

Statement of Senator Tom Harkin
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee Hearing
on the Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
March 21, 2002

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and your staff for holding this first in a series of hearings on the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As many of you know, this issue is near and dear to my heart. I am proud to have played a critical role in several reauthorizations of this Act and from that experience know that the process can be difficult at times.

It was a little more than a year ago that we celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of IDEA. A great deal of change has occurred over those years in services for children with disabilities and in the educational context in which those services are provided.

In reflecting on this history in preparation for today I was struck by the fact that there are not many laws that Congress has passed that have so radically changed the lives and opportunities of so many people-in this case children with disabilities and their families. I have heard from countless parents, young people with disabilities, teachers, and others what a significant difference special education and related services have made in the quality of the lives and learning of individual children and youth with disabilities. You will hear from Valerie Findley, a parent from Des Moines, Iowa who is one of our witnesses today, about the difference that IDEA has made for her nine year old daughter, Louisa, who is on spring break from Hillis Elementary School and is here with us also .

This is a good law and much of it will stand as is without much attention being paid to it in this reauthorization because it works. However, this does not mean there are not areas in need of improvement. We will hear from our witnesses today as I do from families, educators and others in Iowa that there are issues in implementation of some parts of the law. That should not surprise us. This is a very multifaceted law that is intended to address the complex learning needs of children with disabilities. There is no "one size fits all" because each child with a disability is unique and interacts differently with the learning process. Implementation is understandably going to require a combination of several factors:

- partnerships between families and schools,
- well-trained personnel providing the services,
- adequate resources and supervision, and

∴ accountability.

Implementation can break down at any one of these points. It is easy to see that the implementation problems are compounded for school districts or, in some cases, whole state education systems that have problems at several of these points (e.g., as would be the case in those school districts or states that lack qualified personnel, have insufficient resources, and have high administrative turnover).

In the last IDEA reauthorization that was completed in 1997, we made important changes to the law to assure that children with disabilities were not left out of educational reform efforts. We also made changes to assure closer partnerships between parents and schools and between special and general education. We will review the improvements that were made and make further refinements in some areas. I look forward to working together with other members of the Committee to find quality solutions to the issues we identify in this and subsequent hearings.

Another critical issue we must confront is full funding. As many of you know, last year the Senate -- on a unanimous vote-- approved the Harkin-Hagel IDEA full funding amendment. This would have provided mandatory funding and would have put us on the steady path to full funding within 6 years. Unfortunately, the House conferees refused to go along with the bipartisan action we took here in the Senate. We are committed to continuing our efforts to finally bring the federal government up to that 40 percent level committed to back in 1975. I know there is strong sentiment on this Committee to live up to that commitment. I am hopeful that the 2003 budget resolution will contain a \$2.5 billion increase in IDEA funding and a firm commitment to full funding in 6 years.

The IDEA has made a significant contribution to the lives of children with disabilities and millions of families around the country. It has provided services to these children from infancy to adulthood; it has helped families meet the challenges that raising and nurturing a child with a disability can pose; for many, it has helped keep their families together by providing the support necessary to lessen the impact of stressors they face. We have a heavy burden and responsibility to make sure that our refinements to this important law enhance and in no way impede the continued progress of children with disabilities as they benefit from their educational experiences and move toward full participation in their communities as adults.

I look forward to the upcoming testimony and thank the chair for the opportunity to make this statement.