



More federal dollars sought for special education needs

by Veronica Thomas

State governments are finding it increasingly difficult to fund special education programs mandated by federal law.

Since 1975, when the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was passed to guarantee students with disabilities the right to a free education, special education costs have risen significantly. Several factors have caused the increase. According to data from the American Institutes for Research, those factors include the de-institutionalization of children with severe disabilities, lower student-teacher rates, and advances in technology and facility improvements that have increased accessibility for the disabled.

As more children with severe special needs enter the public schools, additional staff, programming and money are required. There also has been a rise in the number of children diagnosed with “non-severe” learning disabilities. Since 1988, 60 percent of enrollment in special education has been children with learning disabilities. An estimated 75 percent of new costs are allocated to the category of “non-severe” disabilities.

These special education needs are putting a strain on state budgets. This year, many state policymakers have been closely following congressional action in Washington, D.C., with the hope that the federal government will provide more money for special education.

Under IDEA, the federal government was supposed to provide states with 40 percent of the funding needed to provide services for students with special needs. Instead, Congress has contributed between 6 percent and 15 percent per year.

“A lot of people don’t realize that the formula the feds use is 40 percent of what it costs to educate an average student in the country,” says Kansas Rep. Kenny Wilk, a Republican from Lansing. “That’s a cost that is significantly less than the average cost of educating a special education student. This is a key fact that’s lost to most people.”

According to Wilk, the federal government pays for about 12 percent of his state’s special education costs. In July, he sent a letter to George Bush asking the president “to rethink his whole education policy.”

“The best single reform for education is for the federal government to fully fund the 40 percent,” Wilk believes. “If we got the full 40 percent, it would free up about \$160 million that we could use for other things in the K-12 system.”

“Not getting the 40 percent doesn’t hurt our

special education programs, they’re mandatory,” he adds. “It’s the other 85 percent of the kids in the K-12 system that get shortchanged when there’s not enough to go around. It’s very challenging.”

Several bills are now pending in the U.S. Congress that would require the 40 percent federal funding. Under a bill titled “Helping Children Succeed by Fully Funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,” special education would be automatically funded each year, and annual increases for inflation would be factored in. The bill would increase special education funding by \$2.5 billion over each of the next six years to reach the 40 percent goal — about \$22 billion — by 2007.

State Sen. Nancy Boettger, a Republican from Harlan who chairs the Iowa Senate’s Education Committee, says more funding from the federal government would certainly help.

“Not getting the promised funding is really putting a burden on the state and school districts,” she says.

Michigan Sen. Bob Emerson, a Democrat from Flint, agrees: “The cost of special education services is increasing at an alarming rate, and the state is already struggling to pay for these services. As additional federal mandates continue to filter down to us, without the needed funds to pay for them, it becomes a no-win situation for us all.”

Emerson says the state of Michigan must absorb 100 percent of the costs because of the Headlee Amendment, which constitutionally requires the state to pay for special education services.

“We’re required to fully fund all federal mandates with state dollars,” he adds. “As our current economic outlook points toward a slow recession, this is becoming more and more difficult.”

Special needs

States use several different formulas to finance the cost of educating a special needs student. Some states’ formulas weigh all special education students equally (meaning the money given to a school district is the same for a student with a substantial disability as a child with a minor one.) Other states have different categories for special education students and provide each with a specific weight.

Iowa weighs a student based on his or her ability to spend time in a regular classroom. The state’s law does not differentiate between students who have a physical handicap and those who are learning disabled. Thus, a physically handicapped student who is able to spend the majority of his or her day in a regular classroom would receive less funding than a student with a learning disability who must spend the day in a special education class.

Statistics from the National Center for Policy Analysis indicate that more than one in 10 children now qualify for special education in some way. The cost of educating a disabled student can sometimes be as much as \$25,000 per year — compared to \$5,000 per student in regular education.

Since passage of IDEA, many special needs students have been successfully mainstreamed into classrooms with non-disabled students. “It gives regular students a chance to have good friends who are special education kids,” Boettger says. “The program also helps disabled kids feel like they’re a part of things.”

But mainstreaming does create new challenges for policymakers. The Indiana Civil Liberties Union brought a suit challenging a state re-

quirement that students with disabilities pass a high school graduation test before receiving a diploma. The group argued that disabled students had not been prepared for the test as thoroughly as their peers. In June, the Indiana Court of Appeals upheld the requirement.

Indiana Rep. F. Dale Grubb, a Democrat from Covington, has been pushing for legislation that would waive the test for students with disabilities who otherwise are eligible to graduate.

“It’s not right that there are students working to the best of their ability, and they can’t get a diploma,” he explains. “They need to feel the sense of accomplishment that comes with a diploma.”

Iowa allows special needs children to attend college without receiving a diploma. Boettger says one of the state’s most successful programs is one that helps special needs children receive specialized training so they can obtain and retain work.

State policymakers will continue to search for ways to better educate special needs children. In the future, many hope to receive more financial assistance from the federal government.

Year	Cost
1982-83	\$5,010
1987-88	\$6,210
1993-94	\$6,453
1998-99	\$7,612

Source: American Institutes for Research

Disability	1988-89	1998-99	Growth
Severe	789,418	965,598	22%
Non-severe	3,384,094	4,575,190	35%

Source: American Institutes for Research