

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

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Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today on the topic of highly qualified special education teachers. The No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB, is truly landmark legislation in the history of American education. Although this law is much discussed and sometimes misunderstood, it does represent the gold standard by which all other accountability-based education policies should be measured. NCLB is the result of bipartisan legislation built upon the premise that all children can learn to high standards. It also recognizes that students need highly qualified teachers in order to meet challenging state academic standards. Because the cornerstone of this law is the founding belief that all students can learn, including students with disabilities, it is very important that we pay attention to the standards for professionals who specialize in teaching students with disabilities or special education teachers.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, is also a landmark statute. This law has ensured that children with disabilities are afforded the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers. The recently reauthorized IDEA statute and NCLB work together to focus on results for all children.

This afternoon I would like to talk about the highly qualified teacher requirements as they relate to teachers of students with disabilities. As you know, NCLB requires three simple things of teachers: they must hold at least a bachelor's degree, full certification from the State, and know the subject they teach. The reauthorized IDEA reaffirms the NCLB requirements because research shows that teachers are a key factor in student achievement. Research tells us that if a student has an ineffective teacher three years in a row, his or her achievement shortfalls most likely will not be remedied. The student won't catch up. Along the same lines, research tells us that when teachers are knowledgeable about the subject matter they teach, their students achieve to higher standards. This is true for all students, including students with disabilities.

Before the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, the first version of what we now call IDEA, more than one million children with disabilities were excluded from the education system. Thirty years after the initial implementation of this legislation, 6.8 million children with disabilities are receiving special education and related services under IDEA, and 96 percent of students with disabilities ages 6-21 are now served in regular education classrooms with their non-disabled peers. We have made incredible progress in

gaining access to mainstream education for students with disabilities, and we have made steady progress in ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum. We now need to strive for the same excellence in education, for this population of children, as we strive for excellence for children who do not have disabilities.

State-reported data collected by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) tells us that roughly 50 percent of students who receive special education services and supports are students with learning disabilities. This data also tells us that 80 to 90 percent of these students, who have learning disabilities, are referred for special education services because of reading difficulties, which may be, in many cases, preventable. Most children who are found to have a specific learning disability have average or better intellectual abilities. Therefore, we must ask, why aren't these children learning to grade level standards? The first reason may be low expectations. Another factor is the type of instruction these students receive. Are the instructional methods based on sound scientific evidence? Many times they are not. Also, who teaches children with disabilities? It depends upon the level of special education services and supports, but many children who receive special education services and supports are taught core academic subjects by special education teachers who do not have the crucial content knowledge or skills to teach core academic subjects. This is too often the case, even though the vast majority of special education students are expected to meet the same academic achievement standards as non-disabled students. What does the research tell us about students in general? It tells us that when teachers have knowledge and skills in the core academic subject they teach, students do better. Many times special education teachers may know "how to teach" but not "what to teach." We believe that the lingering achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers is partly attributable to this lack of adequate training in academic content.

The field is concerned about special education teachers not having enough time to meet the requirements to become highly qualified under the reauthorized IDEA by the end of the 2005-06 school year. I should point out that over the past few years the U.S. Department of Education has provided on-going technical assistance on the highly qualified teacher requirements, and has provided direct assistance to help all teachers who teach core academic subjects understand how the requirements will affect them. One significant Department initiative is the Teacher Assistance Corps. Established in 2003 to support states in their efforts to implement the highly qualified teacher requirements in NCLB, forty-five teachers, former teachers, principals, superintendents, leaders from higher education, and national experts from around the country participated on teams led by Department of Education officials. During visits to every state, D.C. and Puerto Rico, the Teacher Assistance Corps explained the provisions of the law including requirements for special education teachers, listened to the concerns of state and local officials, answered policy questions, and learned of unique situations in every state. Many states believed that the reauthorized IDEA would have different requirements or lesser standards for special education teachers to become highly qualified. They opted to ignore the NCLB requirements and waited, hoping that the reauthorized IDEA would eliminate or modify the requirements for special education teachers. As a result, some states did not

take any steps to ensure that special education teachers would join the ranks of highly qualified teachers by the end of the 2005 –2006 school year.

The Department has a common sense approach to the highly qualified teacher requirements under NCLB and worked with the Congress to provide additional flexibility under IDEA, where it was possible to do so without diminishing the quality of instruction to be provided to children with disabilities. Special education teachers who are already in the field can use the High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE), including a HOUSSE covering multiple subjects, to demonstrate competency in the core academic subjects they teach. Special education teachers who are teaching exclusively to children with disabilities who are assessed against alternate achievement standards must have subject matter knowledge at the elementary level or above needed to effectively teach to those alternate achievement standards, as determined by the State. New special education teachers who teach multiple core academic subjects and are highly qualified in mathematics, language arts or science have an additional two years to demonstrate subject mastery in other core academic subjects that they teach. The Department believes that it is possible for all students to be taught by highly qualified teachers by the deadline set forth in NCLB and IDEA.

The Department has also engaged in many initiatives and activities specifically designed to help all teachers understand NCLB, understand the requirements to become highly qualified and to achieve highly qualified status. One very important initiative that accomplishes all three goals for teachers is the Teacher-to-Teacher Initiative which is designed to help teachers improve student achievement in several ways. First, the Department, as part of this initiative, sponsors Teacher-to-Teacher Workshops which allow teachers to learn and share various best practices from across the country that improve student achievement. After an overwhelmingly positive response to the 2004's summer and fall workshops, the U.S. Department of Education will host summer 2005 workshops. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services continues to work collaboratively with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education to ensure that sessions specifically address teaching children who receive special education services and academic supports in an inclusive setting. Secondly, the Department provides free access to professional development courses on a Teacher-to-Teacher Website. These e-learning modules were developed using content from the summer 2004 Teacher-to-Teacher Workshops. In each of these modules, some of the nation's best teachers and principals share strategies for raising student achievement and informing teachers of the latest successful, research-based practices. Thirty-two states have agreed to allow teachers to use these modules toward points on their HOUSSE or recertification requirements. Third, teachers may sign up to receive electronic Teacher Updates from the Department on hot topics, and access resources that aid teachers in learning about the latest policy, research and professional issues affecting the classroom. Fourth, the Department has ongoing Teacher Roundtables on various topics during which senior Department officials listen to and engage teachers in discussions regarding teacher needs and concerns. Fifth, teachers have been honored by the Department through the American Stars of Teaching awards. Teachers, including special education teachers, who are improving student achievement and using innovative strategies to reach students have

been honored. So you see, the Department has taken a diligent and proactive approach to help all teachers understand the highly qualified teacher provisions in NCLB, and provide flexibility and support to help all teachers become highly qualified by the 2005-2006 school year.

With the reauthorization of IDEA, we intend to launch additional efforts to support special education teachers' understanding of what highly qualified means for them. We at the Department are pleased that the reauthorized IDEA affirms the highly qualified teacher requirements set forth by NCLB, with some additional flexibility. It's simple. All students need and deserve highly qualified teachers, especially students who have disabilities. Parents want highly qualified teachers for their children. The Department knows that requiring all teachers to be highly qualified is the right thing to do for our children.