

Eligibility of Students with Disabilities for Special Education Services: An Overview of the United States and Ireland

Adi Hercowitz-Amir Mariela Yabo
Nurit Guedj

Editor (Hebrew): Revital Aviv Matok
English editing: Suzanne Brown
Graphic design: Efrat Speaker

The study was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and funded with its assistance.

Myers JDC Brookdale Institute

P.O.B. 3886, Jerusalem 9103702, Israel

Tel: 02-6557400

brookdale.jdc.org.il/en | brook@jdc.org

Jerusalem | June 2025

Abstract

Background

The provision of special education services that are tailored to the needs and functional level of students with disabilities or with health and/or behavioral difficulties is an essential condition for ensuring their success in school and in everyday life as well as for their integration into all aspects of life in the future. In practice, the extent to which the special education system addresses this challenge varies from country to country and between types of disabilities. Studies have examined the ways in which eligibility for special education services is determined in various countries and the levels of functioning required in order to be eligible for these services, but they have not focused on special populations, such as students with mental or emotional difficulties, or students with rare diseases. Thus, knowledge regarding the eligibility of these students for special education services is lacking. The Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education asked the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to prepare a review that would shed light on these issues.

Goal and Research Questions

The purpose of the review was to examine the eligibility of the following student populations for special education services in the United States and Ireland: (1) students with mental health difficulties; (2) students with behavioral-emotional difficulties; (3) students with learning disabilities; and (4) students with rare diseases (such as neurological syndromes or diseases such as cancer). Regarding these four populations, the following questions were asked:

1. Are these four populations **entitled** to special education services in the countries examined?
2. What are **the criteria for determining eligibility** for special education services in these countries?
3. What are **the special education services** provided for these students?

Research Method

The review was conducted in two stages:

The first stage: In August–September 2024, an extensive search of a variety of online sources of information was conducted to obtain information on eligibility for special education services among the four student populations. In addition, interviews were conducted with five experts in the field of special education and the inclusion of diverse

populations in special education from Israel and the United States. At the end of this stage, it was concluded that there was not enough readily accessible information to provide appropriate answers to the research questions, and it was decided to consult with special education professionals and experts in selected countries.

The second phase: In December 2024-January 2025, interviews were held with five experts in the field of special education, four from the United States and one from Ireland. The experts referred the research team to relevant literature and information concerning policy on students with disabilities in their countries, including the four study populations.

Findings

The various sources of information helped answer the research questions, even if for some of the questions the information obtained provided only a partial picture:

1. **The first research question (entitlement):** Although each country has different definitions of what constitutes a disability, it appears that in both countries, the four research populations are entitled to receive special education services.
2. **The second research question (eligibility criteria):** In both countries, there are no criteria or guidelines for determining eligibility for special education services, and each case is examined individually by the school's Individualized Education Program (IEP) staff according to the students' needs.
3. **The third research question (services):** The services are determined in each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and include different types of support and treatment that vary according to the student's needs and the levels of support required.

In addition, to provide an overview of the policy regarding students with disabilities in the United States and Ireland, including the four study populations, this review expands on the following topics:

1. The target populations that are entitled by law to special education services
2. The prevalence of types of disabilities among special education students and the educational settings for them
3. The eligibility criteria for special education services
4. The process of determining eligibility for special education services
5. Budgeting issues
6. Perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education system

Regarding the educational settings, it was found that in the United States two-thirds of students with disabilities study in a regular classroom for 80% or more of the school day, a rate that has been slightly increasing over the past decade. This is in accordance with the prevailing view that students with disabilities should be integrated and included as much as possible in the regular education system and the regular classroom. In Ireland, 97% of students in need of special education services receive them within the regular education system, with no need of a formal disability diagnosis, but according to the needs and levels of support required by the student.

Summary

This review shows that, in the United States and Ireland, the four study populations addressed are entitled by law to receive special education services. However, there is no list of criteria for determining the eligibility for services and the services they will receive, but rather each case is examined individually by a team of professionals in the student's school according to the needs of the student and the levels of support required. Thus, the individual educational plan is prepared for each student by the school, and it is the responsibility of the school to monitor the student's academic progress, the achievement of the educational goals set by the professional staff, and the need to make the necessary changes in the program. The review also shows that in both the United States and Ireland, the vast majority of students with disabilities receive special education services in the regular education system and the regular classroom.