



Higher Education Consortium
for Special Education



TEACHER
EDUCATION DIVISION
COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

December 2, 2010

Mr. Bill Gates
PO Box 6167
Ben Franklin Station
Washington, DC 20044

Dear Mr. Gates:

As leaders in the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE) and the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (TED), we want to respond formally to your recent comments made at the meeting for the Council of Chief State School Officers and to generally express our concerns about how special education teachers are evaluated.

In your address, you mentioned that schools must raise student achievement in light of unprecedented budget reductions. As such, you indicated several costly strategies that schools have embraced which yield little benefit in terms of student achievement. Two viable cost saving tools would be to discontinue paying teachers for seniority and advanced degrees. As an example you cited data from the state of Washington, where teachers receive an "average salary bump of nearly \$11,000 for a master's degree" a salary raise that more than half your teachers receive, costing the state of Washington more than \$300 million and the United States more than 9 billion dollars.

Although we are well aware of the data on teacher education more generally, we wanted to set the record straight on experience and advanced degree attainment for special education teachers, as the data support a different position. **Feng and Sass (2010), in an IES supported study of teachers in Florida, found that for special education teachers advanced degree attainment was positively correlated with student achievement gain. They also found that advanced degrees in special education add value beyond that associated with a bachelor's degree in special education, which was also associated with higher gains for students with disabilities, particularly in the area of reading. Further, experience teaching in special education was associated with**

higher achievement gains for students with disabilities. Thus, more prepared, more experienced special education teachers are also those likely to be more effective.

While it is clear that replication of Feng and Sass' study in states other than Florida is warranted, this well-designed study provides viable evidence that special education preparation at the undergraduate level and advanced degrees for special educators do promote improved achievement in reading and math among students with disabilities.

Importantly, both HECSE and TED support your emphasis on rethinking approaches to teacher compensation, but feel **it is important to reward teachers who obtain advanced degrees or additional certifications when there is evidence that those advanced degrees do indeed increase student achievement.** Further, rewarding special education teachers for their degrees could serve to increase pay for these teachers, and attract teacher candidates into what historically has been a profession plagued by teacher shortages.

We also believe that it is imperative to examine how special education teacher practice is different from general education teacher practice. Many school districts are moving ahead with uniform evaluation systems for both general and special education teachers, failing to distinguish between the two types of professionals and the role they might play in promoting student achievement. For one, special education teachers often work with students for only small portions of the day, making it difficult to isolate their impact on the achievement of students with disabilities. Secondly, special education instructional practice is likely to be somewhat different from general education teacher practice, as special education teachers often must provide more explicit, intensive instruction on key academic and behavioral skills. Treating both teachers similarly in the evaluation system suggests that there is little that is "special" about special education instruction and that special education teachers do not have unique expertise. Unfortunately, we have no research to inform our decision-making about how evaluation systems might be differentiated to recognize the nuances of special education teaching.

HECSE is comprised of 54 universities with doctoral programs in special education. Our member institutions are at the forefront of teacher education, research and development in special education. TED focuses on supporting children, youth, and families of individuals with exceptionalities by preparing special educators. With a membership of over 2300 individuals, TED is one of the largest organizations representing those who prepare and support special education teachers and teacher educators. Together, HECSE and TED have worked to ensure that all students with disabilities receive evidence-based instruction from well prepared educators.

At HECSE and TED, we welcome the opportunity to work with you in addressing the need for well-prepared and highly effective special education teachers. Please feel free to contact us if you would like additional information or have questions.

Respectfully,



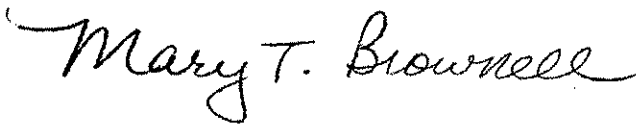
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