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Improving Outcomes for Children with Disabilities Through High-Quality Early Learning Programs

SUMMARY

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides early intervention and preschool services to more than 1 million infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities and their families, a 45% increase over the last 20 years.
- IDEA's early childhood programs decrease the need for special education services in kindergarten, support developmental progress and prepare children to thrive with necessary educational services & supports.
- Stagnant federal funding has meant 40% fewer dollars per preschool child with a disability over the last 20 years. In fact, funding per child has hit a 27-year low for preschoolers with disabilities. As a result, states have narrowed eligibility criteria and shifted costs to families.
- CEC supports the *Strong Start for America's Children Act* (S.1697/H.R. 3461) though urges Congress to dedicate 5% of authorized funding for each of IDEA's Early Intervention Program (Part C, serving children birth-2 years) and Preschool Program (Part B Section 619, serving children ages 3-5 years).
- Federal funding for IDEA's Early Intervention and Preschool program must substantially increase to keep pace with the number of children and families who rely on services.



Over 75% of children who receive IDEA's early childhood programs show greater than expected growth.

More than 1 million infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities and their families currently receive services provided by IDEA. While these services – known as Early Intervention and Special Education – are individualized to meet the needs of each child, they share common goals of improving developmental, social, and academic outcomes.

Research has demonstrated that intervening at the earliest age possible can improve outcomes for children with disabilities as they enter into kindergarten and progress in their education. In fact, studies have found a number of long-term cost savings, such as decreased grade repetition, reduced special education spending, enhanced productivity, lower welfare costs, increased tax revenues, and lower juvenile justice costs.

IDEA's early childhood programs, IDEA Early Intervention Program (Part C) and Preschool Program (Part B Section 619) have demonstrated positive results for children, their families, and society. In fact, over 75% of children who receive IDEA's early childhood programs show greater than expected growth in knowledge and skills, social relationships, and taking action to meet needs, according to analysis by the Early Childhood Outcomes Center.

The Council for Exceptional Children supports the *Strong Start for America's Children Act* (S.1697/H.R. 3461), legislation to expand early learning opportunities for children from birth through age 5. Specifically, this bill would:

- Expand high-quality preschool for 4-year old children from families earning below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.
- Encourage states to spend their own funds to support preschool for young children with family incomes above that income level.
- Reinvest in programs benefiting infants and toddlers.

While this legislation takes a bold and critical step forward, CEC and others in the disability community have urged Congress to recognize that with newly-expanded preschool opportunities, it is likely that more children will be identified as needing special education services.

Therefore, CEC recommends that the *Strong Start for America's Children Act* be amended to include a 5% funding set-aside for IDEA's Preschool Program and 5% of funding be set-aside for IDEA's Infants and Toddler's with Disabilities Program. This complementary investment will help ensure that children receive the services they need to learn and thrive.

Strong Start for America's Children Act (S.1697/H.R. 3461)

*Introduced by Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), Congressman George Miller (D-Calif.),
Congressman Richard Hanna (R-N.Y.)*

- ✓ *Preschool formula grant program to provide universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten for 4-year olds.*
- ✓ *Promotes coordination with IDEA's early learning programs serving children from birth-5 years.*
- ✓ *Reserve 15% funding for programs serving infants/toddlers through high-quality providers.*
- ✓ *Establishes Early Head Start-child care partnerships for infants/toddlers.*
- ✓ *Invests in training, scholarships and professional development for early learning educators.*