



AUTISM ALLIANCE OF MICHIGAN

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Autism Alliance of Michigan Public Comment State Board of Education October 14, 2025

Modernizing Special Education Finance Through the MI Blueprint: An Imperative for Michigan

Good afternoon Board members, Interim Superintendent, and Department staff.

I'm Heather Eckner and I serve as the statewide director of education for the Autism Alliance of Michigan.

The Autism Alliance Education pillar advances a Whole Child vision for Michigan by catalyzing advocacy and engagement activities to move an equitable education agenda for children and youth with special education needs focused on **funding reform, appropriate identification, access to interventions, system accountability, and decreasing disparities**.

Across our public comments this year¹, a consistent throughline has emerged:

- The right to a free appropriate public education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), *which reaches the 50th anniversary in November this year*, and
- The growing disconnect between this educational right and the reality experienced by students with disabilities across Michigan.

Today, I am addressing one of the most foundational of these disconnects: **how Michigan funds special education—and the opportunity we have to fix it**.

The Current Model: Outdated, Inequitable, and Unjust

Michigan's current special education finance system fails to meet the needs of the very students it is meant to serve.

- It reimburses districts at just **28.6% of total costs**, among the lowest in the nation.
- It relies heavily on local property taxes, limiting resources in communities with fewer means.
- It penalizes the districts working hardest to support students with the most complex needs, creating vast disparities in service delivery.

¹ AAoM Public Comment to the State Board of Education available here: <https://mipaac.org/advocacy/>



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This is not merely a budgetary issue. It is a civil rights issue. Underfunding special education denies students access to the individualized supports, services, and staffing required by law and essential to their success.

As complaints rise, graduation rates fall, and educators face resource constraints, one truth becomes clear: **a broken funding system creates broken outcomes.**

The MI Blueprint: A Michigan-Built Path Forward

The Michigan Special Education Finance Reform Blueprint² represents a critical, stakeholder-driven response to these structural failures.

Authorized by the Legislature and led by a statewide collaborative—including school personnel, families, advocates, technical experts, researchers, and policy leaders—this project has designed a new, weighted funding model based on student needs, not ZIP codes.

To date, more than 1,000 stakeholders have shaped this effort, including many of the same families and educators impacted by the current system's shortcomings.

This is not about tweaking an old formula. It is about building a better one from the ground up. One that is **transparent, fiscally sound, and aligned with research based on what students with disabilities need.**

Strategic Recommendations for Board Leadership

As this work enters its final phase, the Autism Alliance urges the State Board and the Michigan Department of Education to:

- **Elevate the MI Blueprint as a core component of much needed education reform.** A weighted student formula is not a luxury, it is a necessity for upholding IDEA and delivering on Michigan's strategic education goals.
- **Prioritize implementation in FY26.** Legislative delivery of the model is October 30. We must now shift from design to action.
- **Champion stakeholder voice.** This is what the Autism Alliance does best: ensure the lived experience—particularly those farthest from opportunity—remain at the forefront of this work.

² <https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/special-education-experience-see-survey/>



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Key Takeaways

- **Underfunding Equals Underserving.** Without adequate, predictable resources, districts are forced to choose between compliance and quality. Students lose either way.
- **Finance Reform is Civil Rights Work.** Equity is impossible without the means to deliver services equitably. The MI Blueprint is a policy solution *and* a moral obligation.
- **This is Our Moment.** The MI Blueprint is the result of years of work, broad input, and rare statewide alignment. We must not lose the momentum.

The Autism Alliance stands ready to partner with this Board, MDE, and our legislative leaders to ensure this funding reform is fully implemented, and that it results in the lasting change students deserve.

Thank you.

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About the Autism Alliance of Michigan

The Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) is a 501(c)(3) organization serving as a trusted ally and partner for thousands of families across the state. AAoM's mission is to lead efforts to raise expectations and expand opportunities for people connected to autism across their lifespan. The organization's Education pillar drives initiatives that address systemic barriers to education, focuses on student-centered advocacy, and educates families on related topics – working towards its goal to make Michigan a top 10 state for special education outcomes.

For help finding resources, providers, and information contact our MiNavigators at 877-463-2266 (AAOM) or email at navigator@aaomi.org.

More information about AAoM's Education pillar can be found at:
<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/>.

Learn more about how AAoM is elevating the lived experience, identifying system barriers, and amplifying the voices of parents and students with disabilities connected to the special education system in Michigan to inform our collective advocacy efforts:

- **Special Education Experience (SEE) Survey: Report to the Community**
bit.ly/AAOM-SEE

Learn more about how AAoM is looking toward a broader vision of system transformation with the aim of increasing high-quality, inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities while improving educational outcomes through special education finance reform that will serve to re-imagine how our system serves kids with disabilities Pre-K through post-secondary:

- **Funding Our Future: The Call for a New Framework in Special Education Finance**
<https://tinyurl.com/AAOM-Funding-Our-Future>

The MI Special Education Finance Reform Blueprint (MI Blueprint) is a statewide initiative to create a better system— one that aligns funding with actual student needs and ensures schools have the resources to deliver. This work, led by Autism Alliance of Michigan with support from Public Sector Consultants, is backed by legislation and bipartisan support, and it's grounded in data, experience, and input from families, educators, and advocates.

- **Michigan Special Education Finance Reform Blueprint (“MI Blueprint”)**
<https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives/mi-blueprint/>

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