

Testimony of

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Redesigning the Preparation of General and Special Education Teachers:  
Collaboration within a School-Wide System of Support

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*Redesigning the Preparation of General and Special Education Teachers:  
Collaboration within a School-Wide System of Support<sup>1</sup>*

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Chairman Kildee and Members of the Subcommittee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify on the No Child Left Behind Act and its impact on teacher education in this country. I am Michael Hardman, incoming Dean of the College of Education and currently Chair of the Department of Teaching and Learning and the Department of Special Education at the University of Utah. I am also a member of the Board of Directors for the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and a past-president of the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE). Since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, CEC and HECSE have worked closely together to ensure that the promise of every student succeeding in our nation's schools becomes a reality. Although my testimony includes excerpts from the CEC Teacher Education Division and HECSE recommendations on the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, my role today is in the capacity of a faculty member and administrator representing the College of Education at the University of Utah.

### **Background**

In its report on the status of teachers in the United States, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future stated that: "What teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn . . . New courses, tests and curriculum reforms can be important starting points, but they are meaningless if teachers cannot use them well . . . Student learning in this country will improve only when we focus our efforts on improving teaching. Good teaching has never been more important than it is today." The obvious corollary to this statement is that good teacher preparation has never been more important as well. However, while we are more knowledgeable about what constitutes good teacher education, many programs continue to prepare new teachers in a paradigm that is inconsistent with the needs of today's schools. These needs include knowledge and skills to teach a more diverse student population; an increasing emphasis on standards and access to the general curriculum; and the call for both special and general educators to work together and be accountable for improved performance of all students. In many parts of this country, general and special education teachers are still being prepared in total isolation of one another. Consequently, many new teachers lack

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<sup>1</sup>Portions of this testimony were excerpted from Hardman, M., & McDonnell, J.M. (in press). Teachers, pedagogy, and curriculum. In L. Florian & M. McLaughlin (Eds.). Perspectives and Purposes of Disability Classification Systems in Research and Clinical Practice. London: Sage Publications and The Higher Education Consortium for Special Education and the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children. (2006). Recommendations to the NCLB Commission for the Reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. Washington, D.C: Author.

the necessary skills to work together. These isolated teacher preparation programs continue although more than 96% of all students with disabilities spend at least a portion of their school day side-by-side with their peers who are not disabled in an inclusive classroom setting. Four of ten students with disabilities spend more than 80% of their day in a general education class (U.S. Department of Education). According to the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), nine of ten general education teachers currently have an average of 3.5 students with disabilities in their classroom. The reality is that neither general nor special education alone has the capacity to respond to the complex educational needs of America's children. As suggested by Marlene Pugach from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, "the need to prepare all teachers to create classrooms that embrace students with disabilities and teach them is no longer contested." Collaboration is the key to raising expectations and increasing the performance of all students as mandated in NCLB and IDEA.

### **One University's Vision for the Redesign of Teacher Education**

The University of Utah is presently undertaking a university-wide redesign of teacher education at every level from early childhood to secondary education. Several factors have led the faculty to rethink the University's traditional approach to teacher education, including the increasing number of students in public education with unique educational needs who come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and are now learning together in inclusive classrooms. The critical shortages continue in the supply of teachers and the university faculty needed to prepare them, particularly in the areas of special education, math, and science. These shortages are fueled by inadequate salaries and high attrition rates in the first five years of employment. Finally, universities and colleges must find new and innovative ways to meet the challenge of preparing highly qualified teachers under the mandates of NCLB and IDEA 2004.

The design of our new teacher education programs reflects the vision of the University of Utah to attract and retain a diverse faculty of the highest quality who have the desire and responsibility to provide both general and special education teachers with the mentoring, coursework, and field experiences that are rigorous and relevant for successful careers in today's schools. Our program design is based on three critical elements:

- *Universal design for learning* within the framework of a three-tier model for evidence-based instruction that provides teachers with the tools for data-based decisions.
- An extensive *professional education core* of knowledge and skills that is required for every general and special education teacher candidate attending the university.
- *University courses directly linked to continuous field experiences* in inclusive classrooms and schools.

**Universal Design for Learning (UDL).** Teacher candidates at the University of Utah develop the skills to create instructional programs and environments that work for all students, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized

design. UDL, adapted from architecture where buildings are created from the beginning with diverse users in mind, is intended to make curriculum and instruction accessible and to every student, regardless of their abilities or learning styles. A range of options are available to each student that supports access to, and engagement with learning materials. (Rose & Meyer).

In the teacher education program at the University of Utah, UDL is incorporated into a three-tier model of instruction and teacher candidates are provided with the progress monitoring tools that are needed for data-based decisions in terms of selecting, using, and adapting instruction. Data are used to guide instruction, appropriate intervention and practice, parent involvement, and other research-based practices. (Utah State Office of Education; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm). Tier I focuses on core classroom instruction that is provided to all students using evidence-based practices to teach the critical elements within a core curriculum. The general education teacher and special education teacher in conjunction with a school-wide support team (such as speech language professional, paraeducators, and school psychologists) provide instruction to students who are at various levels of development in critical skills. Most students will demonstrate proficiency with effective Tier I instruction. These students are able to acquire skills through the core (standard) instruction provided by the teacher, whereas others require more intensive instruction in specific skill areas. Using universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, multi-level learning and targeting specific skills classroom teachers in conjunction with the school-wide support team are able to meet the needs of most students.

Tier II provides supplemental targeted instruction in addition to evidence-based practices taught at the Tier I level. For some students, core classroom instruction in the general classroom is not enough for them to demonstrate proficiency. These students require targeted supplemental instruction in addition to the skills taught through core instruction. Tier II meets the needs of these students by giving them additional time for intensive small-group instruction daily. The goal is to support and reinforce skills being taught by the general and special education teachers as well as the school-wide support team at the Tier I level. At this level of intervention, data-based monitoring is used to ensure adequate progress is being made on target skills. The frequency, intensity, and duration of this instruction vary for each student depending on the assessment and progress monitoring data.

A small number of students who receive targeted supplemental instruction (Tier II) continue to have difficulty becoming proficient in necessary content skills. Tier III provides intensive targeted instruction to the most at-risk learners who have not adequately responded to evidence-based practices. These students require instruction that is more explicit, more intensive, and specifically designed to meet their individual needs. Additional sessions of specialized one-to-one or small-group instruction are provided with progress monitoring of specific skills.

The key components of the three-tier model are (1) the use of evidence-based instruction designed to meet the needs of students at each level, and (2) assessment and progress

monitoring procedures that measure current skills and growth over time and that are used to provide new instruction to individual students. The three-tier model provides a system that is responsive to students' changing needs.

**A professional education core required for general and special education teacher candidates.** Traditional teacher education programs reinforce student differences by separating teacher candidates into isolated preparation programs, each with their own unique perspective and curricula. Such a structure makes little sense in today's schools where there is a need for a collaborative approach to teaching and every educator must have a core skill set of knowledge and skills to improve the performance of every student. The professional education core at the University of Utah is intended to develop a common understanding of the goals and purposes of schooling, knowledge and skills to meet the educational needs of all students, collaboration across educators in a school-wide support system, and the use of evidence-based instruction leading to advanced skills. Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) calls for a cross-disciplinary core in which every teacher candidate develops understanding of content and content-specific pedagogy. Using the INTASC framework and its principles for student-centered learning, the program at the University of Utah prepares every new teacher with knowledge and skills the following content areas:

- Child, Adolescent, and Human Development
- Safe Schools, Character Education, and Professional Ethics
- Ethnic Studies, Multicultural/Multilingual Education, and Effective Instructional Approaches for English Language Learners
- Foundations of Exceptionality and Effective Instruction for Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms
- Research and Inquiry in Education
- Principles of Assessment and Data-Based Decision-Making
- Positive Behavior Support
- Communication and Language Development
- Reading and Writing Foundations and Methods
- Math Foundations and Methods
- Integrated Curriculum Methods (Across Fine Arts, Health, and Physical Education)
- Effectively Using Technology in Diverse Classrooms
- Education Law and Policy for Classroom Teachers (NCLB and IDEA)
- International Education

**Linking university coursework to continuous field experiences.** Teacher candidates must continuously demonstrate the knowledge and skills learned in coursework in actual classroom and school settings. Field experiences are viewed as an extension of university courses in which students translate research and theory into practice. Faculty and school district/agency cooperating teachers regularly observe, evaluate, and provide feedback to teacher candidates regarding their classroom performance. Each candidate's performance is evaluated in regard to (a) measurable

gains in applying knowledge and skills from coursework, and (b) whether students with whom the candidate is working learn the content.

### **Recommendations**

Implicit in the call by federal policymakers to reform education and improve student achievement is the critical need for effective and qualified general and special education teachers, as well as a re-examination of their preparation. To guide this effort in the future, recommendations are proposed for the preparation of general and special education teachers.

**Recommendation 1. Federal policy should ensure that any teacher who is deemed highly qualified has demonstrated evidence-based pedagogical skills necessary to teach students with disabilities and English language learners in inclusive classrooms.**

Effective teacher preparation is based on a careful analysis of the competencies needed for new teachers to improve student performance. The curriculum should include approaches, methods, and techniques that have been validated through research; are effective across students with diverse needs; and can be implemented successfully in a general education classroom and school setting. Teacher preparation programs must set content standards that describe the specific skill set expected of new teachers as well as performance standards describing how they will demonstrate mastery. Course work and field experiences are then structured to these content and performance standards. Fortunately, there is a robust research base on effective strategies to support student learning. Effective preparation programs must anchor their curriculum to these evidence-based practices and teacher candidates must be able to demonstrate that they can implement them successfully.

**Recommendation 2. Teacher education programs should require a professional education core for all their teacher candidates in order to ensure these individuals have demonstrated knowledge and skills to continuously assess student performance, adjust the learning environment as needed, modify instructional methods, adapt curricula, use positive behavior supports and interventions, and select and implement appropriate accommodations to meet the individual needs of students. Title II of No Child Left Behind can provide support to universities in partnership with public schools to develop this core.**

Through coursework and field experiences, teacher candidates acquire a common core of knowledge and skills designed to ensure educational programs and services are accessible and applicable to every student, regardless of ability, cultural background, or learning style. The core is grounded in the three-tier model of instruction, universal design for learning and evidence-based practice as a foundation for further preparation in a teaching specialization.

**Recommendation 3. Teacher education must include a balance of coursework and field experiences that are consistent with teacher roles in inclusive general education schools and classrooms.**

Effective teacher education programs use field experiences as a tool to push teacher candidates to translate theory into practice and advance their learning to a higher level. In order to accomplish this task, teacher preparation programs must work with local schools to identify evidence-based instructional techniques. Schools must also be willing to collaborate with teacher preparation programs to create opportunities for candidates to receive the practice necessary to cumulatively develop essential instructional and classroom management skills across time. This is critical for new teachers who have to apply increasingly complex formats in order effectively teach students who require frequent and intense instruction.

**Recommendation 4 Teachers should not be considered highly qualified until they have successfully completed their initial preparation program. Following initial preparation, every teacher must have the opportunity to continuously participate in professional development and improvement.**

Current federal regulations allow states to immediately deem teachers as “highly qualified” when they have enrolled in an alternative preparation program for up to three years but have not completed all program requirements. Only teachers who have successfully completed approved preparation programs and are fully certificated by state agencies should be considered “highly-qualified” special education teachers.

Additionally, our understanding of effective instruction has expanded dramatically in the last three decades. In order for new teachers to be successful, they must be able to keep pace with research-based developments in curriculum design, instruction, behavior support, and program management. They need to be taught how to be critical consumers of research and use it to inform their practice. Put simply, new teachers and the schools they teach in must have a commitment to career professional development. Teacher education programs and schools must nurture and reinforce this commitment as a critical component of their overall mission.

Partnerships are fostered among teacher preparation programs and schools to support the professional development of newly prepared and career teachers of students with disabilities. Effective teacher preparation programs develop close partnerships with schools that are structured to improve the quality and effectiveness of their graduates. At the heart of these partnerships is the development of shared views about the design of educational services for students with disabilities and the importance of career teacher professional development. Teacher preparation programs and schools must work together to establish initiatives that focus on real challenges facing today's schools, including innovative and efficient ways to prepare, mentor, and retain qualified teachers. Concurrently, schools must take advantage of teacher preparation program faculty expertise to promote research-based practices in the education of all students.

**Recommendation 5. Teacher education, including university and alternative preparation programs, must be held accountable for the performance of their graduates.**

Effective teacher preparation programs routinely evaluate the quality and impact of their graduates beyond measuring whether they demonstrate mastery of professional competencies at the time of program exit. Teacher preparation programs must be involved with the schools in a joint preparation, mentoring and evaluation process that begins at the time teacher candidates begin their initial preparation, continue during an induction period of no less than three years, and is maintained throughout their career. It is important to measure how effectively programs graduates successfully fill entry level roles and responsibilities through valid and reliable performance assessments. Preparation programs must also be accountable for how effectively they work with schools to mentor and support new teachers, as well as their efforts to systematically follow-up and evaluate their graduates' performance over time.

**Recommendation 6. NCLB Title II funds need to address the critical shortage areas of highly qualified teachers and the university faculty who prepare them.**

Title II funds should be directly targeted to address critical shortage areas, including special education. The shortage has been persistent and pervasive for decades and the attrition of new special education teachers is of great concern. Approximately half of all new special education teachers leave the field within three years. Title II funds should support higher education partnerships with local school districts designed to address chronic shortages and support the preparation, induction, mentoring, and retention of highly qualified special education teachers. Additionally, while the national focus is on the critical shortages in special education teachers and related services personnel (and rightfully so), little attention has been paid to the shortage of special education faculty in higher education (Smith, Pion, Tyler, Sindelar, & Rosenberg) In the last two decades, special education doctoral degrees have decreased by 30%. In addition, one third of all vacancies for special education faculty remain unfilled every year. This exacerbates the special education teacher shortage, which has now become as critical as the shortages of math and science teachers (American Association for Employment in Education).



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