

Local Op-ed

Congress Promised to Fund Special Education. It's Time to Keep That Promise.

Subhead: 50 Years Later, Special Education Is Still Underfunded

For more than 50 years, public schools have upheld a federal promise to students with disabilities. Congress has not. When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted in 1975, Congress committed to covering 40 percent of the cost of educating students to help cover the excess costs of services for students with disabilities. That commitment was never intended to be optional. Yet today, the federal government funds only 10 percent, one-fourth of that promise, leaving states and local school districts to absorb the rest.

In [insert state], that gap is not theoretical - it is real and growing. Local school boards are legally required to provide special education services. We do not debate whether to comply; we do the work because it is right for students. But when federal funding falls short, districts are forced to redirect dollars from general education classrooms, student supports, and local priorities to meet these federal requirements.

This is not sustainable. Since 1975, the students covered under the act have increased from 3.7 million to 8.3 million students in 2027. Special education costs are rising faster than overall school funding, driven by increased student needs, workforce shortages, transportation costs, and specialized services. At the same time, Congress continues to fall short on its funding obligation—pushing more costs onto states and local taxpayers.

That is why school leaders across the country are calling for “40 by 40” - a renewed federal commitment to fund IDEA at the level originally promised – 40 percent by the year 2040. Fully funding IDEA would not create new mandates. It would simply honor an existing one. For communities like ours, that would mean:

- More resources staying in classrooms
- Reduced pressure on local property taxes
- Greater stability for special education staff
- Better outcomes for all students

This is not a partisan issue. IDEA has always enjoyed bipartisan support because access, achievement and opportunity for students with disabilities are shared values. What has been missing is follow-through. Local school boards are accountable to voters. Congress should be accountable to its commitments.

As Congress debates education funding in the coming months, our community should be clear: honoring the federal promise to students with disabilities is not optional—it is overdue.

Fifty years is long enough. It's time for Congress to deliver on 40 by 40.

[insert name]:

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