



What Are the Major Policy and Funding Components of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

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IDEA is the cornerstone federal law that safeguards and promotes the educational rights of children with disabilities. It was enacted in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which established a right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children with disabilities for the first time. Before the EHA, there were gradual changes in laws regarding the treatment and support of individuals with disabilities, driven by legal actions and advocacy from disability rights groups. Over time, these efforts led to the more comprehensive approach seen in the EHA. Since its inception, IDEA has been reauthorized four times, including in 1990 when it acquired its current name.¹

IDEA influences state and local funding decisions both by tying eligibility for IDEA grants — which represent a substantial share of total funding for special education from all sources — to meeting specific programmatic and administrative requirements and by requiring states and public school systems to sustain at least the same levels of state and local funding for special education year over year.

This brief provides an overview of the purposes of IDEA and the four categories of federally funded programs governed by the law.

NOTE

Bellwether's [Splitting the Bill](#) series primarily focuses on providing information and analysis on aspects of state public education finance policy. Splitting the Bill briefs focused on special education funding deviate slightly from a state policy focus due to the prominent role federal policy and funding have in shaping how states and public school systems fund and provide services for special education students.

What Is the Purpose of IDEA?

IDEA defines six purposes for the law. The foundational purpose is ensuring all children can access a FAPE, which refers to the right of children with disabilities to receive an education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) that meets their individual needs at no cost to their families. FAPE includes special education and related services tailored to each child's unique needs, as outlined in their individualized education program (IEP). FAPE must be available to all children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21, with a few exceptions for children or young adults outside the age range of 5 to 18, largely dependent on the specific state context.² The other purposes of IDEA include:

- Protecting the educational rights of children and their families.
- Assisting states, localities, education service agencies, and federal agencies in meeting the educational needs of all students with disabilities.
- Supporting states with the implementation of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families.
- Ensuring educators and parents have tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities.
- Assessing and ensuring the effectiveness of services supporting the education of children with disabilities.³

What Are the Major Provisions of IDEA?

IDEA consists of four parts that define programmatic requirements and direct the allocation and use of federal funding to support special education.

- **Part A, General Provisions:** This section includes IDEA's purposes and important definitions for interpreting the law, including FAPE. Other important definitions include:
 - a) **IEP:** Schools or providers must develop an IEP or an individualized family service plan (for infants and toddlers) that establishes annual goals for academic and functional achievement and defines the special education services and supports the child will receive to support the attainment of those goals. IDEA specifies detailed policies and procedures for developing and monitoring IEPs, including requirements for evaluation and assessment and specific roles for families, students, educators, and support staff.⁴
 - b) **LRE:** Education services must be provided in the LRE, meaning children with disabilities must have the opportunity to learn alongside their nondisabled peers unless their disability does not enable success in the regular educational environment with support services and educational aids.⁵
- **Part B, Assistance for Education of All Children with Disabilities:** Part B provides federal funding to states to educate children ages 3 through 21 with disabilities.⁶ School districts must identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities, regardless of the severity of the disability, and determine which children are eligible for special education and related services.

- **Part C, Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities:** The general purpose of Part C is to aid states in creating and maintaining “a statewide, comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary, interagency system that provides early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families.”⁷
- **Part D, National Activities to Improve Education of Children with Disabilities:** Part D authorizes competitive grants to improve education for children with disabilities with three areas of focus: 1) state personnel development, 2) personnel preparation technical assistance, model demonstration projects, and dissemination of information, and 3) support to improve results for children.⁸

What Are the IDEA Federal Grant Programs, and How Much Funding Do They Receive?

Parts B, C, and D of IDEA each direct funding through grant programs. In fiscal year (FY) 2022, the federal government allocated \$14.5 billion in total funding to IDEA.⁹ From FY16 to FY22, IDEA funding rose by \$1.68 billion in nominal terms, increasing funding by \$78 per pupil.¹⁰ However, after adjusting for inflation, the trend reverses, with total IDEA funding decreasing by \$670.2 million in real dollars — a \$274 per-pupil decline.¹¹

IDEA Part B Grant Funding

Part B includes two grant programs:

- **Grants to States:** Authorized by Section 611, which provides grants to states to support children with disabilities ages 3 to 21.
- **Preschool Grants:** Authorized by Section 619, which provides grants to states to support children with disabilities ages 3 to 5.

In FY22, \$13.3 billion was allocated to Section 611, Grants to States, making up 92% of total IDEA funding, the vast majority of which is passed through to school districts and charter schools as formula funding to serve students with disabilities.¹² That same year, the federal government apportioned \$409.5 million in IDEA funding to Section 619, Preschool Grants.¹³

NOTE

For a deep dive into Part B, Grants to States, refer to [Splitting the Bill: What Are the Core Funding Components of Part B, Grants to States \(Section 611\) Funding in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)?](#)

IDEA Part C Grant Funding

Part C provides funding to serve infants and toddlers (children up to age 3) with disabilities and their families. In FY22, Part C received \$496.3 million.¹⁴ Most Part C funding supports early intervention services, which are defined in IDEA Part C, Section 303.13. Some allowable early intervention services include:

- **Family Training, Counseling, and Home Visits:** Services that social workers, psychologists, and other qualified personnel provide to assist families of infants or toddlers with disabilities in caring for their children and supporting their growth and development.
- **Transportation:** The cost of travel and other expenditures necessary to enable infants or toddlers with disabilities and their families to access early intervention services.
- **Medical Services:** Diagnostic or evaluative services a licensed physician provides to determine a child's developmental status and need for early intervention services.
- **Occupational Therapy:** Services that address the functional needs of infants or toddlers with disabilities related to adaptive development, adaptive behavior, play, and sensory, motor, and postural development.

IDEA Part D Grant Funding

In FY22, Part D funding totaled \$238.6 million.¹⁵ Part D includes three sections of activities directed by the U.S. secretary of education to provide systemic support nationally or build capacity for specific types of support at the state level, including:

- **State Personnel Development Grants:** These competitive grants support the improvement of personnel preparation and professional development among providers for a range of services and interventions for children with disabilities.¹⁶
- **Personnel Preparation, Technical Assistance, Model Demonstration Projects, and Dissemination of Information:** Funding appropriated under this section can be used to make competitive grants or for contracts to provide a range of supports, including professional development for service providers supporting children with disabilities, technical assistance to support the strong provision of comprehensive services and supports, research and evaluation to support improved results for children with disabilities, and other activities.¹⁷
- **Supports to Improve Results for Children with Disabilities:** Funds allocated under this section are primarily intended to provide training and support to children with disabilities and their families to assist them in meeting their goals and understanding their rights and responsibilities under IDEA. For example, funding under this section supports the National Center for Parent Information and Resources and parent resource centers located within communities across the country.¹⁸

IDEA specifies allocation methodologies for each formula grant it authorizes and defines eligibility for both formula and competitive grants. For funding that states must pass through to school districts and charter schools (referred to as local educational agencies or LEAs), the law defines the allocation methodology states must use.¹⁹

What Are the IDEA Maintenance of Effort Requirements?

To protect against reductions in state and local special education funding commitments, Part B of IDEA includes “maintenance of effort” requirements for state educational agencies and LEAs that limit reductions in year-over-year spending and impose financial penalties if states or LEAs fail to maintain effort.

Generally speaking, to receive the full amount of federal IDEA funding for which they are eligible in any given year, states must provide at least the same amount of state funding for special education as in the prior year.²⁰ Similar to requirements for states, IDEA prohibits LEAs from reducing expenditures for special education below the prior year’s level.²¹

If a state fails to meet maintenance of effort requirements, the U.S. secretary of education must reduce the state’s Part B grant by the same amount by which the state failed to meet the requirement.²² If an LEA fails to meet maintenance of effort, its federal IDEA funding is reduced by the amount of the shortfall.

Questions for Advocates

- *How are stakeholders — including parents, educators, and advocacy groups — engaged in the decision-making process regarding IDEA funding priorities in your state?*
- *How is your state ensuring compliance with the maintenance of effort requirement in IDEA funding, particularly in maintaining or increasing state and local financial support for special education services?*

Endnotes

- 1 "A History of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, U.S. Department of Education, last modified on February 16, 2024, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History>.
- 2 "IDEA Section 1412," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, U.S. Department of Education, last modified on November 7, 2019, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-ii/1412>.
- 3 "IDEA Statute and Regulations," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, U.S. Department of Education, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statuteregulations/>; and "Statute Chapter 33, Subsection I, Part A, section 1400d(1-4)," *ibid.*, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33>.
- 4 *Ibid.*, "Section 1414," last modified on November 7, 2019, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-ii/1414>.
- 5 *Ibid.*, "Section 1412," <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-ii/1412>.
- 6 Kyrie E. Dragoo, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Funding: A Primer," Congressional Research Service, updated August 29, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/r/r44624>.
- 7 "20 U.S. Code §1431 - Findings and policy," Legal Information Institute website, Cornell Law School, Cornell University, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/1431>.
- 8 Dragoo, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Funding: A Primer," Congressional Research Service website, updated August 29, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/r/r44624>.
- 9 "Department of Education Budget Tables," U.S. Department of Education website, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/tables.html>. This includes IDEA funding for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Freely Associated States, and the Indian set-aside.
- 10 "Education Department Budget History Tables: FY 1980—FY 2023 Congressional Appropriations," U.S. Department of Education website, last modified on December 13, 2023, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/history/index.html>. This includes IDEA funding for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Freely Associated States, and the Indian set-aside.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 "Department of Education Budget Tables," U.S. Department of Education website, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/tables.html>.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Dragoo, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Funding: A Primer," Congressional Research Service, updated August 29, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/r/r44624>; and "Statute and Regulations," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statuteregulations/>.
- 17 Dragoo, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Funding: A Primer," Congressional Research Service, updated August 29, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/r/r44624>; and "Section 1461, IDEA statute and regulations," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, U.S. Department of Education, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-iv/part-b>.
- 18 Dragoo, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Funding: A Primer," Congressional Research Service, updated August 29, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/r/r44624>; "IDEA Statute and Regulations," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, U.S. Department of Education, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statuteregulations/>; and Section 1470, "IDEA Statute and Regulations," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, U.S. Department of Education, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-iv/part-c>; and "Special Education — Parent Training and Information Centers," U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/oseppic/index.html>; <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/>.
- 19 Dragoo, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B: Key Statutory and Regulatory Provisions," Congressional Research Service, updated August 29, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41833>.
- 20 "Section 300.203: Maintenance of effort," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act website, U.S. Department of Education, April 28, 2015, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/reg/b/c/300.203>.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Splitting the Bill is a crash course in the essentials of school finance equity for advocates and others interested in reforming state education finance systems. Learn more and read the other briefs in this series [here](#).

About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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