

ISSUE BRIEF: APPROPRIATIONS

OVERVIEW

Infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents participate in and benefit from all federal public education and early childhood programs. At the same time, schools are facing growing student mental health needs, increasing special education enrollments, and severe shortages of special educators, school psychologists, social workers, and other specialized instructional support personnel. A strong federal investment in programs that provide targeted support is critical to ensuring success in the early years, in school, and beyond, and to increasing opportunities for all. Unfortunately, these programs are consistently and woefully underfunded, straining the entire education system.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the preeminent federal law for providing services to infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Fully funding IDEA would significantly improve outcomes by ensuring access to early intervention services, special educators trained to provide specially designed instruction, specialized instructional support services, curricula, devices, and family support.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 congressional budget justification for special education, the total number of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities served under IDEA continues to grow, reaching approximately nine million during the 2025-2026 school year. Stagnant federal funding, a rise in the number of eligible children, a growing shortage of personnel, and rising service costs create significant budgetary challenges.

Consistently well-funded programs will result in a better future for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. We call on Congress to provide appropriate funding levels in FY 2027 for all public education and early childhood programs, specifically the programs listed to the right.

THE LOCAL IMPACT OF FUNDING

School districts in every state are experiencing growing difficulty filling special education positions, maintaining manageable caseloads, and sustaining legally required services amid rising student needs and stagnant federal funding. These challenges increasingly affect general education budgets, local taxpayers, and the ability of schools to provide timely academic, behavioral, and mental health supports for all students.

Members of Congress are Urged to:

Congress committed to covering up to 40% of the excess cost of educating students with disabilities. Today, the federal share is approximately 10%. Therefore, Members of Congress are urged to invest no less than: \$16.7 billion in IDEA Part B State Grants:

- \$632 million in IDEA Part C Infants and Toddlers
- \$491 million in IDEA Part B Preschool Program
- \$135 million in IDEA Part D Personnel Preparation
- \$70 million in the National Center for Special Education Research
- \$32 million in the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Grants
- \$250 million in School-Based Mental Health Professionals

SUPPORT SPECIAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

Approximately 8.1 million school-aged children and youth in the United States benefit from the individualized special education and specialized instructional support services provided by IDEA. These services, provided by special and general education teachers and specialized instructional support personnel, are tailored to meet the specific needs of each child or youth with a disability. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that fully funding the IDEA Grants to States program could support 400,000 additional special educators and specialized instructional support personnel. Without increased federal investment, local education agencies will continue facing larger caseloads, unfilled vacancies, and growing difficulty providing timely services and supports to students with disabilities. Congress must put IDEA on the first step of a 10-year glidepath to full funding in FY 2027 to enable districts to better support children and youth with disabilities and hire more fully prepared special education personnel.

SUPPORT THE NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES

IDEA's early childhood programs serve approximately 1 million children with disabilities and their families annually through the Part C program for infants and toddlers and the Part B Preschool Special Education program. That figure is expected to rise considerably for FY 2027. Part C programs are designed to provide early intervention services that improve outcomes, support the transition to preschool, and mitigate the need for future IDEA services. A national longitudinal study found that more than 40% of Part C recipients did not need IDEA services in kindergarten because of early interventions. Despite this growth in enrollment and documented positive outcomes, federal funding has failed to keep pace. According to the U.S. Department of Education, federal investment per child has decreased by more than 40% over the last 30 years. Significant increases are needed to support infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and their families, and to continue benefiting from the return on investment in the K-12 system.

ENSURE A HIGH-QUALITY SPECIAL EDUCATOR PIPELINE

For the 2024-25 school year, 45 states reported a shortage of qualified teachers in special education, more than for any other teacher shortage area. (U.S. Department of Education). IDEA Part D Personnel Preparation focuses on preparing special educators, early interventionists, and specialized instructional support personnel to help ensure an adequate number of providers with the skills and knowledge necessary to support infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, with an emphasis on incorporating research into training programs and practice. This program is increasingly critical to addressing pervasive personnel shortages across the nation and supports building a well-prepared pipeline into the profession.

DELIVER THE RESEARCH THAT GUIDES BEST PRACTICES

The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSE) is the primary driver of special education and early intervention research in the nation and identifies evidence-based practices for classroom teachers and early intervention practitioners. Recent studies have examined optimal personnel dynamics to support inclusion for children with emotional and behavioral disorders, as well as methods for solving math word problems for third graders with or at risk of math disabilities. Many of the NCSE findings are applicable and beneficial to schools as a whole. Despite the practical solutions developed through NCSE funding that improve outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, NCSE

remains underfunded, significantly hampering support for ongoing research and the ability to undertake new projects. Restoring funding to NCSE, which peaked at \$70 million in FY2010 is critical to researching today's pressing questions in special education and early intervention.

MEET THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS WITH GIFTS AND TALENTS

The Javits Act—the sole federal initiative supporting students with gifts and talents—seeks to address the “excellence gap” among certain populations, including students with disabilities and rural students, by promoting research and programs to better identify and serve high-ability students from underserved backgrounds. Despite being the sole program dedicated to supporting gifted and talented learners, the Javits program's scale remains shockingly low at \$16.5 million annually.

SUPPORT SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

As people develop from infancy, experiences and relationships shape their mental well-being throughout their lives. Unfortunately, young people nationwide are facing an acute mental health crisis. According to the School Pulse Panel (National Center for Education Statistics, March 2025), 53% of public schools reported an increase in students seeking school-based mental health services over the previous school year. The School-Based Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration Grant program and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant program address severe shortages of school psychologists, social workers, and counselors. These programs are designed to shore up the mental health workforce to meet the current mental health needs of our young people in school.

REJECT PROPOSED CUTS IN THE FY 2027 BUDGET

The FY 2027 budget proposal recommends eliminating IDEA Personnel Preparation, the IDEA Preschool Program, and the Javits Program, and severely cutting the National Center for Special Education Research within the Institute for Education Sciences (IES). Cutting these programs would have outsized negative consequences:

- **Worsening the National Special Educator Shortage:** Cutting Part D Personnel Preparation, along with all other parts of IDEA Part D (National Activities), including technical assistance centers, would severely limit the pipeline of qualified special educators and reduce access to professional development and resources critical for effective IDEA implementation. At a time when special educators face the largest shortages among educators in nearly all states, this proposal is particularly devastating.
- **Failing Preschool-aged Children at Long-term Personal and Financial Cost:** Eliminating the IDEA Preschool Program would deny early intervention services to children aged 3–5, preventing preschool-aged children from making meaningful progress during a critical phase of human brain development and leading to more intensive and expensive special education needs in elementary school and beyond.
- **Weakening Evidence-Based Policy:** The loss of IES-supported special education research would hinder states' and districts' ability to make data-driven decisions, implement proven practices, and adapt to evolving student needs and technologies. This will cause educational systems to waste money on programs and data used in ways that don't improve student outcomes, ultimately harming schools and students.
- **Providing States with Less Funding:** 18 K-12 education grant programs, including the Javits program and School-Based Mental Health Professionals Grants, would be consolidated into a pared-down Make Education Great Again fund under the budget proposal. This would result in considerably fewer dollars flowing to states and the elimination of a funding infrastructure to target federal aid to specific needs, including gifted and talented education, the pipeline of mental health professionals, and other programs developed in response to national needs.

FAST FACTS ON FUNDING

- 72% of voters support increased federal funding for education. (Learning Agency poll, June 2025)
- Without a significant increase for the IDEA Grants to States program in FY 2027, the federal share will be 10% or approximately one-quarter of “full funding.” (U.S. Department of Education)
- The nationwide IDEA funding shortfall for the 2024–25 school year was estimated at nearly \$39 billion, leaving states and local districts to absorb the difference to provide legally required services to students with disabilities. (Congressional Research Service)
- Filling the gap between current funding and “full funding” could support more than 400,000 special education jobs. (U.S. Department of Education)
- Students with disabilities show persistent underrepresentation in gifted and talented education programs or other advanced or accelerated learning opportunities. (Civil Rights Data Collection)
- Teacher attrition in special education is nearly double that of general education, driven in part by overwhelming caseloads and lack of support—both tied to inadequate funding. (U.S. Department of Education)
- Eliminating IDEA National Activities and the IDEA Preschool Program would further erode the special educator pipeline, limit the special education field's access to critical evidence-based research, and harm preschool-aged children with disabilities.