'Sequester' Impact Felt on Special Education Aid

By Christina A. Samuels

Cutting professional development and assistive technology, freezing open positions, and shifting money from general education are among the ways that districts are coping with the $600 million that across-the-board federal spending cuts known as sequestration have carved out of the nationwide budget for special education so far.

Such strategies have muted the effects of the federal cuts, district officials and analysts say. But such stopgap measures can only last so long, administrators say, before cuts will be made that will be felt by students.

And because of provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that don't allow dramatic reductions in special education funding, other educational programs eventually could bear a heavier weight from the reduction in federal support, setting up what could be seen as a damaging competition for resources.

"We've continued to have a high level of unfunded mandates, without the financial resources to be able to handle that," said Laurie VanderPloeg, the president of the Council of Administrators of Special Education, which represents district-level officials. Future cuts are going to create a "significant strain" in the general education budget, she said.

Lindsay Jones, the director of public advocacy for the National Center for Learning Disabilities, based in New York, said that even reductions in areas such as professional development can be meaningful, as states prepare for the Common Core State Standards. Implementation of the common standards and the tests aligned to them will require significant accommodations for special education students and training for building-level educators putting them into effect.

States "are not going to be prepared for the new tests, either technologically or instructionally," she said.

Long-Term Headache

The funding cuts under sequestration are slated to remain in place for the next decade throughout the federal government unless Congress can develop a long-term deficit-trimming plan. The Obama administration has used education as an example of sequestration's negative impacts, although it has had to back off on some of its earlier, dire predictions, such as that tens of thousands of teachers could be laid off.

The overall impact on education programs has been hard to quantify. However, the cuts have been felt keenly in programs such as Head Start, where the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has been able to quantify the effects in 57,000 slots lost, and in the U.S. Department of
Education's **Impact Aid program**, which provides funding to offset the loss of tax revenue in areas such as those near military bases and Native American reservations.

Special education funding levels come with stringent mandates under the IDEA. School districts are required to provide a free, appropriate education to students with disabilities, and are constrained from cutting classes or staff if doing so would violate that requirement.

Despite the fact that the federal government provides about 18 percent of the cost of educating special education students, it also controls how much state and local money is spent on special education services, through the provisions of the IDEA. In general, the law's goal is to avoid having major fluctuations in funding from year to year.

**Regional Impact**

However, when districts add more money to special education—as some have been doing to make up for sequestration shortfalls—that increased level of local spending has to be maintained in future years, even if the federal dollars start flowing again.

Not that the federal funding tap is expected to flow any time soon, said Candace Cortiella, the director of the Advocacy Institute, a nonprofit organization in Marshall, Va., and the creator of the blog **IDEA Money Watch**.

"It appears almost certain that this first round of sequester cuts will become our new baseline," Ms. Cortiella said. "We've lost the $600 million, and that's not insignificant," she said.

Some states, such as Michigan, absorbed a portion of the federal sequestration cuts. Michigan lost about $22 million reduction in special education money under sequestration, but came up with about $10 million from other revenue sources to help make up for that.

That state infusion was one-time event, however.

Kathy Fortino, the associate superintendent for special education and early childhood for the Muskegon Area Intermediate School District, which manages federal special education funds for 14 school systems and education agencies serving 30,000 students in western Michigan, said the situation reminded her of her early career as a special education teacher.

At that time, the 1970s, general education teachers were often given pink slips every year and were constantly worrying about maintaining their jobs, Ms. Fortino said. As a special education teacher, she was insulated from that fear, but it set up a difficult dynamic with her peers. And the challenging funding forecast is coming at a time when general educators and special educators are working together more than ever before, she said.

"People are going to start getting protective of their funding," she said.