

UNDERSTANDING SPECIAL EDUCATION: BACKGROUND FOR CANDIDATES AND POLICYMAKERS

The Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition (DVC) is a non-partisan effort to help ensure full participation in the entire electoral process for voters with disabilities, including registering to vote, casting a vote and accessing polling places.

School board members, legislators, and other elected officials have an important role in ensuring students with disabilities receive the services they need in the least restrictive environment possible. This informational handout is intended to provide candidates and policymakers with basic information about Special Education.

How many students receive special education services?

Wisconsin public schools educate nearly **830,000** students; among those students, **14%** or about **116,000** have disabilities and qualify for special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). (WisDash 2021/2022)

Wisconsin supports students with disabilities in 12 program areas:

- Emotional/behavioral
- Speech/language
- Blind/visually impaired
- Deaf/hard of hearing
- Learning disability
- Intellectual disability
- Orthopedic impairment
- Significant developmental delay
- Traumatic brain injury
- Other health impairment
- Autism
- Deafblind

What kinds of services do students with disabilities receive?

The services each student with a disability receives is determined by their Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP:

identifies a student's educational needs



contains learning goals based on the student's needs



describes the services a student will receive in order to progress towards learning goals



Examples of services include education related therapies, classroom accommodations, modified curriculum, assistive technology, counseling, transportation and additional staff support.



Why is it important to educate students with disabilities?

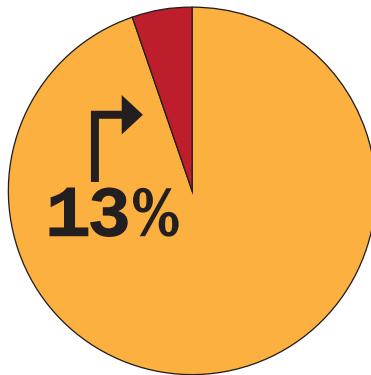
Research shows that even students with the most significant disabilities can make progress in grade level content when provided with appropriate supports. An investment in quality public education for every child with a disability should result in access to postsecondary education or competitive employment in the community and the skills to live independently with necessary supports.

How are supports for special education funded?

Special education services are funded at the federal, state and local levels.

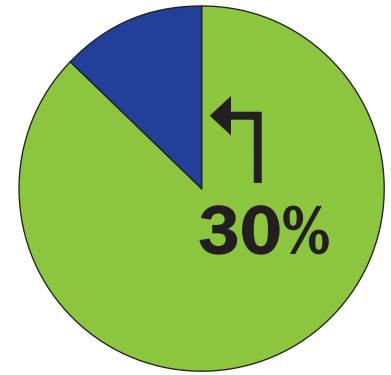
Federal:

Currently covers around 13% of special education costs.



State:

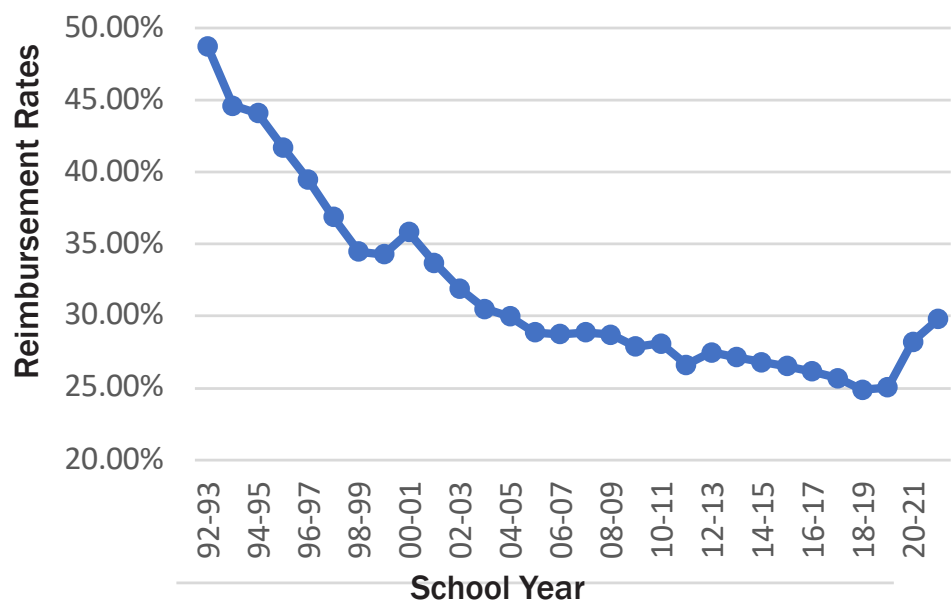
Wisconsin reimbursed districts for just under 30% of the previous year's special education costs in 2022.



Local:

Federal law requires school districts to provide a free, appropriate education for students with disabilities. Therefore, the remaining special education costs must come from local levies. As costs have risen and with federal and state funding failing to keep up, Wisconsin's school districts have been increasingly pressed to make difficult choices. **In recent years, the shortfall across Wisconsin has totaled around \$1 billion.**

Wisconsin Reimbursement Rates for Special Education, 1992-2022



Caption: Chart of the Wisconsin reimbursement rates for special education from 1992 to 2022. The highest data point is near 50.00% reimbursement in 1992-1993, with a downwards trend towards 2020-2021. The lowest point of the chart is 25.00% in 2018-2019.

What other concerns exist for students with disabilities?

Wisconsin students with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to graduate in four years with a regular diploma; score proficiently on standardized tests; and work in the community after completing high school. In addition, students with disabilities are too often educated in segregated environments and are far more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience inappropriate seclusion and/or restraint and to be suspended or expelled from school. Students of color with disabilities have some of the poorest outcomes in our state and when compared nationally.

Additional Resources

- **DPI Special Education Team:** <https://dpi.wi.gov/sped>
- **Special Education in Plain Language Handbook:**
<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sped/pdf/spec-ed-plain-lang-english.pdf>



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The Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition is a project of Disability Rights Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities.

DRW Voter Hotline 844-DIS-VOTE / 844-347-8683

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