

Remarks of Melody Barnes
35th Anniversary of IDEA Event
November 18, 2010

Good afternoon everyone! It's wonderful to be here with all of you – representing President Obama -- as we celebrate the historic 35th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

I want to thank Secretary Duncan for those wonderful words and his leadership, as well as the Members of Congress here today who have worked tirelessly on behalf of people with disabilities. I also want to recognize the honorary sponsors of this event- Senator Tom Harkin, Senator Mike Enzi, Representative George Miller and Representative John Kline. For all you do to make educational opportunity possible for all students, we are forever in your debt. .

Our Administration has long been committed to IDEA. In fact, Vice President Biden -- an original co-sponsor of the law -- has been fighting alongside people with disabilities as long as he's been in Washington. We've come a long way in those 35 years. Back then, some children were isolated in institutions. And those who attended school didn't receive the services and accommodations they deserved so that they could excel like everyone else. Far too many children with disabilities received no education at all. Many public schools simply ignored them.

That began to change in 1975, and we've made great strides ever since. Today, as Secretary Duncan pointed out, nearly 6.6 million children with disabilities benefit from the provisions of this critical civil rights legislation.

From Day One, President Obama has been steadfast in his commitment to the principle that every child deserves a world class education. And, when he and Secretary Duncan say every child, they mean every single child no matter his or her ability or disability.

That's why President Obama made an historic investment in the Recovery Act, devoting more than \$12 billion in funding to IDEA. At a time when school districts around the country were struggling and contemplating cuts, this investment meant that they did not have to eliminate teachers for kids with disabilities. It meant that schools could make their buildings and classrooms more accessible while at the same time creating desperately needed jobs. It meant that schools could purchase technology so that children with disabilities can compete on a level playing field with their peers. And it signaled that this President--this Administration--would not forget about students with disabilities even when times are tough.

But fulfilling the promise of IDEA isn't just about the education system standing alone. President Obama has repeatedly affirmed that we are going to tackle big problems and we can tackle more than one at a time. Issues such as civil rights enforcement, health care for children, and employment, all are intertwined and important for realizing the promise of IDEA.

We must enforce the civil rights laws that ensure children with disabilities will have the tools needed to excel. And, to that end, the Department of Justice -- working with the Department of Education-- sent a 'Dear Colleague' letter to universities and colleges across the country to reinforce the principle that students with disabilities must have equal access to emerging technologies in institutions of higher education. We know that's more and more important at a time when technology plays such an essential role in our education system.

Equally important is our task ensuring that our children are healthy and ready to learn when they reach the school house door. Show me a child who is ill and I'll show you a child who hasn't been given the opportunity to excel in the classroom. That's why passage of the Affordable Care Act is critically important to supporting our parents and the education system. Parents no longer have to worry about caps on coverage for their child with a disability. Parents no longer have to worry about their children being denied coverage based on a pre-existing condition. With the removal of these barriers, children can get the health care they need and flourish at school.

The goals that animate IDEA require that we look beyond high school and college graduation. When our students take off their caps and gowns, they should be able to earn a living wage in an increasingly competitive world.

That's why President Obama has been hard at work increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Just this past July, on the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, he signed an Executive Order that will help make the federal government a

model employer. So those who want to join the ranks of the millions of dedicated public servants will have an equal opportunity to do so.

The President tells us, “The single most important thing we can do is to make sure we’ve got a world-class education system for everybody. That education is a prerequisite for prosperity. It is an obligation that we have for the next generation.” That responsibility is at the heart of IDEA -- every child, whether with or without a disability, should be able to live his or her dream and become a teacher, scientist, author, singer, painter, engineer or even a President. And frankly, with all the great challenges facing the country, we cannot afford to leave anyone behind. This is an “all hands on deck” moment – we need all of our talent at the table.

In closing, I must say I’m glad we’re celebrating the IDEA’s anniversary in this room – the Kennedy Caucus Room. I had the honor of working for Senator Kennedy – a champion for this law -- for many years, and through that work, I was able to witness the power of this extraordinary piece of legislation up close and personal – to meet and to hear the stories of those whose lives have been transformed. When we breathe life into great laws, it changes the course of history.

Congratulations to everyone here for the work of the past 35 years, and we look forward to what we can accomplish together in the years to come.