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IOWA AREA EDUCATION AGENCY SYSTEM EFFICIENCY STUDY

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Research, Development and Engagement to Improve Education

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to analyze the efficiency of services Iowa's Area Education Agencies (AEAs) provide districts they serve. Additionally, the value of services provided by AEAs was explored. The information presented in this report is intended to help support AEAs decision making regarding continued efforts to be effective collaborative partners with Iowa school districts.

Evaluation Questions

The following questions were explored through the study:

1. What are current cost-savings provided by the AEA system?
2. What value does the AEA system provide Iowa districts?
 - a. What is the professional learning value of the AEAs to districts?
 - b. What is the media services value of the AEAs to districts?
 - c. What is the special education value of the AEAs to districts?
3. What are potential areas of additional efficiency within the AEA system?

Summary of Methods

The study employed review of extant data, focus groups with AEA directors, and a review of services provided to a random sample of Iowa school districts, stratified by AEA and district size.

Summary of Results

Question 1: What are current cost-savings provided by the AEA system?

- *Finding 1:* Accurate due process practices are supported through the AEA system.
- *Finding 2:* The AEA system provides specialized and up to date expertise that can be difficult to find at the district level.
- *Finding 3:* The AEA system efficiently and equitably meets low incidence service needs.
- *Finding 4:* High-quality, targeted professional learning opportunities are provided by the AEA system.
- *Finding 5:* The AEA system provides supports for administrative efficiencies.
- *Finding 6:* Districts save money through the bulk purchasing power of the AEA system.

Question 2: What value does the AEA system provide Iowa districts?

2A. What is the special education value of the AEAs to districts?

- *Finding 1:* The cost of staffing consistent special education services provided by AEAs would range from about \$930,558 per year to \$6,769,817 per district, depending on district size. This only accounts for the cost of hired staff salary and benefits.
- *Finding 2:* Most special education services provided by the AEA system are shared between Iowa districts to provide equity and efficiency. Replicating those services in an individual district would be nearly impossible to do without forming collaborative partnerships.
- *Finding 3:* Shared administration of specialized professional learning and compliance-related forms, such as the IEP, provide equity and efficiency in the system.

2B. What is the professional learning value of the AEAs to districts?

- *Finding 1:* Efficiency and equity provided by the AEAs in the area of professional learning saves school districts a projected \$2,575 to \$58,270 per year, depending on district size.
- *Finding 2:* Professional learning provided by AEAs is aligned with state priorities.
- *Finding 3:* Professional learning provided by AEAs is specialized in nature.
- *Finding 4:* Professional learning provided by AEAs meets administrative and technical needs.

2C. What is the value of the AEA Media Services to districts?

- *Finding 1:* AEA Learning Online provides significant cost-savings to Iowa districts through a collaborative and statewide model.
- *Finding 2:* AEA purchasing allows the small districts in Iowa bulk purchasing power.
- *Finding 3:* Online library services are heavily accessed and would likely not be feasible for all districts to provide without the purchasing power of the AEA system.
- *Finding 4:* Van delivery service is a highly-valued service provided by the AEA system.

2: Summary

- *Finding 1:* Districts would likely spend between \$1,107,875 and \$7,080,123 to replicate special education and professional learning staff services, depending on district size. This does not account for materials and efficiencies (e.g. IEP system and forms) that would need to be replicated by each district without the AEA system.

Question 3: What are potential areas of additional efficiency within the AEA system?

- *Finding 1:* AEAs continue to explore and build upon efficiencies in the system.
- *Finding 2:* Efficiencies currently in the system may be able to be expanded.

Summary of Recommendations

Three recommendations are provided for consideration by the AEA system.

Recommendation 1: Communicate results of the study with stakeholder groups.

The summary of efficiencies described in this report likely include information to which stakeholders are not attentive. It is recommended that the AEA system identify simple and clear ways to share these results with applicable stakeholders.

Recommendation 2: Expand the use of briefs, such as the AEA Learning Online Profile of Savings into other areas of AEA service.

Given the perception that AEA efficiencies are not well-understood by stakeholders, briefs such as the Profile of Savings developed by AEA Learning Online will be useful if developed to describe other areas of efficiency described in this report. Briefs for services such as low incidence special education services, professional learning services, AEA Online Library services, and administrative efficiencies, may be beneficial to promote better understanding of these services.

Recommendation 3: Identify and prioritize additional areas of future efficiency.

Throughout focus groups, additional areas of efficiency being explored by AEAs were shared. The AEA system should consider developing clear and concise communication about those additional areas of efficiency to share with stakeholders. Additionally, the AEA system should consider continuing to identify areas of increased efficiency. It is recommended that stakeholder input be used to support the identification and prioritization of the implementation of future efficiencies.

Introduction

In 2016-2017, 481,588 students were enrolled in K-12 public schools in Iowa. Overall, 12.08% of those students were identified as having a disability. When early childhood programming is included, 510,932 students were enrolled in PK-12 public programs in Iowa. Districts range in size, with enrollments ranging from under 100 to over 30,000. In many states, smaller districts in rural areas form consortia, where they pool funding to ensure all students have access to required services. In Iowa, AEAs were established through legislation in 1974 to ensure equitable access to educational services for all learners birth through age 21. They partner with districts, families, and other organizations to support learner success. Iowa's AEAs serve every student, teacher, and administrator across the state. They provide services across curriculum, media, and special education.

Iowa's AEA system is described in Iowa Administrative Code 281, Chapter 72. The system provides leadership and equitable services for school improvement to enable every learner to perform at higher education levels (281-72.1). AEAs are required to provide services in nine standards areas in order to maintain accreditation. These standard areas include:

1. School-Community Planning
2. Professional Development
3. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment services in the areas of reading, language arts, mathematics, and science.
4. Diverse learners
5. Multicultural, gender-fair
6. Media services
7. Effective instruction through technology
8. Leadership
9. Management services (if requested)

While the scope of AEA system supports is broad, their funding is focused largely on providing equitable and high-quality special education services and supports. According to the AEA Chiefs, 76% of AEA funding is appropriated to special education. Fifteen percent of funding is appropriated toward educational services and professional development. A large focus of AEA services are to ensure equitable special education services.

Purpose of the Efficiency Study

The AEAs requested a study to evaluate efficiency and value of services provided to school districts in Iowa. The study was conducted between September and November, 2017, and intended audiences for the information are AEAs and critical stakeholders. The findings presented in this report are intended to help support AEAs decision making regarding continued efforts to be effective collaborative partners with Iowa school districts.

The following evaluation questions guided the study:

1. What are current cost savings provided by the AEA system?
2. What value does the AEA system provide Iowa districts?
 - a. What is the special education value of the AEAs to districts?
 - b. What is the professional learning value of the AEAs to districts?
 - c. What is the media services value of the AEAs to districts?
3. What are potential areas of additional efficiency within the AEA system?

This report summarizes the results and findings for each evaluation question.

Methods

CAREI's researchers used a mixed-methods approach for collecting and analyzing data including a review of extant data from various sized districts across the state, and semi-structured focus groups. A description of each data source is provided below.

Extant Data Review

Various forms of existing data, provided by the AEAs, were analyzed to answer study questions. Additionally, some data were obtained using Iowa's public data resources. Extant data were analyzed in the following areas:

- Professional learning
- AEA staff roles
- Media services
- AEA staff salary
- District demographic information

Professional Learning

Information was collected from each AEA regarding regular professional learning provided. Specifically, AEAs provided information about the number of courses offered and the total number of credits earned through coursework.

Focus Groups

Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted as part of the study. The focus groups were used to gather information across the AEA system about services provided and to clarify questions regarding data submitted as part of the efficiency study, in addition to current and potential areas of efficiency. Focus groups, with 41 total participants, were conducted with:

- AEA Chief Administrators
- AEA Educational Services Directors
- AEA Media Directors
- AEA Special Education Directors

District Sample

A stratified random sample, based on district size and AEA location, was used to select districts for participation in the study. Iowa districts and their sizes were acquired through the 2016 Iowa Condition of Education Report (Iowa Department of Education, 2017). Five district size categories were used to select schools to include in the study. A stratified random sample of 15 schools (three schools in each of the five categories) is shown in Table 1. Each of Iowa's nine AEAs have either one or two schools represented in the sample. The total number of districts in the state that have enrollment falling within each size category is also depicted in the table.

Table 1: *Random sample of schools by district size and AEA.*

District Size Categories	Number of Districts	Keystone	Prairie Lakes	Central Rivers	Mississippi Bend	Grant Wood	Heartland	Northwest	Green Hills	Great Prairie
Fewer than 600	141	X	X	X						
600 – 999	82		X	X	X					
1000 – 2499	77						X		X	X
2500 – 7499	22					X	X			X
7500 or more	11					X		X	X	

Results

Question 1: What are current cost-savings provided by the AEA system?

This question examined the current ways that the AEA system provides cost-savings to Iowa districts. To address the question, CAREI reviewed information about service costs and conducted focus groups with AEA directors regarding services provided. The analysis included considerations regarding costs that would be incurred by Iowa districts should they not receive services from AEAs.

The current study was not intended to provide a list of all services provided by the AEA system. Through focus groups and a review of extant information, several themes emerged as areas of cost-savings provided by the AEA system to member districts. Those benefits are listed below. Following is a description of each benefit with supporting information.

- A. Due process supports
- B. Access to specialized service and expertise
- C. Low incidence special education services
- D. High-quality, targeted professional learning opportunities
- E. Administrative efficiencies
- F. Bulk purchasing power

Due Process Supports

AEAs provide districts with supports to ensure they meet due process requirements. Special education law is constantly changing through regulation changes, updated guidance from federal and state governments, and court decisions. Staying on top of due process changes is a key function of the AEA system. They provide support by attending frequent meetings with state officials, summarizing due process changes to districts, and supporting implementation of the nuances of special education law. They serve as a day to day resource around the multitude of due process questions and issues that arise in districts. Without this regular, high-quality support, it is possible that due process complaints would increase in Iowa schools. The federal government requires annual data to be reported related to due process complaints and mediation. Those data indicate that in 2014-2015, the most recent year for which data were located, Iowa had one of the lowest per capita complaints and mediations of all states and territories (CADRE, 2016). Of the 62 states and entities for which data were reported, Iowa was the 13th lowest in terms of complaints and mediations. Also, in 2014, 85.61% of mediations held in Iowa resulted in mediation agreements and 50% of hearing requests that went to resolution session were resolved through resolution session settlement agreements. With attorney fees and staff time, mediation and complaints are costly. The supports provided by the AEA system to minimize due process legal issues has the potential to save Iowa districts considerable amounts of time and money.

Access to specialized service and expertise

We are in an era where schools need increasing expertise to solve unique problems they face. The AEA system provides specialized and up to date expertise that can be difficult to find at the district level. Iowa district staff regularly contact their local AEA with unique situations. They benefit from AEA staff that regularly interact with other districts and attend learning opportunities with other educational experts across the state.

In addition to up-to-date expertise, the AEA system provides specialized service that would be unlikely to be replicated in the vast majority of Iowa districts. For instance, each Iowa district has access to Challenging Behavior and Autism teams within their AEAs. These staff have highly-specialized training that allow them to support schools in being successful with students with the most challenging social-emotional needs. Many of these providers have national certifications in evidence-based behavioral practices.

Low incidence special education services

Low incidence services are those where the percentage of students with disabilities needing those services is extremely low. Staffing in low-incidence special education services is challenging for even the AEA system to meet at all times. These services include staff such as Teachers of the Visually Impaired and Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. When a district enrolls a student who is blind or hearing-impaired, they are required, by Iowa and federal law, to serve the student immediately. The AEA system has staff members in each of the low incidence areas on hand to serve schools on an as-needed basis. If provided on their own, Iowa schools would be required to post and hire for these positions when needed. As they are extremely hard-to-fill, and may not be needed on a full-time basis, many districts may be required to contract for these services, which results in significantly higher costs. The AEA system is able to both keep costs down, as well as ensure equitable service to meet these needs.

High-quality, targeted professional learning opportunities

Staff in schools are lifelong learners. Through membership in the AEA system, Iowa schools benefit from targeted, specialized, and diverse learning opportunities. Should districts provide all learning opportunities, the scope and depth of available learning may be impossible to replicate. Additionally, due to AEA collaboration, costs for similar professional learning opportunities are significantly lowered. AEAs have developed areas of expertise related to professional learning and work to ensure that staff in districts across Iowa have access to that expertise. For example, one AEA has an annual educational technology conference that district staff from across the state attend.

Administrative Efficiencies

Iowa's AEAs provide support for administrative efficiencies. This includes efficiencies

related to special education due process, communications, budgeting, and more. Some examples include:

- **Budget support.** AEAs provide support for district business managers to complete accurate and timely budgets.
- **Internet.** Some AEAs provide bandwidth for local, rural districts.
- **Special Education due process.** The common IEP system, forms, and procedure manual creates a large time and resource savings.
- **AEA Learning Online.** Having one sign in for all online courses across the state allows district staff access to more learning opportunities than they would have on their own, or with only one AEA.
- **Print Production.** Having access to printing and design services in one location saves districts both time and money.
- **Communications support.** When districts have media needs, or need to develop communication related to a sensitive matter, AEAs provide support through their communications departments.
- **Administrative vacancies.** AEAs provide support for administrative vacancies when they arise. For instance, AEAs have met district's needs for business managers and superintendents in both temporary and more permanent situations.

Bulk purchasing power

The fact that the AEA system includes all Iowa schools allows for powerful bulk purchasing opportunities that would be impossible to replicate by each individual district, or even a consortia of a portion of Iowa districts. Specific areas of bulk purchasing are described later in this report, but the size differences in Iowa schools would lead to inequities in purchasing price for many regular supplies. The AEA bulk purchasing capabilities are essential to provide equity across schools of all sizes.

Question 1 Findings

- *Finding 1:* Accurate due process practices are supported through the AEA system.
- *Finding 2:* The AEA system provides specialized and up to date expertise than can be difficult to find at the district level.
- *Finding 3:* The AEA system efficiently and equitably meets low incidence service needs.
- *Finding 4:* high-quality, targeted professional learning opportunities are provided by the AEA system.
- *Finding 5:* The AEA system provides supports for administrative efficiencies.
- *Finding 6:* Districts save money through the bulk purchasing power of the AEA system.

Question 2: What value does the AEA system provide Iowa districts?

This question explores the value provided to Iowa districts from the AEA system through three sub-questions, each exploring one legislated aspect of Iowa's AEAs. Those sub-questions include:

Question 2a: What is the special education value of the AEAs to districts?

Question 2b: What is the professional learning value of the AEAs to districts?

Question 2c: What is the media services value of the AEAs to districts?

To analyze the value of AEA services to districts, three methods were primarily used. First, extant data regarding services provided were reported and analyzed. Second, randomly sampled districts were used to estimate services provided by AEAs, as well as the cost for those services. Last, AEA directors were interviewed in a focus group manner, to describe services provided.

Results related to each question above are described below.

2A. Special Education

This section provides an analysis of projected expenditures for Iowa districts to provide special education services currently provided by the AEAs, as well as a description of services for which an analysis of cost was not able to be performed within the scope of this study.

Cost of Providing Special Education Services

Several considerations need to be made when determining the costs of providing special education services, as it will differ across Iowa districts. These considerations fall into three broad categories. First, there are common services that are able to be estimated. Second, there are services that will vary across Iowa districts over time making it difficult to calculate accurate projections for each district. Third, there are considerations that apply to some Iowa districts, but not all districts. Each will be described below.

Common Costs Applicable to All Schools

There are some services that are consistent services provided within special education that can be estimated for all schools in Iowa. These estimates were developed using information provided regarding service ratios for randomly sampled districts, described later in this chapter. In addition, information regarding AEA staff salaries was used. For certified staff, this projection is based on the median position in the MA+30 column of the AEA salary schedule of certified staff. After a median was calculated for each AEA, a median was computed for the entire AEA system. That salary projection was used for staffing analyses throughout this report. For leadership and classified positions, the median salary across AEAs was also used. For all staffing calculations, a benefits estimate of 37.3% was added to the salary, based upon most recent averages reported

by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017).

Table 2 depicts anticipated special education staffing costs, including positions within the areas of leadership, consistent special education services, as-needed special education services, Early Access services, Early Childhood services, and secretarial/administrative services. Within the AEA system, these positions are often shared between districts within the AEA. For instance, a school psychologist may serve 2 or 3 districts through their 1.0 FTE position. To develop the anticipated staffing needs, current AEA staffing for each of the randomly-selected districts was used. To account for hiring constraints, all positions were either anticipated as .0 or .5 FTE positions. Current FTE that were not at a .0 or .5 were rounded up, with the expectation that it would not be feasible for districts to recruit a .15 or a .60 position.

Consistent special education staff roles include:

- Audiologist
- Audiometrist
- Regional administrators
- Early ACCESS coordinators
- Early Childhood Consultants
- Occupational Therapist
- Physical Therapist
- School Social Workers
- School Psychologists
- Secretaries/Administrative staff
- Special Education Consultants
- Speech-Language Pathologist

Table 2: *Anticipated Special Education staffing needs and projected costs if hired by districts.*

District Size	Anticipated Special Education Staffing Needs	Projected Staffing Costs if Hired by Districts
Fewer than 600	10.5 FTE	\$930,558
600 – 999	11.5 FTE	\$1,019,217
1000 – 2499	16 FTE	\$1,418,182
2500 – 7499	30.5 FTE	\$2,731,289
7500 or more	77 FTE	\$6,769,817

It is important to note that these numbers represent averaged needs, as needs vary across school districts. Additionally, AEAs report shortages of properly licensed and highly-specialized low incidence staff. This will directly impact districts attempting to hire those staff in rural areas and/or in less than a 1.0 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) capacity.

AEA Directors also indicated that other challenges in hiring and retaining staff are ongoing. For example, it is sometimes hard to find expert staff that are willing to travel to more rural locations within the AEAs, even in more centrally-located AEAs.

Because of these hiring difficulties, some districts in Iowa would be required to contract with for-profit companies to ensure legally-required services are provided to all students. The AEA system did an analysis of rates for these services in December of 2016. For some of the consistent special education positions listed above (Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Speech-Language Pathologists, and School Psychologists), salaries range from \$50 to \$75 per hour. Assuming a 260-day contract, with 8 hour days, this will result in an annual cost of between \$104,000 to \$156,000 for each 1.0 FTE staff member hired. The advantages to these services are that districts would be able to contract only the service level needed at a given time. The disadvantage is that the salary incurred is much more than the AEA or district contract salaries. Additionally, many positions currently provided through the AEA system, including Special Education Consultants and School Social Workers, may not be available through these contracting companies. Table 3 compares the current estimated AEA cost of salary and benefits given the sample districts' staffing to the cost of contracting those services through contracting companies.

Table 3: *Projected costs for districts to provide some special education services via contracting companies.*

District Size	Current Median FTE ¹	Estimated AEA Salary and Benefits ²	Projected Contracting Cost ³
Fewer than 600	1.71	\$151,606	\$226,746
600 – 999	2.34	\$207,461	\$310,284
1000 – 2499	2.85	\$252,677	\$377,910
2500 – 7499	13.93	\$1,235,016	\$1,847,118
7500 or more	35.8	\$3,173,982	\$4,747,080

¹OT, PT, SLP, School Psychologists (combined with Consultants and SSW for this analysis)

²Used median of all AEA salary schedules, plus 37.3% benefit estimate.

³Used median of price ranges across all agencies.

When hiring these services via contractors, in every size category, the service is more expensive than hiring through the district. However, when shortages exist, or very small percentages of staff are needed, contracted services may be necessary without the efficiency of the AEA system.

In addition to the regular staffing costs outlined in Table 2 and Table 3, there are a number of other regular administrative costs currently paid for by the AEA system. These would also need to be accounted for in a district special education budget should they not be provided by the AEA. Some examples include:

- **Supplies.** Special education staff require specialized materials to provide required services. Test kits, student materials, and other specific materials that

are necessary for professionals to do their work are currently provided by the AEAs.

- **IEP system.** The AEAs support a common IEP system, containing all federal and state required forms.
- **Special education data management.** The AEAs enter and monitor the accuracy and timeliness of all required special education data reporting.

Variable Services

Iowa's AEAs also provide special education services that are highly-specialized and not always needed in a single district. Some services will be required by all schools, but at different rates and at different times. These legally-required positions are required to be available immediately upon student need. Because of the variability of need, a single AEA can hire a low number of FTE in these roles, and they can be shared amongst districts on an as-needed basis. The list below includes a sample of services provided by AEAs that are generally considered to be "as needed" services. They are available when districts need them, but a district, especially smaller districts, may not have needs for the services at all times. These positions include, but are not limited to:

- Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Teacher of the Visually Impaired
- Assistive Technology
- Technology Integration
- Challenging Behavior and Autism Consultant
- Assessment Consultant
- Special Education Coach
- Nurse Consultant
- Transition specialist
- Orientation and mobility specialist
- Positive Behavior Intervention and Support consultant
- MANDT trainers
- Family/Educator partner
- Adaptive Physical Education

Each district across the state would need to budget significant funds toward hiring these positions when needed. Depending on district size, it is anticipated that districts may need to plan for between 2 and 14 FTE for these types of positions, costing an estimated \$177,317 to \$1,241,222.

Costs Applicable to Some Iowa Schools

Some costs related to special education are only applicable to districts with specific programs in their service area.

Non-Public School Services

AEAs also provide services to Iowa's 174 accredited, non-public schools. In the 2016-2017 school year, 36,429 Iowa students were enrolled in a non-public school. Staff in these schools access AEA professional learning opportunities and AEAs provide special education direct services to students in Iowa's non-public schools.

Juvenile Detention Centers

AEAs provide special education services to students served in Iowa's juvenile detention centers. Students in those centers are required to be provided with special education services when they're needed.

2A. Findings

- *Finding 1:* The cost of staffing consistent special education services provided by AEAs would range from about \$930,558 per year to \$6,769,817 per year, depending on district size. This only accounts for the cost of hired staff salary and benefits.
- *Finding 2:* Most special education services provided by the AEA system are shared between Iowa districts to provide equity and efficiency. Replicating those services in an individual district would be nearly impossible to do without forming collaborative partnerships.
- *Finding 3:* Shared administration of specialized professional learning and compliance-related forms, such as the IEP, provide equity and efficiency in the system.

2B. Professional Learning

AEAs offered an average of 225 face to face courses in the 2016-2017 school year. This does not include the online learning that will be described later in this chapter, or the many district-specific professional learning requests fulfilled throughout the year. Value for professional learning is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. In this section, the quantitative value of professional learning provided to sampled districts will be described. Qualitatively, professional learning is aligned with state priorities, specialized in nature, and meets administrative and technical needs in Iowa schools.

Sampled Districts

Professional learning value was calculated for sampled districts through analysis of courses provided to districts of various sizes. Sampled districts accessed professional learning from the AEA system at various levels. Table 4 shows professional learning courses completed and credits earned in sampled districts.

Table 4: *Professional learning provided to sampled districts.*

District Size	Median Credits Earned	Median Number of Courses Completed	Median Hours of on-site learning
Fewer than 600	3*	3*	44*
600 – 999	96*	19*	88*
1000 – 2499	85	33	66
2500 – 7499	300	121	545*
7500 or more	306	64	1174*

*Data were unavailable for all three randomly sampled districts. Data reflect the average of two districts' data or the actual data for at least one district in the size category.

The number of courses completed and credits earned demonstrate the amount of professional learning that AEAs provide that contributes toward educators' advanced learning and support continued licensure. In general, larger districts utilize more professional learning from the AEA system than smaller districts.

In cases where professional learning was obtained from the AEA, the estimated cost of the professional learning provided was based on the comparative cost used by AEA Learning Online. For each credit earned, \$1000 is the estimated cost to the district to provide that training without the consolidated service. Cost of the on-site learning is included in the staffing estimates in another section of this analysis. Estimated professional learning costs for providing learning is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: *Estimated professional learning costs by credits earned by district size.*

District Size	Estimated Cost by Credits Earned	Median Statewide Trainings Taken	Median Savings	Total Anticipated Cost
Fewer than 600	\$3,000	103	\$2,575	\$5,575
600 – 999	\$96,000	180	\$4,500	\$100,500
1000 – 2499	\$85,000	258	\$6,450	\$91,450
2500 – 7499	\$300,000	2286	\$58,270	\$358,270
7500 or more	\$306,000	502	\$12,550	\$318,550

In addition providing coursework for district employees, AEAs have staff that serve in coaching and learning roles throughout districts in the state. In sampled districts, AEAs provide a median of .47 to 3.18 FTE in learning staff in each of the district size categories. Specific professional learning staffing for sampled districts of various sizes can be found in Appendix B: Estimated Staffing Needs and Costs.

In addition to the quantitative aspects of professional learning provided by AEAs, qualitatively professional learning is aligned with state priorities, specialized in nature, and meets administrative and technical needs in Iowa schools.

Aligned with State Priorities

Iowa AEAs provide learning opportunities that align with state priorities. This ensures Iowa schools have timely access to important learning. Some examples of state priorities that are regularly supported by the AEAs through professional learning include:

- **Differentiated Accountability (DA).** Iowa AEAs offer significant support for the implementation of the state's Differentiated Accountability work. This includes offering learning sessions that align with state accountability requirements as well as on-site learning opportunities to support individual district's needs.
- **Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC).** Iowa AEAs have offered opportunities for district staff to learn from experts in educational coaching, such as Jim Knight and Diane Sweeney.
- **Early Literacy Implementation (ELI).** Iowa AEAs have offered multiple trainings to support districts in implementing the ELI legislation in an effective and efficient manner.
- **Iowa Core.** AEAs provide regular learning opportunities to support schools to implement the Iowa Core state standards.

Specialized in Nature

Iowa AEAs provide learning opportunities that are specialized to the unique needs of individual disciplines within schools. Some examples include:

- **Crisis Prevention and Intervention (CPI).** When students have social-emotional concerns, de-escalation and, rarely, restraint are needed. The AEAs each have certified trainers in CPI, and offer training to districts on an ongoing basis. The cost to become a certified CPI trainer is approximately \$4000.
- **New Staff Training.** New special education staff have a multitude of due process learning, such as how to complete IEPs, and various other special education procedures. This is in addition to the regular learning required by all new teachers to be successful. Every year, AEAs offer learning opportunities for new special education staff in Iowa schools.
- **Networking Groups.** Through membership in the AEA system, district staff have opportunities to network with staff from neighboring districts. Regular meetings organized by the AEAs, such as Curriculum Network meetings and Superintendent meetings, provide an opportunity to learn about changes in state

guidance, best practice, and evidence-based implementation of effective educational practices with district, AEA, and state-level leaders.

- **Differentiated Accountability (DA).** In addition to being a state priority, DA supports are specialized toward specific needs (currently targeted toward early literacy needs).
- **Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC).** In addition to being a state priority, TLC supports are specialized to specific coaching needs that arise in regions and districts.

Meets administrative and technical needs

AEAs support learning on technical and administrative needs, as well. For instance:

- **Power School/Infinite Campus.** AEAs provide training to local districts on some of the most common student information systems used throughout the state.
- **IEP system.** AEAs provide training related to Iowa's IEP system. The system also includes many forms and documentation for much of special education.

2B. Findings

- *Finding 1:* Efficiency and equity provided by the AEAs in the area of professional learning saves school districts a projected \$2,575 to \$58,270 per year, depending on district size.
- *Finding 2:* Professional learning provided by AEAs is aligned with state priorities.
- *Finding 3:* Professional learning provided by AEAs is specialized in nature.
- *Finding 4:* Professional learning provided by AEAs meets administrative and technical needs.

2C. Media Services

Several media services are provided to Iowa districts through the AEAs. For the purposes of this report, the services are summarized into online learning, purchasing, and library services. The value provided by these three core media services is described in this section.

Online Learning

Online learning is supported by AEAs through AEA Learning Online. This resource has two main purposes. It provides professional learning for educators and online learning for students. It contains both statewide content as well as district-developed content. Table 6 depicts statewide courses taken and savings provided by AEA Learning Online by the size of districts included in the study. These data, as well as the savings calculations, were provided by the AEA Learning Online in the form of the Profiles of Savings (2017). Overall, Iowa district staff took 196,200 trainings in the 2016-2017 year, for a total savings of \$4,905,000 (see Appendix A).

Table 6. *AEA Learning Online use for sampled districts.*

District Size	Median Statewide Trainings Taken	Median Savings
Fewer than 600	103	\$2,575
600 – 999	180	\$4,500
1000 – 2499	258	\$6,450
2500 – 7499	2286	\$58,270
7500 or more	502	\$12,550

Purchasing

AEA Purchasing is a program that provides Iowa schools with competitive pricing. It allows districts, regardless of size, to purchase at equal cost levels. Categories of purchasing services include:

- Athletics and Physical Education
- Buildings and Grounds
- Cafeteria and Kitchen Supply
- Diverse Learning
- Health Supplies
- Library
- Office and Classroom
- School Management
- Technology

Having the ability to purchase at equal costs is imperative for smaller Iowa districts. Approximately 42% of districts in Iowa have fewer than 600 enrolled students and more than 60% of Iowa districts have fewer than 1000 students. Given the small district size, a characteristic that is appreciated by Iowans, AEA purchasing of these supplies supports equity between Iowa districts of all sizes. Table 7 depicts median purchasing savings for the 16-17 school year by size category, for randomly-sampled districts included in this evaluation.

Table 7: *Purchasing savings for randomly-sampled districts*

District Size	Median Total Purchasing	Median Total Savings
Fewer than 600	\$76,008	\$14,106
600 – 999	\$169,857	\$56,706
1000 – 2499	\$166,931	\$44,298

2500 – 7499	\$155,862	\$49,302
7500 or more	\$127,859	\$34,846

Through AEA purchasing, districts can expect between about \$14,106 and \$56,706 in savings each year.

Online Library Services

Iowa AEA Online is a virtual library with access to 14 web-based resources. Table 8 shows a list and brief description of each resource.

Table 8: *AEA Online web-based resources.*

Resource	Brief Description
AEA Digital Library	Collection of digital media resources including video, images, and documents.
BookFLIX (PreK-3)	Early literacy digital resource that pairs animated stories with nonfiction ebooks on various subjects.
Britannica Online	Multi-media resource organized by grade level. Contains videos, articles, games, activities, and more.
CultureGrams	Reliable and up-to-date reports on more than 200 countries and each US state, including the history, customs, and lifestyles.
FreedomFLIX	Social studies digital resource containing units with videos, ebooks, articles and weblinks.
GALE	Screened nonfiction
iCLIPART for Schools	Stock images, photos, sounds and video
LEARN 360	Multi-media content including video, audio, articles, images, and interactive content.
ScienceFLIX	Science digital resource containing units with video, multiple text types, and hands-on projects.
SIRS Issues Researcher (9-12)	Targeted resources for student research
Soundzabound	Royalty-free music library
TeachingBooks.net	Links resources to enhance literacy and library activities to specific books and authors.
Teen Health & Wellness (7-12)	Health and wellness articles
TrueFLIX	Multi-media resource to supplement social studies and science learning.

The value of AEA online library services were measured through two sources: (1) shared purchasing of media services for districts, and (2) use of media services. A summary of statewide use for the 16-17 school year for a sample of databases is included in Table 9. Though the access varies by database, databases are a much-

used resource throughout the state with some databases having over 100,000 views, downloads, and streams to over 18 million with others.

Table 9: *Statewide online database usage.*

Online Database	Views/Downloads/Streams
Britannica	2,815,612
Teachingbooks.net	126,355
Learn 360/Infobase	230,860
iClipart for Schools	288,851
BookFlix	18,050,993
TrueFlix	4,314,452

The cost of providing these services to districts was also considered. Table 10 depicts the cost the AEA system pays for each online database with a statewide contract as well as the list price districts would incur if they purchased it individually. Across all databases, the AEA system paid 5% of the cost that would be incurred if each school district in Iowa purchased the systems alone. This is a large cost savings and it is highly likely that not all districts in Iowa would be able to support the research, acquisition, training, and ongoing communication to keep each of these separate resources. Additionally, it is highly unlikely that each district in Iowa would purchase each of these systems. Given the usage information above, this would result in less access to these resources to students and teachers in Iowa.

Table 10: *Online database cost comparison of statewide vs district-level purchase.*

Online Database	AEA Statewide Cost	Total cost if purchased* at the District-Level
BookFLIX	\$106,250	\$1,572,500
Briannica	\$155,443	\$1,421,103
CultureGrams	\$60,906	\$2,915,550
FreedomFLIX	\$106,250	\$1,572,500
Gale	\$89,000	\$3,621,280
iClipArt	\$50,000	\$2,633,400
Learn360	\$183,943	\$2,059,695
ScienceFLIX	\$106,250	\$1,572,500
SIRS	\$52,546	\$4,984,650
Soundzabound	\$9,128	\$372,438
TeachingBooks.net	\$42,570	\$781,500
Teen Health & Wellness	\$98,000	\$750,000
TrueFLIX	\$106,250	\$1,572,500
<i>Total Cost</i>	<i>\$1,334,671</i>	<i>\$25,997,751</i>

*Based on every district in Iowa purchasing the database.

Library Services

Iowa AEAs also provide traditional library services with a focus on educational needs. For instance, teachers across Iowa schools can participate in a monthly book program where a box of books is sent to them every month for their classroom library. When teachers return the box of books, they are sent a new box of age-appropriate literature. Teachers can also contact the AEA library about a specific topic and receive a box of books specifically about that topic, at the reading level of the students in their class. These are just examples of the library services that are available to Iowa schools from the AEA system.

Van Delivery

One service reported by each AEA director focus groups as most appreciated by schools is the van service. The van service allows for materials to be quickly shifted between schools in the region and to and from the AEA. Each AEA has a van delivery service. This service is efficient both in terms of time and financially.

Other Media Services

Focus groups also reported that a much-appreciated media service AEAs provide are graphics and printing services. These services are much more cost-effective for schools than using a store-based printing shop and the design work results in materials in schools being highly-specialized to that particular setting. For instance, posters encouraging reading can have pictures of the students and staff at the school. The materials are professional and can be designed and printed in a timely and efficient manner.

2C. Findings

- *Finding 1:* AEA Learning Online provided equitable and efficient learning through a collaborative and statewide model. In the 16-17 school year, estimated cost-savings of \$4,905,000 were provided Iowa schools through AEA Learning Online.
- *Finding 2:* AEA purchasing supports both cost-savings and equity in purchasing. Districts can expect to save between \$14,106 and \$56,706 each year through AEA purchasing.
- *Finding 3:* Online library services provide equitable and efficient resources. They are heavily accessed and are offered at 5% of the cost without the purchasing power of the AEA system. If all districts in Iowa purchased all systems at retail value, the savings amount to \$24,663,080.
- *Finding 4:* Van delivery service is a highly-valued service provided by the AEA system.

Question 2 Summary

The value of AEA services to districts is variable depending on district size and student needs. In terms of staffing alone, districts would likely spend between \$1,107,875 and \$7,080,123 to replicate special education and professional learning staff services. These numbers do not account for materials, coordination, and efficiencies, such as the statewide IEP system, that would be required without the AEA system. Efficiencies of providing media services at a statewide level undoubtedly save Iowa districts millions of dollars a year and provide a level of equity in purchasing and access to resources that would be nearly impossible to replicate.

Question 2 Summary Findings

- *Finding 1:* Districts would likely spend between \$1,107,875 and \$7,080,123 to replicate special education and professional learning staff services, depending on district size. This does not account for materials and efficiencies (e.g. IEP system and forms) that would need to be replicated by each district without the AEA system.

Question 3: What are potential areas of additional efficiency within the AEA system?

AEA Director Focus Group

AEA Directors were asked about other potential areas of efficiency within the system. They reported additional efficiencies, including:

- Buying down the cost of universal screening and progress monitoring measures in math and behavior.
- A media portal is being built that will allow for 1 login to access various types of materials, including all online library services, personalized learning support, and folders for learning for students and professionals. This portal can support both district initiatives in the area of personalized learning, as well as professional learning needs of teachers and other staff.

Also identified through focus groups, and verified through a review of extant data, several areas of efficiency that AEAs have fostered should continue into the future. Categories of these efficiencies include:

Special Education Due Process

Per federal requirements, all districts are required to have special education procedures outlined and each student with a disability is required to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The AEA system as a whole has developed one procedure manual and a common IEP. This is a large efficiency in the system. Without this efficiency, each AEA would have to develop, then keep up-to-date, their own procedure manual. Also, each AEA would be required to purchase, train, and update their own

IEP system. Alternatively, without the AEA system, each district would be required to do the same.

Other due process efficiencies are built into the system with similar outcomes. There is a common Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) documentation throughout the state.

Special Education Positions

AEAs share positions when those positions are difficult to hire and when they would be less than full-time if hired by one AEA alone. This efficiency has resulted in the hiring of difficult to fill positions with qualified personnel. In addition, it provides cost-savings, as it keeps each AEA from having to hire staff individually.

Specialized Professional Learning

AEAs provide professional learning opportunities for positions that are specialized in nature. For instance, Occupational Therapists need specialized training to not only keep up with advances in their area of expertise, but also need the specialized learning to keep their certifications to practice. AEAs work together to provide specialized learning to smaller professional groups, as well as other professional groups that are highly-specialized, such as Speech-Language Pathologists. It would be challenging, if not impossible, for each district in Iowa to replicate these learning experiences.

In addition to learning for AEA staff, this specialized learning is also provided for district staff. For instance, the AEA system provides significant resources toward training for teacher leaders. With the Teacher Leadership and Compensation law, many Iowa teachers now find themselves in leadership positions, many without formal training or experience in educational leadership. Iowa AEAs have offered multiple learning opportunities, through collaboration within the system, for district teacher leaders. Experts such as Jim Knight, have been brought into Iowa through this collaborative effort.

Media Services

Efficiencies within media services have been discussed extensively throughout this report. Districts undoubtedly have access to many more online resources due to the purchasing power of the AEA system than they would have if they had to research, negotiate, train, and maintain, each system individually. This efficiency results in teachers and students having access to more resources, aligned to state standards, than would be available without the efficiencies of the AEA system.

Question 3: Findings

- *Finding 1:* AEAs continue to explore and build upon efficiencies in the system.
- *Finding 2:* Efficiencies currently in the system may be able to be expanded.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Iowa's AEA system is unique and innovative in many ways. Statewide implementation of several AEA services, such as professional learning, and the IEP system, results in efficiency within the system that would be nearly impossible to replicate at individual district levels. The results of the study are summarized below by evaluation question, along with recommendations for consideration.

Summary of Findings

Question 1: What are current cost-savings provided by the AEA system?

- *Finding 1:* Accurate due process practices are supported through the AEA system.
- *Finding 2:* The AEA system provides specialized and up to date expertise than can be difficult to find at the district level.
- *Finding 3:* The AEA system efficiently and equitably meets low incidence service needs.
- *Finding 4:* high-quality, targeted professional learning opportunities are provided by the AEA system.
- *Finding 5:* The AEA system provides supports for administrative efficiencies.
- *Finding 6:* Districts save money through the bulk purchasing power of the AEA system.

Question 2: What value does the AEA system provide Iowa districts?

2A. What is the special education value of the AEAs to districts?

- *Finding 1:* The cost of staffing consistent special education services provided by AEAs would range from about \$930,558 per year to \$6,769,817 per year, depending on district size. This only accounts for the cost of hired staff salary and benefits.
- *Finding 2:* Most special education services provided by the AEA system are shared between Iowa districts to provide equity and efficiency. Replicating those services in an individual district would be nearly impossible to do without forming collaborative partnerships.
- *Finding 3:* Shared administration of specialized professional learning and compliance-related forms, such as the IEP, provide equity and efficiency in the system.

2B. What is the professional learning value of the AEAs to districts?

- *Finding 1:* Efficiency and equity provided by the AEAs in the area of professional learning saves school districts a projected \$2,575 to \$58,270 per year, depending on district size.
- *Finding 2:* Professional learning provided by AEAs is aligned with state priorities.

- *Finding 3:* Professional learning provided by AEAs is specialized in nature.
- *Finding 4:* Professional learning provided by AEAs meets administrative and technical needs.

2C. What is the media services value of the AEAs to districts?

- *Finding 1:* AEA Learning Online provided equitable and efficient learning through a collaborative and statewide model. In the 16-17 school year, estimated cost-savings of \$4,905,000 were provided Iowa schools through AEA Learning Online.
- *Finding 2:* AEA purchasing supports both cost-savings and equity in purchasing. Districts can expect to save between \$14,106 and \$56,706 each year through AEA purchasing.
- *Finding 3:* Online library services provide equitable and efficient resources. They are heavily accessed and are offered at 5% of the cost without the purchasing power of the AEA system. If all districts in Iowa purchased all systems at retail value, the savings amount to \$24,663,080.
- *Finding 4:* Van delivery service is a highly-valued service provided by the AEA system.

2: Summary

- *Finding 1:* Districts would likely spend between \$1,107,875 and \$7,080,123 to replicate special education and professional learning staff services, depending on district size. This does not account for materials and efficiencies (e.g. IEP system and forms) that would need to be replicated by each district without the AEA system.

Question 3: What are potential areas of additional efficiency within the AEA system?

- *Finding 1:* AEAs continue to explore and build upon efficiencies in the system.
- *Finding 2:* Efficiencies currently in the system may be able to be expanded.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided for consideration by the AEA system.

Recommendation 1: Communicate results of the study with stakeholder groups.

The summary of efficiencies described in this report likely include information to which that stakeholders are not attentive. It is recommended that the AEA system identify simple and clear ways to share these results with applicable stakeholders.

Recommendation 2: Expand the use of briefs, such as the AEA Learning Online Profile of Savings into other areas of AEA service.

Given the perception that AEA efficiencies are not well-understood by stakeholders, briefs such as the Profile of Savings developed by AEA Learning Online will be useful if developed to describe other areas of efficiency described in this report. Briefs for services such as low incidence special education services, professional learning services, AEA Online Library services, and administrative efficiencies, may be beneficial to promote better understanding of these services.

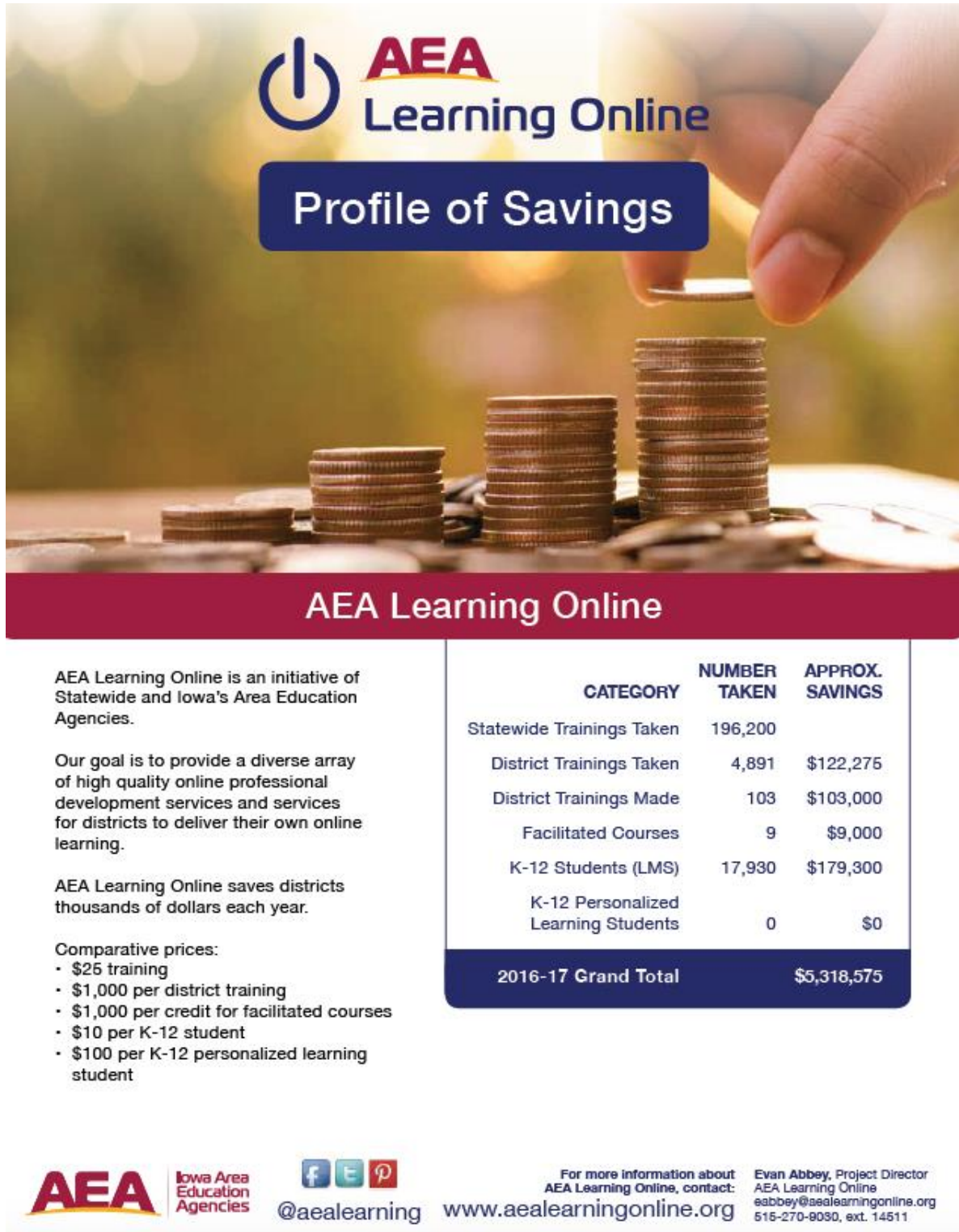
Recommendation 3: Identify and prioritize additional areas of future efficiency.

Throughout focus groups, additional areas of efficiency being explored by AEAs were shared. The AEA system should consider developing clear and concise communication about those additional areas of efficiency to share with stakeholders. Additionally, the AEA system should consider continuing to identify areas of increased efficiency. It is recommended that stakeholder input be used to support the identification and prioritization of the implementation of future efficiencies.

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Appendix A: Statewide Profile of Savings



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Appendix B: Estimated Staffing Needs and Costs

As part of the efficiency study, a random sample of districts of various sizes across the AEAs was gathered. The services provided to each district were analyzed to estimate service provided to districts of various sizes by the AEA system.

For each district in the study, AEAs reported the number and type of FTE provided. The average FTE ratios across each district size category is depicted in Table 11. Note that some variability exists across categories due to differing needs in districts at any given time.

Table 11. *Average staffing ratios by district size.*

Type of FTE	Size of Districts				
	Fewer than 600 Ss	600 – 999 Ss	1000 – 2499 Ss	2500 – 7499 Ss	7500 or more Ss
Leadership	.54	.37	.25	.77	2.75
Professional Learning	1.65	1.7	.47	1.62	3.18
Consistent Special Education	2.9	3.1	4.4	15.43	47.16
As-Needed Special Education	.77	1.03	1.08	7.27	13
Early Access	.80	1.1	.55	2.11	7.24
Early Childhood	.53	.35	.12	.99	2.4
Administrative/Secretarial	.54	1	.26	1.22	3.73

Given the staffing ratios above, Table 12 provides the anticipated staffing needed, as well as estimated costs for staffing, given current AEA contracts. Note that actual costs vary based on student needs at a given time and staff availability. If staff are not recruited, districts will need to work with private companies to supply staff. These costs tend to be much higher than staff recruited and hired directly by districts. Table 12 depicts the anticipated permanent staffing needs and estimated total costs for each district size. For more specific breakdown of staffing by district size, see Appendix B: Estimated Staffing Needs and Costs.

In addition to the general staffing needs and costs, there are additional services provided by AEA staff that are used on an as-needed basis by districts. One of the benefits of having the AEA system is that small districts typically do not have enough students to require a full-time staff member. In an AEA, one full-time position can support students across districts to enhance cost-effectiveness. Because of that, current services had to, at times, be rounded up to increase the chances of filling a

vacancy. Anticipated staffing needs and estimated costs without AEA-provided services are reported in Table 12.

Table 12. *Anticipated staffing needs and projected costs.*

District Size	Anticipated Staffing Needs	Projected Staffing Costs
Fewer than 600	12.5 FTE	\$1,107,875
600 – 999	13.5 FTE	\$1,196,534
1000 – 2499	18 FTE	\$1,595,499
2500 – 7499	32.5 FTE	\$2,908,606
7500 or more	80.5 FTE	\$7,080,123

Staffing needs were determined by using the information shown in Table 11, as well as applying other considerations. First, positions were rounded up to the nearest half or whole FTE. Portions smaller than that were not considered due to feasibility of recruitment and retention. Second, positions were rounded up, as opposed to down because, at least in the first few years, districts would likely need more staffing to support the transition, versus less staffing. Last, in a few cases, reported FTE was lower in large districts versus small districts. In these cases, FTE were considered in the two closest district sizes.

Staffing costs were estimated by using each AEA's salary schedules for relative staffing groups (certified, classified, and leadership). The median salary for each group, across AEAs, was used as the estimated cost for a position. Benefits were estimated to be 37.3% of salary, based on information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017).

It is important to note that these numbers do not represent total costs to a district, because of other services that are sometimes needed, materials, supplies, and other efficiencies implemented in the AEA system.

Staffing by District Size

Information in Table 13 to

Table 17 shows the specific breakdown of estimated staffing needs and estimated salary and benefit cost per district size. Each table contains data for one district size category used throughout this study. These are anticipated staffing needs. There are other staffing needs that will be required for all districts, at some point in time, that are not reflected in these tables.

Table 13. *Estimated staffing needs and costs for districts with **fewer than 600 students**.*

Role	Estimated Staff Needs	Projected Cost (salary and benefits)
Leadership	1	\$144,131

Professional Learning	2	\$177,317
Consistent Special Education	4.5	\$398,964
As Needed Special Education	2	\$177,317
Early Access	1	\$88,659
Early Childhood	1	\$88,659
Administrative/Secretarial	1	\$32,828
Total	12.50	\$1,107,875.00

Table 14. *Estimated staffing needs and costs for districts with 600 to 999 students.*

Role	Estimated Staff Needs	Projected Cost (salary and benefits)
Leadership	1	\$144,131
Professional Learning	2	\$177,317
Consistent Special Education	4.5	\$398,964
As-Needed Special Education	2.5	\$221,647
Early Access	1.5	\$132,988
Early Childhood	1	\$88,659
Administrative/Secretarial	1	\$32,828
Total	13.50	\$1,196,534.00

Table 15. *Estimated staffing needs and costs for districts with 1000 to 2499 students.*

Role	Estimated Staff Needs	Projected Cost (salary and benefits)
Leadership	1	\$144,131
Professional Learning	2	\$177,317
Consistent Special Education	6.5	\$576,282
As-Needed Special Education	5	\$443,294
Early Access	1.5	\$132,988
Early Childhood	1	\$88,659
Administrative/Secretarial	1	\$32,828
Total	18.00	\$1,595,499.00

Table 16. *Estimated staffing needs and costs for districts with 2500 to 7499 students.*

Role	Estimated Staff Needs	Projected Cost (salary and benefits)
Leadership	2	\$288,261
Professional Learning	2	\$177,317
Consistent Special Education	17	\$1,507,198
As-Needed Special Education	5.5	\$487,623
Early Access	3	\$265,976
Early Childhood	1.5	\$132,988
Administrative/Secretarial	1.5	\$49,243
Total	32.50	\$2,908,606.00

Table 17. *Estimated staffing needs and costs for districts with at least 7500 students.*

Role	Estimated Staff Needs	Projected Cost (salary and benefits)
Leadership	3	\$432,392
Professional Learning	3.5	\$310,306
Consistent Special Education	46	\$4078,302
As-Needed Special Education	14	\$1,241,222
Early Access	7.5	\$664,940
Early Childhood	2.5	\$221,647
Administrative/Secretarial	4	\$131,314
Total	80.50	\$7,080,123.00



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