

## COALITION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Minnesota students who have disabilities continue to face barriers accessing their Minnesota constitutional right to education. This Coalition supports policies promoting student inclusion, parental accessibility, and sufficient numbers of appropriately trained staff.

Chair Co-Chair Kresha and Co-Chair Youakim  
House Education Finance Committee  
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd – Capitol 120  
St. Paul, MN 55155

**Apr 6, 2026**

### **Re: Coalition for Children with Disabilities (CCD) Support for HF 4114**

Dear Co-Chair Kresha, Co-Chair Youakim, and Members of the Committee:

During the special session, the legislature established the Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education in response to projected budget pressures and the need to identify cost savings. In response to that directive, the Coalition for Children with Disabilities (CCD) convened statewide listening sessions with families, educators, students with disabilities, and advocates to better understand how the system is working—and where it is not.

What we heard was consistent across communities: Minnesota's special education system is under strain, not because students are receiving too much support, but because the system too often relies on reactive, costly approaches and operates in parallel structures that duplicate effort and resources. Families described delays in services, inconsistent support, and increasing reliance on restrictive settings when earlier, inclusive interventions could have made a difference. The takeaway was clear—better outcomes and long-term cost containment come from strengthening inclusive practices, investing in early intervention, and building general education capacity.

CCD supports HF 4114 because it removes the automatic \$250 million reduction in special education aid and restores legislative responsibility over funding decisions. This is a critical step. Automatic cuts would have created instability in a system that families already experience as inconsistent and difficult to navigate.

At the same time, the original directive to identify significant reductions in special education—while advancing other education and school safety investments—raised real concerns for families. It signaled that services required for students with disabilities could be treated as a place to absorb cuts, rather than as a core part of the education system. When funding is uncertain, the impact is immediate: services are delayed, inclusive opportunities shrink, and students are more likely to experience restrictive or crisis-based interventions.

HF 4114 moves the state in a better direction by maintaining accountability through the Blue Ribbon Commission while removing the risk of arbitrary reductions.

Looking ahead, we encourage the House to build on this step with a clear commitment to a \$300 million investment in inclusive education. Investments in early intervention, educator support, and general education capacity reduce long-term costs while improving outcomes for students. Families have been clear about what works, and the Commission process has reinforced that direction.

Minnesota has the opportunity to move from managing short-term pressures to building a system that is stable, inclusive, and effective for all students.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration.

With the littlest Minnesotans in mind,  
the Coalition for Children with Disabilities

**Working together so every Minnesota child can learn, participate, and be safe.**  
**Coalition for Children with Disabilities**

Coalition for Children with Disabilities Autism Society of Minnesota – The Arc Minnesota – Decoding Dyslexia Minnesota – Epilepsy Foundation of Minnesota – Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid/Minnesota Disability Law Center – Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance Minnesota Council on Disability – Multicultural Autism Action Network – PACER Center – Prader-Willi Syndrome Association of Minnesota Proof Alliance

**Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education Policy Memo**  
*Recommendations from Parent Listening Sessions for the Blue Ribbon  
Commission on Special Education*

**Prepared by:** Coalition for Children with Disabilities

## **Executive Summary**

On July 30 and August 4, 2025, more than 150 parents, educators, students with disabilities, and advocates participated in statewide listening sessions to share their experiences with Minnesota’s special education system. Participants described what is working, where the system breaks down, and areas where change is urgently needed.

This document summarizes 14 strategies identified through those sessions that aim to reduce inefficiencies in the special education system while improving student outcomes. Fiscal modeling and financial analysis are appropriately the responsibility of subject-matter experts. This memo instead presents a qualitative, community-informed synthesis of lived experience, including recurring concerns about system instability, unnecessary segregation, staffing shortages, administrative burden, and responses that occur after crises rather than preventing them.

For clarity and usability, recommendations in this document are organized by feasibility. Near-term recommendations focus on changes that could be implemented within existing authority, staffing, and operational structures. Mid-term recommendations include strategies that may require targeted investment, phased implementation, or additional coordination. Long-term recommendations reflect structural changes that would require deeper analysis, statutory change, or system redesign.

Across all categories, the strategies reflect consistent themes raised during the listening sessions, including the need to strengthen inclusive practices, build general education capacity, improve early identification and intervention, enhance coordination across services, and reduce reliance on segregated placements. Organizing recommendations by feasibility is intended to support practical discussion and decision-making by the Blue Ribbon Commission, not to predetermine outcomes or implementation timelines.

The themes and quotes that follow represent the most frequently raised issues across the listening sessions. Full quotes, with all identifying information removed, are provided in the addendum.

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## **Organizational Framework for Recommendations**

The following recommendations are drawn directly from themes raised during the statewide listening sessions and are presented using the language and structure reflected in participant feedback. To support clarity and discussion, recommendations are organized by feasibility rather than by priority or endorsement.

In organizing the recommendations, the following guiding questions were considered: whether changes can be implemented within existing authority, staffing, and operational structures; the anticipated time horizon for implementation; the extent to which changes reduce duplication or reliance on segregated or parallel systems; whether they strengthen inclusive, least-restrictive environments; and whether they shift practice toward prevention rather than crisis response. This approach is intended to help readers understand how different strategies may align with near-term action, mid-term planning, or longer-term system design.

<b>Feasibility Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Near-Term (High Feasibility)</b>	Changes that focus on improving how the current system functions using existing authority, staffing, and operational structures
<b>Mid-Term (Moderate Feasibility)</b>	Changes that may require targeted investment, phased implementation, or additional coordination
<b>Long-Term (Structural Change)</b>	System-level changes that require deeper analysis, statutory change, or redesign

## **Recommendations:**

**NEAR-TERM: Changes that focus on improving how the current system functions using existing authority, staffing, and operational structures.**

### **Streamline Paperwork and Administrative Overhead**

Administrative Burdens Pull Staff From Students. Educators across districts reported that paperwork demands pull staff away from direct service, requiring districts to hire additional personnel or rely on overtime to stay compliant. This administrative load is a budget issue: time

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spent on paperwork is time not spent supporting students, and districts often compensate by growing central office support. Parents expressed that paperwork reforms could reduce strain without weakening protections. One participant said, “*There are ways to cut back on paperwork that don’t reduce rights for children or families.*” Streamlining processes allows staff time and budget to be redirected to classrooms.

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Evaluate IEP paperwork, Medicaid billing, and staff communication and consider automation where possible
- Audit central office structures to eliminate duplication and redirect teacher resources to classrooms

**Improve Medicaid Billing Efficiency**

Incomplete Medicaid Billing Leaves Money Unclaimed. Families and educators highlighted that inconsistent Medicaid billing practices leave districts unable to draw down eligible federal revenue. At the same time, the administrative workload required for accurate billing strains staff capacity and adds unfunded pressure to district budgets. Participants stressed that without technical assistance and simplified processes, districts will continue losing out on funds meant to support student services. One educator noted, “It’s really difficult to get all the billing done... it’s just not a priority right now.” Improving billing support helps maximize dollars already available to schools.

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Ensure every district fully claims eligible IEP services
- Provide technical assistance so billing requirements do not overwhelm staff

**Leverage Existing Programs Instead of Creating Parallel Ones**

Parallel Programs Create Unnecessary Redundancy. Parents described districts building separate electives, activities, and programs for students with disabilities rather than integrating them into existing offerings. Running duplicate programs increases staffing, space, and scheduling costs without improving outcomes. Participants urged districts to scale inclusive models that already work rather than paying for siloed alternatives. As one advocate put it, “Stop retrofitting the system one student at a time—design it for all learners from the start.” Reducing parallel programming helps control costs. Thoughtful inclusion improves access and outcomes.

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Integrate students into general education electives, trades, and extracurriculars

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- Share and scale best practices from schools already succeeding with inclusion at lower cost

### **Streamline and Coordinate Related Services**

Uncoordinated Related Services Lead to Overlap. Stakeholders noted overlapping roles among OTs, PTs, paraprofessionals, and outside providers, which leads to inefficiencies and duplicated services. Lack of coordination forces districts to fund multiple layers of support when a more integrated model could serve students better and reduce redundancy. Parents emphasized the need for consistent communication between school-based and community-based providers. As one provider said, “We’re out here, and I don’t feel like we’re utilized enough.” Better coordination increases service quality while reducing unnecessary spending.

#### Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Merge overlapping supports across OT, PT, and paraprofessionals
- Partner with community-based and insurance-funded providers to reduce reliance on district-funded staff

### **Streamline Transportation Spending**

Inefficient Transportation Models Add Costs. Families reported that students are often transported long distances for services that could be delivered at their home school or virtually. These transportation patterns carry significant implications—fuel, staffing, midday routes, and lost instructional time. Participants encouraged flexible delivery models that reduce travel demands and improve stability. One parent shared, “My daughter should be able to get services online so she can stay in her home school.” Rethinking transportation reduces disruption and cost.

#### Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Allow students to ride general education buses where appropriate
- Use virtual/online delivery of services to minimize costly mid-day transport

**MID-TERM: Changes that may require targeted investment, phased implementation, or additional coordination.**

### **Reevaluate Staffing Models**

Unstable Staffing Increases Costs. Families and educators repeatedly raised concerns about unstable staffing, uneven caseloads, and paraprofessional turnover. This instability drives

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pressure because districts are forced into continuous hiring, retraining, and short-term staffing fixes instead of maintaining a stable workforce. Participants emphasized that without balanced caseloads and stronger general education collaboration, districts will continue spending heavily just to keep the system running. As one parent noted, reductions in para support left them questioning whether their child would “even be safe if they sent them to school.” Stakeholders urged the Commission to prioritize workforce stability rather than ongoing emergency staffing.

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Balance caseloads through stronger collaboration with general education staff
- Maximize paraprofessional deployment; consider “Grow Your Own” and similar programs to transition paras into licensed roles
- Reduce reliance on continually hiring more licensed staff
- Strengthen General Education Capacity to Support Students with Disabilities

Under-Resourced General Education Elevates Referrals. Families emphasized that many students are referred to special education because general education classrooms lack training, planning time, and tools to support diverse learners. This increases referrals, staffing needs, and separate service pathways that could have been prevented with stronger Tier 1 capacity. Parents stressed that when general education is not equipped, the system ends up paying for more restrictive services downstream. As one participant stated, “A lot of students could do better in the gen ed setting if it was redesigned to meet their needs.”

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Train general education teachers in inclusive practices, de-escalation, structured literacy, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)
- Build time for collaboration and planning to reduce over-reliance on special education educators
- Expanding Tier 1 capacity reduces expensive referrals and one-to-one supports

**Prevent Crisis and Reduce Litigation**

Reactive Crisis Responses Are Resource-Intensive. Participants noted that staffing inconsistencies, lack of trauma-informed supports, and limited preventative tools result in crises that are expensive for districts to manage. Reactive responses strain systems and undermine trust. Families emphasized that predictable supports, sensory spaces, and strong family-school partnerships reduce the likelihood of costly escalations. One example showed a school reduced discipline referrals by 75% after adding a staffed sensory room.

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Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Ensure staffing consistency to avoid service gaps that trigger complaints and compensatory education
- Invest in upstream supports like sensory rooms, trauma-informed practices, and mental health interventions
- Strengthen parent-school partnerships (including Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs))

**Expand Universal / Peer Supports**

Weak Universal Supports Increase 1:1 Services. Families highlighted that universal Social Emotional Learning (SEL), peer mentoring, and integrated social-skills benefit all students and reduce reliance on individualized services. When universal support is weak, districts must fund more resource-intensive interventions. One parent asked, “Why are we pulling kids out to meet the minutes when universal design could meet the need?”

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Provide school-wide SEL, peer mentoring, and integrated social skills practice
- Reduce reliance on 1:1 or pull-out services

**LONG-TERM: System-level shifts that require deeper analysis or redesign.**

**Reduce Reliance on Segregated / Self-Contained Placements**

Restrictive Placements Drive System Duplication. Parents consistently described children being moved into restrictive placements before less-restrictive supports were attempted. Some districts are operating two parallel systems—segregated and inclusive—drawing on the same limited staff, space, and transportation resources. Families urged decision-makers to strengthen inclusive practices to reduce unnecessary duplication and stabilize service delivery. One parent noted, “We are segregating almost half of kids who receive special education services, which is not what IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) intended.”

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Consolidate dual systems into primarily inclusive models
- Invest in co-teaching and universal design for learning (UDL)
- Eliminate redundant programming by shifting resources to inclusive environments
- Reconsider reflexive movement to restrictive settings
- Invest in Early Identification and Intervention (Including Inclusive Pre-K)

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Delayed Early Intervention Raises Long-Term Need. Parents described how delayed screening and limited ECSE access lead to more intensive support later. Families shared examples of children who exited special education entirely after timely intervention. One parent said, “He only needed services until kindergarten.”

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Expand developmental screenings and referrals at ages 2–4
- Embed Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) into childcare and preschool settings
- Provide families with strategies to reinforce skills at home

### **Invest in Mindset and Culture Change**

Inconsistent Inclusion Culture Sustains Two Systems. Parents emphasized that inconsistent beliefs about inclusion result in uneven implementation and resource allocation. One parent explained, “It has to be woven into the culture of the school.”

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Promote inclusion as a core districtwide value
- Highlight successful inclusive initiatives
- Prepare teachers before they enter classrooms

Insufficient Teacher Preparation Drives Retraining Costs. Participants noted that new teachers often arrive without adequate training, forcing districts to spend heavily on retraining. One participant said, “We should not drop students into gen ed without the support teachers need.”

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Embed evidence-based special education strategies into teacher preparation programs
- Reduce district costs for retraining new hires
- Collect and Use Data to Target Services

Lack of Data Transparency Limits Smarter Spending. Parents expressed concern about limited data on restrictive placements and legal costs. One participant noted, “I’ve never seen transparency around legal fees.”

Recommendations to consider/explore:

- Track reasons students move to restrictive placements and analyze legal costs
- Use findings to inform continuous improvement and resource reallocation

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### **Conclusion: A Two-Tiered System That Costs More and Delivers Less**

Before questions of implementation and balance are resolved, there is a fundamental obligation to the students the special education system exists to serve. Across the listening sessions, stakeholders described a two-tiered system—one inclusive, one segregated—that strains districts while too often failing to meet student needs. Duplication, instability, and reactive service models consume resources without improving outcomes.

The path forward is not about reducing services, but being more intentional about how resources are used and aligned with what works. A consistent commitment to inclusive practices reduces redundancy, stabilizes staffing, strengthens general education, and improves coordination across services. System design decisions shape daily student experiences, and stakeholders are asking the Commission to lead a shift toward inclusive models that center student learning, safety, and belonging.

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## **Addendum: Full Quotes From Listening Sessions**

Restrictive Placements – “In my district, we are segregating almost half of kids who receive special education services, which is not what the IDEA was meant to do.”

Staffing Instability – “When we finally just got eligibility for services... one of the placements had the decrease from 11 paras down to five... this parent was really concerned if their kid was even going to be able to be safe if they sent them to school.”

General Education Capacity – “There are probably a lot of students that could do better in the gen ed setting if it was redesigned to meet their needs.”

Early Identification & Intervention – “He only needed services until his kindergarten year and then was dismissed... I think there is something to be said about early identification and early intervention.”

Crisis Prevention – “She implemented a sensory room... In one year she was able to reduce the referrals to discipline by 75% in her school.”

Crisis Prevention – “I think about how much money we spend on discipline, and a lot of it is to address problems that schools created, right?”

Paperwork & Administrative Burdens – “There are ways to cut back on paperwork that don't involve reducing rights for children or families.”

Medicaid Billing – “There just really isn't the time given to bill... with caseloads increasing, it's really difficult to get all the billing done and our staff have been told that's just not a priority right now.”

Parallel Programs vs. Inclusive Design – “In my perfect educational world... we would stop using money to retrofit an education system that was not designed for all learners on a case-by-case basis.”

Parallel Programs vs. Inclusive Design – “Make our education system more accessible to all of our learners.”

Related Services Coordination – “We're out here, and I don't feel like we're utilized enough.”

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Transportation – “My daughter should be able to go online... so she could actually stay in her home school. And this would save you guys a ton of money.”

Transportation – “My daughter has to spend 20 minutes on a bus, 20 minutes back... that’s 40 minutes of the school day.”

Inclusion Culture – “It has to be so woven into the culture of that school.”

Teacher Preparation – “If we were to really take the investments out of some of those self-contained programs and put them into our general ed classrooms... we would really be seeing benefits to our kids who receive special ed services and to our kids who don’t.”

Universal Supports – “Why are we pulling kids out to meet the minutes when... it would be cheaper just to do all of those services inside the classroom under a universal design?”

Data Transparency – “I’ve never seen transparency around legal fees... is that a data point that’s available anywhere?”

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April 7, 2026

Re: Support for HF4114, Contingent reduction in special education aid appropriations repealed

Co-Chair Kresha, Co-Chair Youakim, and members of the House Education Finance Committee,

EdAllies supports HF4114, which would remove an assumed \$250 million cut to state special education funding from the 2027 spending forecast.

While we support the efforts of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education to identify improvements and streamline services for students with disabilities, planning for a substantial cut to special education funding is a move in the wrong direction and poses a serious threat to ensuring high-quality, accessible services for students.

Special education in Minnesota, and across the nation, is chronically underfunded. Ongoing cross-subsidies across districts, coupled with stories that we hear regularly from families struggling to secure necessary supports for their students, tell us that we are not yet meeting the true educational needs of students with disabilities as guaranteed by law.

HF4114 allows the Blue Ribbon Commission to advance its work and formulate recommendations from a lens of *improving* Minnesota's system for funding special education, not simply reducing the cost.

Our collective focus should be on achieving better outcomes for students and a sustainable system for staff by identifying and removing genuine redundancies and inefficiencies—not on imposing arbitrary cuts that risk scaling back the program at the expense of quality, access, and the full education every student with a disability deserves. A directive centered on cuts is a dangerous path that could lead to programmatic erosion without meaningful reform.

We thank the committee for holding a hearing today on this important issue, and urge your support for HF4114 to ensure that the process of reforming Minnesota's complex special education funding system begins with a commitment to meeting student needs, not cutting essential services.

Sincerely,  
Matt Shaver  
Senior Policy Director  
mshaver@edalliesmn.org



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*Our mission: To make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children.*

April 6, 2026

Re: HF4114 - Contingent reduction in special education aid appropriations repealed

Dear Members of the House Education Finance Committee,

Minnesota PTA supports legislation to repeal the contingent reduction in special education aid appropriations. As the Federal government continues to pay less than 13% of the average per-pupil cost for special education, significantly less than its original 1975 commitment to fund up to 40%, we were grateful for the 2023 Legislature's commitment to 50% coverage of the cross-subsidy by 2026-27. However, the 2025 Legislature's action to automatically reduce cross subsidy aid by \$250 million, if service cuts or efficiencies of the same amount are not implemented, threatens the financial security of school districts and instruction and programs for both special education and general education students alike. This is the wrong direction.

School districts continue to face significant funding challenges. There are no plans to allocate additional state dollars to close the gap between past revenues and cost increases due to inflation, and no agreement yet this year on holding districts harmless for decreases in compensatory revenue. Cost increases in staff salaries, health insurance, transportation, curriculum and other school district expenditures are still increasing faster than the rate of inflation. Many school districts are already planning cuts to programs, teachers and staff, and services for next school year and beyond to address deficits.

Services to special education students, and the staff that support them, must be provided to all students who need them. This level of special education funding reduction would be destabilizing for both special education and general education students. Districts on average in Minnesota already redirect 8-15% of their general fund revenue to cover the special education cross subsidy; further reductions in state funding would require districts to shift even more. Diverting funds from the general fund to special education would primarily result in staff reductions, which could include many staff recently trained in new literacy curriculum and instruction strategies under the READ Act, counselors and social workers that provide student mental health services, and staff for elective options that help students chart their plans for life after high school. Many districts cannot make up the difference by increasing local property taxes, creating more inequities in school funding across the state.

Minnesota PTA has advocated for Minnesota parents, students, and educators for over 100 years. We currently have over two hundred local units in Minnesota with 4,000 members representing all forms of schools, including rural, suburban, urban, district, and charter. We believe that every child in Minnesota must be provided with a well-rounded, high-quality education, which will ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential and become productive members of society. Repealing the automatic reduction in special education funding will help ensure that Minnesota schools are adequately, sustainably and predictably funded. The Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education is charged with developing long-term recommendations by October 2026. We ask that you let them complete their work and present their recommendations before setting a reduction amount for special education services.

Thank you for your consideration.

Rachel Coleman  
President, Minnesota PTA

Joanne Barkmeier  
Advocacy Commissioner, Minnesota PTA



April 4, 2026

House Education Finance Committee

**SUBJECT: LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR HF 4114**

Dear Education Finance Committee Members,

The Multicultural Autism Action Network is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting families of children with disabilities in multicultural communities. We write to express our strong support for HF 4114, authored by Representative Bakeberg and co-authored by Representatives Knudsen and Hicks, which would eliminate the contingent reduction in special education funding.

The legislature established the Blue Ribbon Commission on Special Education to carefully examine the cost drivers of special education and develop thoughtful, evidence-based recommendations. Over the past several months, this commission—including educators, parents, advocates, administrators, and legislators—has engaged in a collaborative and deliberate process to assess how best to improve the system.

However, the inclusion of an automatic reduction in the cross-subsidy, which is triggered if the Commission's recommendations do not reach \$250 million in cut, undermines the very purpose of this work.

At a time when special education needs are rapidly increasing, federal funding remains deeply inadequate, and the state is experiencing a budget surplus, it is difficult to justify mandatory cuts that operate outside the Commission's informed recommendations. This approach risks harming students and families who rely on these essential services.

Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, the federal government has committed to covering 40% of the average per-pupil cost of special education. In reality, funding has consistently fallen far short of that promise, with recent contributions covering less than 15% of costs. This gap has placed a growing burden on states and local school districts.

Meanwhile, the demand for special education services continues to rise. As children born during the COVID-19 pandemic reach school age, more students are being identified with diverse and complex learning needs. Early intervention and appropriate supports are not only

critical for student success—they are among the most effective long-term investments we can make.

We strongly support ongoing efforts to identify efficiencies and improve special education outcomes through stakeholder engagement. However, preemptive cuts that conflict with the Blue Ribbon Commission's work are not the right path forward.

We respectfully urge you to support HF 4114 and ensure that any changes to special education funding are guided by thoughtful analysis, collaboration, and the best interests of Minnesota's students.

Sincerely,

Multicultural Autism Action Network

Fatima Molas

Delia Samuel

Rufo Jiru

Maren Christenson Hofer