The study of politics is the investigation of power within particular contexts. Power circulates through discourses among various groups who make use of and are used by values and language to participate in on-going events (e.g., Foucault, 1980; Gonick, 2003; Peet, 2007). These discourses and uses of discourse set parameters, influence actions, and position participants within events. Those who wield power in some contexts are powerless in others as negotiators push and pull participants in ways of their own making, but not entirely within their control. The discourses surrounding DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) can serve as a short introduction to the political contexts of reading disabilities, demonstrating how power works.

Each summer our campus supports a reading program for children and youth who are experiencing difficulty in learning to read at school. The program serves as a practicum for master’s degree students seeking reading specialist certification. Working from a 3-to-1 student/teacher ratio, we enroll between 20 and 30 children each year. Traditionally, the enrollment process begins in late spring after teachers and parents have conferred about a student’s progress throughout the academic year and their projections for success in the next grade. In the past, parent phone calls would trickle in during late May and early June with discussions about “summer regress” and “a boost going into next year.” Over the last 3 years, however, our program is full with a waiting list by the end of January. Parents call with panic in their voices, reporting that their kindergarten and first grade children are “reading disabled” because they have not “passed the DIBELS tests.”

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills are a set of six fluency tests (letter names, initial sounds, phoneme segmentation, nonsense words, oral reading, and retelling) designed to enable regular monitoring of “pre-reading and early reading skills” (www.dibels.org). The purpose, content, and format of DIBELS are built upon the evidence-based conclusions of the National Reading Panel (2000) and Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) and are pronounced valid and reliable based on their correlations with other established tests. In these ways, DIBELS performs the discourse of experimental science—in language, logic, appearance, and values—constructing reading abilities and disabilities in its wake.

At the same time, DIBELS is a product that competes in a market created when the need for regular monitoring of these skills became generally accepted within the reading field. Although the basic materials of DIBELS can be downloaded from a website, and students’ scores can be processed and packaged into reports for $1 per student, the tests are also available commercially in several forms along with test preparation materials and technical and human support as well. These products and services are advertised through professional journals and the Internet. In these ways, DIBELS incorporates the discourse of business, working for a market share and to maximize profits, complicating what it means to determine reading ability and disability.

The market for the regular measurement of early reading was officially sanctioned when the Bush administration implemented its Reading First Initiative of the No Child Left Behind education law of 2002. In order to ensure that all students would test “proficient in reading” by 2014, the Department of Education connected federal funding to state and school district compliance with testing systems that could track schools’ progress toward that goal. With the discourses of science and business firmly underlying modern policy making, federal officials searched for a valid and reliable technology to standardize the practices and outcomes of reading education across the country. According to a Department of Education Inspector General’s Report (September, 2006), Reading First officials pressured states and school districts to adopt DIBELS as the appropriate technology in order to comply with federal policy and qualify for funding. In these ways, DIBELS projects a government discourse, framing the use of its tests as lawful
behavior and a commitment to helping all students become proficient readers.

Through these three (and other) discourses, DIBELS provides support for reading education, replacing local knowledge and practices with the universal values, language, and rules of science, business, and government. For example, adults’ familiarity with students’ interest in text or understanding questions and meanings are discounted in favor of students’ speed and accuracy when decoding sound and print. School traditions and teacher decisions give way to technologies that direct students’ attention to code in printed text. Although sometimes contradictory, they provide new possibilities for the participants as well as limit others. DIBELS enables administrators, teachers, parents, and students to be more effective, efficient, and more accountable during reading instruction.

However, DIBELS also defines these participants by the same terms. Each becomes defined as an able or disabled adult learner, a reader, or a student according to the six measures in the DIBELS battery, and their subsequent actions are disciplined by the meanings assigned and performed through the authority of these discourses. All other relations with text become irrelevant. To the extent that participants internalize these discourses, the power of DIBELS becomes invisible and natural, and local administrators make changes in the laboratory (1850) in the reading of their children, and students are made or unmade accordingly.

And the reach of these discourses extends to the door of our campus reading program with early calls from anxious parents, who are now warned by concerned teachers, who work in schools that must prove that they have a technology to produce proficient readers within specified time limits. Our program’s enrollment becomes younger each year—filled with kindergarten graduates and first grade repeaters. Although the parents’ narratives have changed, the discourses behind the politics are not new. DIBELS is the only recent amplification for these discourses.

In order to consider the political contexts of reading disabilities, we will examine the construction, maintenance, and uses of the discourses of science, business, and the government that have and continue to swirl around reading education in the United States. Although reading disabilities appear to be a psychological state of being, we understand the term to be ripe with politics at many levels. Our examination is to present persons, locating the origins and consequences of these discourses within the emergence of disabilities in the reading field during the 20th century and into the 21st. Within those limits, we shall search for valuable points of view or movements in various ways with consequences that ripple through clinics, schools, states, and national contexts.

Science Discourses

In An Evile Science: The Troubling History of Educational-Research, Kapuscinski argues that scholars’ efforts to apply the principles of the Enlightenment to education resulted in the creation of psychology as an academic field. In order to be recognized as a field, “scientists of the mind” had to distinguish their work from previous philosophic and religious considerations on mental life. Toward that end, would-be psychologists secularized the Christian virtues of faith and hope in terms of science and progress and operationalized the metaphysical questions about the mind—What can I know? What ought I to do? For what can I hope?—How does the brain work? According to a science of the mind, psychology, would provide the positive knowledge that would lead humans out of the problems of theological fiction and the misadventures of egotism toward the natural laws of learning, increasing human capacity to make life easier and securing individual and social freedom (Ward, 2002).

Although efforts to separate science from philosophy and religion began during the French Enlightenment and accelerated with Auguste Comte’s 1830 call for a social science to make humanity more competent, psychology began in William Wundt’s laboratory in Leipzig, Germany, during 1879 (Danziger, 2001). James McKeen Cattell (Wundt’s first assistant) and G. Stanley Hall are often credited for extending Wundt’s experimental work and bringing it to the United States, where it met the burgeoning applications of science to industry, medicine, and the military. William James (1890) pointed out that psychology should have considered the first American book on psychology. Twelve years in the writing, James’s two volumes included chapters on the functioning of the brain and brain activity.

Yet, James’s work would also serve as a metaphor for the struggle among discourses of science, philosophy, and religion within the scholarly discourses of the mind (Teltman, 2001). For example, in 1902, James published The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature in which he rationalized a belief in God, not on ontological or teleological grounds, but as therapeutic. He cautioned psychologists, “Science must be constantly reminded that her purposes are not the only purposes, and that the order of uniform causation which she has for use, and is therefore right in posulating, may be envelopes in a wider order, on which she has no claim at all” (p. 1179). In 1906, he published his interpretation of the central crisis in American psychology, “Does Consciousness Exist?”

Behind this ambiguity, American researchers interested in psychology were quickly steered from philosophy (Koch, 1992). In 1883, Hall established a psychology laboratory at Johns Hopkins and began to publish his results in the American Journal of Psychology in 1887. During the late 1880s, young men at many large, well-endowed universities became the founding discipline for the new Clark University (which hired Hall as his first president). There were 10 laboratories by 1890 and 20 by 1893. The American Psychological Association (APA) was formed in 1892 and held its first meeting that year. In 1895, Cattell became the editor of the Psychological Review with the first recognized editorial review board. Because psychologists found it difficult to present their papers at the

APA conferences and then publish them in the psychology journals, they split from APA to form the Western Philosophical Association in 1901 and the American Philosophical Association in 1910. Appeals to science and the use of science methods were the primary reasons for tension between these groups (Toulmin & Levi, 1982). In 1896, Karl Pearson explained, “The scientific method consists in the careful observation of the classification of facts, the comprehension of their relationships and sequences, and finally in the discovery by aid of the disciplined imagination a brief statement or formula, which when used determines the justification of the evaluation of the various measures of facts.” Such a formula is called a scientific law. (p. 22)

E. L. Thorndike (1906) explained the social advantages of this disciplined imagination and named psychologists as agents of this work.

The judgements of science are distinguished from other judgments by being more impartial, more objective, more precise, and more subject to test by verification by any competent observer and being made by those who by their very nature and training should be better judges. Science knows or should know no favorites and cares for nothing in its conclusions but the truth. (p. 265)

Starting with Wundt and Cattell, psychologists looked for scientific laws that would explain reading (Venezky, 1986). Although Wundt was most interested in physiology, Cattell was fascinated with understanding individual differences by focusing on observable behaviors he thought reliable to reading, including letter and word recognition, legibility, and attention span. His interest in differences led him to extend Galton’s work through the development of mental tests (a term he coined in 1890), which could be used to establish a normal range of intelligence by sampling individual behaviors. In the same study, Cattell predicts that the “serious school psychologist’s interest is likely to take a place in the educational plan of our schools and universities” (p. 390). Although Cattell’s efforts to capture human differences in individual performance, his students (E.L. Thorndike, Walter Demberth, and Arthur Gates) and others would bring the concept of mental testing to their experiments in learning general and on reading in particular. In fact, Venezky (1984) labeled this era the “Golden Years” of reading research, leading to the publication of E. Daniel Burke Huey’s The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading in 1906 and Thorndike’s establishment of the Journal of Educational Psychology in 1910. Kaiser would note in 1968 that “remarkably little empirical information has had to do with what Huey knew (about the reading process), although some of the phenomena have now been measured more precisely” (Huey, 1930/1968, p. xiv).

In these golden years, the language about reading and reading education changed from commonplace of how reading was taught and learned to discourse suffused with captured beauty to analyses of perception, speed, and precision. The language of reading instruction changed from historical and descriptive accounts or personal evaluations of classroom practices and texts to statistical comparisons of basic perception among able and less able readers and of experimental intervention against traditional methods. For example, Ruskin’s philosophical words were often quoted: “To use books rightly is to go to them for help and to be led by them into wider sight, purer conceptions than our own, and to receive from them the united sentences of the judges and councils of all time against our solitary and unstable opinions” (e.g., Brown, 1906). Such sentiments continued throughout the 20th century to a different degree substituting scientific rationality and technological advances for the experimental basis of tradition treatments of reading and reading instruction. Consider the following statements.

After all we have thus far been content with trial and error, too often allowing publishers to be our judge, and a real rationalization of the process of inducing a child with the practice of reading has not been made. (Huey, 1906/1968, p. 9).

When the mechanics of reading, if we may use that phrase, are mastered, the whole attention may now be concentrated on the significance of the passage. (Judd, 1914, p. 366).

Any progress toward meaning how well a child can read with something of the objectivity, precision, cooperation, and control that make our measurements of how tall he is, how much he can lift with his back, or squats at the toilet, would be a great help in grading, promoting, and testing the value of methods of teaching. (Thorndike, 1914, p. 1).

Standard reading tests supply information concerning all phases of instruction from broader issues involved in the course of study to the detailed difficulties encountered by individual pupils. (Gray, 1915, p. 59).

The Standard Test Lessons in Reading are offered to the teachers in our school [Lincoln School at Teachers College Columbia University] with confidence that their use will give to practical comprehension and control, exceeding that yielded by ordinary methods of tracing silent reading...Every lesson is a test and every test is a lesson... Not only is each lesson a test, but every test is a standard test; that is, it shows how well the normal or typical pupil would read these same lessons. (McCall & Inton, 1919, p. 396).

One of the most potent factors in spreading the results of research is through well-prepared sets of readers and manuals, yet we find teachers still instructing children as they themselves were taught, absolutely ignorant and oblivious that science had discovered for us truths and that little children are entitled to be benefits of these discoveries. (Dorrance, 1924, pp. 106–107).

In these remarks, the discourse of science positions teachers and publishers as expert arbiters of the laws of reading into classroom practice. The process of reading is divided and sequenced. Technology is declared
to be the solution to individual variation, leading from accurate measurement to classroom instruction to individual remediation. The discourse established a normal range in reading ability, which is what it is, and then remedied the defects with which it is equipped. Students within this range become able readers, and those outside this normal range are disabled. Assuming all else is equal, only teacher error kept these disabled readers from the normal range, approach, and speed. At the same time, the discourses of scientific psychologists as experts within this field of reading and reading education, applying scientific methods to new issues of concern. Physician, theologians, historians, literary scholars, or even other educators. At the same time, these issues are being addressed in the discussions and actions surrounding reading ability and disability.

The rise of the scientific discourse in reading education has been neither straightforward nor linear. Not to the extent that evidence-based or scientifically based policy and practice are currently considered the norm, it has been successful. Across the 20th century, its increasing influence can be mapped in professional organizations (e.g., National Society for the Study of Education, American Educational Research Association, National Council of Teachers of English, International Reading Association, National Reading Conference, and Society for the Scientific Study of Reading), their journals and meetings, and state-of-the-field reports (NSSE Yearbooks, 1919; Gray, 1925; Gray, 1937; Gist, 1949; Austin & Meiring, 1963; Burton & Wilfley, 1966; Dunkin, 1978; Anderson, Heibert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000). Throughout, there has been a tension of certainty—now coming full circle back to physiology.

Reading reflects language, and reading disability reflects a deficit within the language system. Using functional brain imaging, scientists around the world have discovered not only how reading closely relates to a neural circuit for reading in children and adults who struggle to read. (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004, pp. 7, 8)

Discourses of Business

The rhetoric of A Nation at Risk (1983), and that of the reports of crisis that followed, described reading ability and disability in economic terms (Shannon, 1998). Such crisis-based analyses suggest that those who are able to meet the literacy demands of the economy are those who will prosper and help the United States prosper. Those who are unable to meet these demands are those who will face difficult times, becoming social and economic liabilities. The ability to read in socially acceptable ways, then, becomes capital—something that can be accounted for and spent personally and socially. In this way, the financial well-being of the individual and society are embedded within the formal, infrastructure, and practices that surround reading ability and disability. Literacy skills required within particular economies set the parameters of who is considered able or disabled. As demands or perceived demands shift, the numbers in each group change accordingly. The technology and organization required to ensure ability and prevent disability in the current economy and work environment are a focus of the fourth report, which presents the national standards for reading instruction that will be used to evaluate the quality of instruction. It also presents the findings of the study on the effects of the National Reading Panel's recommendations for improving reading instruction. The fourth report was to be the equivalent of the instructional card for scientific management.

The effort throughout has been to put its recommendations in simple-to-use language that can be translated to a handbook and guide for the use of teachers and supervisors who are interested in planning classroom procedures with an eye to making economy and efficiency in teaching and learning (Wilson, 1918, pp. 78-84).

Gray deduced 48 principles for reading instruction from 35 studies, covering normative standards for progress across grade levels, suggestions for oral and silent reading, and specifications for printed materials. He emphasized that the expectations of the students and the implementation of teaching practices were necessarily superior to all others in terms of results. Rather he argued that instructional efficiency and productivity vary according to how well teachers educate the materials available to them. Just as Taylor had laid down the tools, master teachers of reading were working in classrooms beside teachers who demonstrated little skill. Even before the publication of the fourth report, the NSSE formed the Committee on Materials in Education, combining the Committee on the Measurement of Educational Products and the Committee on the Economy of Teaching, the Society assigned to the present Committee the task of embodying, in concrete materials to be used in classrooms, the principles arrived at by the earlier committees (Begley, 1930, p. 11). In short, the new curricula were to develop a technology that would raise the methods of teaching teachers to the same productivity of the master teachers. In this way, teachers became concerned with the selection and use of texts in order to promote reading ability and prevent reading disability.

The need for more effective technologies of monitoring of student learning and teacher instruction emerges quite clearly from the report on reading community (Shannon, 2001). Tests within reading lessons, tests of reading progress over short and long periods, and diagnostic tests became ubiquitous in classrooms and schools across the next decade or so. This is the beginning of an internalization process of techniques and limits of informal sampling of students' reading that teachers could implement and analyze themselves, and standardized reading tests which required teachers to use them to determine the specific areas of weaknesses among students. As early as 1906, existing textbook companies (e.g., World Book, Lippincott, and Publix) were already publishing reading tests and other written tests to determine the quality of teachers' labor. Their learning was subject to quality control of tests, and teachers' efforts were standardized in order to increase their consistency fidelity to that system.

The four reports successfully demonstrate the potential application of this business model to schooling in general and reading in particular. The first report presented a national survey that established standards of expectations for teachers in each grade level, as well as the tests that would be included within the curriculum, time devoted to reading instruction, rates of reading, vocabulary loads in textbooks, and the tests that were to determine the students' readiness to establish national standards of expectations (Wilson, 1915). In the second and third reports, William S. Gray delivered deeper into daily practices of reading instruction, advocating that silent reading instruction was preferable to oral because of its utility and efficiency in everyday tasks and provided a first look at the national reading panel's Recommendations for Paragraphs and Silent Reading (Wilson, 1917). The fourth report was to be the equivalent of the instructional card for scientific management.

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A recent successful marketing venture concerns the consequences of testing of reading ability. As described by Quinn (2005), readers who fail to reach the able range require more, and perhaps different attention because standardization of technological solutions have been unsuccessful. Prior to taking the tests, readers designated as "at risk" of failure are often given to preparatory tests. Publishers, book publishers, and independent entrepreneurs have moved rapidly into this market, supplying goods and services to improve the odds of passing. Those who still fail provide more reading materials and services as well. Since public schools are responsible for students becoming able readers, the testing market provides a new conduit for public education funds to flow toward private companies and businesses. The continued flow has apparently been lucrative (PSS, 2008). Although there were scores of basal programs at the beginning of the 20th century, there are only five major programs that have publishers that control the right to market today. The news media designated some publishing companies as "Bush stocks" when the No Child Left Behind legislation passed (Metcalf, 2004).

Government Discourse

In North America, government discourse entered reading education. Massachusetts legislators passed a law requiring towns to make certain that "all youth under family Government be taught to read perfectly the English Tongue, have knowledge in capital laws, and be taught some other sciences, and that they be brought up to some honest employment, profitable to themselves and to the Commonwealth" (quoted in Cubberley, 1933, p. 18).

In this statement, the colonial legislature proposed six values to be found in later U.S. government discourse: (a) the United States is a republic and not a democracy (legislators made the decisions), (b) rule of law (all youth—knowledge of capital laws), (c) equal protection of those considered citizens (under family government), (d) building infrastructure to develop the economy (taught to read—some honest employment), (e) accountability (perfectly), and (f) ideology (systemic and not religious—English orthodoxy). In 1789, with the ratification of the U.S. Constitution and its first 10 amendments, education was secured as a state's right, continuing what had been the unspoken commitment to public education and reading education across the various colonies. By necessity, each state legislature had to address a series of questions:

What type of education should the state sponsor?
Who should pay for that education?
Who should determine what is taught and how it is taught in a state sponsored school?
Who should have the opportunity to study? For how long? Toward what end?
Who should determine how and when should they decide when students are sufficiently educated?
Who should decide who is qualified to teach?

Variability in state legislators' answers to these questions resulted in beautifully idiosyncratic consequences yet also standardized outcomes (On the one hand, think of the wonderful classroom libraries that developed in California schools when the state legislature argued that students should read more in the 1960s, but would not fund school libraries. On the other hand, consider the effects of large state textbooks and those values put on reading of basal or core reading programs from which smaller states must also choose). Currently, definitions of reading ability and development are based on the 1964 and 1966 amendments to the U.S. education act (1964, 82-452). A program designed to promote equal opportunity for disadvantaged children through federal funding, during the Johnson as compared to the Reagan administrations. Consider the following two quotes from each in turn.

Anchates tells us many centuries ago: give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum strong enough and I can move the world. Today, at last, we have a prospect of a lever long enough and support strong enough to do something about our children of poverty. The lever is education, and the fulcrum is federal assistance. (Commissioner of Education Frances Keppel, 1965, p. 6)

First the President wanted to reduce substantially federal spending for education. Second, he wanted to strengthen local and state control of education and to reduce dramatically the federal responsibility in this area. Fourth, the President wanted to improve federal-aid laws and rules that would either greatly expanded parental choice and that would increase the competition for students among schools by encouraging the formation of both public and private structures patterned after the free market system that motivates and disciplines U.S. business and industry. (Secretary of Education Terrell Bell, 1980, p. 482)

Although both the liberal and conservative official expressed the promise of local control and thereby are compelled to cope with state regulations and demands. The federal government may lack a constitutional mandate to manage public education, but its direct involvement began after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957 when it appeared that the United States was losing the technological advantage that it had demonstrated during the World War II (Kasples & Smith, 1953). The National Defense Education Act (PL 85-864) provided substantial funding for research on, and development of, school curricula deemed vital to the national defense and security—science, second language and mathematical curricula—and that in time that general curriculum could be improved as well. With this legislation, two new values were added to the government discourse. First, public schools were recognized as a national security concern and that the local school government had a direct interest in schooling. Second, funding would be the federal incentive to gain state compliance with its education initiatives. The federal government would fund research as well as direct payments to schools to enable programs. Subsequent federal legislation (e.g., Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, PL 89-10, and the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, P.L 94-142) reinforced these and the original government values and practices.

The growth of the federal government's role in education has been dramatic, and the legal consequences have been far-reaching. The government, according to its underlying political ideology (Shannon, 2007). Contrast the emphasis in the racial surrounding Project Head start (Public Law 89-32) to that of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (88-452), a program designed to promote equal opportunity for disadvantaged children through federal funding, during the Johnson as compared to the Reagan administrations. Consider the following two quotes from each in turn.

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Ascentides tells us many centuries ago: give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum strong enough and I can move the world. Today, at last, we have a prospect of a lever long enough and support strong enough to do something about our children of poverty. The lever is education, and the fulcrum is federal assistance. (Commissioner of Education Frances Keppel, 1965, p. 6)

First the President wanted to reduce substantially federal spending for education. Second, he wanted to strengthen local and state control of education and to reduce dramatically the federal responsibility in this area. Fourth, the President wanted to improve federal-aid laws and rules that would either greatly expanded parental choice and that would increase the competition for students among schools by encouraging the formation of both public and private structures patterned after the free market system that motivates and disciplines U.S. business and industry. (Secretary of Education Terrell Bell, 1980, p. 482)

Although both the liberal and conservative official expressed the promise of local control and thereby are compelled to cope with state regulations and demands. The federal government may lack a constitutional mandate to manage public education, but its direct involvement began after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957 when it appeared that the United States was losing the technological advantage that it had demonstrated during the World War II (Kasples & Smith, 1953). The National Defense Education Act (PL 85-864) provided substantial funding for research on, and development of, school curricula deemed vital to the national defense and security—science, second language and mathematical curricula—and that in time that general curriculum could be improved as well. With this legislation, two new values were added to the government discourse. First, public schools were recognized as a national security concern and that the local school government had a direct interest in schooling. Second, funding would be the federal incentive to gain state compliance with its education initiatives. The federal government would fund research as well as direct payments to schools to enable programs. Subsequent federal legislation (e.g., Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, PL 89-10, and the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, P.L 94-142) reinforced these and the original government values and practices.
Consider for example, the struggles over the definitions of reading disabilities since the turn of the 21st century. Researchers, teachers, politicians, and parents with children with disabilities have been struggling over the meaning and boundaries of the term "reading disable-ness" for over a decade. It is a complex area of study that involves understanding the interplay between cognitive, social, emotional, and physical factors in the development of reading skills. The field of reading education research is critical in understanding these issues and in developing effective interventions to support all students in their reading development.

In contrast to the variability and wide-ranging nature of the field of reading education research, discipline-specific conferences are much more focused and systematic. For example, the National Reading Conference, which has been held annually since 1899, is a premier event for researchers and practitioners in the field of reading education. The conference typically attracts thousands of participants who come to share their latest research findings and to discuss the future directions of the field.

However, the field of reading education research is not without its challenges. For example, there is often a disconnect between the research conducted in universities and the practices implemented in schools. This can be attributed to a number of factors, including the lack of translation of research findings into practical classroom applications, the limited resources available to schools for implementing research-based practices, and the varying levels of expertise and training among teachers.

Despite these challenges, the field of reading education research remains an important area of study. As the field continues to evolve, it is important to remain vigilant in ensuring that the research conducted is relevant, rigorous, and has a meaningful impact on the education of all students.