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# Special Education Funding In Wisconsin

What do you need to know?

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## Learn in My Shoes



Last year, we organized events that focused on the experiences of Wisconsin students and families navigating special education services. We gathered hundreds of examples of lived experiences and attached each to a pair of shoes. One shoe was delivered to that student's Assembly Representative and one to their State Senator with the request for special education to be reimbursed at 60% in the state budget.

Sharing knowledge, lived experience, and lifting student and family voice are some of the most powerful tools the disability community has.

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## First a Little Background Information:

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that makes available a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities and ensures special education and related services to those children.
- IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.
- IDEA gives children with disabilities the legal right to a free appropriate public education.
- IDEA was intended to be funded by states paying 60% of special education costs and the federal government paying 40%. IDEA has never been funded as intended.

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## A High-Level View of Special Education Funding:

- Education funding is complicated. Let's look at the basics:
  - Special education is funded separately from general education.
  - All students are general education students first, but special education funding is meant to support schools in providing FAPE to students with disabilities.
  - Funding for special education services comes from a few different sources, including the federal government, state government, and medicaid.

Today, we will be discussing the state government portion of special education funding.

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## A High-Level View of Special Education Funding

- Currently, Wisconsin public schools receive approximately 35 cents back from the state for every dollar spent on special education.
- The latest state budget included a special education increase from 33% to 42% in the first year of the budget, increasing to 45% the second year.

**So why are schools still only receiving 35%?**

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## The Problem

- When the legislature funds special education, it does so by making an appropriation that is either sum sufficient or sum certain.
  - Sum sufficient is guaranteed funding = every school receives 42-45%.
  - Sum certain means a certain amount of funding is set aside. When that sum certain amount is gone, it's gone.
- The special education funding increase that passed in the last budget was sum certain. It was not enough to meet the support needs of students with disabilities. This drives down the actual percentage of special education spending districts are reimbursed for.

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## How Does this Affect Students?

A lack of adequate funding to support students with disabilities can lead to:

- Less access to quality therapeutic services
- Not enough classroom support
- Inadequate training & pay for support staff
- A lack or shortage of assistive technology
- Frustration for families, students, and school staff

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## How Does this Affect Students?

Special education services are legally mandated, meaning schools must provide them.

In order to cover special education fund deficits, districts are forced to take from their general education fund. This affects special education students, general education students, school staff, and often local taxpayers.

- In 2024, 147 out of the 421 Wisconsin school districts placed operating referendum questions on local ballots, with a combined annual cost of \$763 million.
- In 16 districts, unreimbursed special education costs accounted for 100% or more of the annual operating referendum amount.

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## So What Is The Issue?

- Special Education Funding from both the state and federal levels are currently lacking and inflation is increasing costs.
- The difference for the funding comes out of the general education fund which lowers the amount per pupil that can be spent in each district.
- This leads to stretching resources thin across the board, and it affects everyone.
  - The rate of out of school suspensions is over 4x higher for students with disabilities than those without.
  - Students with disabilities make up 77% of incidents of restraint and 80% of incidents of seclusion.

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## So What Can We Do?

- Advocate!
- Tell your legislators how you feel about this.
  - Legislators are generalists.
  - They don't know what they don't know.
- Tell your family, friends, and neighbors about this issue. The lack of funding for Special Education affects all of us.

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## Any Questions?

Feel free to reach out to Melissa Custer or Tiffany Schanno via [learninmyshoes@gmail.com](mailto:learninmyshoes@gmail.com).

You can also find us on [Facebook](#) and online at [learninmyshoeswi.org](http://learninmyshoeswi.org)