



Members Brief

An informational brief prepared by the LSC staff for members and staff of the Ohio General Assembly

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Educational Service Centers

From 1914 until 1995, educational service centers (ESCs) were called “county school districts” and tasked with oversight of all local school districts in their territories. Since 1989, their missions have incrementally changed to more of a market-based service approach, offering a variety of services to many different kinds of districts, schools, and other organizations on a contractual basis. Each ESC is under the oversight of a governing board made up of members elected by the voters of the local school districts it serves and, in many cases, also of appointed members representing other school districts serviced by the ESC. Since 2011, every city, local, and exempted village school district with an enrollment of 16,000 or fewer students must have a service agreement with an ESC. Larger districts may have an agreement but are not required to do so.

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History

County school districts and boards of education were created in 1914 under H.B. 13 of the 80th General Assembly to standardize and improve the quality of K-12 education in rural areas across the state. To that end, the act created city, village, rural, county, and “exempted” village school districts. The village and rural districts were under the supervision of county boards of education. City and exempted village school districts were free from that supervision.¹ In 1943, H.B. 217 of the 95th General Assembly replaced village and rural school districts with “local” school districts, but did not fundamentally change the supervisory role of county school districts over them.²

¹ The law permitted the residents of a larger village district (i.e., a district with 3,000 or more residents) to vote to exempt their district from that supervision.

² “[History of Ohio’s County Boards of Education](#),” Robert P. Shreve, June 1989, which is available on the U.S. Department of Education’s Education Resources Information Center website: eric.ed.gov.

Initially, county school districts were primarily charged with performing specific duties regarding the local school districts under their supervision, including assisting in the consolidation and centralization of local districts, publishing a minimum course of study, recommending textbooks, providing training for teachers, and supervising classroom instruction. However, over time, the law gradually changed to permit county school districts to adopt a more market-based service approach. S.B. 140 of the 118th General Assembly, for example, was enacted in 1989 to, in part, permit county school districts to provide similar, mutually agreed upon services to city and exempted village school districts located in the county on a contractual basis (such districts became commonly known as a county school district's "client districts").

In 1995, under H.B. 117 of the 121st General Assembly, county school districts became known as educational service centers (ESCs). H.B. 117 also mandated the merger of many smaller ESCs by July 1, 1997, or July 1, 1999, depending on the number of school districts and students they served.

In 2006, H.B. 115 of the 126th General Assembly created the Educational Regional Service System (ERSS) to provide regionally based support services to school districts, community schools, and chartered nonpublic schools. At that time, ESCs were required to provide administrative oversight and a variety of services to the local school districts in their territory as required by law, but districts and schools were otherwise free to purchase services from *any* ESC. In 2013, H.B. 59 of the 130th General Assembly eliminated most of the statutory requirements for ESCs to provide services and administrative oversight to local school districts. Instead, H.B. 59 generally required city, local, and exempted village school districts to have a service agreement with an ESC of their choice – in effect turning each district into a "client district" (for more information, see **"Service agreements"** below).

Today, Ohio's 51 ESCs³ provide professional development, specialized instructional programs, behavioral and health services, technology, and fiscal and administrative services to client districts and schools.⁴ ESCs may also act as sponsors for community schools and operate preschool programs.⁵ Most education laws that apply to school districts also apply to ESCs. Any provision of law in Ohio's Education Code⁶ referring to "school district," "school board," or "board of education" without expressly referring to city, local, exempted village, or joint vocational school districts is construed to include ESCs or their governing boards.⁷

Governance

Each ESC has its own superintendent, and a governing board made up of representatives of the local school districts located in the county or counties within its service territory. Generally, members of an ESC's governing board are elected by the voters of those local school districts.

³ For a list of the current ESCs and maps showing their service areas, see [Ohio ESC Client District Service Areas](https://www.oesca.org/ohio-esc-client-district-service-areas), available at the website of the Ohio Educational Service Center Association: [oesca.org](https://www.oesca.org).

⁴ Educational Service Center Study, Ohio Department of Education (2022).

⁵ R.C. 3301.52 and 3314.02.

⁶ R.C. Title 33.

⁷ R.C. 3311.055.

The territory from which the members of an ESC's governing board are elected is the combined territory of the local school districts of the ESC's service area. It does not include the territory of city and exempted village school districts the ESC might serve.⁸

An ESC governing board also may have a minority of appointed members. These appointed members may represent city and exempted village school districts receiving services from the ESC.⁹

The governing boards of up to five adjoining ESCs may adopt resolutions to combine into one ESC called a joint ESC. The governing board of a joint ESC may divide its electoral territory into subdistricts with each member elected from one of those subdistricts, instead of being elected at large from the ESC's entire territory. To comply with the constitutional one-person, one-vote principle for popular elections, each ESC that has subdistricts must reconfigure them every ten years so that each member fairly represents about the same number of people. If a governing board fails to redistrict its territory, the Director of Education and Workforce must redistrict it within 30 days.¹⁰ However, at the time of the 2010 and 2020 censuses, the General Assembly passed temporary extensions for redistricting and initial board member elections for joint ESCs in uncodified law.¹¹

ESC governing boards are considered public offices under Ohio law and are subject to public records and open meetings laws.¹²

Service agreements

The board of education of each city, exempted village, or local school district with an average daily student enrollment of 16,000 or fewer students, according to the district's most recent state report card, must enter into an agreement with an ESC to receive services. As of the 2024-2025 state report card, this requirement applies to all but the ten largest school districts in the state.¹³ A school district with an enrollment exceeding 16,000 may enter into such an agreement but is not required to.¹⁴ Joint vocational school districts, community schools, STEM schools, and political subdivisions may also enter agreements for services from ESCs.¹⁵

⁸ R.C. 3311.05.

⁹ R.C. 3311.056.

¹⁰ R.C. 3311.053, 3311.054, and 3311.057.

¹¹ Section 733.30 of H.B. 153 of the 129th General Assembly and Section 733.50 of H.B. 110 of the 134th General Assembly.

¹² R.C. 149.011, 149.43, and 121.22. For more information on these laws, see the Ohio Attorney General's [Sunshine Laws Manual \(PDF\)](#), available at: ohioattorneygeneral.gov.

¹³ See Department of Education and Workforce, [District Overview 2024-2025](#) Data Report, available at: reportcard.education.ohio.gov.

¹⁴ R.C. 3313.843.

¹⁵ R.C. 3313.844, 3313.845, 3313.846, and 3326.45.

The state law governing ESC service agreements does not limit the ESCs with which a district or school may enter into an agreement. Thus, districts and schools enter into agreements for services with any ESC in the state.¹⁶

According to the Ohio ESC Association (OESCA), all school districts purchase at least some kind of services from an ESC and only one school district does not have a primary service agreement with an ESC.¹⁷

Funding

ESCs have no taxing or bonding authority and most of their funding is derived from their fee-based service contracts with school districts, community schools, STEM schools, and political subdivisions. ESCs also, however, receive state funding from several different sources for the services they provide. First, client districts must annually pay a per-pupil amount of \$6.50. This amount is deducted by the Department of Education and Workforce from each district's state education aid and then paid to the ESC.¹⁸ Additionally, if an ESC provides preschool special education services through an agreement with a district, that district may authorize the Department to transfer funds to the ESC in an amount computed under the preschool special education funding formula.¹⁹ ESCs also receive funding directly from the state through an operating subsidy and an appropriation for school improvement initiatives. H.B. 96, the main appropriations act for the 136th General Assembly, appropriates up to \$49,152,105 in FY 2026 and \$51,023,465 in FY 2027 for the state subsidy, and up to \$3,500,000 each fiscal year for school improvement initiatives. ESCs, like other school districts, also receive gifted funding and special education transportation reimbursements.²⁰

¹⁶ R.C. 3313.843, 3313.844, and 3326.45.

¹⁷ See "Are Ohio schools required to align with an ESC?" on [About ESCs](https://oesca.org) on OESCA's website: oesca.org.

¹⁸ R.C. 3313.843(H), 3313.845, and 3317.023(B).

¹⁹ R.C. 3317.0213(B).

²⁰ R.C. 3317.024 and 3317.11; Section 265.210 of H.B. 96 of the 136th General Assembly.