

# Focus on Special Education

Public schools are required to meet the educational needs of all children. For some, these needs may require specialized services tailored for individual students' success. The education of children with disabilities is one of the most important responsibilities of public schools.

To do this effectively, however, requires appropriate funding and resources for school districts. Faced with extensive state and federal mandates, districts are struggling to meet the diverse needs of special education students.

## What is Special Education?

Special education consists of an extensive array of services. Special education students receive specialized instruction and, in some cases, also receive related services that are necessary for them, including:

- Transportation to and from school
- Physical, occupational and speech therapy
- Health services
- Specialized physical education

In Pennsylvania, special education services can be delivered in the resident school district, at a regional intermediate unit or, in the most severe cases, through an approved private school. School districts, parents and sometimes the state help determine how these special needs can best be met.

## How Special Education is Funded

Special education is one of the most highly prescribed instructional programs of public schools. Because eligibility requirements and program standards are largely dictated by the federal and state governments and cannot easily be changed, school districts are limited in their ability to keep expenditures in line with available revenues.

The cost of providing special education has become a major portion of many school district budgets. These rising expenses have many causes, some of which are:

- Increased enrollment of students in special education programs.
- More and very expensive support and related services.
- Increased training for regular and special education school personnel, parents and the local community.
- Detailed record-keeping and documentation as mandated by state and federal laws and regulations.
- Court-ordered services.

The mandated right to special education services guarantees that all eligible students will receive appropriate programs and services. A lack of funding, personnel or other resources does not allow a school district to withhold specialized programs and services from eligible students.



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Districts must ensure that funding is in place and adequate personnel and other resources are available to deliver a free and appropriate public education to all students with disabilities.

While the law ensures all children access to special education, school districts continually worry about how to pay for the cost of these programs. Special education program costs greatly exceed the cost of regular education, in many cases by thousands of dollars per student. As these costs continue to grow, Pennsylvania's public school districts are facing a very real financial crisis.

Increasingly, school districts of all descriptions – rural, urban and suburban, large and small – are experiencing the need to increase taxes or make cuts in regular education programs in order to cover the growing costs of special education. This is due, in large part, to the current formula for distributing state funds for this important program.

More than a decade ago, the state guaranteed payment to school districts for the “excess costs” of special education services. However, this system was abandoned in favor of a funding formula under which state government no longer provides the extra dollars needed to pay for extraordinary expenses. The formula sends aid to school districts as if students with special education needs are evenly distributed across the commonwealth and assumes that all special education costs are the same statewide.

The result of this funding change is that many districts with a high percentage of special-needs children must shift money from regular instructional programs and/or increase local property taxes to fund special education. Because districts already struggle with decreased local revenues and an unequal state funding system, the burden of providing much-needed services for children with disabilities while providing a quality educational program for all other students is stretching tax dollars and local communities to the breaking point.

