



September 12, 2006

Elizabeth Payer  
U.S. Department of Education  
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW.  
Room 602c  
Capitol Place  
Washington, DC 20208

Dear Ms. Payer,

On behalf of the Executive Board of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children, we are pleased to provide comments on the Institute of Education Sciences' plan for addressing the long-term research priorities approved by the National Board for Education Sciences. DEC's Research Committee prepared these comments and submitted them for review and approval of the Executive Board on August 27, 2006.

The Division for Early Childhood is an international membership organization for those who work with or on behalf of young children with disabilities and other special needs. Currently, DEC has approximately 4500 members. It is our mission to promote policies and advance evidence-based practices that support families and enhance the optimal development of young children from infancy through age eight. The Research Committee has developed a set of research priorities for the early intervention and early childhood special education fields. In the attached comments, you will see that DEC's priorities are closely aligned with those proposed by the Institute for Education Sciences.

DEC would like to thank IES for this opportunity to comment on the proposed IES research priorities. On behalf of our DEC members and our nation's children and families, we appreciate the leadership and vision of IES and the continuing effort to shape the future research agenda for all young children, including those with disabilities.

Sincerely,

Tweety Yates, Ph.D.  
President of DEC

Sarah A. Mulligan, M.Ed., CAE  
Executive Director

# Comments on the Plan for Addressing Long-Term Research Priorities for the Institute of Education Sciences

Submitted on August 30, 2006 by  
The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Research Committee

**T**HE RESEARCH COMMITTEE of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is submitting this document in response to the invitation to comment on the plan for addressing long-term research priorities for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). DEC, the single largest professional organization in the world devoted to early intervention and early childhood special education, promotes rigorous research that continues to advance the field of special education and the translation of this research for use in applied settings. We begin by acknowledging the critical importance of developing a plan to address research priorities in education and expressing our appreciation to IES for its leadership in this regard. We applaud IES for launching the early intervention, early childhood special education, and assessment program to address the notable gap in coverage on special education research on infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities. The publication of the IES plan for addressing research priorities coincides with an initiative of the DEC Research Committee focused on developing research priorities for the early intervention and early childhood special education field to address the needs of children birth to 8 years and their families. We are pleased to note that both sets of priorities are closely aligned.

In the remainder of this document, we offer a brief description of the goals and expected benefits of early intervention and early childhood special education as a context for our comments on the plan for addressing long-term research priorities. Then, we discuss how the priorities proposed by the DEC Research Committee align with and build on those developed by the Institute of Education Sciences.



## Goals and Benefits of Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education

Recent advances in the science of early childhood development, including the identification of complex neurological and behavioral mechanisms, suggest that the early years constitute a unique period in which to alter children's developmental trajectories. It is now widely accepted that investments in comprehensive and coordinated early intervention services will generate long-term benefits for children and families. On the basis of this knowledge, federal policy (IDEA) requires all states and localities to develop a coordinated system of services. Although federal legislation created separate infant-toddler (IDEA, Part C) and preschool programs (IDEA, Part B, Section 619), the major legislative goals of these programs are compatible. Both parts of the legislation seek to: a) enhance the child's development; b) reduce the need for, or amount of, special education service; and c) involve parents in order to enhance their capacity as a means of improving their child's outcomes. Recently, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has begun requiring states to provide outcome data on the results of service provision to young children and their families. Research is needed to continue to improve all aspects of service delivery (i.e. conditions under the control of the system), to enhance the capacity of the system to ensure the use of research-based practices, and to measure the outcomes of these essential services.

## Alignment of IES and DEC Research Priorities

This section is organized around the IES priority headings. Under each heading, our comments address the primary research goals for young children with disabilities (and those considered at risk) and their families. In some instances, the DEC Research Committee suggests additions to the IES priority areas. We strongly recommend that IES incorporate the research goals and issues described under each heading into both the IES priorities and future Requests for Proposals.

### Outcomes

IES proposes to focus on *readiness for schooling* during pre-kindergarten and *developmental outcomes* for infants and toddlers with disabilities. The DEC Research Committee builds on this priority by proposing that the results of effective early education and intervention should be evaluated across a broad range of child outcomes that include physical health, as well as all areas of development and learning, including social-emotional development and academic content areas. In addition to the need for research on measuring child outcomes, research measuring family outcomes is equally important, not only for purposes of program planning and improvement, but also to provide accurate outcome data to the Department of Education. Furthermore, there is a need to evaluate the conditions that contributed to various outcomes and to determine the extent to which services, supports, and family involvement lead to enhanced capacity and other important outcomes for children and families.

### Conditions Under Control of the System

**CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT.** Although the IES priorities separate these three conditions, the DEC Research Committee has intentionally grouped them together. There is a need to further develop and evaluate methods that promote early identification and timely intervention, and those that help practitioners link assessment and intervention practices as part of an integrated system. Specifically, early childhood teachers and specialists need resources and expertise in administering universal (1) screening for all children and (2) research-based interventions and progress monitoring for individual children who require additional support and focused interventions to access the general curriculum. There is a need to further

develop and evaluate specific assessment approaches such as curriculum-based measures and alternative assessments for children with disabilities, as well as specific interventions such as routines-based and embedded instructional practices in natural settings. The increasing diversity of the population presents an urgent and critical need for research-based interventions and assessment approaches that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Finally, research is needed with regard to assessments and interventions for young children with particular types of disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorders, other low-incidence conditions, children who have or are at risk for learning disabilities or serious emotional disorders).

**QUALITY WORKFORCE.** Although there is a new emphasis on improving the quality of personnel through innovations in professional development, these approaches remain largely untested through scientific research. In addition, research is needed to evaluate the unique contributions of various models of collaboration and change such as coaching, mentoring, consultation, and communities of practice that are designed to support professional development and knowledge utilization in practice settings. Given the changing demographics of the nation, early education and intervention professionals increasingly encounter children and families from diverse racial, economic, cultural, and linguistic groups. With a greater proportion of students of color currently receiving special education services and an increasing number of Americans who speak a language other than English at home, the demographics of early education and intervention programs are changing rapidly. As a result, there also is a need for professional development that is designed to ensure that practitioners are highly qualified to work with children and families from diverse groups. In addition, research is needed to identify the barriers and facilitators for recruiting and maintaining a diverse workforce.

**SYSTEMS AND POLICY.** Early childhood is a distinct period of life in which children's learning and development are highly dependent on family relationships and environments that are embedded within a wide range of socio-cultural contexts. There is a need to identify and evaluate the most effective models of *collaborating with families*; to determine whether professional-family partnerships lead to enhanced capacity or other outcomes for children and families; and to identify which early education and intervention services, resources, and supports are most relevant and useful for families, and under what conditions.

More than forty states now have early learning standards and the remaining states are in the process of developing descriptions of desired results, outcomes, and expectations that outline what children should know and be able to do before beginning kindergarten. The early learning standards movement is part of the larger accountability movement in which federal and state programs are required to show measurable results for the services they provide to children and families. The existence of multiple *accountability systems* within the early childhood field has resulted in fragmentation, duplication, and a lack of alignment of outcomes and standards across different accountability initiatives. Of particular concern is the need for alignment of outcomes developed for children with disabilities with other learning standards developed for the general population of young children. Because early learning standards generally have been developed on the basis of the field's collective wisdom rather than on empirical evidence, longitudinal research is needed to determine whether specific early learning benchmarks or indicators actually predict later academic success and developmental outcomes.

Research regarding *service delivery, organization, and mechanisms* is crucial to developing an infrastructure to support effective services and practices. There is a need for a more coordinated, systematic approach to serving young children and their families. A smooth, coordinated learning experience for children ages birth to 8 is important, but many children in this age range are served by multiple programs, which makes it difficult to provide a continuum of learning and to plan seamless transitions. Separate funding streams, eligibility criteria, and program goals and standards across various types of early childhood

programs serve as a barrier to communication and service integration. There is a particular need to focus research on policies and systemic issues related to effective models for implementing inclusion, home visiting, early intervening services, and comprehensive transition plans. There is a similar need to evaluate services organized around a coordinated point of access and vendor-based versus program-based early intervention services to determine effects on timely identification and access to various types of services.

### **Capacity and Use**

Given the complex multi-organizational structures of service delivery for young children, the DEC Research Committee recommends that this priority explicitly include research on service delivery models that are relevant to early intervention and early childhood special education.

The DEC Research Committee strongly supports interdisciplinary doctoral and post doctoral training in rigorous research methods, the continued development and refinement of research methods that adequately address the diverse research questions challenging our field, as well as the responsible expansion and use of longitudinal data bases such as NEELS, PEELS, ECLS-B, and ECLS-K to address policy issues.

In recent years, as part of the evidence-based practice movement, there has been a proliferation of initiatives, many of which are web-based and designed to organize and translate research-based knowledge. Little is known, however, about the process by which this information is used, diffused throughout the field, and adopted in practice by families and practitioners. To date, the emphasis has been on gathering and appraising empirical evidence, with randomized controlled trials as the centerpiece of this effort. Still undetermined is whether and how empirical evidence can be integrated with other forms of evidence, most notably, professional and family wisdom and values. As a result, there is a need to identify and evaluate methods for involving consumers as participants in establishing the evidence base and to identify strategies for strengthening partnerships between research and practice communities. There is a similar need for research on how evidence-based practice is affecting early education and intervention, and the practices, strategies, and future directions for implementing an evidence-based practice approach in applied settings. ■

*On behalf of DEC and the entire early intervention and early childhood special education field, we express our appreciation for the opportunity to provide comments on the IES plan for addressing research priorities. We value the leadership provided by IES on behalf of our nation's children and their families. We are eager to work collaboratively with IES in shaping the future research agenda for all young children, including those with disabilities.*

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### **Members of the DEC Research Committee Executive Work Group**

Virginia Buysse, Ph.D. (Chair), The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Patricia Blasco, Ph.D., Oregon Health Sciences University

William Brown, Ph.D., University of South Carolina at Columbia

Gloria Harbin, Ph.D., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Deborah Hatton, Ph.D., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Robin McWilliam, Ph.D., Vanderbilt University

Michaelene Ostrosky, Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Beth Rous, Ph.D., University of Kentucky

Patricia Snyder, Ph.D., Vanderbilt University