

Federal Education Funding Cuts

Federal funding for all education programs, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was cut by 5.1% in 2013 due to sequestration. Funding for IDEA is critical to the provision of school-based special education and early intervention services including occupational therapy. Currently, the federal government only funds about 14% of special education spending, much less than the 40% Congress authorized in IDEA. The current reduction in federal funding puts services to our most vulnerable students at risk. If Congress cannot reach an agreement on the budget, education funding will be cut by an additional 2.1% for a total of 7.2% in 2014. AOTA opposes the continuation of these cuts at this dramatic level, and urges Congress to end the steep reduction in funding to special education services.

AOTA Position:

It is critical that Congress finds a way to balance spending in a way that does not adversely affect the success of our nation's most vulnerable students. We strongly urge Congress to end the dramatic cuts to education and IDEA funding and find a more balanced solution to balancing the federal budget.

Role of Occupational Therapy Practitioners in Schools

Occupational therapists have provided school-based services to students with disabilities since the passage of IDEA in 1975. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA extended the availability of occupational therapy services to all students, not just those with disabilities.

The profession of occupational therapy is concerned with a person's ability to participate in desired daily life activities or "occupations." In the schools, occupational therapy practitioners use their unique expertise to help children to participate in important learning and school-related activities. School-based occupational therapy practitioners support academic and non-academic outcomes such as social skills, math, reading and writing, behavior management, recess participation, self-help skills, and prevocational skills. They help to develop curriculums and school-based programs, address school health and safety, identify assessment accommodations, recommend modifications to classroom environments, and develop violence prevention and other types of initiatives. Occupational therapy practitioners play a critical role in educating students with diverse learning needs.

Effect of Sequestration on Schools and Students with Special Needs

Because of the ways schools are funded, most school systems are just starting to feel the effects of the FY2013 sequestration as the new school year begins. IDEA Part B, which supports special education services for students age 3 to 21, has lost an estimated \$579 million in federal funding; these cuts will likely impact 300,000 students with special needs.¹ In general, schools are increasing class sizes, eliminating positions for teachers and related service providers, limiting funds for assistive technology, and decreasing professional development programs. The effects of funding cuts on school-based occupational therapy include fewer occupational therapy positions, freezes in hiring, increased workloads, and reduced access to critical occupational therapy services for students with disabilities.

Please work to end harmful cuts to education and IDEA funding enacted under sequestration.

¹ The Pew Charitable Trusts. "Sequester Hits Special Education Like 'Ton of Bricks'" (2013)