
Costs and Numbers of Special Education Students Have Substantially Increased

SUMMARY

Minnesota school districts spent about twice as much to educate students who receive special education services compared with those who do not, according to a study by the Legislative Auditor. The study estimated the total cost of special education, identified reasons for the growth in special education spending, analyzed the population of special education students, and suggested ways to contain future cost increases and improve services.

Overall, the study found that Minnesota school districts spent \$1.1 billion, or about 21 percent of their total budgets, on special education students in fiscal year 1995. This includes \$693 million that was earmarked for special education services and \$432 million for the routine, indirect costs of public education plus the regular education that special education students typically receive. The average was about \$12,100 per special education student compared with \$5,800 per regular education student. The Legislative Auditor's results are consistent with national studies showing that the cost to educate special education students is 1.9 to 2.3 times greater than for regular education students.

The study also found that school district spending for special education services grew faster than inflation or school enrollment between 1988 and 1995. During that period, school districts' total ex-

penditures rose 11 percent while special education spending increased by 22 percent. The main reason for the spending increase was a decline in the number of special education students per staff member--from 6.6 in 1988 to 5.2 in 1995. The reduction in student/staff ratios was mainly due to increased numbers of aides and support staff, not teachers or administrators.

According to the study, Minnesota had about 101,000 special education students in 1996, and just over half of them had either of two main problems: learning disabilities (38 percent) or emotional/behavioral disorders (17 percent). Another 19 percent received special education mainly due to speech/language difficulties. Ten percent had some degree of mental impairment, also called mental retardation, and

9 percent had assorted problems in infancy or early childhood. The remaining 8 percent received special education services because of seven low-incidence conditions such as autism and blindness.

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Key Findings:

- School district spending for special education services grew 22 percent in constant dollars between 1988 and 1995, mainly because the number of students per staff member dropped from 6.6 to 5.2.
- The average cost to educate a special education student is about \$12,100 compared with \$5,800 per regular education student.
- Minnesota allows special education for more students than federally required but has less than the average percentage of special education students.
- Compared with the federal government, Minnesota imposes more administrative responsibilities on special educators.
- State and local policy makers could do more to contain special education costs and improve services.

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The study found that the percentage of Minnesota's students who received special education services increased from 7.4 percent in 1977 to 10.9 in 1996. More than half of the population growth occurred between 1977 and 1980 as the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act took effect. Since 1980, the percentage of special education students has generally increased each year. However, the data showed that the overall percentage of Minnesota's special education students was slightly less than the national and Midwestern averages of 11.2 percent.

Special education policy throughout the country is based on federal laws and rules, but the states can adopt broader eligibility criteria and impose additional requirements on local school districts. The study compared state and federal laws and rules and found that Minnesota makes special education available to a wider range of students than federally required. For example, Minnesota allows special education for students who have behavior problems, for preschoolers who have developmental delays, and for infants and toddlers beginning at birth. The federal government does not require special education for students with behavior problems unless they also have serious emotional disturbances, nor for developmental delays or children less than three years old.

The study also found that, compared with the federal government, Minnesota imposes more administrative responsibilities on special educators. State requirements are more specific and involve additional meetings, reports, and deadlines. Also, teachers must make at least two documented efforts to resolve students' learning difficulties

through regular education before referring them to special education. However, the state has allowed several school districts, including Minneapolis, St. Paul, St. Cloud, Osseo, and White Bear Lake, to use alternative methods on limited, trial basis. Most of the resulting programs are designed to better serve students with learning disabilities or emotional/behavioral disorders.

Although the study found that state and local policy makers have taken numerous steps to provide special education more efficiently and effectively, it concluded that more could be done. For example, legislators could simplify the state's special education funding formula and give school districts more flexibility in spending special education dollars. Compared with some other states, the study said Minnesota's funding policies involve considerable paperwork, are more restrictive, and may not contain special education spending over the long term. Among other potential changes in state laws and rules, the report suggested acting on existing legislative task force recommendations, continuing to encourage the use of regular education and other alternatives to special education, and giving school districts greater administrative freedom in delivering services.

Copies of the report, *Special Education*, may be obtained from the Office of the Legislative Auditor. A summary is on the World Wide Web at <http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9703.htm>. For further information, contact Marilyn Jackson or Roger Brooks at the Office of the Legislative Auditor (612/296-4708).



STATE OF MINNESOTA
OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR
658 Cedar Street, St. Paul, MN 55155

INTER-OFFICE

