EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

POLICY BRIEF

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Funding Special Education Services

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Executive Summary

The number and percentage of students receiving special education services in schools has increased over the past two and half decades, and this trend has continued in recent years even as overall student enrollment has declined. Common explanations for the increasing enrollment point to improvements identifying students, such as better diagnostic tools, improved recognition of common conditions and decreased stigma about children receiving special education services. However, increased enrollment can also reflect potential biases, which can lead to significant disproportionality or certain racial and ethnic groups being overly identified for special education. Accurate identification can improve student outcomes. Research from the Wheelock Educational Policy Center finds consistent positive academic effects on students placed into special education services in three states: **Connecticut**, **Indiana** and **Massachusetts**.

The increased enrollment of students for special education services has created cost pressures on state and local budgets. All **50 states** and the **District of Columbia** dedicate state dollars to support special education services. Education Commission of the States (ECS) has classified state funding for special education into five funding mechanisms (single weight or per student grant, multiple weights or per student grants, resource allocation, cost reimbursement, and high-cost services funding). High-cost services funding is a type of cost reimbursement provided in addition to another funding mechanism. High-cost services funding prevents placing disproportionate spending pressures on districts by reimbursing expenses for students whose Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) pose an extraordinarily high cost to the district.

Researchers recommend grounding special education funding in estimates for the cost of providing evidence-based services for students. States can conduct their own or contact with outside organizations to estimate the costs needed to provide the range of services a student may receive in their Individualized Education Program. An IEP is the plan, required under IDEA, for providing special education and related services. In addition, AIR is completing a National Study of Special Education Spending that will identify spending on special education services from a national sample of districts and schools. The findings from the study can be informative to state leaders in their design of state funding allocations, especially in the absence of a state-specific study of costs.

Once state leaders determine how the cost of providing special education services varies among students with different disabilities and needs, the next step is to design a funding model that is informed by this analysis. Rather than allocating a single-dollar amount or weight for every student with an IEP, the state can design funding allocations that differentiate funding levels based on the costs of services that a student receives. Two strategies states can take to differentiate funding are:

- Funding multiple weights or per student grants that provide tiered funding.
- Including high-cost services funding.

These strategies serve as a fiscal safety net for districts with students that have complex learning needs.

When states have effective funding strategies, they can prioritize providing high-quality special education services and instruction. Two strategies states can use to support high-quality special education services and instruction are developing recruitment and retention efforts for special education instructors and strengthening regional education service agencies (ESAs) to provide special education services across a broader region. Regional ESAs provide support and oversight for special education services and can help reduce costs for special education services across school districts.

This report discusses:

- Increases in special education enrollment across the country, by region, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status;
- State responses to growing cost pressures;
- The national landscape of state funding mechanisms;
- State strategies to more equitably fund and support high-quality services for students.

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Key Findings

- All 50 states and D.C. dedicate state dollars to support special education services, and many states have more than one funding mechanism.
- Researchers recommend grounding state special education funding allocations in estimates for the cost of providing evidence-based services for students.
- States can differentiate funding based on costs for services that a student receives, by funding:
  1| multiple weights or per student grants that provide tiered funding, and
  2| high-cost services funding to serve as a fiscal safety net for districts with students that have complex learning needs.
- States can develop recruitment and retention efforts for special education instructors and strengthen regional education service agencies to reduce costs and provide special education services across a larger geographic area.

Increasing Special Education Enrollment and Spending

The number of students qualifying for services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) Part B has increased by 1.2 million since 2000-01, equal to a 20% increase. This increase has put the total population of students with IEPs to over 7.5 million nationwide. Part of the growth since 2000 has been caused by increases in overall student enrollment. However, another part is explained by an increasing share of students who are identified for IDEA Part B services. The identification rate for IDEA services increased from 13.3% in 2001, to 15.2% in 2023 (see Table #1). The increasing identification rates have also varied by region, with most occurring in the northeast region and by student background including race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Table #1: Percentage of Students Identified for IDEA Part B Services

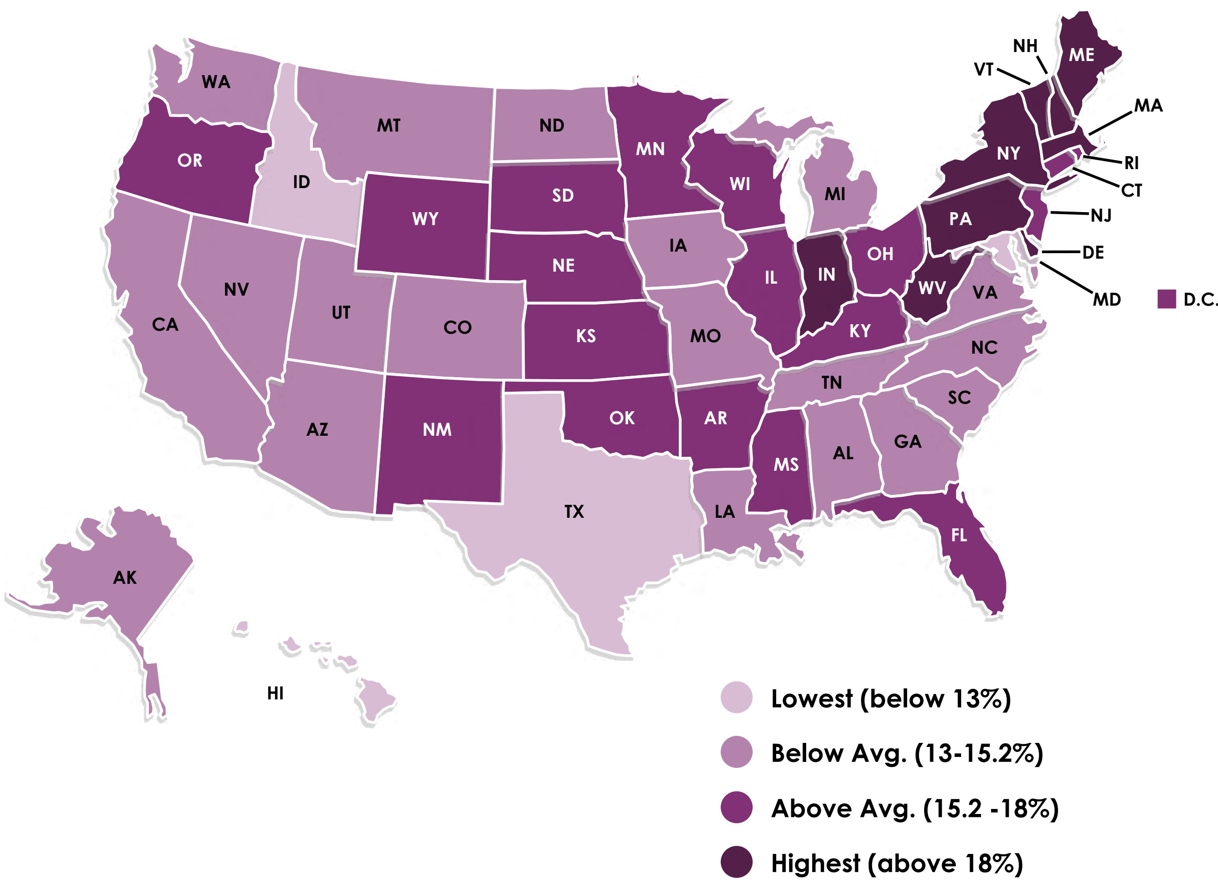
	IDEA Identification Rates			
	2000-01	2010-11	2020-21	2022-23
United States	13.3%	13.0%	14.5%	15.2%
Northeast	15.2%	16.5%	18.8%	19.2%
Midwest	13.9%	14.5%	15.2%	15.5%
West	11.2%	11.2%	12.9%	13.3%
South	13.5%	11.7%	12.4%	12.6%

Source: NCES Digest of Education Statistics, Table 204.70, 2000-01, 2010-11, 2020-21,2022-23.

In recent years, the increasing IDEA identification rates have resulted in continued growth for special education services, even as overall student enrollment has declined. Special education enrollment has grown by 5.5% in the last five years of data, while overall student enrollment has dropped by 2.3%. Many schools now face a challenging dynamic, where they are simultaneously experiencing fewer students, less overall state aid and more students receiving high-cost services and placements.

Looking by state, the IDEA identification rates have increased in every state and the District of Columbia in the past five years, except for **Missouri**, where the rate has remained fairly stable. IDEA identification rates are the highest in **Maine**, **New York** and **Pennsylvania**, where more than 20% of students are identified for special education services. The rates are the lowest in **Hawai'i**, **Idaho** and **Texas**, where less than 13% of students are identified for special education services (see Figure #1). Even though Texas has one of the lowest identification rates in the country, it is among the states where identification rates have grown the fastest over the past five years.

Figure #1: Percentage of Students Identified for IDEA Part B Services by State



Source: NCES Digest of Education Statistics, Table 204.70, 2022-23.

Increases in special education enrollment vary by racial or ethnic groups. Students who identify as American Indian, Alaskan Native or Black are the most likely to be identified for special education services. In 2023, 18.9% of American Indian/Alaskan Native students and 17.2% of Black students received special education services compared to the national average of 15.2%. Enrollment growth in special education services has been fastest for students who identify as Asian or Latino, mirroring the overall demographic shift in U.S. public schools. Yet, students who identify as Asian are still the least likely racial or ethnic group to be identified for these services. Student socioeconomic status is another source of special education enrollment variation. Research in **Oregon** finds that students from families in the lowest income percentile are more likely to be identified for special education services than their more affluent peers.

Common explanations for the increasing enrollment point to improvements identifying students for these services. The increases are attributed to better diagnostic tools, improved recognition of common conditions and decreased stigma about children receiving special education services. Researchers also point to subjectivity in the identification process that can create variability across states. The largest enrollment increases are in the IDEA disability categories for autism spectrum disorder and multiple disabilities. The number of students identified with autism spectrum disorder has grown particularly fast, more than doubling since 2011. This growth has been attributed to a broadening definition for autism (which now includes outdated diagnoses like Asperger's Syndrome or Pervasive Developmental Disorder) and increased awareness from caregivers.

Improved identification of students for special education services can have positive impacts on student learning. Recent research from the Wheelock Educational Policy Center finds consistent positive academic effects on students placed into special education services in three states: **Connecticut**, **Indiana** and **Massachusetts**. The academic gains for the students are immediate, grow over time, and are consistent across four different IDEA disability categories (specific learning disability, emotional disability, other health impairment and speech/language disability), racial and socioeconomic groups, and the setting where the student receives services. Gains in academic performance are based on math and English Language Arts scores from annual state standardized assessments in grades three through eight.

The increased identification of students for special education services has also placed increasing cost pressures on state and local budgets to fund these services. Numerous states in recent years have established legislative bodies to re-examine the state's special education funding formula. Some of the states that have either completed or are in the process of completing a review on this topic, include:

- **Connecticut** established the Task Force to Study Special Education Services and Funding in 2021 to study the cost of special education, changes in special education costs and state special education reimbursements. The task force issued its final report in 2025 recommending that the state modify the Education Cost Sharing formula to include a weight for special education funding and to adjust the Excess Cost Grant.
- **Kansas** created the Special Education and Related Services Funding Task Force in the 2023 education finance bill to study and recommend changes to the special education funding formula. The task force issued recommendations in 2024 directing the state to increase state reimbursements for special education excess costs and continue to study the equitable funding of special education services.
- **Maryland** enacted legislation in 2025 directing the state's department of education to contract a study, which is currently being conducted by AIR. The legislation directs the study to focus on funding special education in the state, issuing recommendations on special education costs, the rising cost of special education for pre-K, and the establishment of a system that uses multiple weights for special education funding, among other items.
- **Minnesota** established a Blue Ribbon Commission in the state budget in 2025 to assist the governor and state legislature in transforming special education services and to identify recommendations to assist the state in identifying a savings of $250 million in special education aid for the 2027 two-year budget period.
- **North Dakota** enacted legislation in 2025 establishing the Special Education Funding Committee that is directed to complete a comprehensive review of special education funding models, including student contracts, students with expensive support needs, residential placement and reimbursement under the Medicaid program.
- **Oregon** commissioned a review as part of a larger study on the school funding formula. The legislature contracted with AIR to complete the review that examines current levels of federal and state funding and how they differ among Oregon's school districts, spending estimates on special education programs, and the extent to which the state special education funding pays for district spending.
- **Washington** directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee to review special education funding. AIR conducted the study on behalf of the committee and found that some districts in the state receive nearly four times more state funding per student for special education than other districts. The report also recommended the state remove the enrollment cap on funding for special education services and adjust the excess cost multipliers.

In addition to state-level reviews, the U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences (ED/IES) is completing a National Study of Special Education Spending. This study, which is being conducted by AIR on behalf of ED/IES, is a follow-up to the 1999-2000 Special Education Expenditure Project (SEEP) study, and will collect spending data from a national sample of districts and schools about how much is spent to educate students with disabilities. The findings will provide estimates for what is spent to provide special education services across the country to help policymakers make better informed funding policies. The first report from the study is expected to be released in 2028.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Special education services are legally required by federal law. The most significant piece of federal legislation supporting special education students is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA has four parts: Part A outlines purpose of the law and provides definitions; Part B covers services and funding for individuals ages 3 - 21; Part C covers services and funding for children ages 0 - 2; and Part D provides competitive grants. Approximately 95% of federal funds are allocated through IDEA Part B.

To receive federal funds through IDEA Part B, states and local education agencies (LEAs) must provide all students with a disability a free appropriate public education, which must be implemented in the student's least restrictive environment, provide instruction specially designed for the student, be provided at no cost for families and meet the needs of the student. Free appropriate public education is implemented through students' IEPs, which is the plan for providing special education and related services. IDEA Part B also includes a maintenance of effort requirement that requires a state or an LEA to not reduce overall funding for special education and related services below the level provided in the previous fiscal year. States may be granted waivers from this requirement in "exceptional or uncontrollable circumstances" such as a natural disaster or drastic financial decline.

IDEA also sets a goal for the federal government to pay up to 40% of the excess cost of providing special education and related services, which is commonly known as "full funding". The federal government has never met this goal. Instead, funding levels have historically ranged from 7%-19%. The percentage was 10.2% in 2025 according to the Congressional Research Service. The president signed the 2026 federal budget for the U.S. Department of Education in February providing $15.49 billion in IDEA funds, comparable to prior year funding levels.

National Funding Landscape

States play a significant role in funding special education. All **50 states** and the **District of Columbia** provide additional funding for students with disabilities, and many use more than one funding mechanism to support these services. ECS has classified state special education funding strategies into five funding mechanisms (single weight or per student grant, multiple weights or per student grants, resource allocation, cost reimbursement, and high-cost services funding). Additional information including definitions and state examples can be found on the Funding Special Education Services homepage.

Table #2: National Landscape - State Funding for Special Education Services

Funding Mechanism	Number of States	States
Single Weight or Per Student Grant	15	AK, CA, CO, CT, HI, LA, MD, MO, NC, ND, NH, NJ, NY, OR, VT
Multiple Weights or Per Student Grants	25 and D.C.	AL, AZ, CO, FL, GA, HI, IA, IN, KY, MA, ME, MN, MO, MS, NM, NV, OH, OK, PA, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, WA
Resource Allocation	6	AR, DE, ID, IL, VA, WV
Cost Reimbursement	6	KS, MI, MN, NE, WI, WY
High-Cost Services	36	AK, AL, AR, AZ, CO, CT, ID, IL, IN, KS, LA, MA, MD, ME, MI MN, MO, MT, NC, ND, NE, NH, NJ, NV, NY, OH, OK, OR, PA, RI, SD, VA, VT, WA, WI, WV

Note: The table does not sum to 51, because many states use more than one funding mechanism to support special education services. High-cost services funding is a form of cost reimbursement that is used in addition to other funding mechanisms.

Source: ECS 50-State Comparison K-12 Funding (2024) – updated

State Strategies and Policy Solutions

Special education services are provided to a complex student population with diverse learning strengths and needs. Schools provide services and specialized staffing, such as speech language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, audiologists, paraprofessionals, and high-quality educators who are certified in special education to support student success. School districts may also have high costs from transportation services or student placements in private facilities, residential treatment facilities, or in homes or hospitals. The result is that spending on this diverse student population varies widely. This section discusses different strategies states have taken for equitably funding special education services for this diverse student population, strengthening recruitment and retention of special education professionals, and providing services in communities with limited providers.

Identify Special Education Costs

Researchers recommend grounding special education funding in estimates for the cost of providing evidence-based services for students. States can direct the state department of education or contract with an outside organization to estimate the costs needed to provide the range of services a student may receive in their IEP. For example, **Ohio** contracted with AIR to conduct a study to identify best practices for providing special education and related services to students with disabilities and to estimate the costs of implementing those identified best practices. Among the findings, the review recommended regrouping the disability classifications to more closely represent cost variation and to recalibrate the funding amounts. **Maryland** also contracted with AIR to undertake a similar study to develop special education cost estimates for the state.

Alternatively, if the time and resources for undergoing a cost study are prohibitive, states may consider reviewing variation in what they are currently spending. These reviews can be informative to state leaders to see how equitably state dollars are being distributed based on the current school district spending patterns. **Oregon** commissioned a spending review as part of a larger study on the school funding formula. The review found wide variation in funding from the state did not necessarily reflect student need, but rather differences in district size and location (rural, urban or suburban). ED/IES has contracted with AIR to undertake the National Study of Special Education Spending (2026-27 school year) that will identify spending on special education services from a national sample of districts and schools. The findings from the study can be informative to state leaders in their design of state funding allocations, especially in the absence of a state-specific study. In the interim, state leaders can also use estimates from the SEEP study by inflating to current dollars.

In addition to these studies, states may also consider standardizing IEP forms and centralizing the collection of student IEPs to gain a better understanding of what services students are receiving. The Wheelock Educational Policy Center has collaborated with **Indiana** to collect special education services at scale using IEP data. This review is made possible because Indiana requires schools to submit electronic IEP data into a centralized database.

Spending Versus Costs

When assessing school funding adequacy the terms "spending" and "cost" have different meanings that require different methodologies. Spending refers to the amount a school district spends on specified services. A review of spending is a descriptive analysis of spending patterns based on administrative data collected by school districts. This information can be informative to state leaders to ensure state dollars are allocated in ways that mirror actual spending patterns rather than overcompensating for certain services and undercompensating for others. However, spending patterns may reflect underfunding and local fiscal constraints.

In contrast, "cost" refers to the estimated expenditures necessary to reach desired goals for students or to provide services in line with identified best practices rather than reflecting current practices. Studies estimating costs use different methodologies, such as cost functions, professional judgement panels, evidence-based or successful school models.

Differentiate Funding Based on Need

Once state leaders have identified variation in costs for different special education services, the next step is to design a funding model that is informed by this analysis. Rather than allocating a single dollar amount or weight for every student with an IEP, the state can design funding allocations that differentiate funding levels based on the level of services a student receives. Common funding mechanisms used by states to differentiate funding are:

- Multiple weights to provide tiered funding levels across all special education students.
- High-cost services funding, where the state dedicates a separate pool of resources to serve as a fiscal safety net for districts with students with particularly high-cost services.

The funding mechanisms are frequently used by states and can be used in tandem with one another.

Multiple Funding Weights

States that differentiate funding using multiple weights vary in design. States identify students for different levels of funding based on IDEA disability category, student placement (i.e., in-district, out-of-district, residential facility or homebound), spending, cost estimates, percentage of time the student is in a general education classroom, and the number of hours the student receives direct or related special education services. IDEA disability category is one of the most frequent methods, yet it has some limitations, particularly for disabilities with a range of services based on student needs, such as autism spectrum disorder. AIR's review of **Ohio**'s weights based on IDEA disability category suggests the weights could be revised to more closely aligned with estimated costs. Alternatively, states can use the previously discussed cost study to categorize services into groups with similar associated costs.

Tennessee is an example of a state that differentiates funding based on the hours of special education services determined in the student's IEP. The state has ten special education option codes that translate into eight funding weights.

- Direct services one hour or less;
  related services less than hour / week (15%)
- Direct services 1 – 4 hours;
  related services 1 – 4 hours / week (20%)
- Direct services 4 – 9 hours;
  related services 4 – 9 hours / week (40%)
- Direct services 9 – 14 hours;
  related services 9 – 14 hours / week (75%)
- Direct services 14 – 23 hours;
  related services 14 – 23 hours / week (80%)
- Direct services 14 – 23 hours;
  related services 14 – 23 hours / week (100%)
- Direct services 23 or more hours; related services 23 hours or more / week or self-contained or comprehensive development classroom (125%)
- Residential services 24 hours / day or hospital / homebound provided 2 or more hours / week (150%)

High-Cost Services Funding

Many states provide high-cost services funding to districts for students with particularly complex learning needs. The costs for these out-of-district and private placements can be significantly higher than costs for students and can reach as high as $100,000 per student. To avoid placing disproportionate spending pressures on local districts, states fully or partially reimburse districts for these costs. Under this funding mechanism, districts are responsible for the cost of special education services up to a certain threshold. If costs exceed that threshold, that state would then provide additional funding through reimbursement to the district.

To determine who is eligible for reimbursements for high-cost services, states may set a dollar threshold where students become eligible if spending on services exceed a threshold amount. For the **10 states** that set a dollar threshold, the average amount is approximately $40,000. Alternatively, states may set eligibility relative to average cost per student. In these states, students are eligible if they exceed three- to four –and-a-half times the average amount per student. Finally, some states determine eligibility based on student placement. Students are determined eligible if they are placed in a residential treatment facility, are homebound, or are placed out of district or out of the state.

Develop Recruitment and Retention Initiatives

Many schools have difficulty recruiting and retaining special education teachers and specialists — special education has remained the top educator shortage area for almost 30 years. In 2024, half of public schools reported that they would need to fill a special education teaching position before the start of the next school year. These shortages are driven in part by teacher turnover, which negatively impacts student achievement and district finances. It can cost $12,000-$25,000 to replace an educator due to recruitment, onboarding and hiring processes. In response, states have adopted various strategies through financial incentives, induction and mentorship programs and improving working conditions to assist schools in recruiting and retaining special education instructors.

Providing stipends and differentiated pay for special education instructors are strategies states can use to address recruitment and retention concerns. For example, **Alabama** allocated $7.65 million in the 2024 education budget (H.B. 145) to give a $1,200 stipend to each special education teacher for the 2024-25 school year. Another example, **Hawai‘i** offers a $10,000 pay differential for special education teachers. Teachers can also earn a higher salary for serving in a hard-to-staff school in select geographic areas. The pay differentials can be stacked, meaning a special education teacher in a hard-to-staff school could earn an additional $18,000 a year. After this pay differential was implemented, Hawai‘i saw a 16% increase in licensed special education teachers, and the number of open positions was nearly cut in half.

Teacher shortages are more dire for certain geographic areas and student populations, including students from low-income households and students of color. States may develop initiatives targeted by subject and geographic area, as seen in Hawai'ii. In another example, **Illinois** provides special education grants to teachers under contract and those teaching special education in designated high-poverty geographic areas. The grants provide funding toward tuition and fees at the teaching candidate's postsecondary institution as well as a stipend for each semester hour of enrollment.

High levels of teacher turnover, especially for new teachers, is another challenge within special education. To address this issue, states have developed induction and mentoring programs with a specific focus on special education. **Delaware** has a Comprehensive Induction Program for new educators and an alternative route for teacher licensure and certification program for special education, which includes a paraprofessional to teacher pathway. In **Georgia**, state leaders have implemented a provider retention program. The program focuses on keeping new special education teachers in the classroom using a train-the-trainer model with content developed by the Georgia Department of Education, the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders and Kennesaw State University. The program has seen promising results in its first years of implementation. Among the teachers who completed the program in the 2021-22 school year, 84% were retained for the next school year, compared to 74% of non-completers.

Strengthen Regional Supports for Districts

Regional Education Service Agencies provide support and oversight for special education services by offering specialized staff and direct services which can help reduce costs for special education services across school districts. ESAs are also referred to as intermediate service agencies, boards of cooperative educational services and regional education offices and can differ by state in terms of specific processes for governance, funding and services. However, each is charged with providing cost effective services and support to promote efficiency, quality and access to programs and services. According to the Association of Educational Service Agencies, there are over 400 ESAs across **39 states**.

Support for and oversight of special education services is one of the most common services that ESAs provide within states. The type of services offered by ESAs tend to be those that support low-incidence disabilities and with whom the certificated personnel are limited in number and difficult to recruit. ESAs can hire these staff to provide the service at multiple school districts, rather than forcing districts to compete amongst themselves for a limited number of available candidates. In addition, by ESAs providing these services, smaller school districts are not required to hire full-time staff. These personnel are most typically provided to school districts by contracting the staff hired by the ESA to provide the service at the school districts.

Michigan's Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) have oversight responsibilities in the provision of special education services. State law charges the governing board of ISDs with developing and continually evaluating in cooperation with the member districts a plan for the delivery of special education services. ISDs can also be contracted by member districts to operate special education programs, provide transportation and employ special education personnel. The ISD has authority to investigate and report failures of special education programs. The state also permits ISDs to submit a ballot question to voters on whether to increase the millage rate to fund the education of students with a disability.

Pennsylvania's Intermediate Units (IUs) provide support for students with disabilities, offering specialized programs, professional development, and technical assistance. Most (80%) of children in Pennsylvania's Preschool Early Intervention Program are served by IUs who are contracted by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning. These units provide early intervention services for children ages 3-5 years old who have disabilities and/or developmental delays. To support professional development and technical assistance, all 29 IUs are required to have five full time training and consultation personnel who provide in- class modeling, coaching, guided practice, consultations and other supports to educators, parents, and entities that provide services for students with disabilities. Additionally, the IUs provide special education transportation services to more than 13,000 special education students from more than 400 school entities.

Final Thoughts

This report outlines strategies that states have taken to better align state funding allocations with student need and cost estimates for special education services. Yet, with the increase in special education enrollment, many states are exploring ways to balance containing cost growth while providing high-quality special education services. States must also comply with IDEA requirements for maintenance of effort. In addition to the previously mentioned approaches, states are exploring Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and setting prices for services from private special education providers. While the research in this area is less established, these are approaches that states can consider.

Research in **Oregon** suggests the implementation of MTSS services can lead to reductions in special education identification rates, along with positive gains on test scores for Black students and no significant impact on other students. This research suggests states can bolster their MTSS services and possibly see overall reduction in special education services as a result.

Massachusetts charges the Operational Services Division with setting tuition prices for more than 200 special education programs serving students in private school settings. The state regulations for the rate setting process includes limits on annual price increases and compliance with state auditing standards. While this process does not address growing enrollment in special education services, it can create boundaries on what the state will pay for services.

Together with the other strategies, these approaches could more accurately and equitably allocate resources to districts to ensure students receive the academic and behavioral services that best meet their needs.

About the Authors

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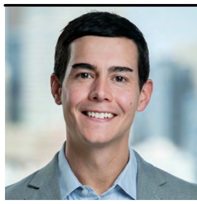

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