

Nov. 21, 2025 Meeting Minutes

Iowa Special Education Advisory Panel
Location: Grimes State Office Building or Zoom
Time: 9 a.m.– 3 p.m.

Present

Wendy Andersen, Joy Barlean, Carrie Champine, Jennifer Dickey, Casey Force, Tami Hoffman, Mary Jackson, Jill Johnston, Sarah Norvell, Keri Osterhaus, Kristie Ostrander, Stephanie Petrillo, Ashley Reedy, Karen Thompson, Rebecca Torres, Kristi Upah, Kimberly Van Beek and Joel Weeks

Absent

Josh Bowar, Linda Dettman, Lee Longmire, Alissa Mayer, Rohey Sallah, and Katie Sharp

Department Staff Present

Leisa Breitfelder, Betsy Lin, Nancy Hunt, Beth Buehler-Sapp

Public Comment

None

Welcome/Introductions

The meeting was called to order by Casey Force, Chair at 9:05 p.m.

Approve Agenda

A motion was made to approve the agenda by Joel Weeks. The motion was seconded by Karen Thompson. Motion carried.

Consent Agenda

Minutes were reviewed by the panel members. Rebecca Torres made a motion to approve the minutes. Sarah Norvell seconded the motion. Motion carried.

ACHIEVE Family Portal Usage – Shannon Grundmeier, Iowa Department of Education

Education Program Consultant Shannon Grundmeier provided the Panel with an update on the ACHIEVE Family Portal and the usage. As of Nov. 21, there are 8,030 unique learners with at least one active family portal account. That is 7.65% of invited contacts. The Department would like to increase participation in the family portal. Shannon asked Panel members for personal experiences with the portal, feedback on barriers families may face in creating an account and ideas for promotion. The following questions were discussed:

- Are AEAs and LEAs proactively discussing the Family Portal with families?
- What barriers do AEAs and school districts face in promoting this tool?
- Are families interested in using this tool?
- What barriers do families face in accessing the Family Portal or understanding documents?

Federal Update – Thomas Mayes, Iowa Department of Education

General Counsel Thomas Mayes provided a summary of key topics related to updates at the federal level as of the time of the meeting.

Key Topics Discussed:

1. Government Shutdown and Funding Continuation

A government shutdown deal was passed, which will provide continued funding for the federal government through January 30, 2026. With exceptions, Funding for the Department of Agriculture (includes SNAP benefits), the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Food and Drug Administration and the military is fully funded through the federal fiscal year, ending September 30, 2026. In addition, OSEP staffers were hired back to work.

2. Department of the Interior Reorganization

The Department of the Interior is in the process of transitioning certain services to other agencies. This reorganization aims to streamline functions and, in some cases, eliminate agencies.

3. The Department of Education announced six interagency agreements to functionally move Federal US Department of Education programs to other agencies.

- **Elementary and Secondary Education:** Co-managed with the Department of Labor (DOL).
- **Postsecondary Education:** DOL will take on a greater role in administering most postsecondary education grant programs authorized under the Higher Education Act.

4. OSEP and OCR

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) will remain under their current agencies, at least for the time being.

5. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives are no longer mandated unless required by law. For example, special education.

6. Language Translation Requirements

Language translation services are still required as per the underlying statute, unless the statute is repealed. Some guidance documents have been rescinded but were not the law, but rather advice on how to apply the law. The underlying statute is still the same.

By-Laws Update - Leisa Breitfelder, Iowa Department of Education

Special Education Director Leisa Breitfelder brought up several proposed By-Law changes for discussion. Many of the changes were proposed due to staffing and structure changes at the Department of Education.

There was lengthy discussion around a proposed change in how member applications are reviewed. Members of the panel should be appointed by the director of the Iowa Department of Education and should be reasonably representative of the state population. In the past, individuals interested in serving on the Panel would complete an application. The applications were reviewed by a membership committee of Panel members. The committee would then forward their recommendations to the Director for appointment. The proposed change is for the Department to seek nominations from AEAs and districts to ensure representation across the entire state. The membership committee would no longer review applications.

Summary of the discussion: Panel members appreciated being intentional about ensuring representation from all areas of the state; however, there was some concern about going to a nomination-only process. The Panel cautioned against it being a “popularity contest” where only parents who are “towing the line of what

the district wants” would be brought forth. The conversations at SEAP are rich because members do not all think the same or have the same experience.

The consensus of those that spoke was that we continue the application process where interested individuals can apply in addition to seeking specific nominations. The director will review all applications and appoint new members from the applicant pool. The Panel facilitator will continue to organize the applications for review.

The proposed changes will be submitted to the Chair and the revised By-Laws will be brought to the Panel for a vote at the January meeting.

Continuous Improvement – State Processes – Leisa Breitfelder, Iowa Department of Education

Special Education Director Leisa Breitfelder provided an update of work at the state level. The following topics were covered:

- Administrator Professional Learning Network – The professional learning is led by two regional special education directors. There were 8- participants this year.
- Special Education Teacher Professional Learning and Coaching - this is specifically aimed at new special education teachers, as well as teachers that could conditionally-licensed. There is a professional learning and coaching group that is working and meeting on a monthly basis.
- Policy and Practice Webinars – month webinars that are recorded and posted to the website. The webinars are well attended.
- Professional Learning Library – multiple staff members are working to pull together training, webinars and resources into a training library. The training may be used to address corrective action.
- Special Education Director Fall Support Sessions – support for new special education directors.
- Alternate Assessment Team – creating guidance documents on how to make decisions if a student qualifies for alternate assessment.
- Public Facing Dashboards – dashboards to display data for the public.
- Assistive Technology Professional Development - providing addition learning to the field around assistive technology and changes.
- Statewide Behavioral Health – a task team is working on best practices for students who have mental health needs.

In addition, Leisa asked the Panel for feedback on informal removals. The Department is preparing guidance for the field and providing training.

Goal Writing - Leisa Breitfelder, Iowa Department of Education

Special Education Director Leisa Breitfelder led the Panel through a SMART goal activity to continue the Panel’s work on setting goals for the Panel’s focus. The following summary reflects the conversation the members had within their goal area groups.

1. Inclusion and Access to General Education Curriculum

- There is a need for a better understanding of what FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) and LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) mean, as these concepts are unique for each child. This should be a focal point during IEP meetings, with clear, direct discussions.
- It’s crucial to offer special education training to undergraduate students and to raise overall awareness about LRE and inclusion.
- To implement LRE effectively, support staff is essential. Without proper resources, achieving full inclusion is challenging.

- Key areas for training and support include:
 - The individuality of LRE for each child
 - Support staff supporting inclusion
 - Clear definitions of LRE and the continuum of services
- Guidance for IEP Teams: Providing specific questions for teams to address and ensuring student input is included in the decision-making process.

2. Resources Around Services for Families

- Conversations about getting families and children on waivers should begin earlier in the process.
- Emphasis should be placed on educating staff (especially those in teacher preparation programs, as well as early childhood educators) about these services.
- It's important to educate families in a way that is accessible, understandable, and actionable—offering tangible resources they can refer to at their convenience.
- Collaboration with HHS (Health and Human Services) is necessary to keep families updated on the constantly changing service options.

3. Behavior and Trauma-Informed Care

- Implementing an environmental scan approach is vital to assess the current state of behavior and trauma-informed care: defining existing resources, identifying gaps, and establishing a future framework.
- A comprehensive, school-wide trauma-informed care framework should be developed, providing all staff with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively recognize, respond to, and support students impacted by trauma.
- Special focus should be placed on Tier 3 supports for students with the highest needs.

Announcements

Required Open Meetings and Records Training – Targeted for Jan. 9 meeting

Future Agenda Items/Emerging Issues

- Speakers for topics connected to the SMART goals.

2025-26 Meeting Dates

January 9, 2026

February 27, 2026

April 10, 2026

May 15, 2026

Adjourn

Joel Weeks made a motion to adjourn. Sarah Novell seconded the motion. Motion carried.