



According to an August 2024 article in *Education Week*, “Some states collect data from school districts on special education spending. Some researchers have an inkling about the trajectory of special education costs so far during the 21st century, particularly as the proportion of America’s students receiving special education services has trended upward. But the last detailed, nationwide study of special education spending, which can vary widely from state to state and district to district, was conducted 25 years ago.”¹¹

What’s more, until relatively recently, even though special ed can easily consume around one in five school district dollars, the very idea that this service should be viewed through a fiscal lens was essentially verboten. “Not so long ago, I probably would have refused to have this conversation,” Nathan Levenson, president of New Solutions K12, said. “We just couldn’t talk about the cost of special ed. Only bad people did that, right? We owe students with disabilities better outcomes, but doing so cost-effectively should be the goal.”

“We have looked away from these costs for too long, and now we’re at a point where we need to come to terms with what we’re doing and take a sharper eye toward these services,” Roza said. “We need to make sure we’re getting good value for these kids because they deserve that. And often we are, but some of the things we’re doing cost a lot of money and aren’t delivering value.”

“For a long time here in Norwalk, we have begun to see a steady increase in special enrollment and complexity of needs of our varying students,” said Lunda Asmani, the chief financial officer for Norwalk Connecticut Schools. Currently, 17 percent of our students have been identified with some type of specialized learning need that we are legally mandated to provide. But funding for special education around the state, and around the country, has not really kept pace with the increasing demand and needs of our students—so it does create a structural challenge to our operating budget.”

PERSPECTIVE

Special Education: Coming to Terms with the Issues

BY KATHERINE BARRETT
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“Many Americans may think of basic education as a federally mandated right for all. But in fact, it’s a state obligation, and the federal government has none—with one exception: special education,” Marguerite Roza, director of the Edunomics Lab at the Georgetown McCourt School of Public Policy, explained. “If you’re a kid, and you get diagnosed as having a disability—which, for good or bad, is a subjective category—then you have a right, a federal right, to a free, appropriate public education. That’s true if the child has a disability. If not, they have no federal rights when it comes to schooling. None.”

The dollars going to special ed have been increasing vigorously over time, but nobody knows exactly how much.

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AT THE GEORGETOWN MCCURT SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY**

Among the biggest cost drivers for special education has been a rise in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnoses. According to the April edition of the CDC’s April 17, 2025, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, “Among children aged 8 years in 2022, ASD prevalence was 32.2 per 1,000 children [one in 31] across the 16 sites [surveyed].” That’s up from an average of 6.7 per 1,000 in 2000, according to a CDC survey of 6 areas in the United States done that year.

But that’s not all. “Yes, the rate of autism is increasing,” Asmani said. “But we’re now identifying more speech and language impairments and similar issues, and we’re also seeing a lot more emotional and behavioral disorders, as well.”

Are these increases being driven by new cases, or is it because of under-identification in the past? That’s a difficult question to answer, but “the consensus in the field is that both things are at play,” said Tammy Kolbe, principal researcher at American Institutes for Research.

The determination of what’s an “appropriate education” for any single student is driven by a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). “IEPs are essentially contracts between the district and the family and the child about what the additional special education services should be, and they are developed by school personnel,” Kolbe said.

When parents disagree with the district’s evaluation of the services their child needs, they can turn to the courts. “Special Ed is the most litigated area in public education because it comes with this federal right, and everybody knows it,” Roza said. “We hear from school districts all the time that they don’t have

any leverage in the lawsuit with this language, and more often than not, it’s easier to just give in than to pay the cost of the lawsuit.”

The expenses can skyrocket in instances when a school district is unable to provide a child with an appropriate education in the classrooms that already exist. At that point, a district is required to place more students in private institutions that specialize in servicing students with need. Since there is a limited number of these specialized service providers, their costs have also gone up drastically.

What’s to be done? There’s no argument against the basic thesis that all children deserve to have the kind of education that will help them live the best lives they can. But, Roza said, “We need to take a fresh look at special ed and see if all these treatments are necessarily working, whether the specialists are needed, and whether there are other alternatives that could get similar or better outcomes at similar or lower costs.”

Levenson argued that there’s a great deal to be gained by emphasizing the importance of core instruction—typical grade-level general education—so educational problems that might manifest themselves in later years would be dealt with at the earliest possible stages. “Kids who struggle academically, which is the vast majority of kids with special needs, need that core instruction,” he said. “Plus, they also need extra time to learn.”

One key here, he said, is that the schools “need to redesign the schedules so students will have extra time to catch up.”

There’s also a need for better-trained people who deal with students who need special education services, Levenson added. “Roughly two out of every three special educators at the elementary level report that they have not been trained in teaching reading, and about 80 percent of special educators who teach math at the secondary level self-report that they’re not very good at math themselves. So, you are using scarce resources and asking folks who do not have the background or haven’t been given the training to teach things that they’re not yet prepared to teach. So that is bad for kids and unfair to the teachers.”

Finally, Levenson argued that many people in special education classrooms aren’t being given enough time working directly with the young people themselves. “They spend more than half their day in meetings and doing paperwork,” he explained. “So more than half the day for speech therapists, occupational therapists, special educators is meetings and paperwork. Contrast that to a general educator, like an elementary classroom teacher who teaches for about 85 percent of the day. A special educator teaches for about 45 percent of the day.”

Reorganizing the schools and the systems would obviously be a gigantic task. But something needs to be done with a system that is taking a large share of school budgets for a worthwhile cause, but one that is pushing school budgets to the precipice. ■

¹ Mark Lieberman, “How Much Does Special Education Truly Cost? Finally, an Answer Is on the Horizon,” *Education Week*, August 26, 2024.



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