



# SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING

Investing in Improved Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Wisconsin

## BACKGROUND ON SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING

Families of children with disabilities in Wisconsin have always known that with appropriate instruction and supports, their children can achieve in the classroom alongside their peers. Research backs up this notion by demonstrating that all but 1% of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities can learn grade-level content in the general education curriculum and achieve proficiency on grade level standards.<sup>1</sup>

However, the reality of providing, as a 2000 Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling describes, “an equal opportunity for a sound basic education” for students with disabilities requires a renewed investment by our state.

Over the last two decades, the state’s share of special education funding – which provides for therapies, assistive technology, specialized instruction and other classroom accommodations – has dropped from 44% to 26%. Adding to the funding crisis are reading and math scores for students with disabilities that have never been lower. Fall 2011 Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) scores show students with disabilities at just 22% proficient in math and 14.2% proficient in reading.<sup>2</sup>

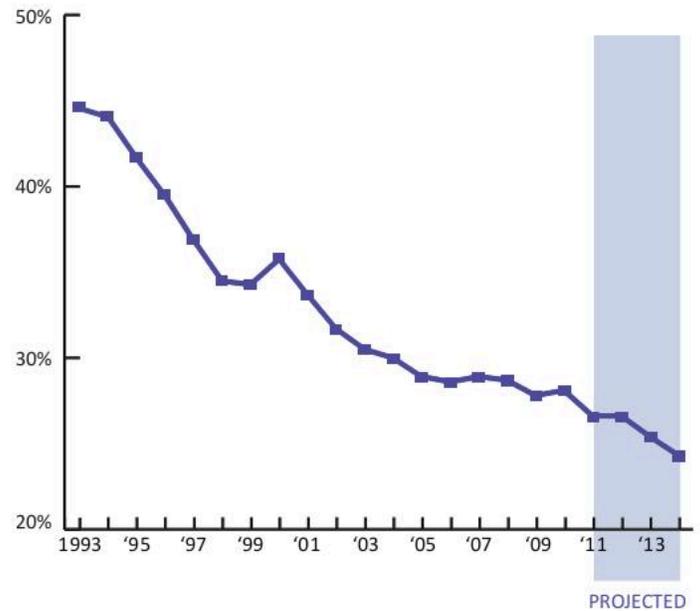
## RENEWED ACCOUNTABILITY

The good news is that Wisconsin is now in a new era of education accountability with higher standards for the performance of all students, including those with disabilities. The state’s new federal education waiver means nearly double the number of students with disabilities in Wisconsin are now being included in the state’s accountability system. This includes adding 461 schools to a reporting system in which they were not previously held publicly accountable for results for students with disabilities (see chart on page 2).

The need to improve results for students with disabilities has never been greater, but our funding investment that helps families and school districts to improve results for students with disabilities has not kept pace with the need.

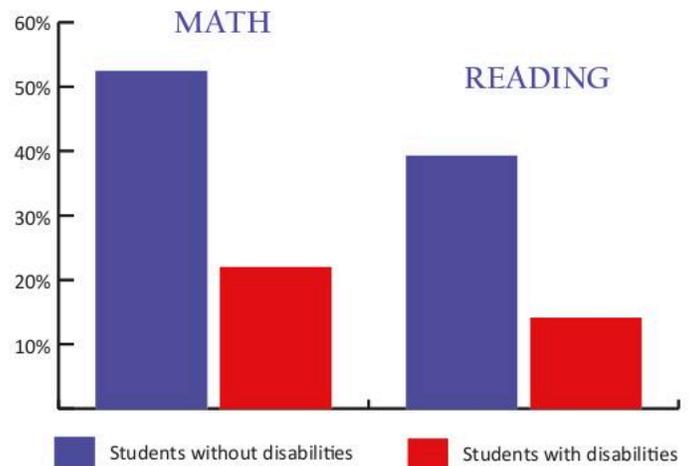
Last year, in a statewide survey of nearly 450 Wisconsin families, 46% of respondents indicated their child with a disability’s education programming was worse compared to previous years.<sup>3</sup> This report coincided with a statewide survey of school districts in the 2011-12 school year showing large cuts in special education staff.

## STATE REIMBURSEMENT RATES for SPECIAL EDUCATION



Source: DPI 2013-2015 Biennial Budget Request (pg. 89-90)

## PROFICIENCY LEVELS

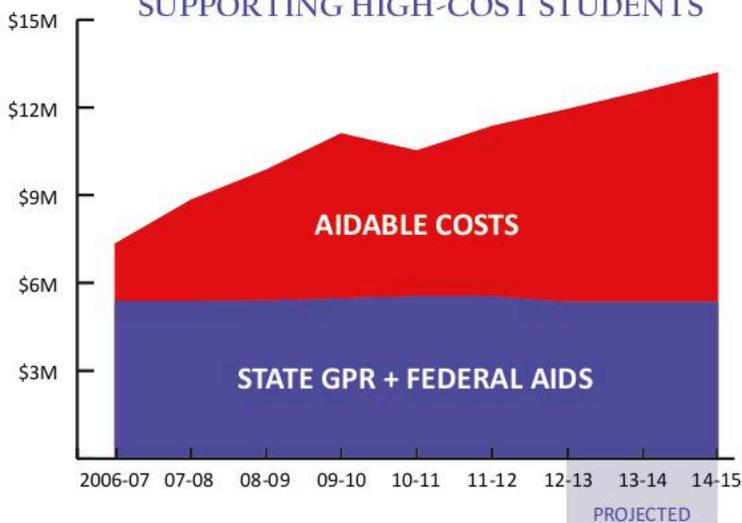


Graph depicts percentage of students proficient or advanced in specific category. Data from Fall 2011 WKCE scores using nationally aligned benchmarks.

Source: State Department of Public Instruction



## SUPPORTING HIGH-COST STUDENTS



Aidable Costs include all costs related to educating a high-cost student (\$30,000+) with special educational needs. The state General Purpose Revenue (GPR) Appropriation and federal assistance provide reimbursement.

Source: DPI 2013-2015 Biennial Budget Request (pg. 91)

It is necessary for the state's investment in special education to keep pace with rising costs. In addition, the state's continued commitment to support districts with higher-than-average special education costs is essential, particularly for small districts. The high-cost special education fund, which now supports one-third of all districts and nearly 1,000 children, has not seen an increase since it was created seven years ago. While it was intended to provide relief to support the education of students with the most significant disabilities – with a promise to reimburse a district at 90% of costs above \$30,000/student – the state's support to these districts is expected to drop to 40% in 2014.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?

The Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations supports an investment in students with disabilities to a 30% state reimbursement for special education costs and an increase in the high-cost special education fund to at least 55%.

- The estimated cost of a 30% reimbursement for state special education aid: \$66,039,900 GPR in FY14 and \$86,483,900 GPR in FY15.
- Increasing the state's commitment by \$1,500,000 in FY14 and FY15 will increase the reimbursement level for high-cost special education to 55% and 52.3%, respectively.

## MORE STUDENTS with DISABILITIES INCLUDED in ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM



Data reflects an increase in the number of Wisconsin schools (and students) now held accountable for reporting the academic performance of students with disabilities under new federal requirements.

Source: 2012 Wisconsin Federal Elementary and Secondary Act Waiver

<sup>1</sup> L. M. Pinkus, ed. "Meaningful Measurement: The Role of Assessments in Improving High School Education in the Twenty-First Century." (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Department of Public Instruction

<sup>3</sup> Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations. "Impact: A Report on the Impact of the 2011-2013 Biennial Budget on Wisconsin Students with Disabilities." March 2012.