

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 5, 2022

Katherine Neas
Acting Assistant Secretary
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC, 20202

Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Neas:

We value your commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in supporting the education of all children in the United States. The historic levels of financial support for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) programs in the President's FY23 budget are encouraging, particularly the significant increase proposed for Part D personnel preparation grants. Such an investment will make it possible to better reach the goal to educate every child to their greatest potential.

We write you as partners in the shared goal to provide well-prepared teachers and related services professionals in our schools. A group of teachers and related services professionals desperately needed by schools are teachers with experience and expertise in instructing deaf, blind and deaf-blind students. We also need interveners who are specialists in providing instruction for deaf-blind students. There continues to be a great shortage of these teachers and professionals. In the coming fiscal year, we ask the Department to prioritize some funds appropriated by Congress for IDEA Part D grants to increase the number of grants for the training of teachers and interveners for students with sensory disabilities.¹

It is critical to the education of students with sensory disabilities to have sufficient personnel to educate them, inclusive of teachers and interveners. The lack of sufficient teachers and interveners pre-dates the passage of IDEA in 1975, and it is beyond time to move to rectify the shortage. With the implementation of the zero reject provision of IDEA and the tremendous efforts of local education agencies (LEAs) to educate all children, personnel who have expertise in addressing the academic needs of children with low-incidence disabilities are desperately needed. The teachers and school leaders prepared with the support of Part D grants in the 1970s and 1980s are set to retire. New teachers and school leaders with knowledge and skills to instruct students with disabilities are needed. Parents, advocates and students with sensory disabilities across the nation have shared with us their experiences with shortages of qualified teachers for supporting the education and development of students who are deaf, blind or deaf-blind, and the lack of interveners to support deaf-blind students.

Over the past two decades, we have seen the closure of personnel preparation programs to prepare teachers to instruct students with sensory disabilities. According to the National Center on Deaf-Blindness, in 2021 only 13 states had postsecondary coursework to prepare teachers to

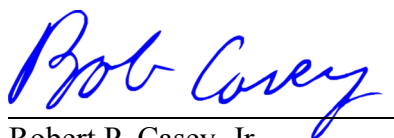
¹ Sensory disabilities include those children who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, visually impaired or deaf-blind.

instruct students who are deaf-blind². Currently, only two universities in the country have programs to prepare interveners.³ A 2016 study found that 12 states offer no programs to develop professionals to work with students who are deaf, blind or deaf-blind, and that there was huge variability in the availability of professional development in the remaining states for teachers responsible for instruction of students with sensory disabilities.⁴ Support and development of personnel preparation programs for students with sensory disabilities needs to be addressed at the federal level, so that students with sensory disabilities can receive the instruction and support needed regardless of where they live.

We recognize and support the Department's significant investments in the preparation of the next generation of university faculty with specialties in sensory disabilities through the National Leadership Consortium in Sensory Disabilities. Over the last decade, there has been a decline in the number of degrees or certificates conferred in high need specialties, like special education, potentially exacerbating a workforce pipeline issue.⁵ We need to prepare more teachers and allied services professionals with experience and expertise in instructing students with disabilities in order to fulfill the promise of IDEA, providing individualized educational instruction for all children with disabilities.

As you prepare for the 2023 fiscal year and into the future, we ask that you prioritize some of the Part D funding to increase the number of teachers and interveners who can provide high-quality instruction to deaf, blind and deaf-blind children. Investing in this group of teachers and interveners will make it possible for children with sensory disabilities to excel. We look forward to hearing from you regarding prioritizing Part D funding for these purposes. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Michael Gamel-McCormick at Michael_gamel-mccormick@aging.senate.gov or (202) 224-4193. Thank you for your concern and attention to these critical issues.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



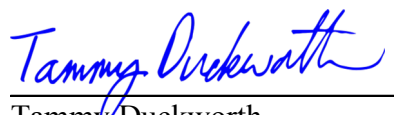
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

² National Center on Deaf-Blindness. <https://www.nationaldb.org/national-initiatives/iqp/>

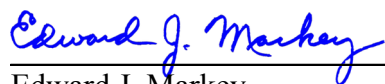
³ Ibid.

⁴ Howley, C.B. & Howley, A. (2016). Improving Service to Students with Low-Incidence Sensory Disabilities in Ohio: A Mixed-methods Study to Examine National Context and District Experience. Available from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED570178>

⁵ <https://aacte.org/resources/research-reports-and-briefs/colleges-of-education-a-national-portraitv2/>



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

CC: Valerie Williams, Director, Office of Special Education Programs
Meghan Whittaker, Special Assistant, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation
Services