

Comments for House Committee on Public Education: Interim Charge Number 3 (Corrective Action Plan)

The [Autism Society of Texas \(AST\)](#) works to improve the quality of life for all Texans with autism by offering innovative, person-centered support to people impacted by autism and their families. Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects 1 in 54 Texans, as well as their parents, caregivers and friends. We offer assistance through a myriad of services and programs related to advocacy, recreation, education and support. We work in partnership with our community, seeking input from individuals with autism to advise our decision-making and offering comprehensive education and training so that communities may become more inclusive. We are providing comments today on issues that impact people with autism across Texas.

Interim Charge Number 3: Monitor the progress of the TEA's compliance with the Corrective Action Response required by the United States Department of Education, the implementation of the state's Special Education Strategic Plan, and the state's compliance with other federal requirements regarding special education, including maintenance of state financial support for special education. Recommend solutions to barriers the agency, school districts, students with disabilities, and parents face in accessing a free and appropriate public education and in meeting the milestones of the plan and any measures needed at the state level to ensure that students with disabilities are being located, fully evaluated, and appropriately identified for special education instruction and services.

Recommendations:

The Autism Society of Texas continues to be concerned with the lack of effort and progress on rectifying many of the agreed upon actions listed in the Corrective Action Plan. As noted in the recently released [Special Education Finance Advisory Committee Recommendations](#) the average special education enrollment rate is now 10.7% in Texas. This is a significant increase from the previous low of 8.6% when the Texas Education Agency (TEA) provided guidance via the PBMAS manual that led school districts to deny access to special education services to thousands of students each year. However the Texas special education enrollment rate is still nowhere near the national average for 2019 of 14.1% according to data found in [The Condition of Education 2020 At a Glance](#). Thousands of students remain unidentified and without services and supports that could positively affect their lives in so many ways.

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It is a disturbing and sad fact that students with autism are still not being identified and provided with special education support. Progress has been slow, and thousands of students continue to be left behind and left out of receiving special education services. As an organization that assists parents and caregivers through a state-wide Information & Referral Service, we continue to hear from parents whose students have been denied special education services, and /or the school district is unwilling to recognize that the student has autism. In addition, we find that parents do not know that each student has a right to special education, do not understand how to request a special education evaluation, and do not understand how to appeal or request an independent evaluation (IEE) should they not agree with the school's initial evaluation. These issues are basic problematic findings from the Department of Education (DOE) listening sessions, follow up audits, and the agreement TEA made with the DOE in the Corrective Action Plan and they are still not being addressed by many districts.

In addition, we believe that the Corrective Action Plan recommendations regarding "professional development" for all teachers should be implemented and expedited so teachers are more aware of what to look for when identifying a child who may have a suspected autism diagnosis or other suspected disability, and require an evaluation. All teachers should learn how to support students identified with autism both in a general education and special education setting.

We recommend that the Texas Education Agency should expedite their compliance with the Corrective Action Response and provide a report to the Texas Legislature on what they have done and what has not been accomplished at this time.

In addition, we concur and support with the [Joint Response to Request for Information to the 86th Legislature, House of Representatives, Public Education Committee, Interim Charge No. 3: Special Education](#) September 30, 2020 from: Disability Rights Texas; Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities; Arc of Texas; Autism Society of Texas; Coalition of Texans with Disabilities; Decoding Dyslexia Texas; Down Syndrome Association of Central Texas; Family to Family Network; Paso del Norte Children's Development Center – El Paso, Texas; Texans for Special Education Reform

The Autism Society of Texas believes that the above recommendations will help Texans with autism live better and more meaningful lives. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this input.