



Status quo won't work on Pennsylvania special ed funding

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Patriot-News Op-Ed

Children with disabilities often experience tremendous challenges when they reach adulthood. National research shows that about 70 percent of all adults with disabilities are unemployed.

That often translates to a greater reliance on public benefits and significant isolation from the world of work, taxes, elections, shopping malls and everything else that constitutes full participation in Pennsylvania community life.

Ensuring a quality education for all children in all public schools in Pennsylvania is the first step in preventing this unfortunate outcome.



Daniel Shaffer takes part as special education teacher Penny Greyhosky reads a story about the letter "K" at Oak Flat Elementary School. Daniel's communication facilitator, Adda Jasper, at left, signs the reading and instructions to Daniel. DAN GLEITER/THE PATRIOT-NEWS

Each school district must have the resources to offer effective education and special supports for students with disabilities. Adequate funding is important and it must be spent on strategies with a track record of helping children succeed.

Most students eligible for special education can learn and achieve to high levels along with other students if they receive the extra supports and services necessary to accommodate their disabilities.

But in 2008, the General Assembly increased special education funding only 1.6 percent, while funding for other students was increased 5.2 percent.

In 2009, the state provided no increase for special education, while basic education funding was increased 5.7 percent.

In his initial budget proposal for 2010-11, Gov. Rendell provides special education with no increase.

Given the economic crisis, it's hard to complain when special education for students with disabilities is not

cut like so many other programs.

On the other hand, special education is one of the fastest-growing cost items for public schools, and flat funding by the state for a second consecutive year falls far short of actual expenses.

This merely shifts the burden to local property taxes. In short, the current state system of funding and accountability for students with disabilities is completely broken.

Year after year, state officials have told families and disability advocates to be patient. But these important needs now seem to have been forgotten by many. Some brave legislators from both parties have decided that this situation cannot continue.

More than 80 state representatives and senators have co-sponsored House Bill 704 and Senate Bill 940. These bills would fix the state system for special education funding and accountability.

In 2009, the House Education Committee twice approved House Bill 704, by large bipartisan majority votes of 22-3 and 23-2. This reform legislation is necessary and responsible.

There would be no additional cost until 2011, which is after the economy has had a chance to recover. The cost in subsequent years is reasonable, raising state expenditures for special education by about 3.5 percent per year through a six-year period.

It also ensures that these new investments would make a real difference for children with disabilities. The accountability section of the bill requires that school districts spend the new dollars on items that will improve academic outcomes for students.

It is long past time for our commonwealth to address these important issues. We urge the leaders of the General Assembly to move House Bill 704 and Senate Bill 940 toward passage.

All individuals must be given a chance to contribute to our commonwealth to the best of their abilities.

A quality public education is the silver bullet that can make a lifetime difference for children with disabilities, their families, and all Pennsylvania communities.

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