Spotlight On...

ESU #1 AGENCY IMPROVEMENT PROCESS
And Upcoming Mini-Visit

AGENCY IMPROVEMENT

By: Rhonda Jindra

It’s easy to become preoccupied with an Agency Improvement Visit – even if it’s just a “Mini-Visit.” First, you must select the External Team and find a date that works for all. Then there’s meeting with the Agency Improvement Team to prepare the agenda, organize the documentation report and plan what will happen after the visit. Every detail must be arranged – everything from where the team will meet to ordering lunch to being available and accessible to the team throughout the visit. There is an investment of time made to ensure that all goes as planned.

But having said this, there’s more to Agency Improvement than preparing for a Mini-Visit. Agency Improvement is about creating a system of success – one that is infused into every department’s day-to-day activities. At ESU #1, we have created a process of continuous improvement, always striving to set department and individual goals that meet the overarching goals of the ESU.

We are proud of the steps we have taken towards continuous improvement. Our Agency Improvement Team meets monthly, overseeing the process and providing guidance and support to ESU personnel. In addition, the Team Leaders/Coordinators address continuous improvement topics at each meeting. This is also true for each ESU Board meeting and Advisory Council meeting.

To further support continuous improvement efforts, the Professional Development team has provided assistance to each ESU department. This has enabled each department to feel confident in the process and determine what next steps are needed. It also helps to have a friendly face provide side-by-side leadership.

As we prepare for the November 25th Agency Improvement Mini-Visit, it is important to note that this is our opportunity to share our story – highlighting the successes and challenges we have experienced throughout this journey. After the visit, the External Team will provide written documentation offering commendations and gentle nudges for continued improvement. This will serve as a guide as we move forward.

If you are at the Central Office on November 25th, please feel free to talk with the External Team and share your perspective of agency improvement and its impact upon the work you do. We hope to see you then!
Educational Service Unit #1 strives to be a leader in all aspects of education. Continually we examine our practices to determine if our mission and goals represent who we are as a partner to our school districts. Our mission is to **Provide Innovation, Leadership and Service**. As we reflect on who we are as a service agency, we value the professional staff we employ and our partners within the school districts of northeast Nebraska.

Just as school districts continuously review their data and practices, ESU #1 examines the services we provide to:

- Determine goals for each department that align with our agency goals.
- Gather data from a variety of sources including staff and the students, teachers, administrators, parents and communities we work with.
- Provide focus, guidance, and direction through the development of action plans.
- Implement strategies, gather resources, establish timelines, collect and analyze data, and evaluate our services.

The continuous improvement process allows us to:

- Prioritize and establish a clear vision of what we expect of ourselves.
- Integrate and coordinate departments, efforts and activities toward a common set of goals so as to maximize the impact of our work.
- Identify our strengths and areas of concern and provide the basis for data analysis and improvement planning.
- Continuously evaluate the data regarding our progress and the effectiveness of the work we are doing.

Together, with our schools, we continue to look for ways to improve instructional skills and student achievement. By continually examining who we are, we can narrow our focus to efforts that will have the greatest impact. ESU #1 takes pride in the success of its staff, students and the school districts we serve.

For more information about the ESU #1 Continuous Improvement Process visit: [http://www.esu1.org/agencyimprovement/agencyimprovement.html](http://www.esu1.org/agencyimprovement/agencyimprovement.html)
The External Team

On November 25th, three faces, unfamiliar to many, will be seen at ESU #1. Norm Ronell, ESU #7 Administrator, Bob Lungrin, ESU #10 Staff Development Director, and Freida Lange, State Administrator of Accreditation and School Improvement, have been invited to serve on the External Team that will evaluate ESU #1 and provide feedback on what the agency is doing well and what can be improved.

Norm Ronell started his career in education as an elementary teacher in Wyoming. He came to ESU #7 in Columbus as a Reading Consultant and worked as a Curriculum Coordinator and Director of Staff Development before taking the role of ESU Administrator in 1997. Norm enjoys being with family, traveling, automobiles, skiing, music, and reading. His family consists of his wife, three grown children, two son-in-laws and five grand children.

When asked to describe what he most enjoys about the Agency Improvement process, Norm said “The variety presented by the work and people, plus the great opportunities that it presents to improve Nebraska Schools through the ESU Network.”

Bob Lungrin has been working in Professional Development at ESU #10 for 12 years. Before coming to the unit, he spent 19 years teaching elementary and middle school for Kearney Public Schools. When asked to describe his hobbies, Bob remembers three things that as a young man he wanted to experience. “I wanted a good hunting dog, a Harley Davidson, and a horse. I still enjoy my hunting dog as we hunt upland game. The Harley and the horse(s) were enjoyed, but I no longer have either.” Now, Bob and his wife enjoy camping in their 5th wheel trailer (purchased on eBay) and a fishing boat (also purchased on eBay). Bob says, “So I guess you could say eBay is a hobby.”

Bob enjoys many things about the Agency Improvement process. He believes it provides opportunities for collaboration between departments, initiates high-level professional conversations, enables assessment of the quality of current practices, helps envision practices to improve future services, and supports and encourages all staff to participate in the process.

In 2005, Freida Lange began working at NDE, where she currently serves as the Administrator of Accreditation and School Improvement. Freida also taught for 19 years in Hershey Public School, served North Platte Public Schools for five years as the Administrator of Gifted Programs and also worked as part of the Staff Development Department for ESU #16 in Ogallala.

In her free time, Freida enjoys reflecting on life and doing lots of reading. She loves movies and finds traveling to be highly satisfying. She loves her yard and talking to friends and her seven brothers and sisters. She also has 18 nieces and nephews, one step-son who is the father to three wonderful grandchildren and her daughter, Kate, who lives in Bellevue with husband, Andy.

When asked what she most enjoys about the Agency Improvement process, Freida commented that she values the reflection. “I love education and learning! I believe in the adage, ‘An unexamined life is a life not worth living.’ This is true of anything and I see it played out so beautifully in the Agency Improvement Process.” Freida believes that we must continually examine what it is we are doing and says, “If we don’t, we are not placing ourselves in a position to do better in the most effective ways possible. The Agency Improvement Process allows us to examine our lives and pushes us to become better and better for those for whom we are responsible.” Freida sincerely appreciate the opportunity to continue to work with “the family” of ESU people. She says, “ESUs are one of Nebraska’s treasures.”
ESU #1 is currently exploring the possibility of obtaining accreditation with the North Central Accreditation Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA).

On October 31st, I had the opportunity to attend an NCA informational meeting in Lincoln with fellow employees Rhonda Jindra, Wendy Consoli and Cheri Matthews. The four of us were asked to attend the meeting on behalf of ESU #1 and provide opinions as to whether or not we felt it would be in the best interest of the Unit to move forward with the NCA application process.

We have been working very hard at ESU #1 on our Agency Improvement Plan over the past few years. I have to be honest, most of the time I’ve been lost when it comes to figuring out the role I play in the agency improvement process, especially when terms like rubrics, assessments, standards, data, etc. are tossed out. I have struggled when asked how, in my position, I affect student learning. Being a non-educator, I have no direct relationship to student learning and can’t necessarily visualize how I am aligned with the whole process.

The system elements of NCA include **everyone** – schools, teachers, students, parents and agency staff, including certified, classified, technology and accounting staff members, etc. – in the process. Their seven standards are organized so that, regardless of your position within the agency, you can link yourself to the agency’s continuous improvement. The first standard in this process is **Vision and Purpose** and each subsequent standard builds upon that vision and purpose, which allows each person associated with the agency to identify their role in the process.

Imagine an ESU #1 relay race with a baton representing our vision as an agency. The baton passes on through each standard and, if it is dropped, we lose the race and our commitment to continuous improvement.

If you would like more information about NCA accreditation, visit: [http://www.ncacasi.org/](http://www.ncacasi.org/)
So How Exactly Does This Continuous Improvement Process Affect Me?

You might be reading all of this and wondering, so how exactly does this affect me? Read below as several ESU #1 employees share their perspectives on the Agency Improvement Process and how it has made a difference in their department or to them personally.

The ESU #1 Improvement Process was set into place and took our SLP/Audiology Department to a grassroots effort in brainstorming to make the best better. We broke into teams and I was on the technology team. I learned more about the computer I was given to work with and how to use it and pass that knowledge along to coworkers. I stand amazed at the creativity I’ve witnessed of the ESU #1 SLPs in therapy with their students and using computer programs and other technology to facilitate steps to reaching speech and language goals. I personally have had the opportunity to use new computer technology to test students’ hearing ability and keep those results on file on the computer. Technology is just one area that we dove into with vigor because of the fast pace in an ever changing and highly useful arena of tools, which is ongoing.

Vernae Luhr, ESU #1 Audiologist

Understanding how things work and fit together is important to me. Being part of the Agency Improvement Process has been tremendously helpful to me because it allows me to not only see how all the pieces fit, but it also provides the hooks on which information about other departments can be hung. The result is that I am much more knowledgeable about our agency as a whole and much more in awe of how dedicated and talented our people are.

Stuart Clark, Director of Special Education

The ESU #1 agency goals help me to focus my personal goals within the larger context of the service unit goals. While individual goals are critical, it is equally important that as individual team members, we recognize the potential for change through coordinated team effort. Positive change occurs when we share the same vision.

Sheila Jensen, School Psychologist

The Central Office staff’s departmental goals of Collaboration/Time Services Sharing have allowed the office staff to broaden our job descriptions to include special projects that were initiated during our monthly staff meetings. Taking on additional or “out of the box” projects has a two-fold effect. First, the result of these projects has aided various departments through organization and accountability. Secondly, it has allowed the office staff to undertake a plan from start to finish, awarding us a sense of accomplishment as well as of being an integral part of the Unit.

Diane Keim, Accounting/Finance
Do you know that the ESU #1 Agency Goals are:

Goal #1: ESU #1 provides support and builds expertise to increase student achievement.
Goal #2: To communicate the role of ESU #1 in providing quality educational services.

Can you match the departments listed below with their goals for the 2007-2008 school year?

Technology
Staff Development
Early Childhood Special Education/EDN
Instructional Materials
Central Office

React to the technology needs of our schools and support ESU staff with their technology needs.
Collaboration and Time/Services Sharing.
Better utilize technology.
Increase the usage by our schools of PowerMedia Plus and NROC.
Maximize Department Meetings & Time Management Within Them