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Most schools in Pa. underfund special education

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By Eleanor Chute for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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 and Associates Inc. for the Education Law Center, Disability Rights Network and the Arc of Pennsylvania.

The consultants calculated the base cost for the average student in Pennsylvania at \$8,003 in 2005-06. The base cost does not include food, transportation, debt service and capital costs.

They figured that the additional base cost for an average special education student at \$10,404, bringing the total to \$18,407.

The report states 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 Denver firm did an education costing-out study ordered by the state Legislature. That study last year led 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. In reality, the percentage is higher or lower in most districts.

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 events in Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and Philadelphia. It also is the subject of a hearing before the House subcommittee on special education in Harrisburg tomorrow.

In the report, the average base cost is adjusted for each district. It says that Pittsburgh, for example, in 2006-07 spent an additional \$13,154 per special education student, which is more than its costing-out estimate of \$10,501 in additional costs for the city.

Advocates long have wanted the state formula changed to reflect the actual number of special education students.

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 it now, she said the state could phase it in, as it is doing with the new basic education subsidy formula. She said it is estimated the state share of the \$380 million shortfall would be about \$224 million.

Nancy Murray, president of the Arc of Greater Pittsburgh, said she was disappointed that the governor's budget proposal released last week did not include an increase in special education funding even though it called for an increase for basic education. It also did not change the formula.

"Each year, Pennsylvania is falling further behind in terms of funding per student that we're seeing go to special education," she said.

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 services be provided less often than optimal.

The full report can be found at www.elc-pa.org.

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