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In this section, we examine the basic federal regulations that govern how public school systems support children with disabilities and the rights that parents have to be involved in the process, Louisiana's public education funding formula, the two largest Capital Region school systems (East Baton Rouge Parish Public School System and Ascension Public Schools), elements of an ideal modern public school system, and a sampling of private school options in the Capital Region.

EARLY DIAGNOSIS

- Referral to physician specialist
- Referral to other medical specialists for comorbidity evaluations (if applicable)
- Referral to early intervention programs

EARLY INTERVENTION

- Intensive therapeutic intervention, including ABA therapy and other evidence-based interventions
- Application/referral to state waiver programs (if applicable)

PRE-K-12 EDUCATION

- Individual Educational Plan (IEP)
- Continued supplemental intervention and therapy
- Individual Transition Plan (ITP) in high school

ADULT TRANSITION

- Post-secondary education
- Career training
- Independent and supported living



PUBLIC EDUCATION: FEDERAL GUIDELINES

Children with an ASD diagnosis can access special support services provided by the public education system through one of two general provisions of federal law – Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. A general description of these two federal provisions is provided here.

PART B OF THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (IDEA)

Part B of the IDEA establishes standards and guides how *special education* and *related services* are made available to eligible students through public school systems.⁶⁷

Special education is defined as specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability.⁶⁸ The law prescribes 14 diagnosed disabilities that determine eligibility for special education services. Autism, ADD, ADHD, specific learning disabilities, and speech or language impairments are all conditions that qualify a child for these services. Once a child has been determined eligible for special education services, the IDEA mandates that a team that includes the parent or guardian work collaboratively to develop a plan for services, called an Individualized Education Program (IEP). For parents, this IEP process is the most important mandate contained in the IDEA. The IDEA outlines a specific process that must be followed by local education agencies (LEAs), as well as the rights that parents have to be involved in the IEP process. The IEP is made up of several important parts, including written descriptions of the student's current level of academic and functional performance, customized student goals and objectives, descriptions of how progress toward goals will be measured, type and amount of special education services, need for assistive technology, need for behavior support, and a list of related services including type and amount.

Related services are defined in the law “as transportation and such developmental, corrective, and supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education.”⁶⁹ Some examples of related services include: behavioral intervention, counseling, speech pathology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and school health services. However, federal law specifically states that the services include those services listed in the law but are not limited to those listed. Services are determined based on each child's individual needs. With respect to autism, it is important to note that while ABA therapy is not itself a “related service,” it is a type of behavioral intervention service and therefore can be considered a related service. In fact, **in several states such as Connecticut, so many students are receiving ABA therapy as a related service that the state enacted a law mandating that ABA therapy be provided to any child with ASD if the IEP requires such services and establishing guidelines for how these ABA services must be delivered and supervised.**⁷⁰

67 For information about Part B of IDEA, visit United States Department of Education website at www.idea.ed.gov.

68 Center for Parent Information Resources, “Defining Special Education,” available online at www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/iep-specialeducation/#definition.

69 34 CFR § 330.34 Related Services. See also Center for Parent Information Resources, “Special Education”, available online at www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/iep-specialeducation/#definition.

70 Ch. 164: Educational Opportunities § 10-76ii, Provision of Applied Behavior Analysis Services.



MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY

A point of confusion and frustration for parents of a student with an ASD diagnosis is the fact that a medical diagnosis of ASD does not automatically qualify a student for special education and related services. Several parents interviewed in connection with preparing this report described being given inconsistent information from school officials and educators regarding the need for a medical diagnosis to qualify for special education services, obtain an IEP, and receive related services, either in a public school or a private school, to the extent a school district has agreed to do so. In many cases, parents are told they need a medical diagnosis, which given the shortage of specialty physicians providing ASD diagnoses in the Capital Region could take several weeks or months, only to be told later that the diagnosis is not sufficient to obtain an IEP.

As described below, special education eligibility is determined based upon an educational evaluation that determines if the student's disability is severe enough (under IDEA guidelines) to require special education and related services. As such, not all children with an ASD diagnosis will be deemed eligible for special education and related services under the IDEA. However, this does not mean that a medical diagnosis of ASD is not an informative and useful document for parents – assuming they are comfortable sharing the information – to provide to school officials. Most importantly, in order for school systems to seek reimbursement from private and commercial insurance or Medicaid for related services, such as ABA therapy provided in an educational setting, the school must be able to submit documentation of “medical necessity.” Thus, parents who are interested in requesting behavioral intervention therapies such as ABA therapy as part of their child's IEP related services should discuss obtaining a medical diagnosis for this purpose with school officials before or early in the IEP process.



THE IEP PROCESS

Under the IDEA, parents and guardians have a right to be involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of their child's IEP. Parents also have a right to invite other important parties such as therapists or counselors to IEP meetings. It is therefore important that families fully understand the IEP process and their rights.

The process mandated by the IDEA includes the following basic elements:

Step 1

Child is identified as possibly needing special education and related services. A school professional may ask that a child be evaluated to see if he or she has a disability, or parents may contact the child's teacher or other school professional to ask that their child be evaluated.

Step 2

Child is evaluated. The evaluation results will be used to decide the child's eligibility for special education and related services and to make decisions about appropriate educational programs. If parents disagree with the evaluation, they have the right to take their child for an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) and can ask the school system to pay for the IEE.

Step 3

Eligibility is decided. A group of qualified professionals and the parents review the child's evaluation results and together, decide if the child is a "child with a disability" as defined by the IDEA. If a parent disagrees with the eligibility determination, the parent may ask for a hearing to challenge the decision.

Step 4

Child is found eligible for services. If the child is found to be "a child with a disability", the child is eligible for special education and related services. Within 30 days of the eligibility determination, the IEP team must meet to write an IEP for the child.

Step 5

Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is scheduled. The IEP meeting is scheduled and run by the school system. Staff from the school must contact the participants, including parents; notify parents early enough to ensure they can attend; schedule the meeting at a time and place agreeable to the school and parents; tell the parents the purpose, time and location of the meeting, as well as who will attend; and notify the parents that they may invite others who have knowledge or special expertise about the child. The entire IEP team includes:

- The child's parent or guardian,
- The child (when appropriate),
- A special education teacher or other special education provider,
- A general education teacher (when appropriate),
- A representative of the school system who is knowledgeable about specially designed instruction, curriculum, and the school system's resources, and
- Others who the parent/guardian or the local school system wish to invite (i.e., therapists, physicians, and support navigators).



Step 6

IEP meeting is held and the IEP is written. The IEP team gathers to discuss the child's needs and write the IEP. Before the school system can provide any services to the child, the parents must give consent. If parents do not agree with the IEP and/or placement, they can discuss their concerns with members of the IEP team and try to work out an agreement. If there is still disagreement, parents can request mediation or file a complaint with the state education agency and request a due process hearing.

Step 7

After the IEP is written, services are provided. Parents are given a copy of the IEP, and each of the child's teachers and service providers must have access to the IEP and understand his or her specific responsibilities.

Step 8

Progress is measured and reported to parents. Progress toward annual goals must be measured and parents must be regularly informed of the child's progress and whether that progress is enough for the child to achieve the goals by the end of the year.

Step 9

IEP is reviewed. IEPs are reviewed at least once per year, or more often if parents or the school request. The IEP must be revised if necessary, and parents, as IEP team members, must be invited to any meetings. Parents can request additional testing, independent evaluations, request mediation or a due process hearing, or file a complaint with the state education agency if they do not agree with decisions regarding revisions to the IEP.

Step 10

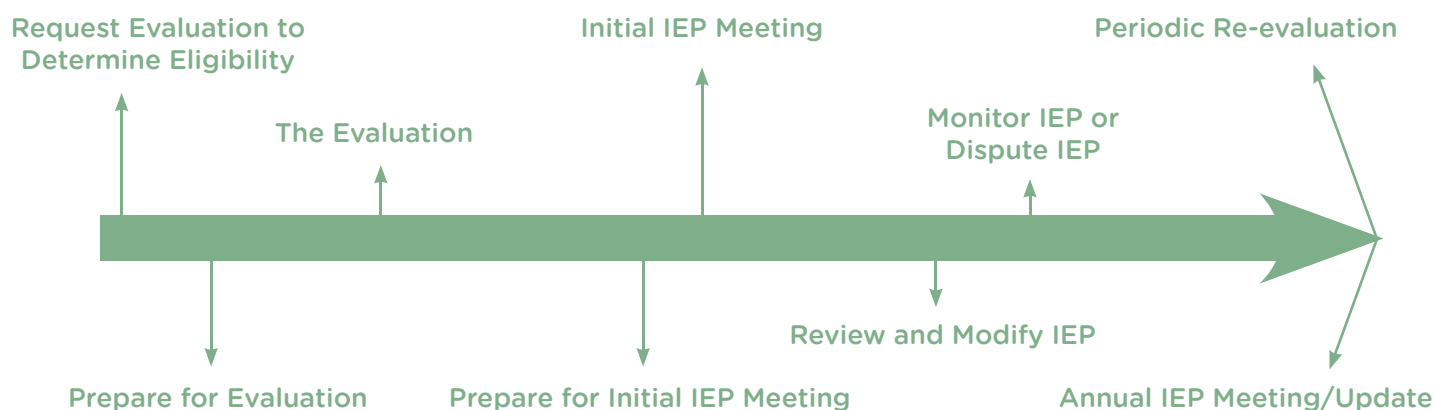
Child is reevaluated. A child must be reevaluated every three years, or more often if conditions warrant or if a parent or teacher requests a new evaluation.⁷¹

Figure 7 offers a general timeline, developed by Autism Speaks, of key steps in the IEP process.

⁷¹ <http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html>; see also Center for Parent Information and Resources, *10 Basic Steps in Special Education*, available online at www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/steps/.



07 Autism Speaks: IEP Timeline⁷²



More detailed information about each of these basic elements of the IDEA process is available through the Center for Parent Information and Resources, <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/>. Every state has at least one Parent Training and Information (PTI) center, operated by the Center for Parent Information and Resources, that offers families information about early intervention, the IDEA, school services, therapy, transportation, and much more. Many states also have a Community Parent Resource Center (CPRC), which offers the same type of support and training to parents of children with disabilities. Louisiana has one PTI, the Families Helping Families of Jefferson, in Harahan (201 Evans Rd., Bldg. 1, Ste. 100, (504) 888-9111), and one CPRC, the Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center, in New Orleans (3132 Napoleon Ave, (504) 218-8922). This CPRC serves the Greater New Orleans area. Additionally, the Louisiana Department of Education (DOE) has developed a guide, *Louisiana's Educational Rights of Children with Disabilities, Special Education Processes + Procedural Safeguards*, to help parents navigate the special education system in Louisiana's public schools.⁷³

All public school systems in Louisiana are required to utilize the basic processes and procedures included in this guide. Louisiana's regulatory guidance for pupil appraisal and IEPs for students with exceptionalities are available online through the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) website:

- **BULLETIN 1508** – Pupil Appraisal Handbook, Revised May 2009⁷⁴
- **BULLETIN 1530** – Louisiana IEP Handbook for Students with Exceptionalities, Revised March 2015⁷⁵

Implementation of special education guidelines (federal and state) is the responsibility of local school districts. As a result, special education services vary from school system to school system based on local design and resources. Additionally, services are ideally customized to meet the unique needs of each child accessing special education services. However, as will be discussed later in this Section, there are certain important resources, such as federal IDEA funds, High-Cost Services funding, and third-party/Medicaid reimbursement, that are available to all school systems in order to enable them to offer the appropriate amount and type of special education services to students.

⁷² Autism Speaks, "IEP Timeline," figure available online at <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-Y24lwyETbSQ/Tn0iOOK5xol/AAAAAAAAALvO/ImS7zngtMdM/s640/IEP+Timeline.PNG>.
⁷³ *Louisiana's Educational Rights of Children with Disabilities, Special Education Processes + Procedural Safeguards* is available online at <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/academics/louisiana-s-educational-rights-of-children-with-disabilities.pdf?sfvrsn=10>.

⁷⁴ Bulletin 1508 available online, <http://www.doe.louisiana.gov/osr/lac/28v101/28v101.doc>.
⁷⁵ Bulletin 1530 available online, <http://www.doe.louisiana.gov/osr/lac/28v97/28v97.doc>.



TRANSITION SERVICES

The IDEA requires that transition planning start and transition services be added to the IEP by the time a student reaches age sixteen, or earlier, if the IEP team decides it would be appropriate to do so. The IEP team, which includes the student and parents, develops the transition plan.

Transition services are a coordinated set of activities that promote movement from school to such post-school activities as post-secondary education, vocational training, employment, adult services, independent living and community participation. They must be based on the individual student's needs, taking into account his or her preferences and interests. Transition services must include instruction, community experiences, and development of employment and other post school adult living objectives.

From “Legal Requirement for Transition Components of the IEP”

by Barbara D. Bateman, PhD, JD⁷⁶

The word “coordinated” contained in the definition of transition services suggests that services should be planned in sync with one another in order to drive towards a result – full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency to ensure that students with disabilities can lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible.

Developing an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) that adequately serves the uniqueness of an individual student is a challenging task given the broad scope of ASD and the diversity of potential co-occurring conditions. Obviously, the quality of ITPs is highly dependent on the knowledge and expertise of the plan developers (IEP team) and reasonable access to the resources and services required to successfully implement the ITP. Provision of the transition services is the responsibility of the school system even though the plan may include participation by a variety of public agencies and/or private entities, including the Louisiana Rehabilitation Services (LRS) office. Specific transition resources offered through LRS are discussed in more detail in the **Adult Transition** section of this report.

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Bateman, PhD, JD, “Legal Requirement for Transition Components of the IEP,” available online at <http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/trans.legal.bateman.htm>.



SECTION 504 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination based upon disability. Disability is defined as a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities such as self-care, manual tasks, walking, seeing, speaking, sitting, thinking, learning, breathing, concentrating, interacting with others, and working.

The definition of impairment is broader in Section 504 compared to the IDEA. Often, students with a disability who are not eligible for special education under IDEA guidelines can qualify for supportive accommodations under Section 504. The major differences between IDEA and Section 504 are in the flexibility of the procedures. For a child to be identified as eligible for services under Section 504, there are less specific procedural criteria that govern the requirements of the school personnel, whereas under IDEA a child must meet very specific criteria. The parental participation requirements are also much less detailed under Section 504.

To be protected under Section 504, a student must be determined to:

- Have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; or
- Have a record of such an impairment; or
- Be regarded as having such an impairment.⁷⁷

“Major life activities”, as defined in the Section 504 regulations, include functions such as caring for one’s self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working. This list is not exhaustive.

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Center for Parent Information and Resources, “Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: Eligibility Under Section 504,” available online at www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/section504.



Under the IDEA, school districts are required to identify and evaluate any child suspected of having a disability. Section 504 does not have this requirement. However, anyone, including a parent or doctor, can refer a child for evaluation under Section 504, although a school district does not have to evaluate a child under Section 504 solely upon parental demand. The key is whether school district staff suspects that a child has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity and is in need of either regular education with supplementary services or special education and related services. A Section 504 evaluation draws on information from a number of sources and is documented in a written plan identified by knowledgeable individuals. However, the decisions do not require written consent of parents, only that parents be notified. There are no provisions requiring that the school district cover the cost of an independent evaluation. Rather than an IEP, a Section 504 plan is developed and must be reevaluated “periodic[ally]”.

In general, the accommodations provided to the student under a Section 504 plan are determined individually based upon the nature of the relevant disability conditions. Accommodations provided are designed to offer the qualified student a more equal opportunity to compete with the non-disabled students. Examples of accommodations include (but are not limited to):⁷⁸

- Highlighted textbooks
- Extended time on tests or assignments
- Peer assistance with note taking
- Frequent feedback
- Extra set of textbooks for home use
- Computer aided instruction
- Enlarged print
- Positive reinforcements
- Behavior intervention plans
- Rearranging class schedules
- Visual aids
- Preferred seating assignments
- Taping lectures
- Oral tests

As with the IDEA, parents have certain due process rights under Section 504. If a parent disagrees with the identification, evaluation or placement of his or her child, the parent must be given an impartial hearing, although most details with the exception of a parent’s opportunity to participate with counsel are left to the discretion of the school.

⁷⁸ Durham, Mary, “A Parent’s Guide to Section 504 in Public Schools,” available online through GreatKids (GreatSchools) at www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/section-504-2/.



STATE FUNDING FOR EDUCATION

Determination of whether a child qualifies for special education modifications is dependent on the IDEA process. This qualification determination dictates how funding from federal, state, and local sources will be allocated to the school serving the child.

Louisiana's Minimum Foundation Program (MFP), combined with dedicated local revenues and other Louisiana Department of Education (DOE) sponsored programs, provide the financial resources for educating Louisiana's public school students with special needs. **Figure 8** details state and local per pupil funding for the East Baton Rouge (EBR) Parish Public School System.

The Louisiana DOE maintains robust information on its website about the state's MFP Formula, including a detailed explanation of the calculations included in the formula.⁷⁹ In general, local education agencies (LEAs) receive block grants from DOE proportional to the student population they serve as calculated by the MFP. Certain student characteristics, like special education students, gifted and talented students, and others, result in higher funding for an LEA through a multiplier. A school district serving students with special needs will receive additional funding based on a 1.5 MFP multiplier within their block grant. In practice, this 1.5 weight does not mean that every special education student receives 150% of the base per pupil funding amount. Rather, the weight is applied to the total number of students, resulting in special education students counting as 2.5 students for the LEA funding determination.

LEAs are responsible for the allocation of the total funding provided in their MFP block grant and few employ a differentiated formula. Rather, most LEAs spread the funding across all students. Although the total amount budgeted for special education must be spent on special education services, in practice, these funds are spread across the special education student population rather than individually on a student by student basis.

In 2011, the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University analyzed the Louisiana MFP formula in a policy brief. This brief provides an explanation of how the formula works in practice.⁸⁰

With the passage of Act 467 in 2015, the MFP allocations were changed for Type 1 and 2 charter schools⁸¹ to help ensure that additional MFP money allocated for special education students and other students in one of the "weighted categories" (gifted and talented, "at-risk" or career and technical units) in fact flows to schools who are educating those students. Rather than receiving the *average* per pupil amount as determined by the MFP formula, Type 1 and 2 charters who educate children with an IEP will now receive increased funding on a per pupil basis for those special education students. The chart below demonstrates this funding differentiation.

79 <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/funding/minimum-foundation-program>

80 Cowen Institute for Public Education, Louisiana's Minimum Foundation Program Formula: Analyzing the Results, <http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Analyzing-the-MFP-Final.pdf>.

81 Type 1 charter schools are authorized by a local school board or local charter authorizer and Type 2 charter schools are authorized by BESE.



08 East Baton Rouge Parish Public School System

- State and Local Allocation of Funding on a Per Pupil Basis

	2014-15		2015-16		
	EBR School Per Pupil Amount (Average)	Type 1 or 2 Charter within EBR with a District Building	EBR School Per Pupil Amount (Average)	Type 1 or 2 Charter within EBR - Students Eligible for Special Education Weight with a District Building	Type 1 or 2 Charter - Additional Funds
MFP Allocation Per Pupil	\$4,165	\$4,165	\$4,248	\$6,421	
Base				\$1,971	
Special Ed Weight				\$2,957	
Level 2				\$256	
Level 3 Pay Raise				\$801	
Level 3 HH and Mandate Cost				\$436	
Low Income and ELL					\$434
Career and Technical Education					\$118
Gifted and Talented					\$1,183
Local Revenue Representation Per Pupil	\$6,067	\$6,067	\$6,278	\$6,278*^	
Total Revenues Per Pupil	\$10,232	\$10,232	\$10,526	\$12,699	
Additional Available Funding					
Federal IDEA Funding**	\$2,827	\$2,827	\$2,827	\$2,827	
High Cost Services Allocation***					
Total Possible	\$13,059	\$13,059	\$13,353	\$15,526	

* Per 2015-16 Charter per Pupil Calculations, this is the amount if the school is in a district building; a school not in a district building is slightly higher.

**EBR reports 4,468 students with IEPs (11.7% of children in public schools) in 2014-2015; EBR received \$12,631,355 in IDEA funding in 2014-2015 which is given as a block grant to the district. Per pupil costs estimated by dividing the number of students qualifying as special needs.

***High Cost Services (HCS) are available for school districts supporting students whose costs exceed 3X the state average per pupil cost of \$11,113 (\$33,339). For the 2014-15 Fiscal Year, the State allocated approximately \$8.4M for HCS (\$4M MFP + \$4.4M IDEA). An additional \$5.4 million was allocated for the 2015-2016 year.

^This number will vary as the local revenues will come from the school district in which the student resides, not in which the charter school is located.

The MFP Task Force, established by BESE in Spring 2013, evaluated the special education spending of all LEAs. On the whole, LEAs expend more money on special needs students than their state MFP weighted student funding requirement. During the 2012-2013 school year in East Baton Rouge Parish, for example, the parish was required by the state to spend \$12.4 million on special education students. The parish spent an additional \$44 million from its own local revenue sources in order to meet student needs. Across the state for the 2012-2013 school year, \$312 million was mandated and provided by the state, and an additional \$567 million was spent on special education from local revenue sources.⁸²

82 Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, "FY 2012-13 Weighted Student Funding: Students with Disabilities," available online at [www.boarddocs.com/la/bese/Board.nsf/files/9QYEPA799CD5/\\$file/Handout%20FY2012-13%20SWD%20Weighted%20Student%20Funding.pdf](http://www.boarddocs.com/la/bese/Board.nsf/files/9QYEPA799CD5/$file/Handout%20FY2012-13%20SWD%20Weighted%20Student%20Funding.pdf).



IDEA AND HIGH COST SERVICES FUNDING

Federal IDEA funds are provided to the state as a block grant. The amount is based on a 1997 formula adjusted for changes to the population of 3- to 21-year-olds and the number of children in poverty. DOE distributes IDEA funding to each LEA based on the same formula. LEAs then make their own determinations as to how the funding will be spent on special education students. States can choose to reserve a portion of the IDEA grant for High Cost Services (HCS).

HCS is intended to provide additional funding to schools because the state recognizes that it is a financial challenge for districts and charter schools to support some of the costlier services required to support students with special needs. HCS funds are only available for school districts supporting students whose costs exceed three times the state average per pupil cost of \$11,113 (\$33,339). HCS is currently funded through three sources: federal IDEA funds, state MFP funds before local district calculations occur, and other state funds including money from the general fund.

Students are eligible for HCS funds if they meet the following criteria:

1. The cost to educate and provide services to the student exceeds three times the average per pupil cost of \$11,113 ($3 \times \$11,113 = \$33,339$), as of the 2015-2016 school year;
2. The cost to educate and provide services to the student causes a negative financial impact on the school district's budget;
3. All services and supports listed in the HCS application are included in the student's IEP, evaluation, health plan, or behavior plan.

School districts can apply for HCS funding based on the number of eligible students they serve. Charter schools are also eligible to receive HCS funds – Type 1 charters through their associated school district and Type 2 charters as a local education agency (LEA) themselves. There is no limit on the number of eligible students for whom a district or charter school can apply for HCS funding. However, if Medicaid or insurance can pay for the services, such as ABA therapy, the services cannot be included in the HCS application.

Because funds requested from districts and charters generally exceed total HCS funds available, districts do not receive 100% of the HCS funds requested. Allocation of HCS funds to LEAs is based on the proportional impact to the LEA's budget. For the 2014-2015 school year, all districts and schools whose application was approved were reimbursed 38% of the funds requested.

There was a backlog of \$12.4 million in unfunded HCS requests from LEAs in the 2014-2015 school year.

For the 2015-16 school year, the available funds for HCS totaled \$13.4 million, a \$5.4 million increase over the 2014-2015 school year. The Louisiana Department of Education issues an annual report for High Cost Service Allocation, which is available on the Department's website.⁸³

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The report for the High Cost Services Allocations for the 2014-2015 School Year is available online, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/teacher-toolbox-resources/high-cost-services-state-plan-14-15.pdf?sfvrsn=2>



ESTABLISHING DIFFERENTIATED FUNDING FORMULAS

As noted earlier, Louisiana currently applies a 1.5 weight factor to student populations for each qualifying special education student, *regardless of disability or accommodation(s)*. With the exception of the Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans, Louisiana does not utilize any medical or service need criteria to differentiate funding for individual special education students.⁸⁴ Differentiated funding, which more and more states throughout the country are adopting, allocates money based on individual student needs – to ensure the right amount of money follows each student. The goal of this methodology is not only to provide a more fair and accurate distribution of funding, but also to ensure that schools have the financial resources to serve their neediest students.

Some states that have adopted differentiated funding formulas differentiate based on additional one-on-one hours required for each student, while other states differentiate funding based on a child's medical diagnosis.

Figure 9 illustrates how Arizona, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, and South Carolina differentiate special education funding.

09 Examples of States with Differentiated Funding⁸⁵

State	Number of Categories for Special Education Funding	Range of Additional Funding	Basis of Weights
Arizona	11	0.003 to 7.947	Disability and Placement
Georgia	5	2.3960 to 5.8253	Disability, Services Required, and Placement
Iowa	5	0.72 to 2.74	Services Required
Kentucky	3	0.24 to 2.35	Disability
South Carolina	5	1.74 to 2.57	Disability

⁸⁴ The Recovery School District, established in 2003, "is a special school district run by the Louisiana Department of Education that intervenes in the management of chronically low-performing schools." There are currently 68 schools in the RSD in New Orleans. From Louisiana Department of Education website about Recovery School District, available online www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/recovery-school-district.

⁸⁵ Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, "FY 2012-13 Weighted Student Funding: Students with Disabilities," available online at [www.boarddocs.com/la/bese/Board.nsf/files/9QYEPA799CD5/\\$file/Handout%20FY2012-13%20SWD%20Weighted%20Student%20Funding.pdf](http://www.boarddocs.com/la/bese/Board.nsf/files/9QYEPA799CD5/$file/Handout%20FY2012-13%20SWD%20Weighted%20Student%20Funding.pdf).

SPOTLIGHT: THE FLORIDA EXCEPTIONAL STUDENT EDUCATION (ESE) PROGRAM

From 1973 to 1997, Florida provided special education funding to local districts based on a formula based on weighted program eligibility and minutes of direct service provided to students. But in 1997, the Florida legislature adopted a revised Exceptional Student Education funding model for statewide implementation. Under the new model, still in operation today, a document called the Matrix of Services is the cornerstone of funding determinations and is used to determine the cost factor for each special education student based on the decisions made by a student's IEP team. The new funding model is based on both type and intensity of services provided and is intended to base school district funding upon the services actually provided to a special education student throughout the school day and across all settings, as documented on the Matrix of Services form.

The Matrix of Services form is divided into five sections called "Domains" that are used to group the types of services and five levels that are used to describe the nature and intensity of services within each domain. The five domains include: (1) Curriculum and Learning, (2) Social/Emotional Behavior, (3) Independent Functioning, (4) Health Care, and (5) Communication. Each domain has five levels, ranging from Level 1 (lowest service level) to Level 5 (highest service level). The factors that are used to determine the levels are: frequency of the service provided; intensity of the service provided; and, in some cases, qualifications of the person providing the service. Costs increase with each succeeding higher level. The total number of points, determined by adding together scores for each domain and applicable special considerations points, results in a rating of Support Level 1 (251), Support Level 2 (252), Support Level 3 (253), Support Level 4 (254), or

Support Level 5 (255). At least two special education personnel (teachers, coordinators, specialists, therapists) must complete the Matrix of Services form after initial IEP meeting, after an interim IEP meeting if services are changed, and annually for any student with a Support Level of 254 or 255. Students with a Support Level of 251-253 do not have to have another matrix completed unless new services provided move them to a level 254 or 255.

Each year, the Florida legislature sets funding amounts for the various matrix service levels. Cost factors (weights) are assigned to each of the two highest support levels (254 and 255) to determine the amount of funding districts will receive for these students. With the exception of students participating in the McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program, students scoring 251-253 receive special education funding based only on their grade group, without regard to the level of service provided. But for students with a score of 254 or 255, the base per pupil amount is multiplied by the assigned cost factor to determine the total amount of special education funding provided to the district. For the 2014-15 school year, the cost factors applied to ESE Support Levels 4 (254) and 5 (255) were 3.548 and 5.104, respectively, and total funding for the 254 and 255 support levels was approximately \$14,000 and \$21,000, respectively. Educators at one of Florida's autism charter schools indicated that most children with an autism diagnosis fall receive a 254 or 255 support level since most of these students need regularly scheduled occupational or physical therapy; a direct, specialized instruction and/or curriculum for the majority of learning activities; and a highly structured individualized behavioral intervention plan.

More information about the Florida Exceptional Student Education Program and the Matrix of Services model is available online at <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7690/urlt/2015MatrixServices.pdf>.



Despite Louisiana's reluctance to embrace differentiated funding on a statewide basis, the RSD in New Orleans is nonetheless at the forefront of differentiated funding for students with disabilities. The RSD historically differentiated based on diagnosis alone; however, after noticing that students with the same diagnosis often need different levels of intervention, they have now moved to a funding formula based on disability diagnosis and total weekly service minutes. **Figure 10** illustrates the differentiated funding formula used by the RSD.

10 RSD Differentiated Funding Formulas⁸⁶

	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	Tier 5
Approx. Additional Funding per Pupil	\$1,500	\$8,000	\$13,000	\$15,000	\$20,000
Disability Diagnosis	Total Weekly Service Minutes				
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	Tier 5
Autism			Below 421	421-1260	1261+
Developmental Delay		Below 421	421-1260	1261+	
Multiple Disabilities				Below 1261	1261+
Speech/Language	All				

A comparison of two students, both with an autism diagnosis, demonstrates how the funding formula helps direct funding appropriately to those students who need it the most.

STUDENT A

Diagnosis: Autism

Total Weekly Service Minutes: 1,650

Approximate Additional Funding: \$20,000

Student A requires a full day, small group instruction in a pull out learning environment with designated adult support.

STUDENT B

Diagnosis: Autism

Total Weekly Service Minutes: 135

Approximate Additional Funding: \$13,000

Student B thrives in a regular classroom environment with appropriate supports and technology.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Recovery School District, "Ensuring Excellence and Equity for Students with Disabilities," March 2014, available online at http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/RSD_COW_5-2_Differentiated_Funding_Formula_RSD_March2014.pdf.

⁸⁷ *ibid*

SPOTLIGHT: NHS HUMAN SERVICES SCHOOLS

NHS is a nonprofit organization that provides innovative solutions to support the unique needs of the individuals they serve by striving to create a caring and responsive environment that promotes the highest standards of integrity and quality.

The NHS Education and Autism Division focuses on the continuum of care throughout the lifespan. The core, fundamental principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) are incorporated into a specialized approach across all NHS service offerings.

Early Childhood Education – Provides early intensive behavioral interventions (EIBI) to both neurotypical children and those with developmental delays building the framework for later success in school, the workplace and the community. The high-quality early childhood education services NHS offers minimize the long-term impact of a child with a developmental delay or other diagnosis.

- Childcare
- Preschool
- Pre-K Readiness
- Award-Winning Curriculum

Education – NHS blends behavioral expertise and education to provide a nurturing environment in their licensed private academic schools for students with an Autism or Emotional Support Diagnosis. Their goal is to instill confidence and build skills so each student reaches their fullest potential and transition to a least restrictive environment.

- Transition Services
- Consultation
- Gender-Responsive Programming
- Behavior Modification

Autism Services – NHS has a team of Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) and other skilled clinicians and support staff to provide therapy for individuals with an Autism diagnosis. Their programs are tailored to meet specific goals of each individual child.

Adult Autism Services – As students transition into adulthood, NHS provides specialized activities designed to enhance skill development and independent living for adults with an autism diagnosis. In addition, NHS provides integrated housing services in community settings which those with a diagnosis live alongside typically developing residents.

Ancillary Services – The Education and Autism Division also has the expertise to provide specialized comprehensive speech, occupational, and physical therapy services across the lifespan. Through the integration of individualized therapy, NHS will develop goals and a customized treatment plan of selective interventions based on evidence-based practices.

Recruiting – Highly qualified staff are the cornerstone in providing quality educational and autism services. NHS has entire team of specialized recruiters to ensure hiring managers consider only the best candidates for employment.

NHS has met with many stakeholders in the Capital Region and is interested in expanding their programming into school districts in the Capital Region. More information on NHS can be found at <http://www.nhsonline.org/>.



POTENTIAL MFP CHANGES

In 2013, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) convened the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) Task Force to consider revisions to the state's MFP formula. The Task Force includes members from the Legislature, local school boards, superintendents, teachers, parents, and community and education organizations. The Task Force offered several recommendations for changes to the MFP for the 2015-16 school year.

Among the recommendations, the Task Force suggested an increase of the MFP per pupil base funding amount, an increase to the state's High Cost Services funds, and a more in-depth study of the principles underlying the MFP formula. The Task Force recommendations are available on the Louisiana Department of Education website.⁸⁸ Additional information on the MFP allocation information is also available on Louisiana Department of Education website (DOE).⁸⁹ On its website, DOE identifies MFP allocations for each of Louisiana's local education agencies (LEAs).

Louisiana State University (LSU) was engaged by BESE and DOE to conduct the in-depth study of the MFP formula as recommended by the MFP Task Force. The purpose of this more detailed study is to identify alternative allocation approaches to certain components of the MFP formula simplifying the methodology and, where possible, continuing to maintain the equity and efficiency of the allocations. The study was originally intended to be presented to the incoming Governor, Legislature, and BESE in 2016 as they outlined future education and fiscal policies. However, due to state budget shortfalls, it is not certain the contract with LSU will materialize, and as such, LSU has not yet been authorized to begin its work.

88 <http://bese.louisiana.gov/documents-resources/newsroom/2014/01/06/mfp-task-force-recommendations>

89 www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/minimum-foundation-program.



PRIVATE EDUCATION SCHOOLS

Private schools, unlike public school systems, do not operate under any broad regulatory obligation to serve students with exceptionalities, including ASD. Historically, there have been limited private school options in the Capital Region for students with exceptionalities. Many private schools simply did not possess the resources necessary to serve these students. However, this circumstance is gradually changing for the better as the list of private school options available grows. The following is a list of private school options currently available:

- Behavioral Intervention Group (BIG)
- Diocese of Baton Rouge Catholic Schools
- The Dunham School – McKay Academic Center for Excellence
- The Emerge Center
- Greater Baton Rouge Hope Academy
- St. Lillian Academy

Information about each school is provided in the [Key Providers and Organizations in the Capital Region](#) section of this report. In addition to these schools, there are numerous examples in the Capital Region of private schools that accept very small numbers of students with an ASD diagnosis on a case-by-case basis.

State funding available to private schools in Louisiana includes three programs.

1. Louisiana Scholarship Program
2. School Choice Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities
3. Tuition Donation Rebate Program (STO Program)



EXISTING STUDENT CHOICE PROGRAMS

Louisiana has established the following specific programs that facilitate access to educational options and allow families greater opportunity to select a school environment that best meets their child's need. These programs provide greater access to private school options.

1. **Louisiana Scholarship Program:** Formerly named the Student Scholarships for Education Excellence Program, a participating private school receives a voucher amount of the school's tuition plus an incremental amount based on the cost to educate the school's students, up to the maximum per pupil MFP amount for the school district in which the private school is located. The average scholarship amount for the 2015-2016 school year was \$5,856 per student. To be eligible for a scholarship, students must have a family income that does not exceed 250% (\$60,750 for a family of four) of the federal poverty guidelines and must be entering kindergarten or enrolled in a public school with a C, D, or F grade.⁹⁰
2. **School Choice Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities:** Students with disabilities in some school districts may be eligible for the School Choice Program, which provides families with tuition assistance to attend eligible participating schools that offer special needs programs. Students wishing to attend a nonpublic school in parishes with a population of 190,000 or more are eligible for this program. In the Capital Region, East Baton Rouge Parish is the only parish that qualifies.

More than 3,200 students statewide applied for the Louisiana Scholarship Program for the 2015-16 school year and approximately 1,700 students accepted a scholarship and enrolled in a participating state-approved private school.⁹¹ Within East Baton Rouge, more than 1,200 students applied for the program for the 2015-16 school year and approximately 250 students accepted a scholarship.⁹²

Participating private schools must be eligible to receive state funding. For the 2015-2016 school year, participating private schools in East Baton Rouge Parish include: Greater Baton Rouge Hope Academy, Our Lady of Mercy, St. Louis King of France, St. Michael the Archangel High School, Redemptorist Elementary School, and The Dunham School. Statewide, more than 400 students applied for assistance through this program for the 2015-16 school year, and approximately 360 students accepted an award.⁹³ Within East Baton Rouge, approximately 115 students applied and approximately 100 accepted an award.⁹⁴

Tuition assistance is 50% of the state per pupil funding for the student's school district (approximately \$2,200) and cannot exceed the cost of the private school tuition. Families are responsible for paying the difference if tuition exceeds that amount.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Louisiana Department of Education, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/louisiana-scholarship-program>.

⁹¹ ibid
⁹² ibid

⁹³ ibid

⁹⁴ ibid

⁹⁵ Louisiana Department of Education, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/school-choice-for-students-with-disabilities>.



3. **Tuition Donation Rebate Program:**⁹⁶ The Tuition Donation Rebate Program empowers low-income Louisiana families with the financial resources to choose the school that will best prepare their children for college and careers. This program provides rebates to Louisiana state taxpayers, including corporate taxpayers, who donate to School Tuition Organizations (STOs), tax-exempt, not-for-profit organizations. STOs use these donations to provide scholarships to students in low-income families.

To be eligible for a scholarship, a student must have a family income that does not exceed 250% of the federal poverty line and must be entering kindergarten or must already be enrolled in a Louisiana public school, or enrolled in the Louisiana Scholarship Program. Students apply directly to STOs for scholarships. Once the student receives a scholarship, the student can then apply directly to the nonpublic school of the student's choice for enrollment.

School Tuition Organizations determine the amount of the scholarship. Scholarship amounts cannot exceed the lesser of either the school's tuition and mandatory fees or 80% of the state average per pupil funding for elementary and middle school students (approximately \$4,000) and 90% of the state average per pupil funding for high school students (approximately \$4,500). Parents must pay the difference of any tuition and fees not covered by the scholarship.

Louisiana currently has three School Tuition Organizations participating in the Tuition Donation Rebate Program.

- Arete Scholars Louisiana
- ACE Scholarships Louisiana
- New Schools for Baton Rouge Excellence Scholarship Fund⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Louisiana Department of Education, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/tuition-donation-rebate-program>.
⁹⁷ ibid



LOUISIANA'S NEW ABLE ACCOUNT SAVINGS PROGRAM

The Louisiana Legislature passed the *Achieving a Better Life Experience in Louisiana Act* (Louisiana ABLE Act) in 2014 establishing a savings account program for financing of qualified expenses of persons with disabilities who meet either of the following criteria:

- Have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment which results in marked and severe functional limitations, and which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than twelve months, or
- Are blind.

The ABLE program is intended to be treated in the same manner as a qualified tuition program defined in Section 529 of the federal Internal Revenue Code, and is being designed to function much like Louisiana's existing Student Tuition Assistance and Revenue Trust Program (START) that can be used to reimburse higher education expenses.

A wide range of qualified disability expenses can be paid from an ABLE account including: assistive technology and personal support services, education expenses including tuition for preschool through postsecondary education, employment support expenses related to obtaining and maintaining employment, health and prevention and wellness expenses, housing expenses for primary residence, transportation expenses, and other miscellaneous expenses.

The ABLE program will be administered by the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA).



SPOTLIGHT: EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

The Education Savings Account (ESA) is a new innovation in Pre-K-12 education that provides qualified families the opportunity to direct the educational funding (provided by the state) to the schools, courses, programs, and other relevant services they deem most appropriate to meet the needs of their child. The monies placed in an ESA are managed directly by the parents under state-established guidelines and oversight. ESAs currently exist in the states of Arizona and Florida. The following are ESA program summaries for both states.

ARIZONA'S EMPOWERMENT SCHOLARSHIP ACCOUNT (ESA) PROGRAM⁹⁸

The Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Program began five years ago to provide broader educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Sometimes referred to as “School Choice 2.0”, the ESA choice model constitutes an important refinement of the original school choice concept. Rather than a state-funded coupon that parents can use to cover costs at a public or private school, an ESA is literally an account controlled by parents. Participating Arizona parents sign an agreement with the state and in return receive an account with 90% of the funds that their public school would have received. Parents can use these funds in a variety of ways – private school tuition, certified private tutors, licensed therapists, individual public or private school courses, community college tuition, online programs, etc. ESA parents have an incentive to judge service providers by both quality and cost, as one of the allowable uses of funds is to save funds for future higher education expenses in a federal education savings account. Parents access funds through use of a restricted debit card with state officials continually monitoring and auditing accounts.

Currently, the program serves approximately 2,200 schoolchildren, and current regulations cap program enrollment at 5,500 students. However, those caps expire at the end of 2019, and legislative efforts are currently underway to expand the program to all of the state's 1.1 million public school children.

Minimum Qualifications:

1. Reside in the state of Arizona
2. Meet **one** of the following criteria:
 - a. Enrolled in an Arizona public or charter school full time for the first 100 days of the previous fiscal year
 - b. Received a School Tuition Organization (STO) scholarship for displaced and disabled students
 - c. Eligible for kindergarten or preschool
3. AND Be identified in **one** of the approved student populations
 - a. Child with a disability
 - b. Child who is a ward of the juvenile court and is residing in prospective permanent placement foster care
 - c. Child who is a ward of the juvenile court and who achieved permanency through adoption
 - d. Child who is the sibling of a current ESA recipient
 - e. Child who attended a public school assigned a letter grade of “D” or “F” for the first 100 days of the school year
 - f. Child with an active duty military parent

How It Works:

- Parents sign a contract saying they are responsible for their child's education and waive the public school's Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) requirement
- Child must withdraw from public school and enroll in a private school, home school, or online curriculum program
- 90% of state allocated funding for the child's education is placed in a bank account for the parents to use
- Parents receive a debit card and pay for services directly using this account
- Debit cards will only work on approved expenses
- Parents submit a quarterly report to the Department of Education as back-up for the approved expenses

Funding Amount:

- Funding amounts vary depending on disability, grade level, and school district. Children with Autism in this program typically receive between \$20,000 and \$25,000
- There is no financial cap on the program. Currently, 1,300 of the 220,000 eligible students are participating in the program
- Program is administered by the Department of Education and Treasurer's office

Approved Funding:

1. Tuition and fees at a nongovernmental (private) school for Pre-K-12
2. Required textbooks
3. Tutoring services from an accredited provider
4. Services provided by a public school including individual classes and extracurricular programs
5. Approved curriculum, generally defined as a complete course of study for a particular content area or grade level
6. Tuition and fees for a private online learning program
7. Fees for nationally standardized norm-referenced achievement tests, advanced placement exams, or any exam related to post-secondary admissions
8. Tuition, books, and fees at an eligible postsecondary institution in the state of Arizona
9. Educational therapies or services from a licensed or accredited practitioner or provider, including ABA therapy, as determined by the parent
10. Services/aide from a licensed or accredited paraprofessional
11. Funds remaining in the account can be rolled over into a 529 account for future college expenses

SPOTLIGHT: EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

FLORIDA'S PERSONAL LEARNING SCHOLARSHIP ACCOUNT (PLSA) PROGRAM⁹⁹

Florida's Personal Learning Scholarships Accounts Program is a newly created program administered by state-approved nonprofit Scholarship Funding Organizations that, like Arizona's ESA Program, is designed to provide the option for a parent to better meet the individual educational needs of his or her eligible child. The PLSA provides eligible students a scholarship that can be used to purchase approved services or products. To participate, parents must apply to one of the nonprofit scholarship funding organizations that are administering the program.¹⁰⁰ Parents initially pay for approved educational services and then are reimbursed. Funding provided through the program can pay for everything from instructional materials to curriculum to approved specialized services and therapies such as ABA therapy. The amount of a child's PLSA is dependent on a number of different factors, including grade level, county of residence, and a student's individual level of need. The average for the 2015-16 school year is approximately \$10,000. Like Arizona's program, a child enrolled in the PLSA program may not receive a PLSA and attend public school at the same time, unless it is to receive contracted services.

Nearly 3,900 Florida students have PLSAs today. Enrollment in the program is capped based on the amount of funds allocated by the state legislature. However, in 2015, the Florida legislature appropriated approximately \$53.4 million for the program, which is enough to help more than 5,000 students.

Minimum Qualifications:

1. Reside in the state of Florida
2. AND Be identified in **one** of the approved student populations:
 - a. Child with an IEP
 - b. Child with a diagnosis of autism, down syndrome, intellectual disability, Prader-Willi syndrome, spina-bifida, Williams syndrome
 - c. Kindergartners who are considered high risk

Requirements of Private School Providers:

1. Located in the state of Florida
2. Comply with requirements for private school participating in the state school choice scholarship program
3. Provide to the eligible nonprofit scholarship-funding organization all documentation required for the student's participation, including the private school's and student's fee schedules
4. Be academically accountable to the parent for meeting the educational needs of the student
5. Employ or contract with teachers who have regular and direct contact with each student receiving a scholarship under this section at the school's physical location
6. Annually contract with an independent CPA to perform a report of the results to the scholarship-funding organization

⁹⁹ <http://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/k-12-scholarship-programs/plsa/>; see also <http://townhall.com/columnists/heatherkays/2015/08/25/florida-legislators-recognize-need-for-flexibility-choice-in-special-education-n2043127>.

¹⁰⁰ See <https://www.stepupforstudents.org/for-parents/special-needs/how-the-scholarship-works/>.

How It Works:

- Parents sign a contract saying they are responsible for their child's education and waive the public school's Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) requirement
- Child must withdraw from public school and enroll in a private school, home school, or online curriculum program
- 90% of state allocated funding for the child's education is reserved for expenses related to the child's education as chosen by the parent
- Parents pay for approved services out of pocket and submit reimbursement requests electronically as expenses are incurred to the nonprofit agency approved by the state to administer the program (Scholarship Agency)

Funding Amount:

- Funding amounts vary depending on disability, grade level, and school district.
- Average anticipated funding was \$10,000 per child for the 2015-2016 school year. Official numbers have not been released.
- 3,900 students are currently enrolled with funding to support up to 5,000 students
- Program is administered by an approved nonprofit agency, the Scholarship Agency for the state.

Approved Funding:

1. Tuition and fees at a nongovernmental (private) school for PK-12
2. Tutoring services from an accredited provider
3. Approved curriculum, generally defined as a complete course of study for a particular content area or grade level
4. Tuition and fees for a private online learning program
5. Tuition, books, and fees at an eligible postsecondary institution in the state of Arizona
6. Educational therapies or services from a licensed or accredited practitioner or provider, including ABA therapy, as determined by the parent
7. Services/aide from a licensed or accredited paraprofessional

These programs have seen great success in Arizona and Florida achieving high levels of satisfaction from the families utilizing this funding mechanism. ESAs could be implemented in Louisiana; however, families would be required to leave the public school system – including charter schools – and coordinate private schooling or homeschooling coupled with therapies on their own.



SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS

New Schools for Baton Rouge, a Capital Region nonprofit launched in 2012 for the purpose of catalyzing the creation of a new network of excellent schools, developed the following comparative summary of nonpublic and public charter school options, including requirements and opportunities to serve students with exceptionalities (like students with ASD). Many different factors determine whether or not a school should incorporate as a nonpublic or public charter school. These factors are heightened when discussing the needs of a school focused on special education. More information on Louisiana charter schools can be found on DOE's website¹⁰¹ and Bulletin 126 outlines the laws surrounding charter schools in Louisiana.¹⁰²

Authorization for Charter Public Schools – In Louisiana, there are five separate types of charter authorizations.

- All charter schools are 501c3 nonprofits governed by a nonprofit board.
- There are five types of charters in Louisiana:
 - **Type 1:** local school board authorizes a new start school
 - **Type 1B:** Local authorizer authorizes a new start school
 - **Type 2:** BESE authorizes a new start school
 - **Type 3:** local school board converts an existing school. Note that a nonpublic school may not convert to a charter.
 - **Type 3B:** The RSD returns an existing school to the local school board
 - **Type 4:** BESE authorizes either a new start school or conversion school upon application by the local school board
 - **Type 5:** BESE authorizes a school under jurisdiction of the RSD

¹⁰¹ <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/charter-schools>

¹⁰² www.doa.la.gov/osr/lac/28v139/28v139.doc



Funding: Nonpublic vs. Charter Public – The funding sources for nonpublic schools and public charters are varied. The funding outlined below demonstrates anticipated funding for schools serving students with special needs.

Funding sources available to **nonpublic schools** include:

- Louisiana Scholarship Program: amount equals the school's tuition and fees or per pupil funding in the district where the student lives, whichever is less.¹⁰³ The statewide average in 2015-2016 is \$5,856.¹⁰⁴
- Tuition Donation Rebate Program: amounts cannot exceed the school's tuition and fees or 80% of state per pupil funding.¹⁰⁵ Amount for 2016-2017 will be \$4,156.80 for students in kindergarten through 8th grade and \$4,676.40 for students in 9th through 12th grade.
- School Choice Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities: approximately \$2,200¹⁰⁶
- Tuition¹⁰⁷
- Fundraised dollars
- Medicaid or insurance refund for covered services and/or therapies

Funding sources available to **charter public schools** include:

- Public funds: local, state, and federal funds equal an estimated \$15,526 per student¹⁰⁸
- Per pupil facility funding for Type 2 charters in private facility: approximately \$920 per student
- Fundraised dollars
- Medicaid or insurance refund for covered services and/or therapies

¹⁰³ Louisiana Department of Education, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/school-choice/fag---scholarship-program-comparison.pdf?sfvrsn=14>.

¹⁰⁴ Friedman Foundation, <http://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/louisiana-scholarship-program/>.

¹⁰⁵ Louisiana Department of Education, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/school-choice/fag---scholarship-program-comparison.pdf?sfvrsn=14>.

¹⁰⁶ A student may only benefit from one of the first three sources of funding, in a given year.

¹⁰⁷ If a nonpublic school accepts scholarship for a student, tuition cannot be charged in addition to that amount.

¹⁰⁸ See explanation of the Louisiana MFP calculation on pages 142-143.



Curriculum and Accountability – The variances in curricular control and accountability requirements include the following.

Nonpublic schools:

- Full autonomy over curriculum.
- Students participating in the Louisiana Scholarship Program must take all state assessments.
- Students participating in the Tuition Donation Rebate Program must take state assessments in English language arts and math, during 3rd through 8th grade and certain end of course exams in 9th through 12th grade.
- Students on school choice program scholarship are not required to take state assessments.

Charter Public Schools:

- Full autonomy over curriculum.
- A formal renewal process after five years and annual review for provisions of Charter School Performance Contract. Compact asks charters to set and meet targets for academic performance, financial health, and organizational items such as enrollment, facilities, governance, discipline, health, and safety
- Students must take all state assessments.





Student Enrollment – Nonpublic schools and charter public schools have different guidelines for enrolling their student population. Nonpublic schools establish their own constraints over student admission and enrollment.¹⁰⁹ However, the guidelines for student enrollment in a charter public school include the following:

- Charters are open enrollment public schools. However, a school may “have admission requirements that are consistent with the school’s role, scope, and mission”, as approved by the authorizer.¹¹⁰
 - A charter public school could write an admission preference for students with special needs into the charter application.
 - The school could seek students with special needs through marketing and student recruitment efforts.
- A charter public school student population must include 85% of the school district’s average population of at-risk and special needs students. As an example, if a school district population has 10% students with special needs, a charter school should serve a student population of which 8.5% have special needs.

Board of Directors Code of Ethics Requirements – In a nonpublic school, there is no code of ethics requirement for Board members. In a charter public school, however, there are several requirements of the Board members, including:

- Board members must submit financial disclosure statement annually,

- Board members cannot be members of the same immediate family and potential family benefits from a proposed action must be disclosed,
- 60% of board members must reside in the community where the school is located, and
- Board members must develop and follow an annual training program.

Auxiliary Services: Transportation and Food

Services – A nonpublic school has full discretion to charge for auxiliary services such as transportation and food services. Guidelines for charter public schools include:

- Generally, charters must provide transportation, which is often a high-cost expense. However, there are transportation waivers available for Type 2 charters with a mission of serving students with exceptionalities, where the transportation requirement would create a substantial financial burden.
- Charter public schools must provide free or reduced lunch to students who qualify.

Other General Charter Public School Requirements –

There are a number of other additional rules and regulations charter schools must comply with. Two significant requirements include:

- Charter schools must follow open meeting law requirements, and
- Charter schools must comply with all provisions of the federal IDEA.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ There are some stipulations for nonpublic schools enrolling students in the Louisiana Scholarship Program or the Tuition Donation Rebate Program

¹¹⁰ Louisiana Division of Administration, Bulletin 126, Ch. 27, Sec. 2705.A.

¹¹¹ See additional information on IDEA on page 134.



Sampling of Charter Schools in the US Focused on Students who are Developmentally Disabled

The following is a sampling of innovative charter schools throughout the US that are focused on serving students who are developmentally disabled, including those with an ASD diagnosis. Descriptions for each school were taken from the respective websites.



Arizona Autism Charter School (Phoenix, Arizona)

The Arizona Autism Charter School is the first tuition-free, public charter school in Arizona that specifically focuses on the educational needs of children with autism. The school has the mission to educate students with autism and related disorders using evidence-based strategies grounded in the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) delivered by highly trained teachers and staff. Educational curriculum is delivered via ABA techniques. Classrooms are multi-grade and group students by ability and need. All teachers and staff are supervised by BCBAs. Today, the school is limited to grades K-6, but the school is authorized to grow up to grade 8 and plans to add an additional grade each year. There are currently 108 students enrolled. Class sizes are limited to a maximum of nine students and have a student to staff ratio of 3 to 1. The Arizona Autism Charter School also provides fee-based after school programming.¹¹² The school's operations are funded almost exclusively from public funds. Arizona's base per-pupil funding ranks among the lowest in the country, at approximately \$8,000. However, it's tiered funding formula for students with disabilities allows a charter to receive an additional nearly \$20,000 to educate a student with autism.



Charterhouse School (Richmond, Virginia)

Charterhouse School is an educational institution located in Richmond and Edinburg, VA, that serves the needs of students with autism and other neurological differences, emotional disabilities, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, and other health impairments. The Charterhouse approach focuses on a student's individual academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs while addressing the four needs of the "Circle of Courage" – belonging, independence, mastery, and generosity. Founded in 1979, Charterhouse School educates elementary, middle, and high school students ages six to 22 and has an average student to teacher ratio of 8 to 1. The school offers both residential and non-residential services, as well as more mainstream classrooms and specialized classrooms for students with autism or other neurological disorders. Within the autism program, behavioral specialists are present throughout a student's day, recording behavioral and social observations as needed. Students participate in weekly support groups facilitated by the school counselor and receive individual therapy as needed. These services help students develop the skills they need to reflect and self-regulate.¹¹³ Today, the Charterhouse School serves 39 students (27 day students, 12 overnight residential students). Charterhouse is not a traditional public charter school. Rather, it is a private day school that enrolls students referred by the public school system whose IEP indicates they cannot be appropriately educated in the traditional public school setting. Charterhouse receives approximately \$242 per day from the Local Education Agency (LEA) for each student with autism or another intellectual disability.

¹¹² For more information, visit the Arizona Autism Charter School website at www.autismcharter.org.

¹¹³ For more information, visit the Charterhouse School website at www.charterhouseschool.org.



The Hope Center for Autism (Stuart, Florida)

The Hope Center for Autism is a Florida public charter school with the mission to open doors for people affected by autism and related disabilities. The Hope Center for Autism offers a curriculum based on ABA. The student to teacher ratio is 2 to 1, and each student receives one on one instruction on a daily basis. All educational plans are overseen by a BCBA and implemented by a teacher certified in Exceptional Student Education and experienced therapists and paraprofessionals. The Hope Center for Autism accepts students in grades Pre-K through grade two who reside in Martin County, FL, and have been determined eligible for Exceptional Education Services by the Martin County School District.¹¹⁴



New York Center for Autism Charter School (New York, New York)

The NYC Autism Charter School is the only public charter school in New York State devoted solely to children with autism. The NYC Autism Charter School is co-located in East Harlem with P.S./IS 50, providing students the opportunity to interact with developing peers in the East Harlem community. The educational program offers individualized and evidence-based instruction rooted in ABA and one to one teacher to student ratio in most classrooms. The faculty provides 30 hours of intensive ABA instruction to students every week. The school serves approximately 32 students and receives approximately \$62,000 in public funds per student. Additional funding is provided by private donations which total close to \$20,000 per student.¹¹⁵



Florida Autism Center of Excellence (Tampa, Florida)

The Florida Autism Center of Excellence (FACE) is a public charter school located in Tampa, FL that offers successful educational programs for children and young adults with ASD. FACE serves children with ASD from ages three to 22 in Pre-K through grade 12 and is open to residents in Hillsborough, Pinellas, Polk, Manatee, and Sarasota counties. FACE implements ABA principles to help students gain the academic, social, language, behavioral, vocational, and life skills they need to help them become independent later in life. FACE utilizes ABPathfinder, an autism therapy management tool, to aid staff in defining and administering individualized ABA programs.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ For more information, visit the Hope Center for Autism website at www.hopecenterforautism.org.

¹¹⁵ For more information, visit the New York Center for Autism Charter School website at www.nycacharterschool.org/home.

¹¹⁶ For more information, visit the Florida Autism Center of Excellence website at <http://www.faceprogram.org/>.



Palm Beach School for Autism (Lake Worth, Florida)

Palm Beach School for Autism is a tuition-free public charter school, located in Lake Worth, Florida, that serves children from pre-school through grade 12 on the autism spectrum in Palm Beach County. The Palm Beach School for Autism has the mission to provide a developmentally appropriate education using intensive behavioral strategies for students with ASD and related disabilities. The foundation of the educational program is the application of ABA and other therapies infused with innovative learning methods that include sensory integration, hands on learning, team collaboration, individualized instruction, achievement portfolios, and language based instruction.¹¹⁷ The school currently serves approximately 280 students. Students seeking to enroll must have an IEP from a public school district that identifies the student as having ASD. Once the IEP is provided to the Palm Beach School, school staff conduct an additional intake and assessment to determine the unique set of programs and resources necessary to educate the student. The amount of state funding for each student is based on the student's Matrix Score. As discussed in the **Spotlight: The Florida Exceptional Student Education Program**, in Florida, the Matrix of Services is the document used to determine the cost factor for exceptional education students based on the decisions made by the IEP team.¹¹⁸ Scores range from 251 to 255 and most children with autism score 254 or 255, qualifying the most high-cost students for up to approximately \$20,000 in state funding. The school also receives federal IDEA funds for each student. The combination of state and federal funding is not enough to cover the complete cost of educating the school's students, so fundraising, grants and private donations are also pursued.

¹¹⁷ For more information, visit the Palm Beach School for Autism website at www.pbsfa.org.
¹¹⁸ <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7690/urlt/2015MatrixServices.pdf>.

St. Coletta Charter School (Washington D.C.)

St. Coletta of Greater Washington operates a public charter school and a private school, co-located in the District of Columbia. St. Coletta has the mission to serve children and adults with intellectual disabilities and to support their families. Students served are between the ages of three and 22 years and must be diagnosed with an intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities and have a minimum of 24.5 hours of special education services on their IEP. They must also have a secondary disabling condition such as speech language disorder, vision or hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, health impairment or behavior disorder. St. Coletta's approach to teaching children with autism incorporates various approaches including picture communication, sensory diets, positive behavior intervention, and management of environments based on the TEACCH program.

St. Coletta serves approximately 250 students each year. They receive approximately \$35,000 per student from public funding sources, bill Medicaid for most therapy services, and have a full-time grants staffer who works in development.

St. Coletta also offers adults the opportunity to participate in vocational and pre-vocational training, supported employments, life skills training, and community integration. The adult program, located in Old Town Alexandria and North Bethesda, focuses on developing life skills through community integration.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ For more information, visit the St. Coletta Charter School website at www.stcoletta.org.



As with the unique mix of services and supports necessary to help a child with autism reach his or her full potential, the specific type of school and educational setting and curriculum that will help a child with autism maximize his or her educational experience will be different for each child. There is long-standing and robust debate among parents, policymakers and advocates concerning whether mainstream education or education in a more exclusive setting is most advantageous for children with developmental disabilities. The recommendations contained in this report, including the recommendation to establish a charter school focused on children with autism, are not intended to suggest that an exclusive educational environment will be right for all, or even most, children. Parents unquestionably are the most qualified decision makers when it comes to choosing the type of school setting and environment that are right for his or her child, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer. To that end, in light of the staggering number of children in the Capital Region projected to be on the autism spectrum by 2030, the authors of this report conclude there is a need for a host of different educational options for parents to choose from. A specialized charter school for children with autism is simply one option among many. Additionally, the recommendation for a specialized charter school is not intended to relieve local public school systems in the Capital Region from their obligation to provide appropriate services and supports to children on the autism spectrum.

SPOTLIGHT: A FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR A SPECIALIZED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN THE CAPITAL REGION

Over the past several years, The Emerge Center (Emerge) has become one of Baton Rouge's leading nonprofit organizations dedicated to optimizing independent communication and social interaction skills, and it remains poised for continued and sustainable growth, expansion, and success. A potential area for expansion is elementary education for children with autism in the Baton Rouge area.

During the fall of 2015, Emerge engaged Emergent Method, a Baton Rouge-based strategy and management consulting firm, to conduct a feasibility study to assess opportunities to expand current interdisciplinary services and potentially create a school that would serve children with autism and related disorders. The objectives of the feasibility study were to develop a program and curriculum model that would build upon the strengths of Emerge's ABA therapy program, determine the potential population of students the school would serve, explore different options for creating a school (public versus private), and develop a financial model that would account for potential revenue sources as well as expenses. Coleman Partners Architects was engaged to develop a master plan for the current facility and site to support any such expansion.

In February 2016, the first phase of feasibility study was completed. The findings of the study have determined that a therapeutic school for children with Autism at Emerge is feasible. Based on this preliminary information, the Emerge Board of Directors has voted to move forward with a planning phase as the next step. During this phase, Emerge's Board of Directors will continue to assess and take a prudent approach in analyzing the model and determining philanthropy and funding opportunities. The Board of Directors of the Emerge Center will operate under the guiding principle that this programmatic growth must supplement the current strengths of Emerge as well as continue to assess any potential risks to existing programming.



STATE STUDENT ACCOUNTABILITY/ ACHIEVEMENT SYSTEM

Student accountability for school performance is complex, ever evolving, and linked with federal standards which mandate that all students participate in state accountability systems and large-scale testing systems.¹²⁰ The Louisiana Department of Education, in collaboration with stakeholders and policy advocates, continues to refine the state's accountability system, including the development of alternative and appropriate accountability assessments for students with disabilities.

LAA 1

Louisiana students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are eligible to take the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) Alternate Assessment, Level 1 (LAA 1), an alternate assessment for students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and meet specific criteria.¹²¹

Under the LAA 1, students in grades 3 through 8 and 10th grade are assessed in English language arts and mathematics; students in grades 4 and 8 are also assessed in science. Students in 11th grade are assessed in science only. Students who take the LAA 1 may receive a Career Diploma through an alternate pathway or a Certificate of Achievement.

Louisiana's state accountability system for high school (9th to 12th grade) includes four equally weighted components – high school ACT score, End-of-Course (EOC) assessments, cohort graduation rate, and the graduation index. Federal law requires all students to be included in the denominator for calculating the graduation rate and graduation index. Students who are eligible for the LAA 1 and receive a Career Diploma are included in the graduation index numerator. However, students that receive a Certificate of Achievement are not included in the numerator.

More information on the LAA 1 can be found on DOE's website:

<http://www.louisianabelieves.com/assessment/alternate-assessments>.

¹²⁰ The federal standards that mandate state accountability systems are the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind Act.

¹²¹ www.doa.la.gov/osr/lac/28v97/28v97.doc



ACT 833 OF THE 2014 LOUISIANA LEGISLATIVE SESSION

In an effort to further recognize performance of schools serving students with exceptionalities, Act 833 of the 2014 Louisiana Legislative Session provided an additional alternative for students with exceptionalities within the state accountability system, including grade promotion, pursuing a career major curriculum, graduation criteria, diploma eligibility, and monitoring and corrective action for school systems with high rates of students with exceptionalities performing below expected levels.

The general purpose of Act 833 is to make certain “students with exceptionalities shall be afforded the same opportunities to pursue a high school diploma and to exit with all course credits, honors, and financial awards as other students.”¹²² Additionally the Act ensures “A student with an exceptionality... who successfully completes the requirements of his Individualized Education Program, including performance on any assessment required for graduation determined appropriate by his Individualized Education Program team, shall be issued a high school diploma.”¹²³

Act 833 creates another opportunity for students with exceptionalities in Louisiana public schools to achieve a high school diploma and for their schools to receive accountability credit for their performance. A summary of Act 833 can be found on the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council (LaDDC) website.¹²⁴

THE ACCOUNTABILITY CONSTRAINTS OF FEDERAL LAW

Louisiana’s efforts to extend the opportunity for a high school diploma to students with exceptionalities are ultimately constrained by the federal definitions previously included in the No Child Left Behind legislation and is now superseded by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). With the passage of the ESSA, schools will still be held accountable for student performance; however, states will have more autonomy to determine standards and intervention protocol. Louisiana is actively engaged with policy makers on the federal and state level to promote more inclusive definitions and standards for the reauthorization of this federal policy. A summary of the ESSA and its impact in Louisiana is available on the LaDDC website.¹²⁵

122 Act 833, Regular Session, 2014, (Louisiana, 2014).

123 ibid

124 <http://www.laddc.org/content.cfm?id=563>

125 <http://www.laddc.org/news/LaDDCNews12-22-2015.pdf>



TEACHERS AND LOCAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Typically, teachers not certified as special education instructors receive limited exposure to working with this unique population. Even special education instructors who receive extensive training need ongoing education and support to stay up to date on changing best practices. Professional development and support for teachers includes behavioral intervention training and tools, access to behavioral intervention experts for classroom support, and continuing education opportunities focused on classroom techniques for students with an ASD diagnosis. The following information describes the available resources in the Capital Region.

TRAINING RESOURCES

Nicholls State University

As mentioned previously in this report, the Nicholls State University BCBA Program, housed in the University's Education Department, is a two-and-a-half-year program that provides the education to become a certified BCBA. While the students in the program are not all teachers, the program is geared towards both special education and regular education teachers to train them in behavior analysis techniques so these individuals can be used as ABA resources within their home institutions.

Ascension Public Schools has taken advantage of the Nicholls State BCBA program and currently employs three teachers who have graduated from the Nicholls State program. These teachers are leveraged as resources around the school district in a "train-the-trainer" model. They are called into classrooms when students have behavioral outbursts and work closely with the everyday teachers. They teach these teachers techniques for managing the child's behavior to prevent future outbursts and encourage a learning environment. These experts can also be leveraged for IEP and Individual Transition Plan (ITP) development and counseling.

The East Baton Rouge Parish School System has not worked with Nicholls State. Previously, a single Program Specialist provided expert support for all teachers in the system serving ASD students. However, this staff person has left the school system and no plan for replacement has been identified.



Calcasieu Parish School System

has adopted a model to support educators and administrators in managing children with ASD. Calcasieu Parish has on staff a group of behavioral specialists who are supervised by a BCBA. Each specialist oversees a few schools and can be called upon to support teachers for Individual Education Programs (IEPs), transition planning, and behavioral issues. These behavioral specialists can be called in by teachers for consultation and can act as case managers for students as they progress through school.



Louisiana Autism Spectrum and Related Disabilities (LASARD) Project

In addition to the LASARD Project's educational materials for physicians, referenced in the **Early Childhood Diagnosis** section of this report, LASARD also engages in efforts to improve educational practices and outcomes for students with ASD and related disabilities and to develop statewide capacity to provide high-quality educational programs for these students. LASARD provides free online training modules, professional development opportunities, and technical assistance statewide. The Autism Training Modules are a nine-part professional development electronic modules available online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through the LASARD website – www.hdc.lsuhs.edu/lasard.

LASARD will also provide contract support to school systems upon request on a case-by-case basis. The Baker, Ascension Parish, and St. Helena Parish school systems from the Capital Region have taken advantage of LASARD's contract support services. The East Baton Rouge Parish school system has not.

LASARD also provides support free of charge to ten "partner" school systems (including charter schools) selected through an application process each year. Each partner commits to creating and supporting up to three teams of educators, administrators, therapists, family members, and paraprofessionals. LASARD provides each team three days of training in the areas of environment, communication, curriculum and instruction, collaboration, inclusive practices, behavior, social interaction, and transition.

After training, teams create action plans to improve one or more of these areas within their respective schools. LASARD also provides regular follow up meetings and targeted development assistance for all teams. St. Helena Parish School System is the only Capital Region system that has been accepted by LASARD as a partner for the 2015-16 school year.

Additionally, LASARD provides professional development to any school district that requests assistance, regardless of whether the district is a "partner" district. During the 2014-15 school year, LASARD provided a workshop at the City of Baker schools, but no other district in the Capital Region requested professional development assistance. LASARD also offers web-based professional development tools that may be accessed by anyone and hosts training opportunities and events around the state on a variety of topics including adult transition, behavior in the classroom, and social interaction. See **Pre-K-12 Education** section for more information. Anecdotal evidence from study interviews indicates LASARD is an underutilized resource. LASARD leadership acknowledged that with more funding from the Louisiana Department of Education, the organization could serve more districts through intensive technical assistance (as provided to LASARD's partner districts), but stated that even with free supports available today, no districts in the Capital Region have applied for services.



CAPITAL REGION PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Interviews were conducted with two of the largest school systems in the Capital Region – the East Baton Rouge Parish School System and the Ascension Public Schools – for the purpose of understanding how these local systems serve special education students, including those with an ASD diagnosis.

Ascension Public Schools and East Baton Rouge Parish School systems, like all public school systems in the US, utilize the prescribed federal guidelines and processes to serve all special education students including students with an ASD diagnosis who also meet special education criteria. As described earlier in this section, the centerpiece of the federal special education guidelines is an IEP developed by a team that typically includes education professionals, the family, health care professionals, and other relevant experts.





ASCENSION PUBLIC SCHOOLS SYSTEM

In the Ascension Public Schools system, IEPs are reviewed and updated once per year on or before the anniversary date of the previous IEP – unless the student’s anniversary date falls within the September/October timeframe. Updates for those students are completed toward the end of the previous school year.



Officials from the Ascension Public Schools system interviewed as part of this assessment identified the following specifics of their special education infrastructure as key components of their program.

- An organizational culture that emphasizes problem-solving and student success over mere compliance with federal and state requirements.
- An elaborate, structured six-step process to evaluate and remedy poor student performance prior to referral for a special education eligibility assessment. This process utilizes a team approach referred to as the Professional Learning Community (PLC) which includes the child’s teacher(s), other grade level teachers, speech therapist, counselor, special education staff, and trained facilitators. The exact members of the team are individualized based on the needs of the student. The school system’s PLC Problem-Solving Flow Chart is provided in [Appendix C](#) of this report.
- An emphasis on providing elaborate transition support services for students including grade-to-grade, school-to-school, and school-to-adult world/work transitions.
- A system-level Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) expert to serve as a resource across the school system. The school system also leverages a close working relationship with the ABA educational program at Nicholls State University. Additionally, the system has teachers trained in a variety of other behavioral intervention techniques. The school system does not currently leverage insurance reimbursement for ABA therapy.
- The school system offers several health care services including speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy and nursing services. The school system is enrolled as a Medicaid provider allowing for Medicaid reimbursement of these services for eligible students.

School system officials identified the following as potential improvements of the Ascension Public Schools special education program:

- A need for better coordination between private student evaluators, health care professionals, and the school system.
- Guidebook resources and other simple tools and collaterals that facilitate greater family understanding and more efficient navigation of the special education infrastructure.

We spoke with several families and stakeholders who indicated that Ascension Parish has demonstrated a commitment to special education students that has seen success.



EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

In the East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools System, IEPs are reviewed and updated annually. The update process is initiated by the school system approximately 60 days prior to expiration and the IEP meeting is conducted at least 30 days prior to expiration.



Officials from the East Baton Rouge Parish Public School System interviewed as part of this assessment identified the following specifics of their special education infrastructure as key components of their program.

- A focus on getting families connected to and interfacing with the available early intervention resources including the Early Steps program resources.
- An elaborate multidisciplinary infrastructure to support pre-appraisal interventions, the pupil appraisal function and IEP development. Copies of the school system's key pre-appraisal intervention documents are provided as [Appendix D](#) of this report.
- ASD-exclusive classrooms, including approximately thirty-three elementary classes, ten middle school classes, and five high school classes.
- Health care services including speech therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy. The East Baton Rouge Parish Public School System does not currently offer ABA therapy to students.

School system officials also identified significant needs to improve the East Baton Rouge Parish special education program (to serve students with an ASD diagnosis):

- Guidebook resources and other simple tools and collaterals that facilitate greater family understanding and more efficient navigation of the special education infrastructure.
- A system of ongoing ASD-specific training for teachers, therapists, school administrators, and other relevant school system staff.
- ABA therapy resources and expertise to support ongoing ASD-specific staff development and to provide ABA therapy as appropriate.
- More and better adapted educational resources/materials for ASD students – age, grade, and skill level appropriate.
- A more effective transition services function, including more effective student training, greater family engagement, and a more robust interface with external transition resources.

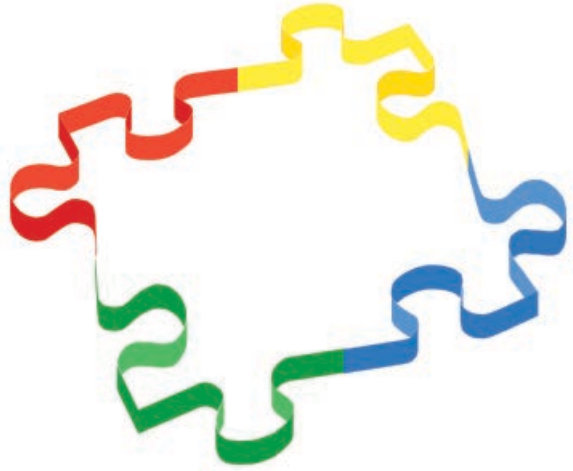
We heard from parents and stakeholders that the East Baton Rouge Parish Public School System has room for improvement in terms of delivering special education support services, particularly to students with an ASD diagnosis. With the departure of the school system's ASD specialist, parents no longer have access to a dedicated and knowledgeable resource. With the recent change in school system administration, East Baton Rouge Parish Public School System is primed for implementation of best practices in special education.

SPOTLIGHT: **CALCASIEU PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM**

Approximately 20 years ago, the Calcasieu Parish School System began developing what is now a robust support infrastructure for students with an ASD diagnosis. This system-level infrastructure includes:

- Two full-time education professionals and experts dedicated exclusively to supporting students with an ASD diagnosis by working with school administrators and special education teachers and general education teachers in the classroom. These individuals are educators who have completed special training and ongoing development to maintain an expertise in supporting ASD students. These educators provide ongoing teacher training and serve as resources to the schools and the classrooms.
- Speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and ABA therapists who are engaged to work with teachers. The school system does not currently seek insurance reimbursements for ABA therapy, but utilizes behavioral intervention techniques in the classroom. If there is a need, the school system works with external groups, like the McNeese Autism Program, to bring more specialized techniques into the classroom.
- The school system has engaged a BCBA from Indiana University to serve as a consultant to the system, working with the system to design the ASD programs and services. She also visits the system during the year to provide ongoing development.
- A strong collaborative relationship with families, outside health care providers (including therapists), transition/workforce development resources available through the state (Louisiana Rehabilitation Services), local providers, the local community and technical college, and local employers.
- Transportation services leveraged to maximize utilization of existing training programs available across the school system for older students in the transitional phase of the IEP.

Calcasieu has been identified as one of the better school systems in Louisiana for children with an ASD diagnosis.



Although many school systems are not offering ABA therapy or ABA techniques in the classroom, some in the state have incorporated models that do utilize these services. For example, St. James Parish consults with an ABA therapy provider for classroom behavior intervention techniques and Assumption Parish works directly with outside agencies to provide ABA services.

Families can push their school districts to work with existing service providers and entities to more easily facilitate the provision of ABA therapy.

The school district can establish a memorandum of understanding with these organizations who can then provide therapy in the school setting.





ATTRIBUTES OF AN IDEAL SPECIAL EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The following is a list of attributes of an “ideal” special education infrastructure to best serve public school students with an ASD diagnosis. This list was developed from research conducted throughout this assessment, including interviews with education professionals, medical professionals, advocates, and other stakeholders.

The ideal infrastructure is focused on achieving maximum student potential through a collaborative, professional effort that leverages all available resources. The ideal infrastructure is also transparent and easy to navigate by caregivers, and driven by innovation and continuous improvement.

- **Student/Parent-centered Design**

A high-quality special education system is designed around the needs of the student and the parents, not the organizational structures and staff of the school system bureaucracy. Student/Parent-centered design means families are provided the information and tools they require to clearly understand and efficiently navigate all relevant requirements, responsibilities, processes, and timelines that collectively comprise the special education function.

Perhaps the most important component of the design is how the school system approaches the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), including the Individual Transition Plan (ITP). The development and ongoing management of a student’s IEP/ITP should reflect ASD-specific evidence based practices and real collaborative input from all relevant contributors – educational experts, medical experts, behavioral experts, workforce experts, and the family.

Student/Parent-centered design also requires an inventory of easy-to-use tools (hardcopy and digital) that facilitate family understanding, collaboration, and satisfaction. Examples of tools that school systems should develop to facilitate good student/parent navigation of the special education function include:

- Special education how-to guidebooks for parents,
- Parental responsibility check sheets and timelines,
- Simple graphical flowcharts that help explain key special education processes,
- Experts and counselors easily available to parents for consultation,
- A robust webpage and digital helpline, and
- Survey instruments to measure family satisfaction.



- **Collaborative Culture**

ASD is an umbrella diagnostic label for a complex array of medical and behavioral conditions found in varying combinations and concentrations from person to person. ASD is recognized as a lifelong disorder without a cure, and expert research focused on understanding and addressing ASD is relatively limited and still evolving. Together, these facts significantly challenge public school systems to gain the knowledge and insights necessary to understand how to best serve each student with an ASD diagnosis.

Federal and state regulations provide a solid framework to make sure every school system follows basic requirements and standards for student eligibility, individualized education planning, and student performance measurement. However, compliance with regulations will not alone provide students and families with the service and support they need. The uniqueness of each student with an ASD diagnosis is best understood and addressed through true collaboration – the culture for which must be developed and continuously nurtured by the special education department of the school system.

Recognized collaborative partners should include: the family (including the student when appropriate), physicians and other relevant health care providers (such as psychologists, clinical social workers, therapists, etc.), education experts including special education experts and educators with ASD-specific expertise, and other relevant student/family support resource providers.

- **ASD Expertise**

The expanse and complexity of the different conditions that are included in the broad definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder warrants school system investments that provide ASD-specific expertise including:

- A recognized lead ASD expert at the school system level,
- System-level ASD expert resources available for special education eligibility evaluations, IEP/ITP development and classroom support,
- Incorporation of evidence-based practices and therapies that represent current best practices for students with an ASD diagnosis, including ABA therapy and ABA techniques and strategies for the classroom, and
- Ongoing continuing education of staff and periodic evaluation of the school system's relevant staffing/service delivery model.



- **Comprehensive Transition Planning and Support Services**

The journey through Pre-K-12 education includes numerous significant transitions that students and families must successfully manage, including grade-to-grade transitions, school-to-school transitions, and the transition out of the secondary (high school) school environment. These transitions can be traumatic for any student and they can be especially so for students with an ASD diagnosis. School systems can make these transitions less daunting for students with an ASD diagnosis (and their families) by providing a comprehensive set of transition planning and support services.

Grade-to-grade and school-to-school transitions can be facilitated by student and family orientation sessions and collateral materials, and preliminary visits that offer environmental orientation and acclimation. The transition out of the high school environment is guided by the student's Individual Transition Plan, but also ideally includes the active ongoing engagement of community resources external to the school system, including workforce development resources, the full array of available independent living resources, postsecondary education providers, and cooperative employers from the public and private sectors.

- **Determination to Leverage Available Resources**

Public school systems typically operate under significant financial pressures that do not allow for the internal development of all support services and resources needed to optimize outcomes for students with an ASD diagnosis. Such financial constraints compel school systems focused on optimizing student outcomes to leverage all appropriate resources available through public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector. Examples of external resources that can be leveraged to support students with an ASD diagnosis include:

- Third-party health care insurance reimbursement (including Medicaid) to provide needed health care services including appropriate therapies such as ABA therapy,
- Transition planning/guidance and workforce development resources available through the Louisiana Workforce Commission, especially Louisiana Rehabilitation Services (LRS), and
- Services, expertise, and other resources available from the relevant public agencies, nonprofit service providers, and advocacy organizations operating in the Capital Region, such as LASARD. These services can include therapy providers like speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and ABA therapy, as well as training materials for teachers and expertise regarding transition planning and access to available supports for families.



05

RECOMMENDATIONS

PRE-K-12 EDUCATION



Federal and state laws provide an elaborate framework to guide how public school systems serve students who qualify for special education support due to an ASD diagnosis. However, appropriate implementation of federal and state guidelines requires transparent and accessible processes and programs, adequate resources, and ASD-specific expertise.

1. Public school systems in the Capital Region should conduct an independent assessment of their special education system as it relates to serving students with an ASD diagnosis for the purpose of organizational and operational redesigns to improve quality of system performance. Following the findings of this assessment, the recommendations should be implemented. The ideal system attributes include:
 - a. Student/Parent-centered design
 - b. Collaborative culture
 - c. ASD expertise (including ABA therapy experts and a dedicated ASD expert to support staff development and coordinate service delivery)
 - d. Comprehensive transition planning and support services
 - e. Determination to leverage available resources
2. Public education systems and private schools should develop the organizational and operational infrastructure needed to leverage third party reimbursement, including private/commercial insurance and Medicaid reimbursement, of ABA and other relevant therapies and health care services.
3. The Louisiana Legislature should support the following changes to education funding:
 - a. Increase the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) base per pupil funding by 2.75% as recommended by the MFP Task Force,
 - b. Implement a differentiated or tiered MFP for special education students based upon disability diagnosis and levels of intervention, similar to the differentiated funding model currently utilized by the Recovery School District in New Orleans, and
 - c. Increase the funds set aside for High Cost Services by at least \$7 million in addition to the \$5.4 million allocated for the 2015-2016 school year, totaling approximately \$21 million, as recommended by the MFP Task Force.



4. The Louisiana Department of Education should continue to work with policymakers on the state and federal levels to maximize the opportunities for students with exceptionalities to be included in the state accountability system.
5. In addition to the Emerge Center, relevant ASD community stakeholders should conduct a feasibility study for the establishment of an East Baton Rouge-based charter school serving Pre-K-6 or Pre-K-12 students with ASD and related disorders. This charter school and study should analyze the breadth of disabilities and disorders the school could service and does not need to be exclusive in nature, but could provide inclusive education to both typical and non-typical children. The feasibility study should include:
 - a. Required demand for viability
 - b. Transportation to potentially extend reach beyond East Baton Rouge
 - c. Funding
 - d. Accountability standards
6. The Louisiana Department of Education should establish a state-level ASD champion/expert to consult with local school systems, advocate for best practices, assist with troubleshooting and problem solving, and understand available resources, connect school systems to those resources, and serve as a liaison with other appropriate state agencies (i.e., DHH, LWC, DCFS).

