

Valerie Caruso
Augusta
LD 98

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I am a professional educator for over 30 years specializing in special education systems. The percentage of Maine students identified as having an educational disability is higher than the national average—over 19%. As of January 2022, there were 32,641 students enrolled in Maine public schools with an identified disability and an individualized education plan, or 19.5% of all students. This was 650 more special education students than in January 2020, when there were 31,991 students with identified disabilities.

Special education plays a crucial role in ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have the opportunity to succeed in the educational system. However, for many schools, the resources allocated to special education programs are insufficient to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. It is my firm belief that special education funding should be increased. Doing so would not only help provide the necessary resources for these students but also promote a more inclusive and equitable education system for everyone.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of special education, many schools still face significant funding shortfalls in this area. Special education students often require individualized instruction, specialized staff, and tailored resources—such as assistive technologies, therapies, and behavior management programs. Unfortunately, due to limited funding, many schools struggle to provide these services adequately. In some cases, students are placed in overcrowded classrooms or have to wait for long periods before receiving the necessary support. This lack of sufficient funding can hinder their academic progress and social development, leading to long-term negative consequences.

Moreover, underfunded special education programs can lead to increased stress on teachers. Special education teachers are already tasked with meeting the unique needs of their students while also managing a variety of behavioral, emotional, and educational challenges. Without sufficient resources, it becomes increasingly difficult for teachers to provide the individualized attention and care that special education students need. This can lead to teacher burnout, high turnover rates, and, ultimately, a decrease in the quality of education provided.

The Importance of Increasing Special Education Funding

Increasing funding for special education is essential for addressing these challenges. By providing adequate financial resources, schools can ensure that special education students receive the support they need to succeed academically and socially. This includes providing smaller class sizes, hiring specialized staff such as speech therapists or occupational therapists, and offering assistive technologies that can help students with physical or learning disabilities engage with the curriculum.

Additionally, more funding would allow for greater professional development opportunities for teachers and staff who work with special education students. Teachers would be better equipped with the tools and training they need to meet the diverse needs of their students, leading to improved educational outcomes. This investment in teacher development can also reduce burnout and increase retention, ensuring a stable and consistent learning environment for students.

Promoting Inclusion and Equal Opportunities

One of the most compelling reasons for increasing special education funding is to promote greater inclusion within the education system. Every student, regardless of their disability, deserves access to a high-quality education. Inadequate funding often results in students being segregated into separate classrooms or even sent to specialized institutions, rather than being integrated into general education settings. This can limit their opportunities to interact with their peers and participate in

extracurricular activities, which are essential for their social and emotional growth. Increased funding can make it possible for schools to provide inclusive environments where students with disabilities learn alongside their typically developing peers. Research has shown that inclusive education benefits all students, not just those with disabilities. When students with different abilities work together, they develop empathy, communication skills, and an understanding of diversity. By investing in special education, we can foster a more inclusive, compassionate, and equitable society.

The Long-Term Benefits of Increased Special Education Funding

The benefits of increased funding for special education extend beyond the classroom. Students who receive appropriate support and services are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and enter the workforce. By giving students with disabilities the tools they need to succeed, we are setting them up for a more independent and fulfilling life. This not only benefits the individual students but also contributes to society as a whole. When students with disabilities are empowered to reach their full potential, they are more likely to contribute positively to their communities and the economy.

Moreover, the financial investment in special education can lead to long-term cost savings. By providing early intervention and adequate support, schools can help prevent the development of more severe issues that may require more expensive services later on. Early intervention has been shown to be one of the most effective ways to support students with disabilities, leading to better outcomes and reducing the need for costly interventions in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, increasing special education funding is essential for providing equitable educational opportunities to students with disabilities. Adequate funding ensures that these students receive the support they need to thrive academically and socially, while also promoting inclusion and reducing the strain on teachers. By investing in special education, we are investing in the future of all students, creating a more inclusive, compassionate, and prosperous society. It is time for policymakers to prioritize special education funding and ensure that every student, regardless of their abilities, has the opportunity to succeed.