



School District of Thorp

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To: Members, Joint Finance Committee
From: John Humphries, Superintendent
Re: Special Education Funding Issues
Date: April 15, 2019

Hello:

Thank you for the opportunity to address you directly about our state budget. You dedicate yourselves to the wellbeing of our state and citizens, and your commitment is to be applauded.

My name is John Humphries and I am the Superintendent of Schools in rural Thorp, WI, about 100 miles east of here. I am joined by Dave Burke, who serves as School Board Clerk and is a retired special educator. We are deeply invested in the success of all schools, and believe we can and should be doing more to support all students. In Thorp, I lead an excellent team that educates 600 students in Pre-K through 12th grade with an annual budget of about \$7,000,000.

We want to address special education funding today. As you may know, Wisconsin's special education law predates federal law. We can be proud to have led our nation's efforts to provide equitable services to children with disabilities. With our 1976 law came a promise from the Legislature and Governor: this would not be another unfunded mandate. Unfortunately, it has become exactly that. This year, the School District of Thorp will transfer over \$500,000 from other accounts to provide legally-mandated services for children with disabilities. Special education services are identified through careful evaluation and deliberation of a team of professionals and parents. Services are identified by needs under the law, not by funding or reimbursement rates. A recent Supreme Court case called *Endrew F* actually raised the bar for required school district services. So at a time when reimbursement rates are at their lowest ever, the expenses associated with special education are going up.

I've heard a handful of candid concerns behind closed doors about why you may choose not to prioritize additional funding for special education. One has to do with whether we over-identify disabilities. Wisconsin has a placement rate of approximately 14%. Is this too high? It's a value judgment, a matter of degree of impairment. School teams work hard to make sure that children get the help they need. If over identification exists, it exists equally across all schools and so doesn't result in any gain for any school district. Please don't let the thought that there may be over identification of children in special education stand in your way of providing funding.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO EXCEL

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The next issue has to do with the question of whether there will be additional spending and effort put forth for children with disabilities if you provide additional funding. The answer is no, and should be no. Let me explain. Spending in special education is determined by the child's. In fact, the only way that you would begin to see additional spending in special education is if you begin to reimburse districts *more than 100% of the costs*. Until that point, school districts are obligated to spend no more, so they don't. However, the additional funding I hope you do provide in special education will go directly to improving the bottom line of school districts. You'll see more money spent on gifted education, literacy program expansion, additional services in mental health and other priorities that school districts and school boards share with the legislature. Rather than standing as a barrier to funding, the fact that you won't see any additional spending in special education should actually be an asset of the proposal to increase reimbursement rates.

There has been a proposal to provide funding directly to general education rather than filtering it through special education. Here's why that's a bad idea – regular education funding does not follow kids with disabilities. In other words, that money is not concentrated in the areas with the most significant special education needs. Distributing the funds to all districts doesn't recognize the fact that some of us have more kids with disabilities than others. Further $\frac{2}{3}$ of districts have no kids with high cost disabilities, those over \$35,000 per year. So putting more money into a high cost aid doesn't help most of us.

In the School District of Thorp, we transfer over \$500,000 of our annual budget from regular to special education. We do it because it's the right thing to do. What we're asking is that you increase the reimbursement rate. An increase from 25% to 28% would result in just \$21,000 in additional reimbursement in our district. That amounts to about one, part-time educational assistant. With an annual \$500,000 transfer, that helps a little. I urge you to consider the impact of additional special education reimbursement and avoid per-pupil aid awarded outside of the revenue limit as was done in previous budgets.

Finally, with regard to Maintenance of Effort at the state level, increased reimbursement would reflect a longstanding commitment to supporting the special education mandate you gave us.

In summary, special education funding has been neglected for years, even decades. We sincerely hope you will offer your support for school districts as we struggle to meet the requirements established in state law.

Thanks again for your time.