

Beaver County Times

Huge gap: State and federal governments fall short on special ed funding

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Don't blame school districts for the shortfall in funding for special education in Pennsylvania.

It's the state and federal governments that aren't putting their money where their mandates are.

Last week, a report done for the Education Law Center, Disability Rights Network and the Arc of Pennsylvania found that 391 of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts are spending less than a basic adequacy level on special education.

The study, done by Denver-based Augenblick, Palaich and Associates Inc., calculated that the base cost for the average student in Pennsylvania was \$8,003 for the 2005-06 school year.

This base cost did not include food service costs, transportation costs, capital costs such as school building construction, debt service costs, etc.

However, the additional cost of educating a special-education student was determined to be \$10,404, bringing the total cost to \$18,407. Four out of every five school districts in the commonwealth failed to achieve the \$10,404 funding benchmark.

Don't blame the school districts. "Children with disabilities have a right to expect the basic services they need to succeed in school, but most school districts do not have the local resources to support their legitimate needs without additional state funding," the report noted.

Or federal funding, for that matter.

Let's start with the state. Its funding formula for special education has no basis in reality on two points.

First, it assumes special education students will account for 16 percent of a district's enrollment. Whether the district has a higher or lower percentage doesn't matter.

Second, the state does not take into account the true cost of meeting the educational needs of these children. If that exceeds the amount of the state subsidy, the school district must make up the difference.

The federal government is even more egregious in its lack of support.

When the Individuals with Disabilities Act was enacted in 1975, it promised to pick up 40 percent of the tab.

Dream on.

According to the Augenblick study, special-education revenues for students in Pennsylvania in 2007-08 broke down as follows: local, 54 percent; state, 32 percent; and federal, 14 percent.

Let's put the blame for this funding shortfall where it belongs, on the state and federal governments for not holding up their end of the bargain.