Dear Senator:

The undersigned organizations, representing millions of educators, parents, school administrators, and school board members, would like to express our concerns about the funding formula proposed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (S. 1248) for providing states with special education funding. Specifically, we believe the proposed formula would arbitrarily limit state funding without taking into account the actual need. As the Senate considers this legislation, we urge you to ensure a fair funding formula that reflects the needs of students with disabilities and to move toward full funding of special education.

Current law provides that no state grant under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) may exceed 40 percent of the national average per pupil expenditure (APPE) multiplied by the number of children in the state receiving special education and related services. Thus, the law ties a state’s maximum allocation, or full funding level, directly to the number of students with disabilities in the state. Under the proposed Senate reauthorization bill, however, increases in a state’s maximum allocation would be based on growth in the state’s total population and in the state’s poverty rate, rather than on increases in the number of students in need of IDEA services. This change would create an arbitrary state funding cap with no relation to actual need.

We understand the desire of Congress to address the disproportionate representation of certain student populations in special education programs. Changing the funding formula, however, to remedy this problem is inappropriate. The proposed formula rewards states whose overall population is growing, regardless of the states’ population of special needs children. The formula, therefore, is an extremely imprecise tool to use to address the disproportionality phenomenon in special education. Instead, we believe that focusing on increased early intervention efforts will help to identify and address problems before they become barriers to learning, thereby reducing the number of students identified for special education programs.

Further, we strongly believe that, rather than changing the funding formula, Congress should focus on moving toward full funding at the promised 40 percent of APPE. Providing a quality education for all students, including those with disabilities, requires a federal-state-local partnership. Today, however, federal appropriations fall far short of the federal commitment to help meet the cost of educating students with disabilities. Inadequate funding means that many schools lack the necessary trained staff to provide needed services to students with disabilities. Lack of funding also places considerable strain on entire school budgets, as tax increases or cuts to other critical programs are often necessary in order to continue to provide mandated IDEA services.

While we recognize that there have been increases in IDEA funding over the last several years, the under-funded federal share – in combination with current state fiscal crises – forces schools to dip into general education budgets to make up for the shortfall. Even with increases of $1 billion per year, Congress will
never reach the promised 40 percent at that rate of increase. Schools cannot afford to wait any longer for the relief they so desperately need.

In summary, we urge the Senate to maintain the funding formula in current law – which reflects actual needs of students with disabilities – and to provide the funding to meet those needs by moving toward full funding.

Sincerely,

American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
Council for Exceptional Children
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Education Association
National School Boards Association