

Special Education – Special Cost – Insufficient Funding

Special Education is an underfunded mandate. Abiding by all state and federal regulations comes with a high price tag and low governmental reimbursement rates from the same state and federal governments that issue the mandates. Providing services to all Special Education students, including “gifted,” in an individualized manner carries a cost that is mostly paid by local taxation.

Special Education cost is going up and government funding is going down. Next year the cost of Special Education, including the “gifted” program, is projected to be \$42.6 million dollars, up 5.24% from \$40.5 million in 2010-11, and the combined federal and state reimbursement for Special Education is projected to be \$8 million. The \$2.1 million expenditure increase that is mandated and/or contractual comes in the same year that the state is funding Special Education at 2010 levels and cutting 6% from Council Rock’s overall state funding.

Council Rock’s taxpayers must make up state and federal funding gaps in the Special Education budget. This year, there are 1,895 Special Education students in Council Rock at a cost of \$40.5 million, representing 20.3% of the district’s total budget. To fund Special Education this year, Council Rock received approximately:

- \$3.3 million (7.7%) from the federal government
- \$6.3 million (15.5%) from the state government
- \$31 million (76.4%) from local taxation

Next year, less Special Education funding is expected from the federal government and the state reimbursement remains the same. Council Rock is projected to receive approximately:

- \$1.8 million (4.2%) from the federal government – a 45% reduction from 2010 levels
- \$6.3 million (14.8%) from the state government
- \$34.5 million (81%) from local taxation – an 11% increase from 2010 levels

As Special Education cost rises, and state and federal subsidies remain static or decline, local taxpayers are forced to pick up more of the tab.

Council Rock has gained better control and reduced expenditures for Special Education over the years. Until 2003, the Bucks County Intermediate Unit (IU), a department of the state, provided many Special Education services in CRSD. In 2003, the Autistic support classes at Richboro Elementary were transferred from the IU (a process termed Transfer of Entity) to be run by CRSD. When Dr. Charles Lambert, Director of Special Services, joined CRSD, he determined that Special Education in Council Rock could run more effectively and with great cost savings if additional Special Education services provided by the IU were run in-house, particularly Autistic Support at Goodnoe Elementary. That change occurred in the 2007-08 school year. At this time, Becky O’Hara is the Supervisor of Autistic Support Programs, and Scott Helsingier is the Autistic Support Program Coordinator. Together, they oversee many of the functions previously done by the IU.

According to the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units, “Intermediate units provide services for students (ages three-21) in public and non-public schools that support, enhance, and augment their educational experience” in many areas of Special

Education; programs such as early intervention and Head Start, and other services, such as preschool and after school programs, Drug/Alcohol prevention and more. The district still contracts with the IU for speech, occupational and physical therapies, vision and hearing support.

Cost has also been contained by utilizing aides (as appropriate) in inclusion classrooms instead of providing a second teacher, and using programs for early intervention such as Reading Recovery. Although Reading Recovery is not part of the Special Education budget, its 70% continued success rate in 2nd grade for those who received Reading Recovery in 1st grade has deferred students who struggle with reading from being identified as in need of Special Education. Technology has also progressed allowing for cost savings. For example an IPad can now do, with one inexpensive device, what multiple technologies were required for in the past.

For 2011-12, Council Rock is proposing \$1.2 million in staffing cuts to Special Education. The “gifted” program will have two less support teachers – one at the high school and one at the middle school. There will also be savings realized by the reduction of 10.8 teachers (4.5 at the elementary level, 2 at the middle level and 4.3 at the high school level) and 10 Instructional Assistants in the Special Services department. These staff cuts result from decreases in overall enrollment and identified students, and changes in team structures at the Middle Level. While there will always be some impact when staff is decreased, the District is confident that the needs of all students will continue to be met at the levels CRSD expects.

The effect of proposed cuts to supplies and programs on Special Education is unknown. There are other proposed reductions in the Council Rock 2011-12 budget that may affect Special Education students. Teen Biz, a middle school computer program that helps both regular and Special Ed inclusion students read and work at appropriate reading levels, will be eliminated for regular education and still be in use for some Special Education programs. Reading Recovery, which has been previously touted as a program that keeps regular education students out of what is a more expensive Special Education placement, is also at this writing among the proposed cuts. As a substitute for Reading Recovery, the district is falling back on good, early identification and “reading clubs.” The effect this change might have on Special Education will not be known until future data can be analyzed regarding numbers of students being referred to Special Education.

It is clear that Council Rock has reduced Special Education costs where possible, while mandates at the state and federal level remain unfunded or underfunded, resulting in a greater tax burden to the local residents.