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FROM THE UTAH INSTITUTE ON SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW: WHAT’S HAPPENING IN DC?

August 4, 2010 by JoLynne Lyon

The annual Utah Institute on Special Education Law is hosted by the CPD’s Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education center.

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So what’s happening in Washington, DC regarding special education?

A lot of disagreement and stalling, said Nancy Reder, who delivered the keynote address at the annual Utah Institute on Special Education Law. The conference, hosted by the Utah State Office of Education and the CPD’s Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education Center, happened earlier this week. Reder spoke to a crowd that packed the ballroom at the Eccles Conference Center in Ogden.

Any bills that require funding are hotly contested in Congress, she said. Some lawmakers are concerned about the budget, some believe the United States Government spent all it could afford on the stimulus package, some think the stimulus didn’t go far enough, but the deadlock continues, especially in the Senate. Still, a bill designed to save jobs in education and other public workers looks like it may pass despite a filibuster and protracted debate. The Associated Press reports that the measure passed the Senate and that House lawmakers will return to vote on it next week. UPDATE: the bill passed the Senate. Education Week offers a more indepth look.

As for other issues, the summer break is about to begin and elections are coming up—two events that are likely to slow or halt any progress on the Hill. Still, here are some issues to watch:

• Though the education budget for 2011 has not passed, the Obama administration is still working on a preliminary budget for 2012—and it calls for a 5 percent across-the-board budget cut.

• The Common Core State Standards is an attempt to make expectations consistent throughout the United States. The initiative was coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. So far participation is voluntary, and 27 states and the District of Columbia have signed on. Utah is not currently participating.

• The Elementary and Secondary Education Act—ESEA (the fore-runner of the No Child Left Behind Act) is up for reauthorization—and again, the process will likely go on for several months or even years.

• Reder outlined several areas where general and special education could be better aligned. For example, post-school outcome data is collected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act but not under the ESEA, making it hard to determine how kids are actually doing after they finish school.

• Standards that evaluate teachers based on their students’ performance are troubling to Reder, who asked what this means for special education teachers—especially those with small class sizes. “Your numbers are kind of skewed when you only have six students.”

More than 750 people attended the conference.