

OVERVIEW

Evaluation of the State's Integrated Special Education Database System

Report No. 03-05, April 2003

Summary

The Department of Education is responsible for the Integrated Special Education Database (ISPED) system. The department has already spent almost \$16 million to make ISPED operational and plans to spend an additional \$6 million for on-going development and maintenance. ISPED was developed to address the *Felix* consent decree's requirement that the State develop a seamless system of care for children and adolescents requiring mental health services, supported by a computerized information system. However, we found that a lack of vision and long-term planning hampered ISPED from the start.

Although ISPED was implemented in June 2001, it continues to have significant infrastructure and web site deficiencies that need improvement. For example, about one-third of the 71 school personnel interviewed noted that the web site is difficult to navigate, confusing in general, and not user friendly. Special education teachers have reported slow response time of the ISPED system, with modules taking four to ten hours to complete per student.

The statewide use of ISPED is also inconsistent. No formal ISPED training has been established, key ISPED functions are underutilized, and ISPED confidentiality concerns have arisen. Some school personnel seemed unconcerned or unaware of ISPED's importance as a *Felix* requirement. We even encountered one school that had begun using ISPED only two weeks before our October 2002 interviews. Staff at other schools were given the option of inputting data into ISPED. A *Felix* consent decree benchmark—that ISPED contain accurate, current, and complete information by November 1, 2001—does not appear to have been met.

The department's administration of ISPED is also confused and lacks adequate controls. The department has not adequately incorporated management tools to hold employees accountable for their performance, such as clear roles, responsibilities, guidelines, and personnel evaluations. For example, the department could not provide us with a job description for the ISPED project manager, arguably the most critical position in ISPED's development. Nor are there written roles and responsibilities or minimum qualifications for this management job. There is no clear supervisor. The fact that the current incumbent is the third person since November 2000 to hold the ISPED project manager position, with no evaluations for any of them, is an indication that accountability has not been a hallmark of ISPED's implementation. Each member of the ISPED project team, including the manager, reports to two or three supervisors. The confusion extends to other state and complex level staff. Most complex area superintendents do not use ISPED reports or interact with the project team.



Millions of dollars have also been spent on contracted services critical to ISPED's success; however, department management has allowed unjustified contract costs to be paid, contract deficiencies to linger, questionable relationships to exist, and flawed ISPED ownership agreements to be created. For example, of the 15 ISPED contracts, agreements, and modifications we reviewed, two contracts increased by \$1.6 million without justifying documentation, four contained no deadlines for contractors' performance, seven were signed after their effective date, and five contained no liquidated damages clause.

Finally, management lacks financial accountability in several areas. The ISPED project manager does not track, monitor, or scrutinize ISPED's budgets, appropriations, allotments, or expenditures, which are in the millions. In addition, no one formally oversees or monitors the department's efforts to maximize funding for Section 504, IDEA/special education, and *Felix* consent decree students. While the department has received approximately \$62 million in federal grants during the past three calendar years, the department has not pursued approximately \$14 million annually in potential Medicaid reimbursements for at least two years.

Recommendations and Response

We made a number of recommendations to the superintendent of education to correct the problems identified. We also recommended that the Board of Education hold the superintendent accountable for the problems identified and institute consequences if remedial actions are not completed within specified timeframes.

In its written response, the department generally agreed with our findings and indicated that it plans to implement many of our recommendations. The department also indicated what corrective actions they plan to or have implemented and provided some clarification regarding our findings.

The board did not provide a written response.

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