

[Click Here for Fire and Emergency Related Resources](#)

VOLUME 39

NO. 23

# FISCAL REPORT

PUBLICATION DATE: NOVEMBER 15, 2019

## Overview of Special Education in California

BY [MICHELLE MCKAY UNDERWOOD](#)

Copyright 2019 School Services of California, Inc.

posted November 8, 2019

In advance of significant 2020–21 State Budget conversations on special education, the Legislative Analyst’s Office released an [Overview of Special Education in California](#). The report provides a high-level review of special education laws, services, outcomes, funding, and costs. As stated in the conclusion, their “intent throughout this report has been to help the Legislature understand [special education] complexity, with the ultimate goal of better positioning the Legislature to engage with the administration in developing cost-effective policy responses for improving special education in California.”

The report makes no specific recommendations for special education but does note some interesting observations that may come into play in the upcoming State Budget conversations:

- Adjusted for inflation, between 2007–08 and 2017–18, special education expenditures increased 28%—attributing one-third of that increase to staff salaries and the other two-thirds to a rise in incidence of students with relatively severe disabilities
- During that same time, local unrestricted funding has been covering an increasing share of special education expenditures, rising from 49% in 2007–08 to 61% in 2017–18
- The average annual cost of educating a student with disabilities (SWD) is now \$26,000 (compared to \$9,000 for a student without disabilities) and that cost can range significantly
- The prevalence of students with relatively severe disabilities has almost doubled since 2000–01, largely driven by the rise in autism which now affects about 1 in 50 students
- The majority of SWDs are in mainstream classrooms
- Compared to other California students, SWDs are disproportionately low income and disproportionately African American
- The suspension rate of SWDs is almost double the statewide average
- The average percentile on state tests for SWDs in 2017 was 18th

The 2019–20 State Budget education trailer bill includes a preview of continued special education conversations to come. As a condition of continued funding, Assembly Bill 75 states that the director of finance and the chair and vice chair of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee must notify the state superintendent of public instruction that a 2020–21 budget trailer bill makes statutory changes designed to improve the academic outcomes of individuals with exceptional needs. These statutory changes may include:

- Expansion of inclusive practices to ensure that every individual with exceptional needs has access to learn in the least restrictive environment
- Opportunities for local educational agencies to receive state and regional support to address disproportionality of special education identification, placement, and discipline and ensure equitable access to services for individuals with exceptional needs
- Review of existing funding allocations for special education
- An examination of the role of Special Education Local Plan Areas in the delivery of special education services and supports for individuals with exceptional needs, including increasing accountability and incorporation into the statewide system of support

As noted above, the Legislature will likely look to this report as a foundational part of the upcoming conversations around special education.