

Response to the 2009 Questionnaire

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In general, what is your vision for education in New Jersey and how does that vision reflect the needs of student with disabilities?

I have been committed to meeting the needs of students with disabilities, and I will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that their needs are met well. I am committed to serving students in the least restrictive environment, and we have taken tangible steps to encourage and enable school districts to create better options for students with special education needs. I also recognize that students' needs vary greatly, and that there is a role for county-based or regional special services school districts and education services commissions, as well as a role for private providers. As students needs vary in intensity and type, we need different options to meet those needs.

We have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into strengthening these options for students with disabilities. In fact, for the FY 2010 budget alone, the increases in special education funding for students with extraordinary needs increased from \$52 million to \$140 million. This historic increase, called for under the new school funding formula, is especially notable given the severe fiscal climate the state faces; it was one of only a handful of increases in the FY 2010 budget. This follows on the heels of significant increases in funding for special education that were embedded in the new school funding formula, as well as the \$19.5 million grant program I created in FY 2007 to provide in-district options for students with autism and other special education needs.

The treatment of children with autism has moved to the forefront, and received priority status in my Administration. In 2007, I enacted a series of laws specifically aimed at assistance, treatment, and research regarding New Jerseyans diagnosed with autism, including: the creation of a statewide autism registry; mandated autism guidelines for healthcare professionals; autism training for first responders; the creation of an adults with autism task force; and of course, the funding of six centers of excellence for autism, including the center where we meet today. And, I recently mandated coverage by insurance companies for the treatment of autism.

Finally, I have made significant investments in school construction: in-district projects that serve students with special education needs have been prioritized with the \$1 billion in school construction funding I fought to authorize in the summer of 2008 for the regular operating school districts (coupled with the \$2.9 billion for the SDA districts).

All of these investments haven't just been aimed at making up for past failures to invest in special education. They have also been aimed at bringing about real improvements in quality in the types of services and programs districts across the State can offer. When I travel around the State, I hear from parents about the improvements that their districts have made as a result of the investments made during my first term. They talk about their students no longer traveling on a bus for 45 minutes to an hour, because their local school districts have been able to develop in-district options to meet the needs of their children. There is no greater reward than to hear from these parents. While it is clear that we still have significant work to do, there are tangible strides that have been made.

These strides were recently recognized by the federal government: in recent weeks we have been given the definition of "meets requirements" by the U.S. Department of Education for implementing the provisions of IDEA. This is the highest rating awarded to states. This is a noted improvement from past designations the State received, and it reflects my focus on accountability and equity for students with special education needs.

My vision for education – and our committed focus on the needs of students with disabilities - has been embodied in all of this work. I am working to provide all students across the State with access to the highest quality education that will prepare them for the demands of the global economy and strengthen the future economy of the State. This is the goal for every single one of our students, and we have made dramatic improvements in working toward this goal for students with disabilities.

With respect to state funding:

1. Do you support a census model of funding special education?

Yes. The census-based model is currently used by the federal government for special education to states as well as in ten other states across the country. It is also the basis of special education funding since the enactment of the School Funding Reform Act of 2008 (SFRA), which I signed into law in January 2008. Prior to the enactment of the SFRA, special education in New Jersey was funding through a pupil weighting system based entirely on tiers.

In its 2003 New Jersey Special Education Expenditure Project, the Center for Special Education Finance found that there was often misunderstanding by school district staff in assigning students to tiers and that the category of disability was a poor proxy for variations in special education spending from district to district. Using the census model, the formula accounts for the full statewide cost of special education and districts are fully compensated for the cost of educating special education students. This minimizes the instances where districts are forced to use general education funds to comply with special education mandates. At the same time, the census model reduces districts' incentive to inaccurately report special education students since there is no longer a direct distinction between disability category and funding level.

2. Do you support a tiered model of funding special education?

In a sense, a tiered model of funding special education is also supported in the SFRA with regard to extraordinary special education funding. While this differs from the tiered approach for categorical special education funding that existed prior to the SFRA, the changes in funding for extraordinary aid do constitute a new type of tiered approach.

Under the SFRA and the FY 2010 Appropriations Act, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) reimburses districts for 95% of the costs over \$40,000 for educating a child with extraordinary needs in in-district placement. NJDOE also reimburses districts for 85% of the costs over \$40,000 for educating a child with extraordinary needs in out-of-district public placement and 85% of the costs over \$55,000 for educating a child with extraordinary needs in a nonpublic placement. This represents a vast increase in the reimbursement of extraordinary special costs, found to be about 23% for the costs over \$40,000 prior to the enactment of SFRA.

For FY 2010 alone, despite severe budget constraints, funding for extraordinary special education aid for students has increased by from about \$52 million in FY09 to \$140 million in FY2010 – an increase of \$88 million in a year where few to little increases were made. This increase in categorical aid for extraordinary costs compensates districts that have a higher percentage of students with greater and more expensive needs.

Used together, the census and the new extraordinary aid approach in the SFRA provide for a predictable level of special education funding that is both beneficial to the State and individual districts.

3. Would you support a comprehensive study to examine the full costs of special education in NJ?

Yes. In fact, my commitment to such research is found in the language of the SFRA. The Act calls upon the Commissioner of Education to commission an independent study of the special education census funding methodology. The purpose of this study is to determine if adjustments in the special education funding formula are needed in future years to address the variations in incidence of students with severe disabilities requiring high cost programs and then to make recommendations for any such adjustments. Given the statutory requirement and the importance of answering this policy question, I believe that this study should be completed first. However, subsequently or even in conjunction with the study required under SFRA, I would support a study to further examine the full costs of special education funding.

4. What quality indicators do you think need to be measured in special education?

We need to ensure that the same quality indicators we focus on for all students are in place for students with special education needs. Furthermore, we need to ensure that we are identifying the special needs of students early and providing essential services and programs to meet those needs.

As you know, indicators regarding school districts' special education program are currently reported online by the NJ Department of Education. These include graduation rates, dropout rates, assessment data, suspension/expulsion data, data regarding the Least Restrictive Environment requirements, parental involvement, disproportionality, etc.

However, I believe there are additional quality indicators that we are working to implement and improve. We need to look at the intensity and availability of the services provided, student-teacher ratios, the ability to tailor instruction to meet an individual student's needs, and the quality and appropriateness of the curriculum and activities planned for students. All of these quality indicators must focus on ensuring that students with disabilities are prepared for higher education and the workforce.

I believe that many of these investments that I have made in education will lead to improvements in these areas, and I will continue to raise the bar to ensure that our students have access to the high quality services and educational opportunities.