

Educate ALL Children

A E A S ' G O A L S I N C E T H E B E G I N N I N G

Less than 30 years ago, many children in Iowa with physical or mental disabilities did not receive public educations. They were excluded from the classroom for a variety of reasons. In 1974, the Iowa legislature removed those barriers, and Congress soon pursued a similar goal with enactment of public law 94-142 in 1975. That law is now known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). The law requires schools to provide equal opportunities in education for all children, regardless of their disabilities.



children with mental and physical disabilities. This includes providing counseling and coaching to parents, teachers and administrators who work with these children.

Caring About Children's Learning

As a state representative, Senator Charles Grassley helped introduce and support the legislation creating the AEA system. Recently reflecting on the legislation, Sen. Grassley said, *"Before 1969, if you had a child with a mental handicap, you went to the superintendent and he sent you elsewhere. We had the movement toward providing special education with small schools unable to do it. Joint county superintendents were beginning to put together programs, but it was on an*

ad hoc basis – not a very studied way. We came upon the idea of abolishing the joint and county school systems because of inefficiencies in that approach. In most cases, service agencies were for special education, but there were other things local schools couldn't do, and soon enough, there were a number of ways the AEAs were helping with those things, too."

The reasons for maintaining a solid AEA system today are as valid now as they were when the AEAs were created a generation ago.

When Kareen Strumpel began teaching at Briggs Elementary School in Maquoketa, Iowa in 1969, her students had only a small number of well-worn library books gathered by the teachers who had previously taught in the room.

Says Kareen, *"When I compare the beginning years of my teaching to the last years of my teaching, I think of the many students who did not get any help for learning problems because there wasn't anything available. If I wasn't able to figure out for myself what special assistance a child needed,*

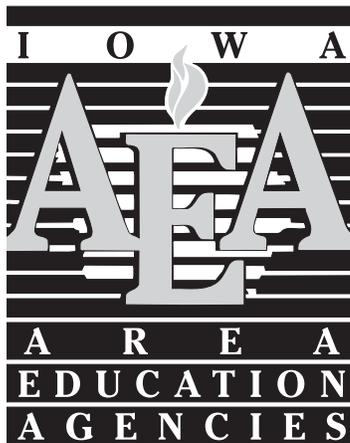
there was no one to go to for help. The only help available for children other than the classroom teacher was a clinical psychologist who was responsible for the entire county.

"After the Area Education Agency started working with our district, the education offered the students was more varied in content because there were films, books, videotapes, and consultants there to expand the classroom experiences available to students.

Area Education Agencies provide efficiency, excellence and equal opportunities for all learners in Iowa's schools

"Now there are people who will work with a classroom teacher to figure out how a child can best be helped... to help them develop their potential. How often I have wished that I could go back to the beginning and help those students who had passed through my classroom without receiving this extra boost."

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Since the beginning of AEAs, the agencies have devoted nearly 75 percent of their financial resources to providing assistance to

AEAs Provide Cost Efficiencies

From the start, the purpose of the AEAs was to make education service delivery more efficient. The AEAs

The AEAs devote nearly 75 percent of their financial resources to providing assistance to children with mental and physical disabilities.

constantly look for ways to share resources with multiple schools, thus making education more cost-effective in Iowa. This began with shared filmstrips, educational films and books routed to schools via agency-owned vans. These lending libraries continue to provide schools statewide with thousands of educational videos and books today, and the efficiency of the agency van delivery system continues to cost significantly less than delivery of materials through commercial delivery systems.

Over the years as technology has improved, the AEAs have served school districts with development of networking systems, email, and server connections to the Internet. AEAs negotiated and purchased licensing agreements providing software to school districts statewide. In 2002-03 the savings on this investment

was \$3.5 million. Using the Internet, students today can access vast repositories of historical pictures and age-appropriate articles using software purchased by the AEAs. (For more information about these resources, go to <http://www.iowaaeaonline.org>.) Most of the schools use Internet filtering systems purchased and distributed through local AEAs.

Approximately 300 school buildings currently participate in the AEAs' food cooperative purchasing group. Savings on food purchases of \$14 million exceeded \$2.5 million in 2002-03. The AEAs have also negotiated cooperative purchases on art, office, and janitorial supplies; paper; and audio /visual equipment.

Looking Toward The Future

When the Iowa Legislature enacted its new teacher quality laws, an AEA task force began working with superintendents and principals, helping them hone their supervisory and evaluator skills. At the request of the Department of Education, AEAs also put together the state's teacher mentor training program for beginning and new teachers.

The concept of educating all children and leaving none behind was the inspiration for the AEAs, and the agencies still actively work toward that goal. With enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB),



the AEAs are actively involved in helping schools meet this new challenge, and the Department of Education has asked AEAs to aid schools that have been identified in need of improvement.

Schools throughout the state face a stringent goal set by NCLB: 100 percent of Iowa's students must be grade-level proficient in math, reading and science by

Approximately one out of every eight children in Iowa schools has some type of disability.

2014. The AEAs have responded to this challenge by collaborating with local districts and providing professional development and educational collaboratives. AEAs are building teachers' skills at all grade levels.

Angel Melendez, superintendent of the Alburnett Community School District recently commented,

"We need the support and expertise of the AEA to respond to the challenges of No Child Left Behind."

Larry Williams, superintendent of the Sioux City Community School District has said, *"Any budget cut to the AEA system is a budget cut to K-12 education. It's as simple as that. We need the AEAs to provide quality educations for the children in this state."*

Tipping Point for AEAs?

Author Malcolm Gladwell describes how social systems or organizations can reach a critical tipping point when systems collapse or dramatic changes occur. Ron Fielder, current chair of the AEA Chief Administrators' group, says the AEA system may soon be facing a tipping point due to state budget cuts. *"As dollars are taken from the AEAs, the agencies are forced to lay off staff or make reductions through attrition. Each time funding diminishes, the quality of K-12 education in Iowa deteriorates a little more.*

We will ultimately reach a tipping point where the quality of education in Iowa could go downhill quickly. The problem is, will anyone be able to recognize soon enough when the cuts have gone too far? It's so much easier to take something apart than it is to put it back together again."