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POSITION STATEMENT

Strengthening the Workforce to Support All Children and Youth with Exceptionalities

Every child deserves access to high quality, well-prepared educators to support their learning and well-being.

The members of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) strongly advocate that all professionals must come prepared and continue to develop through ongoing professional learning opportunities the skills necessary to promote the meaningful and appropriate participation of children and youth with exceptionalities in schools and community-based settings. Moreover, all teachers, early intervention specialists, special education professionals, and school leaders must demonstrate respect for each individual's dignity, culture, language, and background, empowering them to achieve the highest possible individualized learning and quality of life outcomes.

CEC represents nearly 400,000 special education teachers, early intervention providers, and transition specialists who advocate for the need to maintain a strong, dedicated workforce aimed at advancing the success of children and youth with exceptionalities of all ages. This requires access to rigorous, high-quality preparation and professional learning opportunities, as well as supportive and favorable working conditions. Such resources are necessary to meet goals of inclusion, equity, and access to a free appropriate public education, the ambitious goal set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; Office of Special Education Programs, 2021). The [Professional Standards](#) adopted by CEC affirms this commitment and establishes rigorous expectations for the field.

Despite this commitment, enduring and chronic shortages and uneven distribution of high-quality special education teachers continue to be a challenge, especially in schools and community-based settings serving high proportions of low-income and racially/ethnically minoritized students (Cook & Yang, 2016; Mason-Williams, 2015; Ondrasek et al., 2020). Highly specialized, separate schools providing intensive and individualized services also struggle with staffing needs (Mason-Williams & Gagnon, 2016; Mason-Williams et al., 2017). Such challenges potentially undermine efforts to fully meet the promise of IDEA. Moreover, a lack of qualified special education teachers (SETs) and other related service providers all but ensures inequitable access and outcomes for low-income and racially/ethnically minoritized students (Gilmour, 2020; Schochet et al., 2020).

Ensuring all children and youth with exceptionalities have the opportunity to learn from high quality and well-prepared special education teachers requires a sizable commitment from policymakers at all levels. Members of CEC support policies that strengthen the teacher workforce and advance outcomes for children and youth with exceptionalities by a commitment to those they support by:

- 1. ensuring all members of school and community settings are prepared to implement inclusive, culturally-sustaining, and evidence-based pedagogy appropriate to the developmental, physical, and social needs;**
- 2. attracting and retaining an adequate supply of SETs for all settings and age-ranges that reflects sociocultural and linguistic diversity;**
- 3. providing rigorous, high quality preparation and professional learning opportunities for all professionals; and**
- 4. supporting SETs' access to resources that promote favorable working conditions, including access to supportive colleagues and administrators, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and improved compensation.**

The Council for Exceptional Children is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the educational success of children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

Advancing Outcomes for Children and Youth with Exceptionalities through Inclusive, Culturally Sustaining, and Evidence-based Pedagogy

CEC members believe that all special education professionals must adopt inclusive, culturally-sustaining, and evidence-based pedagogies, set challenging and appropriate expectations, and respect the diversity of children and youth with exceptionalities. As professionals committed to upholding the dignity and worth of all individuals, we believe this philosophy extends to include all families, children, and youth, inclusive of their ethnic and racial backgrounds, language, age, abilities, family status, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic or immigration status, and religious and spiritual values. We contend that all members of a community, including the families, teachers, and staff members who work there, should feel safe, welcomed, and supported. Each setting should be free from bullying, discrimination, harassment, aggression, violence, and abuse. This is essential to ensuring inclusion and equity, as well as providing a free appropriate public education. We advocate for all state and national standards, preparation, and professional learning opportunities to echo these core values.

In special education, preparation and on-going, high-quality professional learning opportunities must advance this philosophy of inclusive, culturally-sustaining, and evidence-based pedagogy appropriate to the abilities of the children and youth in school and community settings. These expectations are defined in the CEC [Professional Practice Guidelines](#) and in the [Special Education Professional Preparation Standards](#). As research evidence bolsters the need for well-qualified SETs to increase learning and lifetime outcomes among students with exceptionalities (Feng & Sass, 2013; Gilmour, 2019), these guidelines should drive preparation and ongoing professional development among special education professionals.

During preparation, candidates must demonstrate mastery of evidence-based and high leverage practices through course and fieldwork activities in school and community settings reflective of the communities these teachers and leaders will serve (Boveda & Aronson, 2019). CEC members advocate for early, intentionally planned fieldwork including the full range of ages, types and levels of abilities, and collaborative opportunities matching the candidate's perspective license or role. This may include inclusive community and school settings in urban, rural, and high need schools, as well as specialized and alternative school settings for students with more intense learning and behavioral needs. Further, SET preparation programs should include explicit training in how to identify appropriate educational settings aligned to the unique needs of the child/youth and create and sustain safe, culturally sustaining, and inclusive learning environments.

After completing preparation, maintaining a high-quality special education workforce requires SETs and all other educational providers to engage in ongoing, high-quality professional learning opportunities focused on research-based, trauma-informed, proactive, and supportive school climate strategies. As described in the CEC Position Statement, [Ensuring a Safe and Positive Climate in School and Community Settings for Children and Youth with Disabilities](#), this includes building learning communities that support positive development and academic achievement by considering the ways school personnel evaluate school climate comprehensively based on credible research and use data on school and classroom climate and discipline.

Attracting and Retaining an Adequate, Diverse SET Supply for All Schools

Building capacity to fully staff all settings with high quality, well-prepared SETs has been a policy goal for more than 60 years. Persistent shortages, high rates of turnover and attrition, and uneven distribution make attracting and retaining an adequate, diverse SET supply for all schools more difficult. Research evidence suggesting that SETs with less experience, who work in high poverty schools, or who teach students with emotional/behavioral disorders are more likely to leave suggests a need for targeted supports to more effectively retain SETs (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley, 2004; Gilmour, 2019; Guarino et al., 2006). Additional research on the role of stressors and workload manageability is crucial to develop effective policies.

Attracting, preparing, and retaining a high quality, well-prepared SET workforce fully reflective of the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity for all children and youth is an urgent international priority (Annamma, 2015; Boveda & Aronson, 2019; Scott et al., 2020). Long-standing investments in attracting individuals to the special education workforce through grants and scholarships help, but fall short of adequately staffing all settings. Similarly, initiatives that incentivize teaching in low-income schools or high-need content areas (including special education and in early intervention) are promising, but limitations in scope and funding have not yielded long-term supply gains (see for example, Feng & Sass, 2017). Likewise, grow-your-own programs to attract individuals of color into the teaching profession by recruiting high school students and paraprofessionals into the workforce are especially promising. Increased, long-term investment in such initiatives can considerably impact the availability of well-prepared racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse SETs to meet demand. Therefore, CEC members

stress the urgent need for advocating for policy development and increased funding for research and implementation of these initiatives.

A limited supply of teachers of color thwarts efforts to provide inclusive, culturally- sustaining settings for all children and youth, including those with exceptionalities. CEC members acknowledge that making the field more attractive to people of color will require efforts beyond recruiting and induction activities. In fact, all special education professionals must work to understand the intersectional impact of various markers of difference, overcome cultural stigmas of disability and participation in special education, and commit to recognizing and abolishing systemic racism and the impact it has on identification, assessment, and placement decisions, as well as on disciplinary actions (Boveda & Aronson, 2019). Further, special education professionals must work to ensure state and local curriculum promotes authentic inclusion and promotion of people of color (Annamma, 2015; Scott & Alexander, 2019). These positions align with CEC's core values, our commitment to diversity and inclusion, and the [Ethical Principles and Practice Standards](#) adopted by members.

At the same time, retaining SETs of color in the workforce requires recognizing and actively working against systemic racism that may influence administrative decisions, including in hiring and teaching assignments, that can lead to unfavorable working conditions. Emerging evidence of unconscious bias among administrators related to caseload size and makeup, where SETs of color are assigned more challenging children and youth, feel less supported, and are overlooked for leadership opportunities negatively influence efforts to retain SETs of color (Cormier, & Scott, 2020; Bristol, 2020; Scott et al., 2020). CEC members advocate for additional research on these challenges to identify ways to better support and retain SETs of color and to uphold a culturally-sustaining, inclusive workforce, including the role mentorship and induction activities may play.

Increasing the number of high-quality, well-prepared educators with disabilities is another area of CEC advocacy. Members recognize the unique gifts, talents, and insights that educators with disabilities bring to the field of education and value their first-hand experience managing disabilities during their education and employment. This personal experience often places educators with disabilities in a unique position to understand and effectively teach children and youth while providing a model for success. Their compassion and empathy for children and youth with exceptionalities and their families results from their own experiences, enabling them to build stronger rapport and partnerships through mutual understanding. We urge continued efforts to increase recruitment and retention of individuals with disabilities into the profession at all levels of teaching and leadership.

Finally, CEC members recognize the need to build capacity and meet supply needs among specialized instructional support personnel (i.e., speech-language pathologists, educational audiologists, school psychologists, etc.) to assist children and youth with exceptionalities in meeting their individualized goals. However, chronic shortages, challenging working conditions, and high rates of attrition serve as barriers to accessing these professionals. Aligned with organizations like the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, CEC members advocate for efforts aimed at attracting and retaining an adequate, diverse supply of specialized instructional support personnel to meet the promise of IDEA.

Providing Rigorous, High-Quality Preparation and Professional Learning Opportunities to Support Children and Youth with Exceptionalities

CEC members ardently urge policymakers to resist responding to shortages in special education through policies that compromise professional standards for entry. Research evidence shows that rigorous, high quality SET preparation increases the learning of children and youth with exceptionalities; and strong preparation leads to retention (Bettini et al., 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Therefore, CEC members support efforts at all levels to ensure all teachers and educational leaders are well-prepared to provide rigorous content and specialized instruction to all learners, including children and youth with exceptionalities. To ensure high-quality preparation of beginning SETs, CEC members adopted [the Initial Special Education Professional Preparation Standards](#) for preparation programs, accreditation organizations, and credentialing agencies. CEC members strongly advocate for the adoption of these rigorous preparation standards, including for those who access multiple pathways to the profession (e.g., grow-your-own programs and alternative preparation routes) and recognize the need for professional learning systems that support the growth of individuals entering through such pathways.

Prior to full participation in the workforce, CEC members believe all SETs, as well as other school-based professionals, must demonstrate that they are properly prepared to implement evidence-based, culturally-sustaining, inclusive practices and intensive interventions in a wide range of settings with the diversity of children and youth with exceptionalities. CEC members support continued research on preparation to meet the tenets of IDEA, including researcher-accessible statewide longitudinal datasets. Such resources allow researchers to investigate further the role of preparation, certification, and experience on a variety of long-term outcomes for children and youth with exceptionalities.

Access to rigorous and high quality professional learning must extend throughout the career of a SET, from pre-service to in-service opportunities as demonstrated in the [Advanced Preparation Standards](#). CEC members value access to high quality professional learning opportunities aligned with their immediate challenges and interests. This includes opportunities to learn and develop skills grounded in the research that prepare them for their unique role, match the children and youth they serve, and support them in providing rigorous instruction to diverse learners. Increased funding for national centers and other IDEA Discretionary Grant programs that promote the dissemination of research and the professional learning needs of SETs can enhance in-service learning, along with partnerships forged with other professional organizations aimed at improving the lives of children and youth with exceptionalities.

To support their skill development, SETs value timely performance feedback aligned with instructional practices that support child and youth outcomes and the varied roles SETs play. However, many current professional evaluation systems align poorly with the skills and practices essential to promoting learning for children and youth with exceptionalities (Gilmour & Jones, 2020). Building professional learning systems that streamline learning and skill development from pre-service, through induction and career development can support the capacity and development of SETs, reduce role ambiguity, and strengthen administrator support. Therefore, CEC members advocate for the development and dissemination of tools that may be more reflective of the varied roles of SETs. Additionally, we seek research on data-based evaluation systems that better match the needs of SETs.

Promoting Favorable Working Conditions

Creating favorable workplace conditions for SETs includes considering the demands that may influence an individual's decision to remain in the workforce (Billingsley & Bettini, 2020). This includes considering the range of instructional and non-instructional responsibilities, including supporting students' varying academic and social/emotional, and behavioral needs; conducting screenings, assessments, and evaluations; collaborating with multiple stakeholders; arranging, preparing for, and facilitating multiple meetings; and completing all required paperwork. CEC members support policies at all levels that balance resources with demands, especially in light of evidence of the relationship between role ambiguity with attrition from special education (Brunsting et al., 2014; Garwood et al., 2017). We urge additional research to be funded to identify ways to promote such a balance, including investigations into the various roles SETs play and the resources in place to support their effectiveness.

High turnover and attrition rates in special education are evidence of the challenges to favorable SET working conditions. Therefore, to ensure children and youth with exceptionalities can access high quality, well-prepared SETs, we advocate for retention policies that provide favorable working conditions, increase job satisfaction, and ensure support from colleagues and administrators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2020). Designing such policies requires a more complete understanding of the roles and responsibilities of SETs within and across schools. Currently, our limited understanding of the considerable variation in SET roles challenges research efforts to improve education and lifetime outcomes for children and youth with exceptionalities. Increased access to statewide, longitudinal datasets that represent the wide range of roles SETs play is critical. Access to such data would enable researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders opportunities to reflect on how roles and responsibilities relate to SET retention and effectiveness and their impact on the long-term outcomes for children and youth with exceptionalities. Such research evidence is urgently needed.

Finally, effective administrators play a critical role in creating a collegial culture in school and community-based settings that can help retain racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse SETs (Scott et al., 2020). This includes supporting racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse novice SETs through mentorship opportunities and developing comprehensive systems of support. Collectively, CEC members advocate strongly for increased research and dissemination projects on the impact of

leaders, mentors, and peers on retention to identify effective, evidence-based programs, ensure sustainability, and disseminate findings.

Conclusion

Ensuring inclusion, equity, and access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is central to the vision and mission of CEC. This requires all special education professionals to promote meaningful participation in schools while respecting the individuality of children and youth with exceptionalities. We support policies that strengthen the teacher workforce and advance outcomes for children and youth with exceptionalities through inclusive, racially, culturally sustaining, and evidence-based pedagogy provided by an adequate supply of socio-culturally and linguistically diverse SETs across all schools. To make this happen, CEC will continue to advocate for rigorous, high quality preparation and professional learning opportunities for all educators serving children and youth with exceptionalities and for working conditions that support SETs' access to resources necessary for effective practice.

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