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A brighter future, whatever it takes

An editorial on special education funding by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

I'd like to tell you a story, or rather a few stories. We'll start with Amy. Amy was a student at a Wisconsin elementary school who received special education services, in her case, speech and language. She learned strategies to help her verbal expression, as well as how to advocate for herself and her needs.

Maddie was a student at a Wisconsin middle school who received special education services, in her case in the form of accommodations to support her auditory processing time. She learned how to better navigate a world that expects immediate answers, including how to advocate for herself and her needs. Robert was a student at a Wisconsin high school who received special education services, in his case for challenges with behavior. He learned coping strategies and how to effectively regulate his emotions, his anxiety, and he also learned how to advocate for himself and his needs. He got additional support so that he can transition to life after high school seamlessly and successfully.

See, public schools support *all* learners, no matter what. Because whatever it takes to give the future generation a brighter future, that is what our public schools do.

Amy, Maddie, and Robert – and all Wisconsin students, those who receive special education services and those who do not – represent the future, and our state will have a brighter one because they are able to access their education in the way that fit their learning needs. The fact is you know a child who receives special education services. Maybe it's your neighbor's kid, or your friend's grandchild, or your cousin, or – if you're like me – your own child. To these students, the ones we know and love, the services they receive to support their education are invaluable: invaluable to the rest of their classmates who benefit from the inclusion of their classmates, invaluable to the future workforce and our society at large, and of invaluable benefit all of us as residents of a stronger Wisconsin with a brighter future.

It has been almost half a century since the signing of what we now know as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees the right to a free appropriate public education to all

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students, including students with disabilities. Public schools really are for everyone. Access to public education is a right. And that is exactly how it should be.

Providing appropriate public education also costs money. Currently, Wisconsin reimburses special education expenses at a rate of less than 30 percent. The other 70 percent has to come from somewhere, and as a recent district administrator, I can shed some light on where that is: the other parts of a school district's budget. In order to ensure these necessary, valuable, and legally required services, we transfer money from other funding categories, like deferring maintenance on the roof or making a difficult decision to not hire more support staff or pursue more arts courses or other programming. These are decisions that we should never force a district to make. Because our students need special education services, and they also need roofs and support staff and enrichment opportunities. All of these add up to a free appropriate public education. And when it comes to providing services to kids, our public schools will always put the best interest of the child first, and they will do whatever it takes to accomplish that.

Providing services is also exactly why we pay taxes, and why our state should significantly increase the special education reimbursement rate. Over the next biennium, we need to make – at a minimum – a \$750 million investment in special education. As a reminder, Wisconsin is sitting on a surplus of over \$6 billion. Investing at least \$750 million would allow us to increase the reimbursement rate for those services to 45 percent in 2023, and to 60 percent in 2024. And we shouldn't stop there. To completely invest in our kids, our sights are on a 90 percent reimbursement rate in the near future. Wisconsin's parents, caregivers, and educators have been calling for reform to our special education funding for years. I should know; I'm a parent and an educator, and I know we need this change. That difference would mean that districts would be able to replace the roof, or expand fine arts enrichment, or hire more staff, while also providing the special education services that so many students need without having to make a choice of what must get cut in return.

You may have noticed that the three stories I just told, the experiences of Amy, Maddie and Robert, all included learning self-advocacy strategies. I am perpetually impressed by our young people's ability to advocate for themselves, and I also believe they shouldn't have to advocate alone. As they advocate for their needs, we must advocate for our state's needs, and our state needs students who receive robust special education services, which means our state has the responsibility to fund them effectively.

Increasing funding for special education services helps students with disabilities, and it helps students without disabilities. It helps every student – the kid next door, the grandchild of your friend, your

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cousin, your own child – every single kid in our state will get a better education when we increase special education funding. And every single one of us will know Wisconsin’s future will be a brighter one.

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NOTE: The names of the students mentioned in this editorial have been changed. A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly is available [on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s website](#). This guest editorial is available online [on the Wisconsin DPI’s website](#).