



## Congress Boosts Funding For Special Ed, Disability Programs

by Michelle Diamant | March 17, 2022

A \$1.5 trillion spending bill signed by President Joe Biden will mean more money for special education and other programs for people with disabilities, but advocates say it's not enough.

The package, signed early this week, funds the government through September. It is the first federal spending bill to be approved since Biden took office.

It includes \$14.5 billion for special education, an increase of \$448 million over last year, as well as a \$6 million bump for home and community-based supportive services, \$1 million more for respite care and \$10 million extra for a Down syndrome research effort, among other changes.

"We are very pleased that Congress has finally passed an omnibus spending bill for the fiscal year that began five months ago. This avoided a year-long continuing resolution at level-funding which would have been devastating for people with autism and other disabilities," said Kim Musheno, vice president of public policy at the Autism Society of America.

But, Musheno said that the final legislation left out many of the increases that had been included in a version approved by the U.S. House of Representatives. Specifically, she cited a big increase for special education personnel development that got cut from the bill and she said that the slight increases for most developmental disabilities programs fall short of what was in the House version and the president's budget request.

“The combination of the smaller increases in this final bill and the stalled Build Back Better Act means that there continue to be significant unmet needs for people with autism and their families,” Musheno said.

Meanwhile, officials with AASA, The School Superintendents Association, pointed out that even with the increase to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act funding included in the bill, it represents a cut compared to the amount allocated under the American Rescue Plan, the COVID-19 relief legislation approved last year.

“We applaud (Congress) for the small increases included in today’s bill, while also holding them accountable for once again leaving IDEA severely underfunded,” Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, said in a statement. “The proposed level puts schools on an IDEA funding cliff and all but ensures that (American Rescue Plan) IDEA dollars will go to one-time expenditures instead of sustainable quality investments.”

Left out of the bill altogether was additional COVID-19 aid that the White House had sought. That’s bad news for people with disabilities who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, said Zoe Gross, director of advocacy at the Autistic Self Advocacy Network.

“Our biggest concern with this spending bill is that Congress removed funding for COVID relief, such as testing, vaccinations, protective therapies for immunocompromised people and treatments, from the bill. That funding was vital for implementing the president’s COVID response plan and protecting people with disabilities,” Gross said. “Without the funding, Congress is essentially abandoning high-risk Americans to face COVID without continued mitigation efforts.”