

Texas special education students face teacher shortage and budget shortfall

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As the school year gets underway in Texas, the consequences of the state's longstanding refusal to provide special education services to as many as 250,000 students, or roughly 5 percent of the total student body, are becoming ever clearer. Despite Texas having been ordered by the federal government to increase its services for special needs students, there is a severe shortage of qualified teachers and billions of dollars are missing from the budget to fund the necessary programming.

In January 2018, the US Department of Education found Texas in violation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Instead of proactively seeking out eligible disabled children, referred to as the "Child Find" provision, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) set a "cap" of 8.5 percent on the number who would be admitted into special education programs regardless of the true level of need.

The purpose of the TEA cap was to cut costs. To educate a student in special education is roughly twice the cost of educating one in general education.

Local districts employed a variety of means to block students from getting the testing necessary to determine their eligibility. In some instances, parents faced aggressive questioning from school administrators before being allowed to receive application forms. In other cases, they were told that the public schools could not provide services.

In one northwest Houston suburban school district, Klein ISD, Maritza Woodard, whose daughter suffers from bipolar disorder, was given a list of local private schools that would serve her child's special needs, denying her access to the public education system.

Classroom teachers also encountered obstacles getting their students the services they needed. Educators reported that they would submit

recommendations for students who, in the course of their own professional observations, they deemed deserving of eligibility testing. Administrators then attempted to undermine these recommendations. Melanie Urbis, a math teacher in West ISD, said, "They sit you down and basically interrogate you about whether this kid really needs to be evaluated for special ed services, and if you really think that, and if you're sure."

In the state with the third largest number of billionaires in the US, lawmakers cut \$5 billion from the education budget in 2011. Responsibility for school funding was shifted largely onto local districts, which raise money through property taxes. However, the state employs a taxation formula that prevents districts from increasing property taxes from year to year, even when new funding is required to meet immediate needs, such as the current rapid influx of special education students into the public schools following the federal government ruling.

In a recent report to a subcommittee of the legislature, the TEA estimated that the increasing enrollment in special education will require a funding increase of \$3.2 billion over three years and an additional \$1.5 billion annually thereafter. These numbers do not include the estimated \$150 million the state stands to pay out in compensation to students who were denied special education during the years the cap was in effect. The state government is working to pass these costs on to local districts, which can only handle such burdens by making cuts in other areas.

The flip side of Texas' illegal cap on special education services was the failure to train, recruit, and hire certified special education teachers. There is now a massive teacher shortfall, which some estimates say could be as high as 10,000. Linda Darling-Hammond,

president of the Learning Policy Institute at Stanford University, told Bloomberg that last school year 29 percent of Texas's special education teachers were not even certified in the field.



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