

# Iowa State Board of Education

## Executive Summary

November 16, 2022



**Agenda Item:** Central Rivers Education Agency (AEA) Accreditation Report

**State Board Priority:** Eliminating Achievement and Opportunity Gaps  
Improving Teacher and Leader Preparation

**State Board Role/Authority:** Iowa Code section 273.11 (1) directs the State Board to develop standards and rules for the accreditation of AEAs. The Department of Education is directed to develop and establish, in consultation with the AEAs, an accreditation process for AEAs. Iowa Code section 273.10 (1-3) states the State Board shall determine whether a program of an AEA shall receive initial accreditation or remain accredited...based upon the recommendation of the Director of the Department of Education after a study of the factual and evaluative evidence...in terms of the accreditation standards adopted by the State Board.

**Presenter(s):** Eric Heitz, Administrative Consultant  
Bureau of School Improvement

**Attachment(s):** One

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that the State Board grant continued accreditation to Central Rivers AEA through the next review period.

**Background:**

Iowa Code section 273.10 requires the State Board to approve AEA accreditation for a term up to five years. The process requires the use of an accreditation team appointed by the Director of the Department of Education to conduct an evaluation, including an on-site visit of each AEA.

The AEA accreditation team shall determine whether the accreditation standards for a program have been met and shall make a report to the Director and the State Board, together with a recommendation as to whether the programs of the AEA should receive initial accreditation or remain accredited.

The accreditation team shall report strengths and weaknesses, if any, for each accreditation standard and shall advise the AEA of available resources and technical assistance to further enhance the strengths and improve areas of weakness.

# Central Rivers Area Education Agency 2022 Accreditation Report



October 12, 2022

State of Iowa  
Department of Education  
Grimes State Office Building  
400 E. 14<sup>th</sup> Street  
Des Moines, IA 50319-0146

## **State Board of Education**

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## **Bureau of School Improvement**

Eric Heitz, Administrative Consultant  
Buffy Campbell, Consultant

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## Purpose

Iowa Code 273.10 defines the purpose of this report as determining if standards have been met and making a recommendation to the Iowa State Board of Education (State Board) as to whether the programs of the area education agency (AEA) should receive initial accreditation or remain accredited.

This recommendation is based on a desk audit review of documents and an on-site visit.

## Central Rivers AEA Service Area Data:

- 53 public school districts
- 23 nonpublic schools
- 68,221 students, preschool through grade 12
- 5 comprehensive schools
- 69 targeted schools
- 531.88 total staff members
- Covers 8,872 square miles

## On-site Visit:

Iowa Code 273.10 and Iowa Administrative rule 281.72 require the Iowa Department of Education (Department) to conduct an AEA accreditation desk audit and visit to determine if the AEA is meeting accreditation standards listed below.

- School-Community Planning: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(a), 281 IAC 72.4(1)
- Professional Development: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(b), 281 IAC 72.4(2)
- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(c), 281 IAC 72.4(3)
- Diverse Learners: Iowa Code 273.2(4)
- Media, Technology, Leadership, Multicultural/Gender Fair: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(f)(g), Iowa Code 273.4(2)
- Management Services: Iowa Code 273.7A

## School-Community Planning

This section includes how the AEA provides support for school-community planning, including a means of assessing needs, establishing shared direction and implementing program plans, and reporting progress. 281 IAC 72.9, Iowa Code 273.11, Iowa Code 273.11(2)(a), 281 IAC 72.4(1)

### A. Comprehensive

#### Strengths:

The Central Rivers AEA desk audit documents reflect a strong comprehensive improvement plan, use of the AEA Assessment of Multi-Tiered System of Support Implementation (AEA SAMI), as well as other measures of progress on AEA goals. The AEA has a strong leadership foundation, and has established strong relationships with the school districts they serve, as evidenced by various survey data.

#### Recommendations:

There are no recommendations in this area at this time.

#### Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## **B. School-Community Planning**

### Strengths:

Interviews with Central Rivers AEA groups indicated that blending theory of practice with inspired leadership philosophical approaches to organizational leadership, has established the basis for a strong, consistent service delivery plan which supports the current organizational structure. This, coupled with feedback loops and the cycle visits, has established a routine that allows for stakeholder input and monitoring of programs, services and multiple pilot initiatives.

Several interview groups shared that the AEA utilized the Hanover Survey, a custom research model for informational research, as the foundation for assessing effectiveness with school districts. Data points from the survey provided evidence that the AEA is comparable to the state of Iowa in all areas, while surpassing the state average for satisfaction in: awareness of services in special education supports; familiarity of educational services; and instructional media and technology services.

Interviews with Central Rivers AEA leadership indicated that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is a priority for the AEA. The AEA conducted an internal equity audit during the 2021-22 school year. Based on the results, Central Rivers AEA hired a DEI coordinator, and is working with the Equity Committee to build capacity in this area with AEA staff. The AEA's cabinet hopes to expand DEI support to districts in the future.

Multiple interview groups reported Central Rivers AEA's embedded leadership teams, which include regional administrators and consultants, regularly participate with school district leadership teams to support a variety of school-related programs and initiatives, when invited to do so. Superintendents noted these efforts help keep their school districts and the AEA aligned in determining needed services.

Interview groups, including district and AEA board member groups, reported that the organizational structure appears to meet the needs of the AEA and school districts. For example, the AEA created a five-year cycle for visits with each school. These visits are an instrumental tool in creating two-way communication between school districts and the AEA.

Several interview groups reported that Central Rivers AEA's support for districts during the COVID-19 pandemic was evident. The superintendents' group was especially appreciative of the weekly informal conversations with their peers, facilitated by AEA leadership.

According to parent interviewees, the AEA supports parents, and staff are highly responsive to their needs and questions. When parents were prompted with "who to go to for a conflict or concern?" they consistently responded to the AEA team representative, noting the strong relationships they developed with AEA staff.

### Recommendations:

The site visit team encourages Central Rivers AEA to internally evaluate pilot programs, to ascertain the effectiveness and practicality of expanding implementation and the AEA's capacity to sustain current program support in doing so.

### Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## Professional Development

This section provides evidence that explains how professional development programs offered by the AEA respond to current needs. Iowa Code 273.11(2)(b), 281 IAC 72.4(2)

### Strengths:

Interview groups noted the numerous pilots that Central Rivers AEA supports, such as the Learning Management System (LMS), shared services and Multi-occupational Certification (MOC)/work-based learning.

All interview groups reported the AEA's organizational structure provides support for efficient and effective service delivery of professional development opportunities. Examples include: the recent Behavior Summit hosted by the Central Rivers AEA in response to district requests for support, data warehouse toolkit customized to each district and the development of the LMS, which houses a catalog of course opportunities across multiple content areas.

Multiple interview groups shared that the implementation and continued expansion of the LMS has provided a variety of delivery modalities for learning modules covering a wide range of topics which include instruction, assessment, special education, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and data analysis, as well as others, to support staff and administration.

Interviews with AEA and school district staff reflected that the AEA provides learning opportunities in the area of special education, focused on the implementation of the ACHIEVE system to support internal and external client use. In addition, the AEA hosts specialized training opportunities for paraeducators that include paraprofessional certification and Crisis Prevention and Intervention (CPI) training.

According to multiple interview groups, Central Rivers AEA utilizes an internal monitoring system that includes feedback loops and cycle visits to gather data on the impact of their service delivery, and can make real-time adjustments to better support each of the school districts that they serve. District interviewees representing several special education groups noted this.

AEA staff have been trained in Inspired Leadership. They are building more capacity for this model by training AEA coaches and offering additional learning for staff who are interested.

### Recommendations:

The site visit team encourages Central Rivers AEA to continue to expand on the LMS, potentially creating the opportunity for earning micro-credentials (short, focused credentials designed to provide in-demand skills, know-how and experience in a specific skill or set of skills). Consider reaching out to Keystone AEA for support in this process.

The site visit team encourages Central Rivers AEA to continue in their flexibility and responsiveness to specific school district needs, especially in the area of professional learning related to early childhood scale-up of the Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) framework.

### Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

This section provides evidence of how the AEA supports curriculum development, instruction and assessment for reading, language arts, mathematics and science, using research-based methodologies. Iowa Code 273.11(2)(c), 281 IAC 72.4(3)

### Strengths:

Multiple interview groups emphasized Central Rivers AEA's focus on standards-based systems of delivery to ensure the success of all learners in an MTSS. Each student is provided with core instruction and universal support for learning.

Interviews with the AEA's school improvement consultants, school district administrators and teachers, indicated that there is strong support for data utilization, interpretation and use in decision-making. School district administrators expressed appreciation for the support provided by both AEA consultants individually, and through the care team delivery system. Assistance was provided for school districts required to use the SAMI process, and for those schools that chose to use SAMI voluntarily, to monitor system strengths and overall school district health. Additionally, it was noted by AEA consultants that school districts were encouraged to use Conditions for Learning survey data to assess student and school district climate and culture.

Interviews with Central Rivers AEA staff indicated the AEA has provided both resources and support in the area of Future Ready Iowa standards, including resources and templates for school districts to use in Portrait of a Graduate and Future Ready Iowa work.

Teacher interviewees shared that the AEA serves as a point of contact with school districts to connect those who are adopting the same curricula to one another through collaboration as they proceed with the process.

Teacher interviewees said they valued the AEA's support for curriculum adoptions, including unpacking standards, exploring best practices, providing resources and building the collective capacity of teachers prior to selecting a new curricular resource.

### Recommendations:

The site visit team encourages AEA consultants to continue to encourage learning and implementation of MTSS Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports. This will help make sure school districts are equipped to support students who may not meet the threshold for special education or other support services. The goal is to ensure these students don't fall through cracks in the system, widening the achievement gap. The site visit team suggests utilization of ESSA resources as they are updated and become available.

The site visit team encourages Central Rivers AEA school improvement consultants and leadership to engage in dialogue around the connections between Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), and curriculum and instruction, seeking opportunities to enhance services and support across all AEA offerings.

### Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.



## Diverse Learners

This section provides evidence of support for special education services, gifted and talented children programming, English language (EL) programming and 504 supports and procedures. Iowa Code 273.2(4)

### A. Students with Disabilities

#### Strengths:

Interviewees among AEA preschool/Early Access staff, the agency's special education leadership and parent groups shared that focused guidance from the Central Rivers AEA team supports student transitions between early childhood and kindergarten, as well as post-secondary planning for older students. The agency helps ensure planning meetings with parents occur with ample time for students and families to prepare. The AEA special education consultants specifically focus on transitions beyond high school, which begins at age 14 for special education students.

The AEA's special education leadership team described the agency's ability to support diverse learner needs across a full continuum of services from birth to age 21. Examples include extensive support for transitions experienced by families and children receiving services through Early ACCESS and early childhood special education, as well as the development of shared programs to support mental health and therapeutic environments.

Interviews with AEA and school district staff reflected that the agency provides learning opportunities in the area of special education, focused on the implementation of the ACHIEVE system to support internal and external client use. Additionally, Central Rivers AEA hosts specialized training for paraeducators including paraeducator certification and Crisis Prevention and Intervention (CPI) training.

#### Recommendations:

AEA leadership consistently encourages districts to collaborate with agency consultants to engage in learning about, and implementing MTSS Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports as a means to ensure that districts are equipped to support students who may not meet the threshold for special education or other support services do not fall through cracks in the system, and continue to widen the gap in their achievement.

#### Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

### B. English Language Learners (EL)

#### Strengths:

Services for English language learners (EL) and teachers were acknowledged across multiple interview groups. Examples include: support for newcomers, professional learning opportunities, support for new EL teachers, providing an EL teacher on a short-term basis when a district does not have one, and the critical data analysis process used by the EL consultants to review English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) data.

Through interviews with Central Rivers AEA general support staff, it was noted that support for EL students is evident, especially for small school districts with few identified students. This includes support from consultants, and shared positions until the school district is able to hire a certified teacher. AEA staff indicated that "all students are general education students first," and noted the importance of strengthening universal instruction. Agency consultants collaborate with one another to ensure the support provided is aligned with supports for identified students.

Recommendations:

There are no recommendations in this area at this time.

Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

**C. Gifted and Talented**

Strengths:

Internal and external interview groups commented on the support available from the Central Rivers AEA regarding learners who are talented and gifted or exceed age level expectations.

Recommendations:

There are no recommendations in this area at this time.

Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

**D. Section 504**

Strengths:

Based on review of Central Rivers AEA's Comprehensive Improvement Plan, its "504 Guideline Manual" summarizes the 504 process, provides support and suggested structures for school districts, AEA staff, parents, and students and offers documentation templates. Central Rivers AEA also provides formal, regional 504 training, conducts in-district professional development and works directly and indirectly with school districts, parents, and students to ensure free appropriate public education for all.

Recommendations:

There are no recommendations in this area at this time.

Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## **Media, Technology, Leadership, Multicultural/Gender Fair**

This section provides evidence of: support for instructional media services that supplement and support local district media centers and services; support for school technology planning and staff development for implementing instructional technologies and assistance provided to school districts for the general improvement of their educational programs and operations. Iowa Code 273.11(2)(f)(g), Iowa Code 273.4(2)

**A. Media**

Strengths:

Media, instructional technology and technology support were noted as essential services by several of the school district interview groups. Services included not only the materials collections, but the numerous web-based applications and resources for students and staff use, as well as support for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), and Coding resources.

Central Rivers AEA consultants mentioned in their interview that the Media staff completed a review of all media resources this past summer, weeding out those that were out of date, reviewing circulation data and determining areas of interest for growth.

Recommendations:

There are no recommendations in this area at this time.

Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## **B. Technology**

Strengths:

Media, instructional technology and technology support were noted as essential services by several of the LEA interview groups.

Multiple internal and external interview groups mentioned the AEA's efforts to provide information and resources on cybersecurity protection, communication and media support.

Teachers, principals, superintendents and AEA staff shared examples of media services provided by the AEA for general improvement of educational programs, which also assist in a reduction of costs for school districts.

Recommendations:

The site visit team encourages Central Rivers AEA media staff to continue their work promoting the collections and resources available to school districts, continue anticipating areas of need and increase the resources they provide.

Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## **C. Leadership**

Strengths:

Multiple internal and external interview groups mentioned the AEA's efforts to provide information and resources on cybersecurity protection, communication and media support.

Multiple interview groups were enthusiastic about the LMS for the delivery of professional development through multiple modalities including synchronous, asynchronous, blended and on-demand options. The AEA offers more than 150 learning modules across a wide range of topics.

All interview groups representing AEA, school district and school leaders mentioned the value of AEA networking opportunities provided to superintendents, curriculum and special education directors, teacher leaders, teacher-librarians and counselors.

Recommendations:

There are no recommendations in this area at this time.

Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## **D. Multicultural/Gender Fair**

### Strengths:

Interviewees shared multiple examples illustrating the instrumental role Central Rivers AEA plays in assisting with data review and implementation of actions to address identified needs. Examples include assisting principals with the review of data collected through the Conditions for Learning survey to develop needed resources, and supporting special education directors during the review of bullying reports to determine if specific student populations are targeted. In addition, various comments from district interviewees indicated the AEA assists districts with the process of developing committees to address equitable treatment of all students. The AEA has also provided proactive training opportunities at superintendent meetings.

### Recommendations:

There are no recommendations in this area at this time.

### Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## **Management Services**

This section provides evidence of any services to school districts, not limited to: superintendent services, personnel services, business management services, special maintenance services and transportation services. Iowa Code 273.7A

### Strengths:

Several interview groups reported Central Rivers AEA has implemented shared systems and contracted personnel services for districts to address the shortage of teachers and administrators. These positions include special education work experience coordinators, special education directors, curriculum directors, EL teachers and IT support, as well as interim superintendent support.

Teachers, principals, superintendents and internal AEA staff gave examples of multiple media services provided by the AEA for general improvement of educational programs, which also assist with school district cost reduction.

Interview groups noted that Central Rivers AEA provides compliance support with the ADA across multiple media platforms. This includes software, hardware and the deployment of adaptive technology devices.

### Recommendations:

The site visit team encourages all AEA staff to share the AEA's story, the accomplishments and support provided for districts whenever possible.

### Standard Met/Not Met:

The standard is met.

## Conclusion

Based on the desk audit and site visit the team determine the following standards have been met:

- School-Community Planning: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(a), 281 IAC 72.4(1)
- Professional Development: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(b), 281 IAC 72.4(2)
- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(c), 281 IAC 72.4(3)
- Diverse Learners: Iowa Code 273.2(4)
- Media, Technology, Leadership, Multicultural/Gender Fair: Iowa Code 273.11(2)(f)(g), Iowa Code 273.4(2)
- Management Services: Iowa Code 273.7A

### Recommendation:

It is recommended that the State Board grant continued accreditation to AEA through the next review period.