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All kids count: Fairly fund special education

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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. Unemployment is costly for the individual and for the broader society. It can mean 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. 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.

What is the current situation for special education in Pennsylvania?

--- More than 270,000 students eligible for special education attend public schools.

--- The one-year dropout rate is eight times higher for students with disabilities than for all students.

--- Fewer students with disabilities are taught by "highly qualified teachers" as defined by federal law.

--- Only 36 percent of students eligible for

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special education are passing state assessments in basic reading and math skills, compared to 72 percent of all students.

--- 54 percent of special education funding comes from local school districts, with 32 percent from the state and 14 percent from the federal government.

--- During the administration of Gov. Ed Rendell, state spending for special education has increased only half as much as basic education -- 12.5 percent total increase over seven years compared to 24.9 percent.

--- Money matters. Academic achievement for students with disabilities is twice as high in the 50 wealthiest districts as in the 50 poorest districts.

In 2006, the General Assembly commissioned a report on the resources needed to provide all students with a quality education. The Costing-out Study addressed the needs of all students, including recommendations for funding special education. Two years later, the General Assembly adopted a new system of funding and accountability for basic education that left out students with disabilities.

Costs are rising for the professional supports, extra services and assistive technology needed to educate these students. 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. And the state system for ensuring effective investment of special education resources to meet student needs remains outdated and slow to respond to problems.

In short, the 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 quite reasonable, raising state expenditures for special education by about 3.5 percent per year over a six-year period.

The reform legislation 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 things that will improve academic outcomes for students.

It is long past time for our commonwealth to address these important issues. We urge Gov. Rendell to talk about special education funding reform in his annual budget address on Tuesday. We urge the leaders of the General Assembly to move House Bill 704 and Senate Bill 940 toward passage by June at the latest.

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.

Here is a message for Gov. Rendell, Senate President Scarnati, House Speaker McCall, and all state officials: We are counting on your leadership to finally begin meeting the educational needs of children with disabilities. Act now.

Baruch Kintisch is director of policy advocacy for the Education Law Center. This column was also signed by Stephen Surovec, executive director, The Arc of Pennsylvania; Sallie Lynagh, children's project director, Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania; Janis Risch, executive director, Good Schools Pennsylvania.

Online

--- For more information about special education funding and to see a list of the 40 organizations supporting House Bill 704 and Senate Bill 940, see:

ReformSpecialEdFunding.org

--- For more data and analysis, see the comprehensive report posted at ReformSpecialEdFunding.org: [Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania's Education Goals for Students with Disabilities.](#)