

CONGRESSMAN JARED POLIS

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DEFENDING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS AND FAMILIES ACT

Fully Funding IDEA through Responsible Defense Budget Cuts

Nearly four decades ago, Congress pledged to pay up to 40 percent of the excess cost of educating students with disabilities. Yet, today, the federal government covers only about 16 percent of special education costs. The Defending Special Education Students and Families Act would finally live up to that nearly 40-year old promise by fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities in Education (IDEA) Act.

Full Funding of Special Education. The Defending Special Education Students and Families Act would increase federal special education funding to its 40 percent share (“full funding”) by 2016. In 2011, the federal government appropriated about \$11.5 billion in IDEA Part B grants to states, which covers an estimated 16 percent of the excess cost of educating children with disabilities. The legislation would increase IDEA funding over the next five years, culminating in an annual federal appropriation of \$30.6 billion by 2016 and a commitment to keep federal funding at the 40 percent level going forward.

Responsible Defense Cuts. IDEA funding would be fully offset by cutting unnecessary Defense Department weapons systems by \$18.8 billion over the next five years. The bill would replace projected purchases of the Navy and Marine Joint Strike Fighters, which have suffered repeated cost overruns, with cheaper and proven F/A-18E/Fs (saving \$14.5 billion). It would cancel the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, an unnecessary program that the Pentagon has already said it no longer supports (saving \$2.5 billion). Finally, it would reduce the number of aircraft carriers and Navy air wings by one, without sacrificing naval superiority (saving \$1.8 billion).

Additional Background. When IDEA was enacted in 1975, it was estimated that children with disabilities cost approximately twice as much to educate. As states continue to make significant cuts in their public education budgets because of the recession, local school districts have been forced to lay off teachers, close schools and cut classroom programs. The increasingly high burden of special education costs borne by school districts makes these cuts to general education even more painful. It is time that the federal government pays its fair share so all students can have access to an effective education. The Defending Special Education Students and Families Act shows that such critical funding expansions are feasible and practical.

Colorado-Specific Information. In Colorado, the special education funding burden falls mostly on the state’s 178 local school districts, which in 2009-10 paid for nearly 62 percent of the funds and the state paid about 20 percent of the costs. Federal funding amounted to 18.5 percent. This translated into school districts paying more than \$472 million—more than 3 times as much as the state paid—which was about \$151 million that same year. Colorado school districts pay a greater share of special education costs than local districts in other states, according to some historical data that found school districts across the country on average covered at least 15 percent less of the total amount than in Colorado.