

# May 15, 2026 Meeting Minutes

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

## Present

Wendy Anderson, Joy Barlean, Jennifer Dickey, Casey Force, Tami Hoffman, Mary Jackson, Sarah Norvell, Keri Osterhaus, Kristie Ostrander, Stephanie Petrillo, Karen Thompson, Rebecca Torres, Rohey Sallah, Kristi Upah, and Joel Weeks

## Absent

Josh Bowar, Carrie Champine, Linda Dettman, Jill Johnston, Lee Longmire, Alissa Mayer, Ashley Reedy, Katie Sharp and Kimberly Van Beek

## Department Staff Present

Leisa Breitsfelder, Betsy Lin, Barbara Lacina, Nancy Hunt, Beth Buehler-Sapp

## Public Comment

None

## Welcome/Introductions

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

## Approve Agenda

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

## Consent Agenda

Minutes were reviewed by the panel members. Joel Weeks made a motion to approve the minutes. Stephanie Petrillo seconded the motion. Motion carried.

## Legislative Update – Thomas Mayes, Iowa Department of Education

Thomas Mayes, general counsel, provided an update on legislation that passed during the recent session.

- **School Choice and Charter Schools**
- **Charter authorizer expansion:** University of Northern Iowa can now authorize charter schools alongside the State Board of Education; UNI would approve applications but not operate schools directly.
- **Charter school funding reform:** AEA education and media services funding for charter school students will now stay with the AEA to serve those schools, eliminating windfall payments to resident districts that couldn't serve charter students.
- **IPERS coverage codified:** Charter school employees are now explicitly IPERS-covered, with service credits counting toward retirement.

- **Driver's education clarified:** Public school of residence must provide driver's education for charter students, with charter schools responsible for associated costs.
- **Concurrent enrollment access:** Charter school students can now participate in concurrent enrollment programs for college credit, closing a gap in the original charter law.
- **Revolving loan fund:** New charter school revolving loan fund created for facility financing at preferential interest rates, with property liens for defaults.

### Education Savings Accounts (ESA)

- **Second application window:** ESA applications can now be submitted October 15-November 15 for spring semester if June deadline missed; covers partial year only, requires annual reapplication.

### Statewide Voluntary Preschool

- **Standalone participation:** Non-public preschools can directly apply for statewide voluntary preschool funding without partnering with districts; funding and staffing logistics still being clarified.

### Private Instruction (Homeschool)

- **Diploma equivalency:** Homeschool diplomas issued by parents or cooperating teachers now have same legal effect as public school diplomas for post-secondary admissions, employment, and occupational licenses.
- **Independent instruction expansion:** Removed the four unrelated children limit and no-fee restriction for independent private instruction, enabling micro-schools; students remain ineligible for public school sports, AEA services, or special education except concurrent enrollment and optional state testing.

### Legislative Cleanup and Code Maintenance

- **Legacy charter law consolidated:** Innovation zone school chapter (never used, zero schools created) merged into current charter law; thousands of references to non-existent innovation zone schools removed from Iowa Code.
- **Special Education Council repealed:** Council that duplicated SEEP work eliminated from code.

### Discipline Bill – Future Discussion Required

The discipline bill passed but contains complex provisions requiring structured discussion with SEAP before implementation guidance is issued.

**Planned approach:** Hold a structured discussion session with SEAP at a future meeting including immediate feedback, on how changes affect children and organizations served.

## Parent Involvement Survey (Indicator 8) – Melissa Schnurr, Iowa Department of Education

Administrative Consultant Melissa Schnurr discussed the current state of the Parent Involvement Survey, which is Indicator 8. Indicator 8 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) measures the percentage of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results.

The current survey asks a single yes/no question via ACHIEVE through an email with a link to the survey. We have a 10-14% response rate with very high yes responses from those who respond. The single question provides insufficient data to improve student outcomes, which OSEP now prioritizes over sample representativeness.

Melissa discussed the following proposed changes:

- **Nine-item survey:** Expanded to nine statements rated on 4-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) plus one open-ended question; 7th-8th grade reading level.
- **Scoring method:** Respondents with mean score of 3+ (agree to strongly agree) counted as "involved" if they answer at least 50% of items.
- **Implementation timeline:** New survey effective for 2026-27 school year (first year of new SPP/APR package) after Director Snow review.

The survey is anonymous so open-ended responses cannot be linked to districts or AEAs for targeted follow-up.

- **Potential solutions discussed:**
  - Ask families to voluntarily provide a district/AEA (though some may fear identification).
  - Work with ACHIEVE vendor to auto-link AEA in backend output.
  - Use state-level patterns only since district attribution is unavailable.
- **Feedback requested:** SEAP members are asked to complete feedback form by end of day June 20 on survey clarity, relevance to parent involvement and open-ended question utility.

## Reevaluation Changes – Jessica Hernandez, Iowa Department of Education

Education Program Consultant Jessica Hernandez provided an overview of the recent reevaluation changes.

Teams can determine re-evaluation not needed only when the parent agrees; however, if the parent wants one, it must be completed. The team cannot skip the reevaluation if the team is considering exiting the learner (except graduation/aging out). In addition, the reevaluation cannot skip two consecutive reevaluations. It should be a rare occurrence and only occur when there are no questions about disability or educational needs.

Parent participation is required. The date of parent contact is now required for both consent and notice forms, even for records-only reviews. Parent input and background/other relevant data sections are now mandatory (mirroring initial evaluation structure). Data is organized by domain area in output. The assessment methods (review, interview, observe, test) are embedded within summaries rather than separate pages. The "Test" option is only available after approved consent is received. Fair evaluation questions from the initial evaluation are now required for re-evaluations involving testing.

All unfinalized re-evaluations removed and no longer accessible. The new process is available July 2.

## Facilitated IEPs – Jen Cira, Iowa Department of Education

Dispute Resolution Coordinator Jen Cira discussed the Department's new Facilitated IEP program. Jen described the following program structure:

- **State facilitators:** Neutral third parties (not IEP team members or decision-makers) who help with communication, engagement and resolving disagreements; term used instead of "IEP facilitator" to avoid confusion with teacher role in ACHIEVE.
- **Mutual consent required:** Both family and district must agree and sign form before scheduling; form available on dispute resolution webpage by September 1<sup>st</sup>.
- **Three-hour limit:** Sessions capped at three hours due to intensity; teams can schedule additional sessions if making progress.
- **Not for manifestation determinations:** State facilitators cannot be used for manifestation determination meetings.

Facilitated IEPs can be requested when there are communication concerns, complicated IEPs with many needs, lack of trust/tense past meetings, power imbalances where voices not heard and when previous IEP meetings were long or unfocused. Facilitate IEPs are not appropriate when there is an active state complaint,

due process or mediation (unless corrective action identified need) or when previous facilitated IEPs failed to resolve issues. Additionally, the program is not appropriate when the turnaround is under 14 days. If there is an attorney involved, there is a requirement for disclosure on the request form.

The Department is conducting a pilot program. Three state facilitators trained January-February 2026. The facilitators are also available for mediations. Des Moines, Davenport and Red Oak were invited April 22 to participate in the pilot. All three responded positively but no requests were received yet (late in the school year). A Request for Proposal (RFP) to contract additional facilitators is under review. The RFP will be publicized when it is reopened.

## Year in Review – Reflection on Accomplishments – Leisa Breitfelder, Iowa Department of Education

### Professional Learning Expansion

- **Administrator Leadership Series:** Monthly sessions for principals and assistant principals (including those serving as special education directors); flipped classroom model with content review before Zoom discussions of scenarios and questions; continuing next year
- **Emerging Special Education Teachers Series:** For new teachers using flipped classroom model; content exploration followed by application discussions; ongoing
- **New District Special Education Directors Series:** Three summer sessions covering allowable spending, case rosters, Part B IDEA application, district-level service delivery plans, alternate assessment system setup. **Year-long director support:** Extend new district special education director series to full year for ongoing learning as issues arise
- **Policy and Practice Webinars:** Monthly webinars; survey currently open (closes in couple weeks) on format, timing (Wednesdays), live vs. recorded preferences to inform 2025-26 schedule development

### IDEA Differentiated Accountability – Cycle 2 Results

#### Three-Year Cycle Comparison (2022 vs 2025)

- **Level 1 stable:** 172 districts remained Level 1
- **Improved to Level 1:** 32 districts from Level 2, 14 districts from Level 3
- **Declined from Level 1:** 43 districts to Level 2, 13 districts to Level 3
- **Level 2 movement:** 24 districts remained Level 2, 8 declined to Level 3, 7 improved from Level 3
- **Level 3 stable:** 12 districts remained Level 3
- **Charter schools:** Did not exist in 2021-22 but included in 2025 cycle

### Future Accountability Framework

- **New framework in development:** Still running analysis; Cycle 2 will complete before Year 1 of new designation framework; potential overlap of Cycle 2 Year 3 with new framework Year 1 for closeout/intro activities

### Coaching and Support Hours Delivered

- School Improvement Team (General Education Focus): 6,700+ hours. Coaching provided to school staff in comprehensive and targeted schools, including those identified for students with disabilities
- Regional Special Education Division: 3,400+ hours. Coaching and support at district administrative level (superintendents, special education directors, administrators)
- AEA Practice Coaches: 7,000+ hours. Direct coaching to special education teachers in identified districts with focus areas; coaches typically embedded in buildings as part of regular assignment, not sole job duty; some large districts have dedicated practice coaches across buildings

# State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR)

## Current Performance Against Targets

- **Reading proficiency:** Above target (actual data exceeds blue target line)
- **Math proficiency:** Above target at 29.01% vs. 25.36% target; new math requirements may impact future trends similar to reading initiative effects
- **Graduation rate:** Below target at 77.18% vs. 88.87% target; data accuracy issues identified with districts miscoding graduation status in student information systems.
- **Post-secondary enrollment/employment:** Below target; data pulled from Iowa Works misses students crossing state borders (e.g., Illinois employment); discussions on improving accuracy when districts know outcomes not captured in data source.

## End of Current Package

- **New targets coming:** This is the final year of the current SPP/APR package; SEEP will help set targets for the new package; department researching other states' target levels for comparison.

## General Supervision and Compliance

### Focus Monitoring Activity

- **2022-23:** 1 school district
- **2023-24:** 0 school districts
- **2024-25:** 3 school districts
- **2025-26:** 4 school districts planned

## State Complaints

- **Current year:** 91 state complaints as of yesterday
- **Last year same time:** 28 complaints (ended year at 36)
- **Tripling of volume:** 3x increase over prior year; national trend, not Iowa-specific
- **AI-generated complaints:** Significant increase in AI-generated complaints from both parents and districts; complaints copy-pasted from ChatGPT with characteristic formatting; investigators must request actual evidence beyond AI-generated text
- **Staffing response:** Hired two full-time state complaint investigators; previously "other duties as assigned" taking hours from staff doing professional learning, data, guidance, and policy webinars

## Alignment with Pre-K-12 Division

### One System of Improvement Goal

- **Unified approach:** Aligning special education work with general education PK-12 Division's ESA work; both coaching teachers in schools identified for students with disabilities.
- **Consolidated planning:** Reducing multiple implementation plans; filtering district-level plans to building level; coordinating professional learning delivery and needs assessments to avoid duplication.
- **Shared responsibility:** Creating understanding that all students are shared responsibility; modeling state-level collaboration that districts should replicate between general and special education.

## Future Priorities

- **Expanded coaching:** Strengthening instructional practices and behavior/social-emotional supports for "unseen disabilities" that are misunderstood.
- **District/AEA partnerships:** Creating strong partnerships to stabilize systems across Iowa.
- **System stabilization:** Focus on consistency and sustainability statewide.

## Department Update - Iowa Department of Education staff

### New Positions Filled

Medicaid specialist: John Nease from Timberline (Medicaid reimbursement vendor) joined to assist districts with reimbursements.

ACHIEVE management analyst: Tonia Hoch from Prairie Lakes AEA hired for back-end ACHIEVE support, data pulling, bug fixes.

State complaint investigators: Tiffany Poage moved from significant disabilities consultant role to investigator; one investigator position being reposted after resignation.

Early ACCESS professional development (CSPD): Melanie Reese returned to department after working with multiple states; brings external expertise to early childhood system.

619 coordinator (3-5): Valerie Moose transitioned from special education finance role; background includes Texas regional director work and preschool through transition experience.

### Open Positions

Accreditation position: Reposted after offer declined; will assist with AEA accreditation process and AEA standards, join Pre-K-12 team on school visits.

Significant disabilities consultant: Position open after Tiffany Poage's move to investigator; applications closed yesterday, moving to interviews.

State complaint investigator: One additional investigator position being posted

## Announcements

Outgoing Panel Member: Sarah Norvell

Thank you to Casey Force for her service as Chair.

## Future Agenda Items

- **Special education finance deep dive:** Member requested comprehensive education on special education finance including funding silos, deficit allowances, General Fund vs. special education budgets, federal funding gaps.
- **Discipline bill implementation:** Structured discussion needed on new discipline bill provisions, definitions, and implications for students and organizations

## Emerging Issues

None

## 2026-27 Meeting Dates

September 18

October 16

November 20

January 8

February 26

April 9

May 14

## Adjourn

Joel Weeks made a motion to adjourn. Sarah Norvell seconded the motion. Motion carried. Meeting adjourned.