



STETSON  
& ASSOCIATES, INC.

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Houston, TX 77014 April 15, 2023

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TO: Texas Education Agency  
Austin, TX

I am writing this Letter of Support for the Austin Independent School District regarding its significant efforts to improve the quality, impact and compliance of services provided to students with disabilities and their families. My educational consulting firm, Stetson and Associates, Inc. was initially engaged to conduct an evaluation of services for students with disabilities in 2020. Due to the pandemic-imposed limitations on access to staff, parents, campuses and classrooms, it was not until April 2022 that a final report was delivered to the Superintendent and Cabinet. The findings were presented to the Board of Trustees, May 2022.

I began my career as a teacher of students who were blind and, during my work toward a Master of Education degree at the University of Texas, I was an intern for the Texas Education Agency and was later employed as Chief Consultant for Students with Severe Disabilities. Because of TEA's reputation for its work regarding education of children with disabilities I was fortunate to move my career to Washington, D.C. in 1976 for the birth of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, serving as a member of the regulations writing team for this landmark legislation. I continued working with the USDOE, conducting research for OSEP and OCR on the role of leadership in achieving quality services. Serving as the team leader tasked with writing the First Annual Report to Congress regarding the Implementation of IDEA was a major accomplishment before returning to Texas to serve as Director of Special Education for Region IV Education Service Center, and by 1988, formed Stetson and Associates. Working to support positive change in numerous State departments of education and hundreds of school systems, thousands of classrooms in more than 40 states and several countries has been the focus of my group and we consider Austin ISD as a one of those districts committed to positive change.

I provide you with this background to make a point: I am a life-long advocate for students with disabilities. The entry point for my work is systems-change through school leadership and supporting school districts in meeting and exceeding compliance standards and achieving excellence in outcomes for this student population. *I fully understand the grave impact of the challenge Austin ISD is facing - overdue student evaluations for consideration of eligibility for services. Timely evaluations are the bedrock for services promised to all children and youth with a disability. Sadly, these*



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serious compliance concerns exist across our state with high numbers of referrals and staffing shortages.

For the first time in my career, I feel compelled to write this letter to describe the extraordinary work of a district that has much to accomplish to meet basic standards and yet, has accomplished ‘minor miracles’ within a very short timeframe. Since the new superintendent was installed in January until today, less than four months ago, the highest priority has been the rapid improvement of services for students with disabilities in an authentic and transparent way. The critical personnel shortage, particularly in employing the needed numbers and quality of Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSPs), presents a maddingly intractable situation that is the focus of the daily work of the department. I would like to describe some of the actions that have been initiated and accomplished in order to create a significantly improved set of conditions for serving all students with disabilities in the district including employing adequate personnel to carry out the essential procedural safeguards promised to students with disabilities.

For brevity and clarity, information will be provided in a table format. These actions have been initiated and/or accomplished within a six-month period and are only a selection of the many actions underway.

Action	Result	Status
1. Appointed an Interim Superintendent with extensive experience in action planning and execution who has broad support from across all levels of the Austin ISD system. The Board of Trustees extended the timeframe for Mr. Matias Segura to serve as interim superintendent so that actions begun to improve special education services can be completed and these completed steps sustained over time.	Detailed Action Plans with strict timelines and areas of responsibility, monitored and updated daily  Consistent leadership to address the Board’s top priority	Achieved
2. The Board of Trustees has established goals relative to specific improvement to special education services as their top priority and has established sub-committee to	Fully transparent commitment and accountability	Achieved



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<p>monitor accountability for change along with Mr. Segura, interim superintendent</p>		
<p>3. Conducted initial training for all principals regarding the findings of the Evaluation Report and the responsibilities at the campus level for facilitating an effective and efficient referral process and execution of individualized IEPs.</p>	<p>Increased capacity for principals, consistency across the district for students receiving special education services, Increased accountability for principal actions related to special education services</p>	<p>Initial training completed; ongoing training scheduled monthly</p>

<p>4. Provided intensive training to every AISD principal and to a team from each school re: the skills and strategies to achieve strong student outcomes for diverse learners in inclusive settings. Each school team was required to evaluate their services for students with disabilities and develop an Action Plan to improve current outcomes. This Action Plan is collected by district department staff for analysis and tailoring technical supports provided.</p>	<p>126 school teams (over 650 individuals) received 14 hours of training required to shift from the current status to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-a common vocabulary for the entire district;</li> <li>-a common set of processes for individual student decision-making re: supports and services;</li> <li>-clarity regarding the importance of instructional accommodations and when appropriate, curricular modifications;</li> <li>-an instructional planning process that enhances access to and success in on-grade level general curriculum goals;</li> <li>-New staffing models and scheduling;</li> <li>-Action Planning</li> </ul>	<p>Achieved; <i>Note: Each principal was required to attend the training and when necessary, members of the district's special education department assumed responsibility for the campus in order for the principal to attend.</i></p>
<p>5. Provide a personalized, on-site technical assistance day is provided for every school to support the full implementation of</p>	<p>30 of the 126 schools have received a technical assistance visit to date. The remaining schools are scheduled to receive their</p>	<p>24% Completed</p>



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	<p>the Action Plan developed on the last day of training.</p>	<p>visit either this spring or summer. Note: Training alone typically does not change practice but combined with on-site assistance the extent to which positive change occurs is significantly higher. (Rand Study)</p>
<p>6. Provided the same training as described in #4 to all special education department staff and staff from Academics with an emphasis on their shared roles as coaches and technical assistance providers in the process.</p>	<p>125 instructional department staff trained to support the changes at the district and campus levels – with an emphasis of shared responsibility, versus silos.</p>	<p>Completed</p>
<p>7. Conduct Special education departmental working sessions of approximately 40 staff members to aggressively address specifics related to department improvement and assisted in developing priority action steps. The first four meetings with senior department staff, supervisors and coordinators, are scheduled to be concluded in May, 2023. Two have been completed to date. The primary focus of these meetings is to address specific recommendations from the evaluation report of the highest priority. The first three of these are the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Establishing systems for student evaluations that meet state and federal timelines</b></li> <li>○ Develop processes and materials to clarify continuum of services within the district and eliminate confusion over services vs. places and labels</li> </ul>	<p>Engage the full department in identifying barriers and effective solutions to these, and other, improvement priorities for the next year.</p>	<p>Action Plans Developed, Assignments made and timelines set</p> <p>Next stage beginning May 2023 – implementation of Actions</p>



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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Improving IEP development and implementation for increased student success</li> </ul> <p>A secondary purpose is to identify specific strategies to improve the quality of relationships between department staff and campus leadership and between department staff and parents. This is an ongoing effort. The results of these plans will be made public no later than Fall, 2023 and will incorporate feedback and direction from principals and parents.</p>		
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### Actions Specific to Meeting Timelines for Student Evaluations

<p>8. Responded to a salary study showing non-competitive salaries for LSSPs – now offering \$20,000 as an incentive for signing an employment contract; the district has also increased LSSP salaries by more than 20%.</p>		Completed
<p>9. Invited representatives from the University of Texas and other colleges and universities producing individuals with credentials for evaluating students to design a model program for recruiting, onboarding, supporting and coaching evaluation personnel. Meeting scheduled for April.</p>	<p>Designed to reach higher levels of quality support for evaluation personnel, increase numbers of candidates and restored reputation of the district in providing these critical services.</p>	In-Process
<p>For more information, consult the detailed District Action Plan, Section B.</p>		



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As I complete my career as a special educator, I have developed an even stronger sense of urgency for the work that remains to be done in improving the quality and the humanity surrounding students who struggle in school and their parents. This work is further complicated by a new weariness among educators in fulfilling the roles they chose in our schools as the tasks are increasingly challenging.

The commitment among the Austin ISD Board and Leadership and by the parents I have met and their hope that the district truly embraces the goals set forth in their strategic plan is without question. The Texas Education Agency has an immense role in ensuring quality and equity for all of Texas' children. It is my sincere hope that the Agency support provided to Austin ISD recognizes and acknowledges the district's effort and achieves the results we all want to see.

When the action plans are implemented and the capacity of the staff is built to sustain and enhance these changes, my opportunity to work with and learn from Austin ISD may be one of the highlights of my career. I look forward to seeing the district that will emerge from the efforts of educators, students, and parents, and TEA within the next few years.

Respectfully,

Frances Stetson, Ph.D.