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exceptionalchildren.org

December 3, 2020

President-elect Joseph Biden
Vice President-elect Kamala Harris
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris,

On behalf of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), congratulations on your historic victory in the 2020 election.

CEC is a professional association of 22,000 educators dedicated to advancing the success of children with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. We accomplish our mission through advocacy, standards, and professional development. The organization has a long history as a leading advocacy voice on behalf of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. Our advocacy work centers on promoting evidence-based best practices in special education, supporting educators at all levels- from early intervention through higher education, and securing the fiscal resources necessary to enable each individual to attain their highest level of education, employment, and life success.

CEC is pleased the Biden Campaign put education and educators front and center in the Biden-Harris plan, and to see that commitment begin to take shape by putting in place an education transition team that includes individuals with depth, experience, and commitment to educators, as well as our nation's students. Likewise, CEC appreciates the thoughtful development of an education platform that in many ways mirrors our own priorities, including a focus on supporting educators, providing full funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and promoting a strong focus on equity that includes promoting inclusion and diversity, especially for those impacted by systemic racism.

As you begin to lay the groundwork for the incoming Administration, CEC respectfully offers the following recommendations:

1) Protect and support the core principles of IDEA.

CEC was a leader in 1974 during the drafting of the landmark IDEA and we deeply understand the progress that has been made in the last 46 years. We are committed to ensuring that the 7 million students with disabilities and over 700,000 students with 504 plans in public schools and their families remain an equal priority within our public education system. Any action by Congress or the U.S. Department of Education must preserve the rights children with disabilities have to a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. Furthermore, the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children must be protected; and, educators and parents must have access to the necessary tools to improve educational results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities by supporting system-wide improvement activities, coordinated research and personnel preparation, coordinated technical assistance, dissemination of evidence-based research and practices, and support.

2) Protect and expand policies and programs that are outside the scope of the IDEA but support students with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

Education policies and programs outside of the IDEA impact students with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. Thus, we recommend that any authorizing bill or law that impacts students, considers students with disabilities and/or gifts and talents and reinforces their need for and ability to access the general curriculum. The preparation, training, and professional learning of educators and support personnel must also be prioritized. Such legislation, regulation, or other policymaking includes but is not limited to the Higher Education Act, the



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Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, and any future early childhood education and care legislation, as well as any future pandemic-related policy or funding effort.

3) Strengthen the special educator profession.

Well before the pandemic struck, the special educator shortage had already hit 48 states and the District of Columbia. For most states, special educators were the top shortage area, propelling the situation to crisis proportion. Simultaneously, special educators were leaving the profession at an annual rate of over 12 percent, nearly twice the rate of their general education peers, and enrollment in teacher preparation programs had dropped by over one-third in the last five years. Since the pandemic, additional factors are making the crisis grimmer; in fact, more educator jobs were lost in April alone than during the Great Recession. Half of the job losses reported between March and April of 2020 were among special education teachers, tutors, and teaching assistants. Simultaneously, educator preparation programs are shuttering at an alarming rate.

The special educator shortage gravely impacts students, results in high turn-over of special educators and is costly to schools and districts, perpetuating the quality staff gap and the student achievement gap. To support the personnel that provide the specialized instruction, interventions, education, and related services to infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents, we must initiate and support bold action in educator preparation, high-quality and evidence-based professional development, and retention support efforts. That is why CEC was proud to endorse legislation to establish an Educator Jobs Fund that would provide up to \$62 billion over the next 10 years to avoid massive educator layoffs and target funding to teacher preparation programs that would increase the diversity of the profession. However, policy and targeted funding must go beyond the impacts of the pandemic and generate large-scale, long-term investments in the educator pipeline to ensure that educators have the skills and support necessary to be effective in the classroom and to stay in the profession.

4) Fully fund IDEA.

CEC is a leading voice advocating for full funding of IDEA. We have helped spearhead legislation for many years which would provide the funding necessary to ensure that infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities are provided access to educators trained to provide specially designed instruction, intervention, support, curricula, devices, and related services that allow them to meet the highest possible outcomes. Fully funding IDEA also ensures students have access to and support for learning and a quality of life that respects their dignity, culture, language, and background. We appreciate that the incoming Biden Administration has also elevated this issue and has pledged to pursue IDEA full funding. We look forward to working together to advance this important initiative.

5) Support policies that promote safe, inclusive, and supportive schools.

Under IDEA, students with disabilities have the right to learn in the least restrictive environment. Yet, students with disabilities have faced major disparities in the way they are treated in school, and significant disproportionality in identification, placement and disciplinary actions persist and will continue until policymakers, educators, families, and communities work cohesively to address the problem. To build safe and positive school and community settings, members must acquire a wide knowledge base of evidence-based and effective practices that support human and civil rights and promote social justice for the diverse student populations. CEC is pleased to have recently endorsed legislation that stops the harmful use of restraint and seclusion and bans corporal punishment, refocusing schoolwide efforts on evidence-based initiatives such as training for school personnel in de-escalation techniques including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. We look forward to working with the Biden Administration to advance these and many other critical initiatives that establish safe, inclusive, and supportive school settings.

6) Act immediately to support schools and programs impacted by COVID-19.

As you know, this has been an extremely difficult year for educators, students, and families. Pandemic-related remote teaching and learning was thrust upon school systems with very little notice. While CEC has been



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heartened by the innovative ways our members have risen to the occasion to ensure instruction and support services are delivered effectively, and how they have gathered as a community to support each other, it has certainly been a struggle. CEC is particularly concerned about the impact this could have on the special educator pipeline, students who are disparately impacted by remote learning, and on schools systems more broadly as they brace for the potential of significant budget shortfalls next year. Thus, in parallel to the priorities listed above, CEC has the following COVID-related recommendations:

- Support a one-time stimulus of emergency funding for IDEA as delineated in the *Supporting Children with Disabilities During COVID-19 Act*.
- Support large-scale funding to states to bolster state budgets so that schools can be protected from major revenue losses and educator cuts.
- Support the establishment of an Educator Jobs Fund to preserve existing jobs and begin investing in the pipeline, including targeting efforts that result in a more diverse profession.
- Provide an additional \$100 million for the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Grants in Title II of the Higher Education Act.
- Support \$12 billion for an Emergency Connectivity Fund, administered through the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) E-Rate program to ensure all students have access to remote learning.
- Support emergency funding to support evidence-based professional development on remote learning for special education teachers and support staff.

CEC sincerely appreciates the focus that the Biden Administration has placed on education. We look forward to working in partnership to advance the issues cited above. Please consider us as a resource as you develop initiatives that impact infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Kuna Tavalin, Senior Policy and Advocacy Advisor at ktavalin@exceptionalchildren.org.

Sincerely,

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

Jennifer J. Lesh, Ph.D.
President
Council for Exceptional Children