

News Release

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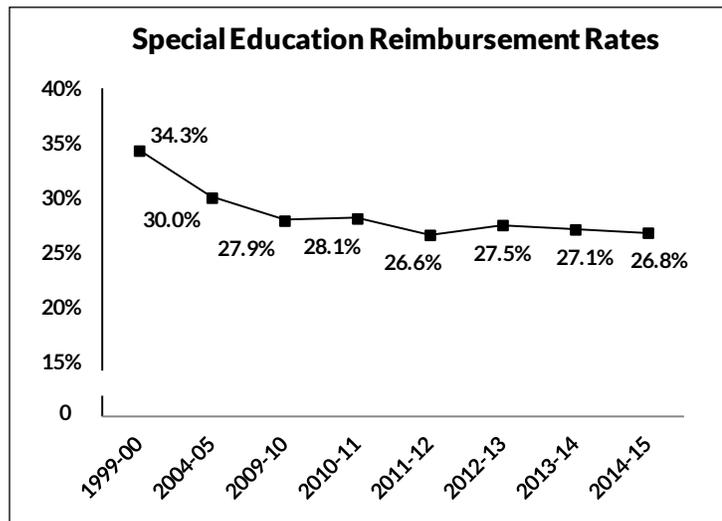
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Funding for special education will be frozen

MADISON — State aid that supports the education of students with disabilities remains frozen in the 2015-17 budget proposed by the governor and Joint Committee on Finance (JFC), a move that will result in a continuing slide in reimbursement rates for special education costs.

Funding for special education categorical aid will remain frozen at the level set in the 2008-09 school year, \$368,939,100. The end of the 2015-17 budget will mark the eighth consecutive year that special education aid will

have held flat. Costs associated with educating students with disabilities have increased over time, resulting in an overall decrease in the average reimbursement rate the state provides to school districts. In the 1999-2000 school year, reimbursement rates were 34.3 percent. For the 2014-15 school year, the rate is 26.8 percent of costs. While declining, the reason reimbursement rates have not gone lower, is because Wisconsin



schools have implemented a series of instructional interventions that have reduced the numbers of students identified and requiring special education services.

“Funding our public schools is a responsibility that is to be shared by local, state, and federal governments,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “Educating all students, including those with disabilities, is mandated by state and federal law. When the state shirks that duty, the burden falls on our local property taxpayers and draws resources away from other students.”

The 2015-17 proposed budget will provide an increase in funding for high-cost special education aid. That aid supports the small percentage of students who have severe or multiple disabilities that require educational

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programming with costs in excess of \$30,000 per year. Aid for 2014-15 reimbursed 46.2 percent of prior year aidable costs. The state superintendent's budget request sought full funding for high-cost special education aid. The motion adopted by the JFC would increase aid by \$5 million in the second year of the biennium. The proposed budget also improves equity and access to open enrollment options for students with disabilities and their families, a provision of the state superintendent's 2015-17 budget request.

Special education aid is the state's largest categorical aid program. It is targeted at helping local districts offset the additional costs related to educating students with disabilities. More than 118,000 students enrolled in Wisconsin public schools for the 2014-15 school year qualify for special education services and account for roughly 13.5 percent of the overall student population. Those students have speech and language impairments, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and a number of other conditions that affect their ability to achieve in school. By law, they are entitled to a free and appropriate education where, through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, parents and school leaders identify services and accommodations a student with disabilities will receive to ensure an equal education.

According to the "Diploma Counts" report released today, outcomes for students with disabilities in Wisconsin are right around the national average. Reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show large gaps. For the state's graduating class of 2013, 69 percent of students with disabilities earned a regular high school diploma, compared to 62 percent for students nationwide. The gap between graduation rates for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers is 19 points for both the state and the nation. Wisconsin is in the middle among states across the nation for the size of its gap.

Wisconsin's overall graduation rate for 2013 was 88 percent, tied for third highest in the nation. The state's 2013 graduation rate for students with disabilities (69 percent) is tied for 16th in the nation.

"We continue to ask our public school teachers and support staff to do more with less, and the data clearly shows that is unsustainable," Evers said. "The disparities in academic achievement and graduation outcomes for our students with disabilities require the governor and Legislature to prioritize funding for the state's public schools to help address this issue. The 2015-17 budget that is being considered for Wisconsin draws resources away from our public schools, which pits the needs of our most vulnerable kids against all students," he said.

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