

Who are the people impacted by this issue?

Wisconsin public schools educate nearly 855,000 students; among those students, 14% or about 102,350 have disabilities and qualify for special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Wisconsin supports students with disabilities in 12 program areas, including speech/language, learning disability, autism, emotional/behavioral disability, and intellectual disability. Examples of services include education related therapies, classroom accommodations, modified curriculum, and additional staff support.

Why is this issue important?

Research shows that even students with the most significant disabilities can make progress in grade level content when provided with appropriate supports. 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 provided with support 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.

How are supports for this issue funded?

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

Federal: The 1975 federal law that became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally passed with the intention to federally-fund 40% of special education costs, but the reality has never matched the promise. Federal funding currently covers less than 15% of the costs of special education.

State: Wisconsin's 2019/2021 state budget included the first increase for special education in over a decade, such that the state was to reimburse districts for 26% of special education costs in FY2020 and 30% in FY2021. However, twenty years ago Wisconsin's reimbursement rate was 35.8% and has fallen over the years from a high of 60% of special education costs.

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. 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. Although special education enrollment has declined modestly over the past decade, costs have increased by an estimated 18.3%.

What are major concerns related to this issue?

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; and work in the community after completing high school. In addition, students with disabilities are too often educated in segregated environments, and are far more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience inappropriate seclusion and/or restraint and to be suspended or expelled from school. Students of color with disabilities have some of the poorest outcomes in our state and also when compared nationally.



EDUCATION

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.

How has this issue been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The statewide closure of schools in March 2020 created unprecedented challenge for students with disabilities and their families. District efforts to move to virtual learning have varied in their support for students with disabilities. Technology-related access and implementation challenges have been rampant, as well as scheduling challenges for parents who have struggled to juggle working from home, caring for children with complex needs at home, and facilitating education for students who need significant individual attention. The pandemic and the focus on virtual instruction has shed light on the digital divide with an estimated 40,000 students without access to the tools needed to benefit from instruction. Families remain concerned that new protocols put in place to reopen schools may be difficult or impossible for some students to comply with. Many students have fallen behind and will need additional special education services to make up for education they did not receive during the school closure or may have trouble accessing in the new school year. Families are also concerned for safety as the pandemic continues, and how to balance their students' medical needs with their social, emotional, and educational needs.

