



Editorial: Money left on table

Milwaukee Public Schools snares only a small portion of available state aid for its high-needs special education students. The district got funds for only 11 students.

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Milwaukee Public Schools must do a better job of acquiring state funding for its severely disabled children.

MPS received only \$40,182 of the \$5.4 million pool distributed statewide for students with severe special needs. Twenty-five other school districts received more from the state than did MPS.

We believe the district could have gotten more to serve its neediest students. The district received funding for only 11 special education students. MPS has about 18,000 special education students districtwide. By contrast, the Madison Metropolitan School District received \$1.4 million for the 300 students for whom it submitted claims. Madison has about 4,000 special education students.

MPS officials say only students who cost a district more than \$30,000 a year can be counted for state funding and that the district's economies of scale works against them, according to Pat Yahle, director of special services for MPS.

For example, Yahle said the state's smaller school districts may use one bus to provide services for a student in a wheelchair while Milwaukee can use the same bus to pick up six disabled children, keeping the cost per child down.

Stephanie Petska, the state Department of Public Instruction director of special education, doesn't buy MPS' explanation.

"I would think more students would qualify," said Petska, adding that the process of collecting data can be cumbersome and tedious.

We understand that calculating grant requests can be time-consuming, but the Madison district felt that the issue was so important that it devoted one person to oversee the process. MPS does not have such a system in place, but it does submit collected data to a financial analyst.

"It's something we will look into," Yahle said.

The district also learned that the state's July 1 estimate projects an \$18.2 million decrease in general state aid and poverty aid to MPS. That means, assuming the estimate holds, that the budget the School Board adopted in June will require a property tax levy of \$288.6 million, up \$37.5 million, or 14.9% from the levy for the 2008 budget year.

Although MPS receives \$25 million in federal funding annually for its special education students, the state aid is useful in covering any additional cost that may occur, Petska said.

Without this, those additional costs can be passed on to taxpayers.

As school budgets get squeezed, MPS should adopt Madison's model to make sure it is getting all the money it can for its most needy students.

Does Milwaukee Public Schools need to hire someone to track spending associated with caring for special education students? To be considered for publication as a letter to the editor, e-mail your opinion to the [Journal Sentinel editorial department](#).

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