

Special Education Funding Reform in Pennsylvania

December 1, 2008

Core Principles

1. Providing a quality public education for children with disabilities is important for the well-being of families and communities throughout the Commonwealth. Every Pennsylvanian benefits from this investment.
2. Educators know how to help students with disabilities to succeed in school, or can be trained on these skills. The missing ingredient is often the funding needed to support professional development, quality instruction, and support services.
3. Pennsylvania's system for funding special education is broken and must be fixed. Currently, the state is distributing funds without a rational system related to student and district needs. The level of state funding is also too low, which forces local school districts to carry an excessive burden and puts pressure on property taxes.
4. Another consequence of insufficient resources is that schools do not effectively include and educate eligible students with disabilities in regular classrooms with supports. Pennsylvania ranks among the states offering the least inclusion, despite legal mandates for considering this process and despite proven benefits in school and after graduation for students with disabilities, with some exceptions, and their peers. Funding and accountability reforms are needed for increasing the amount and quality of appropriate inclusion in public schools.
5. The Governor and General Assembly have a constitutional responsibility for implementing major reforms to the state system for special education funding and accountability. In 2008, the Commonwealth adopted comprehensive reforms to the funding system for public education, but failed to include special education in these reforms. Special education reforms should not be delayed past June 2009, as part of the budget for fiscal year 2009-10.

Summary of Proposed Legislation

New Formula for Special Education Funding by the State.

Special education funding should be calculated and distributed through an independent formula so that each district receives state funding based on: (i) a five-year average of actual student enrollment in special education; (ii) a single multiplier (1.3) reflecting additional costs for educating students with all levels of disability above the "base cost" for other students, based on the 2007 Costing-out Study; (iii) an additional ten percent multiplier providing funding for districts that raise their average rate and quality of educating eligible students in regular classrooms; and (iv) annual adjustments for inflation, local wealth, tax effort, and local cost factors. Additional funding should be gradually appropriated by the General Assembly over the next five years, until an adequate level of funding is reached. The Contingency Fund for special education should be maintained, increased in size, prioritized for districts with low wealth and high tax effort, and utilized to provide resources both for unanticipated extraordinary expenses and to provide incentives for districts making extraordinary improvement in meeting high standards for quality special education.

Special Education Accountability to Commonwealth Taxpayers.

The state should enhance and enforce the current accountability systems for special education to ensure that school districts use funding effectively to meet student needs and do not over-identify students. Special education plans by districts should include: (i) a budget and implementation benchmarks; and (ii) an explanation of how resources – especially increased funding – will be used for research-based programs and supports benefiting students with disabilities, improving student achievement, and addressing the challenges of teaching eligible students in regular classrooms.

Approved by the following organizations (2-6-09):

Disability Rights Network
Education Law Center
The Arc of Pennsylvania
ACHIEVA
Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania
Alliance for Infants
Western PA Coalition of Education Advocates
The Total Learning Center
Parent Education & Advocacy Leadership Center (PEAL)
Vision for Equality
Mentor Parent Program
Local Task Force on the Right to Education, IU2
The Parent Learning Support Network
Kids Together, Inc.
Pennsylvania's Education for All Coalition, Inc.
Philadelphia Right to Education Local Task Force #26
Center for Independent Living of North Central PA
Community Justice Project
Chester County Right to Education Task Force
Good Schools Pennsylvania
Parents United for Public Education
Local Task Force #3 (Allegheny Co.)
DuBois Special Education PTA
Coalition of Inclusion Advocates
Liberty Resources
Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALFIE)
Local Task Force on the Right To Education, Delaware County
Pennsylvania TASH
Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia
Public Citizens for Children and Youth
Autism Sharing and Parenting
Pennsylvania NAACP
Philadelphia Student Union
Support Center for Child Advocates
The Arc of Northeastern PA
Statewide Early Intervention Coalition of Advocates

(Other approvals pending)

➤ **For information contact:**

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