

History Note: Foundation for special education was laid in 1975

by [Access Press Staff](#) // September 8th, 2017

Crayons, pencils, a ruler and a backpack are necessities at back-to-school time. Learning the ABCs for students with disabilities requires another set of three letters – the IEP or Individualized Education Program. 2017 marks 40 years since IEPs began to be widely used. Key changes to IEPs were made 20 years ago.

For many years students with disabilities had few options to learn, with many even denied access to public education. Children who were home-schooled were among the most fortunate. Many others spent their lives in institutions. Many weren't educated at all. Programs varied widely between states, and within states.

Changes started to occur in the 1950s and 1960s. But it was slow going. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 1970 U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities. Many states had laws excluding certain students, including children who were deaf, blind, developmentally disabled or living with mental illness.

The foundation of today's special education law was passed in 1975 and enacted in 1977. Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA), provided free public education for children ages three to 21 years. It protected the rights of children with disabilities and their parents including due process rights. Education was to take place in the least restrictive environment. Federal funding was allocated to help educate children with disabilities. A key part of the act was to provide for IEPs, to make sure that students with disabilities got the help and support they needed.

In 1986, EHA was amended to address the need for early intervention and mandated services from birth. The amendments required the development of a comprehensive system of early intervention for infants.

The provisions of EHA were broadened, and the act itself got a new name in 1990. The act's new name became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA. This law expanded the eligibility categories to include autism and traumatic brain injuries. It also provided for assistive technology devices and services.

In 1997, IDEA was amended and reauthorized. One key focus 20 years ago was to spell out an initiative for transition services. It required a transition plan to be a part of every IEP no later than the student's 16th birthday.

Other changes made 20 years ago state that every IEP must include present levels of performance, measurable goals, statement of services, and statement of accommodations or modifications. Another key change is that a regular education teacher must be involved in the

IEP. The door was opened to allow students with IEPs to participate in state assessment tests. Discipline rules were updated to align with rent court decisions and to reflect those rulings.

Another important change in 1997 was that federal law addressed eligibility for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) under the “other health impairments” section.

IDEA has had many more changes over the years. It’s important to recognize that before EHA and IDEA, too many children were shut out of learning opportunities. From infants to young adults, the approach is much different. Children routinely can attend their neighborhood schools, and high school graduation and higher education aren’t out of reach.

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota’s disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities..