Looking back at the NAEA as we look to move forward

As I look forward to assuming the role of the NAEA President, I feel it is important that I and we as an organization look back at our history. I was asked at our July Retreat of the NAEA board to give Regional Directors an overview of the NAEA history and Dr. Brown asked me to share a similar overview to you.

Despite what many would think, the NAEA is still in its early stages of development and formation when compared to other educational associations. The development of the association occurred in 1995 and was an affiliation of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay until 2008. In 2008, it became affiliated with Farris University in Michigan.

The NAEA was developed to support the disenfranchised youth and to re-engage these students back into the educational environment. The NAEA is a byproduct of the Safe Schools Coalition (SSC). The SSC organized and supported the initial alternative education conferences in Kissmmee, FL then Orlando, FL. The founders of the SSC were Ruth and Edsel Erickson.

The NAEA founders are considered to be Fritz J. Erickson, EdD, Alan McEvoy, PhD, and John Vonk, PhD.

In 2002 the NAEA was incorporated in the state of Florida. In 2009 the NAEA elected its first official president who was Lori Lamb from Arkansas. At the same time, the NAEA dissolved its affiliation with the University and became an independent association. The NAEA held a symposium in Rogersville, Arkansas during her term. Additionally, the NAEA Exemplary Practices were adopted at this time. The organization also established 5-year strategic goals along with revising existing policies and financial guidelines.

Lori Lamb continued as the president of the association from 2011-2013 and with the support and assistance of the Board of Directors the first NAEA National Conference was held in downtown Nashville. Additionally the organization established outreach strategies for state associations and established a dialogue with the USDOE to speak as conference keynote.

In 2013, Robert Eichorn, from Virginia and Region 2 took over the leadership of the NAEA and served in that capacity until 2015. Under his leadership and the leadership and work of the Regional Directors the NAEA developed a social media presence and technology tools for state associations to use. The Board updated the 5-year Strategic Plan/goals along with updating and adopting “Exemplary Practices in Alternative Education 2.0.” As he left the position, the NAEA now had a website, Facebook, Twitter and an NAEA App.

Ms. Kay Davenport from Tennessee followed in the footsteps of Bob Eichorn from 2015-2017. During her tenure with the work of the Board of Directors, the NAEA expanded regional meetings and assisted in establishing some of the first state associations in Utah and Florida.

Additionally, the NAEA launched a pilot school program based around the Exemplary Practices. This program was similar to the Exemplary Practices Cohort Program that the NAEA recently launched. During this time the NAEA built some valuable partnerships with the National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University and the New England College. Also the NAEA actively collaborated with other educational organizations and submitted a position paper on the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) regarding policy and implications for alternative education. Directors even went to Washington, D.C. to engage Congressmen and members of the U.S. Department of Education to gain support for alternative education.

In 2017 through 2019, Pam Bruening from Florida assumed the leadership of the NAEA. At this time the NAEA was growing rapidly as an organization. Ms. Bruening continued to strengthen the NAEA existing partnerships while developing others. This included a very valuable partnership with Kennesaw State University in Georgia. Ms. Jackie Whitt was a vital part of establishing this partnership that still exists today. Due to the growth, the NAEA hired its first Executive Director to assist with the daily operations of the organization. After hiring the Executive Director, the NAEA updated many aspects of the organization including the website, branding, newsletters, membership database, and the conference registration system.

Kathleen Chronister from Utah followed Ms. Bruening in 2019 as the next leader of the NAEA. As she assumed this position, she nor the NAEA had any idea what was to come with COVID. Due to the size of the NAEA and the fact that the primary financial stability for the organization comes from the annual conference, the NAEA could have easily faltered during COVID but with her leadership, the hard work and dedication of the Regional Directors and the outstanding support of the NAEA membership, the organization was able to weather the storm. The organization pivoted to the virtual platform and offered an annual virtual conference that was a huge success. Additionally the NAEA took positions with regards to civil discourse that occurred in the spring and summer of 2020. Despite the existence of the NAEA, the organization never truly defined alternative education until this time. Under her leadership and guidance, the NAEA released an official definition of alternative education. The NAEA also began the development and preparation to launch the NAEA Exemplary Practices Cohort Model School.

In 2021, Mr. Glen Hoffmann from Illinois became the current president of the NAEA. He inherited an organization that had weathered the challenges of COVID but still needed to be financially prudent in order to move forward. From 2021 until now, the NAEA continues to get back on solid footing and has launched its first Exemplary Practices Cohort, held a post-pandemic in-person national conference and established a consortium with California State University and Kennesaw State University that will launch an individual alternative education certification based around the Exemplary Practices. Additionally the NAEA restructured the position of Executive Director with more responsibility and to be the face of the NAEA. A nationwide search was conducted and interviews were held and Dr. Mary Cullen was appointed to that position. Additionally, NAEA developed a position statement around the Graduation Rate Accountability and presented it to the US Department of Education.

Even though it may appear that the NAEA has been around for a long time, truly it is still considered a “newer” or “younger” organization and the sky's the limit. As we move forward we will continue to look to establish clear and concise policy and procedures that will ensure sustainability for the organization moving forward. We will also look to build capacity and involvement of our membership. We will continue to look to provide resources and support for our members while advocating for the students we serve. As a Region 2 member and an NAEA member, I encourage you to be actively involved with the NAEA and your state. It is important that we have a strong leadership to move forward and your involvement is important.