

EDUCATION BUDGET PRIORITIES

STATEMENT

Improving Education for Wisconsin Students with Disabilities. Survival Coalition supports high expectations for all students with disabilities. This means students must be fully included in their general education curriculum and classroom, learning alongside their peers and are supported to be career and workforce ready. An investment in quality public education for every child with a disability should result in access to postsecondary education or competitive employment in the community and the skills to live independently with necessary supports. Wisconsin parents of children with disabilities are reporting significant dissatisfaction with special education supports and sometimes reporting critical concerns due to lack of funding in special education.

BACKGROUND

Wisconsin public schools educate 867,800 students; approximately 14% of those children have disabilities and qualify for special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). These services may include education related therapies, classroom accommodations, modified curriculum, or one-on-one support. Research shows us even students with the most significant disabilities can make progress in grade level content when provided with appropriate supports. Unfortunately, academic performance for Wisconsin students with disabilities is poor. The 2017 4th grade reading scores recently released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress show Wisconsin students with disabilities scoring nearly 10 points below the national average (177 to 184). Approximately 76% of Wisconsin 4th graders with disabilities scored “below basic” in reading.

Special education categorical aid in Wisconsin has remained flat for a decade while special education costs have increased over 60% since 2000 and the rate of reimbursement has fallen from 35.8% to 25.7%. The current special education reimbursement rate for Wisconsin public schools forces Districts to make tough choices to make up the difference. At the same time, funding for the special needs scholarship program will balloon this year to 90% of the cost to educate a student with a disability. This shows unfair state funding support for the great majority of students who receive their special education in public schools. In many areas of Wisconsin students with disabilities have no choice school options, or these schools indicate they cannot meet a child’s needs.

574 parents of students with disabilities responded to a recent Survival Coalition survey about the quality of special education in Wisconsin. Families shared significant concerns around loss

of staff, poor implementation of services, increases in disciplinary measures and concerns for their children's future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Invest in Students with Disabilities in our Wisconsin Public Schools

- Increase state special education categorical aid funding to keep pace with local costs. Support an additional \$600 million in special education categorical aid. Fund 60% of costs up from 26%, addressing a decade-long funding freeze by the 2nd year of the biennium.
- Even out the reimbursement rate for the special needs scholarship program to more closely match the reimbursement rate for students with disabilities in public schools.

Support Families to Advocate for Results and Quality Special Education

- Initiate a meaningful audit of special education quality and outcomes, including the preparation of students with disabilities for college and the workforce.
- Direct DPI to develop an internal special education quality improvement plan to address achievement gaps for students with disabilities. Direct DPI to set benchmarks for targeted areas (i.e. academic, disciplinary, least restrictive environment and college/workforce readiness indicators and report annually to the legislature.
- Require a review of the quality of education provided to students with the most significant disabilities and outcomes in state-funded County Children with Disability Education Boards. Require CCDEBs to be placed within the state's school accountability system to provide parents with information on student academic, post-school and other outcomes before their children are placed in these settings.
- Support enhancement of the current school accountability system to ensure that schools of all kinds – public, voucher, charter, County Children with Disability Education Boards (CCDEBs) report similar data and that allows for informed choice and comparison between options for parents.

Support Students with Behavioral Needs to Succeed

- Increase the state investment in statewide implementation of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports. (PBIS) is an evidence-based strategy that gives teachers critical tools to increase academic performance of all students while managing a positive environment and contributing to school safety. School safety proposals must include funding for increased PBIS in Wisconsin schools.
- Support legislation to limit the use of restraint and seclusion in schools.

- Expand categorical aid funding for school mental health staff. Increase categorical aid funding to \$44 million and expand to include more pupil services staff extend including school counselors, psychologists, and nurses.
- Increase community and school collaborative mental health grants. Increase grant funding to \$10 million to support integration and co-location of community mental health services in schools.
- Provide \$5 million in statewide training and support to include the creation of a new state program to fund parent peer specialist to help assist families in overcoming emotional and mental health challenges.
- Expand statewide training for school staff and community partners around mental health screening and interventions. Increase funding to \$1.42 million for statewide training in Youth Mental Health First Aid, Trauma Sensitive Schools, and SBIRT (Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral and Treatment).

Focus on Youth Outcomes in Transition

- Increase the Transition Readiness grants from the current \$1.5 million up to \$5 million annually to better prepare students with disabilities for community employment and independence after high school by meeting their transition goals.

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Visit the Survival web site at: www.survivalcoalitionwi.org

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Wisconsin Investing in People with Disabilities***