

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**Research in Education of Individuals With Disabilities Program****AGENCY:** Department of Education.**ACTION:** Notice of final priority.

SUMMARY: The Secretary announces a final priority for the Research in Education of Individuals with Disabilities Program. The Secretary may use this priority in Fiscal Year 1996 and subsequent years. The Secretary takes this action to focus Federal assistance on identified needs to improve outcomes for children with disabilities. This final priority is intended to ensure wide and effective use of program funds.

EFFECTIVE DATE: This priority takes effect on April 4, 1996.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Doris Andres, U.S. Department of Education, 600 Independence Avenue, S.W., Room 3526, Switzer Building, Washington, D.C. 20202-2641. Telephone: (202) 205-8125. Fax: (202) 205-8105. Individuals who use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) may call the TDD number: (202) 205-8953. Internet: Doris—Andres@ed.gov

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Research in Education of Individuals with Disabilities Program, authorized by Part E of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1441-1443), provides support: to advance and improve the knowledge base and improve the practice of professionals, parents, and others providing early intervention, special education, and related services—including professionals in regular education environments—to provide children with disabilities effective instruction and enable these children to learn successfully.

On November 7, 1995, the Secretary published a notice of proposed priority for this program in the Federal Register (60 FR 56192-56193).

This final priority supports the National Education Goals by improving understanding of how to enable children and youth with disabilities to reach higher levels of academic achievement.

The publication of this priority does not preclude the Secretary from proposing additional priorities, nor does it limit the Secretary to funding only this priority, subject to meeting applicable rulemaking requirements. Funding of particular projects depends on the availability of funds, and the quality of the applications received. Further, FY 1996 priorities could be

affected by enactment of legislation reauthorizing these programs.

Note: This notice of final priority does not solicit applications. A notice inviting applications under this competition is published in a separate notice in this issue of the Federal Register.

Analysis of Comments and Changes

In response to the Secretary's invitation in the notice of proposed priority, four parties submitted comments. An analysis of the comments and of the changes in the proposed priority follows. Technical and other minor changes—as well as suggested changes the Secretary is not legally authorized to make under the applicable statutory authority—are not addressed.

Priority—Initial Career Awards

Comment: Two commenters expressed concern about limiting the priority to researchers in the initial phases of their careers. One commenter opposed limiting the competition to one category of researcher given the limited amount of funding, if any, that may be available over the next few years for research. The commenter felt strongly that the priority should focus on the highest quality of research that will continue to move the field forward, irrespective of the status of the careers of the researchers. The commenter also suggested that the priority be changed to encourage applications from persons with disabilities and from professionals who have demonstrated success in service delivery. Another commenter felt the priority could penalize those researchers who have spent a few years outside academia in the "real world" of service systems and programmatic realities, before they define research lines of interest for their research careers.

Discussion: The Department has a basic three pronged approach to develop the capacity of the special education research community. First, there is the Student-Initiated Research Projects priority (begun in 1974) that targets students at the post-secondary level to encourage students to pursue special education research. Second, the Initial Career Awards (ICA) competition (begun in 1990) is intended to bridge the gap between students and established researchers by providing support to individuals who are in the initial phases of their careers to initiate and develop promising lines of research. Third, the Field-Initiated Research Projects competition (begun in 1964 and the oldest continuous source of Federal funding in education) provides support to researchers who may be associated with institutions of higher education,

State and local educational agencies, and other public agencies and nonprofit private organizations. The Department believes this approach should be maintained because historically the students and beginning researchers have a difficult time competing against established researchers, and the Department believes it is important to encourage and support their participation to expand the special education research capacity into as broad a range as possible. The priority as written provides for the involvement of individuals with recognized professional expertise in the subject matter, and researchers with disabilities are encouraged to apply along with other eligible applicants.

The Secretary agrees with the commenter that researchers who have spent a few years outside academia are deserving of support, and they are eligible to apply to the Field-Initiated Research Projects competition.

Regarding the concern that there could be increasingly limited funding for research activities, the Secretary notes that final action on the 1996 appropriation is difficult to predict. Congress has not yet enacted a fiscal year 1996 appropriation for the Department of Education, and is considering proposals to eliminate or reduce funding in fiscal year 1996 for many of the discretionary grant programs administered by the Department for which the President requested funds. In order to ensure that the Department has the ability to award funds in the event they become available for programs for which funding is uncertain, the Department is proceeding with the publication of priorities and the conduct of planned competitions. The Department will make final decisions on the appropriate priorities and mix of awards for each program once a final appropriation is enacted.

Changes: None.

Comment: Two commenters suggested other areas that proposals should focus on including: (1) Natural settings for infants and young children; (2) inclusive classrooms; (3) the effective utilization of technology and telecommunications; (4) students with disabilities meeting educational standards established for all students; (5) integrating students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers throughout their educational experience; and (6) effective transition planning so that individuals with disabilities successfully participate in postsecondary education and are employed in integrated work settings.

Discussion: The Secretary concurs with the importance of the focus areas listed above.

However, the priority as written does not preclude proposals on the suggested topics. The Secretary prefers that applicants be given flexibility to propose their particular area of inquiry, and believes it would be overly prescriptive to limit potential applicants to certain topics.

Changes: None.

Priority

Under 34 CFR 75.105(c)(3) the Secretary gives an absolute preference to applications that meet the following priority. The Secretary will fund under this competition only applications that meet this absolute priority:

Absolute Priority—Initial Career Awards

Background: There is a need to enable individuals in the initial phases of their careers to initiate and develop promising lines of research that would improve early intervention services for infants and toddlers, and special education for children and youth with disabilities. Support for research activities among individuals in the initial phases of their careers is intended to develop the capacity of the special education research community. This priority would address the additional need to provide support for a broad range of field-initiated research projects—focusing on the special education and related services for children and youth with disabilities and early intervention for infants and toddlers—consistent with the purpose of the program as described in 34 CFR 324.1.

Priority: The Secretary establishes an absolute priority for the purpose of awarding grants to eligible applicants for the support of individuals in the initial phases of their careers to initiate and develop promising lines of research consistent with the purposes of the program. For purposes of this priority, the initial phase of an individual's career is considered to be the first three years after completing a doctoral program and graduating (e.g., for fiscal year 1996 awards, projects may support individuals who completed a doctoral program and graduated no earlier than the 1991–92 academic year).

Projects must—

(a) Pursue a line of inquiry that reflects a programmatic strand of research emanating either from theory or a conceptual framework. The line of research must be evidenced by a series of related questions that establish directions for designing future studies extending beyond the support of this

award. The project is not intended to represent all inquiry related to the particular theory or conceptual framework; rather, it is expected to initiate a new line or advance an existing one;

(b) Include, in its design and conduct, sustained involvement with nationally recognized experts having substantive or methodological knowledge and expertise relevant to the proposed research. Experts do not have to be at the same institution or agency at which the project is located, but the interaction must be sufficient to develop the capacity of the researcher to pursue effectively the research into mid-career activities. At least 50 percent of the researcher's time must be devoted to the project;

(c) Prepare its procedures, findings, and conclusions in a manner that informs other interested researchers and is useful for advancing professional practice or improving programs and services to infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families; and

(d) Disseminate project procedures, findings, and conclusions to appropriate research institutes and technical assistance providers.

A project's budget must include funds to attend the two-day Research Project Directors' meeting to be held in Washington, D.C. each year of the project.

Applicable Program Regulations: 34 CFR Part 324.

Program Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1441–1443.

(Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number 84.023, Research in Education of Individuals with Disabilities Program)

Dated: February 28, 1996.

Katherine D. Seelman,

Acting Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

[FR Doc. 96–5056 Filed 3–4–96; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4000–01–P

[CFDA No.: 84.023N]

Research in Education of Individuals With Disabilities Program; Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year (FY) 1996

Purpose of Program: To advance and improve the knowledge base and improve the practice of professionals, parents, and others providing early intervention, special education, and related services—including professionals in regular education environments—to provide children with disabilities effective instruction and enable them to successfully learn.

This notice supports the National Education Goals by improving understanding of how to enable children and youth with disabilities to reach higher levels of academic achievement.

Eligible Applicants: Eligible applicants are State and local educational agencies, institutions of higher education, and other public agencies and nonprofit private organizations.

Applicable Regulations: (a) The Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) in 34 CFR Parts 74, 75, 77, 80, 81, 82, 85, and 86; (b) The regulations for this program in 34 CFR Part 324; and (c) The priority in the notice of final priority for this program, as published elsewhere in this issue of the Federal Register, applies to this competition.

Note: The regulations in 34 CFR Part 86 apply to institutions of higher education only.

Deadline for Transmittal of Applications: May 17, 1996.

Applications Available: March 15, 1996.

Estimated Number of Awards: 5.

Project Period: Up to 36 months.

Available Funds: In fiscal year 1996, the Department proposes to allocate approximately \$375,000 to support an estimated 5 projects, with a maximum size of award of \$75,000 for the first twelve months of the project. Multi-year projects will be level funded unless there are increases in costs attributable to significant changes in activity level.

The Congress has not yet enacted a fiscal year 1996 appropriation for the Department of Education. The Department is publishing this notice in order to give potential applicants adequate time to prepare applications. The estimate of the amount of funds that will be available for this competition is based in part on the President's 1996 budget request and in part on the level of funding available for fiscal year 1995.

Potential applicants should note, however, that the Congress is considering proposals to eliminate or to reduce funding in 1996 for many of the discretionary grant programs administered by the Department, including the program under which this competition would be conducted. Final action on the 1996 appropriation may require the Department to cancel the competition announced in this notice.

Note: The Department of Education is not bound by any estimates in this notice.

For Applications and General Information Contact: Requests for applications and general information should be addressed to: Claudette Carey,