasons why ND REAs have struggled for legitimacy, support and funding -
- Student Achievement – North Dakota's notion that there is no reason for change. Everything is "OK" (the state's achievement scores are average or above (nationally and regionally). The real situation and the problem(s) are not recognized, acknowledged and addressed. The "Lake Wobegone" perception needs to be changed.
  - Strong cultural values of local control – There is the pervasive concept of grassroots and local control. Although these are admirable values, they create their own set of challenges and support long standing suspicions that have become barriers to progress. Other ND services have regional structures. and they effectively provide services. They do not exhibit the

fragmented nature that education services do. The “red herring” issues of additional layers of bureaucracy and the suspicions between stakeholders and partners (DPI, NDSBA, NDEA, NDCEL, NDSSC, etc.) need to be overcome.

- Identifiable Mission - REAs have either not identified or clearly articulated the “one big thing” they are about – the true focus of their work. Priorities must be identified or assigned.

The study identified three (3) drivers for changes needed in education in ND -

- Improved Student Achievement – North Dakota is “above average” (just barely, and the scores have been flat for the past 15 years).
  - Improved Coordination of Education Services in North Dakota – A more effective framework and structure of coordination is needed in which the stakeholders and partners work together to address a broad array of issues including standards and curriculum.
  - North Dakota’s knowledge-based economy – Education is the foundational pillar of the Governor’s economic development initiatives and, as such, should command a primary level of attention and support from the state’s government and its citizens.
- The report presented three primary critiques of REAs -
    - The REAs do not have a clear structure and framework within which they can coordinate their efforts to address issues and provide services.
    - While the professional development activities of the REAs are commendable, they do not conform to the current best practice models especially lacking follow up coaching and mentorship programs for new and existing teachers.
    - North Dakota’s REAs have not been funded to a level that will allow them meet the challenges they face.

#### Discussion and Comments:

- As enrollments decline and REAs receive increasing levels of state funding to provide more services, there will be pressure from the legislature to have more control and accountability.
- The NDSBA is and has been a strong supporter of REAs.
- Partnerships between REAs and with other organizations need to identify mutual goals and project an image of collaboration for positive change – avoid criticisms, mixed messages and disharmony – promote and support open, honest communication at all times.
- The study was well done, complete and should be very helpful.
- No one knows for certain what impact the study may have on the 2009 legislative session. The study’s preliminary summary was presented to the Legislature’s Interim Education Committee. To date, no specific feedback has been received.
- The REAs have developed a certain level of influence and a powerful voice with legislators as demonstrated by their testimony to the Interim Education Committee regarding the REA bill draft and the Committee’s response.
- There is no REA legislation right now. The Interim Education Committee does not have a bill (the bill draft was not moved out of committee), and that committee will not meet again. Any potential REA legislation (besides an

appropriation which will be presented through DPI) will have to be initiated through the legislators themselves.

- DPI and the legislature should be more involved. The REAs have been “thrown” to local school districts to make them work.
- The proposed \$3 million appropriation will not be sufficient to allow REAs to provide the types of services outlined in the Picus report.
- Not everyone agrees on what “the one big thing” may be. The challenge is to meet common needs while allowing flexibility for diverse members/school districts.

#### The REA Legislative Issues Committee – Kyle Davison, Chair, REA Legislative Issues Committee

Kyle Davison provided a brief overview of the history, background and process used by the Legislative Issues Committee (LIC). All participants received a handout that identified the position statements developed by the LIC, reviewed and approved by the local REA governing boards, and presented to the Interim Education Committee. It was noted that the recommendations adopted and presented do not represent the need for any substantive changes in the current ND Century Code regarding REAs (see LIC handout – attached).

The LIC identified eight (8) issues (see attached LIC materials) that were of concern to the respective REAs concerning the draft legislation and LIC and REA members provided testimony regarding them to the Interim Legislative Committee.

Because the Interim Legislative Committee did not move the draft REA bill out of committee, no REA bill exists at this time. This does not mean that a new bill cannot be initiated or the previous one re-initiated, and the process during the coming legislative session should be monitored closely.

#### Discussion and Comments:

- It could be viewed as positive that the legislators drafted a bill, whether REAs supported it or not. It indicates continued interest and support. They were open to and interested in the REA testimony and concerns. It was constructive because it encouraged discussion and allowed the REAs the opportunity to provide feedback.
- There are some legislators questioning why REA membership should not be mandatory.
- REA funding will be addressed through the DPI appropriation bill. In the past, funding was at least partially based on contingency dollars. The current plans do not include any contingency dollars.

#### The Commission on Education Improvement - Lt. Governor, Jack Dalrymple, Chair, ND Commission on Education Improvement

Lt. Governor Dalrymple made the following general comments:

- The administration is working very hard on many issues including the completion of the Commission on Education Improvements (CEI) report and the state budget.

Although this is a very busy time, it is an opportune time to talk about the issues with representatives of the REAs.

- CEI's logic regarding their recommendations on REAs is complex and involved. The conclusions are born out of necessity - the state needs REAs..... without them there will be serious gaps in meeting service needs.
- The Picus report has established a level of school funding necessary to achieve adequacy. That is, additional funds are needed to create a system that is capable of doubling the overall performance/proficiency of North Dakota's students—i.e., moving ND students from 37% to 74% proficiency on the NAEP.
- There remains some disagreement about how the state's students should be evaluated. It appears that students are doing better under the state's assessment, but the CEI is satisfied that we are capable of improving performance/proficiency by any standards.
- The system will need time to achieve the performance improvements recommended by the CEI.
- The Picus report recommends a significant increase in the level of funding for education in the state to reach the bar of performance/proficiency that has been established. The amount or level of funding is not the entire story. Funds need to be spent properly – on the right things.
- The Picus report noted that North Dakota must address 20 areas. The EIC believes that some of these areas do not require immediate attention, while others are critical.

Although the CEI's report is not yet finalized, the Lt. Governor shared the following preliminary conclusions and recommendations:

- Professional Development – North Dakota needs to encourage more professional development activities within the schools or within groups of schools. This approach would support the national best practices model that encourages collaborative work between schools and teachers.
- Instructional Coaching – Instructional coaching produces positive results. 3 or 4 pilot efforts will be recommended, and some of these may be addressed from an REA or regional perspective.
- Expansion of Mentorship Programs - The proper mentorship of new teachers offers the greatest potential for return on investment. Grants to initiate and support this effort should be awarded, and many of the rural areas may be best served by the REA model.
- Increase Availability of Tutor Services – While a certain amount of tutoring is being provided in some school districts, the CEI wants to see a formal focus and process on these services, especially in grades K through 3. Schools will be expected to meet an established level of tutoring staff. Because of the FTE allocations, many small schools may have to pool their resources to provide this type of programming. This may be an option for REAs.
- Raise the Performance Level of College/Work Bound Students – A 3<sup>rd</sup> year of math and science should be added to the graduation requirement. This may significantly impact smaller schools and will have implications regarding its delivery, and a successful response may involve school cooperation through REAs.

- Improved Student Assessments – A Statewide (12<sup>th</sup> grade) summative assessment should be implemented. This will be a nationally recognized instrument. (ACT-SAT-Work Keys) that will help to evaluate the core curriculum and determine its effectiveness over time.
- Ready for College/Ready for Work –All students in the state, rural or urban, should receive an education that adequately prepares them for their next step on the career ladder (continued education or entry into the workforce).
- \$3 Million (hard money) for REAs – The appropriation for REAs will likely be built directly into the foundation funding formula and will likely be based on the per pupil (grades 7-12) levels.

The Lt. Governor noted that there are many other secondary questions about managing and structuring REAs, but the approach for now is to provide the needed funds and monitor how they function and how effectively they are able to meet the service needs of the students. The CEI is uncertain how important issues such as autonomy (hiring and firing), and governance/board structure are and it wants input on these issues. There continues to be some skepticism regarding REAs, their relevance and value. REAs need to clarify their role and demonstrate their value. REAs clearly represent a politically acceptable alternative to consolidation. The Lt. Governor requested REA support and involvement in the coming legislative session at a much higher level than during previous sessions. The CEI has chosen a “go slow” approach to the Picus recommendations that will allow time for the recommendations to be implemented and assessed with as little “push back” as possible. Even if all of the funds the CEI recommends are provided and allocated by the legislature, getting the job done will be a challenge.

#### Discussion and Comments:

- Legal recognition/authority is a stumbling block and may become more critical as services and funding expand. This may have to be bypassed at this time to avoid “muddying the waters” relative to funding, but it will need to be addressed at some point in the future.
- Holding contracts raises concerns from a number of quarters (legislators, NDEA, etc.), but there are existing models within the state and others, including special education and the establishment of a non-profit corporation, that could be considered.
- Allocation of funds based on a per student formula does not address the needs of the smaller (in total student numbers) REAs. There is a cost differential and efficiency difference between the REAs with larger student numbers and those with smaller student numbers. Perhaps a graduated formula (base rate differences at below 5,000 students and above) would be an option.
- The 7-12 approach would not support the K-6 and K-8 schools that are members in several of the REAs. Additionally, it would not support a K-3 focus on tutoring.
- An integrated plan and structure for REAs would be ideal. This would allow funding to be allocated based specifically on what the REAs are tasked to do. The desire is to have REAs be a comprehensive service delivery system on a voluntary basis, but mandatory membership may be included in future considerations.
- The “opt-in/opt-out” principle has been essential to the development and functioning of the REAs. This allows school districts the flexibility they need to

identify and participate in the services and activities that are most relevant to their students and staff and supports collaboration within and between REAs.

- Although the proposal to fund REAs on a “hard money” basis represents a very positive approach, REAs need to know that this is a “base” level and that additional services and mandates must include the provision of additional, adequate funds. This may be addressed in a direct-funding approach or be covered in a fee-for-service format.

*[Note: The final meeting of the Commission on Education Improvement scheduled for Thursday, November 6, 2008, was cancelled due to weather conditions. That meeting has been rescheduled to:*

*Tuesday, November 18, 2008*

*9:00 a.m.*

*Roughrider Room – ND State Capitol*

*Although this is expected to be their final meeting, and the preliminary report has been drafted, the Commission is open to taking additional input. Anticipated final products include a bill that cites their policy recommendations, a bill that provides funding for REAs (DPI appropriations), and a bill that will address related taxation issues.]*

#### **The Current REA Strategic Plan and Vision:**

Tom Conlon, MREC Coordinator, led the participants in a review and discussion of the REA strategic plan and vision statement that included the process used to develop the plan, its approval by the respective REA governing boards, and a focused review of the direction it provides and the progress that has been made.

Copies of the REA Strategic Plan were included in the meeting materials (a copy is attached) and Tom made the following general observations:

- The plan’s vision and mission statements provide a clear expression of “what REAs are all about.”
- His review will be general and is not necessarily intended to be specific to any or all of the REAs.
- There are significant areas of overlap regarding the goal areas (i.e., goals 1, 2, 3 all focus in some way on collaboration).

Goal I –

Reviews of service models (best practices) have been conducted on a regional and national level. These activities have been open to all REAs and reports have been provided through the established communication processes. Existing initiatives, in some cases, reflect these “lessons learned.”

Goal II –

Collaboration is the hallmark of the efforts of REAs in North Dakota. Efforts have encompassed DPI, NDCEL, NDSSC, NDEA, NDSBA, teacher centers, and all school districts in the state. The success of REAs in securing grant funds and providing services is directly attributable to these partnering efforts.

Goal III –

Collaborative efforts have resulted in a higher level of efficiency and cost effectiveness. REAs are mutually supportive and open to sharing resources, ideas and talent. Two REAs (SCEC and SEEC) have actually merged.

Goal IV –

REAs have reached a level of cooperation with regard to the strategic plan, the Legislative Issues Committee, and coordinated testimony to the legislature and partner organizations. Efforts are active and ongoing regarding “getting the REA message out.”

Discussion and Comments:

- There are people and groups that have been involved with the REAs for a long time and have a good fundamental knowledge base of the history and activities of the REA effort. At the same time, there are newer members and participants that lack that knowledge. This difference in levels of REA history and expertise needs to be recognized and addressed on a consistent basis. Coordinators, lead administrators and governing board members need to have the opportunity to be better oriented.
- Efforts to identify, assess and implement as appropriate best practices models should continue.
- Communication and contacts with and between coordinators and others are outstanding and will be critical to the continued progress and success of REAs. Coordinators have been encouraged to be systematic in communication efforts to governing board members and administrators.
- REAs should continue to offer opportunities without requirements.
- Legislators and local governing boards are reluctant to provide increased levels of funding without a systematic plan for accountability based on improved student achievement. Accountability and increased funding have been and will continue to be essential.

**Identification of the Goals and Priorities of North Dakota’s REAs:**

The participants engaged in a facilitated discussion of the current educational and political environment in an effort to identify the issues, activities and potential priorities that the representatives could collectively agree represent a focused, “out of the box” perspective (blueprint) of the future role of REAs in providing quality education services to the citizens of North Dakota.

The participants identified the following issues as items for additional discussion:

- How do we get legislation drafted? Who does it? Who makes the contacts with legislators? Should this go through the LIC?
- What about the equity payment? Is that a base payment? What are the next steps for deciding this and moving it forward?
- Without a guarantee of the \$3 million, we should not talk about other issues in the legislature. If we get that funding, we should talk about TFFR and ability to hire and fire, etc.
- We should revisit the idea of statewide coordination

- What's the "one big thing" that REAs do, and what are the dreams/needs we have long term? Does statewide coordination play a role in this? DPI is supportive of REAs, but unable to commit at this time (cautious) to being a statewide coordinator. DPI is interested in being more than regulatory? DPI wants to be a collaborator. Is the "one big thing" the development of a model all REAs could follow?
- I question whether we have authority to draft legislation or request statewide coordination.
- What if there were zero dollars? School districts functioned as REAs before there was any funding for REAs. Would schools still join without that funding? Without funding would the capacity of REAs be diminished?
- Should there be a role for NDSBA for moving decisions forward? Other discussions have happened but really have gone nowhere. There has been concern about REAs being subsumed by other organizations, co-opted by them, having too much baggage and about REA independence.
- Why can't we just start doing special education? Job loss is a fear of some of the Special Ed Directors; same issues have been present with ITV people. There is no law requiring this change.

The participants agreed that the issues and items were too interrelated to effectively prioritize them. They chose to review the Legislative Issues Committee's (LIC) platform in the light of any changes or concerns that have developed as a result of changes in the "environment" since its approval.

The process of LIC platform approval was revisited and the participants were advised that the platform, as it stands, does not require any legislative action (this is consistent with the Interim Education Committee's actions – did not adopt the LIC positions and did not develop, draft or endorse an REA bill).

Discussion resulted in the following agreements:

**AGREEMENT:** REAs desire a better system of hiring, firing and contracting. Each group will discuss the idea of non-profit and/or political subdivision designation with their respective governing bodies and area legislators; this issue will also be reviewed and discussed at LIC meeting today.

**AGREEMENT:** REAs trust that the \$3 million will be appropriated and do not want to do anything that would jeopardize this funding. Within this context, individual REAs may address their concerns regarding the actual funding formula (i.e., per pupil, small school, large school, equity vs. adequacy) with their administrators, governing boards and legislators.

The participants noted and reiterated the major issues that were shared with the Lt. Governor today:

- Concern about per student vs. base plus per pupil – equity does not necessarily mean equality but could mean fairness – the potential of a leveling formula.
- Concern over the focus of the funding formula on only grades 7 through 12.
- The clarification that the \$3 million appropriation is intended to address how REAs "currently operate" with the need for a method to provide additional

funding for additional responsibilities (potentially coming through the school districts and collected as fees-for-services).

- The need for a long-term approach to the structure, governance and legal status of REAs.

**AGREEMENT:** REAs are here to support the work of the CEI; if we are not satisfied with those decisions, the REAs can discuss and make recommendations through reconvening the LIC; Kyle is Chair. Particular attention needs to be paid to the issue of clarifying the grades 7-12 issue.

**AGREEMENT:** REAs support leaving the governing board structure the way it is (elected officials only). If the CEI recommends something else, the LIC will reconvene to discuss. It is helpful to add teachers to task forces or in other ways to create knowledge and buy-in. (likely that NDEA would support more involvement). Participants were directed to [www.seec.k12.nd.us](http://www.seec.k12.nd.us) to review how the SEEC has structured the organization to define roles of the Governing Board members, Administrators and teachers rather than seek to change the law.

In response to questions raised by the NDSBA consultant's report on the need to identify the focus ("one big thing") of REAs, and the Lt. Governor's comments about some continued skepticism about REAs, the participants discussed and attempted to identify the defining principle that REAs in North Dakota should be known for.

Ultimately, the effort came full-circle and reinforced the work that has been done in the establishment of the strategic plan, the REA vision and REA mission statements. The participants agreed that a universal statement identifying a collaborative framework focus on student achievement with supportive sub-points that are more specific might be best for addressing these questions, such as:

**AGREEMENT:** The REAs are a framework for collaboration that supports and enhances student achievement through assisting all school districts with:

- Professional development
- Assessment/Data analysis
- School improvement
- Technology
- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Tutoring

What service can't a school district live without? Is it something I can't live without? Is it something more I can get?

Does each REA have a different big thing?

The participants were reminded that it does take time to change, but the REA initiative has been bold and accomplished a great deal in a relatively short period of time. REAs, legislators and partner organizations need to recognize how far REAs have come (geographical coverage, 98% of school districts are members, new initiatives and ideas,

efficiencies of scale and resource pooling, grants received and money provided legislatively) and focus on the potential for the future.

### **Summary Comments**

- It was very good, informative, thought-provoking meeting
- Thanks for inviting me.
- After 5 ELM meetings, I realize that REAs are progress in motion.
- We've come a long way baby!
- As a newbie, I've learned a lot and I want to be a part of this in the future.
- Thanks Consensus Council for making all the arrangements. It was good to have the Lt. Gov here. We need to talk to our legislators. The reality is that most legislators are from bigger cities; so if smaller REAs want more base funding, they need to talk to them.
- This was my first meeting. I intended just to listen, but I failed. I couldn't be quiet.
- It was my first meeting, too. I was able to take my blinders off, and it was good to hear other experiences.
- As a former educator I need to tell you that this is not a time to be complacent. Let's move forward. "Yes we can!"
- I would echo the importance of having the Lt. Governor present. We do have some influence, and it was nice to see that he was interested in our input. It was interesting that we talked and talked and came back to essentially our previously identified mission, vision and goals. This is reassuring.
- This was my first meeting. I learned a lot. My greatest concern is making the \$3 million a reality.
- This was my first meeting, too. I thought that the panel presentations put a lot into context for me.
- The meeting was educational, helped me to make linkages and develop new contacts. I am hopeful and inspired.
- WOW! This was my first meeting. I learned a lot. What I know is that we're all working for our kids.
- I've been to 4 or 5 meetings. My perspective is that we may be moving slowly, but we're still moving, and we're on the right road.
- I woke up at 3 a.m. thinking about this, and it's been a great day. We do rehash now and again, but we are making progress.
- I have attended all 5 ELMs. I feel that this one was more free-flowing with more positive conversations. We are making progress and moving forward.
- This smaller group, without other organizations present, led to better discussion.
- We came up with the big things; who we are/what we do and support of student achievement. Now, we need to get that message out across the state.
- I appreciated the good spirit of cooperation.
- This was my second meeting. My head was spinning after the first meeting. This was more relaxed, and I am happy to bring this information back. It will help to bring this back to our districts – we are facing lots of turnover in our REA.
- This was my first meeting, and I also failed. I was going to listen only, but was moved to be a contributor. I am reassured about REAs.

- This was my first meeting too. I enjoyed the opportunity to be here and participate. It was beyond my expectations. “I’m the proud parent of 2 kids who attend school in an REA.”
- The most productive ELM yet!

LIC Committee will meet following this meeting.

**Adjourn**

The meeting was adjourned by the consensus of the group with best wishes for safe travel home and for the holidays.

**Next Meeting**

Thursday, December 18, 2008

Coordinators

IVN - Pre-scheduled K-12 Sites\*

10:00 a.m. to Noon CT

Working Draft