

April 29, 2014

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman, Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education Appropriations Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member, Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education Appropriations Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jack Kingston
Chairman, Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education Appropriations Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member, Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education Appropriations Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Harkin, Chairman Kingston, Ranking Member Moran and Ranking Member DeLauro:

Our organizations write to share with you our concerns regarding the shrinking investment in the capacity of the field of special education to ensure that research informs practice and that general and special education personnel are prepared to effectively instruct students with disabilities.

Over the last several years, we have witnessed the investment in three critical programs decrease, as needs of students with disabilities and their families expand. We believe a strong federal investment in research and educator preparation is critical to creating positive academic and developmental outcomes for the nation's 6 million children and youth with disabilities. Our children thrive when they have access to educators who are trained to address their complex needs and have access to research-based strategies.

We are deeply concerned that the President's fiscal year 2015 budget proposes inadequate investments in the following programs:

- **National Center for Research in Special Education (NCSE) within the Institute of Education Sciences proposes flat funding;**
- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA) Personnel Preparation proposes flat funding;**
- **Teacher Quality Partnership Grants under Title II of the Higher Education Act proposes elimination of all funding.**

These programs have suffered repeated -- and in the case of NCSE dramatic -- cuts which serve to chip away at the foundation of our nation's capacity to effectively education students with disabilities.

We urge you to reject this proposal and instead move toward restoring these programs to their FY 2010 levels to rebuild this critical capacity. Specifically we request: \$70 million for NCSE; \$90.6 million for IDEA Part D-Personnel; and \$43 million for Teacher Quality Partnership Grants.

For years Congress has wisely acknowledged that the mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act -- to provide a free appropriate public education to every child, no matter how significant their disability may be -- could not be carried out if we did not have a sound research base and the personnel with the required expertise to provide necessary and critical services. Children -- and families -- affected by autism, learning disabilities, deafness, blindness, emotional disorders, intellectual disabilities and other disabilities all depend on new research-based strategies and interventions that are delivered by well prepared personnel to thrive in and out of school. Without this research base and critical personnel, the federal mandate simply cannot be fulfilled.

While impressive progress has been made since 1975, more is needed. Specifically:

- The dropout rate for students with disabilities is 23%, more than twice that of students without disabilities (Source: IDEAdata.org);
- Only 11% of students with disabilities scored “proficient” or above in 4th grade reading, and only 16% in 4th grade math. In 8th grade just 6% of students with disabilities scored proficient or above in reading and just 7% in math. (Source: 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).
- The employment rate for individuals with disabilities continues to be significantly lower than virtually any other minority group.

Providing an adequate investment in National Center for Special Education Research, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s (IDEA) Personnel Preparation, and Teacher Quality Partnership Grants under Title II of the Higher Education Act directly supports improving outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

- **National Center for Special Education Research of the Institute of Education Sciences:** To meet the challenges our nation currently faces, children must achieve at their highest possible level and enter the workforce ready to succeed. The research activities funded by NCSER are one essential way the field of special education and research work to meet these goals. Since NCSER began awarding grants in 2006, NCSER has funded over 200 research projects in areas that improve the educational outcomes of children and youth with disabilities. This research – which has focused on projects such as student assessment, autism, literacy, early learning, and family involvement – has produced effective interventions, teaching practices, and strategies for learning that have proven to be an invaluable resource to families, educators and communities.

However, over the last five years NCSER’s budget has been reduced by approximately 30%, or \$20.5 million, thereby limiting the scope of research that can be conducted to fully address challenges in the special education field. This drastic funding cut in FY 2014 resulted in no new grants being solicited or funded. The current RFA from IES suggests this will also be the case in FY 2016. If this funding trend continues, fewer new special education projects will be initiated, leaving families, students, and educators without critical information to best address the academic and developmental needs of children and youth with disabilities

- **IDEA Personnel Preparation Program:** This program is designed to increase the pipeline of well-prepared special education teachers, early interventionists, administrators, and specialized instructional support personnel. Currently, the Personnel Preparation program supports approximately 8,000 scholars annually in nearly every state across the nation all of whom are preparing for a career to serve children and youth with disabilities. In fact, 65% of all Personnel Preparation funds go directly to students, serving as financial assistance that enables them to secure college degrees and gain expertise. Upon completion of the Personnel Preparation program, all recipients of the funds are required to “pay back” through two years of service in a high-need area for every year of federal support; a wise use of federal funding.

But the twin shortages of special education teachers and higher education special education faculty loom large, threatening our nation’s capacity to deliver mandated service. According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly every state reports a shortage of special education teachers and specialized instructional support personnel (i.e. speech language pathologists)¹. In fact, 90% of high poverty districts reported difficulty in attracting highly qualified special education teachers². Further compounding this national shortage is the estimate that 1.6 million educators are expected to retire over the next decade,

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. *Teacher Shortage Areas: Nationwide Listing 1990-1991 through 2013-2014*. (March 2013). <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pol/tsa.pdf>

² U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, Volume VIII—Teacher Quality Under NCLB: Final Report, Washington, D.C., 2009 <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/teaching/nclb-final/report.pdf>

many of whom are special educators³. According to a 2011 report funded by the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 1/3 to 2/3 of faculty in institutions of higher education granting doctoral degrees in special education will retire between 2011-2017⁴. This mass retirement will have a direct impact on children and youth with disabilities as faculty shortages will lead to 50% fewer special education teachers and school leaders trained, further exacerbating the existing K-12 shortage⁵.

Funds for Personnel Preparation have been reduced from \$92 million to \$83.7 million in FY 2014 limiting the capacity of our nation's schools to deliver positive outcomes for students with disabilities and their families.

- **Teacher Quality Partnerships, Title II , Higher Education Act**

The Teacher Quality Partnership Grants provide support for critical innovations in teacher preparation, requiring partnerships between high need PK-12 schools and educator preparation programs to prepare promising students to be teachers in shortage areas – math, science and special education – in high need schools. All teachers prepared by these partnerships, no matter what their field, must be skilled in teaching both students with disabilities and English Learners. The partnerships support one year residency programs and require participants to teach for at least three years in a high need school upon completion of their preparation – again, an important return on investment for the federal government and our nation's students.

Funding for the Teacher Quality Partnership Grants was anticipated to be \$300 million when the program was first created in 2008; yet today it is funded at \$40.59 million. We seek a restoration to at least the FY 2010 level of \$43 million. As students with disabilities are increasingly taught in general education classrooms, the need for general educators to be skilled in instructing students with disabilities has never been greater. These important grants make a big difference in meeting that need.

We can turn the tide and strengthen our investment in the foundations of research and personnel preparation. Our nation's public schools depend on this infrastructure to generate the student gains that are demanded for 21st century success and the global challenges we face. We urge Congress to increase the investment in these three critical programs.

Sincerely,

ACCESS

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

American Council of the Blind

American Dance Therapy Association

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Arc of the US

Association of University Centers on Disabilities

Autism National Committee

Brain Injury Association of America

Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf

Council for Exceptional Children

Council for Learning Disabilities

Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates

Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children

Higher Education Consortium for Special Education

³ U.S. Department of Education, Our Future, Our Teachers: The Obama Administration's Plan for Teacher Education Reform and Improvement, Washington, D.C., 2011. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/our-future-our-teachers.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.cgu.edu/PDFFiles/IRIS-WEST/SEFNA%20Summary%20for%20Web.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.cgu.edu/PDFFiles/IRIS-WEST/SEFNA%20Summary%20for%20Web.pdf>

IDEA Infant Toddler Coordinators Association
Learning Disabilities Association of America
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Disability Rights Network
National PTA
Perkins
School Social Work Association of America
Teacher Education Division, Council for Exceptional Children
The Attention Deficit Disorder Association
The Special Needs Alliance

cc: Members of House and Senate Subcommittees on Labor/HHS/Education Appropriations