



April 18, 2023

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chair, Health, Education, Labor, and
Pensions Committee
United States Senate
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member, Health, Education, Labor,
and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
648 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

On behalf of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, I write to provide initial feedback as you begin bipartisan discussions to reauthorize the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA).

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for 228,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists; speech-language pathologists; speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology support personnel; and students. Audiologists specialize in preventing and assessing hearing and balance disorders as well as providing audiologic treatment, including hearing aids. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) identify, assess, and treat speech, language, swallowing, and cognitive-communication disorders.

More than half of ASHA's members work in educational settings and/or provide early intervention services. These services help ensure that children with disabilities develop effective cognitive-communication skills and achieve successful learning outcomes while receiving a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. These services are also provided to general education students throughout the school setting.

Speech-language pathology services are highly utilized by students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). According to the U.S. Department of Education's 43rd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, 2021, speech or language impairments represent the most prevalent disability category of services provided under IDEA Part B with 39.9% of children ages 3 through 5, and 16.3% of students ages 6 through 21 identified for services under IDEA.¹

As reauthorization of ESRA moves through the legislative process, ASHA looks forward to partnering with you on Committee priorities, including how Congress can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of federal education research and statistics programs, make specific changes to federal technical assistance centers, and strengthen the role of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

Improving the Utility of Technical Assistance Centers

As the Committee examines the role of technical assistance centers, ASHA urges the Committee to include language establishing a technical assistance center on speech/communication disorders within the U.S. Department of Education (Department).

Despite the prevalence of speech or language impairments as a primary disability category, and the use of speech-language services by other students with disabilities—including students with dyslexia, and other general education students—there is no dedicated resource within the Department to provide technical assistance on addressing these impairments. Congress recognized the importance of such support by including language encouraging the Department to provide technical assistance to help SLPs and audiologists better support students with speech-language disorders in school settings in the report to accompany the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law 117-328).

Establishing a technical assistance center will improve the ability of school-based SLPs and educational audiologists to meet the needs of students with communication disorders. The center would support students with speech-language disorders through resources, guidance and best practices pertaining to the assessment and treatment of communication disorders; identify and develop free or low-cost evidence-based tools and model programs; gather evidence-based information and/or data related to speech-language pathology clinical and professional issues including delivery models, identification and utilization of appropriate workspaces, and caseload and workload management; and provide support and guidance regarding the utilization of federal funding sources to support capacity to circumvent staffing shortages for speech-language providers within the school, community, or home setting to ensure the delivery of effective services for all children, youth, and adults with disabilities and speech-language disorders.

Improving the Effectiveness of Federal Education Research & Strengthening the Institute of Education Sciences

Since understanding and production of language represent integral aspects of learning, there must be a greater research emphasis on improved outcomes for students with communication impairments. ASHA encourages the Committee to include further clarity in ESRA's priorities to direct IES and Regional Educational Laboratories to examine issues that directly impact the ability of school-based SLPs and educational audiologists to serve students and their families. This should include the impact of excess workloads for school-based SLPs and educational audiologists on student outcomes. By taking a workload analysis approach to setting caseloads, it would help ensure that students receive services they need to support their educational programs. As we have seen with the impact of COVID-19, it is imperative to have a greater empirical understanding of evidence-based strategies to address these issues to improve student outcomes and social emotional supports.

ASHA recommends that the Committee add conforming definitions to ESRA that reflect the full scope of school community personnel, by adopting the Every Student Succeeds Act's definition of "specialized instructional support personnel," which includes audiologists and SLPs.

ASHA appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Committee's request for information and to provide attached legislative recommendations. We look forward to working with you as the Committee proceeds with reauthorizing ESRA. If you or your staff have any questions, please contact Eric Masten, ASHA's director of federal affairs for education, at emasten@asha.org.

Sincerely,



Robert M. Augustine, PhD, CCC-SLP
2023 ASHA President

Attachment

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs. (2021). *43rd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2021*. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/43rd-arc-for-idea.pdf>.