

**Statement of Suzanne Boudrot Shea
President, Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress**

Before the Commission on the Future of Higher Education

**March 20, 2006
Boston, MA**

Mr. Chairperson and Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Commission regarding the Future of Higher Education for students with intellectual disabilities.

My name is Suzanne Boudrot Shea and I am President of the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress (MDSC), and I am speaking on behalf of our statewide organization, as well as our two national organizations: The National Down Syndrome Society and the National Down Syndrome Congress. Statewide the MDSC reaches over 1,000 families. Nationwide, the NDSS & NDSC serve and represent the 350,000 Americans with Down syndrome and their families. The impact is broad.

Our children and young adults with Down syndrome want to grow up to live as independently as possible, to work in an inclusive environment with competitive pay, to have friends and neighbors and to contribute to their community. They have dreams and goals just like every other human being, and they deserve the opportunity to realize their full potential.

To accomplish these goals, our children and young adults with Down syndrome need the best education possible with the opportunity to attend college and participate as do their brothers and sisters and peers. Students with Down syndrome have made such significant progress in education due to the impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). A generation ago, when IDEA was first implemented, many children with intellectual disabilities were not even allowed to attend school. Today, these students with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities are ready to raise the bar again and move on to higher education, to post-secondary schools and colleges.

I'd like to introduce my daughter, Caroline Shea. She is ten years old and attends our neighborhood elementary school, Cove School in Beverly, MA. She is in the regular grade three classroom, following the Mass state curriculum guidelines for every subject, with adaptations as needed. For example, she just completed a science unit on the Solar System, with a project on Venus, as well as participating in the class play with the role of Earth. Through receiving these same educational opportunities as her older brother and sister, Caroline is flourishing in the classroom. Attached to my written testimony please find a letter from Caroline describing her goals for her future education.

Today you have heard from our previous speakers who have described national and local models and exciting programs. These programs are excellent, but the options today are limited. While students with intellectual disabilities in some areas of the country are experiencing wonderful opportunities at colleges and universities that are opening doors to employment and independent living, in other areas nothing is available. While some school districts are providing transition services in post-secondary settings, other districts are not aware that this is an option. While vocational rehabilitation agencies are providing support for students with intellectual disabilities to participate in post-secondary programs in some states, in other states VR agencies are not. Many colleges and universities are interested in starting post-secondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities and need help identifying and implementing best practice in developing these programs.

I request that the Commission consider recommending the following in your report:

- Clarify in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) regulations that it is ***permissible*** for school districts to use IDEA funds to support transition services on college campuses and dual enrollment in college programs for students still eligible to receive special education services under IDEA.
- Clarify in Department of Education guidance that it is ***permissible*** to use vocational rehabilitation funds to support students in post-secondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities (mental retardation and related disabilities).
- Create a coordinating committee within the US Department of Education that includes the Institute of Education Sciences, Office of Postsecondary Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, and Office of Vocational and Adult Education, to identify and fund research, training, technical assistance, and outreach to help develop and support transition and postsecondary services and programs for students with intellectual disabilities. This should include funding to bring together representatives of existing postsecondary programs; developing model "memorandum of understanding" among agencies; and working with accreditation agencies to develop model criteria for degree and certificate programs for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Support amending the Higher Education Act to allow students with intellectual disabilities to access student financial aid, including loans, grants and work study funds.

Based on my experience with the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress, I have seen how our organization, has made education a critical element of our mission and goals - again the bar has been raised. Having started as a grass roots group, 23 years ago, the focus is continually on improving and evolving. We created a Forum, just for Educators in Massachusetts, to network and to share best practices. We are focusing on strategies for students with Down syndrome to pass our statewide standardized tests (MCAS) in order to get a high school diploma. We are interested in developing tool kits with best practices to share with educators. Each year, there are more high school students who have intellectual disabilities, who are ready to transition to post secondary education. We need to make sure that these transitions happen and are successful.

These students need the support of IDEA funds to help with transition services. They need to access vocational rehabilitation funds as do students with other disabilities. They need access to student financial aid, again just as their brothers, sisters, and peers have access to loans, grants and work study funds. These students need more opportunity to participate in model degree and certificate programs.

Our students and children with intellectual disabilities want to grow-up to lead fulfilling lives, to have 'real' jobs, to be fully integrated into their community. By implementing the above recommendations, the opportunity will be realized. Then the next generation of students will raise that bar even higher.

Thank you to the committee for your consideration on behalf of the MDSC, NDSS, and NDSC.

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Caroline Shea

When I Grow Up I want
to be a teacher. School
is fun. I learn
so much everyday.

I love to ski in Utah.
I love my Boston
Ballet class on
Saturday mornings.

Caroline
Shea

Caroline B. Shea (age 10)
Cove Elementary School
Grade 3
Beverly, MA