

## What You Might Hear & What You Should Know

What You Might Hear	What You Should Know
<b>Fifty years ago, Iowa's AEA's were created to serve children and students with disabilities.</b>	<p>While we're best known for our support to students with disabilities, from our inception, Iowa's AEA's were funded and designed to support all students including those in general education settings.</p> <p><a href="#">The Iowa General Assembly approved SF 1163 (Area Education Agencies Act) in 1974</a> to create Iowa's AEA's, a year before the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The legislation replaced Iowa's county system with 15 AEA's to provide special education support, media and other services to public and nonpublic students, effective July 1, 1975. The title of "other services" was later changed to Educational Services.</p> <p>The AEA's were designed to be economically efficient, provide better equity of services and be more effective in responding to constituent local boards, administrators, teachers and children's needs.</p>
<b>Over the years, AEA's have expanded well beyond the scope of special education.</b>	<p>Our current programs and services reflect the changing needs of families and partnering districts and schools, and those services are provided economically, using only a small portion of our overall budget.</p> <p>It is false and misleading to say that only one-third of the services of the AEA's are focused on supporting children with disabilities. Although on a list of services, special education services appear to be about one-third of the services we provide, these services equate to the majority of what we do on a daily basis.</p>

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	<p>Just as an Iowa classroom and its students look, learn and behave differently today than they did 50 years ago, you'll find that an AEA's programs and services have also been strategically adjusted to ensure relevant support for Iowa families, students and educators. Over the years we have also adapted and evolved largely due to requests by the Iowa Department of Education or the local school districts we serve.</p> <p>Even in our first year of operation in 1975, you can see the flexibility and relevancy of the support services in both general and special education services.</p> <p>→ For example, the AEAs have always received funding for "media" and now that funding supports "media and technology" to reflect the advances in media throughout the years.</p>
<p><b>As the AEAs have expanded their services, the outcomes of students with disabilities have declined.</b></p>	<p>AEA services have been tightly integrated with the demands placed on our classroom teachers. To close the achievement gap, we start by ensuring quality universal instruction in general education classrooms. Services for all students, including those who receive special education services, need to include support in general education classrooms.</p> <p>Test scores don't tell the whole story of success in special education. When a special education student closes the gap and no longer needs services, they are exited from special education.</p>

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	<p>→ For example, in 2022, 5,638 or 7.82% of students with disabilities in Iowa exited or no longer needed special education services because their IEP teams determined they had made sufficient progress and no longer needed services to be successful. We contend this sample size and data related to student IEPs and their individual outcomes is as compelling as some of these national data sets.</p>
<p><b>AEAs will continue providing special education services as they do now, but state and federal special education funds will be controlled by Iowa's public school districts.</b></p>	<p>Iowa law already allows for district input into AEA services.</p> <p>The proposed plan removes the economy-of-scale advantages that come with having a statewide system in place to serve all parts of Iowa equitably. This was one of the founding principles that legislators considered when AEAs were created.</p>
<p><b>To ensure Iowa's AEAs are held accountable and results for students with disabilities improve, the Iowa Department of Education will provide meaningful oversight of special education.</b></p>	<p><a href="#">A quick scan of Iowa Code Chapter 273</a> reveals consistent references to the existing oversight responsibilities of the Iowa Department of Education, and those responsibilities are already tightly threaded into the AEAs' work with students with disabilities.</p> <p>Each AEA undergoes an accreditation site visit process by the Iowa Department of Education with the result being presented to the Iowa State Board of Education. Additionally, each AEA performs an annual comprehensive documentation audit of their agency for the Department.</p> <p>Between the Iowa Department of Education, the Iowa State Board of Education and each AEA's local Board of Directors, every mechanism is in place to provide current and timely oversight of Iowa's AEAs.</p>

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<p><b>AEAs play an important role in our state and that will continue. But their role should be entirely focused on students—not maintaining a system.</b></p>	<p>Without an infrastructure, we cannot support students. Students in special education are general education students first, and supports are needed to ensure effective instruction in all environments for these students.</p> <p>The proposed plan removes the economy-of-scale advantages that come with having a statewide system in place to serve all parts of Iowa equitably. This was one of the founding principles that legislators considered when AEAs were created.</p>
<p><b>The Nation’s Report Card (NAEP) in 2017, 2019 and 2022, which is the best apples-to-apples comparison we have, ranked Iowa 30th or worse in the nation on 9 of 12 assessments for our students receiving special education services.</b></p>	<p>We need to focus on multiple measures to help look at student progress and not just proficiency on one assessment.</p> <p>→ For example, the on-time graduation rate for students with IEPs has risen from 75% in 2012 to 83% in 2022.</p> <p>→ When looking at more than one data source, we see positives and growth for students with IEPs that are not captured when looking solely at state rankings of proficiency on the 4th and 8th grade NAEP test.</p> <p>We agree we need to support our students with IEPs and look forward to the opportunity to work collaboratively as a statewide system including the Iowa Department of Education, AEAs and our district partners to support the growth of our learners.</p> <p>Let’s come together to talk about solutions to these complex challenges instead of imploding one of the state’s primary support structures.</p>

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<p><b>The U.S. Department of Education has recognized this issue and has designated Iowa as “needs assistance.”</b></p>	<p>There are four categories used by the U.S. Department of Education to describe each state’s support for students receiving special education services. Iowa is one of 22 states in the “needs assistance” category, the lowest in severity of consequence.</p> <p>Stating that the federal government will come in to “take over” is a completely inaccurate statement. There are specified potential actions based on each designation level: the potential actions for states in the “needs assistance” category include advising the state of sources for technical assistance, designating the state as a high-risk grantee or directing the use of set-aside funds to areas where the state needs assistance.</p> <p>Iowa has consistently been required to do the least intrusive action in response to this designation, and our state has never been listed in a designation level that requires more enforcement actions.</p> <p>It’s important to note that these outcomes are the shared responsibilities of the AEAs, our partnering school districts and the Iowa Department of Education. We need to work together to best solve special education issues in Iowa.</p> <p>→ For example: The compliance indicators are based on the state's "Timely and Accurate State-Reported Data," "Timely State Complaint Decisions" and "Timely Due Process Hearing Decisions," all of which fall on the work of the Iowa Department of Education.</p>

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	<p>→ The results indicators are based on participation (but not performance) on statewide assessments (i.e., ISASP), participation and performance on the NAEP, graduation rates and dropout rates.</p>
<p><b>Iowa spends more per special education student than any other state.</b></p>	<p>When looking at the small percentage of funding used to fulfill the AEAs' mandates around special education, it paints a true picture of efficiency. ,</p> <p>No other agency, private vendor or consortium can deliver the depth and breadth of services for the same funding.</p>
<p><b>AEA chief administrators are paid too much, and there are currently 400 administrative positions in the AEAs.</b></p>	<p>We are happy to work with legislators to find a metric on administrative salaries if this is a concern.</p> <p>There are currently 139 administrators across all nine AEAs. This includes leadership like AEA regional administrators who play a vital, statutory role in assisting and advising district administrators about compliance issues with all Iowa student IEPs.</p> <p>Per Iowa Code, all public schools and AEAs may not spend more than 5 percent of their total expenditures on administrative compensation. The percent of total administrative expenditures in all nine AEAs is lower than the 5 percent limit.</p> <p>Like school districts, compensation for AEA staff, including administrators, is established by local AEA boards using regional salary and benefit</p>

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	comparisons for similar education positions.

# Get Additional Facts on Iowa's Area Education Agencies

**Fact #1 - All students are general education students first: discussions about closing the achievement gap among students with special needs begin with addressing quality universal instruction in the general education classroom.**

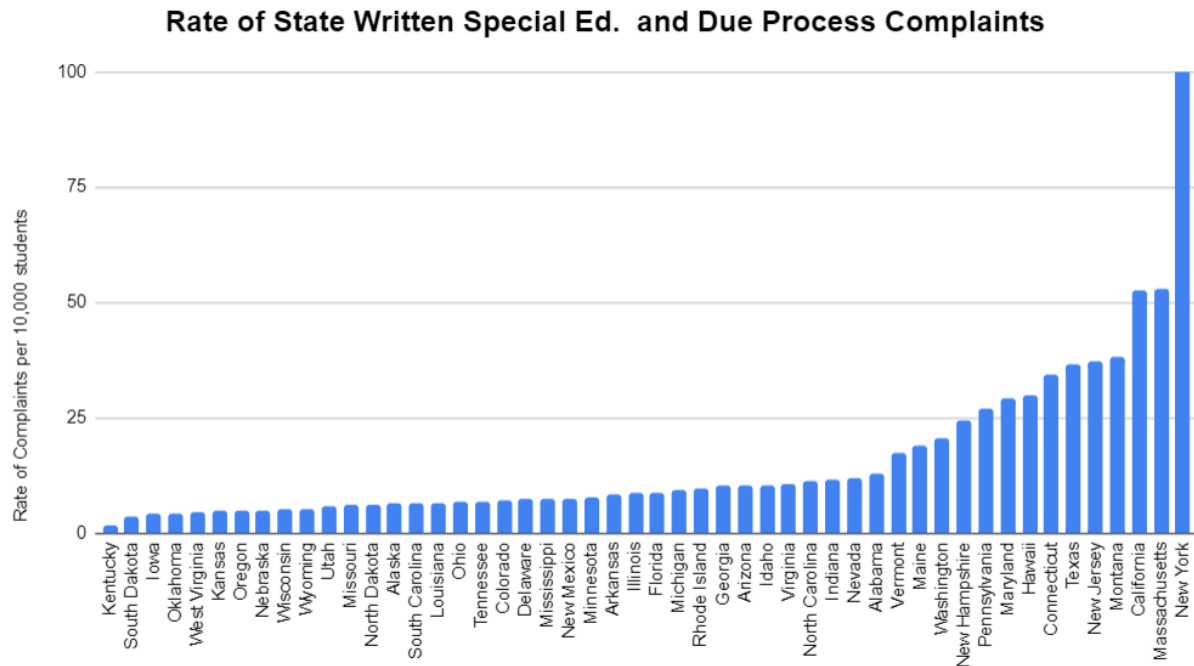
- Our ability to close an achievement gap begins with Early ACCESS services: AEA efforts start at the very beginning of the state's larger system of support for children through early intervention.
  - AEA staff are coaches, consultants and partners with Iowa classroom special education and general education teachers. A large majority of Iowa students who receive special education services receive most of their instruction in a general education classroom with instructional services provided by district (LEA) staff and related support services provided by AEA staff.
  - AEA staff are committed to working alongside classroom teachers and building administrators to ensure positive outcomes for Iowa students.
  - Relying on one measure to make broad sweeping statements about student progress is misleading. Student achievement is based on multiple measures, the most important being individual progress on IEP goals.
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**Fact #2 - Iowa's AEA staff partner with districts and families to improve learning outcomes for students. We co-own student successes and challenges and are united in our common desire to help children succeed.**

- While the common focus between the AEA and the district is on supporting students, our scope of work is vastly different. AEA staff are not hired to teach: AEA staff support teachers.
  - Our special education staff collaborate with school staff as consultants, but district staff provide direct instruction to students in the classroom. Our staff is most often gathering data to help identify better support structures for students, working with teachers to enhance their instructional strategies and working collaboratively with students, their families and educators through the IEP process.
  - AEA staff provide both consultative and direct services (like occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech-language services) to support our district partners in three main areas: diagnosis, design and delivery of specially designed instruction.
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## The Facts About Iowa's Area Education Agencies

**Fact #3 - Iowa's special education system relies on AEA leadership and staff to ensure special education services meet statutory compliance.**



- Iowa is a national leader in providing special education services. In reviewing Iowa against other states in the nation, our state ranks the third lowest in special education state complaints.
- AEA regional administrators play a vital, statutory role in assisting and advising district administrators in compliance issues with all Iowa student IEPs.
  - Iowa school district administrators supervise an average of 35 IEPs per academic administrator. Iowa's AEA administrators supervise an average of 848 IEPs and IFSPs per academic administrator.

<sup>1</sup> CADRE: The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education

## The Facts About Iowa's Area Education Agencies

**Fact #4 - From the system's inception, the funding and planning for Iowa's AEAs included support for special education, educational services and media/technology: a reflection of the state's intention to support the needs of all children, including those who benefit from special education services.**

- Just as an Iowa classroom and its students look, learn and behave differently today than they did 50 years ago, you'll find that the AEAs' programs and services also have strategically adjusted to ensure relevant support for Iowa families, students and educators. Over the years we have also adapted and evolved largely due to requests by the Iowa Department of Education or the local school districts we serve.
- One of our points of pride is our willingness to not only provide educational leadership in the state but also to respond to requests for services. Our programs and services are in direct alignment not only with Iowa Code but also with local community and district needs. We use local advisory boards, customer feedback assessments and other tools to ensure that we meet the needs of our customers.
- AEAs have the ability to bring innovative learning to every district in Iowa. This is fundamental to helping districts meet the needs of their students with things like accessible technology, innovative classroom instruction and student engagement strategies.
- Additionally, Iowa has nine standards of service for AEAs to ensure a level of consistency is available in programs and services across the state. Variability in the programs and services can be directly correlated to regional differences like availability of staffing, funding from the state, student enrollment and district needs. Those standards include the following:
  1. **Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment** - Support and expertise on best practices in both content and skill areas for children birth to age 5 and K-12 students.
  2. **Diverse Learning** - Specialized services for children and students birth to age 21 with diverse learning needs, including gifted students and students with disabilities.
  3. **Instructional Media** - Instructional materials to support K-12 classroom instruction and support for school improvement.
  4. **Multicultural, Gender-Fair Services** that assist schools and school districts to ensure supportive learning environments for all students.
  5. **Professional Development** - Implementation of the Iowa Professional Development Model; coordination of workshops, courses and materials and providing ongoing consultation for area educators and support staff.
  6. **School-Community Planning** - Support for school improvement processes and communication with families and communities.
  7. **School Leadership** - Leadership services that assist with the recruitment, induction, retention and professional development of educational leaders.

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8. **School Management** - Support and interim management of school administrative functions.
  9. **School Technology** - Assistance with technology planning and integration, training, cooperative purchasing, networking, duplication and distance learning.
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**Fact #5 - Iowa's AEAs are regularly engaged in continuous improvement efforts and believe a dialogue around potential changes should include input from local and state stakeholders to ensure the system continues to reflect the needs of districts and children in every Iowa county.**

- Iowa's AEAs have participated in a number of studies over the last few decades to ensure that we are continuing to meet the needs of Iowa's educators, children and families.
  - We ask that any review of our organization be entered into with a spirit of collaboration and involvement of representative key stakeholders.
  - Student equity is always a focus of the AEAs and our educational partners. We're continually engaged with our districts to support them with the challenges of addressing the needs of the state's growing populations of students in poverty, those with language barriers and those with special education needs.
  - We have a long history of inviting feedback and participating in conversations about how we can continually improve. In the last two years alone, Iowa's AEAs have participated in an Iowa Department of Education-directed accreditation site visit of each agency, as well as a desk-audit review around our adherence to standards outlined in Iowa Code. All AEAs passed these reviews.
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**Fact #6 - Iowa's AEAs' programs and services consistently earn high satisfaction ratings from school district administrators and teachers.**

- Every public school district and accredited nonpublic school supported by the AEAs is regularly provided feedback opportunities to ensure AEA services are impactful and support educators and students.
- District staff administrators were provided a survey to share with their staff and participate in an independent survey of AEA services in Fall 2021. In this survey, school district staff rated their satisfaction with 52 AEA programs and services:
  - 48 of those program/service approval ratings were above 90 percent meets/exceeds expectations.

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- 4 of those program/service approval ratings were above 80 percent meets/exceeds expectations.

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### **Fact #7 - Many licensed AEA staff positions require advanced certifications and more experience than what is required for a typical teacher.**

- Licensed staff in Iowa's AEAs hold positions for which licensure is required by the Iowa Board of Educational Examiners and/or the Iowa Department of Health & Human Services.
  - 33 percent of licensed employees at AEAs require certifications in health care and an advanced degree. This includes positions such as audiologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists.
  - 37 percent of licensed AEA employees require an education specialist degree. This includes positions such as school psychologists.
  - 5 percent of licensed AEA employees require a doctoral degree, which includes positions such as physical therapists and audiologists.
- Licensed and leadership positions at Iowa's AEAs require advanced degrees and extensive relevant experience beyond what might be required in a typical K-12 building. AEA staff are often considered experts in their fields and are compensated with salaries and benefit packages that are market-reviewed against similar positions in both education and non-education fields.

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### **Fact #8 - Iowa's AEA leadership compensation is regionally comparable to school district administration compensation.**

- All AEAs meet the requirements outlined in Iowa Code regarding administrative compensation.
- Per Iowa Code, all public schools and AEAs may not spend more than 5 percent of their total expenditures on total administrative compensation. The percent of total administrative expenditures in all of Iowa's nine AEAs for all administrators is lower than the 5 percent limit.
- Like school districts, compensation for AEA staff, including administrators, is established by local AEA boards using regional salary and benefit comparisons for similar education positions.
  - Chief Administrator compensation is often aligned closely with the compensation of superintendents in the largest schools in their respective AEA service areas and is

## The Facts About Iowa's Area Education Agencies

regionally competitive.

- When comparing executive expenditures (a combination of expenses tied to chief administrators and a handful of other expenses) as a percent of the total budget, the AEA executive expenditures are among the lowest in the state.
- When ranking executive expenditures in AEAs and school districts, Iowa's AEAs are below the average and fall into the 3rd and 4th quartiles of expenditures.

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### **Fact #9 - Iowa's AEAs utilize a regional service model that ensures equitable, accessible services for both urban and rural districts.**

- AEA staff provide services to children, families and educators in all of Iowa's 99 counties.
- Regardless of changes to the number of AEAs in the state, AEAs would still need to support the same number of school districts and the same number of students.
  - Most of our student services are best delivered in a face-to-face setting: increasing the geographic size of each AEA will reduce the amount of time AEA staff can spend directly supporting students.

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### **Fact #10 - Funding for Iowa's AEAs in the areas of special education and rural services needs modernization to reflect the shifts in student populations and address the growing sparsity of resources in Iowa's rural communities.**

- Iowa's AEAs provide support in the areas of educational services and media/technology to every public and accredited nonpublic school.
- Iowa's AEAs provide on-site direct service IEP support, Child Find services and support the work between our public schools and accredited nonpublic schools in facilitating IEPs.
- This support is provided even though AEAs receives no state funding for special education services delivered at nonpublic schools. Iowa's AEAs require a new funding formula to ensure AEAs are able to continue supporting all students regardless of their location or educational setting. This formula must:
  - Fund special education services at accredited nonpublic schools just as special education services are currently funded at public schools.
  - Provide a transportation equalization payment to our most rural AEAs to compensate for increased staff travel time between school districts.
  - Alter AEA funding disbursement intervals from a 10-month to a 12-month disbursement plan.