



Department of Education

Central Rivers Area Education Agency 2025 Accreditation Report

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Purpose

Iowa Code 273.10 defines the purpose of this report as determining if standards have been met and making a recommendation to the Iowa State Board of Education (State Board) as to whether the programs of the area education agency (AEA) should receive initial accreditation or remain accredited.

This recommendation is based on a program audit review of documents, a clarification call with the AEA team, an on-site visit and a final verification process.

Central Rivers AEA Service Area Data

Central Rivers AEA encompasses

- 53 public school districts
- 27 accredited nonpublic schools
- 64,136 students, preschool through grade 12
- 493 total AEA staff members
- Covers 9,000 square miles
- 6 IDEA-DA Level 3 districts
- 6 IDEA-DA Level 2 districts
- 4 ESSA CSI
- 47 ESSA TSI
- Center of Excellence: Iowa AEA Early ACCESS

AEA Accreditation Process

Iowa Code 273.10 and Iowa Administrative Code chapter 281-72 require the Iowa Department of Education (Department) to conduct an AEA accreditation process to determine if the AEA is meeting accreditation standards. Accreditation standards for the AEA were revised during the 2024 legislative session, with the new standards taking effect July 1, 2025. Therefore, the Department developed and piloted a new AEA accreditation process during the 2024-25 academic year that encompassed the existing standards that were expanded to include learners with disabilities and the new standards that were added to the expectations. The accreditation process used during the 2024-25 year included a program audit which is a review of Department collected and AEA provided data. It also included a clarification call with the AEA team, an on-site visit, and a final verification process.

For the purposes of the AEA accreditation pilot, similar standards were grouped together and reviewed collectively as a whole. The standards will become a part of Iowa Code after they become effective and the Iowa Administrative Code is updated.

Standards were grouped together as follows:

- School – Community Planning
 - Standard a – Support for school-community planning, including a means of assessing needs, developing collaborative relationships among community agencies, establishing shared direction, and implementing program plans and reporting progress toward goals for all students, including students with disabilities.
- Professional Development
 - Standard b - Evidence-based professional development programs that respond to current needs.
 - Standard q - Support for staff development and adult learners utilizing evidence-based professional development in a manner that meets the professional needs of staff and adult learners consistent with standards adopted by the state board of education.

- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
 - Standard c - Support for curriculum development, instruction, and assessment services that address the areas of reading, language arts, math, and science, using research-based methodologies, for all students, including students with disabilities.
 - Standard p - Support for students using educational programs and services in a manner that is consistent with the educational standards established pursuant to section 256.11.
- Special Education Services and Support
 - Standard d - Special education support.
 - Standard j - Support for early childhood service coordination for families and children, age birth through three years, to meet health, safety, and learning needs, including service coordination.
 - Standard m - Support for addressing the diverse learning needs of all children and youths, including children and youths who are eligible for special education through services that include direct services to students with disabilities.
- Technology Planning and Services
 - Standard g - Support for school technology planning and staff development for implementing instructional technologies.
 - Standard o - Support necessary to implement effective instruction for all students, including students with disabilities, through school technology services.
- Learning Environment
 - Standard l - Support for schools and school districts in analyzing student achievement data related to the learning environment, comparing data to the external knowledge base, and using that information to guide schools and school districts in setting goals and implementing actions to improve student learning for all students, including students with disabilities.
- Compliance
 - Standard k - Timely submission of required reports and documents to the state board of education, the department of education, and the division of special education of the department of education.
 - Standard n - Support for schools and school districts to ensure compliance with rules adopted by the state board of education related to special education.
 - Standard r - Compliance with all relevant federal and state laws in the provision of services and supports to students with disabilities.
- Program Evaluation
 - Standard h - A program and services evaluation and reporting system that includes information related to special education.
- Management Services
 - Standard e – Management services, including financial reporting and purchasing as requested and funded by local districts.
- Media Services
 - Standard f – support for instructional media services that supplement and support local district media centers and services.
 - Standard i – Support for school district libraries in accordance with section 273.2, subsection 4.

AEA Accreditation Standards and Results

The on-site visit at Central Rivers AEA included several interviews, a presentation by the Chief Administrator and Administrator Team and an observation at River Hills specialty school. The following are the results for each standard area reviewed during the accreditation process.

School-Community Planning

This section includes how the AEA provides support for school-community planning, including a means of assessing needs, establishing shared direction and implementing program plans and reporting progress toward goals for all students, including students with disabilities.

Strengths:

Central Rivers AEA has created great partnerships and this was evident across most interview groups throughout the visit. School districts were appreciative of the partnership they have with Central Rivers AEA. The AEA has also built partnerships with other community partners in order to support families from birth to 21. Examples of these partnerships included the partnerships the AEA uses to share information about Early ACCESS and early childhood services, the relationships that supported implementation of transition fairs, and the partnerships with the community colleges and businesses.

Interviews with core team leads indicated the desire to continue to work in a highly collaborative and positive environment within Central Rivers AEA and with district and community partners. These on-going partnerships and the collaborative nature of staff are a strength that can be used to support school-community planning efforts in all districts.

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement:

While the districts continue to appreciate Central Rivers AEA support, it appears it has created a reliance upon the AEA. It will be important moving forward to shift towards a district-led approach that ensures the local systems, staff and administrators are equipped to initiate, implement and monitor special education compliance and general supervision beyond the child find process. It will be imperative for the agency to have consistency across all domains and districts with staff responsibilities. It is recommended that the AEA intentionally develop plans to assist AEA and LEA staff in understanding the shift in responsibilities; provide clear messaging that the Department, AEA, and districts are all “in this together” and working to support student success; and identify ways to build district capacity to support independence in special education compliance and general supervision.

There are inconsistent school-community processes and procedures being used across the AEAs to support school-community planning. In addition, what is available is not uniformly being offered or provided to all districts and nonpublic schools in the AEA. It is recommended that the AEA partner with the Department and the other AEAs in the state to define the expectations for school-community planning and identify common statewide processes and procedures that may be uniformly offered to districts and accredited nonpublic schools.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standard is met.

Professional Development

This section provides evidence that explains how evidence-based professional development programs offered by the AEA respond to current needs and are consistent with the standards adopted by the state board of education.

Strengths:

A review of the permanent products, data review and interviews indicate that Central Rivers AEA provides professional learning aligned to statewide initiatives in the content areas. Professional learning opportunities include LETRS, intensive literacy needs instruction and SOAR. Follow up support for districts includes coaching and helping districts evaluate curricular materials to ensure resources align

to evidence-based practices. If materials are not aligned, the agency will support districts in adopting High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM).

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement:

Central Rivers AEA is encouraged to continue offering professional learning on evidence-based practices in literacy and mathematics, while also leveraging implementation science to support the implementation fidelity of HQIM through coaching. Consistency across districts may be strengthened by ensuring all consultants receive training on content offerings. In addition, there is a need for extended professional learning in mental health for both district and AEA staff.

Internally, the agency should develop a more robust and on-going professional learning plan for AEA staff. Although there is a plan for year one and year two staff to engage in learning with their mentor, additional professional learning is needed beyond these years to support staff capacity and consistency in practice. It is recommended that the agency develop discipline-specific learning opportunities for disciplines and/or specialized staff (e.g., OT/PT, SLP, Audiology, Teachers of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing) to ensure consistent, high-quality services are provided agency-wide.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standards are met.

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

This section provides evidence of how the AEA supports curriculum development, instruction and assessment for reading, language arts, mathematics, and science using research-based methodologies for all students, including students with disabilities.

Strengths

Central Rivers AEA demonstrated strong collaborative leadership support, with consultants partnering alongside district administrators to model coaching with teachers. AEA staff actively supported districts through the curriculum adoption process by providing professional development, coaching, and implementation support across multiple content areas.

Central Rivers AEA supported the use of data to drive continuous improvement efforts. The introduction of the Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAMI) tool has been instrumental in guiding districts to reflect on and strengthen their Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) structures while also connecting their work to broader initiatives. Through the review of Central Rivers AEA permanent products, it is evident that the AEA created tools to support conversations around curriculum, instruction and assessment, like the District Data Profile Dashboard and the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP) data review template.

Central Rivers AEA placed significant focus on HQIM implementation, engaging in active discussions and professional learning through Curriculum-Instruction-Assessment (CIA) networks, district presentations, and alignment of materials to standards. The CIA network provided opportunities for shared expertise, aligned learning with the statewide network, and collaborative engagement amongst AEA consultants.

The AEA also provided professional learning to districts to support instruction. In literacy, the agency supported extensive LETRS training paired with coaching, reaching over 800 participants, and offered intensive literacy courses for both elementary and secondary staff with many districts opting in to participate. Central Rivers AEA also offered access to a variety of tiered supports, including English Learner curriculum and Tier 2 materials such as SOAR and STAR materials for autism.

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

It is recommended that Central Rivers AEA sustain its practice of pairing professional development with ongoing coaching and fidelity checks, particularly as districts transition into “life after LETRS” and the use of the RAVE-O Reading Intervention materials.

In addition, it is recommended that the agency consider expanding the availability and implementation of Tier 2 and Tier 3 instructional supports in order to build upon the current foundation of core instruction. It would also be beneficial to formalize the process of tracking and monitoring implementation of tiered instruction across districts to ensure consistency of implementation and sustained impact upon student outcomes.

Internal collaboration structures, such as CIA networks, should continue to be leveraged for consistent messaging and shared learning across districts. Central Rivers AEA should also build additional internal capacity to support future curriculum adoptions, developing expertise and coaching models that are adaptable to evolving district needs. Lastly, as new instructional materials are introduced, the agency should continue to assess and address evolving professional learning needs to ensure both consultants and district staff are well-equipped for successful implementation.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standards are met.

Special Education Services and Support

This section provides evidence of support for special education services, early childhood services for families and children and support for addressing the diverse learning needs of all children and youth.

Strengths

The River Hills team effectively implemented universal social-emotional regulation and safety practices aligned with their mission and Portrait of a Learner, with strong staff buy-in. Curriculum integration combined the Essential Elements and the Iowa Core standards using Readtopia, tailored to students' IEPs. Assistive technology (AT) was widely used, including a new coffee shop pilot promoting student independence.

The Work-Based Experience Program served 43 of 53 districts and 500-600 students annually, with growing partnerships despite lacking formal success metrics. District engagement indicated strong perceived success and some IDEA-Differentiated Accountability districts joined after being designated for secondary transition. The program also supported youth detention centers and began collaborating with Choice Charter.

Strengths were identified in both areas of Part C and Part B. In Part C, Early ACCESS maintained strong transition procedures from Part C to Part B, ensuring clear communication amongst families, teams, and scheduling. In addition, all new AEA staff received Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) Foundations and SDI Framework Training, making SDI a core focus for the agency.

Required Actions

The agency is required to provide professional learning and follow-up coaching or implementation support for all special education staff on Child Find. Reviews and interviews indicated that there are inconsistent practices in the way Child Find is implemented in the agency. In order to support the implementation of more consistent practices in Child Find from the disability suspect process through the eligibility determination process, the agency is required to provide Child Find training for all staff in Part C and Part B who potentially participate in the special education evaluation and eligibility

determination process. This training must be completed by November 15, 2025. Best practice would be for the professional learning plan to include training, coaching cycles and periodic fidelity checks on implementation.

Additionally, Central Rivers AEA must ensure consistent Child Find and consultative services are delivered across all districts, regardless of size. The agency should implement a system of general supervision to regularly monitor the implementation of Child Find practices and consultative services throughout the year to ensure they are being provided equitably to all districts. In order to address some of the potential root causes of the discrepancies in service delivery, the accreditation team noted that it may be help for the AEA to provide education to districts and community partners on the implementation of MTSS structures and support in buildings and districts, the Child Find process, dyslexia evaluations, and special education eligibility. Delivering this content in partnership with information about the services available from the AEA and/or the services the district should expect to receive from the AEA might help address the consistency of service delivery across all districts in the AEA.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

To support continuous improvement, River Hills staff may want to consider developing more direct and frequent data measures to better evaluate the implementation of strategic plan goals. In addition, the Work-Based Learning program collects valuable data by district and business, but would benefit from adding long-term outcome data to better assess program impact over time.

The accreditation team identified concerns in the area of Early ACCESS to early childhood transitions. AEA leadership and/or the Early ACCESS team is encouraged to closely review child find procedures, identification rates, and transition assumptions to identify the root causes behind high rates of children moving from Early ACCESS to early childhood special education. It would be beneficial to develop a plan to address any potential root causes.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standards are met.

Technology Planning and Services

This section provides evidence of support for school technology planning, staff development for implementing instructional technologies and support for implementing effective instruction through the use of technology, including for students with disabilities.

Strengths

Interviews with media services indicated partnerships with local libraries, higher education, community colleges and local county boards to work towards a shared vision and expand services for children and families within the Central Rivers AEA region. Central Rivers AEA media collection contained a wide variety of digital and print resources to support public and nonpublic schools as well as homeschool families.

Multiple interview groups indicated that "learning boards" are a tool used throughout the agency, providing immediate resources and information to core team members.

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

Several interview groups revealed that there were no intentional agency-wide professional learning opportunities focused on AT and Accessible Educational Materials (AEM), with past reliance on a disbanded AT Team. Early ACCESS was also noted as an area with limited involvement. It is

recommended that the agency review current practices and develop processes and strategies to increase awareness, consideration, and use of AT and AEM. Additionally, Service Support Team members expressed a desire for more in-person coaching related to AT tools and AEM to better support staff and student needs.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standards are met.

Learning Environment

This section provides evidence of support for districts in analyzing data related to the learning environment and in guiding districts in continuous improvement efforts towards improving the learning environment and social-emotional-behavioral outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.

Strengths:

It is noted that Central Rivers AEA staff were providing various training for districts and for their AEA staff around social-emotional-behavioral support.

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement:

It is recommended that Central Rivers AEA continue to provide evidence-based practices around social-emotional-behavioral needs. It is suggested that follow up to the learning take place through coaching to ensure fidelity of implementation. It would also be beneficial to consider a plan to evaluate the implementation of new learning and the impact of professional learning on teachers and students.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standard is met.

Compliance

This section provides evidence of timely submission of required reports and documents, compliance with relevant federal and state laws in special education and support for schools to ensure compliance with rules related to special education.

Strengths:

The AEA has submitted required reports on time. There have been no corrective action plans assigned to the AEA as a result of focused monitoring or other types of noncompliance.

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

Central Rivers AEA focus moving forward should continue to focus on ensuring compliance with general supervision requirements across the agency and LEAs. It is recommended that the AEA continue to review and refine current general supervision procedures to ensure consistent application across the AEA and all LEAs to ensure identification of potential noncompliance is addressed early and consistently.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standards are met.

Program Evaluation

This section provides evidence of a program and services evaluation and reporting system that includes information related to special education.

Strengths:

Interviews with various groups indicated the agency had a robust process for program evaluation and continuous improvement planning. In the past, agency leadership created the plan and filtered information down to teams across the agency. Teams were able to articulate the agency's core values, goals and how their work collectively contributed to the overall continuous improvement plan. It was stated that this has not been the case due to staff turnover throughout the last three years. It was reported by groups that this was not a priority because everyone was in "survival mode." Individuals stated that the agency is experiencing more stability now and there is a recognized need to return the focus to creating a new comprehensive plan. Regional administrators have shifted thinking to the idea that we (the AEA) CAN impact student achievement, however, staff were only able to speak at a surface level about 504 Plans, Talented and Gifted, and Lau Plan services being provided to districts. One example of a comment about services for diverse learners was, "We have people doing that."

Interviews and observations revealed the two-year mentoring support of new staff is a strength for Central Rivers AEA. Many interviewees discussed the importance of this program for onboarding new team members and its role to help staff members feel supported.

Required Actions

Central Rivers AEA had not engaged in agency visioning or the development of an agency comprehensive improvement plan in recent years. At the time of the on-site visit, the agency did not have a current comprehensive improvement plan and it was reported to the accreditation team that AEA staff intended to begin working on it the next day. As a result, Central Rivers AEA is required to develop a current comprehensive improvement plan. It is recommended that the agency involve staff at all levels of the organization in the development and execution of the plan as having a cross-section of departments and leadership will ensure an integrated response to the districts' needs. Central Rivers AEA will need to produce the current continuous improvement plan by March 6.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement:

It is recommended that the AEA resurrect the robust process used in the past to support LEAs with program evaluation and continuous improvement planning. There is a need to identify the various data sets that are available to support program evaluation and ensure access to and understanding of the data. In addition, agency leaders should consider how to develop staff capacity to support the program evaluation processes and procedures and ensure that program evaluation is available to all LEAs in the area.

It is recommended that Central Rivers AEA create a leadership team with varying levels of expertise and experience within the agency or consider how it might access multiple perspectives and ensure the use of distributed leadership. In addition, agency leadership should focus on creating an environment which enhances efforts that create sustainability within the system regardless of specific staffing as well as building collective efficacy amongst staff on the impact the agency has in supporting schools to positively impact student outcomes.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standard is met.

Management Services

This section provides evidence of support for management services, including financial reporting and purchasing as requested and funded by local districts.

Strengths:

A document review confirms that Central Rivers AEA offers management services to districts upon request. These services may include support in areas such as superintendency, personnel, business management, technology, leadership, or other specialized needs.

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement:

To maintain effective and responsive management services, the agency should implement regular reviews of service delivery models, gather input from district leadership, and assess internal capacity to meet evolving needs. Strengthening communication channels and aligning services with district goals will ensure that support remains timely, efficient, and impactful.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standard is met.

Media Services

This section provides evidence of support for instructional media services that supplement and support local districts.

Strengths

Interviews with media services indicate partnerships with local libraries, higher education, community colleges and local county boards to work towards a shared vision and expand services for children and families within the Central Rivers AEA region. Central Rivers AEA media collection contains a wide variety of digital and print resources to support public and nonpublic schools as well as homeschool families. The agency utilizes qualitative and quantitative data to determine what resources will be most impactful for schools. In addition, Central Rivers AEA media services were at the forefront in leading other agencies' technology in the classroom through the use of virtual welding kits and other virtual career exploration tools to support students in being future ready.

Required Actions

There are no required actions for this standard area.

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

While Central Rivers AEA has historically maintained a strong strategic plan in the area of media services, the past year has brought challenges due to significant changes. It is recommended that the agency convene their strategic planning team to discuss these challenges and current needs. It will be important for the team to continue to build upon a vision that aligns with the needs of the AEA and districts. Central Rivers AEA should build upon the needs assessment and evaluation system that was used in the past in order to align with the professional learning needs and service needs that are identified.

Standard Met/Not Met

The accreditation standard is met.

Conclusion

The team determined the following standards have been met based upon the program audit, clarification call, on-site visit and final verification process:

- School – Community Planning

- Standard a – Support for school-community planning, including a means of assessing needs, developing collaborative relationships among community agencies, establishing shared direction, and implementing program plans and reporting progress toward goals for all students, including students with disabilities.
- Professional Development
 - Standard b - Evidence-based professional development programs that respond to current needs.
 - Standard q - Support for staff development and adult learners utilizing evidence-based professional development in a manner that meets the professional needs of staff and adult learners consistent with standards adopted by the state board of education.
- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
 - Standard c - Support for curriculum development, instruction, and assessment services that address the areas of reading, language arts, math, and science, using research-based methodologies, for all students, including students with disabilities.
 - Standard p - Support for students using educational programs and services in a manner that is consistent with the educational standards established pursuant to section 256.11.
- Special Education Services and Support
 - Standard d - Special education support.
 - Standard j - Support for early childhood service coordination for families and children, age birth through three years, to meet health, safety, and learning needs, including service coordination.
 - Standard m - Support for addressing the diverse learning needs of all children and youths, including children and youths who are eligible for special education through services that include direct services to students with disabilities.
- Technology Planning and Services
 - Standard g - Support for school technology planning and staff development for implementing instructional technologies.
 - Standard o - Support necessary to implement effective instruction for all students, including students with disabilities, through school technology services.
- Learning Environment
 - Standard l - Support for schools and school districts in analyzing student achievement data related to the learning environment, comparing data to the external knowledge base, and using that information to guide schools and school districts in setting goals and implementing actions to improve student learning for all students, including students with disabilities.
- Compliance
 - Standard k - Timely submission of required reports and documents to the state board of education, the department of education, and the division of special education of the department of education.
 - Standard n - Support for schools and school districts to ensure compliance with rules adopted by the state board of education related to special education.
 - Standard r - Compliance with all relevant federal and state laws in the provision of services and supports to students with disabilities.
- Program Evaluation
 - Standard h - A program and services evaluation and reporting system that includes information related to special education.
- Management Services
 - Standard e – Management services, including financial reporting and purchasing as requested and funded by local districts.
- Media Services
 - Standard f – support for instructional media services that supplement and support local district media centers and services.

- Standard I – Support for school district libraries in accordance with section 273.2, subsection 4.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the State Board of Education grant continued accreditation to Central Rivers AEA through the next review period with the required improvement actions completed.

Central Rivers AEA will include confirmation of the implementation of all required improvement actions and its work towards recommended improvement actions in its budget reviewed for approval by the State Board of Education in March 2026.