REIMAGINING CONNECTICUT’S SPECIAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR A POST-PANDEMIC FUTURE

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In the United States, children with special education (SPED) needs are entitled to a free and appropriate public education. These services cost money over and above general education expenditures. Connecticut statewide SPED costs increased by 33 percent between 2007 and 2019. This rise in SPED spending has far outpaced that of total education spending, which increased only nine percent over the same period. Using Connecticut’s current methods of funding and delivering SPED services, school districts are struggling to keep pace with these rising costs, and the state’s students are suffering as a result.

Worse still, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed obstacles to educating SPED students in Connecticut that could have serious ramifications for students for years to come. Other states have seized the moment of increased awareness caused by the pandemic to improve their SPED systems and make them more sustainable. Connecticut should do the same to make lasting progress towards a more effective and equitable education system.

**JUST FACTS ABOUT CONNECTICUT STUDENT ENROLLMENT**

- Connecticut’s student enrollment decreased by 47,000 students between 2007 and 2019—a decline of more than eight percent.
- Meanwhile, Connecticut’s population of SPED students grew by nearly 16,000 students between 2007 and 2019—an enrollment increase of 23 percent.
- Between 2010 and 2019, Connecticut experienced a 74 percent increase in students identified as having Autism, a 42 percent increase in students identified through “Other Health Impairment,” and a 37 percent increase in students identified as having a “Learning Disability.”
- When necessary, a student may be enrolled (at the expense of the home district) in a separate out-of-district school to better meet their needs. Between 2000 and 2019, enrollment at these separate schools increased by 53 percent in Connecticut.
- 40 percent of outplaced students in Connecticut attend a private out-of-district program.
JUST FACTS ABOUT SPED FUNDING IN CONNECTICUT

• In 2016, six percent of Connecticut’s SPED funding came from federal sources, 29 percent from state sources, and 65 percent from local sources.

• Between 2007 and 2016, statewide SPED costs grew by 21 percent. Over that period, the average share of state contribution to SPED expenses decreased by three percent, while the average local contribution increased by six percent.

• The Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant, which is Connecticut’s education equalization fund, is the State’s largest source of SPED funding.

• While statewide SPED costs increased by more than $472 million in inflation-adjusted dollars between 2014 and 2017, State contributions to SPED through the ECS grant fell by $54 million over that period.

• The Excess Cost Grant, which reimburses districts for students with extraordinarily expensive SPED needs, is the State’s second largest source of SPED funding.

• Between 2008 and 2019, district requests for funding through the Excess Cost Grant increased from $154 million to $205 million in inflation-adjusted dollars. However, State allocations fell from $154 million to $148 million. Consequently, the rate of reimbursement decreased from 100 percent to 72 percent.

• Between 2014 and 2016, Connecticut’s wealthiest districts received eight times more per pupil Excess Cost Grant funding than Connecticut’s most impoverished districts. This funding disparity has a disproportionate impact on Connecticut’s students of color.

• The fastest-growing SPED expenditure is for tuition to out-of-district schools for special education. This type of expenditure has increased by 39 percent between 2007 and 2016.

JUST FACTS ABOUT THE VOLATILITY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION EXPENDITURES

• SPED costs have been predictable at the state level but volatile at the local level, which has made SPED budgeting unpredictable for districts.

• SPED expenditures are more volatile than general education expenditures. Across all districts from 2007 to 2016, general education expenditures fluctuated about three percent each year while SPED expenditures fluctuated about six percent.

• SPED expenditures are especially volatile in small districts where the cost of a single additional student makes up a greater percent of the total budget; the average annual percent change for Connecticut’s 54 districts with fewer than 1,000 students is eight percent.

• Expenses for out-of-district tuition fluctuated by 35 percent year-over-year for school districts; these expenses are extremely volatile.
JUST FACTS ABOUT GROWING DISPARITIES IN STUDENT PERFORMANCE

• The budgetary strain of districts’ increasing SPED costs has coincided with a decline in the performance of SPED students relative to their general education peers. Between 2014 and 2018, the achievement gap between SPED students and general education students increased by 0.8 points in language arts and three points in math.

• Between 2014 and 2018, districts with above-average concentrations of students experiencing poverty saw their achievement gap between SPED students and general education peers grow by even more: 1.4 points in language arts and 3.9 points in math.

• During the COVID-19 pandemic, a greater percentage of Connecticut SPED students than general education students followed a remote-only learning model. Students in remote-only learning models demonstrated 19 percent lower on-track rates than students with some in-person learning.

• Connecticut Voices for Children estimates that remediating learning loss for SPED students will cost the state at least an additional $1.7 billion over the next five years; the federal pandemic relief money will not be nearly enough to cover these expenses.
JUST POLICIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

• The State should increase its contribution to the SPED portion of the ECS grant and re-distribute funds through a multiple weights formula that accounts for student needs. Sixteen states across the country are matching grant dollars to student needs using funding based on multiple weights. Weights could be assigned based on the extent of need (e.g., mild, moderate, or high), based on student disability type (e.g., students with dyslexia receive X amount and students with autism receive Y amount), or on the resources that the student receives (e.g., student aids, pull-out resource rooms, etc.) Connecticut’s formula should consider the resources required to meet a student’s needs. Students who need more expensive types of services should receive a greater funding weight than students who need less expensive types of services. Providing Local Education Agencies with multiple points of assessment of needs shifts the focus away from boxing children into disability categories and towards providing the services children need to achieve their educational goals.

• Distribute Excess Cost Grant payments above the current basic contribution threshold using an equity measure, and introduce a second, higher threshold above which the state would assume all costs. The State could use the District Reference Group (DRGs) classification system to differentiate prorated grant rates. DRGs with greater socioeconomic needs would receive reimbursement at a higher rate than DRGs with lesser socioeconomic needs.

• RESCs should build district capacity to identify and serve the emotional and mental health needs of students in early childhood, specifically those from Black and Latino/a/x backgrounds. Black and Latino/a/x students are disproportionately outplaced with behavioral health needs. When school districts intervene early utilizing culturally relevant practices, students are especially responsive to interventions that do not require SPED services. Building out programs requires school psychologists, teachers, and specialists trained in providing interventions and delivering culturally relevant pedagogy. Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) could also expand their offerings of professional development for general education teachers in “Response to Intervention” strategies and in culturally relevant in-class interventions so that students can spend more time in general education classrooms.

• Increase the number of direct SPED service programs offered by RESCs and house these programs in pre-existing district schools spread across the state. Private programs typically cost much more than public regional programs to provide the same services. A Massachusetts study found that utilizing public collaborative programs resulted in an average savings of $29,000 per outplaced student, and a similar Minnesota study found a 69 percent savings. Private outplacement programs also lack the same measures of accountability currently in place in public outplacement locations. There is room within the state’s public schools to house these programs, so students would have greater access to the general education curriculum and their general education peers.