



# TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

## FAQ: HOW WILL ESAs HELP SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS?

### INTRODUCTION

ESAs help students who receive special education (sp. ed.) services by matching them to schools and supports that best serve their needs. Key programs show that ESAs help sp. ed. students achieve their full potential.

### CURRENT NEEDS AND SERVICES

It is important to begin with an accurate understanding of the diagnoses and needs of sp. ed. students in Texas. In the 2021–2022 school year, 82% of sp. ed. students learned in a general education setting for more than half of the day, with 54% of students progressing in a fully mainstream arrangement. Almost one-third of Texas sp. ed. students have a *specific learning disability*, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia.

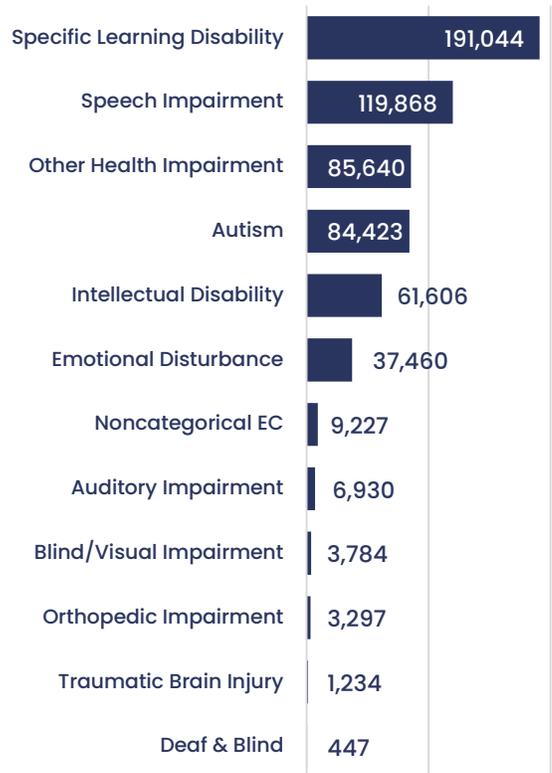
With the right support, most students receiving sp. ed. services can achieve on grade level. As Commissioner Morath testified in 2022, 80% of all sp. ed. students can be fully working on grade level with the right support.

### MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Unfortunately, in the 2021–2022 school year, 25% of students receiving sp. ed. services were on grade level in reading and 23% in Mathematics. This is well below the rates of non-sp. ed. students, 56% of which are on grade level in reading and 45% in Mathematics, and it is nearly the inverse result of what Commissioner Morath observed is possible for students receiving sp. ed. services.

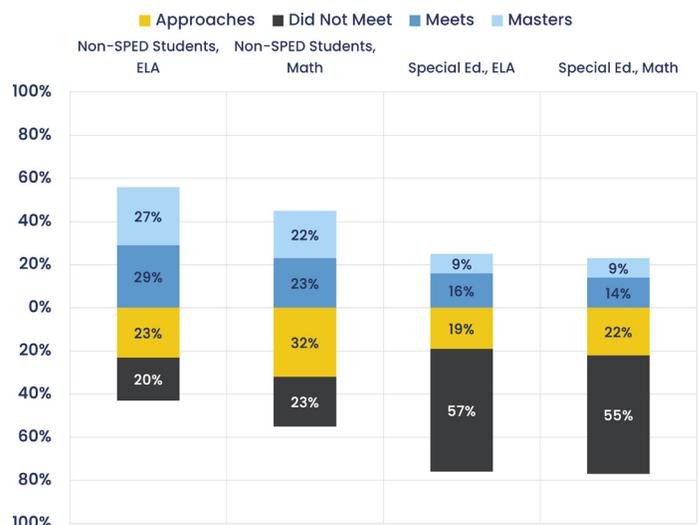
Parents of disabled children want, need, and deserve higher-quality opportunities.

Number of Special Education Students, by Diagnosis (2020–21 School Year)



Source: TEA, Special Education Trends: A Presentation to the Commission on Special Education Funding. (March 17, 2022) Page 16.

Percent of Texas Students on Grade Level (2021–22 School Year)



Source: TEA, 2021–22 TAPR Advanced Data Download

## PARENT-DIRECTED GRANTS

Texas has already seen the results of empowering families with special needs through the Supplemental Special Education Services (SSES) grant. SSES offers a one-time grant of \$1,500 to \$5,000 for sp. ed. students. Established by the legislature in 2021, Texas families responded enthusiastically, with parents of over 100,000 students applying for a grant. By April 2022, the SSES program had awarded 60,845 accounts. In post participation surveys, 97% of families reported that the goods or services funded by SSES helped their child meet their learning goals.

Funding prior to the 88th Regular Session could support 72,600 students, and 32,764 students had been waitlisted by June 2023. In response, the legislature removed SSES' sunset date and provided \$93 million to continue the program.

## FLORIDA'S ESA

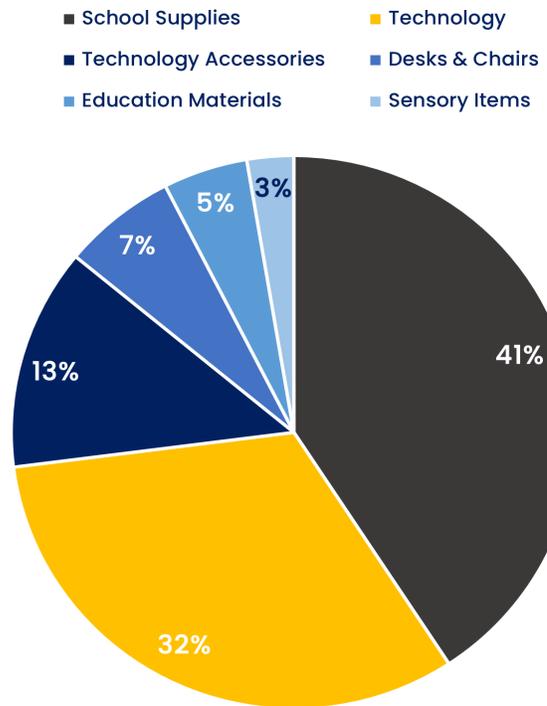
A larger scale program is the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities, which is an ESA available to Florida students with a qualifying diagnosis, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, or a hearing impairment. In the 2022-23 school year 69,500 students participated in the ESA program.

Participating parents can use their child's ESA to select a variety of tuition, tutoring, specialized services, and curriculum options. Parents spend an average of 70-80% of the ESA on tuition and the remaining amount on other goods and services.

"The SSES program was extremely beneficial. It made it possible to get my child the learning materials needed to bridge the gap between school and at home learning."

-SSES Parent

Supplemental Goods Purchased by SSES Families (2021-22 SY)



Source: TEA presentation to House Education Committee, July 22, 2022.

## PROTECTIONS UNDER FEDERAL LAW

Federal law aims to provide two key protections to students with disabilities. First is Child Find, according to which public schools must find and evaluate any child in the community who may have a disability. Second is Free & Appropriate Education, which requires schools to develop a plan to support students with a disability.

Federal law offers a legal minimum, but this not ideal for all students. ESAs are an additional opt-in program that provide access to more quality options.

With ESAs, parents collaborate directly with teachers, tutors, and therapists to provide their child the services they need, when they need them.