

June 8, 2012

**Open Letter to U.S. Congress and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan from the Council for Exceptional Children and the Special Education Research Community**

Over the four decades since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its right-to-education mandate, the experiences, expectations, and accomplishments of America's nearly 7 million children and youth with disabilities who receive early intervention and special education services have improved dramatically.

The backbone of this improvement has been the Federal government's investment in high-quality research that has provided educators and families with a wide range of specialized programs, tools, strategies, and technologies. These evidence-based practices have enhanced the developmental, academic and social outcomes as well as lifelong success of children and youth with disabilities. At the present time, the government's investment is directed by the National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER), within the Institute for Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education.

The government's investment in NCSER is critical because, despite the dramatic improvement in outcomes for individuals with disabilities, much remains to be done in generating new knowledge to help these children and youth realize productive and successful lives. There is widespread agreement among educators and parents that additional practices, based on sound scientific research, are required to better understand how to educate and assess children and youth with disabilities effectively. Indeed, the over 400,000 special educators and early interventionists in communities across the nation rely on the availability of evidence-based strategies to support improved outcomes for children and youth with disabilities.

It is, therefore, alarming that since 2011, the Obama Administration and Congress have decimated NCSER's budget, cutting it by 30%, resulting in fewer research initiatives in the future. This depleted research budget puts children and youth with disabilities at great risk of compromised outcomes. Research tells us that when compared to their non-disabled peers, individuals with disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to enroll in post-secondary education, and have higher unemployment rates. At a minimum, special education research funding must be restored to its fiscal year 2010 level of \$71 million, although to truly address these needs, an increase in funding is needed.

NCSER supports special education research that develops and validates solutions to the special challenges involved in educating children and youth with disabilities. NCSER's significant contributions in recent years include the following:

- Development of reliable assessment tools and measurement systems that permit teachers to accurately monitor children's academic progress frequently and adjust their teaching accordingly.
- Design and delivery of effective early reading interventions that have had a major impact on the teaching of beginning reading specifically for children with disabilities. These practices have also had a major impact on general education programs.

- Better understanding of how schools and curriculum programs work and how to maximize learning efficiency and ensure effective rates of learning for children and youth with disabilities.
- Development of tools, strategies, technologies, and programs for improving developmental outcomes for young children with disabilities, improving family involvement and support in the education of their child with a disability, and including children and youth with disabilities in statewide assessment and accountability systems.
- Systemic approaches for improving professional practice and preparation for educators.
- Creation of a reliable knowledge base upon which the special education technical assistance systems have been developed at the national, state, and local levels.

As the examples suggest, the impact of NCSER's research and development has extended well beyond children and youth with disabilities. One example of the influence that research in special education has had on general education is school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS). This framework, which is now being implemented by over 17,000 schools across 44 states, establishes a positive social culture and individualized behavior supports needed for schools to be effective learning environments for all students. Rigorous research has documented that SWPBIS is linked to reduction in problem behavior, improved academic performance, improved student attendance, and improved perception of faculty effectiveness. Its benefits impact all students, yet it was born entirely from special education research efforts to identify and serve children with significant emotional and behavioral disabilities. Similarly, research in special education provided the foundation for and components of Response to Intervention systems (RtI), which involves the use of screening assessments, research-based interventions, and data-driven decision-making. Schools nationwide are increasingly using RtI to provide systematic assistance to all children who have difficulty learning.

We call on the Obama Administration and Congress to, at a minimum, restore funding to the National Center for Special Education Research to its FY 2010 level of \$71 million, and increase its funding beyond this amount to truly address the nation's special education research needs. This investment will expand educators' and families' understanding of what works in special education and will improve the developmental and academic achievements and lifelong outcomes for children and youth with – and without – disabilities.

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