October 29, 2019

Chairman Bobby Scott  
House Education and Labor Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Virginia Foxx  
House Education and Labor Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Foxx:

On behalf of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), I am writing to congratulate the Committee on taking steps to comprehensively reauthorize the Higher Education Act (HEA) through introduction of H.R. 4674, the College Affordability Act.

As you may know, CEC is a professional association comprised of educators dedicated to advancing the success of students with exceptionalities which accomplishes its mission through advocacy, standards, and professional development. CEC’s Professional Preparation Standards provide the gold standard for the field of special education- they define the specialized expertise that special educators must master to be effective. CEC’s standards also inform college preparation programs, accreditation organizations and credentialing agencies. CEC advocates for evidence-based best practices in special education and supports for educators at all levels, from early intervention through higher education.

A top concern of CEC relative to the status of K-12 education is the persistent shortage of special educators and early intervention providers, which has reached crisis levels. Currently, there are special educator shortages in 48 states and the District of Columbia, and in most states, special education is the top shortage area. Simultaneously, special educators are leaving the profession at an annual rate of over 12 percent, nearly twice the rate of their general education peers, and enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped by over one-third in the last five years. The shortage gravely impacts students, results in high turnover of special educators and is costly to schools and districts; perpetuating the quality staff gap and the student achievement gap.

Broadly, CEC is pleased with provisions in H.R. 4674 which seek to address the special educator shortage crisis by strengthening the educator pipeline and investing in updates to student grants and loans that will lessen the financial burden for educators as they strive to balance student debt costs with lower salaries as compared to other occupations that require a college degree.

In particular, CEC applauds the updates to and additions of the following:

- A reauthorization of the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Grant program that includes a strong focus on high-need schools, expansion to include early childhood educators, support of teacher and leader development accompanied by an increase in the authorization level to $500 million annually;
- In educator residency and induction programs, inclusion of evidence-based practices that positively impact outcomes for students with exceptionalities, including multi-tiered systems...
of support, positive behavioral interventions and supports, universal design for learning, social and emotional learning and support for programs that embed dual certification/licensure for special education instruction and special education leadership;

- Efforts to reduce student loan burdens by increasing the maximum Pell Grant award and expanding the award duration from 12 to 14 semesters, strengthening TEACH grants by creating guardrails to prevent their mistaken conversion from grants to loans, and improving the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program to enable all educators to reach loan forgiveness more quickly;

- Consistency in data reporting requirements for all preparation programs including alternative preparation programs linked to federal funds;

- Requirements that assure students entering college having received accommodations under an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan have immediate access to those supports upon matriculation; and

- Grants that increase accessibility for students with disabilities on college campuses including providing training to support faculty who work with students with disabilities and provide accessible technology and materials in college.

CEC respectfully raises several concerns with H.R. 4674 and urges the Committee address them in the final bill:

- Title II must clarify that any preparation programs - traditional, alternative and grow your own that utilize any federal funds- are required to meet the requirements under Sec. 202: Partnership Grants (F) – (L) that include “the use of rigorous, research-based educator standards…accreditation criteria and licensure requirements....” Additionally, any participating State must include all programs in the requirements under Sec. 207. It is imperative that all preparation programs be required to align with state-set standards and licensure requirements, or students will suffer.

- Title II data reporting for teacher preparation programs appears to be duplicative under a new provision that would expand data collection for all of higher education. While reporting requirements for teacher preparation programs for accountability purposes can provide benchmarking data for quality assurance and transparency, it still remains unclear how Title II data collection is presently used to inform improvements to the teacher preparation field. As currently drafted, this change may create an unnecessary burden on preparation programs and educators in the field.

- TEACH grant data collection at the institution level could dissuade institutions of higher education from participating in the program, resulting in the underutilization of TEACH grants as an incentive to ameliorate the teacher shortage crisis.

Thank you again for your leadership to put forth a comprehensive reauthorization. CEC looks forward to working with you to ensure that a final bill assures the strongest language possible to address the special educator shortage crisis and facilitates that youth with exceptionalities will have
increased access and improved supports to higher education. Please feel free to contact CEC’s Sr. Policy and Advocacy Advisors Kuna Tavalin at kunat@cec.sped.org or Laura Kaloi at laurak@cec.sped.org with any questions.

Sincerely,

Mary Lynn Boscardin, Ph.D.
President