

Special Educators Storm Capitol Hill

Annie Baldauf

“Teachers and children thrive with STRIVE,” cheered 266 advocates along with Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) on the lawn of the United States Capitol Building.¹ This was the penultimate event before special and gifted education and early intervention advocates from 46 states stormed Capitol Hill to meet with their elected officials during the 2018 Special Education Legislative Summit.

From July 8 through July 11, attendees of the summit were immersed in policy issues that affect the outcomes for children and youth with exceptionalities as well as the professionals working in the field.

During a deep dive into four policy issues crucial to the missions of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), attendees heard from various speakers, including CEC Policy and Advocacy Director, Deb Ziegler; Deputy Executive Director of the Committee for Education Funding, Sarah Abernathy, CASE Special Education Legislative Chair, Erin Maguire; and many others. These speakers provided attendees with background information and data concerning the four main issue briefs, allowing attendees to have meaningful conversations with their elected officials.

¹The STRIVE Act stands for Supporting the Teaching Profession Through Revitalizing Investments in Valuable Educators Act.

The four issues addressed by advocates while on Capitol Hill were education appropriations, public school funding, the teacher shortage, and social and emotional learning and mental health. These issues acted as the basis for the asks that each state team would bring to their legislator’s office:

- Increase funding for special education and early intervention programs.
- Keep public funds in public education.
- Address the shortage of special education teachers and early intervention providers.
- Provide support to ensure social and emotional learning, positive climate, and mental health supports.

Table 1 includes a sampling of specific legislative recommendations.

After 2 days of preparation, advocates were ready to storm Capitol Hill. On July 10, advocates gathered on the lawn of the Capitol Building and were joined by Senator Cory Booker for an early morning rally, where Senator Booker praised teachers for their essential work and voiced his concern for the field of education. “We must do all we can to prepare each and every child for success, and that means supporting and

empowering our teachers in the classroom,” said Senator Booker. “Teachers across the country are being asked to do more with less—they’re overworked and undersupported at a time when they are going above and beyond for our students. As the greatest, richest country in the world, we can, and should, be doing more to prepare and support the people doing some of the most important jobs in our country: our teachers.”

Senator Booker has sponsored the STRIVE Act, along with Representative Donald Norcross (D-NJ-01). The STRIVE Act includes several key provisions to help address the teacher shortage in the United States, including increased investments in teacher preparation programs and financial assistance to encourage diversity in the teaching profession. Investing in the next generation of teachers is essential in addressing the teacher shortage and is a key issue for CEC.

Inspired by Senator Booker’s words, advocates dispersed throughout the halls of Congress to meet with their elected officials. While on the Hill, state teams conducted approximately 280 visits to Senate and House offices, helping to increase the number of cosponsors for both the STRIVE Act and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act Full Funding Act.

Table 1. Special Education Legislative Summit Sample Legislative Recommendations

| Issue | Recommendations |
|---|--|
| Education appropriations | CEC urges Congress to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide \$15 billion to fully fund IDEA’s Part B Program in the FY 2019 appropriations bills. • Support and cosponsor H.R. 2902 and S. 2542 IDEA Full Funding Act (Part B). • Provide \$465 million to fund IDEA’s Part B Section 619 Program and \$573 million for IDEA’s Part C Early Intervention Program in the FY 2019 appropriations bills. • Provide \$271 million to fund IDEA’s Part D Program in the FY 2019 appropriations bills. |
| Keep public funds in public education | CEC urges Congress to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support efforts that maintain and enhance the use of public funds for public education and services offered through public school districts. • Oppose the use of public funds for families to access private education through private school vouchers, tuition tax credits, direct tuition payments, taxpayer savings accounts, scholarships, and portability of public funds to private education entities for all students, including students with disabilities, as they are contrary to the best interests of students and their families, the public school system, local communities, and taxpayers. |
| Special education teacher and early intervention provider shortages | CEC urges Congress to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide \$102 million to fund IDEA’s Part D Personnel Preparation Grants providing scholarships for beginning special educators and early intervention personnel. • Provide \$48 million to fund IDEA’s Part D State Personnel Grants to states to reform and improve personnel preparation and professional development. • Cosponsor and support S. 2370 and H.R. 4914, Supporting the Teaching Profession Through Revitalizing Investments in Valuable Educators Act (STRIVE), strengthening the federal investment in recruiting, preparing, and retaining education and early childhood personnel and diversifying the teacher workforce. |
| Social and emotional learning, positive climate, and mental health supports | CEC urges Congress to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the federal investment for ESSA Title II, Part A, Building Systems of Support for Excellent Teaching and Leading to ensure teachers and providers are prepared to implement evidence-based practices to address social and emotional learning strategies and response to challenging behaviors. • Provide \$1.6 billion to fund ESSA Title IV, Part A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants to support schools and early childhood programs in ensuring safe and respectful learning environments for all children and youth. |

Note. CEC = Council for Exceptional Children; ESSA = Every Student Succeeds Act; IDEA = Individuals With Disabilities Education Act; FY = fiscal year.

At the conclusion of the 2018 Legislative Summit, CEC President, Laurie VanderPloeg shared, “Our members seized the opportunity to impact positive change for *all* students, including children and youth with exceptionalities. New relationships were developed, stories were shared, and recommendations were made concerning our four critical issues.”

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A total of 266 advocates went to Capitol Hill during the 2018 Special Education Legislative Summit.



Danielle Kovach, CEC board member and CEC 2014 Teacher of the Year, introduced Senator Cory Booker at the rally on the lawn of the U.S. Capitol Building.



The CEC Indiana Team advocates show their enthusiasm for supporting CEC policy goals on Capitol Hill. They included (first row, left to right) Indiana state team leader Tara Rinehart, Pam Bell, Tamara Hurm, and Ann Higgins; (second row, left to right) Jenny Smithson, Mark Booth, and Brittany Bales; and (third row, left to right), CEC treasurer Jim McCormick and Mary Burton.



Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) (center) met with (left to right) CEC President-Elect Mary Lynn Boscardin, Massachusetts CEC Unit President Elizabeth Stringer Keefe, Children and Youth Action Network Coordinator Liam Rutter-Stokes, and CEC board student member Alexis Morgan.



Johnny Collett, Assistant Secretary, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, at the U.S. Department of Education, spoke to summit attendees.

