

ISDs/RESAs: Rising to the Challenge of Michigan's Best Future

The Opportunity

Schools throughout Michigan are struggling with strained budgets, decreasing enrollments, and responding to an increasing diversity of needs. As Michigan's children continue to be challenged by changing economic circumstances and higher expectations for achievement, the goal remains to have Michigan graduates excel on a regional, national and global level.

ISD/RESAs have an opportunity to better use our collective resources and wisdom as educational leaders, including the strengths that lie in our diversity, to enable our state to substantially improve educational attainment for all of its students – Michigan's best future demands no less of us and we must rise to the challenge.

Current Reality

Intermediate School Districts/Regional Education Service Agencies (ISDs/RESAs) exist to serve the common needs of their constituent local districts, with the primary mission of fostering efficiency and innovation while optimizing the use of public funds. By virtue of these shared services, ISDs/RESAs possess substantial resources in human expertise and operational capabilities that are beneficial to their constituent districts and the students they serve. In service to local districts, ISD/RESAs are already well-versed in alignment for efficiency and innovation.

Michigan's best future depends upon our educational system leveraging from strength – strength that already exists within the ISD/RESA system. Using well what is already in place and finding ways to increase shared services is the best way forward.

Bedrock Principles

When these principles are put into action, Michigan can offer a cost-effective—and world-class—education for its students.

- 1) **Coordinating Core Services**—Core services include education and support services that are essential for every student and community to receive. The form and method of delivery is determined locally by each ISD/RESA in concert with its constituent local districts.
- 2) **Increasing Capacity**—All ISDs/RESAs must have the resources they need to provide the core services required by local districts and communities. By increasing access to the diverse pool of high-value resources available throughout the ISD/RESA system for all Michigan's students and staff, local school districts can be empowered to better address their core mission of producing highly educated graduates. This increase in educational capacity of local school districts, through improved access to, and utilization of, statewide

ISD/RESA system resources, is the single most powerful strategy that can be used to maximize the return on educational investment in the state.

- 3) **Creating Efficiencies**—Through shared services and collaborative arrangements ISDs/RESAs continually seek models of efficiency. The biggest challenge is to do more, where appropriate, in the areas of service sharing and collaboration. The future is not about developing a whole new mindset about collaboration or efficiency – it’s about expanding and enhancing the existing operational models of ISDs/RESAs for maximum advantage to Michigan.
- 4) **Leveraging from Strength**— By building on the existing successes of collaboration among all ISD/RESAs throughout the state, all of Michigan’s students will have increased opportunities to achieve improved academic outcomes. Michigan’s best future depends on increased cooperation among all players in the educational system, with ISDs/RESAs being one of the leadership organizations.

Action Recommendations

- 1) **Coordinate Core Services.** For ISDs/RESAs to remain independent, locally-responsive entities, each ISD/RESA must have in place a formal plan describing how essential core services are delivered. The presently identified 10 regions of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) can enhance cooperative planning and regional service sharing to assure the delivery of core services among the present intermediate school districts.
- 2) **Increase Capacity.** The current system of ISDs/RESAs in Michigan has served the state well, principally by effectively providing high quality needed services in consultation with constituent districts. Yet, the educational landscape in Michigan, and nationally, is very different from what it was even five years ago. Local education is more influenced by developments in state and federal policy than it was previously. At the same time, improvements in technology mean that ISDs/RESAs and the local districts are much more linked, and much less geographically isolated, than in earlier decades. An education system for the future must respond to these changes. It is important to note that the shared services approach recommended for non-instructional (i.e., “back-office”) operations is equally valid when applied to instructional services and support to schools identified for improvement.
- 3) **Create Efficiencies.** Lack of resources may limit ISDs/RESAs from meeting the expressed needs of their constituents. A major strategy for addressing these limitations is service sharing and collaborative arrangements among ISDs/RESAs that reduce duplication of effort and establish efficiencies in operation; such as, an ISD/RESA or a team of ISD/RESAs leading a regional or statewide initiative. Efforts toward merging or elimination of ISD/RESAs would be best left to local decision makers who already have legal avenues to affect mergers, annexations, and disorganizations. If local entities decide to move in this direction of their own volition, the Michigan Department of Education could offer assistance.

- 4) **Leverage from Strength.** Michigan's statewide ISD/RESA network has a significant amount of existing capability that can be used to support and assist the local districts with the educational challenges of today and in the future. This capacity can be used most effectively when cooperation and sharing of expertise is fostered through strong, trusting, enduring relationships. Some of the relationships exist today but many more need to be developed.

Recommendations for Future Work and Study

- 1) Use the existing ISD/RESA school improvement process as a model for regional planning that includes business and educational leaders as well as community organizations to help identify the core services. Needs for shared services will naturally precipitate from this discussion.
- 2) Employ the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) as a discussion and process facilitator. In that role, it should create, maintain, and advertise an easily-accessible knowledge and data repository regarding success and failures achieved through this process. It should also continue its fine work of serving as a dissemination agent for ISD/RESA information while engaging other professional organizations.
- 3) MAISA members will continue to engage in regular, meaningful educator-to-educator discussions starting with existing services and program offerings as a fast-track way to increase adoption of proven solutions.
- 4) Convene a MAISA committee to review "Michigan's ISD Leaders for Educational Excellence" (May 2001) (a.k.a. "Essential Services Document") and update the definition of core services and make other recommended changes.
- 5) MAISA will develop a template for the creation of a periodic report to state policy makers highlighting shared services from each region and documenting proven results and the educational value that is delivered by ISDs/RESAs across the state.
- 6) Explore the adoption of common platforms for financial systems, student management, data warehousing and student instruction to facilitate service sharing among ISD/RESAs to support local districts.

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