

# Somerset Daily American

## Study: Schools fall short on special education funding

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By VICKI ROCK  
Daily American Staff Writer

Most school districts in Pennsylvania, including all those in Somerset County, are not spending enough on special education to meet the students' basic needs, according to a new study.

Augenblick, Palaich and Associates of Denver conducted the study for the Education Law Center, Disability Rights Network and the Arc of Pennsylvania, an advocacy organization for people with disabilities.

The costing-out study found that 391 of the state's 501 districts are spending less than an adequate amount on special education. It is a shortfall of \$380 million annually, or \$1,947 per special education student.

The consultant determined that the base cost for the average student was \$8,003 in 2005-06, not including food, transportation, debt service and capital costs. The additional base cost for an average special education student is \$10,404, bringing the total to \$18,407. The report is to be the subject of a hearing before the House subcommittee on special education.

In Somerset County, Windber Area School District spent the most money on special education students. The report states that Windber spends \$8,287 per special education student in addition to the basic education subsidy.

"We try to look at special education a little different, not as a different program," said Superintendent Rick Huffman. "We see it as a different way of students learning and the different way we provide education. We have adaptive learning for all students from the most challenged to the most capable. We provide an environment for students to achieve. We look at how we can provide the best learning environment for individual students."

In the next two years, the Windber district is going to look at various issues regarding student needs, he said. Administrators will partner with Windber Medical Center to take a holistic approach to learning, looking at issues including child development, nutrition and sleep deprivation.

"I believe we all have the best interests of the students in mind," Huffman said. "The money that we have has to be spent effectively and appropriately for the students' needs."

Somerset Area School District spends \$6,885 per special education student in addition to the basic education subsidy, according to the report. Rebecca Bittner, special education director for the Somerset district, said the state and federal government make many mandates about

special education, but then under-fund programs to support the students' needs.

“The local district does a good job of meeting the needs without the state and federal funding,” she said. “Special education can be very expensive - some students have multiple disabilities. I've been here since 2003, and I'd say the local school board does a good job of meeting the needs of special education students.”

M.J. Bartelmay Jr., president of the Arc of Pennsylvania, said Gov. Edward Rendell's proposed budget calls for no increase in state funding for special education. The basic education subsidy for students without disabilities includes a 5.7 percent increase.

“My son has Down syndrome and relies on special education,” Bartelmay said in a release. “With this budget, the governor is telling me my son isn't important.”

This budget in fiscal year 2008-09 included a 1.7 percent increase for special education, while basic education received 5.5 percent.

Michael Race, press secretary for the Department of Education, said the department is aware of the study and is reviewing it. They hoped to be briefed by the Education Law Center.

“I can't comment on specific findings until we are briefed,” he said. “The Department of Education shares the concern that all students are provided the adequate resources for learning, including special education students.”

The full report is available online at [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org).

(Vicki Rock can be reached at [vickir@dailyamerican.com](mailto:vickir@dailyamerican.com).)