

Educational Services to Very Young Children

LEA Obligations for children ages 3-5

Public Law 94-142

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) is a federal and state mandated program for young children with developmental delays and disabilities. It refers to the range of special education services that apply specifically to children between the ages of 3 and 5, prior to kindergarten. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Rhode Island Regulations Governing the Education of Children with Disabilities ensure that all children with disabilities, including children with developmental delays, who require special education to meet their educational needs are provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) in accordance with their individual needs.

Rhode Island Regulations

Each public agency must make available to each child with a disability, aged three (3) through (5) years old, a program which represents the least restrictive environment (LRE) and the appropriate placement given the student's individualized education program (IEP) or individualized family service plan (IFSP). Unless the individualized education program (IEP) or individualized family service plan (IFSP) requires otherwise, special education and related services shall be provided in that setting in which the child would normally be placed if he or she did not have a disability. The SEA has guidelines to assist IEP teams in determining delivery of services decisions. The array of educational settings shall include the following placement opportunities:

Inclusion Classrooms (Best Practice)

Children are served within a general education classroom, taught by a certified general education teacher, with supports and services embedded throughout the school day.

- LEAs offer public preschool where the ratio of children with IEPs is within natural proportions to the entire population. This requires no more than eighteen (18) three (3) year olds in a classroom or twenty (20) four (4) year olds with a certified teacher (Pre-K – 2) and a teaching assistant. In addition, services provided by special educators, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, school psychologists and 1:1 aides, if applicable, to support the children in accordance with their IEP.
- LEAs service children with IEPs in a childcare setting using a model where special educators, speech-language pathologists, Occupational therapists, and psychologists travel to the childcare center to work with the child in their classroom. This allows the child to remain in their least restrictive environment, in a general education classroom with their typically developing peers. Using the IEP goals the special education provider will embed strategies and techniques for supporting the child directly into the classroom activities, instruction, and daily schedule so they can happen throughout the day and not only when the special education provider is present.
- Using this approach requires collaborative time between the special education provider and the classroom teacher so they can discuss and reflect on the classroom strategies and have designated time for sharing challenges, modifications and successes.
- The services needed for a child's success that are outlined in the IEP must also be provided and available to the community childcare program. For example, if a child qualifies for a 1:1 aid and would have access to the aid within the school department setting then that child must also have an aid during their day at the childcare setting.

Integrated Classroom (Standard Practice)

Children are served within a special education integrated classroom, taught by a dual certified Pre-K – 2 and ECSE teacher.

LEAs offer classrooms in an integrated model where, by law, less than half of the children enrolled qualify for special education services through an active IEP. These classrooms can serve no more than fifteen (15) students with no more than seven (7) children having identified disabilities.

Full-day vs Half-day

For all children, but especially children with disabilities, studies have found that full-day programs are better at preparing children for school than half-day programs. For children with disabilities, this is also true.

To meet the goals and objectives of children's IEPs, more instruction time is needed than can be provided in a half-day program. Special Education teams have decided that moving to a 6-hour day is the only way they can meet the IEP and curriculum needs of the students on their caseloads.

As RI moves to UPK for 4-year-olds, meeting FAPE requirements will also mean providing a full day of an educational setting.

Self-contained Classrooms

Students should only be placed in self-contained classrooms when their disability is so severe that they cannot receive an effective education otherwise.

Most experts agree that students with special needs should be placed in general classrooms whenever possible, and if not possible, have access to a general education setting throughout the school day.

Key Facilities Considerations

Preschool classrooms are different from your typical classroom. There needs to be a minimum of 35 sq.ft per child, not including bathrooms and storage areas.

Classrooms, whenever possible, should have a bathroom with sinks for toileting and changing. If that is not possible, classrooms should be located next to a bathroom, or a plan should be made to have extra staff to assist with toileting needs.

Classrooms should also have sinks outside the bathroom for handwashing throughout the day.

The area should allow for an array of shelving, seating options and floor space for children to learn through intentional play opportunities.

Rhode Island's Vision

Since 2009, when RIDE was funded to support the RI Pre-K pilot, we have strived to increase seats, in a mixed-delivery system to support all children.

RI Pre-K is in 19 communities with almost 2,400 seats.

The general assembly has asked for a plan for expansion to universal preschool, with the addition of 3-year-olds due at the end of this year.

RI Pre-K is nationally recognized and it one of 5 states to meet all ten of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER's) quality benchmarks.