

December 2, 2010
Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Duncan,

As leaders in the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) and the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (TED), we wanted to respond formally to recent comments you made at the American Enterprise Institute and to generally express our concerns about how special education teachers are evaluated.

In your address, you suggested a general framework for doing more with less and moving into the future with strategic approaches for cutting costs in local school districts. The Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) and the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (TED-CEC) support your suggestion that educators focus on employing strategies, such as technology, that can improve student achievement without increasing costs; however, we did want to bring to your attention some important information about paying teachers for advanced degrees, particularly in special education.

In your presentation you indicated that a viable cost saving tool would be to “reward excellence and effectiveness” rather than pay teachers based on paper credentials. As an example you cited the \$8 billion spent yearly to reward teachers who obtained masters degrees and noted that “there is little evidence teachers with masters degrees improve student achievement more than other teachers with the possible exception of teachers who earn masters in math and science.” A notable omission in your statement is any reference to data that supports the added value of advanced degree attainment specifically for special educators. **Feng and Sass (2010), in an IES supported study of teachers in Florida, found that for special education teachers advanced degree attainment was positively correlated with student achievement gain. They also found that advanced degrees in special education add value beyond that associated with a bachelor’s degree in special education, which was also associated with higher gains for students with**

disabilities, particularly in the area of reading. While it is clear that replication of this study in states other than Florida is warranted, this well-designed study provides viable evidence that special education preparation at the undergraduate level and advanced degrees for special educators do promote improved achievement in reading and math among students with disabilities.

Importantly, both HECSE and TED support your emphasis on rethinking approaches to teacher compensation, but feel **it is important to reward teachers who obtain advanced degrees or additional certifications when there is evidence that those advanced degrees do indeed increase student achievement.** Further, rewarding special education teachers for their degrees could serve to increase pay for these teachers, and attract teacher candidates into what historically has been a profession plagued by teacher shortages.

We also believe that it is imperative to examine how special education teacher practice is different from general education teacher practice. Many school districts are moving ahead with uniform evaluation systems for both general and special education teachers, failing to distinguish between the two types of professionals and the role they might play in promoting student achievement. For one, special education teachers often work with students for only small portions of the day, making it difficult to isolate their impact on the achievement of students with disabilities. Secondly, special education instructional practice is likely to be somewhat different from general education teacher practice, as special education teachers often must provide more explicit, intensive instruction on key academic and behavioral skills. Treating both teachers similarly in the evaluation system suggests that there is little that is “special” about special education instruction and that special education teachers do not have unique expertise. Unfortunately, we have no research to inform our decision-making about how evaluation systems might be differentiated to recognize the nuances of special education teaching.

HECSE is comprised of 54 universities with doctoral programs in special education. Our member institutions are at the forefront of teacher education, research and development in special education. We work extensively with local and state education agencies to ensure that teachers and other professionals have the skills they need to provide a free appropriate public education to all students with disabilities.

TED focuses on supporting children, youth, and families of individuals with exceptionalities by preparing special educators. With a membership of over 2300 individuals, TED is one of the largest professional organizations in the nation representing those who prepare and support special education teachers and teacher educators.

At HECSE and TED, we welcome the opportunity to work with you in addressing the need for well-prepared and highly effective special education teachers. We also welcome the

opportunity to meet and develop a plan for improving evidence-based evaluation of our nation's special education teachers. Please feel free to contact any of us for additional information or follow up.

Respectfully,



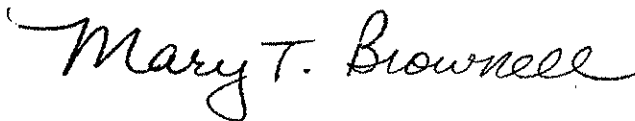
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