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RELEASE: Governor Reynolds Issues Open Letter to Iowans on Improving Special Education

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OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Governor Kim Reynolds ★ Lt. Governor Adam Gregg

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Governor Reynolds Issues Open Letter to Iowans on Improving Governor Reynolds Issues Open Letter to Iowans on Improving Special Education Education

Today, Governor Kim Reynolds released the following open letter to the state of Iowa:

If there's an issue Iowans are most passionate about, it's undoubtedly about our kids. As a grandmother of 11, ranging in age from pre-school to high school, I understand. There's nothing more important than our children.

It's why so many of my policy priorities as governor have focused on building strong families and elevating education for every student. This year is no exception.

In fact, students are the very focus of my education policy this legislative session. Whether it's raising teacher salaries or improving literacy, my priority is ensuring every child has the advantage of a quality education to help them reach their highest potential.

That includes students with disabilities who receive special education services—and it's why I'm proposing to reform Iowa's Area Education Agencies (AEAs).

Fifty years ago, regional AEAs were created to serve children and students with disabilities. These services are critical. From early interventions for infants and toddlers to speech therapy for K-12 students, AEAs will continue to offer the guidance and reassurance families need and the support teachers rely on.

Over the years, AEAs have expanded well beyond the scope of special education, providing a wide array of other offerings for teachers, schools, and districts. These range from athletic coaching certification, cybersecurity, and classroom book sets, to providing graphic design and printing. In fact, only about one-third of the services AEAs list today are focused on supporting children with disabilities.

As the AEAs expanded their services, the outcomes of students with disabilities declined. Over the last 20 years, Iowa's fourth grade students with disabilities have consistently performed below the national average when compared to students with disabilities in other states. In the last five years, fourth and eighth graders with disabilities have ranked 30th or lower on nine of 12 national reading and math assessments.

Despite consistently poor outcomes, under the current system schools are forced to send their state and federal money for special education services directly to the AEAs. Iowa is the only state in the nation that operates this way.

If we don't do something different, we can simply expect more of the same. That's not good enough for our children, and it's why I'm proposing a change.

Under my bill, AEAs will continue providing special education services as they do now, including Early ACCESS and Child Find. But state and federal special education funds will be controlled by Iowa's public school districts. I'm also proposing schools get their share of AEA funding for education services.

With control of these funds, schools will determine what's best for their students. If they like the services from their AEA, they can continue to use them exactly as they do today. Or they could choose to use the services of a neighboring AEA. They can also go outside the AEA system and partner with other districts to share services or contract with another accredited provider. Or they can spend more on special education teachers and put the funds right into the classroom. This legislation puts control in the hands of those who work directly with students every day.

And to ensure the AEA system is held accountable and results for students with disabilities improve, the Iowa Department of Education will provide meaningful oversight of special education.

AEAs play an important role in our state and that will continue. But their role should be entirely focused on students—not maintaining a system. We don't need the AEAs to be all things. We need them to be one thing: the state's premier provider of special education services.

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