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State aid levels leave school districts scrambling to fund special ed

By Craig Smith
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The Sto-Rox School District expects to receive about \$1 million this year from the state to help pay more than \$3.4 million in special education costs.

The difference — about 8 mills in real estate levies — has to come from district taxpayers because of an inadequate special education funding formula in Pennsylvania, school officials said.

"They can't continue to ignore this elephant in the room," said Ed Maritz, a Sto-Rox school director who today will join officials from across Pennsylvania to urge state lawmakers to enact special education funding reforms.

West Mifflin School District will use almost 3 mills to pay the difference between its \$4.7 million in special education costs and the \$1.8 million subsidy it anticipates from the state.

"We're talking funding gap," business manager Dennis Cmar said.

Most school districts in Pennsylvania lack basic resources to provide a quality education to children with disabilities, according to a report Maritz and other officials will discuss today.

Commissioned by The Arc of Pennsylvania, the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania and the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania, the report provides a detailed account of the shortage in "adequate" annual funding levels.

Almost 400 of the state's 500 school districts have inadequate funding for special education, averaging an annual shortfall of \$1 million per district, the report by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates of Denver said. The total gap in annual funding for special education in Pennsylvania is \$380 million.

"There are adequacy gaps in all districts. You have to prioritize," said Michael Race, spokesman for the Department of Education. "We're trying to rectify the problem of school funding in Pennsylvania."

In a year in which the state faces a \$2.3 billion budget deficit, the education department cut \$205 million from its \$9 billion budget, including \$87 million in program cuts, he said.

Advocates said they realize times are tough, but the state could revise its funding formula and spread full funding over a period of years.

"We're not unreasonable folks. We understand tough economic times," said Sandra L. Zelno, school reform associate at the Education Law Center.

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Falling short

Almost 400 school districts have inadequate money for special education, averaging an annual shortfall of nearly \$1 million per district.

Statewide, the gap in annual funding for special education is \$380 million.

The average per-pupil shortfall is \$1,950, based on a total of 194,862 students in districts with funding shortfalls.

Providing a basic, quality education for students eligible for special education requires, on average, more than twice the cost of teaching students without special needs.

Source: Costing-Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania's Education Goals for Students with Disabilities