May 7, 2004

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The IDEA Funding Coalition strongly expresses its support for the mandatory full funding amendment, by Senators Hagel and Harkin, to the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This amendment will finally allow Congress to fulfill its 28-year-old promise to provide 40 percent of the National Average per Pupil Expenditure for every child in special education. As you prepare to take one of the most important education votes in this Congress, we urge you to support all children by fully funding IDEA through this amendment.

Since its inception, IDEA has protected students with disabilities by ensuring access to a free and appropriate public education. Despite the positive influence of IDEA on public education, the federal government has never fully funded the program, forcing state and local taxpayers to pay for a greater share of expenses. With the current $10.6 billion federal funding shortfall, districts have been forced to reduce services under their general education budget as they redirect dollars to cover the lack of promised federal special education funding.

IDEA is the only major federal education program that reaches every public school. Approximately 12 percent of public school students receive assistance through special education. These children have disabilities that require special attention and additional resources. If we are serious about reforming education and leaving no child behind, we should start with those children with the greatest need. We should start by fully funding IDEA through mandatory funding.

In the 28-year history of IDEA, the federal funding contribution has always fallen far short of the full congressional commitment. Funding for FY 2004 is no exception. While the congressionally passed budget proposed an increase of $2.2 billion for IDEA, the FY 2004 Omnibus Appropriations bill contains an increase of $1.2 billion. This is $1 billion short of the congressionally promised level. As special education becomes more extensive and expensive, taxpayers have been forced to absorb the shortfall in federal funds. Congress has made significant progress in recent years, but with the proposed increase, it is still only funding IDEA at 19 percent instead of the promised 40 percent.

The amendment by Senators Hagel and Harkin provides for full funding in eight years by keeping the $8.9 billion base discretionary and making increases of $2 billion per year through mandatory funding. We urge you not to vote for false promises of full funding
through authorization levels. The appropriations process during this year only
demonstrates that funding goals are not enough to ensure that funding levels are reached.

Special education costs are increasing more rapidly than other educational costs.
Students with disabilities have a right to the same educational opportunities as all other
students, and the federal government has an obligation to pay for its fair share of these
costs. It’s past time to remove IDEA from the annual funding showdown and make good
on a 28-year-old promise. We urge your support for the incorporation of this amendment
into the full reauthorization of IDEA.

Thank you for support on this important matter.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Women
American Counseling Association
American Federation of Teachers
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Association of Educational Service Agencies
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs
Association of School Business Officials
Children’s Defense Fund
Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders
Council for Exceptional Children
Council for Learning Disabilities
Council of Chief State School Officers
Council of Great City Schools
Council of State Governments
Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children
Learning Disabilities Association of America
National Association of Black School Educators
National Association of Counties
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Conference of State Legislators
National Education Association
National League of Cities
National PTA
National Rural Education Association
National School Boards Association
New York City Department of Education
People for the American Way  
School Social Work Association of America  
U.S. Conference of Mayors  
United Spinal Association  
Western Law Center for Disability Rights