



## Third-largest charter school network in Texas takes a more data-driven approach to special education

ILTexas uses **Project SPED** to inform decision making, increase transparency, and ensure compliance

At the **International Leadership of Texas (ILTexas)**, a new platform has transformed how educators serve special education students, providing the insights needed to make more effective and informed decisions.

**ILTexas** is a free public charter school founded in 2012 and serving more than 25,000 K-12 students at 25 campuses in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, Cleveland, and College Station areas. ILTexas is the third-largest charter school in the state, and takes a global perspective to education, giving all students the opportunity to learn the English, Spanish, and Chinese languages, and graduate with the skills for future leadership and success in college and career.

Frank Miller has been the Senior Executive Director of Special Programs at ILTexas since 2019, overseeing all special programs for the charter school. Miller says one of the goals of the Special Populations department in the past few years has been to improve its use of data.

### Identifying needs

“When I first came to ILTexas five years ago, every Monday school leaders would meet for 45 minutes to review student data and identify which students are growing or not growing, who is having discipline issues, who has been absent from school, or who might need help,” Miller says. “We use the analogy of triage, because it’s similar to emergency room doctors quickly diagnosing and prioritizing the patients with the most need.”

While the meetings were useful, Miller says there was room for improvement. “The meetings were very well intentioned, but they were paper based and not based on clear data. Teachers are passionate about what they do, and might raise concerns about a particular student, but it could be a subjective judgment about who needed help.”

### Becoming more data-driven

Miller says that one of the keys to improvement was to implement Project SPED, the special education platform from Project Education. Project SPED provides centralized access to all data related to special student populations, including grades, assessments, discipline referrals, and attendance information, so that progress can be closely monitored.

“Project SPED gave us a process for reviewing student data to make informed decisions about how to move forward,” Miller says. “It provides a holistic cumulative file of everything going on in a student’s life, academically or otherwise, enabling us to diagnose based on specific data and determine next steps. We can address issues much more quickly.”

Miller cites an example of chronic absenteeism, an all-too-common challenge in many schools and districts. “If we have a special education student not showing up to a certain class, we can talk to the student, but now we can also go into Project SPED and quickly look at all the data we have about that student,” he says.

“What other factors could be making an impact on attendance? Is there an academic issue? A cognitive or behavioral problem? Is there a social-emotional issue a counselor has identified? Does this student’s schedule reflect their needs? These are all questions we have now been able to answer much faster because we can see it all easily in Project SPED. For many of these students, these decisions can have life changing implications.”

### Improving transparency

Miller says the visibility that the platform provides to other stakeholder groups is also a significant improvement.

“Transparency and accountability are so important. The Project Education system enables everyone to see the same information, so it breaks down silos between departments,” he says.

This new level of transparency has also helped ILTexas communicate with parents of special needs students. “Particularly since the pandemic, more parents want insight into their child’s education, they want to know what’s going on, what decisions are being made and why,” Miller says. “Project Education has a Parent Portal that we can upload all relevant documents into, so parents can see all special education information in real time. The typical SIS parent portal doesn’t have that capability because it isn’t built for special education.”

“Now, when we meet with parents, we look at all the data about their student, not just grades, attendance and their schedule, but

also the communication log recording all the interactions, accommodations, interventions, and conversations concerning that student. We can have a much deeper, more data-driven conversation, rather than a subjective one.”

Miller also notes that Project SPED can send out parent communications in 163 different languages, which has been useful as several languages are spoken in the community, and ILTexas has recently seen an increase in its population of French-speaking households.

### Ensuring compliance

Project Education has also eased the complex task of meeting various special education compliance requirements. “The whole idea of compliance is about doing what’s best for students and getting them what they need, but it also impacts the potential funding you receive,” Miller says. “The risks of noncompliance can include state auditing, an Office of Civil Rights or Justice Department investigation, and fines.”

“If you need to comply with an investigation within 48 hours, and you need to dig through boxes of paper documents to find what is needed, you’re going to be in trouble. But Project SPED gives us immediate visibility into all that information; training, communication, interventions, accommodations made, and where funding is allocated, all in real time. You can’t do any of that in a paper-based system.”

## Project Education helps Douglas County better organize 504 plan management

**MANY SCHOOL DISTRICTS** have found that adding Project 504 from Project Education creates an even more comprehensive support system for students with disabilities.

Dr. Kelli Smith has been the Director of Health, Wellness, and Prevention in the Douglas County School District in Colorado since 2021 and has been working in the district since 2012. Her department supports the administration of Section 504 plans, which enable approximately 3,000 students with disabilities to benefit from the educational program and activities of the school. Douglas County is the third-largest school system in the state, serving more than 62,000 students in 92 schools.

Smith says in recent years, district leaders realized they needed a better way to house 504 information. “We didn’t have a systemized way or a dedicated platform to keep all the important data in one place,” she says. “Instead, we had stored all our 504 information in digital documents, which wasn’t working well.” After looking at a number of options, Douglas County selected Project 504 from Project Education, launching the platform in February 2024.

Project 504 is a fully customizable, web-based program designed to document and track students’ 504 plans, helping to ensure compliance

by monitoring student assessments, grades, schedules, attendance, discipline data, and overall progress. Automatic email alerts keep teachers, administrators and parents informed.

“Project 504 had the features we were looking for,” Smith says. Now, we can easily see data such as how many students we have in the district with a 504, what the most common disabilities are, what the most common accommodations are, and more. That data helps us provide training, develop common expectations, and develop more effective professional development.”

### Insights at all levels

Project 504 has already been useful at the school, district, and individual student levels. “For example, in response to new state legislation about serving students with dyslexia, we can easily pull a report showing how many students have dyslexia listed as a reason for a 504, and what accommodations are being made, to make more informed decisions,” Smith says.

“For principals, it’s going to be so much easier for school-level teams to monitor and track interventions. And on the individual level, in a parent meeting you can call up everything about their child’s 504 quickly and easily,” she says.



Dr. Kelli Smith

“In the past, we would have to print out and hand deliver each student’s accommodation plan to their teacher. For thousands of students, that took a huge amount of time. Now, Project 504 enables us to send those digitally, with a read receipt so we know if the teacher has looked at it.”

Smith notes that the district will be adding the Parent Portal in the future, which will solve many issues. “The portal will give parents a single place to see all the plans and information about their student. If parents feel like something isn’t working for their child, this will enable them to see what the options are in a formal way. That will help put them at ease and make them feel more secure about the support we provide.”