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Study: Pa. short on special-ed funding

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Most school districts in Pennsylvania are not spending enough to meet the basic needs of special education students, according to a new study.

The study found that 391 of the state's 501 school districts are spending less than a basic-adequacy level on special education. Combined, that amounts to a shortfall of \$380 million annually, or \$1,947 per special education student.

The study was done by Augenblick, Palaich & Associates for the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania, Disability Rights Network, and Arc of Pennsylvania.

The consultants calculated the base cost for the typical student in Pennsylvania at \$8,003 in 2005-06. The base cost does not include food, transportation, debt service and capital costs. They figured the additional base cost for a typical special education student at \$10,404, bringing the total to \$18,407.

The report states that the additional cost "does not represent a 'luxury' model for special education, but merely the basic expectation that students with disabilities and their schools will have the essential resources needed to provide a fundamental, quality education under state and federal law. Without this adequate level of resources, educational quality for all students is compromised."

In 2007, the same firm did an education cost study ordered by the state legislature. That study led last year to a significant change in the formula used to determine how state basic education subsidies are distributed among school districts. But the state formula for special education funding was not changed.

For years, the state has allotted money based on the assumption that 16 percent of students in each district are in special education. The actual percentage varies by district. Many school districts also pay for a substantial portion of special education costs with local tax dollars.

The report was released last week and is to be highlighted today at news conferences in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. It also is the subject of a hearing before the House subcommittee on special education tomorrow.

Sandy Zelno, school reform associate of the Education Law Center, said the state needs to improve the funding formula. "Students with disabilities are not second-class citizens," she said.

Even if there is not enough money to fully fund programs now, she said, the state could phase such funding in, as it is doing with the new basic-education subsidy formula.

She said it was estimated that the state share of the \$380 million shortfall would be about \$224 million.

Under federal and state law, school districts cannot use cost as a reason not to provide special education services.

But the report said that some districts try to minimize costs by delaying the identification of eligible children, evaluating children's needs to emphasize less costly disabilities, recommending only some of the possible services, and recommending that services be provided less often than is optimal.