

Pennsylvania's Continuing Pattern of Neglect

A Decade of Shortchanging Children with Disabilities

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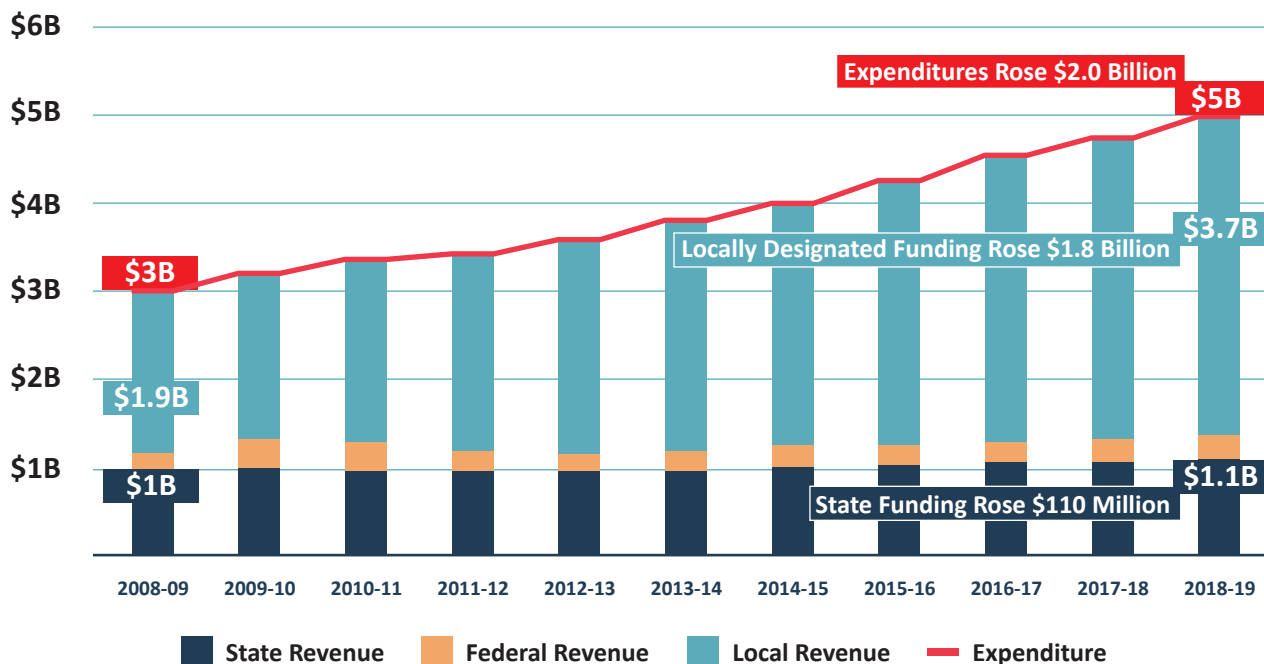
For the past decade, expenditures for educating students with disabilities in Pennsylvania have been climbing steadily, mirroring a national trend. For example, school districts across the state boosted their expenditures for special education by \$254 million in 2018-19, according to recently released [state data](#) on district spending. That was a 5% increase over the prior year.

In 2018-19, the most recent year for which we have comprehensive data, those rising costs were almost entirely borne by local school districts. The state chipped in just a \$15 million increase toward the \$254 million cost. Local districts were thereby forced, on average, to come up with 92 cents for every dollar in new special education expenses, a challenging task for the hundreds of school systems that are already struggling financially.

Thus, for yet another year, Pennsylvania retreated from its responsibility to educate students with disabilities — despite the fact that the state remains legally responsible under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for ensuring that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

The Education Law Center and the statewide PA Schools Work campaign have called out this disturbing pattern of unfairness in [reports issued in 2018](#) and [2019](#). We now can see clearly that this is a steadily worsening, decade-long trend of state neglect of these critical needs.

In Pennsylvania, State Funding for Students with Disabilities Flatlined as Special Education Expenditures Grew by \$2 Billion Over a Decade



Data analysis by Research for Action based on Annual Financial Reports from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Accessed from <https://bit.ly/36c1JdP>

Over that decade, the costs of educating students with disabilities in Pennsylvania public schools grew by a full \$2 billion. State aid for special education during that same period was a feeble response to those rapidly growing needs, climbing by only \$110 million, an average annual growth rate of just 1%. State aid was close to a flat line in a period of rapidly growing costs.

As a result, the state's share of special education funding has declined sharply:

- *Between 2008-09 and 2018-19, the share of special education costs covered by local districts grew from 62% to 73%.*
- *In the same period, the much smaller share of costs covered by state special education funding shrank from 32% to 22%. Over the course of a decade, the state share has been dropping steadily by about 1 percentage point annually.*

While comparable data are not yet available for the last school year or the current one, we can project that with the rapid growth in total special education costs, even the state's unprecedented \$50 million increase in special education funding for 2019-2020 was insufficient to reverse this trend. Statewide special education costs are growing by \$200-250 million per year. Yet the state flat-funded special education in the 2020-21 budget.

More and more, local school districts are confronting difficult choices: Do they raise additional revenue to meet funding gaps? Spread limited resources across a range of programs? Reduce needed services and supports for students with disabilities? Families continue to experience local tax increases and service cuts. A lack of state investment in basic education funding compounds these challenges, eroding the resources available to all students, including those with disabilities.

State dollars are the funds that state legislatures can and should use to address funding disparities resulting from differences in local wealth. When adequate basic and special education state funding is not available, poorer districts — the communities least able to compensate for state underfunding through local tax increases — and the students within them are acutely harmed. We know that this has a harsh impact on Black and Brown students in Pennsylvania, who are concentrated in the state's lowest-wealth districts.

For the state to meaningfully boost its share of support, recurring annual increases in state aid for special education of \$100 million or more are needed. While that will be difficult to achieve in the middle of a recession, the state must take action toward this goal. This is even more urgent as the challenges faced by school districts have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pennsylvania's chronic underfunding of special education is not going to be resolved by the legislature's Special Education Funding Commission, which is considering adjustments to the funding formula that determines how the available state funds are distributed — but is not charged with deciding what level of funding is necessary to meet the needs of students and districts. The General Assembly must make an increased state investment in special education as well as basic education. Without a plan for comprehensive state action, issues of inadequacy and inequity will continue to deepen for students with disabilities across the Commonwealth.

Changes in special education expenditures and revenues for all 500 Pennsylvania districts are provided in the spreadsheet found at bit.ly/spec-ed-2020.

The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, trainings, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, English learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness. Visit elc-pa.org or call 215-238-6970 (Philadelphia) or 412-258-2120 (Pittsburgh).

PA Schools Work is a coalition of organizations from across Pennsylvania representing teachers and other educators; urban, suburban and rural communities; and parents and other community members working together to advocate for PA public schools, their students, and the communities they serve.