

Round Table Discussion: Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Criteria for Special Education Teachers

Bill Number:

Hearing Date: April 27, 2005, 2:30 pm

Location: SD430

Witness:

Bill Connolly

Quirk Middle School in Hartford, CT

Special Education Teacher

Testimony

I'd like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the HELP Committee and the Congress for working to ensure that every student with a disability has a highly qualified teacher. As all of us here today are well aware, the quality of a student's teacher contributes more to achievement outcomes than any other factor, including class size, class composition, or student background. Moreover, if we are to hold students with disabilities to high accountability standards, they must have highly qualified teachers if they are to meet these standards.

For too many years, large numbers of special education teachers have not been highly qualified. Indeed, data from the 2002-03 school year indicate that over 53,000 special education teachers, teaching over 900,000 students with disabilities were not certified in special education. In addition, data from the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey reveal that among secondary special education teachers who teach students with disabilities in the areas of English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, from 82-99% were not highly qualified in the subject matter that they taught.

Having a highly qualified teacher for every student with a disability should go a long way toward closing the achievement gap that currently exists for these students. I applaud this committee and the Congress for boldly addressing this very important issue...an issue that most states have not been successful in addressing for at least the last 20 years.

From my perspective, there are several issues that need to be addressed to ensure a highly qualified teacher for every student with a disability. I'll mention three of those issues, now, and hopefully we'll have time to discuss additional recommendations later in this roundtable.

First, we must learn from states and local school districts that have successfully addressed this issue. Data from 2002-03 reveal that all special education teachers were certified in Connecticut. Many other states had very low proportions of special education teachers who were not certified (i.e., Alabama, Alaska, Illinois, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Washington, and Wisconsin). These states have shown us that it is possible to provide highly qualified teachers for students with disabilities. We need to better understand what these states have done to address the special education teacher shortage.

Second, we must recognize that the approach local districts and secondary schools take to service delivery significantly influences the number of secondary special education teachers who are highly qualified in content areas. In Florida, one large district has over 500 special education teachers who are not highly qualified in the subject areas that they teach, while another large district has no such teachers. This difference is produced, I am sure, by how these districts decide to deliver services to students with disabilities. This is

a key issue that we must recognize and address.

Finally, as I mentioned previously, most states have not been able to address the need for highly qualified special education teachers, as shortages have existed for at least the last 20 years. States need federal support if they are to successfully produce sufficient numbers of highly qualified teachers. For example, there is currently a shortage of teacher education faculty in Institutions of Higher Education that produce teachers, and many faculty positions are going unfilled. There also is a need to increase the supply of special education teachers through incentives for those entering the profession. I've included with my statement a copy of a proposed amendment to the Higher Education Act, written by Mrs. Shriver, which begins to address this need.

Elaboration of the preceding recommendations as well as additional recommendations for ensuring that all students with disabilities have highly qualified teachers include the following:

- State Departments of Education have many requirements for approving teacher education programs in Colleges of Education that make offering alternative teacher education programs difficult, if not impossible for many Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs). State Departments of Education need to address these issues, and ensure that IHEs can develop high quality, fast track, alternative programs to certify special education teachers.
- Support is needed from the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies to ensure that all students with disabilities have highly qualified teachers. The proposed amendment to the Higher Education Act (proposed by Mrs. Shriver), "The Ensuring Highly Qualified Special Education Teachers Act of 2005" is a good start in addressing this issue. Additional funding for Part D of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act to support personnel preparation is also needed.
- Support is needed to ensure an adequate supply of doctoral level leadership personnel (i.e., college faculty) to produce highly qualified teachers. Providing additional funding to support leadership programs as part of Part D of IDEA, and supporting the proposed amendment to the Higher Education Act, "The Ensuring Highly Qualified Special Education Teachers Act of 2005" is a good start in addressing this issue.
- Very little research has been conducted regarding teacher education and special education. We need to study a range of issues such as: the effect of different routes to certification (i.e., traditional institution of higher education based programs, alternative certification programs, 'test only' routes to certification) on student outcomes; factors influencing teacher attrition and teacher retention; critical elements of teacher education programs that produce effective teachers; teacher induction and mentoring; and many more. Funding through the Office of Special Education Programs and Institute for Educational Sciences should be provided to study these critical issues.

McLeskey Testimony

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James McLeskey

University of Florida

Professor and Chair of the Department of Education

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