

**President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education**  
**Second Meeting**  
**Feb. 25, 2002 // Houston, TX**

**Opening Remarks**

Good morning. I am Terry Branstad, the chairman of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education. I welcome you to the second of Commission meeting and the first of its eight regional hearings. Before we open our hearing and listen to our witnesses, I want to briefly describe the Commission, its mission, and its objectives.

The Commission was established last October by the executive order of President Bush. His goal in establishing the Commission was a simple one: "No child left behind." This has become a familiar and important message. "No child left behind" was the guiding principle of the newly reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Act. Now, it comes into play with the work of this Commission. Why? *When President Bush says, "no child left behind" he means children with disabilities most of all because they are the children who most often are left behind.* This Administration is committed to the proposition that every child can learn, and so is this Commission.

At the outset, I must reaffirm that the Commission's work is *not* designed to replace the upcoming reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Rather, the report we produce and issue this summer will provide vital input into not only the reauthorization process but also the national debate on how best to educate all children. When many of us think of Federal reports we think of dense volumes with the type of prose Mark Twain labeled "chloroform in print." We don't want that. I hope the Commission will bring forward a dynamic, informative report that will make a real contribution to our nation's education debate. I want a report that parents and classroom teachers can use and understand – a report that's readable and interesting.

My goal for the Commission's work is a simple: I want us to find out "what works" best for educating children with disabilities – not what works best for the Federal, state and local agencies. In order to learn what works best, we will listen to the experts; look at research; talk with parents, teachers and children; and think broadly and creatively.

The President has charged us with providing findings and recommendations in the following nine areas:

- 1. Cost-effectiveness.** The Commission will examine the appropriate role of the Federal government in special education programming and funding. The Commission will look at those factors that have contributed to growing costs of providing special education services.
- 2. Improving Results.** The Commission will examine how to best use Federal resources to improve the success of children and youth with disabilities.
- 3. Research.** Understanding what works and what doesn't work based on sound research data is critical to making the best use of Federal resources. The Commission will recommend areas to target further research funding, and to synthesize what we already know works and doesn't work in educating children -- particularly those with learning and other cognitive disabilities.
- 4. Early Intervention.** Early identification of first, second and third grade children showing problems in learning can mean the difference between academic and developmental success or a lifetime of failure.
- 5. Funding.** Opening the money spigot without building a better system focused on results and accountability will not solve the problems facing special education today. We must develop fresh ideas about how we can better spend Federal resources to improve special education.

**6. Teacher Quality and Student Accountability.** There are manifold issues in this area. We have a shortage of well-trained special educators, we have a high turnover rate of those that do enter the field, and we need to close the gap between research and teacher training to improve how well we serve children with disabilities.

**7. Regulations and Red Tape.** The Commission will study the impact of Federal and state laws and regulations and how these requirements support or obstruct the ability of schools to better serve children with disabilities. There is more that can be done to reduce the amount of time special education teachers spend on paperwork instead of teaching.

**8. Models.** We will look beyond Washington to find alternatives to the standard way of doing things.

**9. Federal versus Local Funding.** The Commission will review the experiences of State and local governments in financing special education.

Our purpose this week in Houston is to listen to the experts and talk with educators and the public about what's effective in special education. Over the next two and a half days, we will begin to learn what's effective by:

1. Hearing from some of the nation's foremost experts in reading. Several of these reading experts are based in Texas, which is largely why we decided to hold a hearing here.
2. We will examine research on early intervention and identification of children who may need special education services.
3. We will discuss alignment of special education services to current state accountability systems.

4. We will learn about the relationship between student achievement and due process.
5. We will visit schools in the Houston Independent School District.

As you can see, this is an outcome-oriented Commission that is truly concerned about ensuring that no child is left behind. In order to do that, we need your help. We need your suggestions. Tell us about what works. Show us the models.

Thank you for your interest in our work. We appreciate everyone who has taken the time to attend our hearing today. We will now open the first hearing of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education.

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