

Special Education Funding: In an Ideal World, a Full-Funding Solution

By Senator Pete Campos

Congress recognized the need for special education over a quarter century ago when it passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

With the passage of the IDEA, Congress promised "full funding" and committed to fund 40 percent of special education programs mandated under the act. Even with "full" funding, state taxpayers are obliged to pay for more than half of special education programs.

Congress did not fully fund IDEA in its first year of passage — and never has. At most, Congress has provided 20 percent of the special education budget and state taxpayers have contributed the remaining 80 percent.

IDEA has changed the face of education in New Mexico, as it has across the country. The federal act revolutionized education for students with disabilities through recognizing a duty to provide a free *appropriate* education to all students — even to those who could not benefit from conventional teaching and classroom methods.

Including a broad spectrum of students in the classroom, mixing students with disabilities into the general population of students and individualizing instruction where needed, Congress introduced a generation of children to each other, thereby enriching the educational lives of both. Since 1975, regular education students have come to recognize the value of students with disabilities and to accept and embrace individual diversity of skills, abilities and approaches. Students with disabilities have learned from their classroom peers and have had something to teach in return. Virtually every classroom in the country today includes students with identified disabilities, students eligible for special supports and programming mandated by IDEA.

New Mexico taxpayers have made an historic contribution toward fulfilling the goals of IDEA — goals such as full inclusion, individualized education as necessary and a free appropriate education for *all* students. The state chose to include funding for gifted students as students with special education needs, and therefore has provided funds for enrichment as well as remediation.

The New Mexico Legislature has appropriated state funds for the 80 percent of programs not funded by the federal government. And the numbers of special education students nationwide has risen 30 percent in only the past 10 years. Some complain that too many students are identified as eligible for special education, but the rise of special education enrollment can be tracked in part to two changes: better awareness on the part of parents and teachers that students with special needs can be helped in the schools and increased identification of students with reading deficits. Some reading problems may be addressed through the varying requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, but other problems may persist. However, both Congress and state legislators are watching the problem of over-identification.

Constituents who believe New Mexico has not committed itself to special education may benefit from an examination of federal government and state special education funding. According to the National Education Association, the nationwide cost per student in general education classes averages just over \$7,500 per year while the cost for an average special education totals an additional \$9,370. New Mexico's special education funding from the federal government stood just over \$80 million in 2004, while state taxpayers funded almost \$350 million the same year. With states funding 80 percent of costs per student, on average, New Mexico's investment in its special education students is significant. The federal government provides, on average, only 17 percent of special education revenues. Figures provided by the Public Education Department demonstrate that the state's special education investment has increased steadily. Special education funding per MEM has risen from \$4,766 at the beginning of the millennium to \$5,402 in the 2004-05 school year.

Imagine what classrooms would be like if Congress provided "full funding" of special education programs in fiscal year 2005. The federal government would provide New Mexico's special education students with approximately \$180 million instead of the \$84 million actually appropriated and state taxpayers would pay only 60 percent — not 80 percent — of the mandated commitment.

With some \$100 million in additional federal funding, New Mexico's 89 school districts would be vastly more affluent. And with the need to provide only 60 percent

rather than 80 percent of funds devoted to special programming, New Mexico taxpayers could divert dollars to other worthy initiatives. Senate Bill 939, the unsuccessful IDEA Full Funding Act of 2003, proposed that Congress adopt a plan for fully funding IDEA over an eight-year period. SB 939 is just the most recent in a chain of unsuccessful initiatives to increase the federal contribution to state special education programs — a problem confronted by the New Mexico Legislature for a quarter century.

Special education funding in New Mexico, it is true, is not perfectly adequate. However, the funding level per student and the ratio of state versus federal programs demonstrate the commitment of legislators and taxpayers alike to make education all it can be — for all of New Mexico's students.