



Recommendations to the NCLB Commission for the Reauthorization of No Child Left Behind

The Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) is comprised of 54 doctoral granting programs in special education at institutions of higher education throughout the nation. HECSE programs prepare tomorrow's leaders in special education – in research, practice and teacher education. HECSE's mission is to support and promote effective doctoral preparation in special education and serve as a resource to policy makers and other stakeholders in special education.

The Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is comprised of university and college faculty who prepare special education teachers and conduct research related to teacher education. This is the largest division within CEC. TED publishes the most respected teacher education journal in special education *Teacher Education and Special Education* (TESE).

HECSE and TED are pleased to provide the following recommendations to the NCLB Commission for consideration during deliberations. These recommendations are intended to strengthen NCLB so that students with disabilities are served effectively under the law and so that the achievement gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities is closed.

Recommendation #1

NCLB should clarify that the designation of "highly qualified" for a special education teacher ensures both knowledge and skill in special education in addition to content mastery.

States have a range of requirements for determining whether or not a special education teacher is "highly qualified." At a minimum, states should ensure that teachers have demonstrated both special education knowledge and teaching skills. While curricular content mastery is an essential component of being a highly qualified special education teacher, so is the ability to understand the implications of an individual's exceptional condition and interpret assessment results. Even more important is the ability 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. If prospective special education teachers cannot demonstrate these critical skills, they should not be considered highly qualified.

For further reference, the essential elements of the definition of a highly qualified special education teacher are included at the end of this document.ⁱ

Recommendation #2

NCLB should clarify that only teachers who have successfully completed their preparation and are fully state certified are “highly qualified.”

Federal regulations allow states to immediately label teachers as “highly qualified” when they have enrolled – but not completed -- their preparation programs. Thus, when parents are told that their children have “highly-qualified special education teachers,” that could mean that the teacher has had no coursework preparation or field experience whatsoever, or it could mean that the teacher has a masters degree in special education, a BA in a core content area, and 15 years of demonstrated teaching effectiveness. Parents are misled when such a broad range in competence is captured under one certification label. Only teachers who have successfully completed approved preparation programs and are fully certificated by state agencies should be considered “highly-qualified” special education teachers.

Recommendation #3

NCLB Title II funds should be targeted to address the shortage areas of highly qualified teachers.

Title II funds should be targeted to address critical shortage areas including special education. The shortage of qualified special education teachers is now legendary. 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.

Recommendation #4

NCLB should require all “highly qualified” teachers to be skilled in teaching diverse learners, including students with disabilities.

Over 80% of students with disabilities receive instruction in general education classrooms most of the school day. The report of the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) suggested that teachers from general and special education instructional systems should work together to provide effective instruction to ensure that students with additional needs benefit from strong teaching and instructional methods provided through general education. As implementation of both *No Child Left Behind* and *IDEA 2004* put more focus on access to and success in the general education curriculum, general education teachers must have skills in instructing students with disabilities and knowledge about the role of special educators so that they can collaborate to provide evidence-based instruction to every student. General education teachers, however, continue to report that they do not have the skills and knowledge needed to work with students with disabilities. Providing the necessary skills to general educators is, therefore, essential to closing the achievement gap.

Recommendation #5

NCLB should promote early intervention and prevention as described in IDEA.

In *Rethinking Special Education for a New Century* (Finn et al., 2001) the authors note that “if we did a better job of preventing and forestalling education problems, rather than relying on compensatory and remedial activities, disabled children would benefit enormously (p. 337).” IDEA 2004 has codified this in terms of an emphasis on prevention. School-wide early intervention approaches such as Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) and Response to Intervention (RtI) are now being nationally validated; approaches like these can reduce the need for special education “pull-out” programs and yield benefits for many students at risk for school failure. NCLB should provide funds to not only foster the development and use of such models, but to encourage pre-service personnel preparation and ongoing professional development to help both general and special educators implement these promising practices.

For further information on these recommendations please contact Stan Shaw, HECSE President (sfshaw@uconn.edu) or Georgia Kerns, TED President-Elect (gmk@cisunix.unh.edu).

Essential Elements in the Definition of a Highly Qualified Special Education Teacher

Individualized decision-making and instruction is at the center of special education practice. Special educators develop long-range individualized instructional plans anchored in both general and special curricula. In addition, special educators systematically translate these individualized plans into carefully selected shorter-range goals and objectives taking into consideration an individual’s abilities and needs, the learning environment, and a myriad of cultural and linguistic factors. Individualized instructional plans emphasize explicit modeling and efficient guided practice to assure acquisition and fluency through maintenance and generalization. Understanding of these factors as well as the implications of an individual’s exceptional condition, guides the special educator’s selection, adaptation, and creation of materials, and the use of powerful instructional variables. Instructional plans are modified based on ongoing analysis of the individual’s learning progress. Moreover, special educators facilitate this instructional planning in a collaborative context including the individuals with exceptionalities, families, professional colleagues, and personnel from other agencies as appropriate. Special educators also develop a variety of individualized transition plans, such as transitions from preschool to elementary school and from secondary settings to a variety of postsecondary work and learning contexts. Special educators are comfortable using appropriate technologies to support instructional planning and individualized instruction

Assessment is integral to the decision-making and teaching of special educators and special educators use multiple types of assessment information for a variety of educational decisions. Special educators use the results of assessments to help identify exceptional learning needs and to develop and implement individualized instructional programs, as well as to adjust instruction in response to ongoing learning progress. Special educators understand the legal policies and ethical principles of measurement and assessment related to referral, eligibility, program planning, instruction, and placement for individuals with disabilities, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Special educators understand measurement theory and practices for addressing issues of validity, reliability, norms, bias, and interpretation of assessment

results. In addition, special educators understand the appropriate use and limitations of various types of assessments. Special educators collaborate with families and other colleagues to assure non-biased, meaningful assessments and decision-making. Special educators conduct formal and informal assessments of behavior, learning, achievement, and environments to design learning experiences that support the growth and development of individuals with disabilities. Special educators use assessment information to identify supports and adaptations required for individuals with disabilities to access the general curriculum and to participate in school, system, and statewide assessment programs. Special educators regularly monitor the progress of individuals with disabilities in general and special curricula. Special educators use appropriate technologies to support their assessments.

Special educators routinely and effectively collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways. This collaboration assures that the needs of individuals with disabilities are addressed throughout schooling. Moreover, special educators embrace their special role as advocate for individuals with disabilities.

ⁱ Derived from the Council for Exceptional Children standards for the preparation and licensure of special educators.