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February 12, 2020

Chairman Lamar Alexander
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20015

Ranking Member Patty Murray
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20015

RE: Higher Education Act Reauthorization

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray,

On behalf of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), I am writing to provide recommendations as you consider reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). Thank you for the opportunity to provide input as the status of teacher preparation for special educators can be greatly influenced by the decisions you make to update the law. CEC is a professional association comprised of over 21,000 educators dedicated to advancing the success of students with exceptionalities which accomplishes its mission through advocacy, standards, and professional development. CEC advocates for evidence-based best practices in special education and supports for educators at all levels, including administrators, from early intervention through higher education.

The persistent shortage of special educators, which has reached crisis levels, is a top concern that impacts all of K-12 education. There are special educator shortages in 48 states and the District of Columbia. In most states, special education is the top shortage area. Simultaneously, special educators leave the profession at nearly twice the rate of their general education peers, and enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped by over one-third in the last five years. The shortage gravely impacts students, results in high turn-over and is costly to schools and districts, perpetuating the quality staff gap and the student achievement gap. As noted by CEC's High Leverage Practices guide,

...To ensure quality outcomes for students with disabilities, special education teachers should provide instruction that is evidence-based and highly responsive to these students' complex and varied needs...given the disproportionate number of students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, special education teachers must have expertise in delivering instruction and behavioral interventions in a culturally responsive manner. (Aronson & Laughter, 2016, as cited in CEC and CEEDAR Center. High-leverage practices in special education: Foundations for student success., 2017)

Congress can strengthen the educator pipeline by investing in updates and additions to the HEA that will encourage high quality teacher preparation and result in a reduced financial burden for educators as they strive to balance student debt costs with lower professional salaries as compared to other college graduates. Specifically, I ask you to address the following issues in a final HEA bill:

- **Reauthorize the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Grant program** with a strong focus on high-need schools, expansion to include early childhood educators, support of teacher and leader development and an increase in the authorization level to \$500 million annually;



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- **Reduce student loan burdens** by increasing the maximum Pell Grant award and expanding the award duration from 12 to 14 semesters, strengthening TEACH grants by creating guardrails to prevent their mistaken conversion from grants to loans, and improving the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program so that all educators may reach loan forgiveness more quickly;
- **Include evidence-based practices** in educator and school leader residency and induction programs including academic/behavioral multi-tiered systems of supports, positive behavioral interventions and supports, universal design for learning, social and emotional learning, and support for programs that embed dual certification/licensure;
- **Require traditional, alternative or grow your own preparation programs that utilize federal funds to assure** “the use of rigorous, research-based educator standards...accreditation criteria and licensure requirements...”
- **Require consistency in data reporting requirements** for all preparation programs including alternative preparation programs linked to federal funds;
- **Assure students have immediate access to supports/accommodations** previously provided under an IEP or 504 Plan upon matriculation;
- **Provide grants to increase accessibility** on college campuses including providing training to support faculty and provide accessible technology and materials;
- **Strengthen the Transition to Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) program.**

Thank you for your efforts to put forth a comprehensive reauthorization that supports special educators so that children with exceptionalities can thrive. If you have any questions or require additional information about our recommendations, please contact Kuna Tavalin, CEC Senior Policy and Advocacy Advisor at kunat@cec.sped.org or 202-669-2669.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jennifer J. Lesh".

Jennifer J. Lesh, Ph.D.

President

Council for Exceptional Children