



Special  
Education  
Foundation

**Making a Difference**  
*One Student at a Time*

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



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SSD LIAISON



# Dear Friends,

The Special Education Foundation proudly celebrated its 40th anniversary during the 2024 fiscal year, a milestone that wouldn't have been possible without the unwavering support of our donors, friends, and partners throughout the St. Louis region. In the past year, we introduced new programs and hosted an exceptional new event spotlighting individuals transforming the lives of students with disabilities in St. Louis County.



*Julia Burke, PhD  
Chair, Board of Directors*



*Tim Eby  
Executive Director*

Through our various programs, SEF **positively impacted over 6,500 students who receive special education services in St. Louis County.**

The new programs joining our toolkit of support for students were the Autism Independence Project and SEF Presents, part of our **Arts in the Classroom** initiative.

Through a generous grant from the Charles W. Frees & Jean H. Frees Foundation and in partnership with iSocial, the **Autism Independence Project** is a pilot project designed to help students with disabilities served by the Special School District improve their independence by increasing their social skills and expanding their meaningful life aspirations. The early feedback from our participants has been overwhelmingly positive, giving us hope for the future of this project.

A dedicated group of individuals provided financial support to SEF during the 2024 Give STL Day of philanthropy, allowing us to initiate our *SEF Presents* series of music, dance, and theater performances in Special School District schools. The performances inspired and delighted hundreds of students at Ackerman, Litzsinger, Neuwoehner, and Southview schools. For FY 2025, SEF has received additional funding from the Regional Arts Commission to expand these performances with new arts partners.

Another new initiative coming in 2025 is **The Mobility Project**, which will help promote and improve the students' independence and ability to interact with

their environment and peers for students with physical disabilities.

Elsewhere in this report, you will learn about the positive impact of all of SEF's programs on the thousands of students we serve, who range in age from 3 to 21.

SEF's events continued to raise funds and awareness for our work for students in St. Louis County. The 21st annual **Dan McLaughlin Charity Golf Tournament and Auction** had its second-best fundraising event in our history, raising more than \$334,000 in October 2023. Our new event, **The Starfish Awards**, was a unique way to recognize eight educators in St. Louis County, plus three community leaders, who have made significant contributions to the education of students with disabilities. This event, held at CITYPARK Stadium in June 2024, was an incredible evening that celebrated their achievements and the impact of their work.

We also want to express our sincere gratitude to the SEF Board of Directors for their exceptional leadership and our amazing staff for their commitment to our mission, which has made a profound difference in the lives of countless students.

Finally, we are grateful to our partners at the Special School District of St. Louis County for their unwavering dedication to helping students.

Thank you for supporting the kids and allowing SEF to help them in many ways.



## ▶ WHO WE ARE

Founded in 1984 as Missouri's first public school foundation, the Special Education Foundation (SEF) offers vital support and resources beyond what tax dollars provide to students served by the Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD).

Special  
Education  
Foundation



## ▶ WHO WE SERVE

The Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD) is Missouri's largest specialized education provider, dedicated to equipping and empowering students of all learning abilities to reach their full potential. Serving children and youth with disabilities ages 3 to 21, SSD operates under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and tailors services to each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). These services are offered in a range of placements across St. Louis County, from SSD teachers providing support in the student's home district to specialized SSD schools or private agencies. Currently, 99% of SSD students attend school in their local district.

SSD supports nearly 23,500 students with disabilities in its schools and classrooms across 22 districts, more than 1,600 students in career and technical education, and over 1,200 students attending private or parochial schools.





# By the Numbers

YOUR IMPACT FISCAL YEAR 2024

**8,100**

students helped  
in 2024

**89**

educators received  
Classroom Innovation Grants

**\$53,598**

Funding innovative  
classroom projects to  
enhance student learning  
and success

**595**

students experienced  
the Arts in the Classroom  
performances

**\$23,831**

in assistance to  
**81 students** with hearing  
aids, molds, repairs, and  
other adaptive and assistive  
equipment

**\$20,902**

spent on adaptive equipment  
for students in need

**6**

Students supported in the  
Autism Independence Project  
with **\$4,540 in scholarships**

**200**

Students and families  
supported through  
Critical Needs

**\$5,148**

Raised for Winter  
Coat Drive

**\$2,384**

Raised for the Spring  
Personal Care Drive

**15**

Students selected to  
participate in the Fred Saigh  
Leadership Academy

**7**

Grants provided to the SSD  
Principals through SEF's  
Women Leaders

**\$13,255**

Supporting the Special  
School District school  
projects, including the  
Juvenile Detention Center  
and Bridges Program  
benefitting  
**733 Students**

**28**

grants to help send  
Kids-to-Camp

**\$22,395**

funded to support students  
during academic breaks

## Adaptive & Assistive Equipment

FILLING GAPS IN PERCEPTION, COMMUNICATION, AND VISION

Adaptive equipment and assistive technology play a crucial role in helping students with disabilities engage more fully in both academic and everyday life. Thanks to a generous grant from the Tilles Foundation, SEF is able to provide funding for specialized equipment to students served by the Special School District up to age 21.

SEF is dedicated to making a meaningful difference in the education and well-being of students facing financial challenges, with a focus on augmentative devices, adaptive equipment, hearing aids, eyeglasses, and other assistive technologies. Our mission is centered on fostering greater independence and enhancing the quality of life for the individuals we support.

SEF's Gift of Sound program provided hearing aids to over 68 students, while 12 students received adaptive or assistive equipment. These essential tools help students enhance their learning and foster independence both in and beyond the classroom.



"My daughter was able to receive a computer and a recorder. She uses both several times daily, using all the software to access her studies. It allows her to listen to her lectures at home. It is very helpful for operating in the college setting. We are very excited and grateful she has these devices!"

—Julie N., Mother

"My son has been communicating well since receiving an iPad. He is able to use an app to point out what he needs on daily basis pictorially. The program has been a wonderful support for families like ours."

—Danielle G., Mother

"My daughter received an adult stroller which has helped her at school with transitions. It's helping us immensely when we take her out in the community. We are extremely thankful and grateful to the Special Education Foundation as this has helped our family so much."

—Ishwarya S., Mother

# SEF Presents! Arts in the Classroom

BRINGING THEATER AND MUSIC ENRICHING EXPERIENCES INTO THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Theater and music programs can profoundly benefit students with disabilities, leading to increased self-esteem, enhanced social interactions, improved language skills, and a greater appreciation for the arts. Through participation in theater, music, and artistic expression, many students uncover hidden talents and skills.

At SEF, we recognize the essential role fine arts play in the education of students with disabilities. We are committed to providing artistic opportunities that foster growth and development through plays, musical troupes, or other creative experiences within their learning environments.

This year, SEF is partnering with the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Metro Theater Company, The Black Rep, Jazz St. Louis, and other organizations to bring more performances and programs into the SSD schools in the year ahead.

We've recently received a \$7,200 grant from the Regional Arts Commission and 41 donors helped us to raise \$6,225 from the Give STL Day Campaign in May 2024.



"Having The Black Rep perform for our students provided a professional theater and learning opportunity that many students cannot access due to transportation, accessibility, and cost barriers. It was a wonderful and engaging performance and we are grateful to SEF for supporting this opportunity."

*-Kimberly Fine, Principal at Neuwoehner School*





## Autism Independence Project

IMPROVING INDEPENDENCE & INCREASING SOCIAL SKILLS

The Special Education Foundation (SEF) is a proud partner with iSocial in launching the Autism Independence Project. This initiative aligns with SEF's mission to empower students with disabilities served by the Special School District by enhancing their social skills and expanding their aspirations for independent, meaningful lives.

### What is iSocial?

iSocial is a remote group therapy program designed to build social competence, developed by Dr. Janine Stichter and her team at the Thompson Center for Autism at the University of Missouri. Its goal is to transform the lives of individuals with autism, enabling them to lead independent lives with fulfilling employment and strong friendships. The program offers group telehealth therapy for children and adults, helping them acquire crucial life skills.

SEF has received \$15,000 in pilot funding and 6 students served by the Special School District were enrolled in the program in FY 2024.



"In past years, I would always avoid scheduling meetings for at least an hour after school because I knew I'd have to deal with some kind of episode or meltdown. This year has been completely different. I haven't had a single incident to manage. It's 1,000% better than before."

—Erin S., Mother

The calm start to the school year is something the parent credits entirely to the skills her daughter is learning through iSocial.

"Previously, my son couldn't sit in the classroom with his peers, preferring to stay outside. Now, he proudly sits in the classroom and even responds to some of his classmates' questions and comments. This change has made a world of difference in his daily experience at school."

—Aniecia J., Mother



# Critical Needs

## PROVIDING EVERYDAY ESSENTIALS FOR STUDENTS IN NEED

Students with disabilities often face financial or physical challenges that can disrupt their learning and hinder their ability to participate fully in the educational process. When essential needs go unmet, it can significantly impact their success in both the classroom and the community. To address these critical needs, SEF is dedicated to providing financial support.

In collaboration with SSD, we raise funds during the winter Coat Drive to ensure that students served by SSD are equipped with coats and winter accessories to stay warm during the colder months. Additionally, the program has helped provide food baskets for approximately 140 families during winter and spring breaks as well as the start of summer vacation.

In addition, students have received uniform clothing for professional appearances on job sites, graduation clothing to participate in end-of-the-year ceremonies, and personal care products funded during the Personal Hygiene drive in the spring.



# Classroom Innovation Grants

SUPPORT FOR CREATIVITY TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

Teachers continually seek creative ways to enhance education for students with disabilities, often dipping into their own pockets to provide enriching learning experiences.

Since 2002, SEF has supported these efforts through its Classroom Innovation Grants program. This initiative is designed to empower teachers by providing the funding necessary to bring innovative classroom projects to life, enriching the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

Over the past year, SEF awarded \$53,598 to 89 teachers to bring their creative and impactful projects to life.



Rachel Blake, a teacher of the Vocational Skills Program, was awarded a Classroom Innovation Grant for her Smoothies for Wellness project. “The students learned skills related to employability skills for food preparation,” stated Blake. “The deep freezer also provided opportunities for students to expand their smoothie menu to start having monthly featured recipes due to increased frozen food storage space. Through this process of expanding the menu, interns have had the opportunity to learn how to research recipes and make choices about the flavors they will offer on their menu. This ownership in their work has created a sense of belonging and encouraged and motivated students at the office.”



Parkway teacher Amanda Howell’s project involved her fifth-grade deaf and hard of hearing students for a dining experience at a local restaurant. Students were able to order lunch and a drink and dine with their peers. For a few students, this was their first time eating at a local restaurant. “In preparation for ordering lunch at a restaurant, students learned real-world communication strategies for individuals with hearing loss. Students were not allowed to use sign language interpreters for ordering lunch, but rather had to choose if they would use their voice or point to the menu. One student shared that they didn’t know they could order for themselves! Students learned appropriate behaviors when eating at a restaurant (e.g. how to use a napkin, using utensils, throwing away trash). While I observed students showing they were nervous to order lunch, they were beaming with pride after they ordered and received their tray of food.”



# Fred Saigh Leadership Academy

CREATING LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

In 2004, SEF established the Fred Saigh Leadership Academy, made possible by a generous grant from the Saigh Foundation. This annual program is designed to develop leadership skills in students with disabilities, preparing them to take on meaningful roles in their schools and communities.

The Academy's curriculum is crafted to immerse students in real-world challenges and opportunities within the community. Through experiential learning, mentorship, and skill-building, participants gain valuable experience in running for school offices, managing school projects, and assuming leadership roles.

Each year, the class organizes a September car wash to raise funds for three chosen charities. Over the nine-month program, students visit key sites and meet with local leaders, including stops at the St. Louis County Executive's office, the George Westfall Criminal Justice Center, the Missouri State Capitol, and the Holocaust Museum.

15 students from across St. Louis County participated in the program during the 2023-2024 school year.

The program culminates in a graduation ceremony in May, where one student is honored with the C.J. Aubuchon Award for exemplifying kindness and inclusivity.



"The opportunities Henry has experienced in the Fred Saigh Leadership Academy have played a part in his accomplishments this year. We are thankful he has had this experience and we are grateful to the Fred Saigh Leadership Academy for all that they do for young people with disabilities!"

—Karen B., Mother  
Lindbergh High School



# John Cary Scholarships

## PROPELLING STUDENTS TO FUTURE SUCCESS

The Special Education Foundation established the John Cary Scholarship in 2016 to honor the late John Cary, former Superintendent of the Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD), whose dedication to advocating for students with disabilities was unmatched.

This program awards annual college scholarships to deserving students beginning their post-secondary education. Recipients embody the qualities that John Cary valued most—resilience, courage, and determination. Scholarship candidates are evaluated based on their academic achievements, leadership skills, community involvement, accomplishments in athletics or the arts, and their potential for future success.

Each year, SEF awards a \$5,000 scholarship to five outstanding college-bound students and a \$2,500 scholarship from the Christopher Davis family to one Ritenour High School student.







**SHAYNEISHA ALLEN** *Parkway Central High School*

Shayneisha is determined, driven, and focused on meeting her life goals. She has the courage to speak up, shows her authentic self, and supports others when it really matters. She is described as enthusiastic, displays tolerance, is respectful, and has genuine concern for others. Shayneisha is attending Missouri State University and aspires to become a prosecuting attorney in New York City.



**ELLE BRYANT** *Ladue Horton Watkins High School*

Elle uses determination to help balance a busy schedule while maintaining great grades and academic success. She will use her experiences as a guide to being successful in the future. Elle is an excellent violinist, is encouraging and respectful, and demonstrates exceptional dedication and hard work in the classroom. Elle is attending Maryville University to study music composition, production, and performance.



**ANNA JONES** *Brentwood High School*

Anna uses strategies and resources and is an advocate for herself to succeed. She manages her time well and sets her own goals and priorities. Participating in sports has improved her confidence because she achieves goals, overcomes challenges, and sees her progress. Anna is attending Southeast Missouri State University to pursue a career in education or nursing.



**MIA MAGAÑA** *Oakville High School*

Mia has enjoyed helping in school, which has defined the kind of person she wants to be. She volunteers and loves helping and making an impact in her community. Mia is described as having a strong desire to understand what she is learning thoroughly and has a servant's heart with a strong moral character. Mia is attending Lindenwood University to pursue a degree in Nursing.



**TRENTON WATKINS** *Parkway North High School*

Trenton enjoys helping people and seeing their growth with the knowledge they receive. This has motivated him to want to be an educator. He likes helping keep people on track and is sharp-minded and organized. Trenton is described as an outstanding student and mentor. He is motivated and committed to his community by volunteering. Trenton is attending Florissant Valley Community College.



**NOAH HOUSE** *Ritenour High School*

**Recipient of the \$2,500 Christopher Davis Scholarship**

Noah has always loved capturing memories through photography, finding joy in documenting the moments and things that interest him. Known for his talent and strong work ethic, Noah excels at expressing himself both in writing and social settings. His communication skills shine, and he naturally takes on leadership roles when working in groups. Currently studying photography at St. Louis Community College, Noah aspires to become a media specialist.

## Kid-to-Camp

### SUPPORT TO KEEP STUDENTS LEARNING AND ENGAGED DURING ACADEMIC BREAKS

Camp programs are essential for maintaining the educational progress of students with disabilities during extended breaks throughout the year. They provide valuable opportunities for students to interact with peers, build friendships, and develop relationships that enhance their self-confidence and independence.

The Special Education Foundation's Kid-to-Camp program supports families by offering camperships to students with disabilities. These camperships are awarded based on a thorough assessment of financial need and the potential benefits of the camp experience.

Update this sentence to: In the past year, SEF allocated \$22,395 to fund 28 students' participation in camp during winter, spring, and summer breaks.



"My daughter was able to work with a music therapist in the social and emotional skills camp which was a new experience. Without the campership, she would not have been able to attend both sessions. The two sessions attended made for a full day of camp which also was a benefit and convenience to our family due to our busy work schedules."

—Jacquelyn C., Mother

"Attending camp allowed my son to make some new friends and it was his first overnight experience. As parents, we got a break for the first time in 11 years. Thank you SEF!"

—Angela H., Mother





## Women Leaders

The Special Education Foundation (SEF) Women Leaders is a dynamic and active group of women dedicated to supporting children and youth with disabilities in St. Louis County. Established in 2009, the group was created from the enthusiasm of guests attending a friend-raiser, eager to make a positive difference for students with disabilities. Since then, the Women Leaders have remained committed to funding special projects designed to enhance educational experiences and opportunities for students served by the Special School District (SSD).

The Women Leaders organize a range of fundraising events, from fashion shows in previous years, to the Starfish Awards this past summer, all with the singular purpose of helping students with disabilities. Their commitment goes beyond simply raising funds. These efforts highlight their steadfast dedication to driving positive change.

### Principal Grants

Each September, the Women Leaders and SEF staff convene with the principals of the Special School District schools (SSD), including the Juvenile Detention Center and Bridges Program. During this meeting, the principals present detailed insights into their student populations, along with Principal Grant proposals for special projects that could significantly enhance their students' educational experiences.

Through the Women Leaders, SEF is able to provide essential resources for innovative projects that might otherwise go unfunded.

These projects often aim to improve social skills, foster independence, or provide adaptive technology to students with disabilities—offering them new opportunities for growth and learning.



"Thanks to the generosity of the Women Leaders by providing Principal Grants we were able to purchase AMAZING neon t-shirts for all students and staff. To save on the cost, we ordered the t-shirts and decals and were able to use our own press to make the final product. Students in our SLC-Service Learning Center were able to assist in the process. Both the students and staff were so excited to receive their shirts. We passed them out before our End of the Year Glow Dance, and everyone was able to light up the room during the dance and throughout the day. We appreciate the continued support of the Women Leaders!" Niki Tedoni, Principal at Southview School



"The students and staff at Northview High School are so very grateful to the Special Education Foundation (SEF) for their tremendous support over the years. This past year the SEF provided funds to support an ice cream truck and video game truck coming to school in an effort to foster positive vibes and memories while celebrating our students as they closed out the school year. SEF also provided funds in an effort to assist all students with having access to a school yearbook. The Special Education Foundation has truly helped Northview to create a welcoming environment for our students and continues to utilize the community's resources to impact SSD students in a positive way. Thank you SEF!" Brian O'Connor, Principal at Northview School

## Inaugural Starfish Awards

### POWERED BY THE WOMEN LEADERS

The Special Education Foundation established the Starfish Award in order to recognize the individuals within the Special School District who may not seek the spotlight but, through their daily efforts, have brought about significant change through seemingly small yet deeply meaningful actions. Ideal candidates for this honor exhibit the following qualities:

- ▶ Consistently demonstrates unwavering compassion and kindness.
- ▶ Leaves a remarkable imprint on the lives of students and families within the Special School District and the 22 partner districts in St. Louis County.
- ▶ Offers vital support during challenging circumstances.
- ▶ Their actions generate a ripple effect of positivity, creating a nurturing environment for all.

The inaugural Starfish Awards were held on June 13 at CITYPARK, home of the St. Louis City Soccer Club. The evening was filled with heartfelt recognition, inspiring speeches, and a celebration of the unsung heroes in special education across St. Louis County. The Starfish Awards served as a powerful reminder of the collective impact made by individuals in the special education community. The event celebrated not just our winners but also the spirit of compassion, dedication, and resilience that drives the Special Education Foundation’s mission.



The following individuals were recognized and celebrated at this exciting event:

**KERRY BENNETT**

Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Ladue School District

**MARSHA DAVIDSON**

Green Pines Elementary School, Rockwood School District

**KATIE DOWD**

Oakville Senior High School, Mehlville School District

**KARI FRAZIER**

Barretts Elementary, Parkway School District

**MALLORY HURT**

Walker Elementary School, Hazelwood School District

**DANA MEINECKE**

North Glendale Elementary School, Kirkwood School District

**DAVID PETERSON**

North Tech High School, Special School District

**MARY REICH-HERNANDEZ**

Michelle Obama ECAC, Riverview Gardens School District

**STARFISH LEADERSHIP AWARD**

Dr. Joylynn Pruitt Adams, Superintendent of Riverview Gardens School District

**COMMUNITY STARFISH AWARD**

Debbie Bentele, President Emerita of the Special Education Foundation

**SPIRIT OF SEF AWARD**

Diane Buhr Engelsmann, Founding Executive Director of the Special Education Foundation



# Dan McLaughlin Golf Tournament

For decades, the Special Education Foundation has been a beacon of support for thousands of children with physical and mental disabilities and their families. The annual Dan McLaughlin Golf Tournament and Charity Auction, now in its 21st year, has raised over \$5 million, with every dollar going directly to those in need.

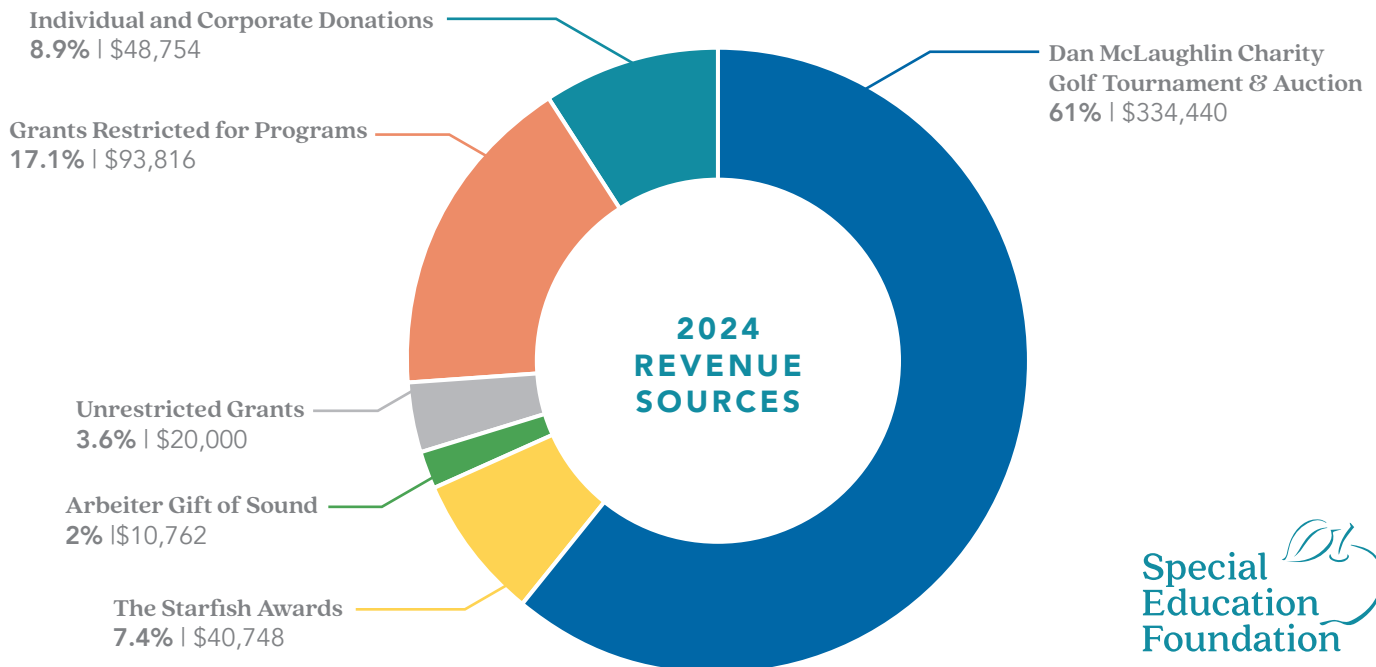
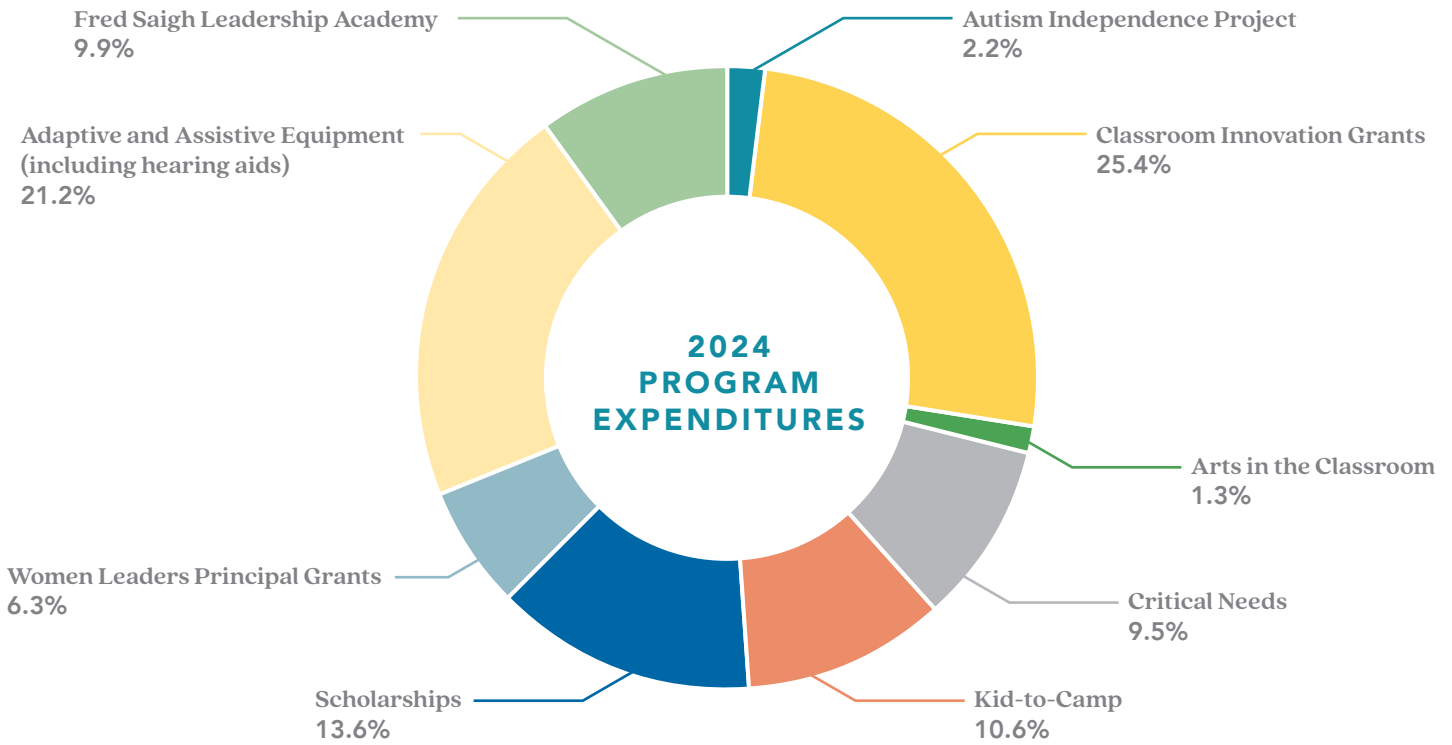
This tournament has a profound impact on students served by the Special School District of St. Louis County, providing essential financial support and equipping them with the tools they need to succeed academically and prepare for life beyond the classroom. SEF's programs and services have significantly transformed the lives of these students and their families, as well as benefitted hundreds of teachers and SSD staff.

As the need for assistance continues to grow, the tournament remains a joyful way to give back to the SSD community. This year, the event raised \$330,000 through sponsorships, golf participation, happy hour, and both silent and live auctions.

Looking ahead, SEF plans to introduce additional special events to increase awareness of its programs and services, aiming to extend support to even more individuals in need and make a lasting difference in their lives.



# By the Numbers





# Your contribution has the power to make a profound impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities.



## DONOR INFORMATION

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City State Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Gift Amount: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

## GIVING OPTIONS

### ▶ Credit/Debit Card

Visa    Mastercard    Discover    American Express

Credit Card Number \_\_\_\_\_

Exp Date (MM/YY) \_\_\_\_\_ CVV Code \_\_\_\_\_

### ▶ Check enclosed

*Please make check payable to Special Education Foundation.*

### ▶ Online Options

Donate through our website:  
[sef-stl.org/about/ways-to-give](http://sef-stl.org/about/ways-to-give)



### ▶ Planned Giving

*Please contact me with information about how I can include SEF in my will or estate plan.*

### Mail Completed form to:

Special Education Foundation  
11933 Westline Industrial Drive  
St. Louis, MO 63146

*Special Education Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.*

# Special Education Foundation

A stylized teal leaf logo with a curved stem, positioned to the right of the text.

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■ 314.394.7030

▶ [www.sef-stl.org](http://www.sef-stl.org)