

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT (IDEA)

August 2026

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures states and territories provide early intervention, special education, and related services to **more than 7.5 million** eligible children and youth with disabilities across the country,¹ including infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. IDEA's early childhood programs play a critical role in identifying developmental delays, providing supports and services, and helping young children build the skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

Neural connections – the foundation for learning, behavior, and health – form most quickly and are most responsive to intervention in the first three years of life. As the brain matures, these connections become less adaptable.² Access to inclusive early intervention services during this critical window helps young children build a strong foundation, develop important skills, and supports better long-term outcomes for children and families.

BACKGROUND

Since 1975, the federal government has supported educational opportunities for children with disabilities through a permanent, broad-scale federal assistance program. Originally enacted as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and reauthorized as IDEA in 1990, the law provides federal funding for the education of children with disabilities and, as a condition of receiving those funds, requires states to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities at no cost to their families. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), **nearly 9% of children** in the United States have been diagnosed with a developmental disability, which includes autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, and any other developmental delays.³

For a majority of the program's history, IDEA has been housed under the U.S. Department of Education (ED). However, in June 2026, the Trump administration announced that ED would partner with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to assist with the administration of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), which oversees IDEA programs.⁴

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 delays or disabilities and their families.
- **Part B, Sec. 619** provides preschool special education and related services to children ages three through five before kindergarten entry.

NUMBER OF YOUNG CHILDREN SERVED THROUGHOUT THE 2023-2024 SCHOOL YEAR

- **Part C:** 460,321 children⁵
- **Part B, Sec. 619:** 581,437 children⁶

FY2026 FUNDING:

- **Part C:** \$540 million⁷
- **Part B, Sec. 619:** \$420 million⁸

Legislative efforts to fully fund IDEA at 40% have not yet been realized. Currently, the federal contribution is around 12%, meaning states are required to make up a significant portion of the funding.⁹



EARLY INTERVENTION & 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 services to infants and toddlers from birth through age two with disabilities or developmental delays, regardless of family income. Children are eligible if they have a developmental delay or a diagnosed physical or mental condition likely to result in a developmental delay. In some states, children who are “at-risk” for a developmental delay also qualify. States establish their own eligibility criteria and are responsible for identifying, evaluating, and providing appropriate services to all qualifying children. Early intervention programs have different names across states and localities, such as “Infant & Toddler Connection” in Virginia.

Services may include audiology, vision, speech-language pathology, psychological services, physical therapy, assistive technology, social work, and service coordination. To the maximum extent feasible, services are provided in children’s “natural environments,” including the home or other community settings, alongside infants and toddlers without disabilities. Access to these services can improve developmental trajectories as well as prevent further delays. If the developmental delay persists at age three, a child may continue receiving services under Part B, Sec. 619.

The percentage of children served varies across states, in part because of differences in state eligibility policies, Child Find and outreach efforts, and available resources.¹⁰ Despite the proven impact of early intervention, federal IDEA Part C funding per-child has declined over time, placing pressure on state budgets and making it more challenging to ensure equitable access across states.¹¹ Most states supplement federal dollars with state and local funding to serve more children.¹²

- In the 2023-2024 school year, **4% of children** under the age of three received early intervention services.¹³
 - This ranged from **more than 10% of children** in New Mexico and Massachusetts to **less than 2% of children** in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma.
 - In 17 states, **more than 5% of children** received services.¹⁴
- **36 states** have eliminated family fees for children receiving early intervention services, reducing financial barriers to access.¹⁵

IDEA PART B, SECTION 619

IDEA Part B, Section 619 authorizes supplemental grants to states to provide preschool special education services for children with disabilities. Three-through-five year olds are eligible for early childhood special education (ECSE) if an evaluation determines they have a disability. At the discretion of the state, children who are experiencing developmental delays may also be eligible. While states and public agencies must comply with IDEA requirements, they can make decisions about who is eligible for services, including how to define developmental delays. **Nationally, 45% of children receiving ECSE are identified as having a developmental delay, followed by a speech or language disability (36%), and autism (12%).**¹⁶

States distribute most of the federal grant to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), that serve children with disabilities in a variety of settings, including public and private preschool programs, Head Start programs, and child care facilities.¹⁷ Children typically receive services under Section 619 until they enter kindergarten, at which point they transition to school-age special education and related services under IDEA Part B.

- In the 2023-2024 school year, **5% of preschoolers** received ECSE services¹⁸
 - This ranged from **more than 10% of children** in Puerto Rico and Wyoming to **less than 3% of children** in Alabama, Georgia, and Montana.
 - In 31 states, **more than 5% of children** received services.¹⁹



Scan or click the QR code for full references and links at ffyf.org/individuals-with-disabilities-education-act-overview/. For more information contact FFYF at mail@ffyf.org.

