



a closer LOOK



The need for greater investments for special education

Of all the cost drivers on school district budgets, special education is one of the fastest rising and one of the hardest to control. School districts strive to give children an equal opportunity for a good education and under state and federal law cannot refuse services to a child with special needs. PSBA urges the General Assembly to increase the state contribution for special education services and continue its commitment in helping our most vulnerable students.

Understanding special education

The education of children with disabilities is one of the most important responsibilities of public education. It is one of the things that distinguishes the American system of education, which serves all children regardless of their aptitude, family income or intellectual ability.

Special education, by its very nature, is costly. Children with physical or mental disabilities require individualized instruction and, often, a wide array of support services to enable them to further benefit from the educational program. These are costs that public schools typically do not bear for other children in a regular classroom setting.



Special education also is an underfunded mandate. In addition to the underlying federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, state law, regulations and standards contain extensive requirements that dictate in considerable detail the actions local school officials and teachers must follow. These include provisions for the evaluation of children thought to be eligible for special education, due process procedures and allowable class sizes for various types of special education programs, to cite just a few.

Providing students with disabilities with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is a critical right granted to students with disabilities. FAPE is guaranteed by state and federal law and regulations and requires public schools to identify and provide students with disabilities with specialized programs, services and supports at public expense, designed to prepare those students for the future.

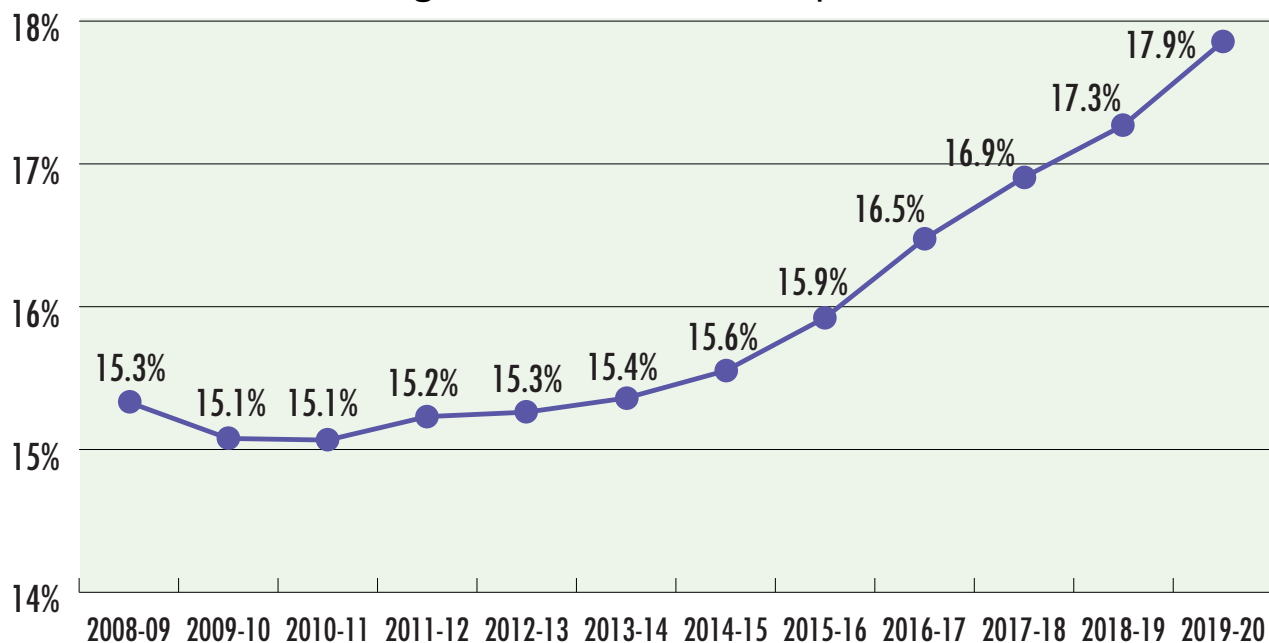
The required specialized programs, services and supports provided frequently come with substantial additional expense because they are individualized, and a public school cannot refuse to provide or pay for any program, service or support called to be provided to a student with disabilities.

While these laws ensure all children’s access to an appropriate course of study, school districts continually grapple with how to pay for special education. As these costs continue to swell, Pennsylvania’s school districts are facing a very real financial crisis. To aid public schools in providing special education, both state and federal budgets include appropriations intended to help pay for educating students with disabilities. However, state and federal financial support for special education has failed to keep up with the increased cost to public schools.

Growing special education population

In the 2019-20 school year, more than 271,000 students with disabilities were enrolled in Pennsylvania public schools – a 12% increase from the 2008-09 school year. Over the last 10 years, the number of students with disabilities has been growing steadily and represents a greater percentage of students enrolled in public schools than ever before.

Percentage of Public Students in Special Education

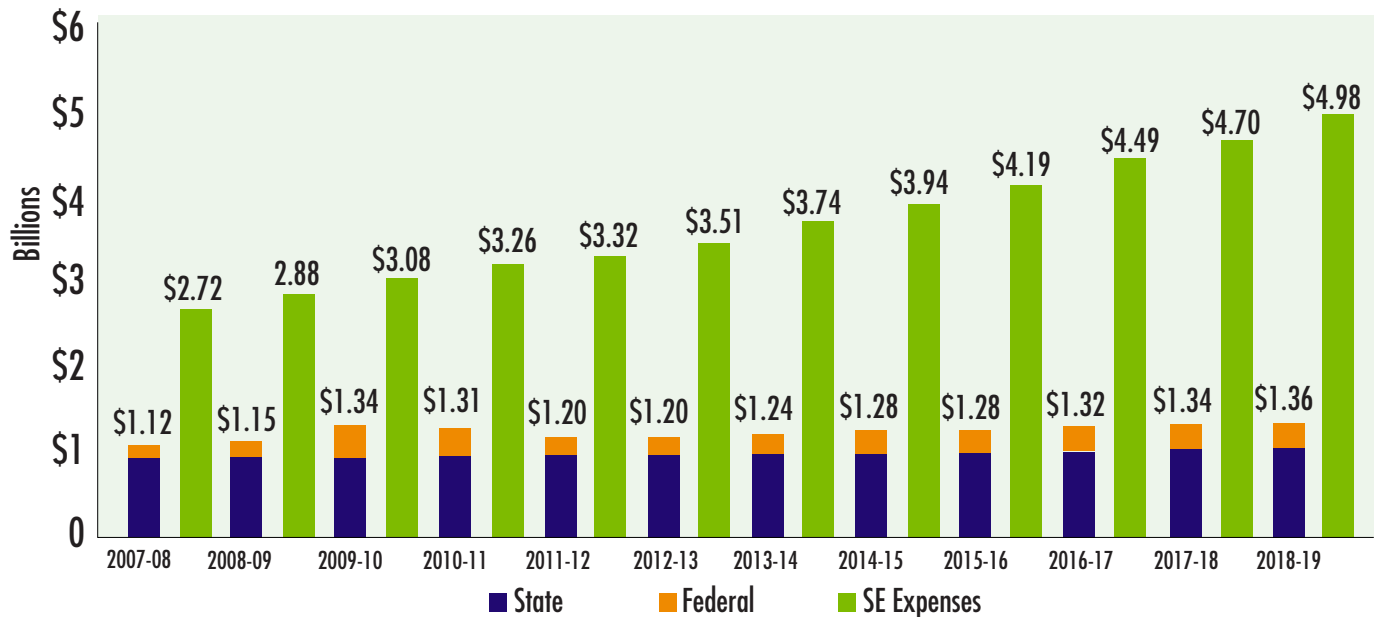




Increases in special education expenses outpace revenues

With the number of students requiring special education growing, so too have the expenses for public schools. In the 2018-19 school year, public schools spent nearly \$5 billion to provide mandatory special education and early intervention programs and services to children and students with disabilities. That's an 83% increase in costs over the last 11 years. State and federal funding for special education only increased 22% in that time.

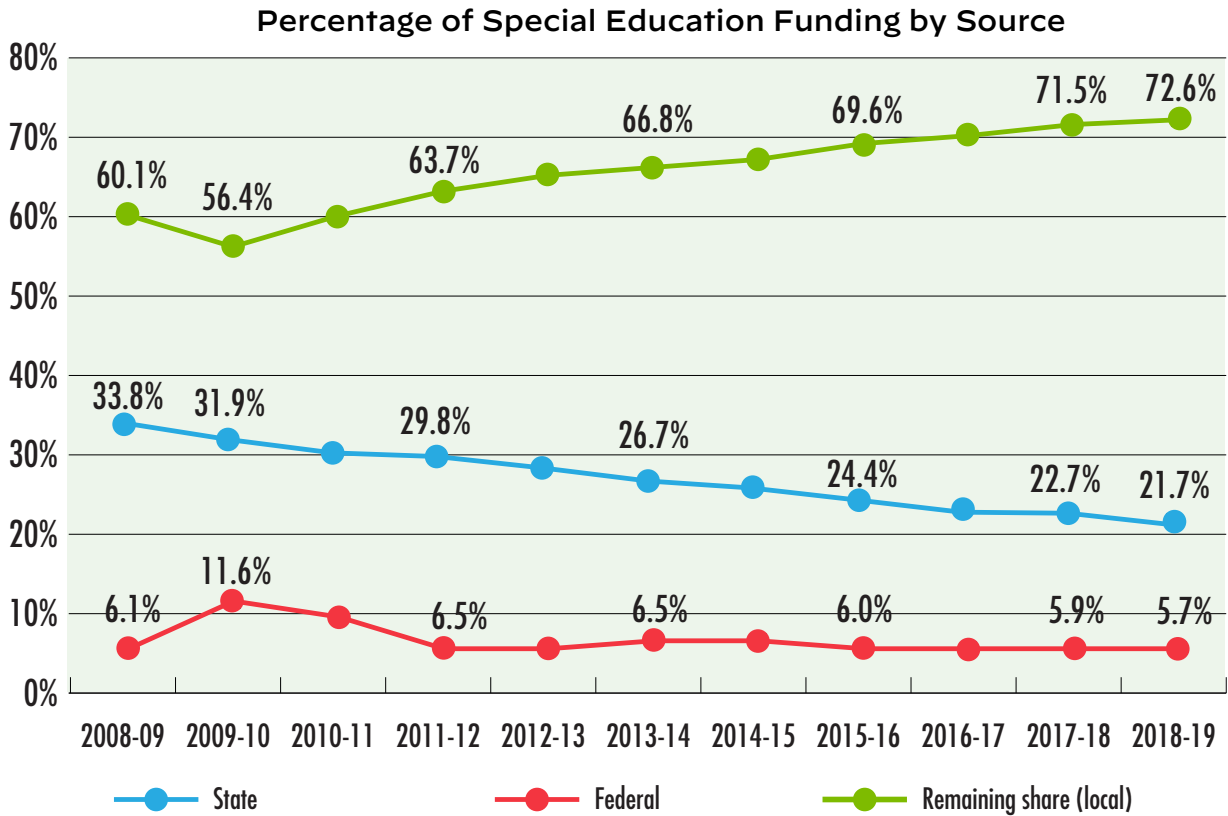
State and Federal Special Education Funding vs Expenditures



State special education funding has been trending in the right direction in the last few years. Between 2013-14 and 2018-19, state special education funding has increased 8.5%. However, special education expenses have increased 33.2% in that same time.

Because state and federal special education funding has failed to keep pace with the growth in expenses, the share of special education expenses covered by state and federal funding have decreased as well. For most school districts, the difference is made up of entirely local funding such as property taxes.

With state and federal funding making up around 27% of what schools spend for special education in the most recent school year, the remaining 72%, or \$3.6 billion, will have to come from other, primarily local sources of revenue.



Congress fails to keep funding promise

When the U.S. Congress first passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, it promised to provide states with 40% of the national average per-pupil cost needed for educating students with disabilities. However, federal funding has never come close to reaching the promised 40%. The current federal investment in special education and related services is less than 15%, leaving states and local public schools to make up the difference.

Special education as a budget pressure

The lack of sufficient state and federal special education funding has created very real financial burdens for local public schools and their taxpayers. In each of the five years that PSBA has conducted its annual State of Education survey, special education has been one of the top budget pressures facing school districts.

Pennsylvania’s public schools need help. To be clear, school districts are in no way suggesting or recommending that the requirements related to providing special education be eliminated or reduced. But because special education costs are mandated, school districts have very little, if any, control over those costs and how they increase year over year. Increasingly, school districts of all descriptions are experiencing the need to raise taxes or redirect existing outlays to cover the growing cost of special education due to the insufficient funding for special education at the state and federal levels.



Conclusion

Few issues produce as much emotion and concern as special education. The matter targets a highly vulnerable group of students – those with disabilities who require specialized instruction in order to succeed in the public school program. That these children deserve special accommodations and commitment of tax dollars is not an issue; how to accomplish that goal, however, is a major concern.

The fact is that special education expenses outpace revenues. Increasingly, schools are experiencing the need to increase taxes or make cuts in existing programs in order to cover the growing costs of special education. The deficit of state and federal special education appropriations results in an increased reliance on local funding to fill the gap. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association urges the General Assembly to increase the state contribution for special education services.

