



National Center for Learning Disabilities
The power to hope, to learn, and to succeed

May 15, 2014

John L. Schroder, Sr.
522 N. New Hampshire Street
Covington, LA 70433

Via email: schrodej@legis.la.gov

Dear Representative Schroder,

On behalf of the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), I'm writing about your reference to NCLD's report *Diplomas At Risk: A Critical Look at the Graduation Rate of Students with Learning Disabilities* on April 29, 2014 before the Louisiana House Education Committee. It is clear from the record that there is a misunderstanding of the purpose and findings of our report. Thus, the purpose of this letter is to clarify the information presented in our report and address NCLD's opposition to House Bill 1015.

We represent the 60 million people – including 15 million children – with learning and attention issues in the United States. We represent the 1 in 20 students in school who are identified as having a learning disability and the additional 15 percent who have unidentified learning and attention issues. We are a parent-led organization and engage with over 600,000 parents each month on our website. Nearly 60,000 of these parents are part of our advocacy efforts around the country.

When NCLD published *Diplomas At Risk*, our main purpose was to highlight the variances in graduation rates across states for the 40.7 percent of students *with specific learning disabilities* (SLD) that are eligible for special education under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Students with SLD represent the largest number of students receiving services under IDEA. Students with SLD do not have cognitive or intellectual disabilities and are typically identified as having reading, writing and math disabilities known as dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. Importantly, these students spend the majority of their day in the regular classroom. Our report intentionally focused on the outcomes of these students and sought to encourage a thoughtful review by states of the graduation outcomes of their respective SLD students and to create policies that:

- Do not lower academic standards for students with SLD;
- Maintain high expectations for these students and recognize the role special education plays in assuring that 'specially designed instruction' – as required by IDEA – is provided to support their achievement of a regular diploma;
- Reinforce that having a disability, while difficult, is by no means a reason to lower standards or reduce access to a regular diploma and the same educational opportunities that lead to career training, college, and meaningful life outcomes;
- By regular diploma, we mean a diploma that is standards-based and available to all regular education students. This would not include diplomas or certificates that are specially designed on an individual basis for individual students with a disability, or available only to certain groups of students with disabilities.

In your testimony, you mischaracterized NCLD's report as representing the graduation outcomes of every child with a disability and implied that NCLD supported your legislation. You failed to mention a critical finding of our report – that when states hold students with learning disabilities to higher standards they can achieve meaningful regular diplomas. Furthermore, achieving a meaningful regular diploma dramatically improves a student's possibilities throughout their life.

Moreover, the legislation you introduced supports a set of policies that directly conflict with the findings of the report and violate the civil rights of all students with disabilities. This legislation, if enacted would, *for IDEA students only*, waive all state education requirements related to standards, promotion, student achievement, assessment and graduation. In essence, the legislation would segregate all students with disabilities by creating a separate system to judge their performance. This bill allows the IEP team to determine the future and fate of every student with a disability. Such a policy violates federal law and would be a major step backward for Louisiana and our nation. As such, we strongly oppose House Bill 1015.

Finally, we know from history, in Louisiana and other states, that policies of segregation like this one result in over-identification of students to special education – especially students of color. Although students with disabilities in Louisiana continue to experience poor academic outcomes as compared to their peers and across the country, this should not induce the state to lower academic standards for these students. Instead, the state must focus on improving evidence-based instruction, access to assistive technology, early screening for learning problems, and providing a more intense focus on professional development. These policies are proven to work. Louisiana should embrace them and work to build a meaningful and rigorous education system for all of its students.

NCLD has a longstanding history of advocating not only for students with SLD, but for all students with disabilities. Our Board is parent-led and parent-focused. We partner, collaborate and support the successful implementation of policies and practices that assure all students have access to high standards and expectations. To correct the record, we ask that you issue a clarifying letter to the Louisiana House Education Committee as soon as possible. We also ask you to reconsider the legislation. Find a better outcome – one that doesn't lower standards for some and hide them away, but inspires and assists all of our students to reach their full potential.

I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



James H. Wendorf
Executive Director

cc: Louisiana House Education Committee
John White, State Superintendent
Sande Winchell, Executive Director, Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council