Texas High Cost Fund State Plan and Application Survey Results

SURVEY OVERVIEW

During the summer of 2017, the Texas Education Agency’s (TEA) Department of Special Populations conducted an online survey regarding High Cost Funds (HCF). The purpose of the survey was to solicit feedback on the High Cost Fund State Application and Plan.

SurveyMonkey was used to garner responses to ten yes/no and multiple-choice questions. Respondents were given the opportunity to provide recommendations on seven of the items. On July 11, 2017, TEA opened the survey to the public by posting it on the agency’s High Cost Fund webpage. Additionally, TEA coordinated with each of the 20 statewide Education Service Centers (ESC) to distribute the survey to all local education agencies (LEA). The timeline for the survey was extended from the original closing date of August 31, 2017, to September 20, 2017.

Ninety-one individuals participated in the online survey. A completion rate of 81 percent indicated that some participants did not provide a response for every question. Although respondents could also submit general feedback and comments through TEA’s HCF mailbox, none were received.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

HCF Plan and Application Process
Approximately 39 percent of respondents submitted recommendations for changes in one or more areas including eligibility, use of funds, documentation, and distribution of funds. Some respondents recommended that TEA consider lowering the cost threshold for high-need student identification, consider the eligibility of costs associated with students enrolled in the Regional Day School Program for the Deaf, and consider the percentage of students for which each district can apply. Other recommendations included making the online application more “user friendly,” modifying the timeline of the application, and clarifying documentation requirements.

Very few respondents made suggestions for changes to the HCF application cover sheet (10%), the demographic page (3%), and reports (13%). Some respondents felt data entry was duplicative and recommended that information be auto populated. Other recommendations included clarifying the process for completing the application and improving the quality of the reports.

Notable comments for the HCF plan and application process:
− “Make it easier to understand the requirements and information needed. Ease of application.”
− “It would be helpful if the process could be completed earlier in the year. It is difficult for districts that end the fiscal year on June 30th to plan when the funds aren't available during the fiscal year.”
− “The threshold for HCF is too high. Lowering the threshold would assist districts in meeting the needs of students.”
− “I would like to the application be more user friendly - not 2 separate applications - notify of time lines.”
− “I think the HCF process is appropriate and not that difficult to follow.”

Transportation
TEA asked respondents about transportation costs. Approximately 56 percent of the respondents indicated that transportation cost was most often related to high-needs students who receive in-district transportation. According to 34 percent of the respondents, common extenuating circumstances that created excess in-district transportation costs included:
− busing students across large districts for services provided at cluster sites;
− providing additional staff and/or routes to safely transport students with extreme behaviors or medical conditions;
− contracting with parent/private providers to safely transport students with extreme behaviors or medical conditions;
− transporting students to remote rural settings;
− providing transportation for extracurricular activities;
− providing transportation to related service providers and special programing not locally available; and
− providing specialized equipment on buses.

More than 75 percent of respondents believe in-district transportation costs should be allowed.

For out-of-district transportation, respondents could select all areas of costs that applied to their district. Forty-three percent of respondents identified cost incurred for transporting students to nonpublic day and nonpublic residential facilities. Thirty-two percent of respondents reported other out-of-district travel costs. Costs associated with parent contracts for provision of transportation services were reported by 26 percent of respondents.

Respondents were asked to indicate how TEA should update the excess transportation cost calculation tool. Respondents could select all areas that applied. Approximately 70 percent indicated that the calculation tool should be updated to prorate for multiple riders receiving in- and out-of-district transportation, and 54 percent stated that the update should include calculation for parent transportation contract costs.

Notable comments for transportation associated costs:
− “Out-of-school therapies for high-need children are not ready available. Distance to these unique providers are often far from the school.”
– “Excess transportation costs can be incurred when a student is bused across a large district for cluster site services (RDSPD, LID, etc.) Additionally, there are rare occasions when a student demonstrates such extreme behaviors that additional staff or routes are added to transport that student safely.”
– “The student had medical issues and needed to be last on in the morning and first off in the afternoon. Our district is fairly large and special needs students have to be on the bus a long time. Rerouting the route made it even longer for students.”
– “Students who cannot ride in a vehicle with any other students due to medical or behavioral concerns. Typically, these students have 2-1 transportation with a driver and an aide.”

Prorating Available Annual Funding
Respondents were asked about prorating procedures when requests for funds exceed the HCF annual allotment. Most respondents (59 percent) preferred utilizing a weighted calculation based on student placement. Using this method, weights are assigned high to low: in-district placement, nonpublic day placement, and nonpublic residential placement. Thirty-seven percent preferred evenly distributing available funds across all eligible applicants. The remaining respondents (4%) felt weight should be based on some other attribute.

Notable comments for prorating available funding:
– “We have students whose behavior is so volatile that they require a separate classroom, with a teacher and one full time aide and a part time aide to manage the behavior. I've had three of these in my 15 year career. I believe additional levels might be appropriate.”
– “Evenly distributed as a percentage of the request made. For example, each district gets 80 percent of what was requested, each district receives the same actual dollar amount.”
– “Knowing that you would get some reimbursement for a high-cost student is better than trying each year and not always getting something.”

Communication
Respondents were asked to provide recommendations for improving communication specific to the HCF application process and online application system. Approximately 38 percent of respondents indicated the need for clear directions and guidance, specific to documentation requirements, timelines, steps for completing the online application, and the formula/funding process.

Notable comments for communication:
– “For the 17-18 school year can a detailed step-by-step guide be provided to districts with the process of completing the HCF application”
– “Provide clearer instructions on what the expectations are for documentation.”
– “Timeliness of the HCF application and award”
– “Clear communication announcements and better instructions which are easily found on agency's webpage”
- "Written formulas for award of funds including process for reducing funds if requests exceed HCF allocation."

Conclusions
The HCF survey provided the Department of Special Populations feedback in four general areas: HCF Plan and Application Process, Transportation, Prorating Annual Available Funding, and Communication. Based on survey results, the agency has determined the following.

Recommendations: Accepted and to be incorporated into the current year processes:
- Update guidance and instructions for the HCF application process
- Continue utilizing the weighted calculation for prorating annual funding
- Complete the modifications to upgrade the online application
- Allow in-district transportation cost; however, in-district transportation cost alone cannot determine a high-need child

Recommendations: No changes
- Modify timeline for application
  - The application timeline is based on a reimbursement model and allows LEAs the opportunity to claim costs incurred throughout the year.
- Lower the threshold for eligibility
  - Per federal regulation CFR § 300.704 (c)(3)(i)(A)(2), the definition of a high-need child is set as “greater than 3 times the average per pupil expenditure (as defined in section 9101 of the ESEA) in that State.” The agency will continue to allow SHARS expenditures and adjusted allotment to be used in the calculation to determine identification as a high-need child. These will be subtracted from the award amount and not subtracted prior to the application of the definition.
- Increase the percentage of students allowed per district
  - The state currently allows for consideration for extenuating circumstances on a case by case basis.

*reported percentages rounded