



# Testimony

## SB 1716

### Serving Texas's Most Vulnerable Students

*Testimony in Support Submitted to the Texas Senate Education Committee*

By Emily Sass, Policy Director

Chairman Taylor, Vice Chairman Lucio, and Members of the Committee:

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, families whose children have disabilities were and are especially vulnerable to disruptions in their educational services.

Early in the onset of COVID-19, federal funds in the form of the CARES Act [flowed directly to states for education](#). The distribution was left up to the discretion of the governors based on their own state's needs. Governor Abbott saw the struggles of Texas students with disabilities and dedicated \$30 million to supporting them this year through the Supplemental Special Education Services (SSES) program.

The SSES program, administered by the TEA, [provides grants of \\$1,500 to eligible families](#) enrolled in Texas public schools to help them pay for TEA-approved services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, technology, and other products or services that will support students' educational progress.

The TEA reports having awarded grants to over 7,000 students since SSES was instituted. As of April 15, 2021, more than 12,000 students have applied for services to help them close gaps in educational services due to the disruptions caused by COVID-19.

This is an ongoing need. A child's struggles after over a year of upheaval and potential learning loss are not going to evaporate even with a widely distributed vaccine. Children of all backgrounds and needs have lost ground this year. Children with disabilities are especially vulnerable: As recently as October 2020, the U.S. Department of Education highlighted [ongoing deficiencies in Texas's special education](#) implementation.

Student need likely far exceeds the capacity of this program. TEA reported nearly [600,000 Texas students were receiving special education services](#) in the 2019-20 school year (see Statewide Totals report). About 60,000 of those students fit the current eligibility requirements; the current funding only covers 20,000 of them.

SB 1716 would statutorily preserve and expand the SSES program that has helped Texas families and has the potential to help many more. There may be an additional influx of \$18 billion in federal education aid coming into our state. We believe that retaining and expanding this program would be a wise allocation of scarce taxpayer resources.

TPPF appreciates the leadership of Chairman Taylor, Commissioner Morath, and Governor Abbott as they seek to help the next generation of Texans achieve their American dream. ☆

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emily Sass** is the policy director for Next Generation Texas at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

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