

LARSON INTRODUCES LEGISLATION TO MANDATE FUNDING FOR “IDEA” EDUCATION PROGRAM NOW

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LARSON INTRODUCES LEGISLATION TO MANDATE FUNDING FOR “IDEA” EDUCATION PROGRAM NOW Meets with State and Local Officials to Discuss Special Education

WASHINGTON, D.C.—U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-01) today announced that he has introduced legislation that will require the federal government to begin fully funding its share of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). Larson also met with officials from the state Department of Education as well as local educators to discuss special education and his legislation.

Originally enacted in 1975, IDEA authorized the federal government to cover 40 percent of the cost of special education in order to provide all students with disabilities a free education that met their needs. The federal government has never covered more than 14.9 percent.

Larson met at Timothy Edwards Middle School in South Windsor with George Coleman, the Associate Commissioner for the Division of Educational Programs and Services for the state Dept. of Education, George Dowaliby, the Chief of the Bureau of Special Education and Pupil Services, and Paul Flinter, Ph.D, the Bureau Chief of Early Childhood Education and Social Services, both for the Dept. of Education. Larson also spoke with Timothy Edwards Principal Jan Tirinzonie, Cynthia Snyder, a special education teacher at Timothy Edwards, and Jenifer Shinn Tait, the Coordinator of School Social Work for the Manchester Board of Education.

Unlike other current legislation related to the program, Larson’s legislation would make IDEA a state entitlement program, meaning that the federal government would match 40 percent of whatever states spend. Larson’s bill would also enact the full 40 percent in funding beginning in 2002, instead of making it an incremental process over the period of several years.

Congress appropriated \$6.3 billion, or 14.9 percent for special education assistance through the grants to states in Fiscal Year 2001. According to the U.S. Department of Education, approximately \$17.7 billion would represent the full 40 percent funding formula for Fiscal Year 2002. That would be an increase of roughly \$11.4 billion over current funding levels.

In the past, the Congress has passed by overwhelming margins non-binding resolutions urging itself and the President to fully fund the program, though no substantive action has been taken.

Larson stated: “With the passage of IDEA, Congress made a commitment to fund 40 percent of the program to avoid placing an unfair burden on schools, municipalities, and states, and simply never followed through. It is time for the federal government to live up to its commitment to those that Congress has placed this burden on; state governments, municipal budgets, and taxpayers. The Congress has a moral obligation to keep its word, and lift this massive financial burden off of local school systems and states by funding its share of the program. IDEA needs to be fully funded to 40 percent beginning in Fiscal Year 2002, not five or 10 years down the road; it must be this year. No phase-ins and no more excuses or empty resolutions.

“With the federal budget surpluses at roughly \$5.6 trillion, and tax cuts approaching \$2 trillion, an additional \$11.4 billion dollar investment in education is not asking too much. Students with disabilities are not receiving adequate education to suit their needs, and this program is designed to do exactly that, but it must be done without overwhelming local budgets,” added Larson.

“In my conversations with people in Connecticut, including families with children in school, state legislators, and teachers, they have expressed that the greatest challenge facing school systems today is a cost of educating special needs students. I believe that with all the recent talk of leaving no child behind, this is a small price to pay for a critical investment in the many children that truly need it, making IDEA an old promise with a new future.

“Congress has a moral obligation to meet this commitment before it gives a tax break to the wealthiest one percent of America. It is the right thing to do for our children, their families and this nation,” said Larson.

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