

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT (IDEA)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 7.2 million eligible children and youth with disabilities across the country, including infants and toddlers. Programs for young children with disabilities play a significant role in early childhood education and development, which is particularly salient when it comes to promoting school readiness. The connections in a baby's brain are most adaptable in the first three years of life. These connections, which are the foundation for learning, behavior, and health, become harder to change over time. Ensuring that young children have access to inclusive early interventions during this critical period of development means that they will get the appropriate services and supports they need to be equipped for success in school and life.

BACKGROUND

Since 1975, the federal government has sought to uphold the fundamental principle of educational equality for children with disabilities through a permanent, broad-scale federal assistance program. IDEA provides federal funding for the education of children with disabilities and, as a condition of the funding, requires states to provide a free appropriate public education specifically designed to meet the needs of children with disabilities at no cost to their parents. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that nearly 9% of children in the United States have been diagnosed with a developmental disability ranging from mild disabilities, such as those related to speech and language impairments, to more serious developmental disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, and autism.¹

AT A GLANCE

CREATED:

1975

WHO THIS PROGRAM SERVES:

Children and youth with disabilities between birth and age 21.

- Part C provides early intervention services to infants and toddlers (birth through age two) with disabilities and their families.
- Part B, Sec. 619 provides special education and related services to children ages three through five.

NUMBER OF YOUNG CHILDREN SERVED IN THE 2022-2023 SCHOOL YEAR:

Part C²: 853,290 children

Part B, Sec. 619³: 535,392 children

FY2024 FUNDING:

Part C: \$540 million

Part B, Sec. 619: \$420 million

Since its inception, IDEA has never been fully federally funded. Currently, the federal contribution is around 14%, meaning states are required to make up a significant portion of the funding. There have been legislative efforts to fully fund IDEA at 40%, however, they have not yet been realized.

EARLY INTERVENTION AND PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

IDEA contains two programs specifically designed to serve younger children with disabilities:

IDEA PART C

IDEA Part C authorizes federal funding for early intervention (EI) services to infants and toddlers with disabilities ages birth to three years. Infants and toddlers are eligible for EI if they are experiencing a developmental delay or have a diagnosed physical or mental condition with a high probability of resulting in a developmental delay. In some states, children qualify if they are “at-risk” for a developmental delay. Early intervention services may include audiology, vision, speech-language pathology, and psychological services; physical therapy; provision of assistive technology devices; and social work, referral, and coordination services. To the maximum extent feasible, services are to be provided in “natural environments,” including the home, with other infants and toddlers who don’t have a disability. If the developmental delay has not been resolved by age three, a child may continue receiving services under Part B, Sec. 619.

- In the 2020-2021 school year, 3% of children under the age of three received EI services.⁴
- This ranged from a high of 10% in Massachusetts to less than 1% in Arkansas and Hawaii. Only six states provided EI services to more than 5% of infants and toddlers.⁵

IDEA PART B, SECTION 619

IDEA Part B, Section 619 authorizes supplementary grants to states for preschool programs serving children with disabilities ages three through five. Under Section 619, three- to five-year-olds are eligible for ECSE if an evaluation determines they have a disability. It is important to note that while states and public agencies must follow federal law and guidance, they can make decisions about who is eligible for services, including how to define disability (i.e. some states consider developmental delays as an eligibility criterion while others do not.)

- In the 2020-2021 school year, 5% of three-and four-year-olds received ECSE.⁶
- This ranged from a high of 14% in Wyoming to 3% in Alabama, Georgia, Montana, North Carolina, and Texas. Wyoming was the only state to provide ECSE to more than 10% of three-and four-year-olds.⁷

References:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “[Diagnosed Developmental Disabilities in Children Aged 3-17 Years: United States, 2019-2021](#)”
2. U.S. Department of Education Open Data Platform, “[IDEA Section 618 Data Products: Static Tables Part C Child Count and Settings](#)”
3. U.S. Department of Education Open Data Platform, “[IDEA Section 618 Data Products: Static Tables Part B Child Count and Educational Environments](#)”
- 4, 5, 6, 7. National Institute for Early Education Research “[The State\(s\) of Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education: Looking at Equity](#)”

