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Unlock Special Education Funding: K-12 Special Education Grants

Webinar Transcript • May 20, 2025

Presented by Ashley Schultz and Christina Fernandez • Grants Office, LLC

Welcome and Introductions

Ashley Schultz:
Hello everyone. My name is Ashley Schultz, one of the managers of research and consultation here at Grants Office. Thanks for joining us today. We are going to be discussing K-12 special education grants and sharing some expert tips with you on how to secure funding for inclusive education.

Housekeeping

Ashley Schultz:
Before we get started, I have just a few housekeeping items for you. First and foremost, you can listen in over your computer speakers or headphones — no need to dial in today. If your audio does become disconnected, you can look in the top left corner of your screen and engage with that audio and video menu to access the feed.

You can ask as many questions as you'd like during today's session. Look in the bottom right-hand corner for that question and answer interface. Feel free to submit as many questions as you'd like, and we'll get to them toward the end of today's presentation. If we run out of time and we don't have a chance to answer your question, you can email us directly at education@grantsoffice.com.

Finally, know that the session is being recorded. This recording is going to be available for download at the Grants Office website starting tomorrow, and the PowerPoint slides that we're going to share here today are also going to be available at that same location starting tomorrow.

Today's Speaker and Agenda

Ashley Schultz:
So again, today we're going to be talking about funding for special education initiatives in K-12 schools. We're joined today by Christina Fernandez. Christina is a Grants Development Consultant here at Grants Office, and she specializes in K-12 funding. I will spoil what's about to come and say that Christina has some really amazing information and a lot of expertise that she's going to share with you here today.

We've got a jam-packed session for you. Grants Office has been doing this series of mini webinars, taking our 60-minute standard event and bringing it down to more like 30 to 40 minutes so that we can really give you some very concentrated content, just about grants in this particular topic and how to be successful with them.

Today's agenda: we're going to be talking about the historical context of funding for inclusive education in the classroom. Then we'll talk about some current sources of grant funding, whether that be from the federal government or through distributions from the individual states. Christina will round out the topic today by talking about grant readiness, how to understand what's coming toward your district, how to be ready for that funding, and also how to maximize that funding for any initiatives you may be looking to implement in the future. And again, at the end we will have time for Q&A, so look for that question and answer component down at the bottom right-hand corner. Drop as many questions as you'd like, and we'll get to them at the end. So without further ado, I'm going to pass things to Christina to take us away. Christina?

Historical Context: Federal Laws Protecting Students with Disabilities

Christina Fernandez:
Thank you so much, Ashley, for the lovely introduction, and hello everyone. Thank you for making it to today's webinar. So, as Ashley said, we have a jam-packed session full of all current and upcoming things in the grants space. But before jumping into that, I did want to take a moment to really understand the key federal laws that protect the rights of students with disabilities. Understanding these laws is essential to understanding the grant funding landscape, because not only do they shape how institutions provide services, but they also ensure that meaningful education opportunities are available for every student.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Christina Fernandez:
Starting off, we have the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, also known as Section 504. This is really the first federal civil rights law created to prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities, specifically within programs that receive federal financial assistance — like your public schools.

Section 504 guarantees that students with disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education, also referred to as FAPE, and that they have access to reasonable accommodations such as assistive technology, extended testing times, and accessible learning spaces. These protections apply even to students whose disabilities may fall outside of the wheelhouse under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, also referred to from here on as IDEA.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Christina Fernandez:
Building on Section 504, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, which formalized the requirement that schools provide FAPE to students with disabilities and introduced the concept of Individualized Education Programs, also known as IEPs.

IDEA is what governs how states and public schools provide funding for things like early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 8 million students, as of the 2023 school year, who have disabilities. I will be taking a deeper dive into IDEA later on in this presentation.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Christina Fernandez:
To round it out here, we have the Americans with Disabilities Act. This expands the protections of Section 504 beyond just federally funded programs, ensuring civil rights for individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including schools. Within K-12 education, this means schools must eliminate all barriers — not only physically but also within their policies and practices — to ensure that students with disabilities can fully participate in school life.

Together, these three laws work in tandem. While there is some overlap in some areas, each provides a unique layer of protection through different accommodations, specialized services, and other safeguards, which has influenced how and why funding is allocated the way it is.

Federal Sources of Special Education Funding

Christina Fernandez:
Now that we have a better understanding about the different legislation that has shaped special education, I want to go over what it looks like in practice.

IDEA Funding Structure

Christina Fernandez:
I mentioned briefly IDEA. This funding is administered by the Office of Special Education Programs, and it is the largest dedicated source of federal funding for special education. There are two main funding buckets from which schools can receive funding.

The first is through a formula, which is allocated to states based on the amount of IDEA funding they received in fiscal year 1999. If there is more money available for a given year compared to that fiscal

year, then additional funding is calculated based on the total number of children, as well as the number of children living in poverty. This formula funding is then passed down to local education agencies.

Within this formula bucket, there are two main parts. You have Part B, which is the largest component of IDEA, as it provides funding for special education services for children between the ages of 3 through 21. Then you have Part C, which authorizes state grants for programs serving infants and toddlers with disabilities. That age difference is the main component between the two parts.

The second funding bucket is the discretionary programs, which offers a variety of competitive grants that state education agencies, institutions of higher education, and other nonprofit organizations can apply for. You'll typically see programs found within this bucket supporting things like research, technology and media services, state personnel development, parent training, and information centers.

Educational Technology, Media, and Materials Program

Christina Fernandez:
Another federal program is the Educational Technology, Media, and Materials Program. This is the primary source of support for accessible technology and media-related activities under IDEA. This program houses a variety of competitive grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements.

Under this umbrella, you'll find two broad categories of activities that are supported, including both accessible technology and educational media and materials. Funding amounts and deadlines vary by program, but typically we can expect to see them opening up sometime in the summer or fall. Eligibility also varies by program, but they're typically open to State Educational Agencies (SEAs), Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) — all the acronyms — plus nonprofits and other public agencies.

Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program

Christina Fernandez:
Another federal funding opportunity I wanted to touch on today that can be used to support special education initiatives is the Education Innovation and Research Program, or EIR. There are three different iterations of this grant: Early-Phase, Mid-Phase, and Expansion-Phase. However, in order to be eligible for the other two iterations, applicants must have successfully implemented this first iteration. So it's a scaling-type grant.

Its main purpose is to support the development, implementation, and feasibility of a program that can successfully improve student achievement for high-need students. High-need can be defined in a variety of ways under this program, so it can include low-income students, students at risk of failure, but also students with disabilities or students in need of special assistance and support.

This program can support a variety of things like providing professional development, offering new curriculum, and implementing new technology. The biggest takeaway with this program is to make learning relevant to students so that they are more likely to engage in the learning process. This program is not yet open, but we do anticipate it to open sometime this summer.

State Sources of Special Education Funding

Common State Funding Models

Christina Fernandez:
Moving on to the state side of grants available, state funding for special education varies dramatically, reflecting different legislative priorities, population needs, and approaches to providing funding. According to the Education Commission of the States, there are seven common funding mechanisms that states generally use when funding special education. For today, I'm just going to discuss the top three most common funding models that we're seeing states use.

We have single-weighted funding, where funding is weighted the same for each student regardless of disability type or needed resources. Versus multiple-weighted funding, which provides different levels of funding for different categories of students, differentiating between their disability type or the services provided.

Next, you have census-based funding. Funding here is distributed based on each district's full enrollment count and then assumes a set percentage of students in each district will require special education services. So rather than using the actual number of students receiving services, it's an assumption. This method can lead to underfunding in areas where disability rates are higher than anticipated, but we see that as a common model as well.

Then we have resource-based funding. Under this model, states distribute resources instead of dollars based on the number of students requiring special education services. For example, a state may provide additional aid for every student who may need individualized support.

In addition to these formula-based funding models, states can also provide competitive funding opportunities to support specific project-based programming. But these competitions do vary widely depending on the availability of funds and the state's priorities for that fiscal year.

Types of Special Education Services Funded

Christina Fernandez:
Now that we've gone over how state-level funding models work, I do want to take a deeper dive into what those dollars are actually supporting — specifically the types of special education services that are

being implemented today in schools across the country. These services can take many forms, and the delivery method is often based on what's outlined in the student's Individualized Education Program, or IEP.

To start, you have push-in services. These are when specialists are brought into the general education classroom and provide support to students alongside their peers. They might co-teach or help modify lessons. The goal here is to minimize disruption and increase access to grade-level content within a familiar setting for students.

You also have pull-out services. Students who need more focused, individualized instruction — such as support from a speech-language therapist or a reading specialist — may be pulled out of the classroom for shorter sessions. This structure allows specialists to work more intensely with a student while still keeping them connected to the general education experience.

We also have inclusive classrooms. Very much in the name, it takes place in an inclusive setting where students with and without disabilities learn side by side. These classrooms are often supported with additional paraprofessionals and co-teachers. This environment not only promotes academic access but also helps build peer-to-peer relationships and social skills for those students.

Lastly, we have exclusive classrooms. Some students would benefit from being placed in a smaller classroom setting with students who have similar educational needs. They still remain within that traditional school setting, but they're put aside to have more one-on-one time with their teachers.

Across all of these services, funding plays a crucial role, whether it's paying for staffing, instructional materials, or specialized training. How states choose to fund special education directly influences what services are available at the school district level.

Private Sources of Special Education Funding

Christina Fernandez:
Then, of course, there are private sources of grant funding. This list is not exhaustive, as there are hundreds of foundations out there that would support high-need student populations. These are just a sampling of foundations that fund different areas and different types of special education services.

Starting with the Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism, they are specifically focused on supporting families, communities, and individuals affected by autism. They have a variety of grants housed within their portfolio, like their Assistive Technology Grant, Community Impact Grant, and Direct Family Safety Grants.

Then you have the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation. They invest in innovative strategies to empower youth with disabilities to live productive lives, focusing on things like workforce development.

Then the Learning Disabilities Foundation, which provides funding for research, education, and public awareness for both children and adults with learning disabilities.

Last but not least, the Tools for Life technology fund. This provides assistive technology grants, which can include different types of equipment — things like laptops, speech-to-text — all to help increase accessibility for students with disabilities in public schools as well as libraries.

Funder Priorities in Special Education

Christina Fernandez:
Before jumping directly into grant readiness tips, I did want to first touch on the different priority areas that we are seeing grant funders care most about as it relates to special education projects. Whether it be federal, state, or private funding, we see them tending to focus on these four priority areas.

Research and Innovation

Christina Fernandez:
Within the research and innovation space, funders want to see new evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. This might include piloting a new project, evaluating assistive technologies, or even partnering with a university to study interventions and how effective those interventions are. A big component with this priority is that funders are looking to invest in projects that can be scaled or replicated, similar to the EIR program we touched on earlier.

Inclusive and Accessible Education Materials

Christina Fernandez:
Within inclusive and accessible education materials, there is growing emphasis on making sure that all students regardless of ability can fully participate in classroom instruction. That means materials that are digitally accessible, culturally responsive, and adaptable for diverse learning needs is something we see a lot in that area.

Transitioning into Adulthood

Christina Fernandez:
Funders want to help prepare students for life after high school — whether that's college, career, or independent living. Projects in this space can include programs focused on job training, life-skill development, and partnerships with community organizations.

Educator Support and Professional Development

Christina Fernandez:
Last but not least, funders know that supporting our educators has a huge impact on student outcomes. We either see grants available specifically for programs that give teachers access to new skills, or we see professional development being called out as a required activity in other grant programs as a way to ensure that teachers can implement and support their project initiatives and bring it to their classroom.

Again, this is not an exhaustive list, but we're seeing most projects get funded within these spaces, and there are a lot of different avenues within these areas that can be explored.

Finding the Right Grant for Your District

Christina Fernandez:
Now that we have a sense of what funders are prioritizing, you might be thinking, “Okay, so how do I actually find the right grant for my school or district?” There are five key questions you'll want to ask yourself before beginning your search.

What Is Your Project Area?

Christina Fernandez:
Whether you're focused on inclusive materials or student transition, you'll want to clearly define the purpose of your project and how it aligns with current funder priorities.

Who Is Your Target Population?

Christina Fernandez:
Funders want to know exactly who will be benefiting from their dollars. So are you going to be serving middle schoolers with autism, helping high school students prepare for employment — whatever the case may be, the more specific you are about the population you're going to serve, the stronger your proposal will be.

What Is Your Geographic Area?

Christina Fernandez:
Many grants are tailored to certain regions, counties, or even types of communities, such as rural versus urban or low-income. Knowing your eligibility based on your location can really help save you time and narrow your search to finding the most relevant opportunities for you.

What Type of Support Do You Need?

Christina Fernandez:
Is this funding going to be for new equipment? Curriculum development? Grants really do vary widely in what they'll support, so it's critical to understand whether your needs are going to match the type of support that a grant funder is offering.

What Are Your Partnerships?

Christina Fernandez:
Do you share any common partners? Are partners required or encouraged? A lot of grant programs are designed to support collaborative efforts between schools, nonprofits, and universities. So if a grant program does require or prioritize partnerships, you'll definitely want to make sure you're identifying those collaborators early on and leveraging any of your existing partners to help begin those planning efforts.

Getting Your Project Grant-Ready

Christina Fernandez:
Now that we've looked at how to identify the grant, I want to get into how to actually get your project grant-ready. Whether you're a classroom teacher, a specialist, or an administrator supporting your team, this step is all about taking your idea and turning it into something that is fundable.

Define Your Classroom Needs

Christina Fernandez:
First, start by taking a closer look at your classroom itself. What's missing? What would make a real difference for your students? Whether it's adaptive tools, new curriculum materials, or anything else, you want to make sure you're clearly defining these needs by drafting a needs statement. That's usually the first step in an application.

Outline Your Plan

Christina Fernandez:
Map out how you plan to teach with the resources you're requesting through the funder. Think about what instruction would look like, how it would align with your current curriculum or current teaching standards. Having a well-thought-out plan shows funders that your program is going to be educationally based.

Set Measurable Learning Goals

Christina Fernandez:
Make a note of any learning goals you have for your students, and be specific about their outcome. Are you aiming to increase engagement? Are you supporting IEP goals? You'll definitely want to link your classroom goals to a measurable outcome.

Identify Tangible Resources

Christina Fernandez:
Confirm the tangible resources you are requesting by creating a checklist of everything you need. Whether you need supplies or training, knowing specifically what you need to make your classroom project successful will really help you when it comes time to justifying these expenses later.

Use the Five W's and the H

Christina Fernandez:
Follow the storytelling framework by asking the five W's and the H: Who will be impacted and involved in the project? What will be done over the course of the project period? Where and when is it going to take place? And why is the project needed? And, of course, how is this project going to be implemented and evaluated? Answering these fundamental questions will help make the application strong and more well-rounded.

Align Grants with Your Priorities

Christina Fernandez:
Last but not least, you want to make sure you're selecting grants that align with your priorities. There are a million grants out there, and you don't want to just go after any program. You want to make sure you're going after the ones that match your goals, and you want to look for programs that are going to be supporting your mission and activity. The better you can align your goals with the funder's mission, the more competitive your application will be.

Preparing Your School for Grant Seeking

Christina Fernandez:
I want to zoom out a little bit and look at what it takes to get your school ready to pursue grants, especially projects that involve multiple stakeholders or bigger initiatives.

Get Early Buy-In from Leadership

Christina Fernandez:
Depending on the size and scope of your grant, you may need to seek approval from your principal, department head, or even your district office, especially if funding is going to involve big-ticket items like staffing or new equipment. Getting that early buy-in and approval from them can help prevent any last-minute roadblocks when it comes time to submitting.

Connect with Fellow Educators

Christina Fernandez:
You're probably not the only one thinking about grants at your district, so start talking to your colleagues about what they're working on. You might discover some opportunity to either collaborate or combine your efforts.

Check Account Registrations

Christina Fernandez:
Make sure that all of your accounts and registrations are active. Some grants — especially federal or state ones — require that your school have an active account on platforms like SAM.gov, Grants.gov, or even your state portals. For smaller grants, it's worth double-checking if there are any membership tiers or registration requirements needed beforehand.

Plan Your Project in Advance

Christina Fernandez:
In case your classroom work is going to be part of a larger school initiative, definitely want to start outlining that early on.

Actively Search for Grants

Christina Fernandez:
Try to make it a habit of checking grant databases, subscribing to newsletters, and checking agency websites frequently. Even if you stumble across a program that is currently closed, check out its previous guidelines if available. That will show you what information and documents you'll need for the next round of funding — things like letters of support, budgets, and so on. Knowing that early on can really help you prepare, and you can begin working on those even before an application opens.

Develop Community Partnerships

Christina Fernandez:
Many grants — especially those related to student transitions or enrichment — favor or require community partnerships, whether with a local business, nonprofit, library, or college. Whatever the partnership requirement is, you'll want to start having those conversations early on. That will help make it easier when it comes time to actually pulling them into your grant project.

Looking Ahead: The FY 2026 Special Education Simplified Funding Proposal

Christina Fernandez:
As we wrap up today's session, I want to take a quick moment to look ahead. While we spent most of today focusing on how special education is currently funded and supported, there are important discussions happening right now at the federal level that could have a real impact on how you plan and deliver services in the coming years.

Recently the Presidential FY 2026 discretionary budget request introduced a significant proposal: the creation of a Special Education Simplified Funding Program. This program would consolidate the seven existing IDEA programs into a single funding stream, essentially making it like a block grant. The intent would be to reduce administrative burdens and give states and school districts greater flexibility in how they support students with disabilities, while also maintaining the funding from 2025.

What This Could Mean for Your District

Christina Fernandez:
What does this all mean for your district? First, instead of federal reporting requirements, schools may start to see new state-level application and compliance processes. This could streamline some areas but also introduce some new expectations at the local level.

There could also be a shift that brings tough decisions about how to allocate these resources, especially in balancing general education and special education priorities. Without those distinct IDEA program lines and combining it all into a block grant, there's going to be additional financial planning required for that.

Perhaps the most important thing that might come out of this is that, as education leaders, it's going to be critical to stay informed and speak up about how funds should be used. Advocacy will matter more than ever, as you want to make sure that your students with disabilities remain at the heart of every funding decision if that were to come into version.

But again, this is just a proposal. This is not final policy at all. It does require congressional approval before any changes are implemented. But just being aware of the potential direction this could have, and knowing if there'd be any big shifts down the road, is always good to be aware of, and start thinking about how your district could or would adapt if this model were to move forward. With that, I will pass things over to Ashley to close this out.

Closing and Grants Office Services

Ashley Schultz:
Thanks very much, Christina. I will just echo what Christina mentioned in the past slide: congressional approval is needed for these types of changes. There has been a lot of legislation put forward, a lot of executive orders put forward here in the last six months or so, and a lot of news articles resulting from those things. But again, it requires congressional approval and a certain amount of legislation behind it. So keep an eye out for those types of phrases as you're looking through news articles.

I will also put a shameless plug out there: keep in touch with Grants Office. We are regularly posting on LinkedIn and regularly posting on a blog on the home page of our website about changes to the federal funding landscape under the new administration. So if you're unsure or want to know more about what is or is not happening amongst all of the conversations, definitely check out those resources.

We have an additional resource on June 24, about a month away — we're having an additional free webinar just like the one we had today, talking about K-12 funding opportunities more generally. This is going to feature Christina's colleague Sam, and he's going to be hopping on to talk about what it takes to be successful, more broadly, in the K-12 funding landscape in the United States. So please do register for that event, should you be interested.

Q&A Session

Ashley Schultz:
I'm just going to open up our Q&A here to see what kinds of questions we have from the crowd. If you have more questions, please feel free to drop them in that Q&A section. If you think of a question later, you are more than welcome to contact us at education@grantsoffice.com, and you'll get a reply from Christina or someone on our team shortly thereafter.

Q1: What's the main difference between IDEA and Section 504?

Christina Fernandez:
That's a great question. The main difference is going to be within the scope and the type of support that's provided. IDEA is focused on those Individualized Education Plans, and it's more specific and an eligibility-based program. Versus Section 504, which applies more broadly as it just ensures access and

accommodations are being provided for students who may not need those specialized supports. Both ensure that students receive a Free Appropriate Public Education, but IDEA comes with more structured services and funding.

Q2: Can a district use both formula funding and grant funding for the same special education project?

Christina Fernandez:
Yes, but you want to make sure you are supplementing and not supplanting. You want to make sure that the grant would be adding or enhancing your existing program rather than replacing or substituting any of those funds. The key when combining funding is to make sure that it's supporting each other and that they have their own track and way to report it. But yes, definitely.

Ashley Schultz:
Great — so yes, and proceed cautiously.

Christina Fernandez:
Yes.

Final Thanks and Grants Office Services

Ashley Schultz:
Thank you again, Christina. Fantastic information shared today. I hope you all found this to be a really good use of your time. The Grants Office team is here for you through this entire process — whether you're working on an inclusive education project or a larger K-12 project, or you're just hanging out here as a member of a local government, hospital, or higher education institution. Feel free to get in touch with us.

Folks come to us with their project ideas in mind. We have initial meetings with you, talk through your project ideas, try to figure out what you're looking to get funded with grants. We have folks like Christina, Sam, and the rest of our consultant team who can find grants for you — essentially put together a funding opportunity report, describe all the grants that are available to fund your project, and then help you understand the general landscape.

We're also here to help you get that application submitted, whether that be walking you through what a project would look like and helping you to construct it, helping you actually put pen to paper on your behalf writing that proposal, or just giving you an extra set of eyes on the proposal itself — something you wrote — looking over spelling, content, grammar, all that sort of thing. So really anything you need to put your best foot forward on a grant application, the Grants Office team is here to help you with.

Please don't hesitate to reach out. If you scan the QR code here on the screen, it's going to take you to our website, where you can learn a little bit more about everything I just discussed. And again — I sound

like a broken record — get in touch with us. GrantsOffice.com is where all of our information is. We are also incredibly active on LinkedIn. Our social media coordinator Kate does a really great job of keeping her finger on the pulse of the funding landscape and making sure that all the major updates, particularly at the federal level, are posted there, so you can see that in your everyday feed on LinkedIn.

Again, my name is Ashley Schultz, Manager of Research and Consultation. Thank you so much for joining us here today, and we look forward to seeing you on a future event.

— End of Transcript —

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