

For immediate release: December 3, 2020

For more information: Paul Socolar, Education Law Center, psocolar@elc-pa.org, 215-372-1650

Report: For a Decade, PA Has Neglected Rising Costs of Educating Students with Disabilities

“A Decade of Shortchanging Students with Disabilities,” a new [report](#) from the Education Law Center and PA Schools Work, finds that from 2009 to 2019, increases in expenditures devoted to educating students with disabilities in Pennsylvania were borne almost entirely by local school districts. State special education aid has been virtually flat, a feeble response to rapidly growing needs.

Pennsylvania districts boosted their spending on special education by \$2 billion over a decade (66%), but state aid during the same period rose by only \$110 million (11%), according to the latest state data. Out of every new dollar spent on special education in the state over the past decade, local districts have provided 92 cents.

The failure of the state to keep pace with growing local need has confronted school districts across the state with the difficult choice of increasing taxes or cutting services. The report notes that a lack of adequate new state investment in basic education funding compounds that challenge, leading to an erosion of resources available to all students, including those with disabilities.

“Pennsylvania has been a bottom-dweller nationally for what a low share of overall public education spending the state provides – just 38%,” said Education Law Center executive director Deborah Gordon Klehr. “For special education, the portion covered by the state is now only 22%, down from 32% a decade ago. When the state abdicates responsibility like this, students are harmed, especially in our lowest-wealth school districts that have the greatest difficulty generating more revenue to meet student needs.”

The shrinking state share is now a steady decade-long trend.

“Since 1971, when we began the fight to provide education for all students in *PARC vs. Commonwealth*, The Arc of Pennsylvania has been passionate about the rights of students with disabilities and their access to a free and appropriate education,” said Sherri Landis, executive director of the Arc of Pennsylvania and a partner in the PA Schools Work campaign. “Our leadership in the ‘70s could never have imagined that our state, the first to adopt the right to education, would later become the state that decreases its state share of special education funding. The General Assembly must make an increased state investment in special education as well as basic education to assure that all students reach their potential.”

The report states that recurring annual increases in state aid for special education of \$100 million or more are needed to reverse the trend.

Pennsylvania has a statewide enrollment of 307,000 students receiving special education services, nearly 18% of the total public school enrollment. Special education funding is critical to ensuring that these students receive a free appropriate public education with specialized instruction tailored to their unique needs, in the least restrictive environment, and designed to achieve grade advancement and real progress in light of a child’s potential.

“The rising expenditures for special education reflect the fact that schools are responding, as required by law, to meet the needs of a growing population of students who need special education services and are entitled to a free, appropriate public education,” said Cindy Duch, director of parent advising at the

PEAL Center. “The fact that the state is not chipping in funding to keep up with those costs puts a squeeze on schools and students, making it difficult for many districts to pay for the services students are entitled to and need in order to make progress.”

The report includes [a spreadsheet](#) detailing special education funding and spending for every Pennsylvania school district and the pattern of declining state share.

The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, community engagement, 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. Learn more: www.elc-pa.org

[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.