



of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

Who are the people impacted by this issue?

Wisconsin public schools educate over 829,000 students; among those students, 14.5% or nearly 120,000 have disabilities and qualify for special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Why is education for students with disabilities important?

- Research shows that even students with the most significant disabilities can make progress in grade level content when provided with appropriate supports.
- Investing in quality public education helps students access post-secondary education or competitive employment in the community, and fosters skills for independent living.
- When students with disabilities are included in the general education curriculum and classroom and supported to meet high expectations, all students are better prepared to value one another's presence and contributions as adults in the community.

How are education supports for students with disabilities funded?

Special education services are funded at three levels: federal, state, and local.

- **Federal:** Federal IDEA funding was initially intended to cover 40% of special education costs, but the reality has never matched the promise, falling below 16% in recent years.
- **State:** Wisconsin reimbursed districts at a rate of 30% for their special education costs in 2021/22. However, between 1981 and 2020 Wisconsin's reimbursement rate fell from a high of 67% to a low of 25%. Meanwhile, the Wisconsin state budget pays at least 90% of costs for students using special needs scholarships at private schools.
- **Local:** School districts are responsible under federal law to provide a free, appropriate education for students with disabilities. The portion of special education costs not covered by federal and state funding must therefore, come from local levies. After accounting for state special education reimbursement and federal IDEA funds, Wisconsin districts were left with a bill of \$1.25 billion in unfunded special education costs. As costs have risen across time, with federal and state funding failing to keep up, Wisconsin's school districts have been increasingly pressed to make difficult choices.

Students of color with disabilities have some of the poorest outcomes in Wisconsin and on national comparisons.

In recent Survival Coalition surveys, families have shared significant concerns around loss of staff, poor implementation of services, increases in disciplinary measures and concerns for their children's future.



EDUCATION

What are major concerns related to education for students with disabilities?

- Wisconsin students with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to:
 - ◊ graduate in four years with a regular diploma
 - ◊ score proficiently on standardized tests
 - ◊ work in the community after completing high school.
- Students with disabilities are too often educated in segregated environments and are far more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience inappropriate restraint and seclusion and to be suspended or expelled from school.

