



COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT STRATEGIES – CASE STUDIES

Prepared for WASA, WSSDA, REC, and AESD

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



Executive Summary	3
<i>Project Objective</i>	3
<i>Methodology & Statistics</i>	5
<i>Key Findings</i>	6
<i>Recommendations</i>	8
Overview of Cooperative Agreements	10
Participant Findings	14
Appendix (Participants)	34

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

The Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA), Rural Education Center (REC), and Washington Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD) continue to support their members with research to communicate the current conditions of the fiscal environments at districts with fewer than 2,000 students and demonstrate the extent to which these districts go to manage budgets. Amid Washington State's fiscal crisis and debate over how much the state can fund public institutions, leaders of these districts must often defend fiscal decisions and educate lawmakers and communities on spending needs.

To support this need, WASA, WSSDA, REC, and AESD have partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to conduct a **multi-phased, mixed-methods research approach** that collects first-hand insights from school district leaders and best-practice secondary research to identify effective and creative budgeting strategies.

Small Schools Efficiency Study



PROJECT OBJECTIVE (CONTINUED)



PHASE II

In this phase (Phase 2), Hanover conducts in-depth interviews with district superintendents to understand the usage, benefits, and impacts of **cooperative agreements**.

This report aims to help WA educational partners:



- ✓ Understand circumstances and service needs for which districts choose to pursue a cooperative agreement.



- ✓ Explore district leaders' experiences with cooperative agreements, including usage, benefits, and drawbacks.



- ✓ Identify the elements of effective agreements and lessons learned about sustaining these agreements.



What is a cooperative agreement?

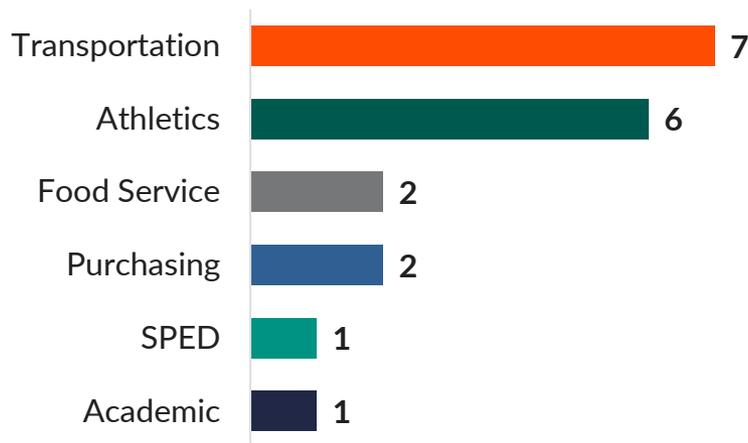
Low student enrollment, specialized staffing shortages, and constrained budgets often make it difficult for small, rural districts (i.e., districts with fewer than 2,000 students) to independently provide comprehensive services and programs.

*In response, these districts often arrange **contracts or agreements with other districts to share costs** in areas such as food service, transportation, specialized staff and services, purchasing, and co- and extra-curricular programs.*

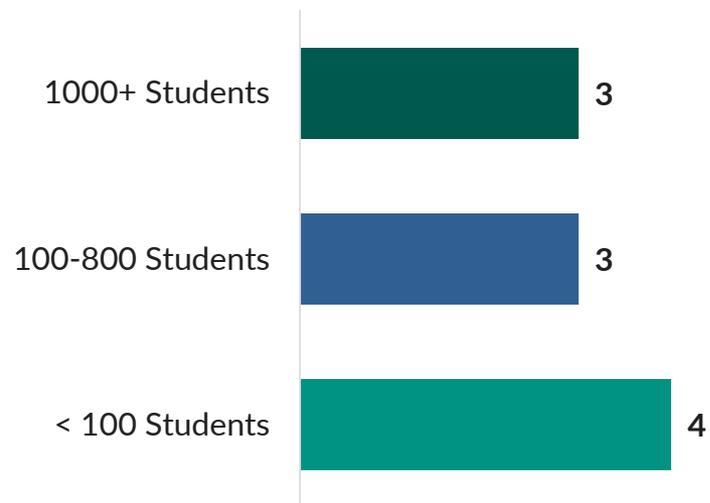
METHODOLOGY AND STATISTICS

Hanover conducted **ten (10) interviews** with current district leaders (e.g., superintendents) at small, rural public-school districts across the state of Washington (i.e., districts with fewer than 2,000 students). To further enhance confidentiality, limited attributions will be included with quotations.

Represented Cooperative Agreement Service Area



Participants by District Enrollment



**Participants may represent more than one type of cooperative agreement and structure (e.g., multiple service areas, districts)*

Note: Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

KEY FINDINGS

-  **Participants describe cooperative agreements as a critical strategy for managing structural limitations while maintaining local control.** District leaders explain that low enrollment, constrained budgets, and limited access to specialized staff drive the use of cooperative agreements to sustain services that would be difficult to provide independently. Participants note agreement structures vary by service area and regional context, allowing districts to preserve community identity while addressing shared challenges.
-  **Participants consistently perceive financial efficiency as a primary benefit of cooperative agreements.** District leaders report cost savings through shared staffing, joint purchasing, and reduced administrative overhead, particularly in high-cost areas such as transportation, athletics, and special education. Participants explain that these efficiencies help stretch limited resources and support core services.
-  **Participants report cooperative agreements expand student access to programs and services in rural contexts.** District leaders describe improved access to specialized staff and broader program offerings, including athletics, advanced coursework, and career and technical education. Several participants also note perceived equity benefits, such as reduced student isolation and increased interaction with peers from neighboring communities.

KEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

-  **Participants identify operational complexity and coordination as the most persistent challenges of cooperative agreements.** Some district leaders describe the time and effort required to align staffing, scheduling, transportation, and service delivery across partners as administratively demanding. Participants also note that cost-sharing equity and community perceptions can complicate partnerships, particularly for highly visible programs.
-  **Participants emphasize the importance of clarity, communication, and regular review in sustaining cooperative agreements.** District leaders report that clearly documenting roles, responsibilities, and financial arrangements helps prevent misunderstandings. Ongoing communication and periodic review processes are viewed as essential for addressing challenges early and maintaining long-term collaboration.
-  **Nearly all participants express strong opposition to forced consolidation and consistently view cooperative agreements as a more effective alternative.** District leaders describe consolidation as misaligned with small and rural community needs, citing risks to local control, community identity, and increased student transportation (e.g., longer bus routes). Participants emphasize that consolidation would not resolve underlying structural challenges facing small districts and could introduce additional costs. In contrast, cooperative agreements are perceived as a community-centered way to achieve efficiencies and expand services while preserving independent governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this report, Hanover recommends the following:

 **Provide districts with practical resources to formalize and monitor cooperative agreements.** District leaders emphasize cooperative agreements are most successful when roles, responsibilities, cost-sharing structures, and accountability mechanisms are clearly documented and revisited regularly. Educational partners should translate these lessons into concise resources such as model agreement elements, review checklists, and outcome-monitoring examples tailored to small-district contexts. These tools can help districts establish clearer expectations at the outset and strengthen long-term sustainability. By focusing on formalization and review rather than day-to-day management, educational partners can support consistency while preserving local flexibility.

 **Continue to support districts in navigating governance and administrative complexity within cooperative agreements.** District leaders describe cooperative agreements as effective but operationally complex, particularly when decision-making authority, financial responsibilities, or coordination processes are not clearly aligned across partners. While labor considerations occasionally add complexity, challenges more often stem from communication, financial alignment, and day-to-day administration. Educational partners should continue to facilitate peer-based problem solving through superintendent roundtables or regional forums focused on implementation challenges. This approach allows districts to identify challenges early and learn from peers who have navigated similar complexities.

RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

 **Elevate cooperative agreements as clear evidence of fiscal efficiency in legislative and public advocacy.** Small, rural district leaders consistently identify cooperative agreements as a key strategy for sustaining essential services (e.g., transportation, special education), as well as stabilizing costs and staffing. Through shared services, staffing, and purchasing power, districts reduce administrative overhead, limit duplicative spending, and stretch resources further than would be possible independently. Educational partners should highlight these agreements in legislative communications to demonstrate how districts are already maximizing efficiencies through collaboration and collective investment.

 **Educational partners might also consider framing cooperative agreements as an equity strategy that expands student access in rural communities.** By developing advocacy materials that translate cooperative models into accessible narratives for policymakers and emphasizing how shared staffing and economies of scale redirect limited funds toward classroom instruction and student opportunities, partners could help to maintain the focus of the conversation on what is best for students.



OVERVIEW OF COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

OVERVIEW: WHY DO DISTRICTS CREATE CO-OPS?

All participants explain their cooperative agreements emerged as a response to the structural limitations of operating small, rural school districts. Low student enrollment, staffing shortages (particularly in specialized roles), and constrained budgets made it difficult for districts to independently provide comprehensive services and programs. In response, these districts pursued cooperative agreements to achieve cost efficiencies, access specialized expertise, sustain essential services such as transportation and special education, and expand student opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable.

*“A lot of it is born out of need; we’re one of the smaller districts in the state of Washington. We try to meet as much of the need as possible locally, but the truth of it is that we just can’t provide, you know, full-on directors and managers. **Because of our size and because of our location, we have to do some cooperative agreements, just to make sure our kids get services, and then also that we have connection to things that we may not necessarily have otherwise.**”*

*“Fiscally, combining resources and supporting each other's development and education for kids, **it levels the playing field for rural school districts** that could never offer even partial programming, compared to an urban or suburban [district].”*

Participants consistently emphasize that cooperatives are a creative, flexible solution to the unique challenges faced by small and rural districts. Many find that the agreements allow their district to responsibly manage financial and operational pressures while maintaining local control and service quality.

OVERVIEW: COMMON AGREEMENT TYPES

Participants describe several common structural models for cooperative agreements, each designed to balance shared responsibility with local control. While structures vary by service area and regional context, the following layouts emerged most frequently across interviews:



Lead-District Model

One district acts as the fiscal or administrative agent (“host” or “lead” district), employing shared staff and managing finances, while other districts contribute funding and participate in governance.



Program-Specific Cooperative

Districts collaborate around a single program or function (e.g., athletics, alternative education), often pooling students, staff, and/or facilities. Governance and agreements are specifically tailored to that program’s needs.



Contracted Service Model

Districts contract with an ESD, another district, or a third-party provider for specific services (e.g., business management, speech therapy), rather than sharing staff directly.



Reciprocal Agreements

Two districts exchange or share services (e.g., one provides transportation, the other food service), typically less formal and based on trust and ongoing negotiation.



Shared-Service Consortium

Multiple districts jointly purchase or manage services, materials, or contracts (e.g., transportation, staff, purchasing, insurance) through formal or informal agreements, emphasizing economies of scale, collective buying power, and cost-sharing.

OVERVIEW: COMMON SERVICE AREAS

Here, we outline the services and programs provided through participating districts' cooperative agreements. Notably, many districts participate in more than one cooperative agreement at a time.



Transportation

Transportation cooperatives range from shared use of drivers, mechanics, or facilities to formal regional entities that centrally manage routing, hiring, maintenance, and compliance for multiple districts.



Athletics

Athletic cooperatives are structured either as fully combined programs or on a sport-by-sport basis, with districts sharing students, coaching staff, eligibility rules, scheduling, and costs when enrollment is too small to field teams independently.



Academic

Academic cooperatives involve districts pooling students or instructional capacity to offer specific programs (e.g., shared secondary grades, CTE pathways, alternative learning) while maintaining separate district governance and enrollment.



Purchasing

Purchasing cooperatives operate through shared bid lists or lead agencies that manage procurement, contracts, and compliance, allowing districts to buy goods and services at negotiated prices without conducting independent bidding.



Specialized Staff and Services

Specialized service cooperatives allow districts to share or contract for hard-to-staff role (e.g., special education staff, technical staff) often through lead-district models or ESD-managed agreements with clearly defined supervision and cost allocation.



PARTICIPANT FINDINGS

IMPACTS

Perceptions of Benefits and
Challenges



“Both districts pony up half the costs for athletics, in a fair way, because we would have to do the whole thing ourselves if not. So, basically, it costs half as much money for us to be in an athletic co-op.”

– Participant

OVERVIEW: PERCEPTIONS OF PROS & CONS

This next section highlights the top impacts cooperative agreements have on participants' districts. The following tables give an overview of perceptions on the many benefits and challenges of sustaining a cooperative agreement, including the operational and financial impacts as well as the impacts on the school community.



Student, Equity, and Community Impacts

AREA	PERCEPTIONS OF BENEFITS	PERCEPTIONS OF CHALLENGES
Student Opportunities & Access	Expands access to athletics, CTE, advanced coursework, alternative programs, and extracurriculars that small districts cannot offer independently.	Participation may require longer days or additional travel for some students.
Equity for Rural Students	Allows rural students to access opportunities comparable to those in larger districts while remaining enrolled in their local schools.	Perceived inequities may arise if one district feels controlled by a larger or more centralized partner.
Community Identity & Local Control	Preserves local schools and community identity while enabling regional collaboration instead of full consolidation.	Shared programs—especially athletics—can generate community tension, rivalry concerns, or fears of district merger.
Long-Term Sustainability	Long-standing cooperatives demonstrate durability and adaptability over time, with some operating successfully for decades.	Ineffective or imbalanced cooperatives may persist due to limited alternatives for small districts.

OVERVIEW: PERCEPTIONS OF PROS & CONS



Operational and Financial Impacts

AREA	PERCEPTIONS OF BENEFITS	PERCEPTIONS OF CHALLENGES
Staffing Capacity & Expertise	Enables access to hard-to-staff or low-incidence roles that districts cannot sustain independently.	Shared staff may feel less directly accountable to one district, complicating supervision and responsiveness.
Staff Stability & Retention	Pooled or cooperative roles allow districts to move away from fragile part-time or short-term staffing and reduce turnover.	Districts may be vulnerable to staffing disruptions if turnover occurs within a partner organization or cooperative.
Financial Efficiency & Cost Management	Generates cost savings through shared staffing, facilities, and services; some cooperatives receive enhanced state funding or grant support.	Cost-sharing formulas can be complex and require ongoing renegotiation as participation or enrollment changes.
Administrative & Compliance Capacity	Certain types of agreements shift hiring, reporting, procurement, and regulatory compliance away from individual districts, freeing leaders to focus on instruction.	Coordination across districts increases communication demands, meeting time, and management complexity.
Governance & Oversight Clarity	Well-defined agreements clarify authority, supervision, and financial responsibility while preserving district independence.	Vague, outdated, or informal agreements can lead to confusion, conflict, or mistrust among partners.

IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL STUDENTS

All participants agree that cooperative agreements improve educational opportunities and services for rural students in contexts where geography, enrollment size, and staffing constraints would otherwise limit access. First, participants highlight how shared staffing and regional programming can provide students with access to athletics, advanced academic classes, career and technical education pathways, and specialized or alternative programs that few small districts could sustain alone.

“We have been able to offer college in the high school, we've been able to offer more dynamic CTE programming, we've been able to offer, smaller class sizes in the junior high...there's a lot of different pathway opportunities that wouldn't exist in either school district.”

“What I really think is a benefit is the fact that our students get to go out and meet other people and have a wider range of opportunities by default.”

“It basically meant that we could actually have full teams and participation. If either district had done them on their own, some of those sports wouldn't have had enough participants.... It gives our kids opportunities to play that we wouldn't otherwise have”

Participants also note that cooperative agreements can help mitigate student isolation by connecting rural students with peers from neighboring communities, while still allowing them to remain enrolled in their local schools. While approaches vary by district, participants consistently emphasize that these cooperatives are not just cost-saving mechanisms but tools for equity—providing rural students with opportunities comparable to those in larger districts without sacrificing local context or community identity.

FINANCIAL IMPACTS OF CO-OP AGREEMENTS: BENEFITS

Most participants say cooperative agreements have a positive financial impact on districts, primarily through cost savings and access to shared resources.



Economies of Scale

According to many participants, pooling resources for purchasing (e.g., transportation, food services, supplies) enables districts to secure lower prices and better contract terms than they could individually.

“When it comes to things like hiring, when it comes to managing purchases of buses, you get all the benefits of the economy of scale.”



Access to Funding

Similarly, some agreements can unlock additional state funding and grant opportunities that are only available to districts participating in formal collaborations.

“Most districts operate at a pretty substantial transportation deficit. We don’t. And we really rely on the enhanced funding boost from the state, which is an incentive from the state for us to run these cooperative agreements.”



Shared Staffing and Services

Participants explain how agreements can save money by sharing the costs of key personnel and/or facilities, allowing access to higher-quality staff or infrastructure at a lower per-district cost.

“We don’t have to hire people, we don’t have the benefits package that we’d have to pay.”



Financial Stabilizing Strategy

Notably, several say cooperative agreements help districts stabilize their budgets by preventing higher expenses rather than generating surplus funds. Budget impact ranges from 2-15%, according to participants.

“With our agreements, and then our local levy, we’re able to offset the increase in operating costs.”

FINANCIAL IMPACTS OF CO-OP AGREEMENTS: CHALLENGES

However, participants also highlighted financial challenges, such as the complexity of cost-sharing formulas and the need for clear agreements that prevent inequitable partnerships.



Complex Cost-Sharing Formulas

Determining fair contributions can be difficult, especially when student participation or district size varies year to year. Some participants note that fixed cost-sharing formulas can feel inequitable when participation or district size differs. Notably, participants in athletic cooperatives were frequently described as financially neutral or expensive, particularly for very small districts.

“Indirect costs are a huge sticking point that need to be kind of hashed out. Sometimes both sides feel like they're not getting a good deal, and maybe that's okay. If both sides feel that way, it might be the right deal.”

“The biggest piece of the cooperative is each district is paying [the same fixed percentage] of the sports costs. So, when we have one or two or three kids going, if you equate that out to, you know, \$20,000 a season or something, it gets very, very expensive quickly.”

CO-OPS ADDRESS HARD-TO-STAFF POSITIONS

“If we were running transportation ourselves, we’d probably have one mechanic, maybe not even full-time—and that would be a hard position to replace. Having full-time people through a cooperative really helps establish a good culture and keeps turnover from happening.”

“We share a teacher for the visually impaired, who comes one day a week, and we’ve contracted with [a district] for that person...She actually travels to different districts every day. There’s just not a huge need in any rural district for a teacher for the visually impaired, so it makes sense to share it.”

“The co-op handles the hiring, training, and licensing, which takes that burden completely off the districts.”

“At some point, you have to admit the talent pool in your local area might not fit your needs.”

Participants consistently describe cooperative agreements as a key staffing mechanism that enables small, rural districts to maintain essential services despite limited applicant pools and constrained budgets. The most prevalent approach involves *shared staffing models*, in which highly specialized, hard-to-staff, or low-incidence positions (e.g., psychologists, mechanics, special education staff) are employed by one entity or regional partner and serve multiple districts. This arrangement allows districts to access expertise they could not recruit or afford independently, while improving continuity of services for students and reducing turnover and reliance on part-time hires.

Some independent co-op structures and ESD partnerships ease administrator workload around staffing and compliance, while other agreements may require districts themselves to handle this coordination.

CHALLENGES OF CO-OPS ARE LARGELY OPERATIONAL

Participants mention the following challenges of operating cooperative agreements:



Coordination and Complexity

Participants say managing shared services across multiple districts requires additional communication, scheduling, and alignment, particularly when districts differ in calendars, priorities, or operational practices. Several participants noted that these coordination demands can increase administrative workload and, at times, slow decision-making compared to operating independently.

“It’s extremely complicated, and it takes a lot of time and energy to keep things moving.”



Maintaining Local Autonomy While Collaborating

While districts value flexibility, participants acknowledge tensions can arise when shared agreements feel overly restrictive or when expectations between partners are not fully aligned. Differences in governance styles, risk tolerance, or community expectations occasionally required renegotiation or careful relationship management to sustain partnerships.

“Sometimes it’s really good for us. Sometimes it’s not successful for both sides, and then we have to go back to the drawing board.”



Staffing and Labor-Related Complexities

A few participants noted that staffing and labor challenges arise primarily in cooperatives that share personnel, particularly due to differences in collective bargaining agreements, supervision, and compensation. While these participants say these issues are generally manageable, they warn how unclear roles or insufficient upfront planning can strain relationships and weaken cooperative agreements.

“The unions are often comparing one district to the other... both unions are trying to drive up the cost by playing it against each other.”

CHALLENGES OF CO-OPS ARE LARGELY OPERATIONAL



Transportation and Athletic Cooperative Specific Challenges

Participants sometimes cite travel time, practice-site selection, driver availability, and mismatched school schedules as operational pressures that affect both transportation and athletics cooperatives. These factors often require ongoing rescheduling, regular cross-district meetings, and clear protocols to keep daily operations running smoothly.

“We have an athletic coordinator here on site, and she does all of the different scheduling, because if the [lead-district] bus decides to leave an hour earlier, then we have to call the driver of the student-athlete, because we have to drive everything, and just coordinate that differently. Teachers have to kind of be flexible, so that the students that are missing seventh period every day are not missing you know, a quarter or a semester worth of math.”

“If there’s two athletes from our district and 20 from [our co-op partner], the practice happens in [their town], and then [our families] have to commute, which feels unfair to them if they think it’s all the sports are moving to [the other town].”

“We share a transportation director, and a dispatcher, and a team of mechanics. But we each operate our own bus driver system, so there are separate collective bargaining agreements, separate transportation schedules, separate routing, separate budgeting.”

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

Best Practices and Lessons Learned on
Maintaining Cooperative Agreements



“The contract has to be solid, and it has to fit for a small school... general contracts just kind of don't really speak to the specifics a lot of the time, because the small schools, as you know, have some very special needs sometimes that are just, like, niches, so you have to find that way to put it up. So yes, contracts are important.”

– Participant

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINABLE CO-OPS

Participants share several best practices for monitoring the outcomes and supporting the health of cooperative agreements. Notably, the complexity, size, and sensitivity of the cooperative agreement seemingly dictate the formal monitoring structure (i.e., more complex agreements often have more formal review structures). However, **strong communication practices** are cited as necessary for *all* types of cooperative agreements.

Monitoring Outcomes

- All participants stress the importance of **regular review cycles** or processes (e.g., annual reviews, board meetings).
- Participants recommend using **multiple data sources that directly connect to the cooperative's intended function** to assess impact, such as participation levels, service continuity and quality, staffing stability, or financial impact.
- When cooperatives involve community-facing programs or shared staff, participants recommend **joint committees or shared leadership groups** to surface concerns early and build shared ownership.

"[Athletic] participation is what we're watching – that's the whole reason for the agreement."

"We formed an athletic advisory committee made up of parents and staff and administrators to unpack some of the issues that are coming up in the community... empower people with knowledge so they would become our champions."

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINABLE CO-OPS

Participant-Recommended Communication Practices

- Participants emphasize **regular, predictable communication between partners**, with the frequency scaled to the size, complexity, and visibility of the cooperative. **Direct communication** among superintendents and key administrators is viewed as critical for **identifying issues early**, aligning expectations, and **preventing misunderstandings from escalating to boards or communities**.
- Participants also note that **communication practices must evolve** as cooperatives mature or face new challenges.
- Some participants stress that **conflict is inevitable** in cooperative agreements—particularly when districts have different sizes, histories, or bargaining contexts. They recommend **addressing disagreements directly** through superintendent-level conversations, **clear documentation** of perspectives, and, when necessary, **third-party mediation** to sustain long-term collaboration.

“All four superintendents sit on the board and meet monthly to review what’s going on.”

“It’s more ongoing communication—weekly emails and check-ins.”

“A lot of issues get handled before they ever become a big problem.”

“Every year we learn something new about how we need to communicate.”

“We’ve had to be very direct when conflicts arise... we also had a mediator come work with our board vice chair and chair.”

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

CLEARLY-DEFINED CONTRACTUAL ELEMENTS

Participants consistently emphasize that clear, well-structured contracts are critical to the success of cooperative agreements.

Clear Roles and Responsibilities



Participants say effective contracts must specify which district or entity is responsible for each operational area, including supervision, evaluation, and day-to-day management of shared staff or services.

“Shared staff can’t just ‘belong’ to one district—you have to spell out who supervises, evaluates, and sets raises.”

“Each district is in charge of staffing their buildings with their funding.”

“We made a list and identified how much we would provide for each sport. They created line items. This year we decided that we would have [the other district] pay the amounts and we would reconcile the books and we would pay their half at the end of the reconciliation.”

Financial Arrangements and Cost-Sharing



Participants share how agreements should detail how costs are divided, including formulas for sharing expenses, handling indirect costs, and procedures for annual adjustments based on participation or usage. They consistently stress the need for routine financial reconciliation, as well.

“For both agreements, the district that is managing all of the hiring, HR, and finance processing is getting a 15% indirect on all costs.”

DEFINED CONTRACTUAL ELEMENTS



Decision-Making and Governance

Participants indicate that effective agreements outline how decisions are made, who has authority, and how input from all parties (including boards, advisory committees, and local communities) is incorporated.

“Each school board has a WIAA rep... and the school board meets once every spring, and both school boards have reviewed the agreements ahead of time... during that joint meeting, it's an approval process, so that there can be a joint approval of the agreements.”



Annual Review and Exit Clauses

Many participants who are satisfied with their agreements share how their contracts include timelines for regular review, processes for making amendments, and clear procedures for notification and withdrawal from the agreement.

“There is a review each year where there's discussion on if we're going to continue the cooperative agreement or dissolve it, and it's always just continued at this point.”

“Every year we notice something we didn't anticipate and revise the agreement.”

“We have an obligation annually to review our cooperative agreement and then if we choose not to continue then we have to make the other board aware.”

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

TAILOR BOARD ENGAGEMENT TO LOCAL CONTEXT

Depending on the school community, school boards may have varied levels of involvement in managing cooperative agreements. Most participants note their school boards often rely on superintendents and senior administrators to identify opportunities, negotiate terms, and manage day-to-day implementation of the agreements. School boards ensure legal and fiscal compliance and step in mainly at key decision points that may require formal board action, such as initial and annual authorization of the agreements, as well as to ensure overall alignment of the partnership with local community and district priorities.

“Their role is to set policy, and thus far, they take the recommendation of the superintendent of entering this agreement.”

“Primarily, I make the decision as a superintendent. For the most part, it's all done at the administrative level with certain key pieces that require board action, like the co-op contract because it's a large amount of money.”

“I share them with [the board] what we're doing, but as far as their involvement on making it happen or keeping it going, it's just about zero. They like all the things we're doing, and they're supportive that way.”

TAILOR BOARD ENGAGEMENT TO LOCAL CONTEXT

Some participants describe higher levels of board engagement within their districts. For example, participants with athletic and transportation agreements mention how these tend to draw more public and board attention, while other service cooperatives (such as special education or business management) are often managed more administratively, with boards informed and consulted as needed. Some districts in a cooperative agreement together have joint board meetings on an annual or even monthly basis.

Notably, some cooperative agreements have established their own advisory boards *distinct* from the school boards of participating districts. Often, these advisory boards will ensure representation from each participating district, such as superintendents, directors, and school boards.

“Once a year our boards meet jointly. And they receive presentations about transportation and about athletics... Leading up to that spring meeting, [the other superintendent] and I and our CFOs and the athletic director and the transportation director are doing a lot of work examining, adjusting, and making recommendations to the agreements that we're teeing up for the boards to approve almost in a perfunctory fashion when we meet in May.”

“I have two board members from my board that sit on the [co-op] Advisory Board and then the other district has two board members. Both superintendents and the high school principal sit on that board along with the athletic director.”



Participants recommend **structured oversight and communication mechanisms** to support successful co-op implementation and maintain accountability, such as:

- Joint or periodic board meetings with partner districts
- Regular financial and performance updates
- Transparent budget reporting

LESSONS LEARNED

Lesson #1: Relationships Matter as Much as Co-op Structures

"When [the other district superintendent] and I can talk on the phone or meet face-to-face and work through conflicts or misperceptions, we can actually drive better outcomes. I would make sure that... we've operated from a relational place that we have, and I think that's been a winner. I would do that again."

"We're better together, but that doesn't mean it's easy... Sometimes the adults are more resistant than the kids."

Lesson #2: Clarity and Adaptability Are Essential

"They have to be written down. If it's not written down, everyone remembers it differently."

"Absolute clarity on who does what. You have to have that in writing, very clear, or things get weird."

Lesson #3: Cooperatives Are Essential Infrastructure for Small Districts

"If we ever combined, [the other district in our current cooperative] would be angry... and the levy would not pass."

"If we didn't have the cooperative, our kids simply wouldn't be able to play sports at all."

"I think if... you consolidate little tiny districts like ours, you're just ripping kids off. This is the healthiest, happiest, most wonderful school... to lose this would be tragic."

APPENDIX (PARTICIPANTS)

Participant #	Type of Agreement
P1	Transportation, Athletics
P2	Transportation, Athletics
P3	Athletics, Purchasing
P4	Academic, Athletics, Transportation
P5	Transportation
P6	Transportation, Purchasing, Food Service, Special Education
P7	Transportation
P8	Transportation, Food Service
P9	Athletics
P10	Athletics



Thank you.

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