Dear CCBD Members,

It is with heavy hearts that we return to work this morning in light of the tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The senseless loss of life is incomprehensible. As a profession, we lost four dedicated educators affiliated with special education in this tragedy.

- First grade teacher, Victoria Soto, 27, was working toward a master's degree in special education at Southern Connecticut State University.
- Principal Dawn Hochsprung, 47, served throughout the area, first as a special education teacher, then as assistant principal and principal.
- School psychologist Mary Sherlach, 56, had worked as a rehabilitation assistant at a psychiatric facility and with disabled adults in a group home. Sherlach described herself as "always ready to assist in problem solving, intervention and prevention."
- Rachel D'Avino, 29, a special education teacher, had begun working at Sandy Hook only this fall.

These educators and others at Sandy Hook responded with courage and bravery to protect their children.

For our profession the public response is challenging. We have already seen public cries to isolate those with mental illness. Each time a senseless act like this occurs a history of mental illness since childhood is described. As professionals trained to support these children it is disheartening to read the trajectory of this young man. But as professionals that have dedicated our lives to serving children with emotional and behavioral disorders we must support each other as we struggle to understand recent events.

As special educators many of our friends and family may ask us questions hoping we may help them to understand what led to this event. We must respond with compassion. Some children are harder to reach than others.

There are many organizations that have supports and resources are available to help parents and educators explain these events to children. It is important that the media attention regarding children with mental illness does not increase the bullying and social isolation for the children we teach. We must help all children feel safe at school. The following are links to resources that help both parents and educators:

- NAMI http://www.nami.org/
- NEA School Crisis Guide http://crisisguide.neahn.org/crisisguide/
- PTA http://www.pta.org/index.cfm
- NASP http://www.nasponline.org/
As part of our mission serving students with emotional and behavioral disorders, CCBD will continue to emphasize the importance of increasing mental health awareness across all educational settings. As a professional organization advocating for at-risk youth, we believe schools need an increased focus on the impact of mental illness on students’ social, educational, and employment outcomes. To ensure those children who require mental health services are identified and provided needed services, educational professionals need to change our knowledge, attitudes and behaviors towards individuals with mental illness. The existing stigma towards individuals with mental illness marginalizes them as members of society, and limits their potential to succeed in school and society. These goals can be furthered by schools:

- Promoting training aimed at reducing discrimination against students with mental illness.
- Actively screen students to identify those in need of mental health services.
- Increasing mental health awareness among educational professionals.
- Increasing student rates of self-help seeking behaviors.
- Increasing availability of mental health services provided within schools.

As a profession, we must continue to advocate for appropriate services for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Screenings such as those included in positive behavior intervention and support models can provide early identification of children at risk for mental illness.

We must also address school violence through vigilance and communication:

- Responding to risk factors: Individual, peer, family, school, and neighborhood;
- Providing a balanced approach that improves students’ investment and bonding to school; and
- Offering general supports for all students.

Our hearts go out to the grieving families. We can only hope from this tragedy will be a commitment to better serving our children and youth with EBD.

On behalf of CCBD,

Kristine J. Melloy, Ph.D., CCBD President  December 18, 2012

Susan Albrecht, Ph.D., AGR Chairperson  December 18, 2012