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Regional Education Associations In North Dakota: Perceptions Of REA Directors And School Superintendents

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REGIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATIONS IN NORTH DAKOTA: PERCEPTIONS
OF REA DIRECTORS AND SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

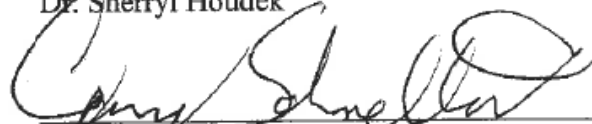for the degree of

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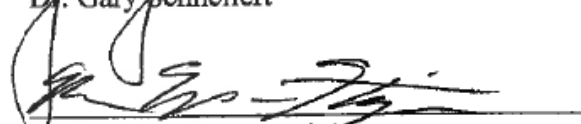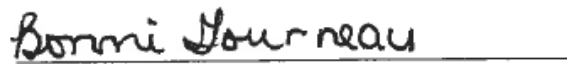
This dissertation, submitted by Jeffery E. Lind in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

Dr. Wayne Swisher
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

May 4, 2015
Date

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PERMISSION

Title   Regional Education Associations in North Dakota: Perceptions of REA Directors and School Superintendents

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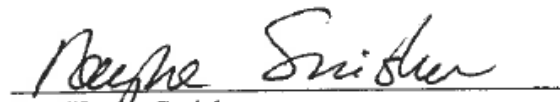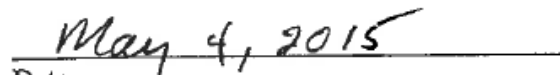   In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this university shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my dissertation work or, in her absence, by the chairperson of the department or the dean of the School of Graduate Studies. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this dissertation or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my dissertation.

                                           Jeffery E. Lind
                                           April 24, 2015

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the perceptions of North Dakota Regional Education Association (REA) directors and a sample of public school district superintendents regarding their REAs' delivery of educational services to North Dakota school districts. Qualitative research methods were used, relying primarily on interview data to review, analyze, and compare perceptions of REA directors and school superintendents. The research questions of this study were:

1. How do REA directors perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

2. How do school superintendents perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

3. What are the commonalities, similarities, and differences of REA director and superintendent perceptions of the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

Since their inception in 2001, REAs have evolved into an integral part of North Dakota's educational system. The majority of North Dakota school districts are members of an REA and are recipients of at least one REA service. This study sought perceptions from REA directors and a sample of North Dakota school superintendents. The perception data collected for this study indicated a generally positive view of REAs by all participants. Participants also perceived there to be issues that may have been impeding the improvement of REAs and their ability to grow as viable educational service providers in North Dakota.

Three thematic findings emerged from analysis of participant interview data. These were: (a) Professional development is perceived as a primary function of REAs, (b) REAs are leadership fragile, and (c) REAs operate in an unstable funding environment. Additionally, a grounded theory central phenomenon – Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous entity – emerged from the findings. Consequences associated with the central phenomenon were: (a) The impact of REAs varies by region; (b) REAs compete for resources; and (c) There are differences in the kind, intensity, and quality of services delivered by each REA.

Findings of this study will be of interest to scholars in the fields of educational policy making, implementation, and organization theory, to practitioners in state and local education agencies that have contact with REAs, and to REA directors and school superintendents.

(KEY WORDS: Educational Leadership, ESA, North Dakota REA, PK-12 Education, Professional Development)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade after Regional Education Associations (REAs) were first

introduced as a way for school districts to cooperate in the delivery of educational

services, REAs had become well-established state funded institutions in North Dakota.

The beginnings of North Dakota's modern REA system dates back to 2001 when, in an

effort to respond to the need of providing resources and services equitably to schools

within the state, North Dakota launched a system of cooperative arrangements among

school districts called "educational associations" governed by a joint powers agreement

(JPA; Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005).

What is an REA?

North Dakota Century Code defines an REA as "a group of school districts that

have entered a joint powers agreement that has been reviewed by the superintendent of

public instruction and verified as meeting the requirements of section 15.1-09.1-02"

(Regional Education Associations, 2013, N.D.C.C. § 15.1-09.1-01) of the N.D.C.C. A

more common definition of an REA is, "a group of school districts seeking to improve

their educational programs and services through cooperation and pooling of resources"

(Erhardt, 2011, para. 1). The NDREA has also described REAs as being typically

governed by a governing board comprised of a superintendent and elected school board

members or their designee. Typically, an administrative board (or executive committee)

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and a lead administrator "carry out the policies set by the Governing Board. Each REA employs a Director to provide leadership, coordinate programs and services, and manage the day-to-day operations of the association" (Erhardt, 2011, para. 2). "Each REA offers unique programs and services based on the needs of the region" (Erhardt, 2011, para. 3).

At the time of this report, REAs were active in all regions of the state; and since their inception, they have established the potential to reach nearly every student in North Dakota. According to the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI, 2012), there were eight REAs operating in North Dakota at the time of this study (Figure 1) with 96% of all public school districts in the state being members of an REA serving 99% of all public school students in the state (Table 1). The most recent NDDPI data available shows 174 school districts participating in REA programs. Additionally, only a small fraction of the total student population in North Dakota was enrolled in districts that were not REA members (NDDPI, 2013).

In 2011, all REAs in North Dakota began working toward offering common programs and services in the areas of professional development, technology support, data systems support, school improvement support, and curriculum enrichment. These five areas are identified by the state legislature (as shown in Table 2) as the minimum services REAs must make available to school districts (Regional Education Associations, 2013). This is the service structure directing present day REA operations. The statutory language in Chapter 15.1-09.1 of the North Dakota Century Code is silent on the specifics of service delivery, leaving these decisions to the discretion of each REA.
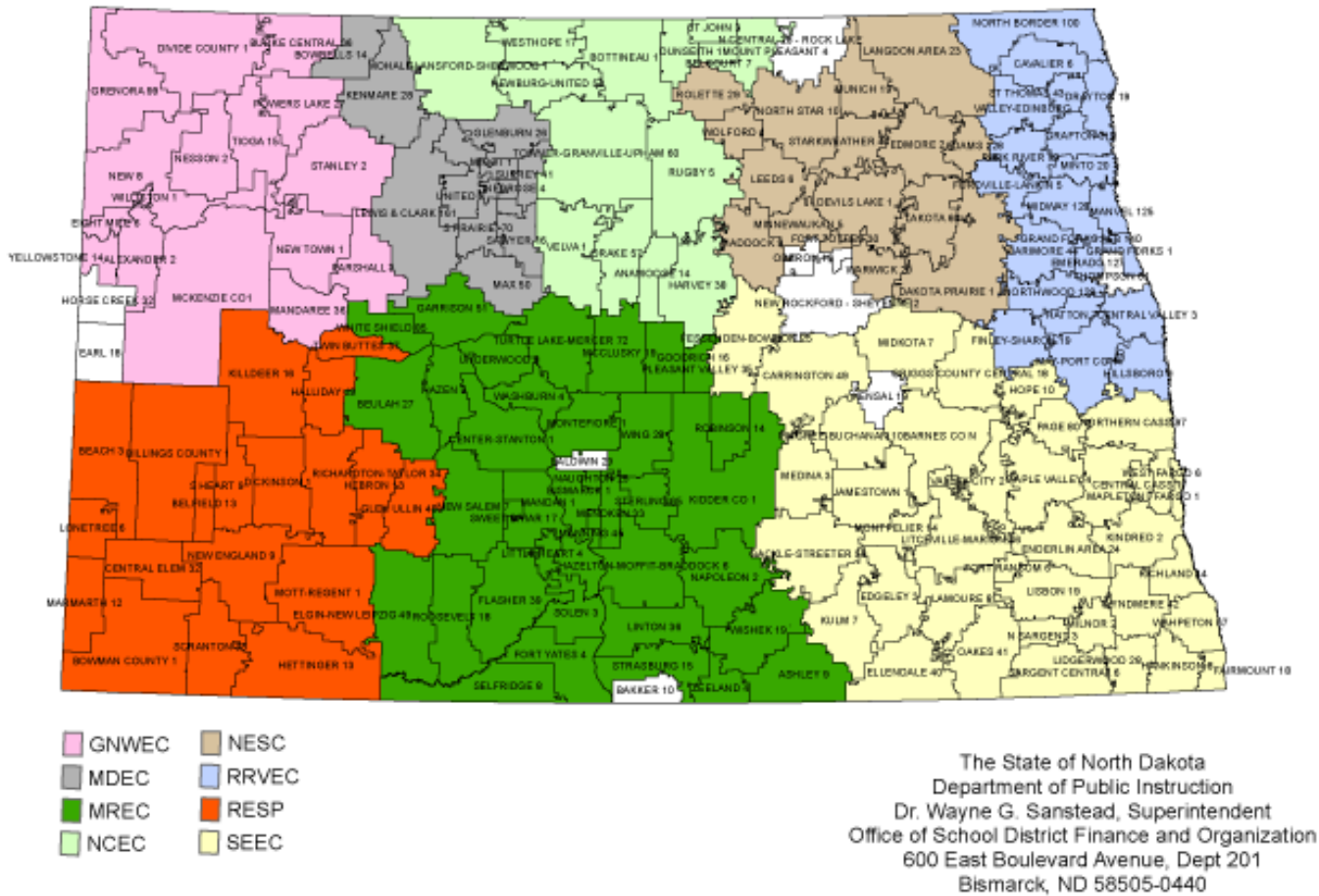
Figure 1. Map of REAs in North Dakota. Reprinted from "2012 ND REA," by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2012, retrieved from http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/finance/jpa/JPAmap.pdf. Copyright 2012 by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction.

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Table 1. REA Membership in North Dakota.

REA	NUMBER OF DISTRICTS	ENROLLMENT	SQUARE MILES
Great Northwest Ed. Coop. (GNWEC)	16	7,591	8,770
Mid-Dakota Education Council (MDEC)	11	9,972	3,511
Missouri River Ed. Coop. (MREC)	38	20,726	13,776
North Central Ed. Coop. (NCEC)	14	5,720	6,655
Northeast Ed. Services Coop. (NESC)	17	4,144	6,533
Red River Valley Education Coop. (RRVEC)	20	12,312	4,904
Roughrider Ed. Services Program (RESP)	19	6,073	10,416
South East Education Coop. (SEEC)	39	32,184	14,123
REA Totals	174	98,722	68,688
State Totals	181	99,192	69,550
Percent of State Totals	**96%**	**100%**	**100%**

Adapted from "Regional Education Associations," by the Department of Public Instruction, 2013. Retrieved from http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/finance/jpa/table.pdf. Copyright 2013 by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction.

Table 2. Services Required to be Provided by North Dakota REAs.

Required Service	Description
Professional Development	"Coordination and facilitation of professional development activities for teachers and administrators employed by its member districts" (Regional Education Associations, 2013, N.D.C.C. § 15.1-09.1-02.1-1-a)
Technology and Technology Support	"Supplementation of technology support services" (Regional Education Associations, 2013, N.D.C.C. § 15.1-09.1-02.1-1-b)
Data Systems	"Assistance with the collection, analysis, and interpretation of student achievement data" (Regional Education Associations, 2013, N.D.C.C. § 15.1-09.1-02.1-1-d)
School Improvement	"Assistance with achieving school improvement goals identified by the superintendent of public instruction" (Regional Education Associations, 2013, N.D.C.C. § 15.1-09.1-02.1-1-c)
Curriculum Enrichment	"Assistance with the expansion and enrichment of curricular offerings" (Regional Education Associations, 2013, N.D.C.C. § 15.1-09.1-02.1-1-e)

Statement of the Problem

REAs have expanded in both size and scope of service since their inception in 2001. The problem addressed in this study is based upon two assumptions. First is that REAs still may not have a clearly understood or consistent role in North Dakota's educational system. The second assumption is that there are significant differences between REAs in the kind and quality of services available to school districts.

At the time of this report, 96% of all North Dakota school districts had voluntarily

agreed to participate in an REA (NDDPI, 2013). However, it is unclear if the REA

delivery of educational services to school districts has yet become "indispensable" as was

the vision of North Dakota State Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Wayne Sanstead, when

he stated: "I expect education associations to provide comprehensive support services . . .

and thereby become indispensable in serving member school districts" (as cited in Mid-

continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005, p. 5).

In a report to the North Dakota School Boards Association (NDSBA), Leddick

and Fielder (2008) noted that REAs were under-funded compared to services they were

expected to provide. The report goes on to suggest that at the time, REAs had not yet

achieved Dr. Sanstead's vision:

The strong cultural **value of local control** throughout the state challenges

statewide and even regional coordinated support solutions. This value, while

admirable when it leads to self-reliance and independence, poses challenges when

it creates suspicion that any addition of service support is, in the words of many of

those interviewed for this study, "just another layer of bureaucracy." (Leddick &

Fielder, 2008, pp. 3-4)

The relatively short time that REAs have existed in North Dakota; ongoing

questions about what their purpose is or should be; and the willingness, or lack thereof, of

school districts and state level leadership to embrace them as viable educational entities

are key factors contributing to the conceptual framework of this study. REAs have

expanded in both size and scope since being established by the North Dakota Legislature

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(North Dakota Legislative Council, 2015). Even though REAs are now well established and their prominence as viable education service providers grows, there has been limited research conducted to ascertain whether or not they are viewed by educational leaders and policy makers as an effective or efficient use of state and local resources, or if they are viewed as essential for providing adequate education to the students of North Dakota.

An assumption of this study, based upon professional experiences of the researcher, is that perceptions of the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs vary widely. This may be due to factors such as size and location of an REA, size of the member school districts, "buy-in" of district leadership regarding the value of collaboration, and ability of REAs to deliver needed services in an efficient and timely manner.

The Education Committee of the North Dakota Legislative Council discussed viability of REAs at an interim meeting held June 10, 2008, in the Roughrider Room of the State Capitol, Bismarck, North Dakota (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2008). In the minutes of the interim education committee meeting, Representative Haas commented on REAs. The minutes recorded his comments as follows:

> Representative Haas said if regional education associations are going to be viable, it is incumbent upon the Legislative Assembly to revise the structure of education and specifically determine how special education, vocational education, professional development, and counseling will be delivered. He said a master plan is needed for the efficient delivery of services. He said some people will feel threatened. He said some positions will be eliminated and others will be created. (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2008, p. 4)

Though this sentiment was expressed nearly 6 years ago, it is statements such as this, and others, expressing doubts about REAs and their future viability that prompted this study.

At the time of this study, a vast majority (96%) of North Dakota school districts were voluntary members of an REA, which would seem to indicate a willingness of local districts to collaborate for the provision of some services. However, it is unclear if REA delivery of educational services to school districts has been perceived by school administrators as helping to achieve the goal of providing an adequate education to all students. Additionally, it is unclear whether or not using an REA to provide services has been perceived by school administrators as being an efficient, effective, or equitable method of delivering resources to their school districts. Finally, it is unclear as to whether there are different perceptions relative to the first two issues depending upon whether one is a school district administrator or an REA director. REAs have not been assessed; and thus, there is no data to inform stakeholders as to how this system of educational service delivery could be improved.

Purpose of the Study

"America's educational service agencies [are] the least understood and
worst- documented component of public education."
(Stephens & Keane, 2005, p. xv)

The purpose of this study was to seek perceptions of North Dakota REA directors and school superintendents about their experiences with REAs, including services being provided by REAs and their impact on education. Results from the study presented patterns in the data leading to the development of a grounded theory and identification of a central phenomenon. Qualitative research methods were utilized in an attempt to

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identify participants' perceptions of REAs, to find what has and what has not been working well, and to determine how the REA system might be improved to better serve its member schools. I approached the study in a pragmatic manner, with the intent that the results of the study would be used to describe key stakeholder perceptions of North Dakota REAs and provide a foundation of information from which to drive improvement, both at the local and state level.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do REA directors perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

2. How do school superintendents perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

3. What are the commonalities, similarities, and differences of REA director and superintendent perceptions of the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

Importance of the Study

For this study, qualitative research methods were used to gather data on perceptions of REA directors and school superintendents on the efficiency and effectiveness of REAs. Seven of eight North Dakota REA directors and a sample of nine school superintendents were interviewed. Interview data were analyzed and findings organized into themes.

By analyzing a sample of North Dakota superintendent's and REA director's perceptions, it was anticipated the data would ascertain their views regarding the impact of REAs. For purposes of this study, impact is defined as the role REAs play in

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providing effective, efficient, and equitable educational services. Data and findings of

this study will add to the current body of literature regarding REAs as a means of

delivering educational services and may potentially serve as a program improvement tool

for the REA system in North Dakota. This study may also support the North Dakota state

legislature, the NDDPI, and educators in efforts to improve delivery of educational

services.

A qualitative approach to seek perceptions of both superintendents and REA

directors was utilized because both parties play key roles in the success of REAs

becoming a viable means to deliver efficient, effective, and adequate educational

services. Their perceptions are viewed as a valuable source of data to drive

improvement. Identifying common ground and divergent opinions of participants was

intended to provide clarity regarding the role REAs should play in delivering educational

services. Findings will be of interest to scholars in the fields of educational policy

making, implementation, and organization theory, to practitioners in state and local

education agencies that have contact with REAs, and to REA administrators.

Delimitations

The following delimitations have been identified as factors defining the

boundaries of the study. First, the population being studied was limited to REA directors

and superintendents; and perceptions of other stakeholders (e.g. teachers, school boards,

legislators, etc.) were not included. Superintendents and REA directors were selected

because of their close working knowledge of the REA system as well as their ability to

directly influence REA operations. Additionally, this study was limited to a relatively

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small sample of superintendents (nine) and REA directors (seven). The qualitative nature

of the study limited the sample size – number of people that could be interviewed – and

the amount of data that could be analyzed in the time allotted for the research.

Researcher's Background

I have been a professional educator for 27 years, serving in both teaching and

administrative capacities. From 2001 to 2012, I served as superintendent of Rugby

School District #5 in Rugby, North Dakota, and since then have been employed by

Mandan School District #1 in Mandan, North Dakota, as an assistant superintendent. My

time serving as a central office administrator during the past 14 years has aligned closely

with the emergence and evolution of REAs in North Dakota. This alignment has played a

role in both my interest in conducting research on REAs and in providing a foundation of

knowledge from which to begin.

Definitions and Acronyms

The following terms are integral to this study and these definitions clarify their

meanings within the context of the study.

AESA (Association of Educational Service Agencies): On its website, the AESA

has introduced itself as:

> A professional organization serving educational service agencies (ESAs) in 45
>
> states; there are 553 agencies nationwide with hundreds of thousands of staff
>
> members. AESA is in the position to reach well over 80% of the public school
>
> districts, over 83% of the private schools, over 80% certified teachers, and more
>
> than 80% non-certified school employees, and well over 80% public and private

school students. Annual budgets for ESAs come to $14.7 billion. AESA's

membership is agency wide and includes all ESA employees and board members.

(Association of Educational Service Agencies, 2013a, para. 1)

ESAs (Educational Service Agencies): ESAs "are organizations that are created by

enactment of special state legislation or administrative rule to provide programs and

services to a collection of schools and local school districts, or to serve state interests in

other ways" (Stephens & Keane, 2005, p. 1). ESAs may be referred to by different

names in different geographic regions of the U.S. North Dakota ESAs are called

Regional Education Associations (REAs). In other states, an ESA may be referred to as

an Education Service Cooperative, Consortium, or Center (ESC); a Board of Cooperative

Educational Services (BOCES) System; a Regional Education Center (REC); a Regional

Education Service Center (RESC); or another similar title that describes an educational

service agency.

JPA (Joint Powers Agreement): In North Dakota, an agreement to exercise "joint

powers" is explained in the North Dakota Century Code as follows:

> Any county, city, township, city park district, school district, or other political
>
> subdivision of this state, upon approval of its respective governing body, may
>
> enter into an agreement with any other political subdivision of this state for the
>
> cooperative or joint administration of any power or function that is authorized by
>
> law or assigned to one or more of them (Joint Powers Agreements Act, N.D.C.C.
>
> § 54-40.3 2013).

N.D.C.C. (North Dakota Century Code): The effective laws of the state of North Dakota (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2014).

NDDPI (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction) or DPI (Department of Public Instruction): NDDPI or DPI is the branch of North Dakota government directed "to enforce all state statutes and federal regulations pertaining to the establishment and maintenance of public schools and related programs, supervise the ND Schools for the Deaf and Blind, and the State Library" (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction [NDDPI], n.d., para. 1).

REA (Regional Education Association): According to North Dakota's Century Code, an REA refers to "a group of school districts that have entered a joint powers agreement that has been reviewed by the superintendent of public instruction and verified as meeting the requirements of section 15.1-09.1-02" (Regional Education Associations, 2013, N.D.C.C. § 15.1-09.1-01). A more commonly used description has been developed by the North Dakota Regional Education Association (NDREA) as: "A Regional Education Association (REA) is a group of school districts seeking to improve their educational programs and services through cooperation and pooling of resources" (Erhardt, 2011, para. 1).

REA Director: Employed as the chief executive of an REA. Directors report directly to their REA governing board and work closely with superintendents serving on REA administrative boards or advisory committees (Erhardt, 2011).

Superintendent: Employed as the chief executive of local school districts, superintendents report directly to their local school boards. Superintendents may also serve as members of REA administrative boards, REA governing boards, or other advisory committees.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I included an overview of Regional Education Associations in North Dakota, including the problem, conceptual framework, purpose, and the research questions for conducting this research. This chapter also provided definitions of terms and acronyms used in the study, identified delimitations, and the background of the researcher.

Chapter II includes a review of the literature relevant to this study. Literature regarding the history and evolution of ESAs in the U.S. from early beginnings in the 1930s to their present day status was reviewed. This section also summarizes research that has been conducted across the U.S. relative to the functioning of educational services delivered via ESA. Research and reports reviewed are categorized as either impact or perception/satisfaction studies. Chapter II concludes by providing a historical perspective on the establishment and evolution of REAs in North Dakota, and a review of studies and reports specific to the state's efforts to deliver services to schools via REAs.

Chapter III includes a description of the qualitative design and research methods used for this study, describing research relationships, site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, verification of data, and ethical considerations applied to the research method.

Chapter IV presents the findings from the data analysis organized by theme. Thematic findings in this chapter emerged from the open coding and categorization of participant interview data. Three thematic findings emerged from analysis of participant interview data. These were: (a) Professional Development is perceived as a primary function of REAs, (b) REAs are leadership fragile, and (c) REAs operate in an unstable funding environment.

Chapter V includes the presentation of the research as grounded theory. A central phenomenon and consequences emerged as a result of axial coding of categorized and thematically organized data. The central phenomenon *Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous* emerged from the findings. Additionally, consequences associated with the central phenomenon were: (a) The impact of REAs varies by region, (b) REAs compete for resources, and (c) There are differences in the kind, intensity, and quality of services delivered by each REA.

Chapter VI includes a discussion of study findings in the context of the research questions. Additionally, as a result of selective coding analysis of categorized data, thematic findings, and the components of the emergent theory, a discussion of questions, implications, and recommendations for North Dakota REAs are presented.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study was conducted to assess the perceptions of North Dakota Regional Education Association (REA) directors and public school district superintendents regarding REAs' delivery of educational services to North Dakota school districts. It is a qualitative study relying primarily on interview data to review, analyze, and compare the perceptions of REA directors and school superintendents. The research questions for this study are:

1. How do REA directors perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

2. How do school superintendents perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

3. What are the commonalities, similarities, and differences of REA director and superintendent perceptions of the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

The purpose of this study was to seek perceptions of North Dakota REA directors and school district superintendents about their experiences with REAs, including the services being provided by REAs and impact of those services on education. The study also sought to find patterns in collected data that might lead to development of a grounded theory. Qualitative research methods were utilized in an attempt to identify commonalities and differences in participant's perspectives, seeking to find what has

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been working well, what has not, and how the REA system might be improved to better serve its member schools. I approached the study in a pragmatic manner, with the intention that the results of the study would be used to describe the current perceptions of performance of North Dakota REAs and provide a foundation of information from which to drive improvement, both at the local and state level.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature for this study. ESAs have been used for decades throughout the United States before the REA system was implemented in North Dakota. With this in mind, a review of the history of cooperative educational service delivery from a national perspective is provided. Additionally, there is substantial research on how ESAs operate and are viewed in other states. At the time of this report, North Dakota was relatively new at providing services to school districts through REAs; and accordingly, there has been limited research conducted that is specific to North Dakota. Because of this, research and reports from the operations of educational cooperatives in other states is an important component of the literature review for this study. Additionally, Chapter II provides a review of the historical perspective regarding the establishment, evolution, and information relating to the current demographics and functioning of REAs in North Dakota.

History of Educational Service Agencies in the United States

What is an ESA?

Stephens and Keane (2005) defined ESAs as "organizations that are created by enactment of special state legislation or administrative rule to provide programs and services to a collection of schools and local districts" (p. 1). Examples of programming

delivered by ESAs at the time of this report "include professional staff and curriculum development, teacher certification, special education, special services (speech, language, hearing, occupational and physical therapy), adult literacy, gifted education, financial, personnel, transportation, food service, custodial, data processing, attendance officers, testing and assessment, printing, instructional media, purchasing, technology, alternative and charter schools, and other programs traditionally associated with central office administration" (Kaufman, 2010, pp. 15-16).

Evolution of ESAs

The expansion of ESAs as providers of educational services has occurred at the same time as number of school districts in the United States has declined. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 117,108 school districts in the United States provided elementary and secondary education in 1939-40. By 2010-11, the number of districts had dropped to 13,588, a decline of 88%. The rate of consolidation has slowed in recent years, but NCES statistics indicate that school district consolidations were continuing to occur at the time of this report (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). ESAs, as presented in the context of this research, can trace their beginnings back to the 1930s where ESAs existed in the forms of county offices of education or supervisory union administrative units. Their early beginnings were influenced by the emergence of large local school districts during the 1920s, which demanded and received autonomy, and reduced county educational services primarily to rural areas (Levis, 1979). In the book, *The Educational Service Agency: American Education's Invisible Partner*, Stephens and Keane (2005) identified four major stages in the evolution of ESAs (p. 3) – Stage 1,

1930s & 1940s; Stage 2, 1950s & early 1960s; Stage 3, early 1960s to early 1980s; and mid-1980s to 2005 – and these are used in the following sections as the basis for a brief historical account of ESA development in the United States.

Stage 1: 1930s & 1940s.

Stephens and Keane (2005) described Stage 1 as an early formative period for ESAs, including the decades of the 1930s and 1940s. The key feature of ESAs during this time period was the establishment of state controlled county offices of education to oversee the functions of small rural school districts. This move was spurred in large part by a growing realization of "variations in educational advantages through the country" (Thurston & Roe as cited in Stephens & Keane, 2005, p. 8).

Stage 2: 1950s & early 1960s.

Stephens and Keane (2005, pp. 12-20) identified Stage 2 of this evolution as occurring during the 1950s and into the early 1960s. Key factors influencing changes occurring in the ESA system during this time were based upon a growing criticism of the move toward centralization of administrative functions to the county education offices that had occurred during the 1940s. At the same time local jurisdictions were critical of county educational units, there was a growing realization that schools could benefit from services provided by an intermediate unit that is adequately funded and is used as a support, not a substitute, for local community schools.

Stage 3: Early 1960s to early 1980s.

Stage 3 of the evolution of ESAs was referred to by Stephens and Keane (2005, pp. 23-30) as the "Golden Age" and has been identified as the time period spanning from

the early 1960s into the early 1980s. It was during this time period that there was much local and state level debate about the regulatory role of the county or intermediate units and their ability and effectiveness to provide assistance to local school districts. As a result, ESAs moved away from regulatory functions to service functions during this stage (Association of Educational Service Agencies, 2013b).

It was also during this time school districts began to conclude there were some functions they could do better through collaboration. This sentiment was expressed in a report published in 1969 by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory on the rationale, administration, and installation of educational cooperatives:

> It is generally recognized that organizational pattern alone does not make the difference between shoddy and quality education. But a new alignment of school systems willing to cut the umbilical cord of dependence upon conventional approaches to administration and instruction can be structured to generate sufficient power to produce changes essential for a real breakthrough in educational practice. If the new alignment changes educational leadership, then it changes education itself. (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc., 1969, p. 18)

Many states used this time period to strengthen or totally restructure their intermediate county units into regional, often multi-county, educational cooperatives collaborating in a state network of ESAs with a clear role of assisting local school districts (Stephens & Keane, 2005, pp. 23-48). It was also during this time that ESAs emerged as service providers for school districts in the area of special education. "The passage of the federal *Education of All Handicapped Act* in 1973 [*sic*]" (Stephens &

Keane, 2005, p. xviii; the correct name of this act is the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) prompted many states to establish service agencies for the specific purpose of delivering special education (Answers4Families, 1994-2003; Stephens & Keane, 2005).

Stage 4: Mid-1980s to 2005.

The fourth stage of ESA evolution from the mid-1980s until 2005 is described as "a period of reassessment and redirection" (Stephens & Keane, 2005 p. 30). Stephens and Keane indicated the most common themes found in states' ESA mission statements were centered upon promoting efficiency, providing effective service, and promoting equity in state elementary and secondary education systems (p. 62).

It is during Stage 4 ESAs were recognized by the federal government as education service providers, evidenced by increasing references to them in major legislation. "ESAs are mentioned in both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)" (Ahearn, 2006, p. 3) as a means of meeting requirements in each. During this time there were also substantial changes in the numbers and kinds of education service agencies as well as changes to how ESAs were being governed. These changes varied by state, with reductions in the numbers of some types of agencies in some states, and the creation of new ESA networks in states where they were limited or not yet established. Additionally, during Stage 4 there was substantial growth in expectations of what ESAs were expected to do. Stephens and Keane (2005) stated:

There appears to be a growing awareness in state policy circles that the service

agencies should be viewed as a critical state asset for addressing equity issues

including the opportunity to offer high-quality and efficient programs throughout

state system of elementary-secondary education. (p. 34)

Finally, this fourth stage is marked by more states adopting a menu of core required

programs and services, more rigorous performance and accountability standards, and a

strengthening of the cooperation between ESAs and metropolitan areas. It is during the

later part of this stage that North Dakota initiated efforts to develop an ESA system.

Current Status

In the nearly 10 years since the publication of *The Educational Service Agency:*

*American Education's Invisible Partner (*Stephens & Keane, 2005), ESAs have continued

to evolve. The Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA) reported a

membership of 553 service agencies in 45 states (Baldwin, Carmody, & Talbott, 2010).

The names of ESAs vary by state. Table 3 provides examples of the varying descriptors

used.

Research on Educational Service Agencies

In the following sections, a clearer picture of the current status of ESAs across the

United States is provided in a review of research and reports published in recent years.

For purposes of this literature review, ESA research conducted since the formal

beginnings of North Dakota's REA system in 2001 was the primary focus, though other

older, regionally or topically relevant studies have also been considered. Additionally,

studies are categorized as impact studies or as perception and satisfaction studies. The

Table 3. Names Used by Selected States to Describe ESA Service Providers.

Name	State
Area Education Agency (AEA)	Iowa
Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)	New York and Colorado
Cooperative Education Service Agency (CESA)	Wisconsin
County Office of Education (COE)	California and New Jersey
Education Service Agency (ESA)	Arizona
Education Service Center/Cooperative (ESC)	New Jersey, Ohio, & Minnesota
Education Service District (ESD)	Oregon and Washington
Education Service Unit (ESU)	Nebraska
Intermediate Unit (IU)	Pennsylvania
Intermediate School District (ISD)	Michigan
Regional Education Association (REA)	North Dakota
Regional Education Service Agency (RESA)	Georgia, Mississippi, & Michigan
Regional Education Service Center (RESC)	New Hampshire and Texas
Regional Office of Education (ROE)	Illinois

Sources: (Kaufman, 2010, p. 16; Stephens & Keane, 2005, p. 55)

studies reviewed do not always fit neatly into a single type of study and often will cross

lines in regards to efficiency and perception. Several of the studies considered both

factors, but for purposes of this literature review, have been classified based upon the

major focus or findings of the study.

Impact Studies

Impact studies typically focus on the aspect of effectiveness, efficiency, and

equity of ESAs, referring to how an ESA has changed, or has the potential to change,

how an educational function is accomplished in schools. Stephens and Keane (2005)

identify effectiveness, efficiency, and equity as the three most common themes found in

ESA mission statements. Effectiveness refers to how well an ESA performs, efficiency refers to resource allocation and utilization, and equity refers to the ability of consumers (schools in this case) to access resources and services by a provider such as an ESA (Stephens & Keene, 2005).

Stephens and Keene (2005) stated that "the purposes of improving student performance and fostering more efficient and cost effective performance on the part of local school districts" (p. xvi) are commonly found in state legislation establishing ESAs. A study of shared service collaboratives sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Kaufman, 2010) researched multiple governmental service providers' efforts to improve quality and efficiency of services. Kaufman used case studies to research the effectiveness of regionalization and collaboration efforts by governmental agencies across various settings and geographic regions. The study included the delivery of educational services through ESAs, but also included other governmental services such as rural fire districts, law enforcement, and regional councils as well. Of particular interest is the fact the North Dakota REA system was one of the case studies for this research.

Kaufman (2010) made several conclusions regarding the sharing of services that are relevant to this study (Table 4). A key finding was that, while regionalization or "shared services" promoted efficiency by improving economies of scale and available services in rural areas, the concept of regionalization has been met with resistance in many cases due to the view that it is a step closer to merger or consolidation. Additionally, it was found "sharing services may be more difficult for smaller

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communities due to their stronger ties to local identity, generations of tradition and the

brand identity that inextricably links public employees to place" (Kaufman, 2010, p. 10).

Table 4. Common Factors Impacting the Sharing of Services by Governmental Agencies.

Factor	Implications
"Regionalization is a 'hot button' term."	"In many cases, it is a non-starter" – often equated with merger or consolidation.
"Shared services achieves the best of both worlds."	"Benefits of mid-sizing and local control" forces collaborators "to take advantages of economies of scale."
"Accreditation was not a factor that stimulated consolidation."	"Prime movers are saving costs and improving the levels and quality of services."
"Sharing services may be more difficult for smaller communities."	"Due to their stronger ties to local identity, generations of tradition and the brand identity."
"It takes time to successfully navigate more complex shared services arrangements, and . . . to measure financial and service improvement benefits."	"These timeframes may be beyond the window of interest for key decision-makers."
"State legislation will be needed."	"Either *de neuvo* or modifications of existing laws or regulations."
"Biggest is not necessarily better."	"Economies of scale diminish in organizations too large and too small."

Source: (Kaufman, 2010, pp. 9-10)

Other factors inhibiting success were found to include "lack of support from upper

management, weak leadership, soft commitment, wavering vision and goals, mistrust,

weak financial support, insurmountable turf and resistance to change" (Kaufman, 2010,

p. 8).

While Kaufman (2010) found that ESAs promoted a more efficient means of

delivering services, a report prepared by the New York State Comptroller to the Board of

Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) regarding the cost effectiveness of BOCES

disagreed (DiNapoli, 2012). DiNapoli found some services provided to school districts

by BOCES generally cost more than if a district provided those services on its own. The

report suggested that while services may cost more when provided by BOCES, school

districts were incentivized by the state of New York to seek services through BOCES by

providing direct payments to school districts who are members of BOCES.

> New York is the only state in the nation that provides incentive aid for broad
> categories of shared school district services. In other states, the availability of
> shared services from Education Service Agencies, such as BOCES, is considered
> incentive enough for districts to use the services of these agencies if it makes
> sense to do so for cost saving or other reasons. (DiNapoli, 2012, p. 14)

In 2009, Idaho was one of the few remaining states without a state supported

regional service provider system. A report to the Idaho legislature regarding efficiency

gains that might be achieved by the creation of consolidated service providers indicated

that efficiency was not a major factor in their creation. According to the report,

establishment of an ESA system would not necessarily increase efficiency or have a

positive fiscal impact, and without additional incentives, the consolidation of services

alone would not be enough to provide savings to significantly influence the state or

districts to adopt the concept of a state supported system. The report also indicated in

order to potentially achieve greater savings, the legislature should consider a review of

major expenditure areas such as administration salaries, which "may lead to a discussion

of the feasibility of consolidating district administration or districts themselves" (Office

of Performance Evaluations, Idaho Legislature, 2009, p. 21).

In creating collaborative systems, state departments of education sometimes walk a fine line regarding how much oversight ESAs require or will accept. A white paper by the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research (Stanley, 2005) cited shortcomings in efficiency, effectiveness, and equity in the Massachusetts ESA system and proposed specific policy changes that could improve public education in Massachusetts through greater involvement by the state. "Although collaboratives are local organizations focused on meeting local needs in a cost-effective manner, the state needs to take a leadership role in fostering their development and utilization" (Stanley, 2005, p. viii). Four major recommendations of this study calling for greater state involvement were to:

► *Build a comprehensive network of educational collaboratives. . . .*

► *Define a collaborative's core roles and responsibilities. . . .*

► *Provide a stable funding mechanism. . . .*

► *Establish a formal performance accreditation system.*

(Stanley, 2005, p. viii)

Meeting unmet needs and increasing efficiency of school districts has been a major emphasis for ESAs over the course of their history (Stephens & Keene, 2005). In a study focusing on improving educational services to rural school districts in Colorado, Fox and Van Sant (2011) provided recommendations regarding the need for inter-district collaboration among rural schools. Fox and Van Sant's recommendations placed a high level of responsibility for the success of the Colorado BOCES system on state government. They stated: "Inter-district cooperation must be directed and championed

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by the highest levels of state government" (Fox & Van Sant, 2011, p. 28) They also recommended:

1. Examining state and district rules to identify "disincentives to inter-district cooperation, and determine if revisions are needed and viable" (Fox & Van Sant, 2011, p. 28);

2. Creating a stable system of regional service centers; and,

3. Creating "a rational structure and financial incentives that encourage participation of districts in that regional service structure."

(Fox & Van Sant, 2011, p. 28)

Comprehensive studies summarizing positive attributes and weaknesses of delivering educational services via ESAs have provided a foundation for analyzing impact of ESAs on school districts. Peters and Svedkauskaite (2008) conducted such a study "to provide an overview of the structure, capacity, and roles of ESAs in the region, within the context of the broader statewide systems of support for educational improvement and progress" (p. 1) in the Great Lakes region. The reported findings capture well the major themes identified in much of the modern literature regarding ESAs. Peters and Svedkauskaite found that ESAs are viewed as becoming an increasingly important part of the educational system in these states with some exemplary programming emerging. However, the study also found ESAs in the five states studied of the Great Lakes region – Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin – faced organizational, fiscal, and accountability obstacles that could affect their impact. Peters and Svedkauskaite's (2008) findings are summarized as follows:

- Literature supports the potential of ESAs to make a difference in the statewide systems of support.

- ESAs continue building a network of support through exemplary programs and services (but not always with universal access).

- There is a lack of formalized agreements between SEAs, LEAs, and legislatures regarding the roles and responsibilities of the ESAs.

- Resources available to ESAs in their educational improvement work are not adequate.

- ESAs' standardized evaluation and accountability processes are emerging but remain sporadic. (p. 1)

Educational Service Centers (ESCs) in Texas were found to be a valuable resource to school districts (Ausburn, 2010). Ausburn (2010) found that ESCs provided schools with "special program support," support with "state and federal funding issues, educator certification programs, and professional development" (p. iii). Ausburn also concluded that ESCs were a valuable resource to school districts who might otherwise have difficulty securing the services of educational professionals. Finally, Texas ESCs were found to be an effective system for providing professional support for statewide initiatives, federal and state compliance, and improving student achievement (Ausburn, 2010).

Jarmuz-Smith (2011) reported both positive impacts and possible concerns of employing ESAs in a white paper to the Maine legislature as it considered implementation of an ESA system. The Jarmuz-Smith analysis of several ESA systems

concluded, "ESAs are working in the 46 of 50 states that are currently employing them in their public education system" (p. 12, Summary section). Additionally, it was reported, "Despite ongoing apprehensions about funding streams, accountability, and accreditation, the benefits appear to outweigh the concerns" (Jarmuz-Smith, 2011, p. 12, Summary section).

The concepts of providing equitable services to rural school districts effectively and efficiently are common themes in ESA mission statements (Stephens & Keene, 2005). Galvin (1995) examined the interactions of district size and wealth factors with the size and wealth factors of BOCES as they relate to expenditures for services. An assumption of this study was that regional education service agencies enable districts to benefit from economies of scale, increasing efficiency. Galvin revealed that the physical characteristics of BOCES are related to expenditure levels and that the investment levels of similar districts in different BOCES was significantly different. The findings of this study suggest that opportunities made available by a regional education service agency may depend upon location, violating the premise of equity (Galvin, 1995).

Perception and Satisfaction Studies

Perception or satisfaction studies typically focus on perceived value or quality of service that school districts receive from ESAs and the level of satisfaction with programs and services provided. While impact studies in the previous section provided variable findings regarding how efficiently educational service agencies deliver services, perception studies in this section typically concluded that stakeholders have a positive view of the ESA serving their districts.

Weiss (1984) examined nine ESAs in five states and provided an analysis and report examining primarily how political and legal constraints influence ESA functioning. The study made recommendations for states considering ESAs as a means of delivering services to schools. In introductory commentary, Weiss summarized the major theme of her study: "An ESA must serve both state purposes and local purposes; it is governed by state law on one side and local school boards and local superintendents on the other side" (Weiss, 1984, p. 1). While this study is now 30 years old, it is Weiss' concluding statements that are of particular interest and relevance when analyzed in the context of why REAs were created and how they have evolved in North Dakota:

> The justifications for choosing this [ESA] strategy for improving local practice must be based on some assumptions about how to effect change in a complex policy system. First there must be the assumption that SEAs are not completely fulfilling their dual function of regulation on one hand and support, technical assistance, and stimulation of innovation on the other hand. Second the assumption must be that local districts left to their own devices will not cooperate, innovate, and comply adequately. If they would, then ESAs are indeed superfluous bureaucracies. Third, the creation of ESAs presumes that direct intervention in local districts by itself is not likely to achieve the desired ends. It presumes that the indirect route (i.e. creating new agencies to assist districts to improve) will be more effective in the end (Wiess, 1984, pp. 288-289).

Manzi and Urahn's (1992) study of Minnesota school districts on the perceptions and satisfaction of Minnesota school district administrators with regional education

organizations found high levels of participation by local school districts seeking to obtain additional programs and services. The study also found that districts received a wide variety of services, and there was a high level of satisfaction with the services provided. The study also found that school districts choosing not to receive services from regional education providers did so because of negative perceptions of the structure and operation of the organizations, and the requirement of a local mill levy.

A study of educational collaboratives in Massachusetts researched the perceptions of education leaders at the state and local level (McKenzie, 2010). McKenzie conducted a mixed method study utilizing a "Collaborative Evaluation Survey" and interviews of educational leaders, including superintendents, collaborative directors, state agency leaders, and legislators. Data collected were used to analyze the programs and services that school districts purchased from educational collaboratives and the perceived quality and cost-effectiveness of collaborative programs. McKenzie (2010) concluded:

(1) School districts in Massachusetts continue to use educational collaboratives for the same purposes as they did when collaboratives were first created;

(2) The majority of school district leaders have positive perceptions of collaborative programs and services;

(3) School district input, perceived cost-effectiveness, and collaborative responsiveness are major factors that influence school district utilization of educational collaboratives; and

(4) Unstable funding and the absence of a structured statewide network constrain the capacity of educational collaboratives.

The study also identified the need for more research on the cost-effectiveness and

impact of programs educational collaboratives offer. (p. vii)

An evaluation of Colorado's Boards of Cooperative Educational Services

(BOCES) system examined BOCES' functions, systems, and structure to identify what

worked well, what did not work well, and what new services districts and schools needed.

The Adams Group (2004) concluded "customers and policymakers valued the work of

BOCES because they were locally controlled, customer-driven, entrepreneurial, save

money, and were effective conveners and networkers" (p. iii). The report also concluded

"A majority of survey respondents also indicated that they were "somewhat" or "very

satisfied" with the services provided by their BOCES" (p. iii). Finally, the report

concluded the diversity of "locally-driven" services was viewed as a positive attribute of

Colorado's BOCES structure, but that this diversity negatively impacted "the ability of

BOCES leaders to have a shared vision and communicate effectively about the value they

added to Colorado's educational system" (The Adams Group, 2004, p. iii). The Adams

report recommendations for improvement in the Colorado BOCES system included:

improved communication, funding, needs assessment and planning, and leadership

(Adams Group, 2004).

Professional Development Through ESAs

As the number of ESAs and participating school districts continues to grow, ESAs

are being viewed in many areas as primary providers of quality professional development

and curriculum development. This appears to be driven in large part by a growing

demand among stakeholders for our educational system as a whole to show results and

improve efficiency. A recent white paper submitted to the AESA (White & Doughty, 2014) stressed the importance of ESAs in delivering quality professional development. White and Doughty contended that if ESAs are to help meet the needs in our educational environment, there is a call for them to be more than just broad based service providers, but rather to become reliable sources of expertise and to prioritize and focus efforts in the areas of curriculum and professional development. In reiterating the mission of ESAs to support local school districts, White and Doughty encouraged ESAs to focus upon being "conduits of accurate information at the regional and local levels" and to "prioritize what is important, and focus on what works" (White & Doughty, 2014, p. 4).

Additionally, Nafuhko, Graham, and Brooks (2008) conducted a study of the Arkansas network of Educational Service Cooperatives (ESC) and its delivery of professional development. The purpose of this research was to review an aspect of the process of evaluating ESCs by sharing results of a survey of ESC clients. The study explained the rationale for creating a network of ESCs in Arkansas was to facilitate professional development of school districts' staff and ultimately increase the quality of teaching and student performance. Nafuhko concluded that respondents were generally very satisfied with the professional development services offered by ESCs.

Anderson and Bruckner (2013) reaffirmed the role in professional development that ESAs can and should play and the value of ESAs making professional development a major focus. Anderson and Bruckner researched a collaborative professional development project involving two eastern Nebraska school districts, an intermediate service agency, ESU #3, and the University of Nebraska-Omaha and found "this

collaborative effort that has put research into practice has yielded results that show this

kind of model for professional development holds promise for future and ongoing

professional support for its school districts" (Anderson & Bruckner, 2013, p. 14)

Finally, in a report on how the Colorado Department of Education can improve

services to rural school districts, Fox andVan Sant (2011) suggested professional

development become a focus of that state's ESA system, stating: "BOCES should have

an expanded state role in staff training and receive funding to support that role" (p. 27).

Summary of Research on ESAs

While ESA impact and perception/satisfaction studies started out with differing

research questions, common themes emerged from most of the studies reviewed. First,

there is evidence stakeholders are generally satisfied with, or have a positive view of the

ESA serving their schools or region. Secondly, the literature suggested ESAs typically

face obstacles in terms of funding and organizational structure. Additionally, ESAs are

viewed as having an increasingly important role in the delivery of education and are

providing valued services. This seems to be especially true for professional development

services, which appear to be taking on an ever-increasing role as the major function of

ESAs across the nation.

<center>**Regional Education Associations in North Dakota**</center>

<center>*"REAs are the only viable alternative to mandatory school consolidation."*
(North Dakota Commission on Education Improvement, 2009, p. 46)</center>

History: Pre-2003

For most of North Dakota's history there has been a steady decline in population.

Much of the backdrop for the establishment of REAs in North Dakota has been rooted in

decades of declining enrollment as well as in resistance by small schools to forced consolidation. The number of public high school districts in North Dakota declined from 256 in 1970 to 186 in 1994 (Sell, Leistritz, & Thompson, 1996). In 2013, the total was 181 districts (NDDPI, 2013).

During the 1980s and 1990s, North Dakota's DPI was a strong proponent of school consolidation and closure for what were viewed as highly inefficient and ineffective small school districts. DPI officials sometimes expressed outright frustration when some small school districts resisted and created animosity between the DPI and school districts. The following excerpts from a January 1, 2000, *Education Week Teacher* article (Manzo, 2000) about school consolidation in North Dakota and the resistance from small school districts expressed the tone that existed at the time:

"All these little districts want to be the survivor," says [State Superintendent] Sanstead, who has pushed for consolidation throughout his 16-year tenure. "There is a denial of what's taking place around them. The question is how can we continue to provide quality education under these circumstances." (as cited in Manzo, 2000, para. 8)

And:

"The net effect of trying to save everybody is that [local school boards] are running schools into the ground until they run out of money or out of kids," says Tom Decker, director of school finance and organization for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. (as cited in Manzo, 2000, para. 6)

As the 1990s came to a close, the discussion about whether or not the state should become involved in forced consolidation and school closure, especially for districts only delivering K-8 education, continued to be a point of discussion among some legislators and the NDDPI. However, forced consolidation would not gain much traction. Bills introduced such as House Bill No. 1033 (1999) which proposed closing small rural schools were typically quickly dispatched. There was some limited response to the monetary incentives put in place by Senate Bill No. 2441 (1999) to encourage consolidation, but even this did not prompt the large-scale closure of small school districts as was the desire of NDDPI officials and some state leaders.

With this backdrop, the concept of consolidating delivery of services to schools to improve efficiencies and opportunities for students without forcing school closure became a talking point among leadership at North Dakota's Department of Public Instruction. This was evidenced in a report by the North Dakota Legislative Council staff for the Education Committee which recognized that JPAs (Joint Powers Agreements) were viewed by state leaders as a more acceptable way for school districts to work together than the option of forced school consolidation: "Faced with the unpopularity of wholesale school district consolidation, the Legislative Assembly in 2003 enacted legislation that formally recognized educational associations governed by joint powers agreements" (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2007, p. 1).

One concept proposed by the NDDPI as a possible solution to declining enrollment without pushing the school consolidation issue was to revisit the concept of educational service regions throughout the state, each with a major population center

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serving as a hub, which had been proposed 30 years earlier by then Governor William Guy (Guy, 1969). The concept as proposed by Governor Guy did not gain traction in education at that time, but was brought back to the table by NDDPI officials after the 1999 legislative session.

North Dakota's first effort to deliver education services through educational service agencies began in 2001 under authority granted by N.D.C.C. § 54-40-01.1(2013) and in response to the need for providing resources and services equitably to schools within the state. North Dakota called them "educational associations governed by a joint powers agreement" (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005, p. 5). These associations were typically referenced by the acronym JPA. JPAs allowed political subdivisions (such as school districts) to cooperate in the delivery of services of mutual benefit (such as education of students). While encouraged and promoted by the NDDPI, consortiums formed into JPAs were not funded by the state legislature (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005).

History: 2003 – Present

After NDDPI's launch of JPAs in 2001, the North Dakota legislature established the first statewide, legislatively controlled system of educational service agencies with the passage of Senate Bill No. 2154 (2003) and creation of Section 15.1-07-28 of the North Dakota Century Code (School Districts, 2003). Senate Bill No. 2154 referred to these new entities (educational service agencies) simply as "joint powers agreements." There was to be a minimal appropriation required by this legislation, with funding capped

at a maximum of $50,000 in reimbursable expenses for each JPA that met minimum service delivery requirements (School Districts, 2003).

JPAs were not the only means of delivering services to schools collaboratively and did not replace existing consortia. In a 2006 report to the North Dakota Legislative Council Education Committee, Tom Decker, Director of School Organization and Finance for the NDDPI, indicated: "There is a plethora of organizations trying to provide services to school districts. He said they include special education units, career and technical education centers, telecommunications cooperatives, Title I cooperatives, Title IV safe and drug-free schools, and teacher learning centers" (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2006, p. 8).

In 2007, the legislature enacted revised statutory regulations and provided more substantial funding, creating the foundation of the REA (regional education association) system that exists in North Dakota today. A background memorandum prepared by the North Dakota Legislative Council stated:

> During the 2007 legislative session, funding for regional education associations was increased to $3 million. Of that amount, $1 million is to be distributed during the 2007-09 biennium on a per student basis at the same time and in the same manner as other state aid payments. The remaining $2 million is to be provided as a contingent distribution, calculated on a per student basis, at the conclusion of the 2007-09 biennium." (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2007)

The contingent nature of REA funding led Tom Decker to state in a letter to AESA, "The impact of that fiscal uncertainty has had an extremely adverse impact on the

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growth of our service agencies" (Decker, 2008, para. 4). It was also in 2007 when the

North Dakota legislature passed legislation expanding REAs' authority to provide special

education and school business management services (Decker, 2008).

In 2008, the North Dakota School Boards Association (NDSBA) sought and

received a grant to be used to fund a study of the organization and structure of Regional

Education Associations in North Dakota. The stated purpose of the study conducted by

Profound Knowledge Resources (PKR), Inc. was "to provide information for

policymakers considering legislative and other changes with potential to help the REAs

to become a critical infrastructure element in the North Dakota public education system"

(Leddick & Fielder, 2008, Title page, Abstract section). Data for the study was collected

through interviews with stakeholders, website reviews, and document reviews. Leddick

and Fielder (2008) submitted the following five REA findings in the report to NDSBA:

- The current financial support provided for the REAs does not match the
  expectations for their impact nor the potential they hold as a critical element
  of the infrastructure of the state's public education system.

- REAs have been able to provide professional development and student
  services that have been perceived to be of value.

- There are three inter-related drivers for change to the current REA system,
  these being: student achievement, fragmented structure of REA services
  delivery, and a knowledge based economy.

- The current vision of professional development is limited, unclear, and

    inadequate to meet the needs of educators.

- REAs lack the "One Big Thing" that focuses their work. (p. 6)

The shortcomings of the professional development system and the long list of

services identified in statute that REAs were expected to deliver with no stated priorities

were major obstacles facing North Dakota's REA system. Inadequate funding was

another major obstacle identified in the study. REA administrators were commended for

their creativity in accessing grant funding to be effective (Leddick & Fielder, 2008).

It was also in 2008 when the North Dakota Education Improvement Commission

received a report (Odden, Picus, Goetz, Aportela & Archibald, 2008) regarding adequate

funding for school districts. One of the recommendations put forth in Odden et al.'s

report was for more intensive professional development and a dramatic increase in the

number of professional development days school districts would be required to conduct;

increasing from two to ten. Odden et al. identified possibilities for increasing the role of

REAs in North Dakota and proposed the following as a possible means of utilizing REA

services for the purpose of professional development delivery and meeting the increases

recommended in their report:

Though the state's largest districts could take the professional development

resources recommended above and design and implement new and effective

professional development activities, the state will need to address how

professional development structures can be created for the many smaller districts

in the states. It could be that professional development could become a major

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feature of enhanced Regional Education Service Agencies. The state could

consider requiring districts with less than 185 ADM to collaborate with REAs for

professional development as a condition for receiving such funds. (Odden et al.,

2008, p. 123)

From 2003 until 2008, North Dakota had nine Regional Education Associations.

However in 2008, two REAs in the Fargo and Jamestown regions merged to "form the

single largest unit in North Dakota. The South East Educational Cooperative (SEEC), in

the Fargo/Jamestown area, covers nearly 1/3 of North Dakota and has nearly 1/3 of the

state's total public school enrollment" (Decker, 2008, para. 5).

The introduction of a state sponsored system of consortiums intended to provide

additional services to school districts did not come without some resistance from school

districts. During an interim North Dakota Legislative Council Education Committee

report, Tom Decker, Director of School Organization and Finance for the NDDPI,

responded to this sentiment stating before the committee "certain school district

superintendents are not convinced that they lack the ability to be totally independent . . .

they simply do not see the value of belonging to a regional education association" (North

Dakota Legislative Council, 2008, p. 3).

Leddick and Fielder (2008) also found resistance to REAs. They stated:

The strong cultural value of local control throughout the state challenges

statewide and even regional coordinated support solutions. This value, while

admirable when it leads to self-reliance and independence, poses challenges when

it creates suspicion that any addition of service support infrastructure is, in the

words of many of those interviewed for this study, "just another layer of

bureaucracy." (Leddick & Fielder, 2008, pp. 3-4)

To address such concerns the legislation enacted ensured that a school district's

participation would be strictly voluntary. REAs, with some guidelines, would be able to

organize into geographic areas and school partnerships as district leadership and school

boards saw fit, without directives from the state. In some instances, public resistance

came from small school districts' perceptions that forced membership into consortiums

would be the first step towards forced consolidations and closures of small, inefficient

school districts (Manzo, 2000).

In 2009, House Bill No. 1400 amended the North Dakota Century Code including

Sections 15.1-09.1-10 (Regional Education Associations, 2009) and 15.1-27-03.1, (State

Aid, 2009) creating a substantial change in how REAs were funded. House Bill 1400

established a factor in the per pupil school funding formula of .004 times the average

daily membership. The resulting number was to be added to a district's weighted pupil

units and multiplied times the per pupil payment to directly support REAs. This was the

first time REAs were not to be funded solely by a separate grant appropriation line and

would be included as part of the per pupil cost of education. Student enrollment within

an REA was now directly impacting the funding that REA received (State Aid, 2009).

In 2011, that state legislature made substantial revisions to Section 15.1-09.1 of

the North Dakota Century Code. Of major significance was the change in services that

REAs were required to provide. Up to this time, school districts would be required to

participate in at least five administrative functions and five student functions from a long

list of activities that REAs could provide. The changes adopted in the 2011 legislation

changed this language, taking the "requirement to participate" language out of the statute,

and also replacing the long list of possible services that REAs could deliver to a short,

very specific list of services that the REA "must" provide (Regional Education

Associations, 2011).

Another major event in 2011 was the launch of the Succeed 2020 initiative in

North Dakota. Succeed 2020 was started with funds received from a 25 million dollar

grant from the Hess Corporation to improve college and career readiness of North Dakota

students. North Dakota REAs were identified as the vehicle through which programming

from the grant would be developed. According to the Succeed 2020 website

(ndsucceed2020.org), North Dakota's eight REAs have lead responsibility for

implementing this initiative and would be funded by the grant over a 5-year period. A

review of all eight REA websites would indicate that the influx of funding as a result of

the Succeed 2020 grants has had a major influence on REA operations in recent years.

This was also evident in interviews conducted with REA directors as part of the research

for this project and will be discussed in the research findings.

Summary of Regional Education Associations in North Dakota

Most of the literature reviewed for this section is documentary evidence regarding

REA establishment, evolution, and operations over the past 14 years. At this point in

time, other than Leddick and Fielder (2008), there has been no scholarly research

conducted on the perceptions and satisfaction of individuals on the impact of North

Dakota REAs on the educational community. Documents reviewed indicate that REAs

are currently active service providers in all regions of the state and have established the

potential to reach nearly every student in North Dakota.

Conclusion

Chapter II provided a review of the literature relevant to this study. Literature

regarding the history and evolution of ESAs in the U.S. from early beginnings in the

1930s to their present day status was reviewed. This section also summarized research

that has been conducted across the U.S. relative to the functioning of educational services

delivered via ESAs. The research and reports reviewed were categorized as either impact

or perception/satisfaction studies. Chapter II concluded by providing a historical

perspective on the establishment and evolution of REAs in North Dakota, and a review of

studies and reports specific to the state's efforts to deliver services to schools via REAs.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

This research studied the perceptions of North Dakota Regional Education

Association (REA) directors and a sample of public school district superintendents

regarding the REAs delivery of educational services to North Dakota school districts. It

was conducted as qualitative study utilizing grounded theory methods, relying primarily

on interview data to review, analyze, and compare the perceptions of REA directors and

school superintendents. The research questions for this dissertation were:

1. How do REA directors perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

2. How do school superintendents perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

3. What are the commonalities, similarities, and differences of REA director and superintendent perceptions of the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

Methods

The framework for conducting this study built upon four components of research

methods used in qualitative research; researcher relationships, site and participant

selection, data collection, and data analysis (Maxwell, 2005). Each of the four

components and how they were applied in this study are described in the following

sections. Utilizing Maxwell's framework, specific qualitative research methods based on a grounded theory approach were implemented.

The research for this study was conducted utilizing qualitative methodology based upon Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory model. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), grounded theory is "a specific methodology developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) for the purpose of building a theory from data" (p. 1). Strauss and Corbin (1998) have also defined grounded theory as "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (p. 12). According to Creswell (2007), grounded theory is useful as a qualitative research method when the researcher wants to "move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory" (pp. 62-63). Creswell (2007) also stated that grounded theory is appropriate when the study participants "have all experienced the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework for further research" (p. 63). These factors are present in this study and are the reasons the researcher determined grounded theory an appropriate approach.

Researcher's Relationships

The key relationships in this study were with REA directors and the sample of school superintendents interviewed. Participants were at the chief executive level of their respective organizations; and therefore, decisions regarding participation were solely theirs. It should be noted that the researcher did have varying levels of preexisting professional relationships with study participants prior to conducting the research. This is in large part due to the fact that North Dakota, in terms of population, is a very small

state with the participant populations accessed for the study being also reflective of the state's small size. It was anticipated previously established relationships would aide in securing participants, but not influence their responses or respective answers to questions.

Participant Selection

Participants were either serving in a role of REA director or school superintendent. All North Dakota REA directors were invited to participate. In North Dakota, this is a relatively small group, with one director representing each of the state's eight REAs. At the time of data collection, one REA did not have a director; hence no interview was conducted in that region, setting the total number of REA director participants at seven.

A representative sample of nine North Dakota Public School Superintendent's was invited to participate. The sample population represented equally superintendents from small, medium, and large school districts. For purposes of this study, small school districts were defined as those with fewer than 250 students enrolled in an average daily membership (ADM). Medium school districts were defined as having ADMs between 250 and 750, and large school districts had ADMs of greater than 750 students. The sample population was also representative of geographic regions in North Dakota. All public school districts were included in the superintendent selection pool, listed alphabetically, and numbered. A number between 1 and 100 was drawn to select the first district. Every 10th district listed after the drawn number was identified from that starting point as a potential participant. If the district met the parameters for school size

and geographic region, it was selected, and the superintendent was invited to participate. This continued until nine districts were identified.

Data Collection

For this study, data were collected utilizing qualitative interview methods. Websites, by-laws, meeting minutes, and other public documents from REAs, state of North Dakota, or local school districts were also referenced during the research, but did not require additional obligation of time by participants. When meeting participants for interviews, each participant was given a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix A) and measures to ensure anonymity were thoroughly reviewed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, beginning with scripted questions (Appendix B) used to guide the interview process. Roulston (2010) described the semi-structured interview as one in which the "interview protocol is used as a guide" and "poses follow up probes in response to the interviewees responses and accounts" (p. 14). Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a third party. Interview transcripts were imported into a data analysis software called HyperRESEARCH[©]. HyperRESEARCH[©] was used to assist in coding, memoing, and theory development. Additional data collected included written feedback received from participants checking interview transcripts. Interview recordings, memos, fieldnotes, jottings, or other interview documentation were stored on my personal computer and in locked file cabinets located in the researcher's office and was only accessible by the researcher (Creswell, 2007; Roulston, 2010; Glesne, 2011).

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted by applying grounded theory methodology. HyperResearch© was used as a tool for the data analysis process. Grounded theory coding processes were applied to analyze the data and memos were used to organize the researcher's thoughts during close reading. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined coding as " the analytical process by which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory" (p. 1). Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory model (1998) utilizes three types of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Open coding analysis was applied during each reading to code and categorize participant responses (See Table 5). Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined open coding as the "analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data" (p. 101). The results of the open coding and categorization process are presented as thematic findings in Chapter IV.

Table 5. Codes and Categories

CATEGORY	CODE	DESCRIPTION OF PERCEPTIONS
Contextual Conditions	funding	. . . regarding fiscal resources
	governance	. . . regarding impact of REA governance structure
	grants	. . . relating to the impact of grant funding
	impact of geography	. . . relating to the impact of geographic factors
	impact of REA leadership	. . . regarding the impact of REA leadership
	impact of REA size	. . . regarding the impact of REA size
	impact of REA system	. . . regarding the impact of state level REA policies
	impact of school leadership	. . . regarding the impact of school district leadership
	interschool relations	. . . regarding relationships between REA member school districts
	large schools	. . . of large school participation
	medium schools	. . . of medium school participation
	perception impacted by school size	. . . influenced by school size
	school size	. . . impacted by school size
	small schools	. . . of small school participation
Systemic Descriptors	effectiveness of services	. . . of the effectiveness of services
	growth of services	. . . relating to increase in scope and size and services
	impact of services	. . . of the impact of services
	improvement since inception	. . . of how services have improved since becoming a member
	opportunity for growth or improvement	. . . of how REAs can improve services or expand into new arenas
	quality of services	. . . of the quality of services being delivered/received
	REA makeup	. . . regarding REA member schools
	services described	. . . of services currently being delivered/received
	services desired	. . . of services districts would like to receive but currently are not
Dissatisfiers	deterrent to participate	. . . of conditions which deter member schools from being active
		. . . of conditions deterring non-member schools from joining
	identified weakness	. . . of weaknesses in systemic or service delivery factors
	inadequate resources	. . . that resources are inadequate to provide desired services
	ineffective service	. . . of services viewed as ineffective in meeting district needs
	obstacle to growth or improvement	. . . regarding systemic obstacles that prevent improvement
Satisfiers	effective service	. . . regarding effective services delivered/received
	identified strength	. . . regarding strengths in systemic or service delivery factors
	incentives to participate	. . . of conditions encouraging schools to be active REA members
	satisfaction with service provided	. . . of satisfaction with type and/or quality of services delivered
		. . . of satisfaction with type and/or quality of services received
	valued service	. . . expressing specific services seen as valuable

Axial coding analysis was applied to reorganize the categorized data and thematic findings. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) axial coding is "the process of relating categories to their subcategories" (p. 123). From the axial coding process, a grounded theory emerged, which became the basis for the identification of the central phenomenon and consequences. A discussion of this emergent theory is presented in Chapter V.

Finally, selective coding analysis was applied to reorganize the categorized data, thematic findings, and emergent theory components. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) selective coding is the "process of integrating and refining the theory" (p. 143). As a result of the selective coding analysis a discussion of questions, implications, and recommendations are presented in Chapter VI. Questions, implications and recommendations are further organized by their relevance to practice, policy, and research.

An example of how the coding processes were utilized to convert raw data related to leadership into categories, thematic findings, grounded theory, and finally the questions, implications, and recommendations is as follows. During reading and rereading of the raw data codes were developed and applied. When it was determined that appropriate codes had been developed and applied through the open coding process, the codes were then categorized. The researcher found through the open coding process that codes relevant to leadership were found in each of four categories. Some of these codes were clearly related to leadership, such as impact of REA leadership. This code was categorized as a contextual condition. Other codes, such as identified strength (categorized as Satisfiers) or identified weakness (categorized as Dissatisfiers) were

found relevant for developing the REAs are Leadership Fragile theme when cross-referenced with other codes and categories. As themes emerged, the researcher continued to reevaluate and consider relationships between themes, categories and codes and considered how this data could be reorganized to develop a grounded theory through axial coding. It was during this axial coding process that the theme REAs are Leadership Fragile was again analyzed in relation to other themes and categorized codes in the development of the grounded theory central phenomenon and consequences. Finally, from selective coding of the data contributing to the grounded theory, questions, implications, and recommendations emerged. Some of these have their foundation in the impact of leadership, identified strengths, and identified weakness codes that were identified in the open coding process.

Validity

In considering the validity or "trustworthiness" (Glesne, 2011) of qualitative research, validation is an attempt by the researcher to assess the accuracy of findings (Creswell, 2007). Prolonged engagement and multiple readings of the data, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, clarifying researcher bias, and an external audit (Creswell, 2007) were utilized as validation strategies.

Validity for this study was supported by the application of interview procedures approved by UND's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and by providing full disclosure of the purpose of the study to all people involved and obtaining written consent from participants. An audit trail consisting of interview recordings and transcripts, written and recorded chronological memos, and analyzed documents has been maintained. The audit

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trail included open, axial, and selective coding of data into categories, themes, and assumptions organized into a codebook and is the framework for developing findings. Validation for this study was addressed by attempting to complete the following actions: (a) obtaining perspectives of persons serving two different administrative functions (superintendents and REA directors); (b) reading and rereading transcriptions; (c) analysis of supporting documents; (d) member checks with participants during data collection and data analysis; (e) researcher memos and fieldnotes; and (f) separate review and analysis of data by the researcher's advisor. Validity checks have provided the researcher with evidence the data collected and transcribed was an accurate reflection of participant responses and the researcher's coding application was reliable.

Ethical Considerations

Research conducted for this study complied with all Educational Review Board requirements for conducting research involving human subjects. Consent forms (Appendix A) described conditions participants would experience during the data collection process. Participants were treated with respect, and their views are reflected in research findings. Individual identities have been strictly protected and none of the data used to report findings is directly attributable to any individual participant. All data collected for this study has been securely stored and locked within the researcher's office location. It will be maintained for a period of 3 years and then will be destroyed. Access to the data has been and will be limited to the researcher, the researcher's advisor, and UND's IRB.

While every attempt was made to minimize the impact of previously established professional relationships between the researcher and participants on participant responses, it is acknowledged that while none of the relationships between the researcher and subjects was on a social level, there has been a professional relationship and familiarity between some of the study participants and the researcher. Additionally, the researcher's experience as a school superintendent and participant in state level boards and committees is acknowledged as a potential source of researcher bias.

Conclusion

Chapter III provided a description of the qualitative design and research methods used in this study. This chapter described the research relationships, site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, verification of data, and ethical considerations applied in this study.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Chapter IV presents findings of the study. This chapter provides a review of the

purpose of the study and the research methodology used to derive thematic findings.

Findings are presented as themes that emerged from axial coding of interview data.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to seek perceptions of North Dakota REA directors

and school superintendents about their experiences with REAs, including services REAs

provided and their impact on education. Qualitative research methods were utilized in an

attempt to identify participants' perceptions of REAs, to find what has and has not been

working well, and determine how the REA system might be improved to better serve its

member schools. The researcher approached the study in a pragmatic manner, with the

intent that the results of the study would be used to describe key stakeholder perceptions

of North Dakota REAs and provide a foundation of information from which to drive

improvement, both at the local and state level. Results from the study presented patterns

in the data leading to the identification of a central phenomenon and the development of a

grounded theory.

Research Methodology

Data were collected via semi-structured individual interviews of REA directors

and school superintendents. In order to understand the research and subsequent findings,

data analysis was conducted utilizing grounded theory methods. Interview questions designed to collect descriptive data from participants were used to provide a framework for semi-structured interviews. Data collected was read and then reread for validity purposes. Memos were compiled throughout the coding process to organize researcher thoughts. Open coding was applied during each reading to label and categorize participant responses and to identify thematic findings. Emergent themes resulting from open coding and categorization became the basis for reporting study findings in this chapter. Next, axial coding analysis was applied to reorganize the categorized data and thematic findings from which a grounded theory emerged and is presented in Chapter V. Finally, selective coding analysis was applied to reorganize the categorized data, thematic findings, and emergent theory components. As a result of the selective coding analysis a discussion of questions, implications, and recommendations were developed and are presented in Chapter VI.

The total population size of REA directors is extremely small, with seven of the eight REAs directors participating in the study. It was determined that utilizing pseudonyms might make it possible to cross reference data and make connections that could potentially identify a participant. For this reason, neither actual names nor pseudonyms were used. While the total population of superintendents is somewhat larger, it was determined that because of the small sample size the use of pseudonyms may have created a similar condition and therefore were not used. The only data identifiers used for reporting findings in this chapter are whether a participant is an REA director or school superintendent.

Theme Development

This chapter presents a description of themes that have emerged from the open coding of participant interview data. The development of each theme was based upon common perceptions of director and superintendent participants. It is where perceptions of study participant groups converge that the most relevant findings came forth (Figure 2).

CATEGORIES & CODES

SYTEMIC CONDITIONS
- funding
- governance
- grants
- impact of geography
- impact of REA leadership
- impact of REA size
- impact of REA system
- impact of school leadership
- interschool relations
- large schools
- medium schools
- perception impacted by school size
- school size

SYSTEMIC DESCRIPTORS
- effectiveness of services
- growth of services
- impact of services
- improvement since inception
- opportunity for growth or improvement
- quality of services
- REA makeup
- services described
- services desired

DISSATISFIERS
- deterrent to participate
- identified weakness
- inadequate resources
- ineffective service
- obstacle to growth or improvement

SATISFIERS
- effective service
- identified strength
- incentives to participate
- satisfaction with service provided
- valued services

EMERGENT THEMES

| PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS PRIMARY FUNCTION OF REAs | REAs ARE LEADERSHIP FRAGILE | REAs OPERATE IN AN UNSTABLE FUNDING ENVIRONMENT |

Figure 2. Theme Development.

Thematic Findings

Using grounded theory methodology of open coding and categorizing data and axial coding to further refine and reorganize the data the researcher identified three principle themes in the study:

1. Professional development is viewed as a primary function of REAs;

2. REAs are leadership fragile; and,

3. REAs operate in an unstable funding environment.

Findings of the study organized by theme are discussed in the following sections.

Theme #1 – Professional Development is a Primary Function of REAs

"Professional development . . . that is our bread and butter."

The interview question "What are the primary services that REAs provide school districts?" brought forth a majority of the data from which this theme was constructed. Responses to other interview questions regarding the strengths, weaknesses, obstacles, and opportunities for REAs also contributed to this theme. REA director participants indicated that they were attempting to meet the statutory requirement of Section 15.1-09.1-02.1 of the North Dakota Century Code to deliver services in professional development, data analysis support, technology support, school improvement, and curriculum enrichment.

In response to the primary services question, both directors and superintendent participants indicated the delivery of numerous services not directly related to professional development. These included services such as career and technical education area centers, teacher centers, interactive TV consortiums, high-tech

consortiums, and other direct student services such as career guidance programs and STEM initiatives. However, REA director and superintendent participants consistently responded that professional development is perceived as the service most accessed by school districts and the service that REAs are most prepared to deliver. The data suggest that REAs have made conscious efforts to make professional development their "one big thing" as was recommended by Leddick and Fielder (2008) as a key to future success.

Both director and superintendent participants indicated professional development was a primary service provided by REAs. Not only did they perceive it as a primary service, in most instances they perceived professional development as the most effective service provided to schools.

The idea that professional development is the "bread and butter" of REA services was reflective of the views expressed by REA directors when asked to respond about primary services provided. Director participants expressed this sentiment consistently when addressing the question; "What are the primary services provided by your REA?" One director said: "Our greatest focus is on professional development as is the majority of the REAs." Another concurred, saying: "[The] big one of course is professional development." The following director expressed how much schools are accessing professional development from the REA in quantitative terms: "I would say we provide probably 80-90% of the PD for most of our schools."

Superintendent participants also consistently identified professional development when responding to the question; "What are the primary services your school district

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receives from the REA?" A superintendent said: "I'd say professional development is by far and away the primary benefit we're getting out of it."

Another superintendent concurred:

Right now I think our major focus is going to be professional development. How do we better prepare our teachers? How do we improve our teaching style? I think that's basically where we're going to put our -- you know hook, that's where we're going to hang our hat.

A superintendent participant not only expressed professional development as the primary REA service but also perceived it as a means for the REA and member schools to have an area of collaborative focus: "The biggest one is professional development without a doubt, I think it's just brought us all together in terms of being able to focus."

REA director participants indicated other service delivery options and strengths; however, professional development was a common link between them. When discussing service delivery in terms of services required in statute, the emphasis was often on how professional development was used to meet the requirement. In discussing services required, a director participant indicated meeting a data analysis service requirement was part of the professional development program, saying: "Our PD that we're providing and our data . . . I think it's kind of a one-two punch where we can get into our schools, and we can help schools and look at their data." Another director participant's response to his REAs primary service indicated there was little emphasis on other services beyond professional development: "Primary services would be professional development, Number 1, and it's hard to do anything after that."

Training for teachers in data use, training for school improvement processes, and technology training were other examples cited of REAs using professional development as a means of delivering statutory required services. A superintendent participant expressed how he perceived the required service of technology support being provided by the REAs professional development program, saying:

> We have a tech person, and she comes out, teaches everybody and . . . with
> Google and Google docs and plus, and she works all schools individually, and she
> also shows up at the professional development and is usually one of the sessions
> that we have is technology.

REA director participants perceived districts as having increased expectations of the professional development service. They also perceived pressures to do more for districts in the area of professional development, with one director saying:

> She is getting some pressure to be more engaged in professional development and
> to support schools in getting professional development standpoint; but she is
> saying that that really is the duty or the purpose of the REAs, and I agree with
> that.

Along with increasing expectations, a director participant expressed a perception that an REA does not have the resources to provide all the professional development being requested by districts. A director said:

> We don't have enough professional development staff. Wednesday that is a great
> day to have all our teachers engaged in some kind of professional learning. Well,

when you have 15 schools, and they all want you to be there on Wednesday, it

makes it difficult to provide that level of support that they need.

This concept of perceived insufficient resources is also discussed later in Theme #3.

Director participants also described a change in the kind of professional

development school districts were seeking from their REA and how it was being

delivered. This was expressed as a move away from large, single site professional

development activities to more customized service occurring within individual schools.

One director said, "A lot of that professional development continues to get closer to the

classroom." Another director said, "The staff have been into all [member] schools for PD

at some level. Some are farther along, so we just find out where you [are] at, and we'll

go from there."

A director discussed the impact of changing the REA professional development

model in terms of increased visibility and accessibility of service: "Superintendents are

starting to see us a lot more often in the schools rather than them coming to us." This

more customized, collaborative delivery model was sometimes referred to as a

Professional Learning Community (PLC). As defined by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and

Many (2006), a PLC is an "ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in

recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the

students they serve" (p. 11).

When discussing professional development delivery via PLCs, director

participants perceived REAs as facilitators or as providing school districts with assistance

in securing the expertise needed to successfully implement PLCs. Regarding PLCs, a director said:

Our emphasis right now is we are doing professional development with instructional strategies. We're going now into schools. We started with the PLCs. We're on our 6th year now with PLCs; so, we started with math, ELA, then we had science, and we had social studies where we brought together regional teachers. Now, we're going directly into schools and building the capacity within the school. We're doing the research, best practices. I have sent staff and myself for training. Now, we go in, find out what are your needs and working with them, so the PD is really big.

REA director participants perceived recent trends in education also influenced the professional development that REAs provided to member schools. Common Core State Standards (CCSS), PLCs, and increasing the instructional capacity of teachers were cited by participants as major areas of service requested by school districts from their REAs. A director said: "You know . . . the bread and butter is professional development. And that professional development right now revolves around rolling out the new North Dakota standards, the common core."

Superintendents also expressed similar views in regard to addressing educational trends. Assistance with professional development in CCSS was viewed as critical to this superintendent participant's school district: "Common core. . . . Obviously they have a real leader in that area for all the schools providing training outside the state people that come in and. . . . I know we could not have done that without [the REA]." Another

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superintendent concurred with this view, expressing that REAs played an important role in meeting professional development needs for his district that might have otherwise gone unmet: "I think it's been very helpful, because otherwise I don't know where we would have gone to get [a] lot of the training that we have gotten in the last four years."

A superintendent participant expressed satisfaction in being able to be selective in professional development opportunities his district participates in: "If there's a good PD topic that comes up we'll go. If it's CPI training, or common core, or teacher principal evaluation that's most of the stuff we're taking part in."

In response to the question: "What is the most effective services the REA provides?" directors perceived professional development as filling this role. A director said: "When you talk about professional development, we have what we're doing for the teachers, which I think is the most important thing that we do."

Most participant interview discussions regarding professional development were focused on teachers. However, a director also expressed an emphasis on professional development for principals within the REA:

> Most effective, I believe, would be our PLCs that we have been holding for our principals. Because, nothing against superintendents or teachers, but superintendents go to lots of meetings; they are very informed people. They communicate in their local areas, in their regional areas, across the state.

Another director concurred that REA provided professional development now had an administrator focus:

We hired some pretty specific areas. The first was a professional development director; and so what this person's main job was, was to build capacity of educational leaders, so to help our educational leaders start to do more of that curriculum teaching and assessment, professional development in their school, what we've been asking the principals for so long.

Superintendents also consistently expressed the perception that professional development was a strength of the REA. One superintendent said, "I think our biggest strength right now is the professional development that we're getting." Another said, "They have got a lot of professional development type stuff. I have to say they have done a nice job of providing those type of things."

Superintendents also indicated professional development was something member schools appreciate access to and that they were satisfied with the service received:

I think schools are very happy with what they are getting professional development wise. I know one school approached [and asked], "Since our days are out can we hire [a trainer] off our own dollar?" So they are willing to do that instead of looking elsewhere; so I'm thinking that it's a pretty good indication that they like what they are getting.

A superintendent participant discussing the impact of REA services indicated professional development was the only service of value received by his school district:

Most of it is the professional development. And that's really about all that we've been able to get off the ground successfully. So really when you look at the last

4-5 years, really the only benefits we've got, it's been through professional

development.

This participant also expressed the view that even though professional development was the only valued service delivered, it was what made district membership in the REA worthwhile. "I like it just because of the professional development . . . to me it makes it worthwhile for what we get out of it."

A superintendent discussing opportunities for improvement of REAs, also referred to expanding professional development services:

I still think that PD is a huge thing. They really do have an opportunity to provide consistent reliable PD opportunities for all the schools in their region because they can have one person who can go out and replicate it over and over again to try and get some consistency.

Additionally, director participants perceived that the Succeed 2020 grant had a positive impact on professional development service provided to schools. One director said, "The grant [Succeed 2020] has allowed to us to do a lot of our target in school professional development for free. And so in terms if that service right now, they are able to get us and not pay anything for that." Another said: "So that's the biggest impact we've had now that we can go directly and assist teachers who don't have the time to do all of this. We're just 'What can we do to help?' That's really the emphasis." And finally, a third director said, "Succeed 2020 was huge to get staff and be able to do work."

However, not everyone agreed the impact of Succeed 2020 had been entirely positive. This superintendent participant perceived the increasing emphasis on professional development since the inception of Succeed 2020 negatively impacted the delivery of other services: "We moved more into the professional development things. I think we've stripped away from some of the student services and opportunities that we've provided."

Theme #1 – Summary

Both directors and school superintendents perceived professional development as the primary service of an REA. Additionally, directors and superintendents both perceived professional development as the service most effectively delivered. The delivery of professional development and the idea it is an REA's primary responsibility to school districts was a common view expressed by participants and appeared to be common link between all the REAs. This would seem to indicate there has been progress in identifying the "One Big Thing" (Leddick & Fielder, 2008) REAs need in order to be considered successful entities.

Theme #2 – REAs are Leadership Fragile

"I think the strength of our REA has been the people that
we've have had in the leadership positions."

According to Northouse (2013), leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Northouse said viewing leadership as a process emphasizes that it is not linear, but is instead an interactive event, occurring in groups. This view would seem to apply to the leadership structure of REAs, where the roles of leader and follower are shared and exchanged by many individuals.

The idea of multiple leaders influencing a diverse group of individuals to identify and

achieve common goals helps paint a picture of the leadership dynamics existing in REAs.

In REAs, the position of leader, and therefore the concept of leadership fragility,

may be attributed to different individuals depending upon context. REA directors,

superintendents, principals, school board members, teachers, and others all take on the

role of leader at one time or another. However, for the purposes of this study the focus

was on REA directors and superintendents as leaders due to the fact they were the most

likely to impact the REA process and have influence towards achieving a common goal.

The researcher has selected the phrase "leadership fragile" to describe the highly

important role effective leadership has played in the success or struggles REAs have

faced. The concept of leadership fragility is not meant to imply any individual REAs or

the REA system lacks leadership either at the REA or school district level. It is instead

used to describe a participant perceived condition in which the functioning of REAs is

highly dependent upon specific individuals not necessarily on effective policy and

organizational structure. One director participant said, "I don't care if it's a school [or an

REA], its people that make it strong, and we've been really fortunate to have people

supportive of what we are doing." A superintendent participant concurred: "So much of

it is driven upon the strengths of the people within your system."

Participant responses to interview questions regarding strengths and weaknesses

of their REA provided much data for construction of this theme. This superintendent

expressed awareness that an REA's success was highly dependent on the director: "Going

to the state-wide meetings, it was obvious to me that really the strengths and weaknesses

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of the REAs across the state depended a lot [on] their lead executive director." Another superintendent perceived director leadership as the strength factor that made an REA successful: "I think the strength of our REA has been the people that we've have [*sic*] had in the leadership positions."

Participants expressed the view that the success of their REA was highly dependent upon supportive, engaged, and effective leadership at both the superintendent and director level. Supporting this view, a director said:

> You have to have leadership in your REA because you have to be able to build trust, and you have to be able to build partnerships, and you have to feel like you're all on the same team in order to move that thing forward and to be successful.

Whenever participants discussed the perceived strengths and weaknesses of their REA it was always people, not systems or programs, credited for having the greatest impact. One superintendent said, "I think the strength of our REA has been the people that we've have [*sic*] had in the leadership positions." A director also offered the following in regard to the impact of an REA: "A lot of it is superintendent-driven, too, with all the depth of their knowledge and academic leadership."

When discussing both strengths and weaknesses of their respective REAs, directors were quick to point to the leadership in each of the member school districts as having a major influence. In the context of this question, directors were typically referring to the district superintendent as leader, though in some instances they may have been referencing school boards or building level principals: "I think the strength

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organizationally is that our superintendents all work very well together, and they cooperate with each other."

REAs were also perceived by director participants as being highly dependent upon leadership and support of school district superintendents. When discussing REA strengths, this director credited superintendent leadership: "A lot of it is superintendent-driven, too, with all the depth of their knowledge and academic leadership." Another director concurred on the importance of superintendents:

I think that's one of the strongest things we have going for us, is that our superintendents are incredibly involved and really great cheer leaders. When they're at meetings, they like the direction that we're going, and they appreciate the effort that's being made and engage.

Finally, in response to a question regarding whether school district size impacted utilization or perceived value of services, this director emphasized that superintendent leadership was the critical component, regardless of size: "I don't know if so much the [district] size. I think it's the superintendent."

A director provided evidence of how a change in district leadership impacted a district's involvement in the REA: "They have had a change in administration in the last two years, since that change I have seen nothing but full support for [the REA]. It's been really a great working relationship."

Another common perception of directors was that the more districts accessed an REA for service, the more likely they were to be satisfied with the REA. The following director expressed this perception:

Well first of all, I'd say that it's like all things, the more you're involved, the better

the service you get, and the better . . . whatever, you get more out of things if you

get involved with them. And so those schools that are really involved, I'd say, are

really getting a lot of great services.

Both directors and superintendents acknowledged that not every district in an

REA utilized or found the same value in services provided. This contrast was expressed

by one director:

We've got schools that go to everything and encourage their teachers to go to

everything. I had another one that said, "I don't want this state stuff rammed

down my throat and my teachers don't need to put up with this," so they go to

their three conferences to take care of their professional development days and

that's it.

Another director was even more critical of disengaged superintendents, attributing

disinterest in REAs in some part to ego and an unwillingness to collaborate or change:

Leaving egos at the door is the toughest thing for superintendents to get used to in

the collaborative process -- they're used to controlling what happens in their

school more and having more say in what happens in their schools.

A director also perceived that districts involved in the governing process were

more informed and supportive of their REA:

I think most schools that are progressive like to have somebody on our board. . . .

If you [have] participation in our board you learn a lot, because you're learning

what's going on in the legislative process, you're learning what's going on in other schools, [and] you're talking to other school board members.

School superintendents were reciprocal in their view that leadership provided by the director was essential to the success of an REA. REA success was perceived by superintendents as being highly dependent upon the leadership and support of REA directors. This superintendent discussed the impact improved director leadership had on the success of an REA: "[Director] leadership is improving. I think that was one of the things that was holding us back for a while; it wasn't a strong focus of where we were at."

One superintendent perceived the relationship between an REA director and school superintendents as pivotal for REA success: "It just seems like we've always had a good working relationship, and I think it comes it goes up to who's in charge." Another superintendent participant identified the leadership of an REA director as an operational strength of the REA: "I think . . . one of the biggest strengths right now is the -- how do I put it, basically their administration, how it's run."

Effective REA directors and member school superintendent communication was perceived by participants as an important factor in the success of an REA. A superintendent said: "The strength of any organization is when the top knows what the bottom is doing and vice versa, and they're all on the same page and work together with." The importance of the director to be aware of member district needs was expressed by this superintendent, indicating satisfaction with his director's leadership: "The [director]

works really hard to look at what do our districts need and how can we make sure we are valued service to the districts."

There was evidence that leadership fragility of an REA can be traced back to its origins and the people in place when it was first established. A superintendent expressed awareness that the director played a pivotal leadership role in the establishment and growth of an REA and that it would not be as successful as he perceived it to be now with less effective leadership: "The success of our REA is traced back to that initial [director] hire. We made a good choice that worked out extremely well for us."

Superintendent participants also referred to leadership by their colleagues as pivotal in whether or not school districts saw benefit in and utilized REA services. A superintendent put it simply: "I think it boils down to the superintendent."

A related view offered by a director expressed an appreciation for progressive, engaged, risk-taking districts and superintendents: "It's more fun to work with [districts] that are really progressive." This director also offered: "Superintendents need to take more risks in their schools to be successful." One might imply from this that this director would in turn be frustrated with districts that are less progressive in their utilization of their REA.

Leadership change at the superintendent level was sometimes viewed as an obstacle to REA success as indicated by this superintendent: "New superintendents come in, new goals . . . and that's hard to bring them up to speed as to what we're doing." However, leadership change was not always viewed as a negative influence. This

superintendent discussed why his current district, which now is a more active REA member, was not highly involved prior to his arrival:

Initially, I don't think they were an active participant in their REA just because the former superintendent had an issue with it. The former superintendent just was always negative about it and didn't see the purpose in it. They should have been on board early on, just because of the size of the [district]. They could have been the leader in REA.

Another superintendent went further, identifying disengaged leaders and resistance to change as major obstacles to REA success:

I would say weaknesses within the individual schools. . . . I can tell you which schools, right now, which are proactive and want to be on the cutting edge of where they are going and get their teachers there. There's the ones that are just waiting for somebody to drag them along. Most of the small ones, in my opinion, are probably waiting and sitting back and either trying to deny they don't have to move but yet are feeling forced to.

Another superintendent discussed his perception of why some districts are more likely than others to utilize REA services: "I think it's going to depend on the administration in each building, some that are progressive are using them, some in denial about things probably don't use it as much."

Theme #2 – Summary

Both directors and school superintendents were highly aware of the impact of leadership on the effectiveness of REAs. Superintendents perceived an REA director,

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while not solely responsible, was highly influential on the effectiveness of an REA.

Director and superintendent participants perceived district superintendents also had a

major influence. This influence extended beyond individual school districts and whether

or not they were active REA members or utilized available services. It was also evident

superintendent leadership also highly impacted the overall functioning and effectiveness

of an REA.

Theme #3 – REAs Operate in an Unstable Funding Environment

"We're very dependent on grant funding."

Directors and superintendent participants were consistent in their perceptions that

REAs operated in a highly unstable fiscal environment and that inconsistent and

indefinite funding sources are a constraint to capacity. One superintendent said: "The

uncertainty of funding, I would say, will certainly always be one of the things [REAs]

face." A director supported this view, saying: "I think that for us to continue to deliver

these services, we've got to find some secure funding, whether that be our schools

individually supporting us to another level, or whether it's the legislature . . . the state that

jumps in and says we are going to support this at another level."

Nearly all director and superintendent participants expressed an uncomfortable

dependence upon grants. This director's concern represents the perception of many

director and superintendent participants: "We're very dependent on grant funding."

Another director participant expressed similar concern:

I am really concerned about the top heavy business of our funding and if

something happens to a grant then what happens to us if another grant fails or is

not available to us in the future or anything like that.

Participants attributed much of this uncertainty to dependence upon a single,

state-wide grant program called Succeed 2020. Succeed 2020 is a program started in

2012 by the Hess Corporation, contributing up to $400,000 per year to each REA's

operating budget. The maximum grant amount any single REA has been scheduled to

receive over a 5-year grant cycle is $2,000,000. Since the infusion of dollars from

Succeed 2020, REAs across all regions of the state have made efforts to expand and

improve the services they provide school districts. The Succeed 2020 program is

scheduled to conclude in 2017 (Succeed 2020, 2013).

Participants perceived Succeed 2020 as having a positive impact on their REA.

Succeed 2020 has allowed REAs to expand and improve the quality of services they

provide. When discussing REA growth and responding to the question, "How much of

that [growth] do you attribute to the Succeed 2020," one director responded:

Tremendously, because we have people who can do the work. For me, prior, it

was just every grant you'd get, you have to set up the program and do all the

work. That was a whole job . . . and in retrospect, it would have been much more

efficient. [The REA] could have grown faster if we would have two people doing

that work. But because of funding, that wasn't allowable. Succeed 2020 was

huge to get staff and be able to do work. That was a value. Before Succeed 2020

it was just basically myself, and a regional technician that works for us, and the schools.

Another director discussed the financial benefit to districts as a result of the REA receiving Succeed 2020 funding: "The grant [Succeed 2020] has allowed to us to do a lot of our target in school professional development for free."

Succeed 2020 allowed REAs to significantly expand the services being provided to schools. With this expansion came the concern of Succeed 2020 grants ending in 2017. Both directors and superintendents expressed concerns about how REAs might sustain these expanded programs beyond the grant period without major changes in both state and local funding mechanisms. A director said: "My big fear, when I wake up during the middle of the night is when the Succeed 2020 money is gone." A superintendent also discussed the uncertainty of Succeed 2020 funding saying: "There's 3 more years and a lot can change in 3 years, . . . what is happening politically, you know this money can go away quick."

With the expansion of services through Succeed 2020, has come increasing expectations of services. One director voiced concerns over the ability to meet the ongoing demands in the absence of funding provided by Succeed 2020: "I worry about Succeed 2020. The [professional development] I mentioned; it's really on the back of the Succeed 2020 grant, and when that goes away, 'Now what? How do we continue funding that?'" Another director expressed concern that demands for services from their REA are currently outpacing resources, even with Succeed 2020 funding:

We can't meet all their needs. I only have so many people; and now, there's a higher demand. Be careful what you wish for and so now, I have to figure out how are we going to do this next year, because I have staff who are running out of days, and the work is not all done.

A big question for all REAs is how to contribute to an equitable and adequate education with such a high reliance on the ability to generate grant funding. This director participant expressed major concern about the adequacy of funding for the statewide REA system: "There's five REAs in the state that are not remotely adequately funded." The director continued, describing the state funding impact on his REA: "Our state funding for our REA is in the neighborhood of 15-20 percent of our funding."

REA director and superintendent participants expressed concern for the large amount of grant supported personnel and programming and what will happen when Succeed 2020 grants expire: "Well I think that if we don't find a way to continue [Succeed 2020] funding . . . that's going to be a huge obstacle. We're not going to be able to provide some of those services like we have now." Another director concurred with the perception that the grant funding was likely not going to be continued: "Succeed 2020, if that . . . when that goes away; I know there's no way we can support the positions that we have right now and the initiatives. I think that really will hurt us."

When asked whether or not member schools in his REA would contribute the required funding to maintain the expanded services as a result of Succeed 2020, this superintendent participant responded:

I think [funding] has to come from the legislatures and through legislation rather than from individual schools, because when you get some of the schools you don't get so many schools that support it, and I just don't think it's going to fly unless it definitely has a purpose.

Another director participant was more optimistic about local districts' willingness to fill in the funding gap in the absence of grants or increased legislative appropriation: "We talked about how that will work for sustainability, and they are starting to understand that if legislation doesn't come along to sustain the funding that they are going to have to pay to keep that work going." Still, another director discussed how services that districts were receiving without paying a fee would need to be paid for by fees in the future in order to sustain REA services:

In terms if that service right now, they are able to get us and not pay anything for that. And we talked about how that will work for sustainability, and they are starting to understand that if legislation doesn't come along to sustain the funding, that they are going to have to pay to keep that work going. So we've already begun talks about implementing a fee for next year maybe to cover mileage, maybe to cover [expenses].

The additional uncertainty of the commitment of the state legislature to support REAs and view them as an integral part of the educational system in North Dakota seems to be a stressor on REAs. REA director and superintendent participants both expressed concern with uncertain state funding. The per pupil system of funding REAs and the autonomy that schools have to participate or not puts them in a somewhat precarious

position. A director perceived that the legislator is likely to expect more from the REAs but doubtful of funding support following: "What is a legislature going to mandate that REAs do? They've already put things in, in verbiage, that the REA will assist with but there's never any funding." A superintendent said: "The uncertainty of funding, I would say, will certainly always be one of the top priority, one of the things they'd face."

Superintendents also expressed that if a way to fill the Succeed 2020 funding gap is not filled, either by a continuation of the grant or by legislative appropriation, some REAs will struggle to maintain their current levels of service. When asked if the Succeed 2020 money is not renewed, would there be support from districts to fill the gap, a superintendent responded:

> I don't see that happening when you look at about $300,000 per year [and] the size of the schools that we have. I do not think they will even consider it, when you start looking at what it would cost. I don't see there being any conversation of that happening, [or] the conversation would be really short.

Another superintendent summed it up this way: "If [Succeed 2020] does not get renewed, we will once again go back to the director and not much else, and at that time, I do believe that would be the end of our REA."

Theme #3 – Summary

Uncertainty of funding is viewed as a major obstacle facing REAs. Much of that uncertainty is linked to the current reliance on a single, large grant (Succeed 2020) that has been set to expire in 2017. Study participants discussed the expansion of services and staffing that has occurred since the inception of Succeed 2020 and expressed concern

about sustainability when the grant cycle ends. Study participants also expressed concern

over commitment of the state legislature to provide adequate funding for all REAs.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a description of the emergent themes derived from

participant interview data. The foundation for development of each theme was based

largely upon common perceptions of director and superintendent participants. It is where

the perceptions of the two study participant groups converge that the most relevant

findings came forth. Using grounded theory methodology of coding and categorizing

data, three principle themes were presented: (a) Professional development is viewed as a

primary function of REAs, (b) REAs are leadership fragile, and (c) REAs operate in an

unstable funding environment. Chapter V will present the results of this study as

grounded theory.

CHAPTER V

EMERGENT THEORY

Grounded Theory

This research was conducted as a qualitative study utilizing methodology based upon Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory model. According to Creswell (2007), grounded theory is useful as a qualitative research method when the researcher wants to move beyond mere description of a phenomenon to the generation or development of theory. Grounded theory is appropriate when study participants "all would have experienced the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework for further research" (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). The researcher determined the conditions described above by Straus and Corbin (1998) and Creswell (2007) are present and support the application of grounded theory methodology for this study.

Based upon a thorough review of current literature and the researcher's prior professional experiences with REAs, the researcher developed a foundation of knowledge to guide the research. This knowledge, interview data collected from REA directors and a sample of school superintendents, and current literature were all referenced while utilizing grounded theory methods to develop a theory about REAs. As a result of the axial coding process, a grounded theory was developed, refined, and is presented in this chapter.

Figure 3 visually describes the REA grounded theory model developed in this study and is organized by the elements described in Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory paradigm (pp. 128-135). The following sections of this chapter provide a narrative for each theory element.

Contextual Conditions

- Legislation creating and governing the REA program in North Dakota
- School districts without adequate resources to provide needed programs
- Decisions of school districts to collaborate via membership in an REA

Causal Conditions

- The location, student population, and demographics of member districts
- Services needed/requested by member districts
- Funding available to each REA

Central Phenomenon

Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous entity

Actions & Interactions

- Actions by REA governing boards, directors, and school superintendents
- Relationships between REA directors and superintendents
- Influence of state legislature and DPI

Consequences

- The impact of REAs varies by region
- REAs compete for resources
- There are differences in the kind, intensity, and quality of services delivered by each REA

Intervening Conditions

- Presence or absence of collaborative culture
- State and/or federal mandates
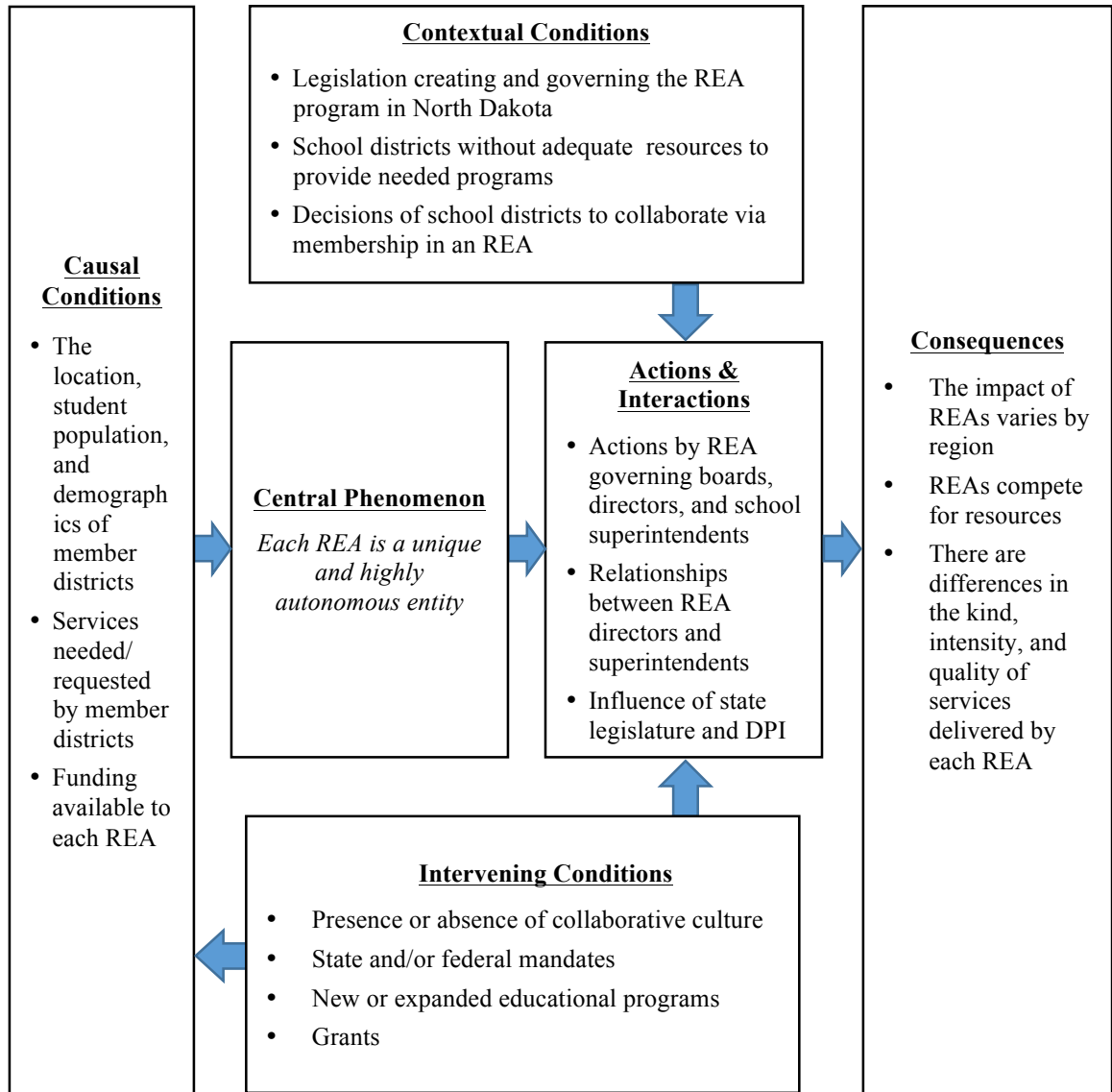- New or expanded educational programs
- Grants

Figure 3. Theoretical Model for the Effectiveness and Efficiency of REAs.

Central Phenomenon

"What is Going on Here?"

Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous entity.

The central phenomenon *Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous entity* emerged from interview data in the context of the research questions:

1. How do REA directors perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

2. How do school superintendents perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

3. What are the commonalities, similarities, and differences of REA director and superintendent perceptions of the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

Throughout the data analysis process of open, axial, and selective coding, it became clear to the researcher the central phenomenon cuts across the three thematic findings discussed in Chapter IV. The introductory interview statement, "Tell me about your REA" provided data relevant to each research question and became the source of a large portion of the data contributing to this grounded theory. Interview questions relating to strengths, weakness, and obstacles facing REAs also were significant sources of data.

In addition to interview data, the central phenomenon emerged from document analysis of services offered, governance structures, operating budgets, size of member school districts, concentration of student populations, and geographic factors. The grounded theory central phenomenon *Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous*

entity does not necessarily identify whether uniqueness and autonomy are positive or negative attributes.

There are strengths and weaknesses to this phenomenon that should be considered by any researcher studying REAs. The strengths of being unique and autonomous include having the flexibility to meet unique needs based on geography, student enrollment, or demographics. Additionally, limited regulation by the NDDPI may be perceived by some as a strength allowing this uniqueness to continue. In addition to minimally meeting five services required in statute, REAs can create and operate programming in demand by their local school districts.

The weakness of being unique and autonomous includes unequal access to resources. This inequity in available resources can have an impact at the REA level, school level, and ultimately at the student level. The fact that REAs are currently free to compete for school district membership (there are some limitations based upon district location), offer unique programming, have limited reporting to the NDDPI, and can lobby legislators for funding independent of their member school districts all are potential weaknesses.

Causal Conditions

"Events that influence the phenomena."

The location, student population, and demographics of member districts.

Factors of location, population, and demographics are causal conditions that were not controllable by REAs or REA member school districts, but had a significant influence on the central phenomenon. A director discussing the difficulty of delivering services to

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all schools because of location said: "We're so spread out." Referring to location, one superintendent responded: "Size for us is a weakness for us being so far away." Another superintendent identified the factors or student population and geography as significant weaknesses: "Geographically, we're really spread out into the far corners. I'd say funding, student numbers, and how big of an area we're covering to get the people that we have are probably our biggest weaknesses."

Unequal concentration of student population and the funding generated by the funding formula at the time of this study was perceived as influential on REA operations and their ability to deliver services. A director provided the following observation; that size relative to student populations contributes to an uneven playing field, to inequities in service: "You have more assets to leverage the bigger you are." Another director provided the following perspective about the impact of student population: "There's a huge [size] discrepancy between the REAs. When Succeed 2020 goes away, they will still have that big support there. So, I don't know how to remedy that besides bringing schools on board to start paying for services."

Directors serving regions with larger student populations also recognized there to be a difference in resources available because of size:

We have no issues with money at all. We do fine because of our size, and state funding is good. Even when the Succeed 2020 grant goes away, we'd like to sustain that, but we're working towards that. But still, we'll be okay.

Another superintendent made a similar observation regarding the influence of student population: "I do think we benefit from population size. Obviously financially we benefit from that."

Services needed/requested by member districts.

The causal condition of needed services is in many ways a by-product of school size. All participants expressed the perception that large school districts were not dependent upon their REA to provide services. Professional development as the primary function of REAs was likely an outgrowth of the need for this service by smaller school districts. While each REA operated professional development programs, there were also very unique programs such as career and technical education centers, teacher centers, and before and after school programs. REA directors stressed the fact that they have been there to meet the needs of their member schools. This REA director discussed how an REA needs assessments to determine services. "We focused really hard on ensuring that we're asking the right questions at the beginning of the year to find out what are your needs."

Funding available to each REA.

The perception of state funding to REAs being minimal was common to all participants. The data suggested directors perceived state funding of REAs to be inadequate to hire staff and provide the services they were expected or asked to provide. A director said: "We just don't have the staff to do it all. . . . We definitely have limitations." Another director concurred:

We certainly could use more staff, and I will tell you, our schools will tell you that we could use more staff, too. Especially with initiatives, implementation of Common Core, and making sure technology is embedded in the classroom, those kinds of things.

A superintendent provided the following insight in response to a question regarding the value of the services, also expressing that he perceived the REA as being underfunded: "It's definitely worth it, but I just think it could do much more if it had some small resources." Without Succeed 2020 and student counts of large districts, REAs, under the current per student funding formula, might struggle to exist.

Intervening Conditions

"Conditions that mitigate or alter causal conditions."

Presence or absence of collaborative culture.

Differences in REAs are not only reflective of student population and access to resources, but also of culture and attitudes of member school districts toward collaboration. A director said: "Some of the schools use the heck out of us; some of them, hardly at all." Perceptions of value also appeared to be influenced by local culture and attitudes in local school districts and the region served. Commenting on the local culture in his REA, one director said: "This part of the state . . . there's a lot of independence and there's a lot of independent individuals and a lot of independent school districts." Another director said:

I think that really depends on the school district. I think some of them see good

value in it. Some of them see limited value in it. But one of the things, I think,

you have to do is we don't try to force anybody to do anything.

A perceived obstacle expressed by one superintendent was that some schools

viewed their REA as a threat instead of a partner. "I think the biggest obstacle still is that

all [districts] are protective of their own turf." Another superintendent said: "In my part

of the world, it was hard to get schools [to] even agree on a common calendar. They are

very independent." However, this superintendent offered the following observation on

the importance of a collaborative culture: "I always believe in local control, but I also

believe that no school can be an island anymore."

State and/or federal mandates.

In some instances, REAs have been utilized as a means for local school districts

to address mandates imposed either from state or federal regulations. REAs have also

been used as a means for the NDDPI to accomplish statewide goals or implement

programming by providing grant dollars. A director perceived that this practice impacted

REAs, saying: "I actually see the state and the state legislature and the DPI moving more

initiatives through REAs. I could be wrong, but that's the light I see. I see the REAs

actually growing."

REAs have played a role for some member schools in providing professional

development and other resources to meet No Child Left Behind Act (2001) requirements.

Providing professional development for districts in Common Core State Standards, and in

principal and teacher evaluation systems were two additional examples of how REAs addressed mandated educational changes.

New or expanded educational programs.

Related to meeting the requirements of state and federal mandates is the idea of REAs providing new or expanded educational programs. A superintendent provided the following examples of some new initiatives delivered by an REA: "ELL, common core, PD in general; if there's a good PD topic that comes up we'll go, if it's CPI training, or common core, or teacher principal evaluation that's most of the stuff we're taking part in." REAs were perceived by a director participant as being essential for small schools to access new educational initiatives.

> I see our REA expanding services for schools at the school level, with
> implementation of common core, project-based learning, those kinds of
> initiatives, STEM initiatives. I think that schools, especially small schools, are
> going to be looking at REAs for the research, for the implementation models, for
> the professional development, for the resources, and to train their staff. I see that
> because that's where education is going, and I see small schools becoming really
> dependent on REAs for those services.

Grants.

Grant funding played a large role in the funding of REAs with implications on the kinds and intensity of services they were able to deliver. A major funding source was a Hess Corporation funded program called Succeed 2020 and is an intervening condition on the functioning of REAs. The Succeed 2020 grant may have assisted in creating some

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uniformity between REAs in North Dakota. However, participant feedback on REA operations before Succeed 2020 and perceptions of what might be on the horizon when the grant ends suggested that the absence of the grant could create even larger differences in REAs. A superintendent offered this observation: "If the Hess money goes away, I think our REA is probably going to dissolve." Conversely, a director said: "We have no issues with money at all. We do fine because of our size, and state funding is good. Even when the Succeed 2020 grant goes away . . . we'll be okay."

Actions & Interactions

"Actions that are taken to resolve a problem."

Actions by REA governing boards, directors, and school superintendents.

Organizationally, there are differences between REAs in terms of governing and management. Some REAs only have school board members on the governing board, others only superintendents, and still others have utilized a hybrid system with both school board members and superintendents participating on the governing board. There are also differences in how REAs have been delivering services based upon how an REA is organized as is pointed out by this director: "Our organizational structure is not up to the same speed as you're going to see in other places. There [are] other REAs that have had big staffs for 4, 5 years. Organizationally, we're going through the pains."

Relationships between REA directors and superintendents.

The relationships between REA directors and superintendents can have significant impacts on REAs. The research findings indicated that directors and superintendents were aware of the importance of these relationships to the ultimate success of each REA.

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Data suggested there were some significant differences between REAs when it comes to REA director and superintendent relationships. In one instance, a director said: "I would say probably our greatest strength is communication with superintendents." However, this superintendent offered a somewhat different view:

> So to me there was some confusion, and I guess in some respect I will take some responsibilities by saying I didn't follow up and find out why. But when you got a thousand million things going on, is kind of like you just say "well -- its going, I'm getting some services, and I don't have time to dig in [and] find any more out about it." But I think . . . there is not clarity always in decisions that are made from the REA.

Influence of state legislature and DPI.

There has been little in the way of state level accountability for the quality of REA programming provided to school districts. Additionally. there has been no requirement for local school districts to take advantage of efficiencies the REA might provide. There is an expressed discomfort by directors and superintendents with the absence of a more adequate and equitable funding system provided by the state. However, this director expressed some resistance to the idea that REAs should be a division of the NDDPI: "I don't ever think that we should be controlled by DPI - I think there has to be a separation, but I think there has to be a stronger link."

Contextual Conditions

"The conditions in this specific circumstance that intersect
dimensionally *and impact the actions/interactions."*

Legislation creating and governing the REA program in North Dakota.

REAs exist within the context of conditions created for them by the North Dakota

legislature. The concept of state sponsored regional collaboration was conceptualized by

North Dakota's DPI, authorized by the North Dakota legislature, and ultimately accepted

by school districts based upon the premise that local regions would have relative freedom

to operate them in a manner that best served local constituents. While there has been

guidance in North Dakota law regarding REA operations, there has been limited NDDPI

oversight or accountability. The idea of autonomy was useful, if not necessary, in getting

REAs off the ground. However, at this point in time might be limiting REAs ability to

improve, both at the regional level and as a statewide system. The current autonomous

REA system in North Dakota may offer little incentive to the state legislature for

providing additional funding to the REA system.

School districts without adequate resources to provide needed programs.

The basic premise that prompted the creation of REAs and their continuing

existence is that in order to provide an adequate education to all students, small rural

school districts needed assistance.

A superintendent identified how an REA helps meet needs in his district: "I guess

that's what I look for out of the REA, is those specialists. I don't have to have a person

on payroll, you know for those things. I can go to the [REA] and use . . . them." He

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continued discussing how he convinced his school board the REA could help small schools:

> I was really big on pushing the REA because of the services for a small school. When I looked at the Board and I talked about ELL, I talked about data specialist, I talked about all these technology classes our kids don't have.

Decisions of school districts to collaborate via membership in an REA.

REAs were originally established with the legislative intent of being voluntary, grassroots, and locally controlled entities. When school districts voluntarily joined as an REA member school district, a per-pupil funding allocation was generated which was funneled directly to the REA. If districts chose not to be a member school district, funding was not generated for the REA and was also not collected by schools in the non-participating district. This created an interesting paradox in which there was no financial gain by the school district by participating in the REA, but there was clearly a negative fiscal impact on the REA when school districts chose not to participate. A director described this idea, saying: "I think that pot of money that is set aside from the legislature, if it's not used, or if a larger school district pulls away from it, that money is not going to go back to the school districts; it's just going to get lost." Another director discussed the importance of having large school districts as member schools: "We're really lucky that our [large] schools recognize that we're all in this education business together, and so they've been really great partners with us, and so we're really happy about the support that we have with them."

Consequences

The range of intended or unintended results of actions/interactions in response to a situation.

The impact of REAs varies by region.

Impact refers to the qualities of effectiveness and efficiency of an REA. The data suggested the current REA system allowing for local autonomy in governance, fee structures, and services provided has contributed to significant variance in functioning and impact of REAs. A director stated: "Every one of the REAs is completely different." The idea of uniqueness was evident in perceptions of both REA directors and superintendents that these differences have been highly valued by REA leadership and endorsed by state level leadership. Granting autonomy to each REA, North Dakota allowed for the creation of eight very unique institutions. Even though a uniform funding system existed with defined purposes for REAs in N.D.C.C §§ 15.1-09.1 (Regional Education Associations, 2013), evidence from this research suggested that delivery of services to schools in each REA was far from uniform. This director used the example of how finances are managed within the REAs as an example of differences: "Some of us have fiscal agents that are colleges and universities; some of us have school districts that are our fiscal agents; we have one REA that is their own fiscal agent."

Differences in REAs were sometimes viewed as a source of pride, some participants pointed to unique and innovative programs in one or more REAs that may not be occurring in others. At other times, participants expressed differences in REAs as a source of frustration. The following director expressed the perception that some uniformity is needed for REA success:

REAs in the state are all different, and I think we need to get our act together. We need to have a strategic plan that is laid out and followed, and is flexible. . . . Once the REAs can get it together, if they ever can, they are going to be service providers for schools.

REAs compete for resources.

Factors discussed in this chapter also support the identified consequence that REAs compete for resources. Sometime this competition is between two or more REAs; and sometimes, it is between REAs and the local school districts they serve. A director made the following observation about competing interests of local districts and REAs: "The obstacle is superintendents seeing us as a partner, not as somebody competing against them for money." Another REA director also offered this perspective: "One of the differences between schools and REAs is that we have to be entrepreneurial. We have to figure out how to generate revenue, so we have to offer quality services that people are willing to pay for." The idea of needing to be entrepreneurial, along with competition for grant dollars may contribute to the perception that REAs as a statewide system needs to be improved. One director suggested increased collaboration and uniformity is a need: "I think as a state group collaboratively we need to work better on that. I mean, unfortunately, like the Succeed 2020, some of these other things have made us competitive." Another director stated: "The obstacle is superintendents seeing us as a partner, not as somebody competing against them for money or for, you know, it's that trust issue."

Competition between REAs for membership is also a factor. A superintendent discussed how school district administrators will look for services elsewhere if funding mechanisms don't allow for equitable services by the REA serving his district: "Schools are seriously considering approaching another one of the REAs and saying what can you do for us and would you be willing to take us? Simply because we saw when it was one person running it, services we were . . . not even [equal] compared to the services [another] REA was getting them."

There are differences in the kind, intensity, and quality of services delivered by each REA.

Since providing services to school districts is what REAs do, it is not surprising that differences in services impact the central phenomenon. The thematic finding of professional development being a primary function of REAs was one of the few consistencies observed. Beyond that, there was evidence of significant differences. Services such as career and technical education, teacher centers, before and after school programming, technology support, and career counseling are examples of programs that were not universal across all REAs.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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Chapter V presented results of this study as a grounded theory that emerged from axial coding of data. Based upon a thorough review of current literature and the researcher's professional experiences with REAs, the researcher developed a foundation of knowledge to guide the research. This knowledge, interview data collected from REA directors and a sample of school superintendents, and current literature were all referenced while utilizing grounded theory methods to develop a theory about REAs. As

a result of the axial coding process, a grounded theory was developed, refined, and was presented in this chapter.

The central phenomenon *Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous entity* might be viewed either positively or negatively, depending upon perspective. There was evidence in the research that participants perceived an REA's autonomy as a positive attribute that could contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational system in North Dakota. The freedom that REAs have been given has made them highly adaptable and able to respond to the changing needs in their member school districts. Member schools are in full control of the REA from an operational standpoint.

There was also evidence in the research that participants sometimes perceived REA autonomy as a negative attribute, creating an inequitable system of delivery of services across North Dakota. The conditions of student populations, geography, and funding in combination with limited oversight at the state level contributed to consequences of REAs being highly variable; competing for available resources; and differing in the kind, intensity, and quality of services delivered.

Chapter VI will present a discussion of findings in the contexts of the research questions of this study, discussion of study limitations, and discussion of emerging theory. It will also present implications and recommendations from this study in the contexts of practice, policy, and research.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Using grounded theory methodology of open coding and categorizing data, three thematic findings were presented in Chapter IV: (a) Professional development is viewed as a primary function of REAs; (b) REAs are leadership fragile; and (c) REAs operate in an unstable funding environment. Additionally, Chapter V described the results of the axial coding process to develop a theoretical model of North Dakota REAs based on grounded theory with a central phenomenon – *Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous entity*. Conditions influencing REAs contributed to consequences that REA autonomy creates: (a) The impact of REAs varies by region, (b) REAs compete for resources, and (c) There are differences in the kind, intensity, and quality of services delivered by each REA.

Chapter VI presents the results of selective coding analysis of the data and is divided into three subsections: (a) Discussion of study findings in the contexts of the research questions, (b) presentation of the implications of this study and recommendations based on this study organized by finding, and (c) discussion of study limitations.

Discussion

Research Question #1

How do REA directors perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

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Interviews conducted for this study produced data on how directors perceived individual REAs they served and the REA system in North Dakota as a whole. All directors interviewed perceived REAs to be a vital component of the educational system in North Dakota. They also consistently expressed the perception of REAs being an effective means of delivering services to member schools. As is mentioned in the study limitations, this perception may be influenced by the nature of their employment, placing them naturally in a position of advocacy. Director participants discussed in detail services their REAs were providing. Directors all perceived that REAs were providing valuable services to member school districts. Each director expressed pride in the role their REA played in assisting member schools to meet needs that might otherwise have been neglected. Professional development for teachers and administrators, data analysis, technology assistance, and direct student services such as career and technical education and career counseling services were provided as examples of what directors considered exemplary programs.

Directors perceived leadership of member school superintendents to be vital to the success of their REAs. They also perceived REAs to be inadequately funded by the legislature. Directors were also consistent in their belief that the REA they directed provided services aligned to five areas required in North Dakota law. An interesting contrast was found that superintendents hardly referenced legal requirements. Superintendent feedback mainly focused on services they were receiving from their REA and the perceived value of those services. Whether or not REAs met a statutory requirement was not expressed as a concern by superintendents.

Data did not reveal clearly director perceptions of the second part of Research

Question 1, regarding REA efficiency. This may in part be attributed to the qualitative

nature of this study in which participants are in control of the feedback they provide. It

may also be attributed to limitations in the interview questions that may not have

adequately probed this issue to answer this research question. With both directors and

superintendent participants expressing that REAs provided services not otherwise

feasible, one might conclude this reflects higher levels of efficiency. With the literature

indicating some conflicting findings on the impact of ESAs in regard to efficiency and

regionalization of services, the question of whether or not North Dakota REAs impact

efficiency provides an opportunity for additional study.

Research Question #2

How do school superintendents perceive the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

Interviews conducted during this study also produced data on how

superintendents perceived the effectiveness of the REA serving their school district.

Superintendents interviewed were less unified in their perceptions of the effectiveness of

REAs in delivery of services to their school districts than were directors. None of the

superintendents interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the REA serving their district

and were generally positive in their perceptions. However, there were differences in

perception regarding the degree of impact their REA had on member school districts.

This may be attributed to the central phenomenon of this study that each REA is a unique

and highly autonomous entity. The differences in the services REAs deliver across the

state would naturally seem to contribute to differing superintendent perceptions.

Some participants placed a high value on services provided by their REA and felt that it was effectively filling unmet needs. Others were less convinced that REAs were vital to their school district's success, taking the approach that they were appreciative of the services offered and would use them if they were convenient and timely. Convenience and timely access to services were also cited as reasons districts did and did not use their REA. There was evidence in superintendent interview data that suggested differences in perceptions of participants on effectiveness of REAs may have been impacted by size, location, and unmet needs of individual school districts. As was the case with directors, the data did not reveal clearly perceptions of the second part of Research Question #2 regarding efficiency.

Research Question #3

What are the commonalities, similarities, and differences of superintendent and director perceptions of the effectiveness and efficiency of REAs?

The data did suggest that REA directors and superintendents had in common some perceptions about REAs. These common perceptions provided much of the foundation for the thematic findings presented in chapter IV of this study and contributed to the development of a grounded theory model. First, were perceptions related to professional development. Perceptions of both superintendents and REA directors consistently supported the finding that professional development was the most widely utilized service offered by REAs and has been a mainstay of the REAs. Not all participants agreed that professional development was the most important function of REAs, but the perception of professional development being a primary service was common. REA director and superintendent participants generally perceived professional

development as an effective service delivered by REAs serving their district. They also perceived REAs were generally able to provide professional development services more effectively than individual districts could on their own.

A second common perception of directors and superintendent participants was that leadership, provided by an REA director and by a member school superintendent, played a key role in the success of an REA. Data suggested both participant groups viewed successes of REAs as being highly dependent on the people in leadership positions. Superintendent participants recognized both the leadership of directors and that of colleagues as critical to the effectiveness of REAs. Directors also perceived leadership and involvement of superintendents in member schools as critical to REA effectiveness and overall success.

Finally, both director and superintendent participant groups perceived REA funding to be a major obstacle to their ability to deliver effective services. Both participant groups recognized the positive impact of the Succeed 2020 grant program, initiated in 2011, to help them expand REA services. They were also aware of difficulties they would face if funding currently provided by Succeed 2020 was not permanently secured.

Implications and Recommendations

Thematic findings presented in Chapter IV provided the basis for the practice, policy, and research implications discussed in this chapter. These findings were:

1. Professional development is perceived as a primary function of REAs,

2. REAs are leadership fragile, and

3.	REAs operate in an unstable funding environment.

Implications reflected what Stephens and Keane (2005) referred to as, "issues that must

be confronted if ESAs are to survive in healthy condition in the future" (p. 240).

Stephens and Keane identified the issues of shedding invisibility, data for policy

decision-making, and the need for more cost analysis and research on program

effectiveness as critical to improving ESAs. The implications for this study are organized

in the following sections by those impacting practice, policy, and research. In each of the

following sections the researcher discusses the implications for each section and includes

questions for REA, school district, and state level leaders to consider followed by

researcher recommendations.

Practice – Implications

The central phenomenon of the grounded theory model presented in Chapter V,

that North Dakota REAs are each unique and autonomous entities, has practical

implications for REAs. Data suggested that when supported by school leadership and

provided adequate resources, REAs can be an effective and efficient service provider for

school districts. A director offered the following view:

> I would say school districts that know us and use our resources and support think
>
> very highly of us. Actually, I think if you would talk to all of our schools, I
>
> believe that they would tell you that we are of great value to them, because we
>
> provide services that they would not have if we were not there.
>
> However, both director and superintendent study participants also perceived that

REAs operate under conditions that vary widely across the state. Data suggested this

variation may be due to differences in funding, local leadership, student populations, demographics, and geography in each region.

Data suggested REAs were a primary means of delivering professional development for many school districts. Member schools would benefit from a continuing focus on professional development as a primary function of REAs. It is recommended that REAs maintain their current focus on professional development and seek ways to expand and improve upon this as a primary service. REAs should resist the temptation to try to be all things to all school districts and focus on doing fewer things very well. This may require REAs to eliminate or reduce some services in less demand by local schools that schools can accomplish adequately without assistance from their REA. It may also require additional sharing and coordination of professional development between REAs.

A director commenting on how REA administrators must think differently than school district administrators in order to address needs said: "One of the differences between schools and REAs is that we have to be entrepreneurial. We have to figure out how to generate revenue, so we have to offer quality services that people are willing to pay for." This concept of being entrepreneurial was not uncommon. However, it could be viewed as troublesome if REAs are ever going to be viewed as a vital component for providing adequate and equitable education to North Dakota students. The idea that effectiveness of an individual REA and its impact on member schools is reliant on an entrepreneurial spirit would seem to contradict the constitutional mandate of the state providing a uniform system of public school for all students. If this continues to be the

case, REAs may struggle in becoming a central component of the state's educational system and continue to operate in a supplemental role.

The thematic finding of leadership fragility has practical implication for REAs. When discussing the weakness in his REA, a director said: "The weaknesses of any REA is leadership; the same as school districts." This statement would appear to be true when discussing strengths, also. However, there are differences in potential outcomes between REAs and school districts when leadership is the variable. School districts can most certainly be adversely impacted by ineffective leadership, sometimes extremely so. However an extensive set of laws, administrative rules, and financial support, help insulate students in school districts from an absence of effective district leadership. There is significantly less insulation provided by laws, rules, and financial support for the REA system, thereby magnifying both positive and negative impacts of leadership on the ultimate success of an REA organization.

Practice – Questions and Recommendations

Practical questions for REA, school district, and state level leaders to consider as a result of this study include:

1. What is the mission and role of REAs, both locally and at the state level?

2. Is the mission and role understood and attainable by all REAs?

3. How can REAs be more equitable in the services made available to school districts and the students they serve; and,

4. What must be done to provide more stability for REAs when leadership at the REA or member school level changes?

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Practical recommendations for REA, school district, and state level leaders to consider are:

1. REAs at both the state and local level should have consistent missions and agreed upon roles regardless of location or demographics. This researcher recommends REAs consider giving up some of the local control they currently have and consider operating within a more organized statewide system under the auspices of NDDPI in an attempt to eliminate "haves and have nots" within the REA system. This recommendation may have the secondary benefit of addressing the potential negative impact of a vacuum in REA or school district leadership.

2. REAs should maintain a strong focus on delivering professional development.

3. REAs should set practical limits to the numbers, kinds, and scope of services provided and avoid the temptation of attempting to be all things to all schools.

Policy – Implications

Minimal funding and limited involvement at the state level may contribute to inequity in the kind and quality of services delivered to schools by REAs. Data from this study identified the need for leaders to address matters of policy. The first of these needs is related to the study finding that REAs are operating in an unstable fiscal environment. Policy makers need to be prepared to address the major funding cliff that REAs are

facing after the Succeed 2020 grant ends. Not only that, they need to have those discussions with REA leadership.

Policy makers need to consider the instability that is created by keeping REAs, for the most part, autonomous in their operations. There is evidence in this study that suggests the current mostly autonomous system may be contributing to regional haves and have nots. The following is a quote from an REA director on regional differences and a call for some uniformity.

REAs in the state are all different, and I think we need to get our act together. There are so many differences, and the dynamics in the state are greatly different. . . . I think the future is going to be, once the REAs can get it together, if they ever can, they are going to be service providers for schools.

A basic premise of educational equity is that access to opportunity not be related to circumstances of location. Data in this study raised some doubt that such a principle is upheld in the organization of REAs in North Dakota at the time of this report. It should be concerning to policy makers that an REA system originally created to provide adequate and equitable education to smaller and more remote school districts may actually be contributing to educational inequity in more rural locations. To counter this, policy makers may consider creating more viable accountability links between REAs and the NDDPI as was suggested by this director: "If they are wanting to set up these regional organizations, then they, meaning the state legislature and the Department of Public Instruction, are going to have to redefine the role of the REAs." However, redefining the role of REAs may not be popular or easy as evidenced by the following

quote from another director: "I don't ever think that we should be controlled by NDDPI. I think there has to be a separation, but I think there has to be a stronger link."

The idea that REAs needed to be strictly grass-roots organizations – organized, developed, and operated as local entities – was in some ways a compromise position to make progress towards a larger goal of the NDDPI to regionalize educational services. During the late 1990s, state leaders at the NDDPI were proposing regionalized service agencies, before the REA system as it is now recognized came to be. During that time, the NDDPI was a proponent of creating state sponsored service regions organized around eight major population hubs. The reluctance of small school districts to become too closely associated with larger districts for fear of forced consolidation slowed this idea. Now that the REA system has been established, and with the data in this study suggesting that school districts no longer feel threatened by their existence, it may be an opportune time for the state to bring REAs under the umbrella of the NDDPI. A superintendent offered this observation when referencing REA organizational structure that would seem to support this idea: "We really [have] nine different school districts across the state. Some are doing this for education; some are doing that for education. But to me, I think there should be some uniformity; there should be something that controls them."

Other research on educational service agencies would support this, suggesting the capacity of an ESA depends in large part on the structure of the ESA and the organization of the statewide network (McKenzie, 2010; Stephens, Bensimon, McAdoo, & Gividen, 1979; Stephens & Keane, 2005).

The state system of autonomy in REA operations and governance places the ultimate success or failure of any single REA largely upon the effectiveness of local leadership. There are several other factors that could impact success or failure, but based upon perceptions of directors and superintendent participants, data suggested that leadership has been a highly influential factor. The data also suggested REA policies at the state and local levels may not be robust enough to withstand a vacuum of effective leadership, at least at the time of this study. Data suggested that both superintendents and directors perceived active leadership and the support of member school superintendents as contributing greatly to the programming available to member schools. This in turn may contribute to inequities between REAs.

Policy – Questions and Recommendations

Policy questions for REA, school district, and state level leaders to consider as a result of this study include;

1. Is there a need for increased state level oversight of REAs and for REAs to become more uniform in the services they provide to member schools?

2. How will the REA system transition from a largely grant supported funding system to a more stable, reliable, and equitable state supported funding system?

3. Will Succeed 2020 be renewed after 2017 and how will local REAs, school districts, and state government respond if Succeed 2020 grant dollars are not renewed or replaced?

Policy recommendations for REA, school district, and state level leaders to consider are:

1. State laws and administrative rules should be enhanced to allow for a more uniform and equitable REA system and for increased oversight and support of REAs by NDDPI. The intent of this recommendation is to enhance consistency in the availability and quality of services provided to all North Dakota school districts.

2. For REAs to be successful in the future, a reliable and adequate state funding system must be established, thereby reducing dependence on grants for delivery of essential services. The state legislature created the REA system, and therefore it is imperative that they are aware of the Succeed 2020 funding cliff and understand the implications for local REAs and the statewide system.

Research – Implications

Because there has been very little in the way of research specific to REAs in North Dakota, the door is wide open for future studies. While data collected for this study were largely focused on the perceptions of "impact," namely effectiveness and efficiency; qualitative and quantitative researchers have opportunities to provide more in depth analysis of these impact factors. Going beyond the perceptions of a small sample group is a natural next step for further research. Research building upon the study themes of professional development, funding, and leadership, and upon the central phenomena of "unique and autonomous" may also assist in improving the North Dakota REA system.

Studies including perception data from other stakeholders such as legislators, representatives from the NDDPI, teachers, principals, superintendents, students, special education and career and tech directors, and school board members all have the potential to expand upon this study.

Research Questions and Recommendations

Because North Dakota REAs have been the subject of limited research there are unanswered questions as well as opportunities for future research. Questions that should be considered for future research include;

1. Are REAs an effective, efficient, and equitable, means of delivering services to school districts? While research questions of this study considered perceptions of efficiency, the data collected and the study design did not produce adequate data to develop findings related to this concept.

2. Are current policies, administrative rules, and funding mechanisms allowing REAs to meet their potential as a service provider to North Dakota school districts?

Research recommendations that may provide answers to questions about North Dakota REAs include;

1. Quantitative cost analysis studies of North Dakota REAs should be conducted. Research from cost-analysis studies may help local and state level leaders to make informed decisions regarding utilizing REA programs and services. Cost analysis studies should be designed to answer the questions of effectiveness and efficiency

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of REAs as well as questions regarding the equity of the REA funding mechanisms.

2. An in depth policy analysis should be conducted. This should include analysis of current policies governing North Dakota REAs and analysis of policies of ESA systems in other states. Research from policy analysis would help local and state level leaders to identify effective policies and to make recommendations for changes to improve the North Dakota REA system.

Limitations

This research was conducted as a small-scale qualitative study, limited to REA directors in the state of North Dakota and a small sample of North Dakota school superintendents. It is acknowledged the qualitative interview process may have limited some participants' willingness to provide frank and open responses that might otherwise be possible with an anonymous survey instrument. Additionally, while the researcher did not sense distrust from participants, it was observed that some participants were clearly more guarded with their responses than others. The researcher sensed in both director and superintendent interviews a reluctance to be too critical of one's own REA or the system in general. This is understandable considering that there could possibly be negative organizational impacts if adverse conditions are brought to light. Finally, directors are employees of an REA. Because of their employment status, it was assumed directors were naturally going to be advocates for REAs, which in turn, may have influenced their responses.

The qualitative nature of this study and the design of the semi-structured questionnaire limited the ability of the researcher to adequately collect data relative to the research questions of REA efficiency. Therefore, there were no findings or conclusions relative to the question of efficiency. A larger scale quantitative study would likely be a more appropriate method of assessing efficiency. Another limitation related to the scale of this study was that, while reaching all REA directors employed at the time, the study only enabled the researcher to collect data from nine superintendents. The findings, emergent theory and conclusions of this study have been solely based upon data collected from a very small sample of superintendents. Finally, the sample of superintendents did not include any of those employed in districts not served by an REA.

Conclusion

Since their inception in 2003, REAs have evolved into an integral part of North Dakota's educational system. The majority of North Dakota school districts were members of an REA at the time of this study and were recipients of at least one REA service. This study sought perceptions of effectiveness and efficiency from REA directors and a sample of North Dakota school superintendents. On the surface, the perception data collected for this study indicated a generally positive view of REAs by all participants. Underlying these positive perceptions, however, were issues to be addressed by local, regional, and state leaders in order for REAs to improve and to remain viable educational service providers in North Dakota.

Three thematic findings emerged from analysis of participant interview data. These were:

1. Professional development is perceived as a primary function of REAs,

2. REAs are leadership fragile, and

3. REAs operate in an unstable funding environment.

A grounded theory model with a central phenomenon, *Each REA is a unique and highly autonomous entity*, also emerged from this study. Consequences identified as a result of this "uniqueness" included:

1. The impact of REAs varies by region;

2. REAs compete for resources; and

3. There are differences in the kind, intensity, and quality of services delivered by REAs.

It is likely REAs will continue to exist and their role in delivering services to North Dakota school districts will continue to evolve. The direction and the speed with which this evolution occurs could be dependent upon how REAs address the findings discussed in this study. A major driver of this evolution will be a commitment from state government, local school districts, and REA organizations themselves to improve, not only local REAs, but the statewide REA system, as well.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT - SUPERINTENDENTS

TITLE: **Perceptions of Regional Education Associations in North Dakota**

PROJECT DIRECTOR: **Jeffery E. Lind**

PHONE #   **701-208-0221**

DEPARTMENT: **Educational Leadership**

A person who is to participate in the research must provide his or her informed consent to participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to participate. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

You are invited to be in a research study about perceptions of Regional Education Associations (REA) in North Dakota because you have been identified as a school superintendent.

The purpose of this study is to develop a grounded theory based upon the perceptions of REA directors and a sample of school superintendents about experiences with REAs, including the services being provided and their impact on education. The study intends to identify commonalities and differences in their perspectives, seeking to find what is working well, what is not, and how the REA system might be improved to better serve its member schools. The researcher will approach the study in a pragmatic manner, with the intention that the results of the study may be used to describe the current functioning of REAs and to provide a foundation of information from which to drive change, both at the local and state level.

Both REA directors and a sample of school superintendents from North Dakota will be invited to take part in this study. Your total time commitment required to participate can be expected to be no more than 2 hours, which will be through a single one on one interview with the researcher.

This study will involve collecting data by conducting interviews with school superintendents. You will be interviewed one time utilizing a semi structured interview procedure in which you will be asked a series of pre-determined open-ended questions. Additional follow-up non-scripted questions may be inserted into the interview based upon your responses to the pre-determined questions. The interviews will be recorded by the researcher and transcribed by the researcher and/or a transcription service secured

Approval Date: JAN 3 0 2014

Expiration Date: JAN 2 9 2015

University of North Dakota IRB

by the researcher. Each interview is anticipated to take approximately 45 to 90 minutes and will be conducted at the work location of the participant. I will contact you via email to confirm and schedule the interview. Recorded interviews will be transcribed and be provided to you for review. Transcripts of your interview will be coded and the data will be analyzed utilizing qualitative research methods.

It is anticipated that risks for participation, if any, will be minimal. Some questions may be of a sensitive nature. You may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question.

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope in the future educators and legislators may benefit from this study. REA directors, administrators, school districts, legislators, or other members of the public may benefit from the information gained either as a policy development tool or for general information about REAs.

There are no costs for being in this research study except for your time.

There is no reimbursement for participation in this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study results may be reviewed only by the researcher, researcher's advisor, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of only identifying participants and their association with a specific REA through the use of pseudonyms both for individual participants, and for the school they represent. Interview recordings, memos, field notes, jottings, or other interview documentation will be stored on the researcher's personal computer or in locked file cabinets in the research site and will only be accessible by the researcher.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

Audio recordings of interviews conducted in this study will be recorded electronically and stored digitally on the researcher's personal computer or portable hard drive. The researcher, advisor, transcriptionist, or UND IRB will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed after 3 years. Both the computer and hard drive will be locked in the research site and will only be accessible by the researcher.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

Approval Date: ___ JAN 3 0 2014 _____
Expiration Date: ___ JAN 2 9 2015 ____
University of North Dakota IRB

The researcher conducting this study is Jeffery E. Lind. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact the researcher at 701-208-0221. The student advisor for this project is Dr. Sherryl Houdek and may be reached at 701-777-2394.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: _____

_____   _____
Signature of Subject   Date

Date_____
Subject Initials: _____

TITLE: **Perceptions of Regional Education**
Associations in North Dakota

PROJECT DIRECTOR: **Jeffery E. Lind**

PHONE # **701-208-0221**

DEPARTMENT: **Educational Leadership**

A person who is to participate in the research must provide his or her informed consent to participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to participate. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

You are invited to be in a research study about perceptions of Regional Education Associations (REAs) in North Dakota because you have been identified as a Director of a North Dakota REA.

The purpose of this study is to develop a grounded theory based upon the perceptions of REA directors and a sample of school superintendents about experiences with REAs, including the services being provided and their impact on education. The study intends to identify commonalities and differences in their perspectives, seeking to find what is working well, what is not, and how the REA system might be improved to better serve its member schools. The researcher will approach the study in a pragmatic manner, with the intention that the results of the study may be used to describe the current functioning of REAs and to provide a foundation of information from which to drive change, both at the local and state level.

Both REA directors and a sample of school superintendents from North Dakota will be invited to take part in this study. Your total time commitment required to participate can be expected to be no more than 2 hours, which will be through a single one on one interview with the researcher.

This study will involve collecting data by conducting interviews with REA Directors. You will be interviewed one time utilizing a semi structured interview procedure in which you will be asked a series of pre-determined open-ended questions. Additional follow-up non-scripted questions may be inserted into the interview based upon your responses to the pre-determined questions. The interviews will be recorded by the researcher and transcribed by the researcher and/or a transcription service secured by the

Approval Date: ___JAN 3 0 2014___
Expiration Date: ___JAN 2 9 2015___
University of North Dakota IRB

researcher. Each interview is anticipated to take approximately 45 to 90 minutes and will be conducted at the work location of the participant. I will contact you via email to confirm and schedule the interview. Recorded interviews will be transcribed and be provided to you for review. Transcripts of your interview will be coded and the data will be analyzed utilizing qualitative research methods.

It is anticipated that risks for participation, if any, will be minimal. Some questions may be of a sensitive nature. You may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question.

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope in the future educators and legislators may benefit from this study. REA directors, administrators, school districts, legislators, or other members of the public may benefit from the information gained either as a policy development tool or for general information about REAs.

There are no costs for being in this research study except for your time.

There is no reimbursement for participation in this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study results may be reviewed only by the researcher, researcher's advisor, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of only identifying participants and their association with a specific REA through the use of pseudonyms both for individual participants, and for the REA they represent. Interview recordings, memos, field notes, jottings, or other interview documentation will be stored on the researcher's personal computer or in locked file cabinets in the research site and will only be accessible by the researcher.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

Audio recordings of interviews conducted in this study will be recorded electronically and stored digitally on the researcher's personal computer or portable hard drive. The researcher, advisor, transcriptionist, or UND IRB will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed after 3 years. Both the computer and hard drive will be locked in the research site and will only be accessible by the researcher.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

Approval Date: _____ JAN 3 0 2014 _____

Expiration Date: _____ JAN 2 9 2015 _____

University of North Dakota IRB

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The researcher conducting this study is Jeffery E. Lind. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact the researcher at 701-208-0221. The student advisor for this project is Dr. Sherryl Houdek and may be reached at 701-777-2394.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: _____

_____   _____
Signature of Subject   Date

                                                                                    Date_____
                                                                      Subject Initials: _____

Approval Date: _____JAN 30 2014_____
Expiration Date: ___JAN 29 2015_____
University of North Dakota IRB

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Perceptions of Regional Education Cooperatives in North Dakota

Director Interview Protocol and Questions

The researcher conducting the interviews will be Jeffery E. Lind. The interviews are being conducted for a research project at the University of North Dakota.

This interview will be conducted as a semi-structured interview and will take place in a confidential setting at a mutually agreeable location. Additional follow up questions or questions that may spontaneously arise during the course of the interview seen as valuable for gathering further or new information of value to the study will be inserted into the interview at a point determined appropriate by the researcher. The interview will be audio recorded.

1. Please begin by telling me about your REA.

2. What are the primary services that school districts receive from your REA?

3. How do you think that school districts perceive the value of each of these services?

4. How effective do you believe your REA has been in its delivery of each these services?

5. What do you perceive are the strengths of your REA's in its delivery of services to member school districts?

6. What do you perceive are the weaknesses of your REA's in its delivery of services to member school districts?

7. What do you see as obstacles that face your REA in its future efforts to serve member school districts?

8. What do you see as potential opportunities for your REA to expand or improve the services it provides to member school districts?

9. Please share with me any other information that might help me gain a greater understanding of how the REA impacts your school district.

Perceptions of Regional Education Cooperatives in North Dakota

Superintendent Interview Protocol and Questions

The researcher conducting the interviews will be Jeffery E. Lind. The interviews are being conducted for a research project at the University of North Dakota.

This interview will be conducted as a semi-structured interview and will take place in a confidential setting at a mutually agreeable location. Additional follow up questions or questions that may spontaneously arise during the course of the interview seen as valuable for gathering further or new information of value to the study will be inserted into the interview at a point determined appropriate by the researcher. The interview will be audio recorded.

1. Please begin by telling me about the REA serving your school district.

2. What are the primary services that your school district receives from your REA?

3. How do you perceive the value of each of these services for your school district?

4. How effective has your REA been in its delivery of each these services?

5. What do you perceive are the strengths of your REA's and its delivery of services to member school districts?

6. What do you perceive are the weaknesses of your REA and its delivery of services to your school district?

7. What do you see as obstacles that face your REA in its future efforts to serve member school districts?

8. What do you see as potential opportunities for your REA to expand or improve the services it provides to member school districts?

9. Please share with me any other information that might help me gain a greater understanding of how the REA impacts your school district.

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