The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is currently on a long list of legislation in need of reauthorization by Congress. Although there is no set date for reauthorization, The Council for Exceptional Children’s (CEC) IDEA Reauthorization Workgroup, which consists of board-appointed experts on policy, practice, and research in special education and early intervention, has begun preparations by drafting the recommendations and principles for IDEA reauthorization. To refine the draft, the workgroup recently sought input from the Representative Assembly (RA), CEC’s membership advisory body to the board of directors, which met at the CEC 2017 Convention and Expo in April. CEC president Mikki Garcia stated that the "power of using the RA to provide meaningful input related to issues in our field cannot be understated." (Read Mikki Garcia’s full statement.)

Members of the RA were provided with the draft principles and recommendations well in advance of the meeting in order to solicit feedback from members of their state unit, division, and the student membership.

Michael L. Wehmeyer, Ross and Mariana Beach Professor and Chair of the Department of Special Education at the University of Kansas, who is also an RA representative for the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities, called the principles and recommendations created by the workgroup a "port in the storm" that can help to ground the field of special education in uncertain times. Wehmeyer celebrated that he had the opportunity through the RA "to sit with colleagues to weigh in on the principles, rationales, and recommendations presented in the reauthorization document. (Read Mike Wehmeyer’s full statement.)

During the meeting, the comments, concerns, and suggestions of the RA were recorded and compiled to bring back to the workgroup. CEC Divisions, members, and other entities were also provided an opportunity to weigh in through an open comment period.
Kathy Maciel, M.Ed., NBCT, a special education consultant and a Kentucky CEC board member who represents Kentucky on the RA, said "it's been an exciting time since CEC's IDEA work group began developing the draft recommendations and principles." Maciel has seen firsthand how the RA can help to engage members and improve collaboration and dialogue between educational and legislative leaders at the state and local level. "This year, I was honored to engage and contribute feedback with other unit and division representatives regarding the recommendations," said Maciel. (Read Kathy Maciel's full statement.)

To encourage this kind of productive exchange, the representation process was streamlined in the early 2000s. Scott Rossig, M.Ed, BCBA, who is an RA representative for New Jersey CEC and served as the first chair of the CEC Representative Assembly Committee, which is charged with oversight of operation of the RA, explained that in addition to trimming the unit and division delegations to just two representatives, the new model for unit representation "maximized opportunities for meaningful feedback" by restructuring the meeting to most efficiently convene members whose "primary responsibility is to provide feedback on key issues in order to guide decision making of the board of directors and CEC." (Read Scott Rossig's full statement.)

"CEC's RA has definitely changed in the time I have been a member of the board of directors," said Garcia. "It is so refreshing to be a part of using this body of professionals to enhance our field and to contribute to such important issues as IDEA reauthorization."

Wehmeyer agrees, adding that reaffirmation of the core purposes of IDEA "is critically important as we begin to inform, educate, and advocate with new federal leaders to ensure that the education of students with disabilities remains focused on what is best for students and families."

The workgroup is currently in the process of reviewing the input from the RA meeting prior to providing its draft recommendations to the board of directors later this year. Deb Ziegler, CEC’s Director of Policy and Advocacy and Staff Liaison to the workgroup said "So much rich material came out of the RA discussion. The workgroup is pleased to have received such thoughtful input from the RA."
The power of using the Representative Assembly (RA) to provide meaningful input related to issues in our field cannot be understated. During the 2017 Representative Assembly meeting at the annual convention in Boston, I was able to observe and participate in rich discussion with individuals who broadly represent our field. I firmly believe that the result of this input will produce recommendations that are sensitive to the needs of students, parents and those who provide services in the field. The work of the IDEA Reauthorization workgroup gave the RA substantive content which they were able to use to reflect and provide feedback. While we are not pushing for reauthorization at this time, it is critical that the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) be prepared to provide input when the time comes. We will be ready as an organization with recommendations that reflect the best thinking from members of our field.

CEC’s RA has definitely changed in the time I have been a member of the Board of Directors. It is so refreshing to be a part of using this body of professionals to enhance our field and ultimately services for students with disabilities.

Michael L. Wehmeyer, Ph.D., RA representative for the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities; Ross and Mariana Beach Professor and Chair of the Department of Special Education at the University of Kansas

To state that these are uncertain times with regard to special education policy, legislation, and leadership is to state the obvious. As is always the case when there is a change of administration at the federal level, the federal leaders in special education with whom we have built relationships and relied on to carry the torch for quality education experiences for students with disabilities have moved on to other roles. As of this writing, a new OSERS Assistant Secretary has been appointed (though only within the last week) and the OSEP Director, to my knowledge, has not yet been appointed. The faithful and effective OSEP program staff remain our touchpoint to ensure that the business of educating students with disabilities continues, but what might lie ahead with regard to policy, legislation, and leadership remains unclear. It has been 13 years since IDEA was last reauthorized, and much has changed in that time. In the Fall of 2015, the CEC Board of Directors appointed a workgroup of the nation’s thought leaders from all points of the special education world to begin developing principles and recommendations for future IDEA reauthorization. The members of this workgroup obviously could not predict the outcome of the 2016 elections and, thus, had the unenviable task of preparing principles and recommendations for reauthorization that might guide the field in any eventuality. It is in times of uncertainty that any light in the storm is critically important, and that could not be more true than now. The Principles and Recommendations provide, to continue the stormy sea analogy, a port in the storm to which the field can drop anchor and tie the ship to dock. As a member of the Representative Assembly at the CEC convention in Boston, I had the opportunity to sit with colleagues—some from universities, some from the classroom, others from administration, and still others students—to weigh in on most of the Principles, Rationales, and Recommendations presented in the document. Our comments, concerns, and suggestions were recorded and compiled to bring back to the workgroup. CEC Divisions, members, and other entities were provided an opportunity to do likewise through an open comment period. Is the document perfect? Do I agree with everything in the document? No, of course not. That’s what consensus is about. I do, however, have a great deal of trust in the members of the workgroup who I know and who are acknowledge experts in all aspects of the field that would need to be present to inform an IDEA reauthorization. The document’s reaffirmation of the core purposes of IDEA is critically
important as we begin to inform, educate, and advocate with new federal leaders to ensure that the education of students with disabilities remains focused on what is best for students and families. From having a well-qualified workforce to ensuring equal access to general education opportunities; from advocating a robust early intervention system to emphasizing the critical role of IDEA in protecting the civil rights of children with disabilities and their families: the CEC Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Reauthorization Principles and Recommendations provides an important—indeed, a critical—resource around which CEC members and other advocates for the education of children with disabilities can rally, can refer to, and can reference as we attempt to move ahead in the murky waters of the future.

Kathy Maciel, M.Ed., NBCT, RA Representative for Kentucky CEC; special education consultant at Green River Regional Education Cooperative

As a KY CEC board member, I’ve been allowed many benefits. The most notable was representing Kentucky at the CEC Representative Assemblies. It’s been an exciting time since CEC and its IDEA work group began developing Recommendations and Principles for IDEA Reauthorization.

In 2015, I was fortunate enough to attend the initial briefing of this work and learn how to engage our own Kentucky members for their input. We’ve sent questionnaires and hosted a town hall meeting at our annual Exceptional Children’s Conference. Engaging our members and improving collaboration and dialogue between educational and legislative leaders at the state and local level have remained part of our strategic plan for KY CEC goals. We could not progress in this endeavor without the guidance and learning opportunities provided by CEC and their hosted events.

It’s our obligation to be knowledgeable, pursue and advocate for educational equity for students with disabilities. In addition, it’s imperative to listen to different perspectives and have honest conversations from those across the nation. This year, along with our President-Elect, I was honored to engage and contribute feedback with other state representatives with various roles in education. These opportunities are crucial for the future state of Special Education. Thank you CEC, for leading the extensive work put into these recommendations. When the time comes for the reauthorization of IDEA, hopefully these will be noted and applied.

Scott Rossig, M.Ed, BCBA, RA Representative for New Jersey CEC, Principal, South Bergen Jointure Commission

I am privileged to have served as a unit representative to CEC throughout my career. As a student CEC member in the early 1990’s, I recall the excitement of representing NJ in the CEC Delegate Assembly! I also recall thinking that participation in the Delegate Assembly was a complex and lengthy process. This experience led to my ongoing participation as a representative and ultimately, as the first chair of the CEC Representative Assembly Committee. The process of unit representation needed to be streamlined. The newly developed model trimmed the unit delegations to just two representatives, yet, the annual meeting remained lengthy, and we were not maximizing opportunities to get meaningful feedback. The process has continued to evolve! Today, the structure of the RA Meeting is such that participants attend for a full afternoon, rather than 1.5 days. They serve as members of a body whose primary responsibility is to provide
meaningful feedback on key issues, so as to guide decision-making of the Board of Director’s, and in turn, CEC and the field. Topics are limited, yet ample time is provided for discussion and strategizing in a small group format with representatives of other units. I was happy to be able to return to the RA and serve as a representative of NJ this past April! I was contented with the feeling that we participated in enriching, meaningful and thoughtful discussion which will be used to guide CEC’s positions and recommendations on the Reauthorization of IDEA, and the future of special education!