

EMPOWERING FAMILIES WITH PARENT-DIRECTED GRANTS



by Michael Barba and Anthony Jones

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Empowering Families With Parent-Directed Grants

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Executive Summary

Similar to their peers, students receiving special education services experienced about 6 months of learning loss following COVID-19 ([TEA 2022a, p. 18](#); [U.S. Department of Education 2021, p. 25](#)). The lack of specialized classroom settings, hands-on services, and occupational or physical therapy contributed to these losses. To help families recover from these educational setbacks, Gov. Abbott and the Legislature established the Supplemental Special Education Services (SSES) program, which allows parents to direct grant funds to pay for goods and services that provide a direct educational benefit to their child outside the normal school day. This brief summarizes the origin of the program, assesses its current state, and provides recommendation for its improvement. Findings include:

- **Student eligibility:** Public school students served through special education (**605,351 students**) are eligible to participate. All medically fragile students are guaranteed acceptance.
- **Waitlist:** Current funding can support **72,600** students; **17,900** are currently waitlisted; TEA projects a waitlist of **48,000 to 74,000 students** by May 2023.
- **Legislative support:** About **three fourths** of each legislative chamber voted for SSES.
- **Family feedback:** **97%** of families reported that the goods or services funded by SSES helped their child meet their learning goals.
- **Administrators:** TEA manages SSES finances, programmatic details, and student applications; Education Service Center for Region 10 manages purchase order approvals, family support, and the ClassWallet contract; ClassWallet executes transactions and maintains the online marketplace.
- **Funding:** **\$141 million** total; \$81 million in federal funds and \$60 million in state funds.

We offer four recommendations to continuously improve the SSES program:

1. **Funding:** Given the growing waitlist, the Legislature should continue to fund SSES, at least at the same rate as the previous biennium.
2. **Annual application:** SSES is a first-come, first-served program, which causes an indefinite waitlist time. We recommend TEA establish an annual application cycle with fixed application and acceptance dates.
3. **Service Availability:** Surveyed parents pointed to the need for an efficient process to approve more educators and vendors, robust search tools to find educators and vendors, and more time to use services before funds expire. Families should have the option to roll over unused funds across fiscal years.

Key Points

- **Student eligibility:** 605,351 public school students served through special education may participate.
- **Waitlist:** Current funding can support 72,600 students; 17,900 are currently waitlisted; TEA anticipates a waitlist of 48,000 to 74,000 students by May 2023.
- **Family feedback:** 97% of families reported that the goods or services funded by the Supplemental Special Education Services helped their child meet their learning goals.

4. **Academic Impact:** Due in part to the novelty of the program, comprehensive educational outcomes are lacking. It would be helpful for TEA to disaggregate applicable assessment results for SSES students to serve as an indicator of outcomes going forward.

Program Origin

Special education in Texas has undergone significant changes in recent years. Since the Texas Education Agency (TEA) released its Special Education Strategic Plan to address requirements outlined by the U.S. Department of Education in 2018, the number of Texas students receiving special education services has surged ([TEA, 2018](#)). In the 2016–17 school year, 477,526 (8.9%) of public school students received special education services; this increased to 605,351 (11.3%) by the 2020–21 school year ([TEA, 2021a, p. 7](#)).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, intermittent closures were detrimental to the individualized learning plans of students receiving special education ([U.S. Department of Education \[DOE\], 2021, p. 25](#)). Gov. Abbott responded by establishing the Supplemental Special Education Services (SSES) program in October 2020 to support students with severe cognitive disabilities, including Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism, blind-visually impaired (BVI), or deaf and hard of hearing (DHH; [Office of the Texas Governor, 2020](#); [TEA, n.d.-a](#)). The program offered qualifying students a one-time grant of \$1,500 for goods and services over and above the free and appropriate education offered by the school ([Office of the Texas Governor, 2021](#)). Low-income students were prioritized, and the initial funding resulted in 18,000 grants.

In an effort to further develop the SSES program, Senate Bill 1716 (87R) was introduced in 2021 ([SB 1716, 2021](#)). Once passed, the law provided appropriations funding, expanded student eligibility, and made other programmatic improvements.

Student Eligibility

This expansion of student eligibility for participation in the SSES program allowed it to aid more special education students in addition to those with severe cognitive disabilities. As a result of SB 1716, all public school special education students became eligible to receive SSES grants ([Letter from the TEA to the Administrator Addressed, 2021](#); [SB 1716, 2021, Sec. 29.044 \(a\)](#)). To help low-income students, the Legislature prioritized compensatory education students, namely, those with deficiencies in meeting Individual

Education Plan (IEP) goals. In 2020, the eligibility threshold for compensatory education was \$47,638 for a family of four ([SB 1716, 2021, Sec. 29.044\(b\)](#); [TTARA, 2022, p. 2](#)). As a result, 70% of funds are allocated to low-income students receiving special education services, while the remaining 30% are allocated to students above this threshold (TEA, personal communication, March 8, 2022). Finally, students are eligible to receive SSES once and may not reapply in subsequent school years ([TEA, n.d.-b](#)), with the exception of medically fragile students ([TEA, n.d.-j](#)).

Medically Fragile Students: SSES+

In December 2021, Gov. Abbott designated \$20 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Grant Program (ESSER III) funds specifically for medically fragile students ([Office of the Governor, 2021](#)). Students are categorized as medically fragile if they:

- are under 23 years old;
- require routine use of medical device or assistive technology to compensate for lost bodily function;
- have a serious, ongoing illness or chronic condition that
 - will last at least a year or requires one month of hospitalization, and
 - requires ongoing medical treatments and monitoring; and
- live with an ongoing threat to their continued well-being ([TEA, n.d.-j](#)).

There are 2,644 medically fragile students in Texas, and these students received a \$5,000 grant in their SSES account beginning August 2022 ([TEA, n.d.-k](#)). Families who had already applied to SSES do not need to reapply; families who have not yet applied must follow the SSES application process.

Program Administration

SSES is administered by the following entities:

- TEA manages SSES finances, programmatic details, student applications, and publishes a list of approved service providers ([TEA, 2021b, p. 4](#); [TEA, n.d.-b](#)).
- ClassWallet, a technology company that provides a digital wallet service, hosts student accounts and maintains the integrated eCommerce marketplace online ([TEA, n.d.-b](#)).

Table 1
Summary of SSES Revenue Sources

Amount	Students Served	Source	Fund Expiration
\$30 million	18,000	Governor's Emergency Education Relief	30-Jun-22
\$20 million	< 3,000	ESSER III (for SSES+)	30-Sep-24
\$31 million	18,600	Governor's Emergency Education Relief	30-Sep-22
\$60 million	36,000	General Appropriations Act (GAA), Article III, Rider 84, 87th Legislature	30-Sep-24

Note. Data from Monitor SB 1716, by TEA, 2022b p. 9 (<https://www.texaspolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TEA-SSES-Monitoring-SB-1716-07-22-22.pdf>), a presentation offered to the House Public Education Committee on July 25, 2022. For background, see also: Governor Abbott, TEA Open Grant Applications For Students With Cognitive Disabilities Impacted by COVID-19, by Office of the Governor, January 21, 2020 (<https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/covid/Governor-Abbott-TEA-Open-Grant-Applications-For-Students-With-Cognitive-Disabilities-Impacted-by-COVID-19.pdf>); State Plan for the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III) Fund, by TEA, 2021, p. 12 (<https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/covid/Texas-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan.pdf#page=12>); Governor Abbott Announces Additional \$123.3 Million in Education Funding, by Office of the Governor, December 2021 (<https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-announces-additional-123.3-million-in-education-funding>); Senate Bill 1, by Texas Legislature, 2021 p. 255 (<https://www.telicon.com/www/TX/87R/pdf/TX87RSB00001ENR.pdf#page=255>).

- Education Service Center for Region 10 (ESC 10) creates accounts, approves purchase order requests, manages the ClassWallet contract, and communicates with families as they search for goods and services. TEA's SSES application lists the detailed program assurances required of ESC 10 ([TEA, 2021b, p. 10](#)).

Program Funding

Table 1 summarizes the four funding sources that support SSES, totaling \$141 million.

Due to high application rates, all appropriated funds were allocated to program participants by April 2022; in the absence of supplemental funding, additional applicants will be waitlisted. TEA projects that 48,000 to 74,000 more eligible students will apply for the program by May 2023 ([TEA, 2022b, p. 11](#)).

Medically fragile students are an exception to the waitlist. Because Gov. Abbott designated ESSER III funds specifically for medically fragile students, SSES+ has sufficient funding to offer \$5,000 to each of the 2,644 qualifying students¹ ([TEA, n.d.-j](#); [TEA, n.d.-k](#)). SSES+ launched in August 2022.

To ensure funds are spent before they expire, participants must complete the following in a timely manner after they are accepted to the program:

- within 30 days, they must complete their account activation by logging into the account and signing the parental affidavit form, and
- within 6 months, they must begin spending funds ([TEA, n.d.-c](#); [TEA, n.d.-d](#)).

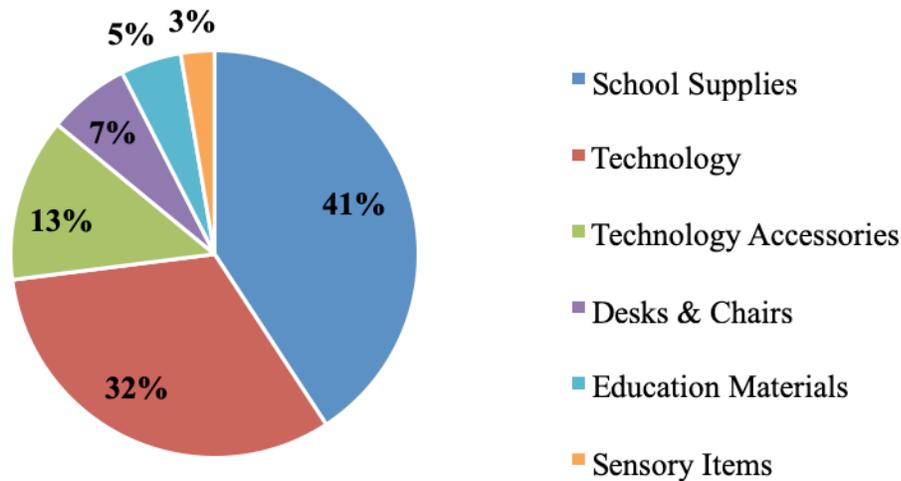
If families do not complete these requirements, funds are reclaimed and awarded to waitlisted applicants.

Student Application

SSES is a first-come, first-served grant; families apply to the program on a rolling basis through TEA's online portal ([TEA, n.d.-e](#); [TEA, n.d.-c](#)). Application submission is confirmed immediately by email, with a note that the student has been placed on a waitlist. TEA reviews applications in the order submitted, notifies applicants of their eligibility, and offers an estimate on how long the current process will take. When funding is available, eligible applicants are contacted with instructions regarding how to access a ClassWallet account to purchase goods and services ([TEA, n.d.-f](#)). ESC 10 provides direct support to help families

¹ The TEA Grant Opportunities webpage (<https://tea4avalonzo.tea.state.tx.us/GrantOpportunities/forms/GrantProgramSearch.aspx>) offers additional detailed grant information but limited search functionality. Search linked webpage for text: "2021-2024 Supplemental Special Education Services."

Figure 1
Categories of Goods Purchased with SSES Revenue



Note. Data from Monitor SB 1716, by TEA, 2022b (<https://www.texaspolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TEA-SSES-Monitoring-SB-1716-07-22-22.pdf>).

understand the goods and services available to them, such as by publishing a video introduction ([Region 10 ESC, 2022](#)).

Account applications have been higher than projected, with 113,019 applications submitted by November 2022 (TEA, personal communication, November 30, 2022). Of these, 90,500 (80%) applications were deemed eligible for an account. Current funding can support 72,600 student accounts and 65,045 students (72% of total applicants) have received an account, and 17,900 students were waitlisted as of November 2022 (TEA, personal communication, November 30, 2022). The remaining applicants were denied and may appeal by offering documentation demonstrating eligibility.

Expenditures

SSES families do not need to pay upfront or out of pocket for eligible expenses. Rather, ClassWallet transfers funds from TEA to the vendors or service providers, thereby ensuring that funds are expended on goods and services that will have a direct educational benefit to the student (TEA, n.d.-b; [Region 10 ESC, 2022](#)). Before families receive access to supplemental items, all purchase requests must be reviewed and approved by ESC 10 staff (TEA, n.d.-b). ESC 10's Special Education Information Center (SPEDTex) provides customer service to families, reviews thousands of orders per week, approves orders, and resolves problems as needed. Purchase requests are typically approved within 2

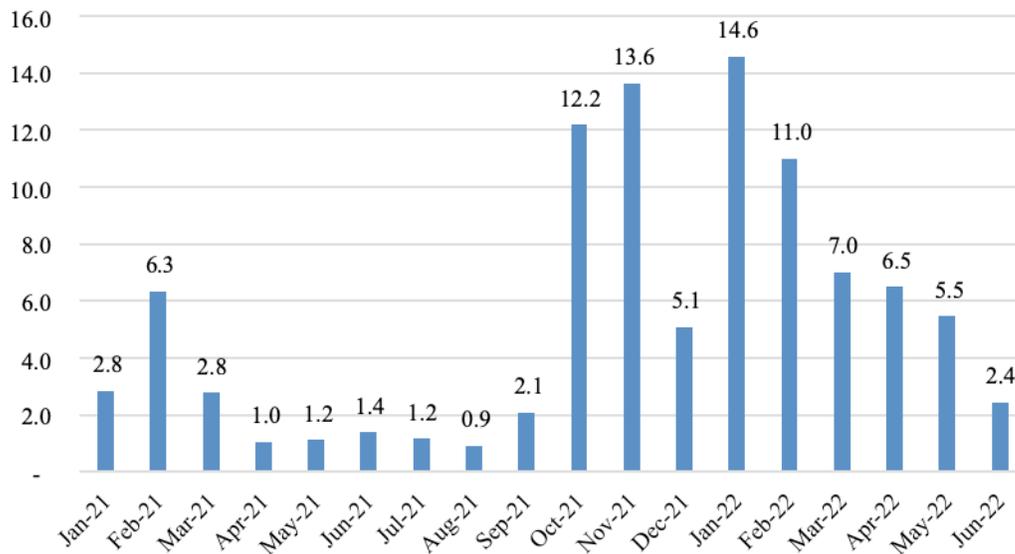
to 3 days; if one is declined, ESC 10 staff suggest an alternate item to help meet a child's needs.

SSES funds may be used to purchase material goods that help the student achieve their academic or curricular goals ([ClassWallet, n.d.-a](#)). Technology hardware is the most common purchase. Certain limits apply; for example, funds may be used to purchase only one tablet, and furniture cannot exceed specified amounts. Funds may also be used to purchase services that provide a direct educational benefit, such as tutoring or speech therapy. Because services must provide a direct *educational* benefit, families cannot use funds for daycare, legal, or evaluation services (TEA, n.d.-b). **Figure 1** summarizes the types of material goods that are usually purchased. Almost 99% of marketplace orders are for material goods ([TEA, 2022b p. 7](#)).

TEA publicly lists service providers, which are also available to families in their SSES portal (TEA, n.d.-g; [Region 10 ESC, 2022](#)). ClassWallet allows families to filter the list of vendors based on the type of good or service; the search feature can be improved, as discussed in the *Recommendations* section. Although these numbers frequently change, there are currently 977 total service providers, consisting of 361 tutors, 478 therapists, and 138 specialized service providers (TEA, 2022b, p. 8). If a service provider is not listed, parents may contact SSES staff to determine the provider's eligibility (TEA, n.d.-b). Because of the unique needs of each special education student, parents may justify uncommon purchase

Figure 2

SSES Applications Submitted from Jan 2021 to May 2022, in thousands



Note. Data from Monitor SB 1716, by TEA, 2022b (<https://www.texaspolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TEA-SSES-Monitoring-SB-1716-07-22-22.pdf>).

requests by providing their student's IEP and explaining the educational benefit and goal of the purchase. Upon reviewing such a request, ESC 10 communicates with the family and may approve the request.

Educator Application

Educators who seek to offer services to SSES students apply through a two-step process in which they first submit information about themselves, the services they provide, current credentials, and a service agreement ([ClassWallet, n.d.-b](#)). In the agreement, applicants are notified of expenditure guidelines and required to certify that:

- their licenses are valid and current,
- facility health and safety standards are maintained,
- insurance policies are up to date, and
- background checks will be completed ([TEA, n.d.-h](#)).

Program Impact

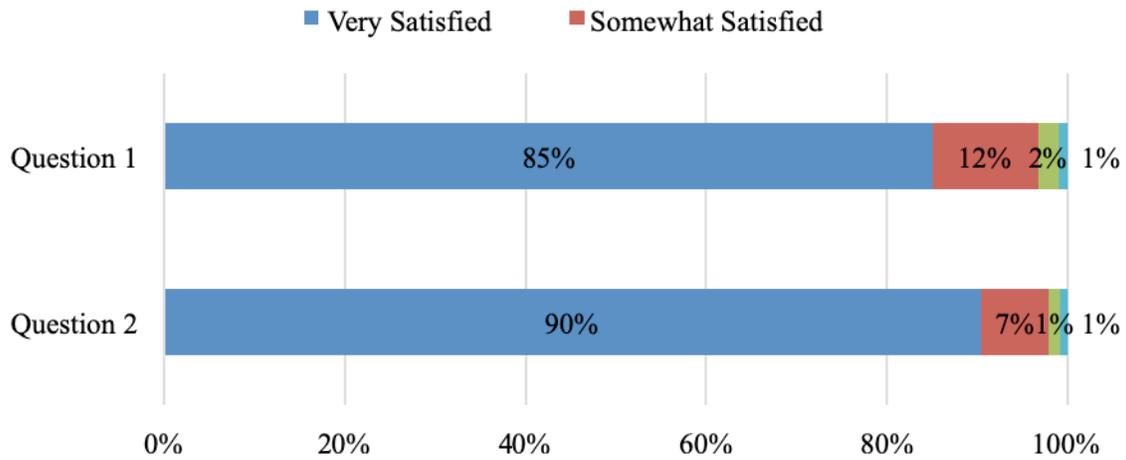
Family Demand and Feedback

As mentioned above, SSES demand is high: with 113,019 applications submitted by November 2022 (TEA, personal communication, November 30, 2022). Current funding can support 72,600 student accounts and 65,045 students (72% of total applicants) have received an account, and 17,900 students were waitlisted (TEA, personal communication,

November 30, 2022). All appropriated funds were allocated to students by April 14, 2022. Since that date, all submitted applications have been waitlisted, except for those of medically fragile students, whose accounts will be funded with federal ESSER III revenue. TEA projects that 48,000 to 74,000 more eligible students will apply for the program by May 2023 ([TEA, 2022b, p. 11](#)). **Figure 2** illustrates the number of applications received each month of the program's operation. The significant increase from September 2021 to January 2022 was largely caused by pent-up family demand, which began to be released when SB 1716 expanded SSES student eligibility. Moreover, TEA and school system leaders communicated program availability to parents, also increasing the number of applicants. However, it is difficult to conclude the cause for declining applications each spring and summer; perhaps other school activities or the presence of a waitlist is slowing the rate of applications.

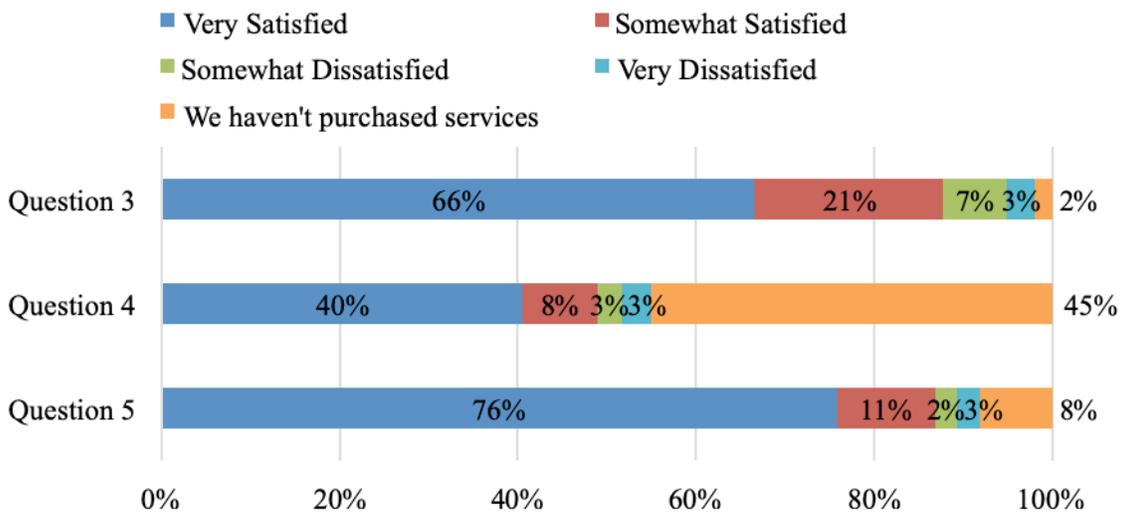
SSES families reported high levels of satisfaction in a spring 2022 ESC 10 survey (TEA, personal communication, April 27, 2022). **Notably, 97% of families reported that the goods or services helped their child meet their learning goals.** Detailed results for the five questions are illustrated in **Figures 3 and 4**.

Figure 3
Family Satisfaction with SSES, Survey Questions 1-2 (Spring 2022)



Note. Data from TEA, personal communication, April 27, 2022.

Figure 4
Family Satisfaction with SSES, Survey Questions 3-5 (Spring 2022)



Note. Data from TEA, personal communication, April 27, 2022.

- **Question 1:** It was easy to apply for this grant.
- **Question 2:** The goods and/or services I purchased through this grant have helped my child(ren) progress toward learning goals.
- **Question 3:** The process for purchasing goods (such as a computer or sensory material) through ClassWallet marketplace was easy.
- **Question 4:** The process for purchasing services (such as therapy and tutoring) through ClassWallet marketplace was easy.
- **Question 5:** I am happy with the level of customer service I have received.

Material Goods

As **Figure 1** illustrates, most families purchased goods such as school supplies and technological hardware. Educators, school leaders, and SSES families explained that hardware and computer applications have a high upfront and low ongoing cost. As such, educational apps offer the greatest benefit because SSES is a one-time grant in which 70% of participating families have a household income of less than \$47,638 for a family of four.

For example, families that sought ongoing instructional services, such as for dyslexia, found that SSES funds would pay for about 10% of services needed over one academic year (Dyslexia School of Houston, personal communication, June 2022). As a result, educators and school system leaders guided families to hardware, which provide access to educational apps like Lexia, which is made by Rosetta Stone. The app offers a personalized approach to literacy through computer-adaptive learning. An internal study of Lexia's effect on students receiving special education support found that the app increased the percent of reading-proficient students from 12% to 32% in one school year ([Hurwitz & Vanacore, 2020](#)).

Families Empowered, a non-profit that connects families with educational opportunities, affirmed that hardware and apps are life-changing tools, especially for low-income students receiving special education support (Families Empowered, personal communication, March 11, 2022). In ESC 10's spring 2022 survey of families who participated in the SSES program, many parents expressed gratitude for the opportunity to purchase material goods. Three examples are highlighted here.

- “My child is low functioning autism and I really didn't think he would have any kind of future other than being placed in a supported living situation... His behavior in school has significantly improved and his attention and focus to his seated work activity it's now up to 45 minutes compared to 5 to 10 minutes per previous levels! His reading skills have improved from a second grade level to a fourth grade level!”
- “This program has allowed me to purchase many supplies and workbooks that will allow me and my son to work toward his educational goals at home. We are able to work together at a great pace and ensure that he will understand each lesson fully.”
- “We are so incredibly grateful that we were allowed to be part of this program. I now have wonderful tools

“I appreciated all the notices I received about making my purchases on time so I wouldn't miss out on the grant ... Thank you for allowing my son to receive many wonderful learning aids that we could not have afforded otherwise”

- A parent whose child received an SSES grant (ESC Region 10, personal communication, April 27, 2022).

that are fun and educational for my son... The selection was vast and I was easily able to pick out items that interest my son. My deepest thanks!”

- “The goods I purchased allowed my non-verbal autistic daughter an opportunity to keep pace with her IEP goals at home and she won't need ESY services this year.”
- “The SSES program was extremely beneficial. It made it possible to get my child the learning materials needed to bridge the gap between school and at home learning.” (ESC Region 10, personal communication, April 27, 2022; [Texas Public Policy Foundation, 2022](#))

Recommendations

TEA and ESC 10 established SSES as a strong parent-directed spending program serving 75,000 students with a 97% satisfaction rate. The following recommendations could build on this success by further improving the program:

1. **Continued funding:** At the current application rate, TEA anticipates a waitlist of 50,000 to 79,000 students by May 2023. To address the learning needs of these special education students, the Legislature should continue to fund the SSES program.
2. **Annual application:** A first-come, first-served application results in indefinite waitlist time. We recommend an annual application cycle with fixed application and acceptance dates.
3. **Service availability:** Surveyed parents pointed to the need for an efficient process to approve more qualified educators and vendors, robust search tools to find

educators and vendors, and more time to use services before funds expire. For example, surveyed parents wrote about the following topics.

- a. *Fund expiration and local availability.* “It was too difficult and too short a time period to use SSES for services like tutoring or therapy. Those services usually have a long waiting list and then to make it an even longer process the vendor would need to be approved to be paid. I felt like these services would have been the best use for the SSES funds but I could not find an already approved vendor in my area nor anyone who was able to add my child to their program. This was very frustrating.”
- b. *Service provider application.* “Everything was great, but only thing: it was hard for the tutor that my son used to apply. So much paperwork and taxes for them. We ended paying her out of pocket.

Hopefully an easier system for us to pay them would be helpful. Many people and schools are not on the list of vendors. Thanks for the grant! Very much appreciated! I was able to purchase educational and sensory items that helped make my sons learning process go smoother.”

- c. *Availability of goods.* “Maybe have more suppliers on the network since my purchase orders kept being rejected since by the time the order was processed, the supplier would run out of stock. I kept trying until one purchase order finally got through.”
4. **Academic Impact:** Due in part to the novelty of the program, comprehensive educational outcomes are lacking. It would be helpful for TEA to disaggregate applicable assessment results for SSES students to serve as an indicator of outcomes going forward. ★

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Michael Barba is the policy director of K-12 education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. His work is focused upon education because it provides our children with economic, civic, and moral benefits: a good education offers students a path to prosperous work, teaches students why and how they must care for their neighbor, and gives students practice in the virtues that allow them to attain lifelong freedom and happiness.

Previously, Michael served as a specialist on the System of Great Schools (SGS) team at the Texas Education Agency where he helped visionary school district leaders understand and deliver the schools that their families want, need, and deserve. Nineteen districts enrolling 525,000 students currently participate in the SGS Network. Michael has also served as the Associate Policy Director for the Catholic bishops of Texas, whom he represented before the state legislature and administrative agencies. Born and raised in El Paso, he completed his undergraduate and graduate education in political philosophy at the University of Dallas.



Anthony Jones was a policy scholar at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. In this role, he conducted research on public policy issues related to education and workforce development; assisted in academic publication; educated lawmakers and members of the public on Foundation research; and provided formal testimony to local, state, and federal entities. Prior to this position, Jones completed internships at both the Heritage Foundation and the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Born and raised in Fairfax, Virginia, Jones graduated from Wyoming Catholic College with a B.A. in liberal arts. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Public Policy and Administration at Baylor University.

About Texas Public Policy Foundation

The Texas Public Policy Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit, non-partisan research institute. The Foundation promotes and defends liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise in Texas and the nation by educating and affecting policymakers and the Texas public policy debate with academically sound research and outreach.

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