

## **ED RESPONSE:**

The Department thanks Yasmina Vinci, Executive Director of the National Head Start Association, for her comments.

The letter includes general comments and specific recommendations. The general comments focus on three areas concerning the quality and utility of information gathered from the conduct of a large-scale randomized controlled trial (RCT) involving preschool children with special needs: (1) controlling for diverse preschool school settings with a wide range of outside factors, (2) having equivalent intervention and control groups when dealing with the diverse disabilities and needs of students; and (3) potentially denying children with disabilities intervention. In addition to general comments, the letter also offers specific recommendations to enhance the quality of the study. The Department's responses (below) are organized into two sections to address both general comments and specific recommendations.

### ***Response to general comments***

General comments highlight concern “with the science and ethics of a large-scale randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluation on preschool children with special needs” and notes a particular concern about “the quality and utility of the information gathered from the RCT” to address the question of understanding how best to meet all children’s needs without jeopardizing the outcomes of some children. While it is true that the objective of the evaluation is to conduct an RCT with preschool children with disabilities, the current call for public comment is for the first phase of the study. This phase focuses on feasibility and design. Only if this phase shows an RCT to be feasible will the Department move forward with such a study.

During this phase, the Department will gather information in order to assess whether it will be feasible to conduct a large-scale RCT focused on evaluating one or more curricula or interventions that are used with preschool children with disabilities to promote their learning of language, literacy, social-emotional skills, and/or appropriate behavioral skills for school. Information will be collected from special education program administrators through surveys of the 50 states and DC as well as a nationally representative sample of districts. The surveys will ask about the curricula and interventions available for use in the district, the settings in which preschool children with disabilities are served in the district, the number and size of classrooms, and staff characteristics. In addition to collected survey data, extant data will provide information about preschool special education programs and an evidence review will be conducted to identify promising curricula and interventions for preschool children with disabilities and features about their implementation in schools. Informed by the information gathered, the feasibility assessment will address design challenges, including but not limited to designing an RCT to account for the wide range of preschool settings serving children with disabilities and the curricula and interventions currently available in districts for supporting the development of preschool children with disabilities.

Following the feasibility and design assessment, the information gathered will also be disseminated through a descriptive report that will be available through the Department’s Institute of Education Sciences (<http://ies.ed.gov/>).

### ***Response to specific recommendations***

The Department appreciates the recommendations about the curricula/interventions and the study context and participants and will take them into consideration in the design and conduct of the RCT. Responses to each specific recommendation are noted below.

### Curricula and Intervention

- *We strongly recommend incorporating developmentally and culturally appropriate curricula and evidence-based interventions. As addressed before, this large-scale RCT will involve preschools from many different communities. It is imperative that the curricula and intervention strategies are meaningful to the families that they serve.*

Thank you for highlighting an important issue concerning the selection of curricula and/or interventions for the study. While information will not be gathered directly from families, the Department will gather information to identify the types of curricula and interventions used widely across states and districts. As part of the study, an evidence review of identified curricula/interventions will also be conducted. Additionally, the Department will seek input from a panel of content experts to identify curricula/interventions with a strong conceptual model and high potential for being implemented with fidelity.

- *Teachers should receive training and on-going professional development on both the curricula and intervention strategies to enhance their skills. Also, a teacher focus group should be included in the study that questions what teachers perceived as the relative usefulness of trainings from various sources (mentors, program staff, consultants, state T/TA, etc.). This will help address questions of the quality of the curricula and intervention that the children receive.*

The Department agrees that training and professional development are necessary for a curriculum or intervention to be implemented as faithfully as possible. Part of the assessment of feasibility includes how training will be provided, whether existing training materials are sufficient, and whether piloting of required training should be conducted before large-scale implementation.

### Study Context and Participants

- *Research by Dr. Robert Pianta and many others underscore the affect that a teacher has on a child's academic achievement. Therefore, we recommend that the study also record information on teacher qualifications. Some criteria to include are level of education, years of teaching experience, and type of teacher preparation program completed.*

As part of the feasibility assessment, the Department will collect information on teacher qualifications and background as well as teacher turnover, which will also inform planning data collection for the RCT.

- *We strongly recommend that the study collect information on additional outside- and inside-school support the child receives due to his or her disability. In addition, information should be collected on whether a school has the ability to provide the support. This will help clarify whether improvement in a child's academic achievement and social-emotional skills is due to the additional support, the curriculum and intervention, or both.*

The feasibility and design phase of the study does include plans for collecting information on the special education programs available to preschool students and will inform plans for recruitment and data collection of the RCT.