

El Paso Special Education Advocates
September 30, 2020

To: The Honorable Dan Huberty and Honorable Members of the Texas House Public Education Committee

From: El Paso Special Education Advocates - Laura Marquez; Gilda Gil; Bonnie Perez Ramirez; Lourdes Torres; Carolynne Ayoub; Kristi Lai; Flor Bermudez; Isabel de Rubiera; Adriana Casado; Zulema Lazarin

Subject: 86th Legislature - House Public Education Committee Interim Charge 3

INTERIM CHARGE 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.

Dear Chairman Dan Huberty, Vice Chairman Diego Bernal and Members of the House Public Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide public input related to House Public Education Committee Interim Charge 3. We are a group of special education advocates consisting of parents of children with disabilities and professionals serving families in El Paso, Texas. Through our respective roles as parent advocates or professionals working in community-based agencies. On average, we assist roughly 800 families and related professionals per year in accessing information and resources related to special education. Collectively, that amounts to over 13,000 direct service hours per year dedicated solely to the topic of special education and supporting children with disabilities.

The following comments are based on our experience working alongside families and our observations as they relate to TEA'S compliance with their Corrective Action Plan. As stakeholders in special education, we thank you again for the chance to provide information on this important topic.

Item: TEA's action steps related to training support and development ([pages 19-21 in TEA'S Corrective Action Plan](#)).

Professional Development – Parents continue to express frustration with the apparent inability of educators (general education, special education, and support staff) to adequately support students with disabilities. As it pertains to least restrictive environment (LRE), the concern is that educators do not possess the general knowledge and competency to work with students who fall under the 13 categories of disability under the IDEA. In the community, advocates and organizations work to educate parents and professionals around disability and how to best support students. It has been noted that in many of these workshops and presentations, there is an absence of educators – arguably the ones who *should* be taking advantage of these opportunities for professional development. Outreach personnel have expressed difficulty in garnering interest and support from school personnel to attend professional development opportunities that are outside of the parameters of local education agencies. If this continues to be the case, there must be greater effort on the part of TEA to ensure that educators are receiving adequate training and skill development to fully support students with disabilities in the most inclusive setting possible. No longer must we accept the notion that *only* special education teachers are responsible for the education of students with disabilities. Every school personnel having the potential to interact with students **MUST** possess the capacity to work with and support students with disabilities as they would students without disabilities.

The Texas Dyslexia Handbook – Parents and advocates have observed difficulty navigating services for dyslexia, in part due to school personnel not having full knowledge or awareness of timelines and process for evaluation. In 2017, the 85th Texas Legislature passed legislation requiring screening for all students as early as the end of kindergarten and grade 1. However, parents are still being told by school personnel that kindergarten is too early and must wait for screening. This causes a delay in services that is detrimental to the students' progress. School personnel must engage in adequate training to properly interpret the State Dyslexia Handbook so they can facilitate as opposed to hinder or further delay evaluation and implementation of supports to students who require specialized supports and intervention.

Child Find Resource Development – For parents of children with disabilities, especially those in the border community of El Paso where over [70% of households speak a language other than English](#), advocates highlight significant gaps in outreach and support on the part of local education agencies (LEAs) to help parents understand and navigate the special education process. Much of this work is being done by community-based agencies (non-profit organizations, parent advocacy networks and support groups, etc.) to educate and inform parents of their rights, the differences between Response to Intervention (RtI), programs for dyslexia, Section 504, and the IDEA. The issue with outside organizations performing this type of service is it becomes difficult to collaborate with schools to access parents to promote and deliver classes and services. It is imperative that better mechanisms be implemented to promote collaboration between LEAs and the community-based organizations providing these types of wrap-around services. LEAs should be a pathway to services, not a barrier.

Educator Preparation – Least restrictive environment (LRE) is a key right under the IDEA. LEAs are charged with ensuring that every reasonable effort is being made to ensure that children with disabilities are being educated alongside their peers without disabilities. The issue that parents and advocates have encountered often relates to educators being ill-equipped to work with ALL students. The branching of the education system, general education v. special education has made it difficult to fully achieve inclusion for students with disabilities. This competency must begin with educator workforce preparation. Every college student majoring in education should be required to complete classes related to disability and strategies for teaching and including students with disabilities in their classrooms. The 86th Legislature missed a key opportunity to pass a significant bill ([HB116](#)) that would improve training and staff development for primary and secondary educators to help them effectively serve every student. It is the opinion of parents and advocates that the Legislature must take steps to pass bills that support educator preparation that would allow achieving true inclusion for students with disabilities.

Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) Partnership – General Workforce Resources and General Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Available to Individuals with Disabilities – Through our outreach work with students and families who are navigating the transition process, it is our general assertion that students continue to fall through the gaps when it comes to transitioning into post-secondary life - whether to employment or higher-education. This is particularly evident for students who have a moderate to severe intellectual or developmental disability, where opportunities for employment, post-secondary education, and community recreation are few and far between. Parents continue to lament the fact that once their children “age out” of the public education setting, they are isolated with little opportunity to progress. Often, in time, they lose out on progress and skills they acquired during their time in school due to the lack of opportunity to exert and practice those skills in the community setting. [Unemployment rates for people with disabilities continues to be at its peak at over 80% nationally.](#) Vocational Rehabilitation Services remain a mystery to many students and parents who cite the difficulty in navigating and understanding the process. Students and families need more opportunities for employment that improve full community integration once they have exited the public education system.