



# The Value of School District Partnerships with Educational Services Commissions (ESCs)

By Dr. Nicholas V. Vancheri, Superintendent of Schools, Northern Region ESC

When I am asked what I do for a living, the shift to the next question is always interesting and frustrating. Being asked “What do you do and where is your job located?” can be a frustrating exercise. For me, as a superintendent of schools of an educational services commission, my answer to the follow-up question is met with a quizzical look or response. Although it has become a tedious way of explaining my job, I simply state that “I am the Superintendent of the Northern Region ESC, which is based in Passaic County. For the most part, each county/region in New Jersey has its own ESC and we are just like any other school district, albeit we also play a similar role to a business or staffing agency.” That response is met with an additional quizzical response or blank stare from the person—however, this tedious back and forth needs to happen as ESCs provide a great service to public, nonpublic, and charter schools in New Jersey.

A quick scan of 18A:6-51 is the best way to start. Here, an ESC is defined as “an agency established or to be established in one or more counties for the purpose of carrying on programs of educational research and development and providing to public school districts such educational and administrative services as may be authorized pursuant to the rules of the State Board of Education.” In addition, “Commissions may enter into contracts with other public and private agencies for the provision of approved services and programs to participating public school districts and nonpublic schools.” Put simply, ESCs are here to help schools throughout the state in any way that we can. Currently, there are educational services commissions all over New Jersey, as far north as Sussex County through the entire Jersey shore — with many of us operating in the middle! Below, I will highlight some of the services offered by ESCs such as the Northern Region ESC, as well as share

some success stories. Whether you work in North, Central, or South Jersey, these services should be offered by your local ESC, and remember, partnering with an ESC saves your district money, time, and potentially space, all while having the support and perks of a fully functioning school district!

## Transportation

Over 1.3 million students attend our schools and many are transported to and from school each day via school buses. The transportation departments of local ESCs are vital entities in the daily operation of our schools, from arranging all elements of transportation from the districts’ initial needs assessments and route bids to any issues to be addressed on said routes. For smaller districts, ESC transportation departments take on a significant role and become the points of contact for most issues while, in larger districts,

they alleviate the stress felt by our partners who are spread thin due to out-of-district placements or vast terrain to cover.

## Special Services

From paraprofessionals, to related services providers such as speech therapists, to child study team members, ESCs are here to support our school districts with hourly, part-time, and full-time staff members. For example, since 2018, the Northern Region ESC and the Paterson Public Schools have worked together to significantly cut down on compensatory services, most notably in speech and language services. Our team of nearly 30 therapists, following the lead of our wonderful partner district and their existing staff of therapists, have done exceptional work going into our 5th school year of the partnership.

In addition, many school districts throughout the state send students with special needs to schools run by ESCs, typically based on an initial need. Case in point, for nearly 25 years, the Northern Region ESC successfully ran Skylands School for students with multiple disabilities. During its successful run, Skylands School enrolled students from both Passaic and Morris counties, and it all happened because several local partner districts had glaring programmatic needs, brought their idea to Northern Region ESC, and the rest is a quarter-century of history!

Although Skylands School closed, its legacy lives on as many of our Skylands graduates have moved on to the Northern Region ESC's newest venture in the world of special services: day habilitation services for individuals beyond 21 years of age. The Skylands School started from simple conver-

sations between parents, their local school districts, and our ESC. Our entry into the world of adult special services began with parents of graduating Skylands students pleading with us to explore this potential program. Three years later, Second Home Day Habilitation Center is prospering, and additional adult special services programming is on the way!

## Alternative Education

There is a glaring need in our state for alternative education placements, mostly for students who are better served in smaller settings and/or during alternative time frames. Your local ESCs can provide enrollment opportunities for these students, or they can tailor a program to your school district's specific needs. Through our 15+ year partnership with the Passaic City Schools, Northern Region ESC has operated Hope Academy, which first started as a high school program and now serves students in grades 6-12. Additionally, in early 2022, the Northern Region ESC opened Ascend Academy through another contract with the Passaic City Schools. This program, in conjunction with Hope Academy, is a twilight program for those students who are better served receiving their education after normal school hours.

## Technology Support

I am very happy to be part of a core group of ESC superintendents in this state who discuss ways in which we can better support our partner districts. One of the ways that the Northern Region ESC supports our partner school districts that is new to the world of ESCs is by providing technology staff and support via technicians,

network administrators, and data specialists, all in a similar way to how we provide related services staff. Additionally, we have recently begun to offer school districts support for the setup and maintenance of their websites and social media accounts!

## Business Services

Aside from special services and transportation, business services is the area where many of our partner districts look to ESCs for guidance. Yes, ESCs can staff a district's entire business department or fill specific positions, but the bulk of ESC work in the business services area is through cooperative purchasing and bidding. Many of our state colleagues have been doing this for a very long time and the Northern Region ESC was excited to enter this world in 2022!

## Closing Argument for ESCs!

If we ever run into each other at a conference, at a ballgame, or in one of your schools, you now know what an educational services commission is and — although our central office is in one specific place — that our reach extends far beyond one town! If your district or school does not currently partner with your local ESC or if you have a specific educational challenge, I am very confident that any of the many ESCs in New Jersey will provide excellent and cost-effective solutions!

## About the Author



**Dr. Nicholas V. Vancheri**, Superintendent of Schools, Northern Region ESC, has worked in public education as a social studies teacher, content-area supervisor, and building principal for 19 years. He earned his B.A., M.Ed., and Ph.D. from Montclair State University and comes from a long-line of family educators, with his wife, Kathleen, working as a student advisor/academic coach at Passaic County Community College. They have one child, Nicholas, who is currently in third grade. Dr. Vancheri can be contacted at [nvancheri@nresc.org](mailto:nvancheri@nresc.org) or via twitter [@DrV\\_NRESC](https://twitter.com/DrV_NRESC).