

Special ed squeeze: General education funds needed for special education

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RACINE COUNTY — Local school districts are robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The districts, facing an increasing cost of special education while state funding for it tends to remain flat, are taking more money from regular education students to serve their disabled counterparts, officials have said.

This reality is a result of how federal special education law, state school district revenue caps and special education funding all intersect. The arrangement may persist because of federal sequestration cuts and because flat state special education funding is recommended in Republican Gov. Scott Walker's 2013-15 budget.

That possibility has area school districts and disability rights groups clamoring for more state funding. Their pleas have local legislators giving the yet-to-be-approved budget a harder look.

Impact on local schools

"We can't specifically (raise taxes) an additional amount for special education purposes," explained Racine Unified Budget Manager Marc Duff, "so we end up cutting in the regular education classroom or cutting maintenance of buildings" to fund special education.

Other Wisconsin districts are experiencing a similar trend, according to the state Department of Public Instruction.

"Federal and state categorical aids for special education have not increased at the same rate as costs," DPI reports. With revenue limits,

"rising special education costs have essentially reduced the spending authority of some school districts for regular education."

The Burlington Area School District has not seen that yet but likely will by 2014-15 if special education funding doesn't increase, said Superintendent Peter Smet.

In Unified, the amount of general fund dollars paying for special education has increased since 2003-04, from \$28.5 million then to \$34.3 million this school year, Duff said.

It's true that increase has come at the same time overall district enrollment has gone down. But Unified nonetheless faces a deficit at the start of each budget season, has ever-growing maintenance lists and has not given staff raises in several years, Unified officials said.

Why general funds take a hit

Laws require public schools to provide necessary services to special education students. The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, also requires a "maintenance of

effort” when it comes to special education funding.

That means districts have to spend the same amount or more each year on special education, unless they have a drastic reduction in special education students or a big turnover in special education staff that results in higher-paid older teachers being replaced with younger lower-paid ones, said Unified Superintendent Ann Laing.

Therefore, if special education cost increases grow faster than state and federal aid for those services — as they have in Unified over the last decade even when factoring in higher staff health care and pension contributions — the district can’t just provide fewer special education services or spend less in that area, Duff said.

The district also can’t just take the difference from taxpayers because of state-imposed school district revenue caps, Duff added, so the extra special education money needed trimming from the district’s general fund.

Looking ahead

Unified’s budgeting for next year is in such early stages Laing could not say what might get cut if flat special education funding happens.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, and state Rep. Cory Mason, D-Racine, both said they’d like to allocate more money to schools. Mason wants a “substantial” increase to special education funding while Vos said “we hope to find more money for schools” but it’s too early in the budget process to know how that might work.

The budget should be approved by the end of June, Vos said.

Laing is optimistic the final document will help schools, she said: “We’re hoping the Legislature will, with all the feedback around the state, realize flat funding will not work for any district in the state.”