

January 18, 2011

The Honorable Tom Harkin  
Chairman, Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee  
731 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C., 20510

The Honorable George Miller  
Ranking Member, Education and Workforce Committee  
2205 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C., 20515

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Miller:

We write to thank you for the opportunity to meet with your staff on January 7<sup>th</sup> to discuss the December, 2010 amendment to the Continuing Resolution related to highly qualified teachers. We appreciate your offices' prompt attention to this issue. You are great champions for the rights of individuals with disabilities, and we appreciate your consistent and unwavering leadership.

As we stated during the meeting with your staff, all of our organizations support the use of rigorous evidence-based alternative route to certification programs. Every state in the nation reports a shortage of special educators. Thus, our field must explore every opportunity to ensure that all children and youth with disabilities have access to the appropriate instruction, services and supports they need. But, as we explained, the recent congressional expansion of statutory language, effectively overturning the Ninth Circuit's decision in *Renee et. al. v. Duncan*, and allowing persons to be deemed 'Highly Qualified', while they are enrolled in alternative route to certification programs and have not yet completed them, is troubling for those concerned about the education of students with disabilities.

Because of the shortages in special education, students with disabilities are disproportionately affected by this amendment. First, the limited data available demonstrates that more interns are teaching students with disabilities than other populations. For example, in California, where the lawsuit originated, more than 50% of those in the statewide internship program were in the special education tract. Additionally, teachers who are not fully prepared are less able to uphold IDEA's requirement to educate students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Meaningfully including students with disabilities in general education classrooms is best achieved by teachers who are fully prepared with the skill and knowledge to modify the general curriculum, provide accommodations and ensure meaningful student learning aligned to the same high standards for all.

As Dr. Mary Brownell from the University of Florida noted at the meeting, the best student outcomes are achieved by fully prepared special education teachers. Indeed, the research on the effectiveness of special educators who are fully prepared, as compared to those who are not, is conclusive. The "highly qualified" amendment attached to the CR moves us in the wrong direction. We cannot expect people with no preparation, or minimal preparation, to be effective in instructing students with some of the most complex learning needs. Like you, we are eager to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The high school graduation rate, the post-secondary education participation rate and the employment rate of people with disabilities is unacceptably low. The only way to turn these around is through effective preparation that builds capacity for effective teaching.

We understand that you are eager to address issues related to teacher quality in a comprehensive way during the reauthorization of ESEA. We are eager to engage with you in that process. As we stated during the meeting, we oppose this amendment and encourage you to remove it at your earliest opportunity and replace it with a comprehensive response to the shortage issues in special education. During the short term, however, while we all work to develop these longer-term solutions, we request two provisions that will help address the critical transparency concerns that the new amendment has raised.

- (1) When the next legislative vehicle arises, perhaps as a result of the current continuing resolution expiring, we request you seek the inclusion of an amendment to Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that clarifies NCLB's current Parents Right to Know provision, specifically Title I, Section 1111(h)(6)(B)(ii), by including the following bolded portion in this provision:  
“timely notice that the parent’s child has been assigned, or has been taught for four or more consecutive weeks by, a teacher who is not highly qualified, **or a teacher who is pursuing, but has not yet completed, a state certification program.**”
- (2) We request that you jointly write a letter to the U.S. Department of Education asking it to collect and report data that states are already collecting –specifically, the number of teachers, who are currently enrolled in certification programs, have not completed these programs and are teaching students with disabilities in public schools full time.

Finally, we are eager to participate in meetings held on this topic with other constituencies, including general education, English language learners and civil rights organizations. We will reach out to these groups ourselves as well, but we believe a joint meeting or meetings where everyone can present their concerns would be beneficial. We also appreciate your staffs’ offer to engage with us in future conversations about the need to make systemic changes to ESEA and IDEA to support retention and teacher effectiveness.

Your leadership is critical to the future of more than 6 million students with disabilities and their families. We very much appreciate your attention to our concerns and look forward to continuing to work with you and your offices.

Sincerely,

Autistic Self Advocacy Network  
Council for Exceptional Children  
Council for Parent Advocates and Attorneys  
Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children  
Easter Seals  
Higher Education Consortium for Special Education  
National Center for Learning Disabilities  
National Association of the State Directors of Special Education

cc: Bethany Little, Andrew Imparato, Lee Perselay, Michele McLaughlin, Michael Gamel-McCormick, Denise Forte, Kara Marchione

# Fully Prepared Special Education Teachers: An Essential Ingredient for Ensuring the Success of Students with Disabilities

## A Research Synthesis

A key ingredient to student success is a quality teacher. Unfortunately, in special education, students with disabilities are less likely to have such teachers, as their teachers frequently are not fully prepared to do the job. Research examining fully prepared versus less extensively prepared teachers, however, demonstrates that more extensive preparation in special education matters to the achievement of students with disabilities.

Graduates of extensive preparation programs and special education teachers with experience are more effective in promoting the achievement of students with disabilities. These programs can be traditional or alternative, but the key is graduating from a program that involves extensive preparation. Given historic shortages of special education teachers and the needs of students with disabilities to have access to special education teachers who are extensively prepared, it is imperative that policymakers and educators identify effective strategies for increasing the supply of such teachers. Simply making it easier for special education teachers to enter the classroom is only a temporary and ineffective solution for a pernicious problem; one that will undoubtedly exacerbate the teacher shortage problem and place students with disabilities at further risk academically.

- ***Special education teachers with more preparation secure better student achievement gains:*** In a study funded by the Institute for Education Sciences, teacher preparation in special education predicted reading achievement of students with disabilities. Teachers with a bachelor's degree, certificate, or approximately 30 hours of coursework in special education had higher value added scores in reading than those without such preparation. Further, having an advanced degree in special education had an even greater impact on the achievement of students with disabilities in math than simply having a bachelor's degree.

Feng, L., & Sass, T. (2010). *Special education teacher quality and student achievement*. Retrieved from the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. Retrieved from <http://www.caldercenter.org/>

- ***Special education teachers who are fully prepared provide better instruction than teachers who are not fully prepared:*** In a study of beginning special

education teachers, those who had completed a state approved teacher education program demonstrated stronger classroom instructional and management practices than those who were securing certification (6 or less hours of special education coursework). All teachers were rated by observers trained to administer Charlotte Danielson's observation instrument. This instrument has been linked to student achievement in urban schools. Observers were blind to the preparation status of teachers.

Nougaret, A., Scruggs, T., & Mastropieri, M. (2005). Does teacher education produce better special education teachers? *Exceptional Children, 71*, 217-229.

- ***Special education teachers with more in-depth preparation outperform teachers from district add on programs:*** In a study of beginning special education teachers, researchers found that special educators from campus based programs and those from collaborative programs (those involving colleges of education and districts) outperformed their peers from district add on programs on classroom environment measures. Special educators from campus based programs, however, provided the strongest classroom instruction. All special educators were observed using PRAXIS III, an instrument based on Charlotte Danielson's framework for observation.

Sindelar, P. T., Daunic, A., & Rennells, M. (2004). Comparisons of traditionally and alternatively trained teachers. *Exceptionality, 12*, 209-223.

- ***Beginning special education and general education teachers with extended preparation are more likely to achieve highly qualified status and indicated being well-prepared:*** In an analysis of the Schools and Staffing Survey, researchers found that teachers with extensive preparation in pedagogy and practice teaching (a) were more likely to be highly qualified and (b) reported being better prepared to teach subject matter and better prepared with respect to pedagogical skills.

Boe, E. E., Shin, S., & Cook, L. H. (2007). Does teacher preparation matter for beginning teachers in either special or general education? *The Journal of Special Education, 41*, 158-170.

- ***Collaborative alternative route programs have better outcomes:*** In a review of 10 studies of AR programs, Rosenberg and Sindelar found that AR programs achieved better outcomes when they involved meaningful collaboration between districts and institutions of higher education, were substantial in length as well as program rigor (36 to 37 units of coursework, seminars, and field work), and involved IHE supervision and building based mentor support. Specifically, participants were more likely to be diverse, stay in the classroom, and be evaluated positively by their supervisors.

Rosenberg, M., & Sindelar, P. T. (2005). The proliferation of alternative routes to certification in special education: A critical review of the literature. *The Journal of Special Education, 39*, 117-127.

- ***Teacher knowledge of reading predicts effective instruction in special education teachers:*** In a study of special education teachers, knowledge of teaching reading predicted effective classroom reading instruction. The instrument used to assess knowledge of teaching reading (Content Knowledge for Teaching Reading Survey) reliably discriminated between teachers and other professionals with strong reading ability, suggesting that the knowledge needed to teach reading is unique to the teaching profession. Moreover, beginning special education teachers scored only a third of a standard deviation below the mean of general education teachers (with 15 years of experience) on the Content Knowledge for Teaching Reading Survey.

Note: Nearly all of the teachers had been trained in special education or were prepared in elementary education and had a strong grounding in teaching reading to students that struggled.

Brownell, M. T., Haager, D., Bishop, A. G., Klingner, J.K., Menon, S., Penfield, R., & Dingle, M. (2007, April). *Teacher quality in special education: The role of knowledge, classroom practice, and school environment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting for American Education Research Association, Chicago, Illinois.

Phelps, G., & Schilling, S. (2004). Developing measures of content knowledge for teaching reading. *Elementary School Journal*, 105, 31–48.

- ***Experience teaching special education predicts stronger reading achievement for students with disabilities.*** In two separate studies, one of a large state database and one of teachers in three different states, special education teachers with more experience had students with higher achievement gains in reading than those with less experience.

Feng, L., Sass, T. (2010). *Special education teacher quality and student achievement*. Retrieved from the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. Retrieved from <http://www.caldercenter.org/>

Brownell, M. T., Haager, D., Bishop, A. G., Klingner, J.K., Menon, S., Penfield, R., & Dingle, M. (2007, April). *Teacher quality in special education: The role of knowledge, classroom practice, and school environment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting for American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois.

- ***Graduates of fast track programs are a greater attrition risk than more fully prepared teachers:*** Graduates of fast track programs pose a more significant attrition risk than those in extended programs. This finding has been established in both general and special education.

Dai, C., Sindelar, P. T., Denslow, D., Dewey, J., & Rosenberg, M. S. (2007). Economic Analysis and the Design of Alternative-Route Teacher Education Programs. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58, 442-439.

Mary T. Brownell, Ph.D., Irving and Rose Fien Endowed Professor of Education, University of Florida, mbrownell@coe.ufl.edu