Budget Cut Impacts on Secondary Special Education Services and Student Academic Performance

By: Carrie Hambelton

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to share the findings about how budget cuts impacted secondary special education programs. In addition, the study hoped to show a correlation between the budget cuts to secondary special education students and/or programs with a drop in academic performance and achievement. This study could possibly improve the manner in which our state and federal government handles budget cuts in the future and demonstrate the areas we cannot afford to lose funding.

The research question for this study was, “How have budget cuts in special education services affected secondary special education student’s academic performance and growth?” The hypothesis is that budget cuts have negatively impacted special education students’ academic learning, removed services that are extremely beneficial, and the lack of resources have been devastating to our students requiring the most assistance from educators.
Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. 2

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... 3

List of Tables and Figures .............................................................................................................. 4

Chapter One: The Problem ............................................................................................................. 5

Chapter Two: Background/Literature Review .............................................................................. 13

Chapter Three: Description of the Study ...................................................................................... 20

Chapter Four: Results of the Study ............................................................................................... 25

Chapter Five: Discussion/Conclusion .............................................................................................. 41

References ......................................................................................................................................... 45
List of Tables and Figures

| Figure 4.1 - 2009 MME Results                                                                 | 26 |
| Figure 4.2 – 2010 MME Results                                                                 | 27 |
| Figure 4.3 – 2011 MME Results                                                                 | 27 |
| Figure 4.4 – 2012 MME Results                                                                 | 28 |
| Figure 4.5 – 2013 MME Results                                                                 | 28 |
| Figure 4.6 – Pupils Enrolled for 2009-2013                                                   | 31 |
| Figure 4.7 – Number of FTEs 2009-2013                                                        | 32 |
| Figure 4.8 – Instructional FTEs 2009-2013                                                   | 33 |
| Figure 4.9 – Support FTEs 2009-2013                                                         | 33 |
| Figure 4.10 – Teacher to Student Ratio 2009-2013                                           | 35 |
| Figure 4.11 – Cost Analysis 2009-2013                                                       | 36 |
Budget cuts have recently taken place in the U.S. and affected many Special Education Programs nationwide. The budget cuts were a result of a 5% reduction in federal funding to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). When this reduction went into effect, programs were reduced or even terminated due to lack of funding and resources (Moore, 2011).

The cut in federal funding had a large impact on the resources available for special education students’, increased teacher caseloads by decreasing the number of teachers, and shut down resource rooms where special education students’ went to receive extra academic help (Lu, 2013). The concern with a significant funding cut is whether we, as an education system, were able to provide a free and appropriate public education to our students’ as they are legally required to receive.

Based on surveys taken by special education teachers, there should never be significant cuts made to special education programs (Lu, 2013). These children demand more assistance to achieve academically, socially, emotionally and physically. State cuts to Special Education take away their services, specialized support staff, and resources provided as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).
The purpose of this study was to share the findings on how destructive budget cuts were to secondary special education programs. In addition, the study hoped to show a correlation between budget cuts to secondary special education students and programs to a drop in academic performance and achievement. The study looked at how much money was cut from the special education budget, what services were negatively impacted, and what effects it had on student performance.

This study has the possibility to improve the manner in which our government handles budget cuts in the future and demonstrate the areas we cannot afford to lose funding. If the results of the study suggest that special education students and the services that are mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act have affected the ability of the students to make academic achievements, then it would be appropriate to take a long look at what other programs could survive with appropriate funding cuts that would not directly impact academic achievement.

Research Question

The research question for this study was, “How have budget cuts in special education services affected secondary special education student’s academic performance and growth?” The hypothesis was that budget cuts have negatively impacted special education students’ academic learning, removed services that are extremely beneficial, and the lack of resources were devastating to our students’ requiring the most assistance from educators. The hypothesis can be found in Chapter
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

5 where the results are discussed in detail and a conclusion can be drawn from the findings.

Terms

This study references several important terms, which include:

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act):

Constitutive Definition: According to the idea.ed.gov website, the definition of IDEA is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. Infants and toddlers with disabilities (birth-2 years) and their families receive early intervention services under IDEA Part C. Children and youth (ages 3-21) receive special education and related services under IDEA Part B.

Operational Definition: The IDEA is a law that must be followed by educators covering assistance for education of all children with disabilities. The goal of IDEA is to provide children with disabilities the same opportunity for education as non-disabled students.‘

Learning Goals:

Constitutive Definition: According to the website www.aea1.k12.ia.us, learning goals are described as “specific statements of intended student attainment of essential concepts and skills. The learning goal is the heart of assessment for
learning and needs to be made clear at the planning stage if teachers are to find assessment for learning manageable” (Schild, 2013).

Operational Definition: Learning goals are brief statements that describe the learning objectives students’ will be expected to master by the end of school year, course, unit, lesson, project, or class period. In many cases, learning objectives are the interim academic goals establish by teachers for students’ who are working toward meeting more comprehensive learning standards.

Academic Performance:

Constitutive Definition: According to Wikipedia, the definition reads; “Academic achievement or (academic) performance is the outcome of education — the extent to which a student, teacher or institution has achieved their educational goals. Academic achievement is commonly measured by examinations or continuous assessment but there is no general agreement on how it is best tested or which aspects are most important — procedural knowledge such as skills or declarative knowledge such as facts.”

Operational Definition: Academic performance is measured by how well a student meets standards set out by local and state government and the institution itself. As career competition grows more fierce in the working world, the importance of high student academic achievement has captured the attention of parents, legislators and government education departments alike.
MME (Michigan Merit Examination):

Constitutive Definition: According to the Education Department of Michigan the Michigan Merit Examination (MME) is the state high school assessment administered annually to grade 11 and eligible grade 12 students’ during the month of March. It is comprised of the ACT Plus Writing college entrance exam, portions of the WorkKeys job skills assessment, and Michigan components developed to assess Michigan high school content standards. The MME assesses students in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies; replacing the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) high school assessment in spring 2007. These test items are aligned to Michigan high school content standards.

Operational Definition: The MME is a state high school assessment administered to students in grade 11 to assess their college and career readiness. This test is aligned with high school standards to reveal to teachers, parents and students’ a score of their current knowledge about particular subject areas.

Resource Room:

Constitutive Definition: According to Wikipedia, the definition of a resource room is a separate, remedial classroom in a school where students’ with educational disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities, are given direct, specialized instruction and academic remediation and assistance with homework and related assignments as individuals or in small groups.
Operational Definition: A resource room is a separate classroom where students' diagnosed with learning disabilities can receive specialized instruction from teachers with specialized training using various alternate teaching approaches.

FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education):

Constitutive Definition: According to Wikipedia, the definition of FAPE is an educational right of children with disabilities in the United States guaranteed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under Section 504, FAPE is defined as “the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services that are designed to meet individual needs of handicapped persons as well as the needs of non-handicapped persons are met and based on adherence to procedural safeguards outlined in the law.” Under the IDEA, FAPE is defined as an educational program individualized to a specific child, designed to meet that child's unique needs, while providing access to the general curriculum and meeting the grade-level standards established by the state from which the child receives educational benefit. The United States Department of Education issues regulations that define and govern the provision of FAPE. In order to provide FAPE to a child with a disability, schools must provide students with an education including specialized instruction and related services which prepares the child for further education, employment, and independent living.

Operational Definition: FAPE indicates that all eligible students’ with disabilities are given the right for their education to be free of cost and appropriate for them.
The education provided for a particular student would be appropriate by ensuring their education is tailored to meet their academic needs, as outlined in their IEP.

IEP (Individualized Education Program):

Constitutive Definition: According to www.education.org the definition of an IEP is a written document required for each child eligible to receive special education services. It is provided to a student who has been determined first, to have a disability and second, to need special education services as a result of that disability. The IEP, the team that develops it, and what it must contain are governed by Part B of the IDEA and amendments to it. The IEP provides information on children's current performance levels and directs the special services and support provided to students who have IEPs. It includes provisions for defining annual goals, evaluating progress, and formalizing what is considered a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for the student with the disability. IEPs have several required components. Among the information to be included in IEPs are the following: (1) present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, (2) measurable annual goals, (3) special education, related services, and supplementary aids and services, (4) amount of time students will receive special education services, (5) participation in state or district-wide academic assessments, (providing accommodations and reasoning for the alternate assessment if the child will not participate in the standard assessment), (6) initiation date and projected duration of IEP, (7) transition services, and (8) a measure of student progression toward annual goals with periodic reporting to parents. Access to and participation in the general
curriculum and use of research-based procedures are emphasized in the preparation of IEPs (Yell, 2006). States or districts may add to the basic components as they see appropriate, but failure to include all required components has been a source of litigation (Yell, 2006).

Operational Definition: The IEP is a legally binding document. It is meant to address each child’s unique learning issues and include specific educational goals. The school must provide all accommodations and educational components promised in the IEP. Developing an IEP is crucial as it spells out a child’s learning needs, services the school will provide, and how progress will be measured.
A lot of professionals in the special education field have voiced their frustration with constant cuts being made to their students’ programs and services (http://ncpssers.org). Voices from the Field polled 1,000 special education professionals, including special education teachers, special education administrators, and specialized instructional support staff from 50 states to report that funding cuts had impacted their ability to provide services mandated by the IDEA (http://ncpssers.org). It is mandated by law that educators provide the same learning opportunity to children with disabilities, which occurs through special education services and programs. The law states that children with disabilities must be provided the same learning opportunity as those without disabilities. This is made possible through special education services and programs provided to children diagnosed with learning disabilities.

The basis for most IEP law is found in three federal statutes, The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Family Educational and Privacy Rights Act (Hancock, 2009). IDEA is a federal law binding in all states. State law can mandate more protection than IDEA, but not less. Each state uses different criteria to determine programs and guidelines for qualifying students’ of special education. It is mandated by state law that our children must have access to services and programs for additional assistance in their education.
Hancock (2009) found that most special education funding has been a complicated topic for most to fully comprehend. Many parents believe that federal and state governments provide funding and some even assume that special education is entirely funded by the federal government (Shirley, 2009). Instead, it is the local school districts that are largely responsible for a free appropriate education, or FAPE. Special education services were federally mandated in 1975 by the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This was later modified and became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA requires states to provide children with special education services as a condition of receiving federal funds (Hancock, 2009).

According to Hancock (2009), the federal government has provided funding for grants under IDEA. The largest is called IDEA Part B, which supports special education programs for grades K-12. Two smaller grants support preschool programs, as well as services for infants and families. On average, most states estimated special education monies from the federal government make up less than 15% (Shirley, 2009). This leaves the local school districts scrambling to fund the remaining costs of mandated special education services. Additionally, the approval of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 forced school districts to encroach on their general fund monies to pay for the necessary special education services.

It seemed obvious to most educators that if the federal government mandated special education services under IDEA there should be a plan in place to adequately fund these programs and services. Unfortunately, public education doesn't always make
According to Hancock (2009), we've all heard the "WE HAVE NO MONEY" speech from our local school districts when it comes to explaining actions such as increasing class sizes, cutting teachers, eliminating extra-curricular activities, and explaining the severe lack of specialists. Parent organizations and special education union members made regular trips to state capitals and Washington D.C. to lobby for the promised 40% special education funding but, unfortunately, no changes have occurred.

Shirley (2009) explained from her study spanning across the United States that statistics show an increase in the number of special education students. Services were drastically needed, yet the funding was just not there. For example, there was an alarming increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders. Most of these children required services in the area of speech and language therapy, however, there was a severe shortage of speech and language therapists across the United States and most districts could not afford to outsource to the private sector (Shirley, 2009). Although the services are mandated by IDEA, most districts could not afford them. This resulted in frustrated parents at IEP meetings forced to negotiate for services that should have been easy to provide by the local school district.

The special education system of funding has been ineffective and everyone has suffered. Each state uses a different formula to determine their allocations from state governments and it appears difficult to find even high level administrators who truly understand special education funding. If school districts accept federal funding dollars, they must provide appropriate services and programs that students with disabilities need to further their education and academic growth. If the programs and services have
been cut, where is the federal money allocated that was already accepted? Are schools providing the correct amount of services under the law to assist students with disabilities? Some of the literature discussed in this research project will provide answers to these questions.

Budget Cuts

According to Schneider (2013), state legislators were not expected to come to the financial rescue either. Representative Brandon Creighton, Republican of Conroe, chairman of the House Select Committee on Federalism and Fiscal Responsibility, said lawmakers would need to see “if there’s truly an impact we need to address,” before they increase financing for any programs affected by the budget cuts, known as sequestration. As federal and state financing sources disappear, the financial burden and responsibility falls on local budgets. Although low-income and special education students were initially affected by the cuts, general education also felt the pinches as well (Schneider, 2013). It’s the trickle-down effect; if school districts shoulder more special education and low-income student costs, consequently their general education students’ will suffer along the way too (Schneider, 2013).

The National Center for Learning Disabilities surveyed parents about the cuts on special education services and how it affected their children’s education. Among American students with disabilities, class sizes were increased, services were wearing thin, and providers were disappearing (Resmovits, J., 2013). According to Resmovits (2013), the impact of these challenges and the affects it had on student’s academic learning was negative. With more cuts to the providers of services and programs came
increased caseload to the remaining providers. The challenge then became more focused on how to balance a larger number of students, thus decreasing the amount of time each student had with their professional special education teacher.

According to Lu (2013), many schools had to eliminate resource rooms where students could get extra help in math, reading, and writing. Numerous schools also had to cut the number of speech, occupational, and physical therapists employed to work with students several times per week. Lu’s research discussed the importance of resources in the special education programs eliminated from schools due to sequestration.

Public schools K-12 felt the greatest impact of sharp cuts in the state spending. The trickledown effect of budget cuts influenced various areas with reduced wages, eliminated many services, and benefits were cut (Moore, M., & Rowden-Racette, K., 2011). The article titled “State budget cuts will affect members, services” discussed the different services that were lost or cut due to a decrease in state funding (Moore, M., & Rowden-Racette, K., 2011).

As said by Oliff and Mai (2012), states made steep cuts to education funding since the start of the recession and in many states those cuts deepened over the years. Oliff and Mai’s article called “New school year brings more cuts in state funding for schools” discussed how restoring school funding must be an urgent priority. The sharp state-level K-12 spending cuts of the last several years had serious consequences for the nation (Oliff, P. & Mai, C., 2012).
The funding situations for Department of Education programs in 2013 were complicated. The 2014 budget request was prepared before final information was available for the 2013 levels on accounts and programs. Therefore, the 2014 budget makes most comparisons to the 2012 dollar levels that had been extended into 2013 by the continuing resolution that ran through March 27. The 2013 funding was also more complex because of sequestration according to (www.2.ed.gov).

Reducing Debt

The Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011, P.L.112-25, extended the Government’s debt ceiling, reduced the deficit by fixing caps on discretionary funding for 10 years, established a procedure for additional deficit reduction proposals from a Joint Select Committee, and set up a backup “sequestration” procedure as an incentive for legislative changes (www.2.ed.gov). Sequestration was a process for automatic, across-the-board cuts. The timing of sequestration was tied to the expiration of various tax reductions and entitlement provisions (www.2.ed.gov). Under the BCA, if deficit reductions did not occur by the end of 2012—what became known as the “fiscal cliff”—funding would be subject to a sequester beginning January 2, 2013.

Just in time to avoid the January fiscal cliff, Congress passed some of the necessary legislation in the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012, P.L. 112–24 (www.2.ed.gov). It also postponed the sequestration deadline to March 1, 2013 to give Congress more time to pass deficit reduction legislation. Congress did not pass additional legislation to balance the Federal budget by the new deadline. Thus, the President was required by the BCA to issue a sequestration order on March 1 canceling
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

approximately $85 billion in budgetary resources across the Federal Government for the remainder of the 2013 fiscal year (www.2.ed.gov). Total cuts for the Department of Education came to almost $2.5 billion.
Chapter Three: Description of the Study

Budget cuts had recently taken place in the U.S. and affected many Special Education Programs in schools nationwide. The budget cuts were a result of a 5% reduction in federal funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). When this reduction went into effect, programs were reduced and terminated due to lack of funding and resources (Moore, 2011). In the researcher’s opinion, this significant cut affected the services required for special education students and it is probable those cuts have had negative impacts on their academic performance.

The cut in federal funding had an immense impact on the resources available for special education students, increased caseloads by cutting the number of teachers, and shut down resource rooms where special education students received extra academic assistance (Lu, 2013). The concern with the significant funding cut was whether we, as an education system, were able to provide a free and appropriate public education to our students, as they are legally required to receive.

Based on the researcher’s classroom experience over a five-year period, and two years studying special education policy and law, there should never be significant cuts made to special education programs. These children require additional assistance to achieve academically, socially, emotionally and physically and we have taken away their services, specialized support staff, and resources mandated by the IDEA that must be provided by the state.

The purpose of this study was for the researcher to share the findings on how devastating budget cuts can be on secondary special education programs. In addition,
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

the researcher hopes to demonstrate a correlation between the budget cuts to secondary special education students and programs, to a drop in academic performance and achievement. The researcher studied the amount of money eliminated from the special education budget compared to others, what services were negatively impacted, and the impact on student performance.

This study could possibly help the manner in which our state handles budget cuts in the future and highlight areas of the budget we cannot afford to reduce money. If the results from the study suggest that special education students and the services that are mandated by the IDEA have affected the ability of the students to make academic achievements, it would be appropriate to take a long look at what other programs could survive with appropriate funding cuts that would not directly affect academic achievement loss. It is possible that funding cuts to other programs may have less of an impact on academic performance.

The research question for this study was, “How have budget cuts in special education services affected secondary special education student’s academic performance and growth?” The researcher hypothesizes that budget cuts have negatively impacted special education student’s academic learning, removed services that are extremely beneficial, and the loss of resources have been devastating to our students requiring the most assistance from educators. The researcher’s hypothesis can be found in Chapter Five when the results are discussed in detail and a conclusion can be drawn from the findings.
The researcher’s study was a historical data collection that included gathering data of student performance on state testing. The researcher has gone back 5 years in the data collection so the reader will see the results from the MME from 2009-2013 from the special education population of students. The researcher felt it was important to go back 5 years so the reader could see if there was a reoccurring trend and ensure it was not just a one-time shift in academic performance. In order to show a true and honest correlation, the study required data from multiple consecutive years to exhibit a pattern.

This study’s data collection was from Grand Rapids Public Schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) is Michigan’s fourth largest public school district and the second largest employer in the City of Grand Rapids; serving more than 17,000 students with 4,000 employees, including 1,400 dedicated teachers (www.grps.org). The student population represents nearly 70 countries with 49 different languages spoken, creating a value-added educational experience and benefit that is above and beyond a basic education (www.grps.org). GRPS is also emerging as a leader in Michigan on consolidation and cost-sharing services. GRPS currently manages center-based special education programs for all schools in the Kent Intermediate School District; food services for East Grand Rapids Public Schools, Grand Rapids Christian Schools, Grand Rapids Child Discovery Center, and two Grand Rapids Catholic Schools (www.grps.org). This background information creates a picture for the reader to visualize the set of students you will read test results for later in the study.

The data collected from GRPS is only focused on the special education students at the secondary level. The researcher looked at the MME data from 5 years for
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

secondary special education students. The reader will see the results of this data in Chapter Four. Data graphs are presented in Chapter Four for the reader to look over and analyze. The reader can then have a better understanding of the secondary special education student’s academic performance over the last 5 years. After the reader looks over the student’s performance on the MME test, the researcher will then show the results, in graph form, of the cost analysis reports from the GRPS district. Comparing these two, side by side, will then give the reader the information to see if a correlation can be made between the two sets of data. The reader can then formulate an answer to the question, “Is there a conclusion that can by drawn from the information presented here?”

The MME data was collected and scored by the MDE (Michigan Department of Education). Student’s MME scores were then divided into four performance levels: exceeded expectations, met expectations, basic, and apprentice. Students who placed in either the met expectations or exceeded expectations levels were considered to be “proficient” in that subject. Those who placed in the apprentice or basic levels were deemed to be “not proficient.” The students must receive a score of 1100 to earn the label "met expectations."

In March 2007, Michigan high school students said goodbye to the MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Plan) and said hello to the MME (Michigan Merit Exam). Unlike the MEAP, the new exam not only combined items from several tests but it also saved student families both time and money. The exam provided students with:
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

• A free ACT college entrance exam score that can be used to apply to college. In other words, one will no longer pay for their child to take the ACT. Students are also allowed one free retake of the MME if they did not qualify for the Michigan Promise scholarship.

• A free Work Keys assessment connecting work skills training and testing to improve student’s education and job opportunities.

• Michigan assessments that measure what students know in core subject areas that parents, educators, and employers say are important yet not covered in the ACT and Work Keys.

Students with special needs were provided with accommodations during the test in accordance with their IEP Section 504 plan. The accommodation included not only students with learning disabilities but also those still learning the English language. The IEP Section 504 plan required the accommodation specifically listed for the student to be eligible to receive the accommodations on the MME. If they were not included in the IEP Section 504 plan, the student would not receive any accommodations during the MME test.

The cost analysis reports from the district contained information on pupil numbers, funding sources, personnel numbers, and services offered. Once the reader is able to look over and analyze the graphs on student performance, they must then look to see if a correlation exists between lower student performance, decreased funding, personnel numbers, and services eliminated. Only then will the reader be able to determine if a trend exists from the presented historical data.
Chapter Four: Results of the Study

In this chapter the reader will be presented with historical data from the Michigan Merit Examination (MME) tests used to measure academic performance of secondary special education students in the Grand Rapids Public School district (GRPS). The MME testing data covered a five year period and is presented in graph form for the reader to analyze. The GRPS cost analysis reports are then visually displayed over a five year period. The reader can then conclude if a correlation can be found from the data.

The MME results were presented in graph form for interpretation, followed by a narrative explanation. The reader is provided with an explanation on how to interpret the data and draw a conclusion from the findings. The study then demonstrated how they analyzed the data and provided an explanation as to how this related back to the specific field of study.

The following graphs represent the MME data from 2009-2013 in the GRPS district, showing the five subject areas tested and the percentage of “not proficient” students in each subject area. This percentage is based on the student test scores each year. The MME consists of four categories; advanced, proficient, partially proficient, and not proficient. A student’s score determines the category they are placed in. Receiving a score of “not proficient” on the MME means the student was not career and college ready. “College readiness” indicates a student is equipped to succeed in first-semester, credit-bearing college courses (www.flushingschools.org). “Career readiness” indicates a student is equipped to succeed in introductory technical career training courses
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

(www.flushingschools.org). Slow and steady improvement is ideal, meaning the district would like to see the percentage of “not proficient” decrease from year to year.
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

2010 MME Results
Figure 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject on MME</th>
<th>2010 Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>38%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2011 MME Results
Figure 4.3

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Subject on MME</th>
<th>2011 Results</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

2012 MME Results
Figure 4.4

2013 MME Results
Figure 4.5
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

In the reading subject area, the percentage of “not proficient” students decreased from 2009-2011, which was good for GRPS. Between 2011-2012 the level rose to a higher level of “not proficient”. This means the district lost some ground on making gains in that subject area. The last year of data, the percentage stayed consistent at 64%.

In the math subject area, the percentage of “not proficient” dropped by just 1% annually from the 2009 thru 2011 data and then jumped up by 3% between 2011 and 2012. From 2012 to 2013, scores dropped by 11%. Remember that the percentage of “not proficient” in these subjects means students were not college and career ready, so the goal is a lower number of “not proficient” students. The school district wanted to lower the number of students in the score range of “not proficient” which would in turn increase the number of students in the other categories such as partially proficient, proficient, and even advanced.

In the writing section of the test, the scores of “not proficient” rose from 2009 to 2010 by 5%. After that year, the testing scores lowered by 8%, then by another 6%. The following year it stayed the same at 49% “not proficient”. Writing was second best subject for GRPS in the 5 year data range of the Michigan Merit Examination, averaging 54.8% “not proficient”.

Science saw a drop from 2009 to 2010 by 3% and again the next year a staggering 13%. The following year of the MME the percentage rose an astounding 21% “not proficient”, going from 79% to 100%. In 2013 students made some gains, dropping from 100% to 96% “not proficient”. To have 96% and 100% of students “not proficient” in this area is a red flag and the GRPS science department should have taken a long
look at how science was taught in the secondary classrooms. Somewhere along the way, the special education students were not grasping the science curriculum at the secondary levels.

In the final subject area of testing data, results were presented to the reader for social studies. This subject had some very large jumps, in both directions, during the 5 year testing span. From 2009 to 2010, the “not proficient” percentage lowered by 5% and then again by 15% the following year. The trend was headed in a good direction until 2012, when the percentage rose by 44%, from 23% “not proficient” all the way to 67%. From 2012 to 2013, the percent dropped by 21%. Social studies had the lowest percentage of “not proficient” of the 5 subject areas in 4 of the 5 test data years.

The goal of most school districts is to see a slow and steady downward trend in the “not proficient” category. The objective should be to consistently better the score from the previous year in the categories of proficient and advanced, in all subject areas. Long term gains in all subjects would show the district is intentional on what they are teaching and how they are teaching their pupils. A school district can expect to have a little movement from year to year but the outcome should not yield big drops and raises in test scores. That would not be the goal of showing a trend toward academic achievement.

Another noteworthy data set was the number of personnel for GRPS from the same five year data window. The following data shows the reader, in graph form, the number of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff in the special education services along with the number of pupils that qualified for special education services. With the presentation
of these numbers, the reader can see if a correlation can be made between scores from the MME and a change in personnel numbers.

The first chart below represents the school year and the number of pupils that were enrolled in special education services for that particular year. The reader will notice that the number decreases every year for the five year data window. The list only includes Grand Rapids Public Schools students that qualified for special education services in secondary education.

The next graph shows the school year and the number of instructional and support personnel as a full-time equivalent (FTE). One full-time teacher or support staff would be equivalent to 1.0 FTE. The researcher added the number of instructional personnel full-time equivalent and the number of support full-time equivalent as a whole
number so the reader can see how many people were employed during each data school year.

The final two graphs separate the total FTE personnel per school year, showing the number of instructional personnel FTEs and the number of support personnel FTEs. The instructional FTEs include professional teachers that were in charge of direct instruction. The support FTEs include social workers, speech pathologists, psychologists, paraprofessionals, supervisors, and other health services necessary for students with disabilities.
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

GRPS 2009-2013
Figure 4.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Instructional FTEs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>231</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>227</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GRPS 2009-2013
Figure 4.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Support FTEs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>81</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

While looking over the presented graphs on the number of staff employed and the number of pupils enrolled, the reader may also be interested to look at the teacher to student ratio. The data given by GRPS entails very specific numbers on full-time equivalent staff and the number of students enrolled each year. However, the number of pupils in a self-contained classroom was not included. A ratio could be calculated from the collected data, though it is an approximation. An exact teacher to student ratio cannot be given as the number varies in different classroom settings.

According to the State Board of Education there is a particular teacher to student ratio that needs to be followed, in accordance with the law, depending on the make-up of students enrolled into a classroom setting (http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530_6598_7376-132157--,00.html ). In an elementary resource room setting, there can be no more than 10 special education students per teacher and no more than a total of 18 students (http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530_6598_7376-132157--,00.html ). In a secondary resource room setting, there can be no more than 10 special education students per teacher and the teacher cannot have more than 20 students with disabilities on their caseload (http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530_6598_7376-132157--,00.html ).

In a classroom setting where the lead teacher is working with students that have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder there is a different ratio. In a classroom setting working with autistic students the ratio cannot exceed 5-1 with a teacher and an aide (http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530_6598_7376-132157--,00.html ). This ratio provides for every five students with autism there must be one teacher and one aide in the classroom. The more severe diagnose for the student,
the more help and attention the classroom needs. The state must ensure that the classroom and teachers are able to provide a safe environment before any learning and achievement can happen.

In the final graph, the reader will see the actual spending per school year from the special education department. This shows the reader how much was spent and the difference in spending throughout the five year data period.
Looking over the numbers in the cost analysis graph, the first thing that sticks out is the large decrease in spending from 2009 to 2010. A decrease of $3,212,750, or 4.6%, in one year is significant. Personnel on staff in the district were down 6.5 full-time equivalents between those school years as well. A correlation is probable between staff and spending decreases. Between school years 2009 and 2010, there was a drop in enrollment by 95 students. Keep in mind that would have had an impact on the amount of money the school district would receive each year. If enrollment is down, one would suspect that available funding in the district would also decrease. However, if the reader revisits the graph on pupils enrolled per year, the number drops every year in the five year span. The largest spending decrease occurs between the 2009 and 2010 school years but pupils were down every year. In fact, the largest drop in pupils occurred between the 2012 and 2013 school years.
When the researcher reviewed specific numbers in the categories of personnel from the 2009 to 2010 school years the full-time equivalents decreased by 6.5, as mentioned above. There was a small drop in all of the personnel categories, but a more significant drop in personnel for the resource room teachers and support staff. That specific category lost 12 FTEs in that one year, while the other categories including hearing impaired, autistic impaired, cognitive impaired, and speech pathologists only lost an average of 1 FTE. The resource room is a classroom where a special education program can be delivered to a student with a disability. It is for students in either regular class or special class placement but need some special instruction in an individualized or small group setting for a portion of the day (Webster, 2015). Individual needs are supported in resource rooms as defined by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Now that the researcher has referenced the drop in spending, full-time equivalents, and pupils between the school years and 2009 and 2010, the researcher will now summarize the scores. In the subject areas of reading, math, science, and social studies the percentage of “not proficient” decreased between 1%-6%. The only subject that rose to a higher level of “not proficient” was in writing, increasing 5%. There was not a dramatic change, for better or worse, due to the decrease in spending. Therefore, a direct correlation cannot be drawn between a decrease in spending and academic achievement between the 2009 and 2010 school years.

The 2011-2012 school years had the highest overall increase of “not proficient” scores of the covered five year period. Every subject category rose in the “not proficient” category by a pretty significant rate, except for writing. In the data, this was the school
year that scores for the MME dropped by a large margin and raised a red flag in the process of gaining academic achievement. The researcher wanted to take a closer and compare some of the data for that school year in particular.

The results for the subject categories were as follows:

- Reading up 2% in “not proficient” at 64%
- Math up 3% in “not proficient” at 97%
- Writing was down 6% in “not proficient” at 49%
- Science was up 21% in “not proficient” at 100%
- Social Studies was up 44% in “not proficient” at 67%

As the performance levels dropped in 4 of the 5 subjects, the researcher felt the next logical step was to take a closer look at the data to see if a correlation was possible between spending, personnel numbers, and academic performance. The 2011 school years had the lowest spending in the five year data span, operating at $66,289,498. This school year had the district’s second highest amount of personnel employed, at 336, but the student to teacher ratio was lower at 6:1. This could suggest that the district had some major budget cuts in resources and programs they were able to provide. If the employee levels were high but the district had the least amount of dollars to use, spending must have been down in another area of the budget.

Another possibility the researcher considered was the amount of the budget used on salaries for the school year. A host of new teachers could explain the drop in both MME scores and spending with an increase in personnel. Bringing in new teachers could account for a drop in scores and spending due to inexperience in the classroom
and since the starting salary for a new teacher is significantly different than a veteran teacher. The salary difference from the 2010 to 2011 school years only made a difference of $1,299,055. In 2010, the salaries from all personnel came to $26,655,151 and in 2011 the total was $27,964,206. Since there were more personnel in 2011 the total salary dollars was larger, but the district operated on a smaller budget. This could conclude a possible correlation between the drop in scores for the 2011 school year and the amount of money taken away from other areas in the budget that contribute to programs and other services. If spending was the lowest of all five years, yet the district had the second highest FTE numbers, spending must have dropped in resources and programs.

After a deeper look into the data of the two school years with the greatest drop in academic performance and lowest operating costs, a definitive answer on a correlation between drops in scores to a drop in spending could not be given. The research did not support a correlation between the large decrease in cost between the 2009 and 2010 school years. Spending went from $69,727,038 to $66,514,288 in one year though scores were not dramatically affected in a negative way.

In the 2011 school year, the district operated with the lowest cost of the covered five school year period. The researcher detected a possible correlation between low spending in 2011 and a significant drop in academic performance. Every subject area, except for writing, increased in the area of “not proficient” by quite a large margin. Of the five year period, the number of school employees was the second highest, so the district was not understaffed more than other school years presented in the data. Since spending was low, staffing was high, and scores were low, there was reason to believe
that the district had to cut money from other programs and resources. Special education students have a need for additional resources and programs such as after school tutoring & programs, social workers, speech pathologists, and teaching resources. A reduction in these resources and programs would not be beneficial to an increase in special education academic achievement.
In the hypothesis stated in Chapter One, the study predicted the data would show that budget cuts have negatively impacted special education students’ academic learning, removed services that were extremely beneficial, and the lack of resources have been devastating to the students requiring the most assistance from educators. The academic data over the five year period provided by GRPS was up and down. There was not a consistent trend of MME scores throughout that time period. The district showed some improvement in academic achievement during the five year period from 2009 to 2013, but there was not consistent long-term improvement.

The presented MME data was shown in a percentage of secondary special education students scoring in the “not proficient” area of the subject tests. Some very alarming numbers were shown as it relates to student’s futures regarding college and career readiness, over the five year period. The presented data does show a serious need for more resources and time spent with secondary special education students in the Grand Rapids public school district to make forward gains in all subject areas.

The operating cost during the five year data window was the highest during the first year, the 2009 school year. The budget was cut dramatically the second year. There was a one year increase the following year, just to be cut again for the 2013 school year. The operating costs for the period showed no trend as spending was up and down. A decrease in enrollment was the one consistent variable in the district’s data. The MME results varied both positively and negatively. FTE’s went up and down.
each year, operating costs were up and down, but the number of students enrolled continued to decline over the five years.

The largest decline in MME scores was between the 2010 and 2011 school years. All subject areas, except for writing, added to their already high percentages of “not proficient” on the test. The 2011 school year also had the lowest operating costs of the five year data period. The researcher cannot argue a cause and effect relationship between the cost variables and MME scores because the same relationship does not exist throughout the rest of the school years collected. Could there be a correlation between decreased spending over a school year and lower MME scores? There very well could be. Evidence is lacking in this data to prove this as a correlation.

In Chapter Two the researcher mentions an article referencing the fact that special education funding is a complicated topic. The researcher has come to find that is a true statement when it comes to government funding and regulations. One thing that would assist the researcher in finding a more accurate cause and effect relationship would be additional data on the programs receiving the largest funding cut. After the federal, state, and local money is collected, what is the process of how it is divided up? How does special education funding compare against general education funding?

This study could possibly improve the manner in which our state government handles budget cuts in the future and demonstrate the areas of the budget that cannot afford to lose funding. If the results from the study suggest that special education students and the services that are mandated by the IDEA have affected the ability of the students to make academic achievements, then it would be appropriate to take an
extended look at what other programs could survive with appropriate funding cuts that would not directly impact academic achievement.

Another aspect that would need further investigation for some additional research into this topic would be a categorization of resources. The data collection given by GRPS has a breakdown of full-time equivalents for instructional and support staff employed for the given years, but no data was given on other resources. What after school and vocational programs were cut due to a decrease in funds? How many resources rooms were closed due to spending cuts for the school year? Of the 2.4 FTE speech pathologists, how many schools and students were they responsible for? This additional data could assist further investigation on a stronger cause and effect relationship between money and academic performance in a school setting.

Additional research could also occur in classroom ratios for each building. In the collected data there is a breakdown of pupils for the year along with instructional and support staff FTEs. The researcher mentioned in Chapter Four that each school district must adhere to the state policies on teacher to student ratios. The data collected only gave a total number of FTEs in special education, thus a true teacher to student ratio is unknown. The researcher would need a list of the specific classrooms for each building, along with FTEs for that building to calculate an exact ratio. This would ensure the ratio would be correctly calculated and accurate.

The research presented in this study gives the reader an idea of factors students, teachers, and administrators are up against in public education. Further research must be completed in this area to ensure that everyone involved is distributing school funds
BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

with a purpose to guide a successful special education program for the upcoming school year.
References


BUDGET CUT IMPACTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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