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**Panel Discussion on Expanding Access to Higher Education for  
Students with Disabilities**

The National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC) is pleased to strongly support the H.R. 3199, the *Improving Access to Higher Education Act*. Opportunities to attend and complete postsecondary education are critical to achieving the goals of employment and community living and this comprehensive bill contains important provisions that will benefit all students with disabilities, including:

- Training faculty to deliver accessible instruction through competitive grants to Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs).
- Establishing an Office of Accessibility in every IHE.
- A new grant program to implement universal design for learning (UDL) across institutions and within distance learning programs.
- A new commission to increase accessible instructional materials and technologies.
- Improvements to data collection activities and closed captioning training.
- Updates to the program that funds IHEs to educate students with intellectual disabilities (ID) and integrate them into the higher education community.

As an organization focused on improving the lives of individuals with Down syndrome, NDSC commends the bill sponsors for including provisions to update and continue programs for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in this legislation. Students with ID want the opportunity to go to college like their siblings and friends, to learn, experience independence, and become employed after graduation. Far too often, what is typically available for these students are “transition programs” in high school that are isolated and a pipeline to living a life of poverty and either languishing at home or working in segregated sheltered workshops receiving below-minimum wage. Postsecondary opportunities for students with ID offer a new path to academic access, social inclusion, and working and living as independently as possible in the community.

In 2001, my daughter Laura, who was born with Down syndrome, was a high school senior and she asked me where she would go to college. There were only a handful of college programs in the country at that time and none near us in Virginia, so we asked George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia to start a pilot program. There are now 50 students from many states and

several foreign countries attending the Mason LIFE program, and 264 programs in forty-seven states and the number is growing. See: [www.thinkcollege.net](http://www.thinkcollege.net)

The driving spirit of students and families was the force behind the bipartisan movement to include programs for students with ID in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA). I chaired, and now co-chair with Kim Musheno, Director of Public Policy, Association of University Centers on Disabilities, the Committee to Promote Inclusive Higher Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities. This is the group of experts -- including family members, professionals, and researchers -- that worked with Congress to include provisions in HEOA that allow students with ID, for the first time, to access federal financial aid, including grants and Work-Study jobs, and authorized model programs and a National Coordinating Center. NDSC is very pleased that the *Improving Access to Higher Education Act* includes so many of the committee's recommendations, developed by families and practitioners.

Thirty-one states have received funding (2010-2020) for these model programs, called Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) grants. Evaluation of the TPSIDs shows that the students are graduating with a high rate of competitive, integrated employment and living in inclusive settings in the community.

This legislation will build on these successes and what we have learned about postsecondary education for students with ID since 2008, and makes important improvements based on that knowledge. Key revisions include new requirements related to:

- Inclusive campus housing, which leads to independent living.
- Additional longitudinal data collection to identify outcomes.
- Recognized educational credentials approved by the institution.
- Sustainability of the programs after federal funding ends.
- An emphasis on academic, independent living and career components.

One of the requirements in the HEOA is for the National Coordinating Center to convene a workgroup to identify model accreditation standards. The Workgroup, which I chair, issued a Report on Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities for the Secretary of Education, Congressional committees, and National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) in September 2016, after extensive public input. See: <http://bit.ly/2tKSr6x>. As stated in the report, "Model accreditation standards will provide guidelines for colleges and universities on how to develop and improve programs, validate these programs within institutions of higher education, and give students and their families an assurance of quality." This bill now requires the next steps, including outreach to accrediting agencies, field testing the model standards, developing technical guidance and updating the model standards as needed.

On behalf of the thousands of individuals with Down syndrome and their families represented by the National Down Syndrome Congress, we applaud this legislation that will improve access to postsecondary education for all students with disabilities, and especially thank the bill

sponsors for addressing the needs of students with intellectual disabilities. We urge Congress to include this bill in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

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**About the National Down Syndrome Congress**

Founded in 1973, the National Down Syndrome Congress is the country's oldest organization for people with Down syndrome, their families, and the professionals who work with them. A 501(c)(3) non-profit advocacy organization, the NDSC provides support and information about issues related to Down syndrome throughout the lifespan, as well as on matters of public policy relating to disability rights. The National Down Syndrome Congress is committed to creating a national climate in which all people will recognize and embrace the value and dignity of people with Down syndrome. For more information about the NDSC, please visit our website at [www.ndscenter.org](http://www.ndscenter.org).