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## **NJ education group releases report on controlling costs of special education**

State officials can reduce costs and improve programs for special education by aggressively promoting early intervention programs, launching a voluntary shared services model and amending state law to protect school boards against the high costs of legal disputes, a new report from the New Jersey School Boards Association has found.

"Special Education: A Service, Not a Place," offers 20 recommendations for improving special education efficiency and quality across the state. Officials should change federal and state laws, identify new ways to pay for programs and provide school districts with more flexibility in using special education funds, according to the report.

"Our goal is to reduce special education costs to school districts without diminishing the quality of needed services," NJSBA executive director Lawrence Feinsod said in a statement accompanying the report, which was released during a panel discussion at the Crossroads South Middle School in South Brunswick Thursday night.

Feinsod said the report also seeks to repair tensions between general and special education programs.

"I am an untiring advocate for children with special needs. However, during my years as a school district superintendent and board member, I have watched special education cost increases far outpace those for general education," he said. "Not only has this trend reduced the resources available for other school programs, it has too often divided school communities into two opposing camps: special education and general education. That's not a healthy situation for any of our students."

Montclair State University professor Gerald Vernotica led the study team, which consisted of school board members and administrators. During their year-long study, the members consulted with more than two dozen special education experts and advocates. They also conducted two surveys, a national look at alternative funding structures and a state-wide inquiry of staffing and local costs.

The recommendations include:

- A change in state law to shift the burden of proof in disputes over individual education programs, or IEPs, from the district to the party bringing the complaint. The report noted the task force's survey of superintendents found "over 38 percent of respondents cited the 'adjudication process' as an area requiring legislative and regulatory change."
- An increase in flexibility for districts to use special education funds for literary and math programs in inclusive settings. The report cites the work of Nathan Levenson, who promotes a

"relentless focus" on reading instruction. Levenson's research shows classification rates drop as reading improves, according to the report.

- New funding methods for special education, including business fees, lottery and grants.

Finally, the NJSBA report seeks to change the perception of special education by integrating it more effectively.

"Public education should not be viewed as two separate systems — general education and special education — but rather as one continuum of instruction, programs, interventions, and services that respond to individual student needs," task force chairman Vernotica said. "In other words, it is part of the range of services public schools provide to children, not a separate place to put them."

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