

## Howard O’Cull: Consider replacing RESAs with market-based approaches (Daily Mail)



As state lawmakers probe for public education efficiencies, British journalist Edward Luce’s analogy about hacking through the Amazon forest is apt — “By the time we have proceeded a hundred yards, the undergrowth takes over.”

Indeed, West Virginia’s public education system is a jumble of entities typified by murky roles, functions and missions.

The tangle worsens because lawmakers established most of the state’s public education enterprise based on programs deemed to have meritorious intent as espoused by interest groups, governors or education officials.

Original agency mission or goals, however, often are diluted through the addition of corollary (usually under-funded) programs. Of course, interests and constituents served by agencies support most of the program add-ons.

This brings us the street talk concerning what will happen to Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs). Restructured, refocused, repurposed are bywords replacing “eliminated.”

The Justice Administration’s education reform bill would eliminate the agencies’ statutory underpinnings. There are no legislative appropriations for the eight agencies in the governor’s proposed budget. RESA spokespersons say the annual \$3.6 million legislative appropriation leverages \$20 million in grants and county-directed entrepreneurial services.

Not surprisingly, agency apologists avow RESAs are unitarily equipped to provide multi-county education services. Thus, disturbing the RESA setup means unequivocal loss of grants, diminished services for needy counties and loss of RESA “side services,” such as training of emergency first responders.

These pronouncements, status quo props for RESAs’ incremental changes (if any), box the discussion so that alternate combined service approaches are not even considered, especially a market-based approach for providing combined educational services.

The market-based approach, which actually recasts RESAs as central service delivery entities, could be accomplished over a three-year period. (Timelines could be expedited.)

During year one, county boards carefully craft listings of services that could be procured through RESAs or through arrangements with county board consortia. RESAs are

integral to these discussions since the agencies provide many combined services — and, as RESAs contend, have converted \$3.6 million to \$20 million for school districts.

During year two, RESAs list the combined services they could provide. Using the market model, however, county boards may work in consortia or seek combined services from other market-based entities.

Large scale combined service initiatives, which could involve arrangements between school board consortia, services procured through RESAs, or services secured by other providers, become operational in year three.

Using the market approach, those RESAs eliminating overhead, reconfiguring staffing and shedding unnecessary programming become competitive market-based service providers. State funds for RESAs becomes unnecessary.

Before any conniptions, market-based principles, although lacking classroom applications, would allow county boards to receive enhanced administrative, professional and service personnel staffing services.

Regretfully, declining enrollments jeopardize some public education jobs. Many displaced education employees simply can't be absorbed by other contracting school districts in the state.

County boards, however, could secure services of curriculum/instructional specialists, aides, teachers or administrators through a market approach that includes school board consortia, RESAs or other market providers.

In terms of the market approach, education officials and lawmakers cannot allow themselves to be stymied in formulating humane policy responses to jagged-edged questions, such as determination of benefits and similar considerations for personnel deployed to counties.

Finally, a market model also will illustrate that many combined services can be provided through state-level coordination — just like today's statewide RESA consolidated purchasing program.

Persistent student enrollment declines, a state economy in flux, an aging population and vagaries of a system commandeering 43 percent of the state's general revenue requires policymakers to consider what can be done rather than trying to preserve the status quo RESA setup.

The governor's "zeroing" legislative funds for RESAs and his proposed legislation give policymakers a valuable window to reconstitute regional services. RESAs need to prove and remain competitive with other county board service providers through market-based principles.

Let's not waste this opportunity through agency window-dressing. It is long past the time when the "quo has lost its status," as Laurence J. Peter aptly concludes in his studies of organizational dynamics.

Howard M. O'Cull, Ed.D. is executive director of the West Virginia School Board Association.

<http://www.wvgazettemail.com/daily-mail-commentary/20170301/howard-ocull-consider-replacing-resas-with-market-based-approaches---daily-mail#sthash.dsME3Oi8.dpuf>