

**President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education
Professional Development Task Force Hearing
March 6, 2002 // Denver, CO**

Opening Remarks

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Good morning. I am Paula Butterfield and I am a member of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education. I welcome you to today's hearing of the Professional Development Task Force. I chair this task force, which is examining the topics we will look at today: teacher training, qualifications, certification, and related issues.

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 Education 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.*

I must reaffirm that the Commission's work is *not* designed to replace the upcoming Congressional 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.

The Commission's goal is a simple one: We want to find out "what works" best for educating children with disabilities. This won't be an easy task, but it's one we must undertake. In my district alone, 15 percent or 6,000 of our students are in special education. We cannot leave them behind. In order to focus our task we will listen to the experts; look at research; talk with parents, teachers and children; and think broadly and creatively.

The President has charged the Commission 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 today in Denver is to listen to the experts and talk with educators and the public about issues pertaining to the training and certification of teachers of special education. We will explore the need for quality teachers in special education to ensure that no child is left behind. A quality special education teacher is the single most important factor in ensuring that children with disabilities are not left behind. Over the past 20 years, a variety of curricular, fiscal, and administrative innovations have emerged as school reforms. Nevertheless, a caring, competent, qualified teacher remains the most important factor in the educational success of each child.

Our nation has a pressing need to train quality teachers for special education classrooms. The reality is this: During the 1999-2000 school year there were 69,000 job openings for special education teachers. More than 33,000 special education teachers employed are not fully certified for their primary teaching assignment. And, research has found that “certification” does not always translate into “quality.”

We came to Denver to listen to the experts and talk with educators and the public. We hope to learn what teachers and administrators must possess to

provide an appropriate education to children with special needs. In doing so, we can ensure that no child is left behind.

This is an outcome-oriented Commission that is 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. We will now open today's hearing of the Professional Development Task Force.

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