



Ask Arne:

A Conversation with the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Members and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

As I have travelled across the country visiting schools and classrooms and talking with teachers and parents, I have heard many questions about our plans at the U.S. Department of Education to support children with disabilities, their families, and the teachers who educate them and fight for them daily. To hear more about the issues affecting students with disabilities and their teachers, I asked CEC to contact members through an e-mail blast. Your response was overwhelming. Though CEC received more questions than we could possibly answer here, I have worked with your leadership to identify some of the central questions for educators of children with disabilities, and I have worked with my staff at the Department so that we can address them in this document. I would like to thank CEC members and all teachers of children with disabilities for their outstanding compassion and commitment and for the range of complex skills and talents you bring to teaching your students every day.

CEC: I saw that the President added \$200 million to IDEA for FY 2012, but I also saw that the full funding dropped to 16.5%. What are you doing to ensure full funding for IDEA, including Part B, Section 619, Part C, and Part D?

ARNE: President Obama and I are absolutely committed to funding for IDEA and supporting the education of students with disabilities. Even in this fiscal climate, the President's fiscal 2012 budget includes a \$200 million increase for Part B Grants to states for 2012. This represents the Administration's commitment to achieving improved results for children with disabilities while reducing the long-term budget deficit. In addition, states received \$12.2 billion in Recovery Act funds that they are still able to spend to meet urgent needs related to the economic climate.

The 2012 budget request also includes an increase of \$50 million in Part C for grants to states for early intervention services for young children with disabilities and their families, to encourage states to implement a seamless system of services for children with disabilities from birth through age 5. To support a holistic approach to the transition of young people on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, the President has requested \$40 million for PROMISE: Promoting Readiness of Minors in SSI, a pilot program that would be jointly administered with the Social Security Administration, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Labor. The program will create new models that improve health, education, and post-school outcomes for children who receive SSI.

The President and I want to protect other critical programs serving students with disabilities, including IDEA Part B Section 619 preschool and Part D national activities funds. We want to fund innovative new research programs to help provide people with disabilities who need accommodations with on-demand access to those accommodations any time, any place there's an Internet connection. We also want to continue to support young people with disabilities as they transition to college and the workforce.

Both the President and I believe strongly that the general education system needs to serve students with disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. The President's 2012 budget request includes support for programs that will help improve outcomes for students with disabilities in the context of the regular education environment. This includes priorities such as:

- ***\$14.8 billion for the College- and Career-Ready Students program*** (formerly Title I Grants to Local Educational Agencies) to strengthen accountability by continuing to require disaggregated reporting of achievement data for students with disabilities, asking states to implement meaningful interventions in schools with the largest achievement gaps, and measuring student growth as well as achievement.
- ***\$350 million for the new Early Learning Challenge Fund***, to make competitive grants to challenge states to establish model systems of early learning for children, from birth to kindergarten entry, including children with disabilities or developmental delays.
- ***\$185 million for the Presidential Teaching Fellows program***, to support scholarships for high-caliber teaching candidates who will attend top-tier teacher preparation programs and teach in high-need schools, high-need subjects, and high-need fields, including special education.

CEC: I keep hearing lots of information about linking teacher pay to student performance on annual state tests. How will all special educators, some of whom teach students who take an alternate version of this test or use accommodations, be included and rewarded in this system? How will related service providers who work with students in very specialized ways, often for varying amounts of time, be included? What research-based practices are you recommending to use to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness other than student test scores? If principals are to be the ones to determine teacher effectiveness, how is the Department ensuring that they have the knowledge, skills, and evidenced-based tools in order to conduct high quality evaluations?)

ARNE: Teachers are the most important part of a child's education. What teachers do every day in classrooms has a tremendous effect on how much children learn and the options they have in the future. Unfortunately, in many states the system we have for evaluating and supporting teachers is fundamentally broken. Teachers don't receive meaningful feedback, and their evaluations are not used to help them grow professionally or advance in their field. To treat teachers as the professionals that they are, I support states and districts moving away from current systems of teacher evaluation and compensation. Instead, I would like them to move towards a more meaningful system of supporting, recognizing, and rewarding teachers based on their effectiveness in the classroom.

A teacher's effectiveness in the classroom must be determined using multiple measures. These measures should include observations by trained evaluators who have knowledge about teaching, the subject matter, and the context. They could also include student and parental feedback and portfolios of student work. And the evaluations should include the academic growth their students make over the course of a year. Growth should be determined based on fair and objective assessments, but should not be based on the results of one test given a single day. States and districts should consider using results from district-developed assessments or portfolios of student work throughout the year graded against a consistent rubric.

Principals may be among those who evaluate teachers, but they needn't be the only ones – some systems are having veteran teachers with experience in the community and classroom assignment

conduct observations. Either way, it is vital that principals be given the support and training to serve as strong instructional leaders who understand the needs of all their students and teachers. To support this, the Department is proposing to nearly triple funding for leadership preparation and to set-aside \$50 million in state-level funds for states to invest in better support and training for principals in implementing evaluation systems and using the results from them to inform sound instructional decisions.

Systems will have to recognize, of course, that a simple 25 -1 relationship of students to teachers isn't the reality for many students and teachers. Sometimes this may mean giving multiple teachers recognition for the achievement gains of a student they both taught. Other times, it may mean using group-based measures for a team of teachers who work with overlapping groups of students. So states and districts should work with their teachers to determine which arrangements best reflect the reality of how teaching and learning happens in their schools. We recognize the prevalence and effectiveness of team teaching; for example, a regular education teacher and a special educator working together in the same classroom. Teacher evaluations have to support and reward teachers working in team teaching or other cooperative models.

CEC: Are you recommending a growth model be used for assessing the progress of all students academically in the upcoming ESEA reauthorization? If so, how will it address students with disabilities? I understand that through federal grants new assessments will be created for states to use annually. How will these tests accommodate the full range of students with disabilities and when will they be available? NCLB has raised the bar for students with disabilities through inclusion on state and district assessments. However, students with average cognitive ability and severe learning disabilities continue to demonstrate low performance on assessments such as the NAEP. Is this being addressed with the reauthorization of NCLB? If so, how? And if not, why?

ARNE: In order to win the future, President Obama has challenged us that we must enable every single American to reach their potential. Every child, regardless of income, race, background, or disability can learn and must learn, and our system of education must embrace this core belief every day in every way possible. We want to model the best practices that we know are most effective, and at the top of that list of best practices is one simple word: inclusion. When we set high expectations, students with disabilities can excel. Students with disabilities, like everyone else, must be college- and career-ready because we know that the good jobs of the future will require more than a high-school diploma. With a high-quality education, children with disabilities will be self-sufficient and will be able to live independently.

In President Obama's Blueprint for Reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, states, districts, and schools will track individual student growth and school progress over time to guide local improvement and support strategies for schools. The focus on student growth will replace NCLB's accountability system that is based on absolute performance toward the goal of proficiency. We want students with disabilities to be held to the same college- and career-ready standards as all students, and schools that are accountable for helping them reach these standards. We also want to recognize and reward growth. Under NCLB, when a 5th grade student goes from a 2nd grade reading level to a 4th grade reading level in one year, both the teacher and the student are branded as failures because the student is still not on grade level. Under our plan, that two-year growth is acknowledged as a great accomplishment because that student is on track to catch up to grade level.

The Department is investing significant resources in improving assessments through the Race to the Top Assessments (RTTA) and General Supervision Enhancement Grants (GSEG) programs. One of the requirements in RTTA and the GSEGs is that the assessment systems provide an accurate measure of student growth over a full academic year. That would include all students with disabilities taking the RTTA assessments as well as the 1% of students that have significant intellectual disabilities who take the assessments developed by GSEGs.

The RTTA consortia are thinking about how to measure growth accurately and appropriately for students with disabilities and making sure the tests they develop can support a measure of individual student growth. Student achievement for all students, including children with disabilities and gifted students, is too important to simply measure them against a single yardstick, once per year. Teachers, schools, and parents need to know if students are on track to be college- and career-ready, and if not, where they are struggling and how much growth they are making. That information is vital to know what is working, what is not, and where to put resources.

We know that students with disabilities continue to perform below their non-disabled peers on academic assessments, and we must do better in preparing students with disabilities for college and a career. In order to help them succeed, all students should have access to high-quality, grade-level instruction aligned to college- and career-ready standards. Students won't meet high standards until they are given access to the regular education curriculum that includes the educational content needed to demonstrate academic competency. Students with disabilities should be regarded as regular education students first, and they should receive the special education and related services guaranteed under IDEA.

CEC: How will the Department of Education identify ways that states and local education agencies will be able to address functional, purposeful transition activities for students with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 21 in IDEA?

ARNE: Great question. It is critical that we do everything we can to help our students transition to college and careers after high school. Effective transition services are directly linked to better post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Researchers have identified evidence-based practices for secondary transition that help to improve student outcomes and better prepare students for college (or other postsecondary education and training) and the workforce. For example, practices such as teaching students employment skills using community-based instruction, developing self-advocacy skills such as directing their own individualized education program (IEP) meetings, and structuring programs to extend services beyond secondary school have proven to be effective.

I recognize that state and local educational agencies continue to need assistance developing and implementing postsecondary goals and transition services that result in the academic and functional achievement students with disabilities need to successfully transition to college (or other postsecondary education and training) and the workforce. To assist them, the Department's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) has funded a number of technical assistance centers. They include:

- *The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, NC.*
- *The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities at Clemson University in Clemson, SC.*
- *The National Postschool Outcomes Center at the University of Oregon in Eugene.*

- *The IDEA Partnership Project's Transition Community of Practice at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc., in Alexandria, VA.*
- *The Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) at four locations: St. Paul College, St. Paul, MN; California State University, Northridge, CA; University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN; and Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY.*
- *The National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research in Washington, DC.*

In addition, every year in May a National State Planning Institute is held in Charlotte, NC, to assist state teams as they develop, augment or problem-solve around their state transition plans. The Institute's purpose is to provide multidisciplinary state teams (representatives from education, vocational rehabilitation, adult services, families, youth, and other stakeholders in secondary transition) with professional development on school completion strategies, other secondary transition education and services, and post-school outcome data collection and use.

CEC: How will you ensure that Universal Design for Learning will be incorporated into ESEA and that it will be appropriate to ALL students' diverse needs?

ARNE: The Department, through OSERS, has been a leader and national pioneer in developing and supporting universal design concepts. I consider the UDL principles to be central to broadening access to educational materials and curriculum so that students with disabilities can be students in regular education programs first, in addition to having their individualized needs met under IDEA. Put another way, UDL-oriented materials, curriculum and testing are major enablers of IDEA's goal of educating all students in the least restrictive environment. Under the Blueprint for Reform of ESEA, the Effective Teaching and Learning for a Complete Education programs will support states and districts in implementing high-quality programs that support instruction in literacy; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; and other subjects for all students, including students with disabilities. UDL principles can help states and districts ensure that these programs include students with disabilities from the beginning.

CEC: Do you anticipate a federal early learning program being enacted as stand-alone legislation like S.470, recently introduced to establish an Early Learning Challenge Fund, or through the reauthorization of ESEA?

ARNE: I am happy to say that early learning programs took a major step forward in the FY 2011 budget Congress approved and President Obama signed earlier this month. Even in a climate of great fiscal constraint, the President and Congress made an important statement that early learning is one of the best investments we can make. The FY 2011 law includes joint activities between the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services and development specifications for state-level improvement of early childcare and education.

President Obama is committed to continuing early learning programs in the future. In his FY 2012 budget, he has requested \$350 million for the new Early Learning Challenge Fund (ELCF). The ELCF will make competitive grants that challenge states to establish model systems of early learning for children, from birth to third grade, including children with disabilities and English learners. These model systems would promote high standards of quality and a focus on outcomes across all settings to ensure that more

children enter school ready to succeed. We've requested this funding under a reauthorized ESEA, and we're hopeful that Congress will include the ELCF in reauthorization.

CEC: What role do you see for technology in the next ten years, particularly as it relates to children with disabilities?

ARNE: The technology cycle of development and adoption is now considerably faster than ten years, so it's hard to say what will happen over the next decade. But we know that we must take advantage of new technology to help all students learn, enhance instruction, and give students access to additional resources and learning opportunities. We also need to make sure that technology isn't just an isolated program – it should be integrated into everything that happens in education.

Rapidly emerging technologies offer great promise for persons with disabilities, and I am in favor of improving access and development of new technologies to help improve learning, independent living, community integration, and employment for students with special needs. The IDEA Part D Technology and Media Services program has long supported technology-oriented solutions to enhance learning for students with disabilities.

I have also asked the our Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to work to ensure that educational technology in federally-assisted programs is accessible to individuals with disabilities. Most recently, OCR and the Department of Justice worked together to help ensure the accessibility of electronic book reader.

We are also working to stay on top of technology trends. For example, our FY 2012 budget request includes \$10M to improve access to technology for individuals with disabilities through cloud computing. The Department also will continue to support the development and use of technology for individuals with disabilities through the Technology and Media Services program under IDEA, as well as the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research.

There are also some specific examples of technology solutions for individuals with disabilities the Department supports. The Steppingstones of Technology Innovation program has supported technology development and research since 1998, and it has produced and tested a number of technology-based approaches to benefit children with disabilities in a wide range of ages and categories of disability. Products have included software, hardware, instructional methods, assessment instruments and methods, audio-visual media, and web-based resources.

The National Instructional Materials Access Center (NIMAC) receives and maintains a catalog of print instructional materials made available to such center by the textbook publishing industry, state educational agencies, and local educational agencies. NIMAC also provides access to print instructional materials, including textbooks, in accessible media, free of charge, to blind or other persons with print disabilities in elementary schools and secondary schools. As of December 2009, NIMAC had 87 publishers providing 19,330 file sets, 148 authorized users who had downloaded 3,300 files for conversion to accessible textbooks, and 132 accessible media producers.

The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research funds 19 Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers (RERCs) to develop and promote technologies that will improve the lives of persons with disabilities. These RERCs, for example, develop and evaluate technology for persons with low vision and blindness, promote equitable access to and use of wireless technologies by persons with disabilities,

and develop telerehabilitation for individuals who have limited access to comprehensive medical and rehabilitation outpatient services. Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) projects support technology access, research, and development activities including natural support mechanisms for people with intellectual disabilities that facilitate greater opportunities and independence in employment settings, an electronic mobility aid for individuals with low vision or blindness to prevent collision with overhanging obstacles not detected by standard methods such as the cane, technology that can assess and train social information processing skills in children with autism spectrum disorders, and a small mobile personal cooling system that can be worn conveniently by individuals with heat-related disabilities such as multiple sclerosis. In addition to the RERCs and SBIRs, there are field-initiated projects that address a wide range of technology needs that support children, youth and adults in home, community, and workplace environments.

Additional Reading

- The Blueprint for Reform, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>
- For more information about OSERS's work on Transition, see <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/reports.html>
- More information about universal design for learning can be found at the OSERS supported Center for Applied Special Technology (now "CAST") website, <http://www.cast.org/>.

Useful Links

- Ideas that Work Toolkit <http://www.osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/index.asp>
this is a good meta-site/URL
- IDEA - Building The Legacy of IDEA 2004: <http://idea.ed.gov/>
- OSEP National Technical Assistance Coordination Center www.tadnet.org
- The IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University has many training modules on effective classroom interventions for teachers to use <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/index.html>
- National Parent Technical Assistance Center Network <http://www.parentcenternetwork.org/>