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April 13, 2020

U.S. Congress

RE: COVID-19 and Students with Disabilities

Dear Member of Congress,

Since 1984, CAST (originally the Center for Applied Special Technology) has worked relentlessly to ensure that our nation is one where learning has no limits for all individuals. We pioneered Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a set of principles and guidelines for inclusive curriculum design that is now endorsed by the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Higher Education Opportunity Act, and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V). Since 1999, we have led efforts funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Department) to support State and Local Education Agencies in providing accessible educational materials, digital learning materials for literacy and STEM courses, open education resources and more.

Today, I write to make the following recommendations as you discuss and finalize the next COVID-19 stimulus bill.

1. **Uphold all provisions under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), and other laws regarding the education of students with disabilities.**

CAST is directly engaged with teachers and students across the United States in implementing the UDL framework—including during this unusual transition to online and remote learning. And, without question, our work with States, districts, schools, and individual educators, as well as students and parents, convinces us that **NO ADDITIONAL waivers are necessary under either the IDEA or Section 504.**

To be clear, we understand how complex the current crisis is. However, individuals with disabilities and their families are depending on us to support them in their civil and human rights to receive a high-quality education, even in these difficult circumstances. We also applaud the ways that the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services at the U.S. Department of Education are already leveraging current investments and projects to provide much-needed technical assistance to help educators and parents support children’s learning amidst these challenging times.

2. **Require the Federal Communications Commission to lift e-rate restrictions, allow schools and libraries to purchase take-home devices or other types of home internet connections with federal funds, and assure equitable internet access to all U.S. households.**

Congress can clarify for the FCC that e-rate funds can be used to help students and their families have reliable access to the internet at speeds needed today to stream and download content as well as engage in learning with both teachers and their peers.

3. Provide funding for IDEA to invest in district and school leaders, teachers and students.

Congress must support schools, teachers and students by providing additional funding to the IDEA. In doing so, Congress would increase the capacity of States, districts and schools to provide more robust professional learning and other needed technical assistance so that teachers can be provided the tools and resources they need to teach and provided educational services and supports.

We also view an infusion to IDEA as an investment in the future. In our view, the pandemic is creating an inflection point that while unanticipated, can also be viewed as an opportunity to assure equitable access. All students, including those who may struggle due to low literacy, language, disability or other factors can be taught remotely when they have the right technology including accessible materials and their teachers have the right tools and training. Let's help states and districts tackle an unexpected crisis and turn it into an opportunity that changes the future for good.

Thank you for this opportunity to weigh in as you contemplate how to support our nation's students and their teachers and school leaders. Please let us know if we can provide examples to you of our work in partnership with states, districts and education leaders.

Sincerely,



Linda Gerstle
CEO

CAST is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to transform education design and practice “until learning has no limits.” Visit www.cast.org to learn more.