

**Subcommittee Hearing: Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Testimony by:
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Good afternoon Chairman Sablan, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Owens, Ranking Member Foxx, and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Danielle Kovach, and I am a third-grade self-contained learning and language disabilities classroom teacher at Tulsa Trail Elementary School in Hopatcong, NJ. I am also the president-elect of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), a professional association of 22,000 educators dedicated to advancing the success of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. And most importantly, I am the mother of three boys, two of whom currently receive special education services.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to speak before you today to share my story about how the outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted my students, and to identify some strategies and make a number of recommendations that can support children with disabilities as we work collectively to recover from the pandemic.

I have been teaching for 23 years, both in general education and special education. My special education experiences range from co-teaching in an inclusive classroom to teaching in a resource room for students who spend most of the day in a general education classroom and are pulled into a smaller setting for math, English language arts, or both. I am currently teaching in a self-contained classroom where my students spend 60 percent of the school day with me and spend the remainder of the day with their general education peers for specials classes (i.e., art, music, physical education), lunch, and recess.

The last year has been a challenge that continues to test the strength of students, teachers, school personnel, and families to do whatever it takes to continue to participate in education and, in many cases, frankly, to survive. I have spent this year surrounded by the tremendous resilience of families, teachers, school teams, and my district. I have also been supported by tools and resources from CEC, as the organization sprang into action last spring to help special educators when the pandemic forced us to change our approaches to teaching.

Congress recognized the potentially devastating impact the pandemic would have on education and acted quickly to stand up emergency funds to address acute needs in K-12 schools through the CARES Act. Thank you. With the subsequent enactment of the Coronavirus Response and Relief

Supplemental Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), we are beginning to work toward recovery for our schools and students.

I also want to thank Congress for including targeted funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the ARP. That funding will be especially critical for early childhood and K-12 special education programs.

My job is to ensure that my students receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The work of a special educator is challenging. It requires patience, care, flexibility, and a lot of student-centric individualization. While nothing could have prepared us for the last 14 months, these qualities certainly helped carry colleagues and me forward as the world evolved around us.

I will always remember March 13th as the day we shuttered our school doors. From that time until the end of the 2019-2020 school year, there was a constant barrage of new challenges that my grade level team, students, parents, the school, and the district needed to navigate. When our school went to remote learning, we had no time to prepare ourselves or our students for virtual learning. We were in uncharted waters without any experience and training for educators, students, or families. Even after 23 years in education, I felt like a first-year teacher all over again.

Because we were operating under the assumption that we would return to in-person instruction in two weeks, at first, it was a little like a field trip with the kids- we were all experiencing something new together. But very quickly, virtual learning proved to be incredibly difficult. The first challenge was getting all the kids online. Telling my students, “we’re going to go on Google Meet, and I’m going to teach you,” did not quite work as smoothly as I had hoped. Technology was not utilized frequently at the elementary level before this crisis. My class had experience using their Chromebooks when writing stories because of voice-to-text accessibility features. They also used the technology to read online stories and play educational games. But suddenly, having technology went from being an accessory to an absolute necessity.

Because I work with elementary-aged students, they do not have email accounts. All correspondence had to go through parents’ email accounts. However, not all parents had email or access to the internet. In those cases, I made phone calls to parents several times a day. I found that many parents were in distress. With their kids home from school, many parents could not work, and some lost their jobs. Several students did not have access to the internet. Without access to school lunches, children were hungry. And there was the constant worry about the virus and many unknowns. It was the perfect storm.

I met with the paraeducators in my class to create a preliminary plan for virtual learning. I made videos for the paraeducators and parents to navigate our online platform. We started with a video about how to log into the school’s platform. We also printed paper learning packets and connected with parents to discuss ways to support their kids for families that could not navigate virtual learning.

It was amazing to see how everyone worked so hard to make the best of an undesirable situation. The paraeducators in my class were phenomenal. I have been working with them for years, and they stuck by our students and me. Learning to navigate new technology was a challenge. Having never been trained in online learning, we all had to learn how to use Google Classroom together. Along with the speech therapist on our team, we had a common goal to support the students, making us an even stronger force. We also included the parents on our team. The only way to make our virtual learning successful for our students was for everyone to be aligned and working together. It was truly a team effort!

My grade level team communicated through group texts every day and recognized that we needed to offer more tools to engage students in virtual learning. We created a website for parents to help their children at home. Resources included fun activities to do at home and materials to help parents assist their children with social-emotional needs.

However, as teachers, we knew that we also needed information to help us teach our students virtually. We collaborated through Google Meet and gave teacher lead mini-workshops on how to navigate Google Classroom. I watched and shared every webinar I could find that offered credible information about effective teaching from a virtual platform. CEC also provided a wealth of information, especially through the CECCommunity, an online forum where special educators connect, collaborate, and share ideas. By using this platform, I learned from other educators across the country who were also facing similar experiences during the pandemic.

Of course, there were bumps in the road. To support parents who were facilitating online learning and ensure students were receiving their instruction and supports, I re-sent parents their child's individualized education programs (IEPs). I walked them through agreed-upon modifications to have a mutual understanding about what we could do together to support their children. We all worked hard to keep the lines of communication open and did whatever we could to ensure the success of every student. For example, when a student in my class struggled with reading, my paraeducator sat outside that student's home and read to her.

I quickly found that the support my students and families needed went way beyond how to deliver academic instruction. I would get phone calls from parents after their children went to sleep. Most of the calls were not about school at all. Parents would ask for advice about securing basic needs like food or medical help or expressed fears about how they would help their children if they got sick. Many just needed someone to talk to.

In many ways, I could relate to the struggles that my student's parents were facing. I also had my three boys at home while my husband was on the front line. My husband is an emergency medical technician. He went on all his calls in full protective gear, and the personal protective equipment shortage was so acute that he had to provide his own. Stress and fear were everywhere, and the white Tyvek hazmat suit my husband hung in our garage every night after work was a constant

reminder of the grim reality our world was facing. I was trying to teach and parent, all while trying to keep my head above water. I was also trying to survive.

I continually worry about the impact of the pandemic on student mental health and social-emotional development. What our students see and hear about the pandemic on the news and in social media is overwhelming. Schools were not always equipped to support the challenges we were facing before COVID-19, and there is now an even greater need for these supports to be more rigorously offered to children and their families. Students with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. My school has a strong team, but with the additional resources provided by Congress we can adequately support the growing emotional challenges students face. I see the tireless work my school guidance counselor is facing. Every day she not only counsels the students in her charge, but her caseload has been growing exponentially since the pandemic. Students who usually do not need counseling services need help from the school to cope with the stress brought on from COVID-19. With additional resources, we can hire staff to help every student and provide teachers with a curriculum to support social-emotional learning.

On June 19, 2020, the last day of school, we did a celebratory count down. I thought it would be a huge relief for everyone that the school year ended. Shortly after school ended, a parent called me and asked if I could to speak to her daughter, who was crying hysterically. She was distressed that the school year was over. That really stuck with me. Children need structure and consistency. Even with all the inconsistencies of last spring, one of the constants was still school, regardless of its changing format. She was scared to lose that.

We went into the 2020-2021 school year anticipating that virtual learning would be a possibility, so we were better prepared. Thanks in large part to targeted emergency funding through the CARES Act, all our students now have devices, and personnel who needed it could access technology from home. My school district provided technology workshops and professional development on Google Classroom and other virtual learning platforms.

Our district also developed a virtual and hybrid learning schedule and a plan for providing instruction for each. This structure provided a needed sense of organization and stability as well as more effective planning. We are currently meeting in person every day for four hours and teaching virtually every afternoon. The schedule allows the school to avoid in-person lunch and allow for our custodians to sanitize every day.

We have switched back and forth from hybrid to completely virtual several times this year based on COVID-19 outbreaks, exposures, and local infection rates. Many times, the switch happened with little to no notice. I learned quickly that taking home all of my teaching materials every day was a necessity in case we were not in-person the following day. My class was the first to quarantine in September and go virtual within the district. But we were prepared for virtual instruction because on the first day of school and each day that first week, we focused on understanding how to navigate our personal devices and our virtual platforms. Ensuring that each

student knows how to use their technology meant we could focus on instruction whenever we switched to virtual. Even though the transition was still disruptive, it was easier because students knew what to expect, which was a major improvement from last year.

In-person instruction is much different now. So much of education is group learning, especially in my classroom, where students can sit where they are comfortable, at a table, on the rug, or on a bean bag and work with their peers. Now my students sit at desks with protection barriers instead of tables. We literally have shower curtains with PVC pipes separating each desk, and the students try to talk to each other through plastic walls.

While a global pandemic changed much of how my classroom typically runs, it did not stop the learning but instead taught me how to adapt and find another way to make things work. Gone from my classroom are the sensory corner and learning stations, which are now a health hazard. Our sensory/calming corner was replaced with individual sensory kits. Learning centers went from hands-on activities to interactive activities in Google Classroom. My classroom library went virtual and students access stories online instead of reading from a book. Our class "treasure chest," where students earn rewards, turned into an online shopping experience.

The highlight of every week for my students is when we cook in Cafe Kids. Cafe Kids is a fully equipped kitchen that teaches life skills through cooking while integrating academics and speech therapy. This year, we decided the pandemic would not stop our students from cooking, so we began a "Cafe Kids Virtual Food Network." Students cook from home with their families as the special education teachers and speech teacher cook in the cafe at school. As one student described it, "I like cooking at home with mom every week because I never cooked with her before. It's cool to watch my teacher cook because I'm learning so much!"

As I continue to juggle teaching environments, I am constantly researching new ways to engage my students. My first strategy for keeping students engaged and excited to learn has been to keep things fun, no matter the setting. We dance, sing, and play games to keep my students happy and energized. My students take a "Mindful Minute" throughout the day where they use picture cards to share their feelings. This allows me to keep an eye on students who are struggling emotionally and intervene when needed. When they needed support, I had to develop innovative ways to help them in a safe environment.

But, in this constrictive environment, it is hard. I worry every day and constantly ask myself, "Are my students getting enough? Am I giving them everything they need?" These questions are the reason that I have not had a solid night's sleep since March 13, 2020.

My colleagues and I are determined to do all we can to continue directly supporting and teaching our students. Through my leadership role at the CEC I am also working at a much larger level to help impact systemic and lasting change.

There is more Congress can do to be sure the dollars that have been invested have a lasting impact. I remain concerned about the long-term effects of the pandemic on the current cohort of students and future students. We are deep into an educator shortage crisis that predates the pandemic but has been exacerbated significantly over the last year. This crisis extends beyond personnel shortages. Higher education special education programs that prepare the nation's special education workforce are closing. There is a shortage of higher education special education faculty to support new teacher candidates. And there is still much to learn about teacher early retirement and the exodus from the educator profession triggered by the pandemic. Our nation's teachers are resilient, yet they are tired. The emotional toll has prompted many of my friends in education to retire because they physically and emotionally cannot go on. Those who cannot retire survive by putting on a brave face every day and continue to provide the best education they possibly can under these extreme circumstances.

Infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities deserve access to a fully prepared workforce of special educators, including teachers, paraeducators, and specialized instructional support personnel. Yet, 44 states reported special educator shortages for the 2020-2021 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

ARP does provide flexibility to invest in educators in the short term, but I fear most districts will forego these investments in personnel without sustainable funding to prevent layoffs when the ARP funds run dry. To truly recover from the pandemic and address long-term needs, many of which pre-date the pandemic, Congress must fully fund IDEA. Schools and districts will especially need sustained investments in the educator pipeline to reverse the special educator shortage crisis.

Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 can be a pivotal year for significant investments in the programs that support the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), most of which funds enable districts to invest in special educators. That is why CEC, along with partner organizations in the disability and education fields, is seeking the following funding levels for IDEA programs for FY 2022:

IDEA Part B State Grants (Sec. 611) – Invest no less than \$15.5 billion:

Over seven million school-aged students, approximately 14% of the total student enrollment, benefit from individualized special education and related services mandated by IDEA. The law requires that schools tailor these to meet the specific needs of each child. With the enactment of IDEA came a Federal government pledge to pay 40% of the excess cost of educating a student with a disability, what is referred to as IDEA full funding. Unfortunately, in FY 2021, through regular appropriations, the Federal share was approximately 13%, leaving states and school districts to pay the balance. This causes great strain on education systems, which are forced to make difficult budget decisions to make up for the Federal shortfall. The Biden Administration's topline budget proposal for FY 2022 puts IDEA on the first step of a 10-year glidepath to full funding by providing \$15.5 billion for Section 611, carrying forward an emergency appropriation of \$2.6 billion for the program through ARP. This important increase would also enable states and

districts to provide long-term investments, namely in personnel, with their ARP dollars, knowing those investments will be sustained in FY 2022.

IDEA Part C - Invest \$732 million; IDEA Part B Section 619 - Invest \$598 million:

IDEA's early childhood programs serve over 1 million infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and their families through Part C and Part B Section 619, respectively. Over the last twenty years, both programs have increased the number of children served by approximately 50% and proven that this early intervention leads to improved outcomes. Despite this growth and positive outcomes for children, federal funding has failed to keep pace. In fact, the federal cost per child has decreased by 40% over the same period. ARP provided a one-time infusion of funds to both programs for FY 2021, for which CEC is grateful. We seek a meaningful increase for FY 2022 that would put these programs on their own glidepaths to full funding, providing a long-term impact on early childhood programs.

IDEA Part D personnel preparation (Sec. 662) - Invest \$300 million:

Special education was the highest educator shortage area in nearly all states before the pandemic struck and is the area that has endured the highest rate of job cuts during the pandemic. This shortage crisis must be addressed through a significant increase to Part D Sec. 662, which helps increase the number of qualified personnel with the skills and knowledge necessary to support infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, including support during the critical early years of a special educator's career.

NCSER - Invest \$70 million:

The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER), within the Institute of Education Sciences is the primary driver of special education research in the nation and provides evidence-based practices for classroom teachers. NCSER is also now faced with investigating a suite of new research areas specifically related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on special education which will serve as critical, informative resources as educators, schools, and districts begin to address the disproportionate impact the pandemic has placed on infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

Providing meaningful increases to IDEA programs will support and grow the number of qualified special educators in the field and aid in the pandemic recovery. However, in the long-term, much more can be done to right the ship in a targeted and systemic way. What we truly need is visionary investments to diversify and strengthen the educator pipeline- investments that the field has been seeking for years.

President Biden's recently unveiled American Families Plan (AFP) rises to that challenge by proposing \$900 million for the development of special education teachers; the doubling of the TEACH Grants Program, scholarships for undergraduates studying to be teachers in high-needs,

low-income areas and the expansion of the grant program to early childhood educators; \$2.8 billion for Grow Your Own programs and paid, year-long residency programs, which have proven to improve educator diversity, retention in the field, and outcomes for students; \$400 million for teacher prep programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority-Serving Institutions; \$1.6 billion to provide teachers with the opportunity to obtain additional certifications in high-demand subject areas including special education; and \$2 billion to support teachers as leaders, including high-quality mentorship programs to provide new teachers with the tools they need to be successful in the classroom and remain in the field of teaching.

Adequate funding through the annual appropriations process and enactment of legislation that incentivizes and invests in the educator pipeline, would be pivotal to the special educator field. Most importantly, it would help states create pathways to ensuring well qualified early education and K-12 teachers and school leaders are prepared to provide the early intervention, instruction, and specialized instructional support that our nation's infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities need and deserve.

Thank you again for allowing me to share the story of my classroom's progression through the pandemic and forward-thinking recommendations to strengthen our field. If you take away one thing from my testimony, I hope it is this: special education teachers, like all teachers, will do anything to help their students succeed, but they could do so much more, for so many more students, if investments are made to strengthen the profession.