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**FINAL REPORT OF THE
SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCIES**

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The Honorable Jack Hill, Chair
Senator, District 4

The Honorable Dan Moody
Senator, District 56

The Honorable Daniel Weber
Senator, District 40

The Honorable John Crosby
Senator, District 13

The Honorable Freddie Sims
Senator, District 12

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Senate Study Committee on Regional Educational Service Agencies was created by Senate Resolution 595 during the 2009 Legislative Session. The Committee was charged with studying the mandatory nature of regional educational service agencies (RESA) and the required membership by local school systems and public postsecondary institutions, including the continued funding by the state of these regional educational service agencies. Additionally, the committee was directed to make any recommendations, including suggestions for legislation, that it deemed necessary.

The Committee was composed of five members of the Senate: Senator Jack Hill, serving as Chairman; Senator John Crosby; Senator Dan Moody; Senator Freddie Sims; and Senator Daniel Weber.

The following Legislative staff was assigned to the Committee: Mr. James Touchton, Senate Research Office; Ms. Raegan Weber, Senate Press Office; and Ms. Natalie Strong, Senate Press Office.

The Committee held two meetings at the State Capitol on December 10, 2009 and December 14, 2009. During its meetings, the Committee heard testimony from the following individuals: Mr. Stephen Pruitt, Chief of Staff, Department of Education; Ms. Clara Keith, Deputy Superintendent for Policy and External Affairs, Department of Education; Dr. Russell Cook, Director, Northeast Georgia RESA; Mr. Dexter Mills, Executive Director, Northwest Georgia RESA; Ms. Fran Perkins, Director, Metro RESA; and Ms. Shelly Smith, Executive Director, First District RESA.

II. COMMITTEE FINDINGS

A. Background Information – Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA)

The RESA Statewide network is composed of 16 regional educational service agencies located in strategic areas across the state. (See Attachment A) These RESAs include: The Central Savannah River Area; The Chattahoochee-Flint; The Coastal Plains; The First District; Griffin; The Heart of Georgia; The Metro; The Middle Georgia; The North Georgia; The Northeast Georgia; The Northwest Georgia; The Oconee; The Okefonokee; The Pioneer in Northeast Georgia; The Southwest Georgia; and the West Georgia RESA.

The first educational service agencies began in Georgia in 1966, with the establishment of shared service agencies. These agencies were created to enhance local efforts targeting state initiatives to improve schools. In 1972, the Georgia General Assembly created a network of Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs), the pre-cursor to RESAs. These agencies were expanded by legislation, identified as Regional Education Service Agencies in 1986 and mandated that RESAs provide specific shared services and assist with documented local needs of the 180 school systems across the state.

House Bill 1187, passed in 2000, the "A+ Georgia Education Reform Act" greatly increased the role of RESA's in providing services to local systems and schools. These services included:

- Identifying or conducting research related to educational improvement and in planning for the implementation of such improvements;
- Developing and implementing staff development programs with an emphasis on improving student achievement and school accountability;
- Developing and implementing curricula and instruction of the highest quality possible, including the uniformly sequenced core curriculum adopted by the State Board of Education;
- Identifying and utilizing electronic technology, including computers, in efforts to improve the quality of classroom instruction as well as classroom, school, and school system management;
- Developing programs, resource materials, and staff development services relating to instruction on the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse;
- Assisting in the development and implementation of a state-wide mentoring program.

Additionally, the legislation authorized RESAs to provide core services, programs for non-traditional alternative routes to teacher certification and provided for instructional care teams. Core services provided to local schools and systems in one RESA could also be provided to other local schools and systems in another member RESA. These core services encompass:

- Training and assistance in teaching each subject area;
- Assistance specifically designed for any school that is rated academically failing;
- Training and assistance to teachers, administrators, members of local boards of education, and members of local school councils on school-based decision making and control; and

- Assistance in complying with applicable state laws and rules of the State Board of Education and the Education Coordinating Council.

The goal of each RESA is to help local school systems meet their educational needs through the sharing of services across school system boundaries. RESA's pool resources to offer numerous educational services to the local schools and school systems that are members of a RESA. All RESA's, at a minimum, offer the following seven services:

1. Research and Planning;
2. Staff Development;
3. Curriculum and Instruction;
4. Assessment and Evaluation;
5. Technology;
6. Health; and
7. School Improvement.

Additional services that are provided by the various RESAs to local school systems and other member RESA's include: Alternative Routes to Certification; Audio Logical Clinic¹; Cooperative Purchasing; Education Technology Centers; Records Management; Science Instructional Support; Safe & Drug Free Schools and Communities; Surveys; School Environmental Services; Teacher Certifications; and Youth Apprenticeships.

All school systems are required to obtain membership in a RESA in accordance with House Bill 1187. RESAs are funded by state, local, federal, and grant dollars. State funding is appropriated by the General Assembly and is allocated by a formula that considers RESA memberships and size. Member school systems contribute to the operation of their area RESA through locally-determined membership fees and charges for specific services.

RESAs are governed by a structure established in legislation by the Georgia General Assembly. Boards of Control govern each RESA and are comprised of member school system superintendents, presidents of higher education institutions located within the RESA, and regional library system representatives.

B. Testimony

Dr. Stephen Pruitt, Chief of Staff of the Georgia Department of Education testified before the committee, stressing the important relationship between the Department of Education and RESAs. He focused on the partnerships between Educational Technology Centers (ETCs) and RESAs. There are thirteen ETC's located in Georgia, seven of which are located in a RESA, with the other six spread among various colleges and universities. ETCs play a crucial technology role for many school systems, providing them with many services that the Department of Education is not staffed to handle.

Dr. Pruitt focused on RESA's and ETC's benefit to school systems in the recent MATH Rollout for teacher training at the local level and the GAP analysis, a Federal requirement for schools in Needs Improvement status. Additionally, ETCs worked with systems to upload No Child Left Behind data, such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports, relieving the local system of this additional burden. Many local systems that have faced financial downturns have had some of their burdens relieved by the RESAs.

¹ Hearing Disorders

Ms. Fran Perkins, Executive Director of the Metro RESA testified before the Committee and focused on the variances in sizes among the RESAs and the effectiveness of the organizations. Among the sixteen RESAs, there is a variance in the sizes (Attachment B). For example, Northwest Georgia RESA consists of sixteen member counties versus the Middle Georgia RESA, which only has seven. Ms. Perkins compared the RESA districts to State Senate districts. The size and needs of the constituency vary, despite the number of counties represented, such as an urban RESA versus a rural RESA. RESAs vary in size and needs, and it is important to note that the Georgia General Assembly created the boundaries served by the individual RESAs. However, the district boundaries do not limit one RESA from serving the needs of another RESA. School systems in one RESA can attend workshops and teacher training courses in another geographically located RESA. RESA's provide a strong network of shared endorsement programs and training modules that impact thousands of educators across the state. RESAs have been organized in their current district settings for the last forty-two years, with other state organizations, such as the Georgia Department of Education, the Professional Standards Commission and the Georgia Network for Educational and Therapeutic Support aligning their services accordingly.

Ms. Shelly Smith, Executive Director of the First District RESA testified to the governance of RESAs, including the effectiveness of the current governing structure. Since the inception of RESAs over forty years ago, the legislature has maintained a governance structure for RESAs that is similar to that of local school systems. The Board of Control (Board) is the governing body of each RESA and is comprised of member local school system superintendents, presidents of higher education institutions, and regional library system representatives. The Board appoints directors of each RESA to carry out policies that have been established by the Board, identify and prioritize regional needs, hire personnel, allocate resources, and evaluate agency effectiveness. Additionally, RESAs are subject to State Board of Education rules and congressional legislation, which holds all RESAs accountable at the state level.

According to Ms. Smith, superintendents report the greatest key to RESA success for more than four decades of service to Georgia schools is their ability to respond to local system needs expediently. The immediacy of response is based upon the geographical and political proximity to the systems that each RESA serves. RESAs think regionally and act locally. Through monthly regional Board of Control meetings, recipients of RESA services review the work accomplished, adjust timelines and expectations, and hold the director and staff accountable, much like a board of education holds a local superintendent and staff responsible. Ms. Smith stated, "The governance structure has functioned well for decades. Changing that structure will remove local control, diminishing RESA's responsiveness and effectiveness."

Mr. Dexter Mills, the Northwest Georgia RESA Director testified before the Committee on the mandatory requirement that all local systems become members of the RESA. Before the General Assembly passed HB 1187, in 2000, membership in a local RESA was optional. Until HB 1187, only four systems chose not to participate in their local RESA. According to Mr. Mills, the reason 97 percent of local school systems chose to join a RESA before it was mandatory was a clear return on investments.

In 1966, the General Assembly created this cooperative and designed it to maximize dollars. Today, the seed money comes from the legislature, with the rest of the money coming from the local systems. Local systems contribute at least 20 percent of operating costs to their RESA as their fee payment (Local RESA determines the fee payment), with the other 80 percent coming from the legislature. Why would all but four local systems pay for RESAs when it was optional? According to Mr. Mills, the reason is because the benefits and services the local systems receive are valuable.

For example, 22 percent of new teachers came through the RESA alternative program (Georgia TAPP program)², versus 22.6 percent of new teachers coming from Georgia colleges in 2007-2008. This part of a RESA's services has been a tremendous help for rural districts that are struggling to produce math and science teachers. Additionally, RESAs provide assistance with the Georgia Network for Educational and Therapeutic Support (GNETS) which supports local school systems' continuum of services by providing comprehensive special education and therapeutic support for students whose behavior severely impedes their learning. Mr. Mills also emphasized large cost savings RESAs have allowed by providing assistance with teacher training and endorsements. He emphasized again that RESAs train as many teachers as the University System of Georgia.

Additionally, the monies that local systems pay to their RESAs translates into more than \$80 million in savings for local systems annually, through services such as cooperative purchasing, professional learning, consulting services, student services and other services provided by the RESA's. A cost effectiveness report of the First District RESA has been provided as a visual example of the savings.

Each RESA director expressed support for the legislature keep the mandatory requirement in place, thereby ensuring that RESA's will continue to provide the many high quality services to the local systems.

² Georgia Teacher Academy for Teacher Preparation and Pedagogy

III. COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

After testimony and careful consideration of the information presented, the Committee agreed that Regional Education Service Agencies are providing a valuable service to the local systems in Georgia. The Committee further agreed that the current requirement for mandatory membership of all local systems should remain in place. The Committee recognizes that the small amount of funding provided by the state to the RESAs is ensuring the many services to local systems that otherwise might not be provided. It believes the value and cost-savings provided exceeds the original state investment. The Committee also determined that RESAs should continue to receive state funding. Recommendations by the committee include:

1. Recommendations for Reorganization and Consolidation of RESAs

The Committee believes with the current economic outlook in Georgia, that improving efficiency and achieving the most cost-effective measure possible is important to the taxpaying citizens. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the State Board of Education restructure RESA's and the current administrative organization, including the possible consolidation of RESA's if it is deemed needed to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

The Committee further recommends that the State Board of Education and RESA's begin to create a strategic plan which encourages shared administration and leadership duties between systems. Particularly, smaller local systems should be encouraged to utilize RESA's for joint administrative and leadership management. This includes shared central office functions and shared administrative management functions, including general clerical duties such as payroll and other services.

The Committee also urges the State Board of Education to create a rule that supports restructuring of required staff in the local system if:

- It is determined that the local RESA can provide the same service at a cost-savings to the local school system; and
- The State Board of Education or Department of Education find that a local RESA has the ability to provide the same service as the local system in a cost efficient manner.

The Committee further recommends that the number of RESAs should not exceed the number of Congressional seats in Georgia.

2. Recommendations for Cost-Effectiveness Reports

The Committee recognizes that it is critical that RESAs continue to provide services to local systems, thereby producing cost savings for the local systems and the state as a whole. The Committee therefore recommends that each RESA produce a cost-effectiveness report, demonstrating the savings that each RESA is providing to their local systems.

The Committee further recommends that the cost-effectiveness reports be submitted to the RESA Board of Control, the Department of Education, and the executive director of each additional RESA in Georgia. These reports may be submitted electronically. A copy of these reports should be included on each RESA's website.

3. Recommendations for Improved Access to RESA Statewide Data

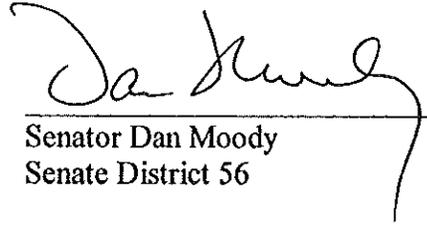
The Committee believes that state-wide data should be available to the public, RESA Boards of Control, the Georgia Department of Education and RESA directors. Therefore, the Committee recommends that RESA annual reports be transmitted electronically to all RESA directors and to the chairpersons of all RESA boards of control when the reports are transmitted each fall to the Department of Education. Sharing of individual RESA data is intended to increase transparency and to enhance the performance of all RESAs.

The Committee further recommends that a copy of the annual report be submitted to the Chairperson of the Senate Appropriations Committee and the Chairperson of the House Appropriations Committee no later than October 1 each year.

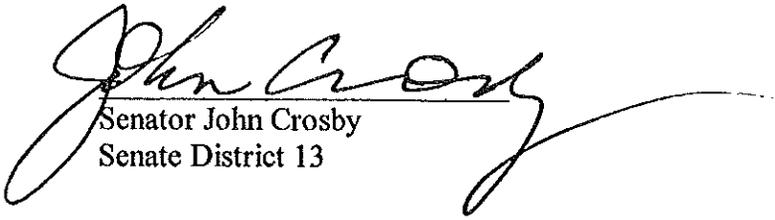
RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:



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