

# Improving Outcomes for Students Served by Special Education - Frequently Asked Questions

*October 10, 2017*

## **1. Why is TEA performing such an in-depth look at special education programs in the state?**

While Texas is not currently under any special education improvement requirements from the state legislature or the United States Department of Education, many concerns have been raised since June 2016 regarding the quality of services received by students with disabilities. To effectively address these concerns, TEA must have a deep and clear understanding of the current landscape of special education in the state. This analysis will allow TEA to make policy and resource decisions based on data, which will improve special education services for Texas students with disabilities over the long term.

## **2. What information will TEA include in this analysis?**

While there are multiple pieces of information that will be analyzed, the following are examples of what TEA may review as part of this project:

- Multiple student performance measures, including graduation rate and growth in STAAR scores for students with disabilities
- Analytic call center data from SpedTex, Texas' special education informational call center, which provides TEA with reports of inquiries received from across the state
- Results from interviews with the following groups of stakeholders:
  - Students
  - Parents
  - Student advocacy group members
  - Teachers and other classroom staff
  - Principals
  - Evaluation staff
  - District-Level staff
- Input directly from stakeholder groups that meet on a regular basis, including:
  - Continuing Advisory Committee
  - State Performance Improvement Plan Steering Committee
  - TCASE Cabinet

- Student Advocacy Roundtable representing TxSER, Disability Rights Texas, ARC of Texas, and Parent to Parent
- Special Education Directors from Regional Educational Service Centers
- TEA will work with a contractor to digitally analyze a representative sample of individualized education programs (IEPs) from across the state. More specific information is contained in subsequent questions.

**3. Why are IEPs being reviewed by an external company?**

The IEPs are not being reviewed as much as they are being aggregated and analyzed. This process will look for trends and point out both strengths and weaknesses in the decisions IEP teams make regarding services and accommodations. This analysis may reveal areas for improvement regarding goal setting, service provision, rigor, etc. It will not be used to determine the quality of services received. Instead, it will help to evaluate whether IEPs include services and accommodations that are most likely to meet the goals of achievement for each student.

**4. Are local educational agencies (LEAs) being paid to provide my child's IEP for this analysis?**

Participating LEAs are eligible for a data sharing grant that is intended to cover the expenses related to data sharing activities (such as staffing costs, technology costs, etc.). The amount of money an LEA receives is commensurate with the number of students with disabilities that it serves. The money must be spent to provide special education services to students in the LEA. TEA wants to ensure that there are no barriers to participation in this free data analysis resource for districts, especially for our smaller and rural districts.

**5. Will the results of this analysis be made public?**

The state-level results will be published on TEA's website. Participating LEAs will receive LEA-level reports, and it will be up to each LEA to decide whether to publish the results. In cases where small group sizes might reveal student identities, LEAs must follow their local policies for data masking to protect the privacy of the students involved.

**6. Who is the outside contractor performing the IEP analysis, and how was it selected?**

Large-scale analysis of IEPs has only been made possible very recently, as the bulk of LEAs in the country are now storing IEPs electronically. What previously would have been a very labor intensive process is now more straightforward. Because of the relative newness of this analysis opportunity, there is only one company in the marketplace currently providing



this specific type of service. That company is a data analysis and consulting company known as SPEDx. After learning of earlier work that SPEDx conducted in another state, TEA saw a definite need for the type of in-depth analysis that SPEDx could perform of our state's IEPs and sought out a partnership with the company. The results of this IEP analysis will only serve to make the larger special education analysis stronger and lead to more improved services for our students with disabilities. Because no one else in the market place is performing this type of analysis, SPEDx is a sole source provider and, therefore, the request-for-proposals (RFP) process was not necessary. Please see the following link for more information about federal law relating to vendor selection in situations like this: [https://www.acquisition.gov/far/html/Subpart%206\\_3.html](https://www.acquisition.gov/far/html/Subpart%206_3.html)

More information about SPEDx and the work that it does can be found at [www.spedx.com](http://www.spedx.com)

**7. What safeguards does TEA require of vendors to keep confidential information secure?**

TEA requires vendors to comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) guidelines and to use commercially reasonable steps, in accordance with industry standards, to maintain data privacy and security. In addition, TEA required SPEDx to execute individual data sharing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with participating LEAs to address any additional security protocols that each respective LEA required. Participating LEAs may make the data sharing agreements available for review.

**8. If the student names are kept anonymous, how are IEPs matched with STAAR data for analysis?**

TEA directed the vendor, as it has done with other vendors, to replace each Texas student's identification code with a unique, randomly generated "Analytic ID" in all data export files. A key file is generated to capture this mapping between TX student ID and the Analytic ID. This key file is stored in a password-protected, encrypted, and secure location separate from the data supplied for the analysis. The Analytic ID is then used in all subsequent data operations to match records between the STAAR and IEP datasets.

**9. What money is being used to fund this project?**

Federal grant money known as IDEA Part B-Discretionary is being used to fund this project. This money flows to states from the federal government to fund state-level activities that support special education programs. Expenditures on this data analysis project do not reduce the amount of funds LEAs receive to serve their students with disabilities. TEA



decided to spend some of these funds on supporting data analysis instead of spending the money on internal agency activities.