

# Southerners for Fair School Funding Advocacy Guide

## Funding for Students With Disabilities

### Why Funding Matters for Students With Disabilities

Recent research illuminates how **money matters in schools**. Increasing school funding for students with disabilities can lead to **higher student outcomes for students with and without disabilities**.

Funding matters for students with disabilities because systems have short-changed them for far too long. Like all supplemental services, these supports require additional funding above the average per-student amount. Southern states have an opportunity now to modernize how we educate our diversifying student population by ensuring that schools have the resources necessary for success.

### Why a Student-Weighted Formula Matters for Students With Disabilities

Student-weighted formulas improve equity, increase transparency, and maintain flexibility. **Twenty-nine states** use some form of a student-weighted formula for students with disabilities. Only half of Southern states have a specific weight for students with disabilities, and even then, not all of those weights are sufficient. The remaining Southern states either use flat weights or resource-based allocations. Flat weights do not vary based on student needs, and resource-based allocations often do not capture everything required to educate students with increased needs. Additionally, **resource-based allocation minimums** prevent school districts with small populations of students with disabilities from receiving funding at all. Weighted funding models allow states to be responsive to changing needs that support students with disabilities.

## Model Funding Policies for Students With Disabilities

Serving students with disabilities requires more resources to meet student needs. Therefore, students with disabilities should receive an additional weight, with distinct tiers, to the base funding allocation. Students should be assigned to different levels based on their specific abilities and skills listed in their IEP using a scoring system by a state department of education IEP review team. Using an IEP-based scoring system more precisely targets funds to needs rather than relying on a diagnosis or a student's educational setting. Students with disabilities are not a monolith and have different needs. For example, students with an autism diagnosis often have needs that vary widely and may require different funding levels. Additionally, this state review process will provide a layer of additional review to check that students are not under or over-identified based on their identity or for any monetary incentives that place students in more restrictive environments.

In addition to the weighted student funding model, states should maintain a high-cost fund specifically to support districts whose special education costs are comparatively higher than others. Currently **16 states** implement high-cost services funding for special education.

### Model Policies For Students With Disabilities Should Include:

- A generous weight for students with disabilities in addition to the base amount.
- Students are assigned to one of the established tiers based on their IEP's listed skills and abilities, increasing funding for students with more significant needs.
- A high-cost service fund that provides additional support to districts with higher special education costs.

### Model Funding Practices in Other States

**Georgia:** See *Ga. Code Ann. § 20-2-161*. Georgia provides increased funding for students with disabilities at five different weight levels.

**Colorado:** See *Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 22-20-114, § 22-20-114.5*. Colorado uses a multi-tier system to allocate funding. Additionally, the legislature annually appropriates \$4 million to reimburse districts for high-cost special education services.

🔗 [FIND YOUR STATE'S FUNDING POLICIES](#)

## Key Questions To Ask Policymakers

- Is our state considering tiered weights for students with disabilities? Will our model also include additional funding for districts with high special education costs?
- How will our state determine the different tiers for educating students with disabilities? How will our model assign students to different levels? Will students identified with dyslexia but without an IEP or 504 qualify for the students with disabilities weight?
- How will our state determine the appropriate weights for educating students with disabilities at each tier?
- How will our state determine the high-cost special education fund's annual allocation?
- Will our state allocate multiple weights for students who have a disability and are from a low-income background, an English learner, or in another student group?
- How will our state monitor IEPs and the identification of students with disabilities in schools and districts?

## Additional Resources

**50-State Comparison K-12 and Special Education Funding: Special Education Funding**  
Education Commission of the States, 2021

**How Can School Finance Systems Support Students With Additional Learning Needs?**  
Bellwether, 2021

**Common Sense & Fairness Funding Tool Builder**  
EdBuild, 2020

**Five Ways That States Limit Special Education Spending**  
Education Commission of the States, 2019