

# Special Education: Considerations for Funding

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# What we know and don't know about funding special education

- First...we don't know how to determine how much is enough funding...because we have no solid research on what constitutes an “adequate” or an “appropriate” education for children who receive special education.
- An “appropriate” education is measured against attainment of individually determined goals as specified in the IEP. Current interpretations of adequacy measure the level of attainment of universal standards or goals.

# What we know and don't know about funding special education

- We have estimates of expenditures or what it costs to deliver special education services...(the Resource Cost Model) and there have been a number of state and local studies of optimal funding based on the Professional Judgment Model....however, these are not based on student attainment of specific goals or standards.

# Cost factors that drive funding decisions

- Three major factors determine what special education “costs” and drive decisions about how and how much money should be allocated to special education:
  - *the number of children who receive special education;*
  - *the characteristics of those children (i.e., the level of need); and*
  - *the intensity of the special education and related services provided to individual students (i.e., the type, the amount and the location)*

# State funding formula and the cost drivers

- To account for the absolute number of students, states use either child counts or a fixed percentage of the total student population, often referred to as "census" counts.
- To account for variation in intensity services, states use one of three funding approaches: \*
  - *Formula funding*: Funding is included in the state's primary funding formula through weights, resource-based allocation ratios or dollar amounts (33 states & D.C.)
  - *Categorical funding*: Funding is allocated outside of the state's primary funding formula through separate line items which can vary each year (12 states)
  - *Reimbursement funding*: Funding is allocated outside of the state's primary funding formula. Districts are reimbursed **after** costs are incurred (5 states)

\* 2015 state survey conducted by the Education Commission of the States  
(<http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquest3D?rep=SD10> )

# State “weighted” funding formula and the cost drivers

- *Formula funding*: (funding is included in the state’s primary funding formula through weights, resource-based allocation ratios or dollar amounts (33 states & D.C.) is the most common measure but states vary substantially in the number and range of weights applied.
  - States attempt to remove incentives for identifying more students and providing more services and must not link funding to a specific place or environment.
  - State formula typically do not attempt to account for variations in type and level of need among children receiving special education in high poverty schools and districts.

# Cost drivers and special education research

- Special education research and policy has been guided by two major goals over the past decades:
  - Preventing the academic and behavioral problems that result in identification for special education and
  - Attenuating or reducing the effects of child specific developmental/acquired conditions that impact learning.

# What have we learned from the research?

- All three of the cost drivers...number and characteristics and intensity of service...are highly dependent on *the quality of general education*...everything that is considered necessary to provide an adequate education is also necessary *but insufficient* to provide “effective” special education.
- The effectiveness of special education...both in preventing and attenuating specific child-specific conditions that impact learning is related to timing, “early is best...earlier is better” and to tailoring the specific interventions to individual child need.



# What have we learned from the research?

- Current research supports the implementation of a *Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)* at the earliest possible ages (pre-K, K, grades 1 and 2) to prevent later special education identification and to reduce the impacts of child specific learning or behavioral characteristics.
  - MTSS is the umbrella term that encompasses “Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) but is broader than either and offers a systematic way to organize schools and programs to provide a continuum of support that can vary in amount, time and place as determined by child need and progress.
  - A number of states and individual school districts have adopted MTSS models...some such as Florida...have a longer history with the model and have tied allocation of special education resources

# MTSS in Florida: One example

- Florida has embraced MTSS and has made this a central core of its schools including how resources are allocated. According to the FL Department of Education website: <http://www.fldoe.org/finance/school-business-services/fl-department-of-edus-multi-tiered-sys.stml>

*“Within a multi-tiered system of supports, resources are allocated in direct proportion to student needs. Data collected at each tier are used to measure the efficacy of the supports so that meaningful decisions can be made about which instruction and interventions should be maintained and layered. The multi-tiered system involves the systematic use of multi-source assessment data to most efficiently allocate resources in order to improve learning for all students, through integrated academic and behavioral supports.*

*To ensure efficient use of resources, schools begin with the identification of trends and patterns using school-wide and grade-level data. Students who need instructional intervention beyond what is provided universally for positive behavior or academic content areas are provided with targeted, supplemental interventions delivered individually or in small groups at increasing levels of intensity. This system is characterized by a continuum of integrated academic and behavior supports reflecting the need for students to have fluid access to instruction and supports of varying intensity levels.”*

# Two parting considerations: MTSS and Early Intervention

- ***Level of child need is compounded by poverty and insufficient general education and results in more intensive and costly special education services....therefore:***
  - ***Special education funding needs to consider the impact of poverty on the type and amount of services a child with a disability will require.***
- ***While early intervention is a critical factor...research has established that pre-k programs do not typically address differentiated instruction or supports...yet we have a substantial body of research that has established specific interventions that are very effective with preschoolers who need additional support. However, these interventions need to be targeted at very specific skill deficits...therefore:***
  - ***Early education programs should be designed based on an MTSS model that targets interventions to a child's specific learning and social emotional development.***