Regionalized Special Education Administration and its Potential to Improve Services to Maine Students

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Introduction

This report was prepared at the request of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee of the Maine State Legislature as a follow-up to recent studies describing challenges in the state's special education landscape. The purpose is to investigate the opportunities, barriers, and potential benefits of adding regional special education infrastructure across Maine.

Maine's current system does not guarantee that every district has access to an intermediate level of administrative or programmatic support. Such Education Service Agencies (ESAs), also called Intermediate Education Units (IEUs) or Regional Education Agencies (REAs), are widespread in other states, particularly in rural areas. While voluntary associations between districts have long existed in Maine and still are a part of today's educational landscape, they do not include all School Administrative Units (SAUs) that may need or want additional services.

To advance the discussion on whether or not regionalization of special education in Maine could be beneficial, this report will look at how ESAs function in other states. We also include highlights from prior reports that describe current inequities and rising costs in Maine and discuss the potential for further regionalization to improve upon the status quo.

Background

Challenges in Maine's Special Education System

This brief builds on prior work that has established several areas of concern for the provision of special education services in Maine. Key highlights include:

- High identification rates. Maine is a national outlier in the percentage of students receiving special education as well as the percentage of students with a greater intensity of needs. In 2021, Maine had 20.6 % of students in special education compared to the national average of 15.4 during the same time period (NCES 2025a).
- Placements in more restrictive settings. In Maine, 43% of students with disabilities were in a general education classroom less than 80% of the school day (MDOE, 2026d), compared to 32% nationally (NCES, 2023). The proportion of students with disabilities that spent less than 20% of their time in

a general classroom was 8.9% compared to only 4.9% nationally. This has been cited as a particular concern in the early childhood years (USDOE, 2025).

- Performance gap for students with IEPs. The Nations Report Card showed Maine's students receiving special education services ranked 40th in the nation on fourth grade reading among students with disabilities receiving special education services. (Edunomics, 2026).
- Rising costs. Maine is one of the top two states in terms of the percentage of education budget that is spent on special education. Both Maine (19%) and Connecticut (21.6%) spend about one out of five education dollars on special education compared to 8% in Ohio and Mississippi (Roza, Cicco, Dhammani, & Anderson, 2024). Rising special education spending is a major contributor to Maine's escalating costs for public education.

There are multiple underlying causes for these challenges. They are often interrelated, making it difficult to isolate and address the root problems. The following factors are almost certainly contributing to Maine's special education difficulties to some extent:

- Shortage of staff with adequate preparation and training (Johnson et. al., 2025)
- Inconsistent use of evidence-backed curricula, particularly in early literacy. (Lech, Fairman, & Nadeau, 2024)
- Challenges in identifying and serving young children. (USDOE, 2025)
- Lack of coherent early intervention systems (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, or MTSS) for academics and behavior (Scheibel, Wilkinson, Fairman, & Tariq, A, 2025)

Prior reports, including the 2018 Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches to Services legislative task force, have suggested increasing inter-district collaborations as a way to control costs, even out students' access to services, and improve educator professional development. However, regional collaboration alone will not address all of the underlying challenges. This report explores their potential as well as limitations.

What are Educational Service Agencies (ESAs)?

Education service agencies (ESAs) are an intermediate layer of the education system between state and local level government. They serve as a link and provide technical assistance, specialized services, and administrative services (US Congress, 2001). Currently, 42 U.S. states use such regional education agencies to provide

instructional support and access to resources, often providing critical and valuable support to small rural districts.

Federal law (20 USC § 1401(5); 34 CFR § 300.12) allows Education Service Agencies (ESAs) to be recognized as administrative agencies for special education services. ESAs that are cooperative arrangements between multiple Local Education Agencies (LEAs) can qualify under Federal law as a Local Education Agency (LEA) if they meet certain criteria. If an ESA meets the federal requirements they can apply for grants as a LEA, and interface with federal agencies as the fiscal agency for the member districts (AESA 2025). In Maine, the LEAs (school districts) are called School Administrative Units (SAUs).

Like most aspects of public education, they are created under state laws, so the specifics of how they operate vary from state to state. The various aspects of each ESA exist on a spectrum that can be characterized from highly centralized to decentralized. Table 1 provides an illustration of how the different elements of ESA governance can vary; features that are under more influence from the State Education Agency (SEA) are centralized, and those that are controlled locally are decentralized.

Table 1. Variation in ESA Structures (State vs. Local Control)

	More Centralized	Moderately Centralized	Decentralized
Borders & Membership	State-determined boundaries (usually counties), all school districts are members	State-determined boundaries, voluntary membership	District-determined regions, voluntary membership
Governing Board	State-appointed	Local school board member reps	SAU Member superintendents
Authority	Strong; may act on behalf of the SEA	Modest; may coordinate with SEA on monitoring	Low; service-driven
Funding	State allocations, federal grants, ability to levy taxes	Mix of state and local; may have power to levy taxes	Local membership fees, fee for service

State Examples[1]

More Centralized

Texas[2] – Each school district belongs to one of 20 Regional Education Service Centers. Each Center receives direct annual appropriations from the state for core services (V.T.C.A., Education Code § 8.121) and also receives funding through additional state and federal grants as well as through fees charged for services provided to member school districts.

California[3] -- Eleven regional service agencies providing direct and regional support to 58 county school districts and serve as the primary implementation arm of the California Department of Education (CDE). County Offices of Education are funded via state allocations from the local control funding formula, funds from taxes managed by counties, and federal funds.

Other Examples: Georgia, Michigan[4], Iowa[5], Pennsylvania; Dept of Defense schools

Moderately Centralized

Oregon[6] - Nineteen regional Education Service Districts serve all school districts in the state. ESDs are funded through annual appropriations from the state government and through fees charged for services provided to their member school districts. Additionally, ESDs have the authority to levy ad valorem property taxes.

Montana[7]: Montana divides the state into 21 regions with set boundaries. Most school districts choose whether or not to participate in their cooperative; MT has a partial mandate and requires that small school districts that fall below a minimum threshold (currently set at receiving $7500 or less in federal IDEA funds) must join their regional cooperatives. The state provides census block grants to local districts based on their total student enrollment (not based on the number of students with IEPs) and requires local matching funds of 25%.

Other Examples: WA, IA

[1] Source: https://www.waesd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AESA.ESA-State-by-State-Report-March-2021.pdf
[2] https://tea.texas.gov/school-district-leaders/esc-services
[3] https://www.cacountysupts.org/what-is-a-coe
[4] https://www.gomaisa.org/value-of-isds/
[5] https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/iactc/65.2/CH1172.pdf
[6] https://www.oaesd.org/about/executive-summary/
[7] https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2015-2016/School-Funding/Meetings/Jan-2016/Exhibits/SFC-Jan-Exhibit39.pdf; https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2015-2016/School-Funding/Meetings/Jan-2016/Special%20Education%20Cooperatives%20in%20Montana.pdf; https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED660596.pdf

Decentralized

New Mexico[8]—Ten Regional Education Cooperatives serve 68 mostly rural school districts through voluntary membership. Regional education cooperatives are funded through contributions from their member districts and through fees charged for services provided. Regional education cooperatives can supplement these funds with grants from state and federal sources.

Wyoming[9] -- Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) units provide pk-12 education services in 13 different regions. Districts can voluntarily choose to become members and choose a school board member to serve on the BOCES governing board. Non-member districts can also contract for specific services on a strictly fee-for-service basis, and can take advantage of offerings from more than one BOCES region. WY is noteworthy for its 100% state funding (reimbursement model) for *allowable* special education services. It has strict definitions for eligible services and employs an aggressive system of monitoring and audits to prevent over-identification. Districts must demonstrate early intervention results and share detailed data tracking before a student can qualify for special education.

Other states: Maine, MA[10], NM, TN

No Regional Infrastructure

VT*, MD, ID, NV, OK, VA, AL, DE (* = Under development)

[8] https://www.nmreca.org/

[9] https://edu.wyoming.gov/parents/cooperative-ed-programs/; https://edu.wyoming.gov/parents/special-education/; https://wyoleg.gov/InterimCommittee/2022/04-2022090608-02_BOCESPresentationCombinedMaterials_20220822.pdf

[10]

Types of Services Offered

ESAs work in partnership with, rather than replacing, the local School Administrative Units (SAUs). ESAs can be primarily administrative, primarily focused on providing direct services to students, or a mixture of both. Table 2 illustrates the variety of offerings that are commonly seen related to special education; the specific services that each ESA provides depends on state requirements as well as local demand.

Table 2. Examples of Administrative and Student Services Provided by ESAs

Administrative Services
• Staff professional development • Expert consultations • Recruitment and hiring support, including partnerships with universities and agencies to support staff preparation and certification / licensure • Information technology, including management of IEPs (tracking software) • Insurance and Medicaid billing • Group purchasing agreements
Student Services
• Universal screening of all students (Child Find) • Evaluation of students with potential disabilities for special education identification and categorization • Regional day-treatment programs for students with intense needs that cannot be met in the regular classroom or resource room • Provision of related services (PT, OT, Speech Therapy) • Clinical mental or behavioral health services • Behavioral Health Professionals (BHP) • Transportation to off-site programs

ESAs in Maine[11]

Maine has a decentralized system of ESAs. There are 15 voluntary Education Service Centers (ESCs), and four of them include services related to special education. The remaining 11 focus on shared services unrelated to special education administration or programs. The four collaborations for special education are summarized in Table 3 below.

[11] https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/embrace/regional-service-center

Table 3. Maine ESCs that Include Shared Special Education Services[12]

Member SAUs	Special Education Services
Hancock Education Service Center (Hancock & Penquis Regions)	
RSU 25, Orrington, Hancock, Lamoine	Shared BCBA (Direct services and professional development)
Penobscot River Education Partnership (PREP) (Penquis Region)	
Airline CSD, Bangor, Blue Hill, Brewer, Brooklin, Brooksville, Castine, Dedham, Deer Isle-Stonington CSD, Ellsworth, Glenburn, Greenbush, Hermon, Indian Island, Indian Township, Isle Au Haut, Milford, Orrington, Otis, Penobscot, Pleasant Point, RSUs 19, RSU 22, RSU 24, RSU 25, RSU 26, RSU 31, RSU 34, RSU 41, RSU 63, RSU 64, RSU 67, RSU 68, RSU 87/MSAD 23, Sedgwick, Surry, Veazie	Regional program for children with exceptionalities, professional development, and psychological services
Rocky Channels Education Service Center (Mid-Coast)	
Boothbay-Boothbay Harbor CSD, Georgetown Public Schools, Edgecomb Public Schools, Southport Public Schools	Special education administration
Sheepscot Regional Service Center (Mid-Coast)	
RSU 1; RSU 12; Wiscasset Public Schools	Regional special education program; special education professional development and support services; cooperative purchasing and sharing of special education equipment and technology; cooperative special education assessment services - psychological evaluations, behavior analysis support, RISC assessment, mental health supports.

The statutory language for Maine's regional Educational Service Centers was enacted in 2018 and is found in Title 20-A Chapters 114[13] (funding) and 123[14] (establishment and governance). Member SAUs pay the ESC dues or assessments as determined by their founding interlocal agreement. The State pays for accounting software support and a portion of the ESC director's salary (MDOE 2025e).

[12] https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/embrace/contact
[13] https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/statutes/20-A/title20-Asec2651.html
[14] https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/statutes/20-A/title20-Asec3801.html

The Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC) professional organization also serves as a collaborative hub for special education leaders[15]. This organization provides professional development and regular meetings of special education directors to facilitate communication between districts. Additionally, the MDOE provides supports including professional development, learning communities, and grant programs such as the three-year Positive Behavioral and Interventions and Supports program and a Math intervention program focusing on students with an IEP (MDOE, 2025f, MDOE 2025g).

SAUs also collaborate to meet the needs of students with IEPs through tuition arrangements. Students may attend a program in a district other than their home SAU, either because their SAU tuitions all of their resident students (i.e. does not operate schools for all grade levels) or by mutual agreement to better meet a given student's needs. In these cases, the SAU where the student resides is responsible for funding their special education services.

Notably, there have been other examples of ESCs focused on providing self-contained special education programs that have not endured. When Maine provided grants to schools to form regional collaboratives in 2017 and 2018, six such partnerships were created. They developed day treatment programs for students in their area with more intense service needs; each served fewer than 12 special education students (Fairman & Seymore, 2018). Of these six, only the Penobscot River's SPRPCE program[16] and the Sheepscot River program continue to exist today.

Potential Benefits of ESAs for Maine

As described above, the expansion of ESAs will not address all of Maine's challenges in special education. However, ESAs do have the potential to support improvements in some areas. Small and rural SAUs have the most to gain from ESCs when they help them to achieve economies of scale and access expertise unavailable at the local level. The possible benefits can be summarized in three major categories:

Administration of Services

- **Transition of FAPE for 3 to 5 year olds:** SAUs are in the process of taking on responsibility for administering special education services for children aged 3 to 5 years old under IDEA Part B, Ch. 619. Transitioning these duties from Child Development Services (CDS) to SAUs will bring Maine into alignment with the established practices for service preschool children used in almost all other states. This is a major, time-consuming task for local special education administrators. This work is regional by nature because the CDS infrastructure

[15] https://www.madsec.org/
[16] https://sprpce.org/

for ages birth to 5 already operates in defined geographic service areas. Establishing regional supports for all SAUs to build new systems and coordinate with CDS is a logical next step.

- **Consolidated Administrative Support:** ESAs can provide a hub for high-cost or complex administrative tasks requiring specialized expertise. Shared administration can also streamline legal guidance, facilitate compliance reviews, and provide technical support.
- **Improved MaineCare Billing:** ESAs could take responsibility for the complex processes of MaineCare and insurance billing. This would remove the administrative burden from local SAU personnel, leading to more thorough billing, reduced risk of billing errors, increased federal revenue capture, and better optimization of those funds to reduce local and state taxpayer costs.

Providing Direct Services to Students

- **Specialized Placements:** ESAs can establish and operate self-contained programs for students with low-incidence disabilities who have intensive service needs. Existing programs offered in private settings (Special Purpose Private schools, or SPPs) are either oversubscribed or non-existent in most parts of Maine; additional capacity is warranted. Public regional programs may also be able to operate at a somewhat lower cost than private SPPs due to lower overhead costs if they are located in existing SAU facilities.
- **Improved Specialist Access:** ESAs facilitate consistent student access to specialized staff (e.g., related services providers and behavioral health professionals) regardless of district size. This partially addresses the problem of SAU competition for staff because specialists employed by an ESA with coordinated scheduling support can serve more students than when the same staff work as independent contractors and are responsible for their own scheduling and billing. In other words, increased efficiencies mean that the same number of staff can serve more students. However, in some areas of the state it is already the norm for providers to be hired on staff at a school district. Simply moving the employer from the SAU to the ESA will not make a dent in shortages; if services are evened out, it will be due to existing resources being spread more thinly. This may generate resentment.

Oversight and Accountability

- **Data and Best Practices:** Regional units can centralize professional development, evaluation teams, and student-level data collection, which is currently fragmented. This centralization improves the ability to review Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for appropriateness, monitor high-cost placements, and disseminate best practices statewide.

Funding Implications

ESAs offer the potential for modest cost savings through increased efficiency and reduced duplication of services and personnel. However, these savings are not guaranteed. Short term costs will increase as new systems are built while the current systems remain in operation. Long-term savings from any operational efficiencies are typically modest; rather than reducing services, we can expect any savings to be reinvested in staff and programs to increase access to services in underserved areas. The most significant potential benefit is rather in the improvement in early interventions, staff, and MTSS programs that can reduce special education identification rates and improve student outcomes in the long run.

Given the current realities, increased regionalization is an identified path with a reasonable chance of making a positive, long-term impact on cost control and resource adequacy. This would require modifying the current funding framework by shifting resources.

- **EPS Reallocation:** If ESCs assume responsibility for specific services (e.g., related services or behavioral health paraprofessionals), the funding for those services will need to be raised by the ESC. This could be achieved by removing funding allocations for those services from the EPS special education cost model and providing the resources directly to ESCs.

- Alternatively, the ESCs could incur the costs for programs and services and charge them back to the resident SAU in a fee-for-service model. In this approach, funding would still flow through EPS to the SAU, which would then pay the ESC (similar to the funding method for SPP schools). This system would preserve a local share for special education costs, resulting in more state support for districts with lower relative total property value.

- **Redirecting Adjustments:** Another option is to redirect some or all of the approximately **$20M to $24M** currently allocated as special education subsidy adjustments to "minimum contributor" SAUs. These districts pay less than the statewide mill rate expectation because they have surplus property value. If these adjustments were tapped to instead fund the ESCs, the minimum contributor SAUs would see an alternative benefit, including potential cost savings, from the administrative support or student services shifted to the ESC. Many of the minimum contributor SAUs are also located in rural areas that stand to gain the most from shared services.

Next Steps

Given Maine’s well-established culture of local control, highly centralized systems are unlikely to take root voluntarily, and top-down mandates from the state for consolidated regional service delivery would likely meet with resistance. A more incremental approach would be more consistent with Maine’s tradition of local control.

The most compelling rationale for expanding ESAs in Maine is the opportunity to improve services for students. However, such improvements are only realized if the ESAs are implemented with fidelity and are intentional about offering the types of evidence-based programs and services that are needed. These specific needs vary by region.

We therefore suggest that policy efforts should focus first on **regional planning.** in order to identify the assets and resources gaps in each region. Such conversations can empower SAUs to identify strategies that are most appropriate in each region, leading to more buy-in for any solutions that emerge.

For the purposes of illustration we offer the following as one potential model for a discussion(s) in each superintendent region:

1. Identify stakeholders who should participate, such as:
   - Special education administrators
   - Superintendents
   - Child Development Services staff
   - MDOE staff and leadership
   - School board members
   - Parents of current students (with and without IEPs)
   - Program providers, including regional and SPP school leadership
   - Others as appropriate

2. Compile information on the assets in each region: enrollments, schools, staff (all types including consultants), regional programs, Special Purpose Private Schools, school-based health centers, public preK programs, private preK and child care programs that meet state quality benchmarks, existing partnerships, community service agencies,

3. Determine the gaps in each region, partly through the above data and partly from the group wisdom. Prioritize.

4. Develop budgets needed to:
   - hire regional administrative staff
   - fill staffing shortages, through new positions or contractors
   - improve or add facilities in underserved areas

The results can then be refined into actionable plans in each region through local, county, regional, and state policymaking channels. This general approach acknowledges the need for collective input from multiple stakeholders to solve shared regional problems. It also preserves local ability to determine what changes should be prioritized.

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