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Good afternoon, Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and subcommittee members.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and participate in the Rural Issues Hearing.

Thank you to the National Center for Learning Disabilities for connecting us. I am Dr. Brittany

Hott, a special educator and board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) with doctoral distinction. I

serve as an associate professor of special education and associate director of the Institute for

Community and Society Transformation (ICAST) at the University of Oklahoma. My testimony

is based on 23 years of experience as a special education teacher, instructional leader, teacher

educator, and researcher.

I am a proud graduate of rural schools. I am a recipient of state and federal personnel preparation support that provided training to serve our rural students and their teachers. My research is situated within rural communities, where nearly 30% of U.S. schools serve one-fifth of all public-school students. Almost 17% of our rural students live below the poverty line and over 14% qualify for special education services.¹

Often our rural schools are portrayed negatively through a deficit-oriented lens. This is not reality. Our rural districts have many strengths including a strong sense of community, teacher autonomy, effective and longstanding partnerships with students and families, the ability to implement individualized interventions, and opportunities to act as special education advocates.² When district personnel leverage these strengths, we have the potential to enhance instruction and ultimately outcomes for students. For example, preliminary results from current

projects at the University of Oklahoma funded through the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (special education doctoral leadership training) and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (behavior analyst, school counselor, and social worker training) are positive. School partners report increased student academic performance, decreased suspensions, and improved capacity to deliver special education services in Oklahoma because of these programs. I am going to talk about many challenges facing rural educators and the students we serve, but I want us to remember our strengths and successes.

Unfortunately, our rural educators continue to face significant challenges including longstanding and pervasive personnel shortages, lack of access to professional development and coaching, and resource disparities.³ Urban and suburban districts face similar challenges related to teacher shortages; however, these challenges manifest quite differently in rural districts, which often impedes access to specialists and resources.

Rural Student Outcomes: Increase Funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA) State Grants to at least \$16.26 million for FY 2024.

Although there is a troubling lack of research reporting the educational outcomes of students receiving special education services from rural localities, current data indicate that rural students with disabilities perform significantly below their peers with disabilities from suburban localities in mathematics⁴ and reading⁵, and are more likely to receive suspensions and expulsions.⁶

Rural students with disabilities face many barriers to accessing quality instruction and intervention including: (a) lack of broadband access, (b) low expectations, (c) geographic isolation, (d) poverty, and (e) teaching quality.⁷ Further, descriptive reviews of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students attending schools in rural areas note a lack of assessment data, progress monitoring, and specialized instruction to support academic growth⁸ and poor

social and behavioral supports.⁹ These disparities directly impact postsecondary options, particularly in STEM fields where rural students are uniquely situated to contribute to our workforce. IDEA funds flow through to districts and schools that provide special education and related services to children with disabilities. We have yet to fully fund IDEA. Increases in funding are needed to support our rural students and ensure access to high quality instructional programming.

Personnel Shortages: Increase Funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Act Part D (National Activities) Personnel Preparation Program to \$300 million for FY 2024

Concerning outcomes are not only limited to students. Similar disparities pointing to inequitable treatment, resources, and results can be seen in the rural special education teaching force. This acute need is reflected in (a) data demonstrating national and state-level shortages of special educators and (b) data reflecting a dearth of special education faculty to train future special educators, particularly rural educators. The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services reports that 98% of school districts in the US experience special education teacher shortages. These shortages result in limited access to special education and related services, an inability to provide early intervention services, and an overemphasis on special education compliance. These shortages are even more pronounced in many rural districts where schools are twice as likely to experience difficulties with teacher retention than their suburban counterparts.¹⁰

These issues are exacerbated in rural contexts where it is difficult to attract educators due to remote locations and lower salaries. Many rural localities face high levels of teacher turnover, which is more pronounced in high poverty rural schools with less desirable working conditions. Teacher attrition creates significant financial burdens for schools and districts¹¹ and reduces

student achievement.¹² Although alternative routes to certification and provisional educator preparation pathways offer some reprieve from teacher shortages, individuals who pursue alternative certification are 2 to 3 times more likely to exit the special education profession than their comprehensively trained colleagues.¹³ With respect to equity, students of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are upwards of 4 times more likely to be taught by a teacher licensed through alternative programs¹⁴ resulting in the least prepared or qualified individuals supporting students with the greatest needs.

Addressing the achievement gaps between rural high need schools and their suburban/urban counterparts requires thoughtful deliberate action. Comprehensive training increases teacher retention. To alleviate these issues, we have found success using networked communities of practice and grow our own programs. This investment hedges poorer outcomes that have resulted from alternative and emergency certification programs that do not provide training through mentored student teaching experiences and a comprehensive curriculum. It also builds a community of educators that can maximize rural strengths to meet student needs. The Teacher Quality Partnerships program allows this work to happen.

In addition to the critical shortages of special education teachers, there are also faculty shortages. Higher education faculty are highly trained to develop quality, comprehensively trained special educators and conduct research. A long standing, well-documented, and pervasive shortage of special education faculty (in general) continues to impact the quality of teacher training programs¹⁵ as well as the depth and breadth of our research base. The initial Special Education Faculty Shortage study established a clear link between the shortage of special education faculty and the shortage of qualified special education teachers. Over two decades later, growth in special education doctoral program graduates has not been sufficient to keep up

with needs. Data suggest that Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) will need to produce at least six times the current number of faculty to generate new knowledge and in turn produce the next generation of special education teachers; yet, between 2009 and 2018 there was a 19% reduction in the number of special education doctoral programs.¹⁶ This is the lowest level of training programs, 79 total, in several decades, which sharply decreases the special education faculty prepared to assume leadership and higher education positions. Like teacher recruitment and retention challenges, IHEs serving rural localities have trouble hiring special education faculty. For example, Oklahoma is a predominantly rural state. Findings from a survey of Oklahoma's IHEs with special education training programs indicate that 1 to 4 additional faculty members are needed to support program needs. Additionally, half of the institutions estimate one to three special education retirements over the next five years. Over half of the institutions indicate they have experienced at least one failed special education faculty search and one institution stated that they had 10 failed searches attempting to find qualified special education faculty member.¹⁷ This pattern of difficulty securing strong faculty qualified to support and develop critically needed programming, engage in meaningful research, and to collaborate with rural partners illuminates the extreme need for additional preparation of special education faculty members.

In summation, I am here asking for your support to ensure our children are workforce ready, highly productive, and strong citizens. We do not have time to wait. Please support the aforementioned increases in IDEA, personnel preparation, and research funding.

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