International Experience in the Provision of
Individual Education Plans
for Children with Disabilities

Summary Report
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Introduction

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act was published in Ireland in 2004. One of the key provisions of the Act was to provide the legislative basis for the introduction of individual education plans (IEPs) for children with special educational needs. While the blueprint has now been established, much of the finer detail of how education plans will be implemented has yet to be finalised.

This report provides a summary of the full report produced by the NDA on “International Experience in the Provision of Individual Education Plans for Children with Disabilities.” This summary report identifies the key provisions regarding education plans contained in the EPSEN Act. It also outlines the conclusions and recommendations that the research made following examination of IEP models in five other countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and USA) and research literature produced on the implementation of IEPs in schools.

Copies of the full report can be accessed on the NDA website (www.nda.ie) or by contacting the NDA on 01 – 6080400.
EPSEN Act: Requirements for Educational Planning

The EPSEN Act 2004 provides for the provision of education plans for students with special educational needs (SEN). The Act identifies SEN as "a restriction in the capacity of a person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition." Under the Act, children with SEN will be educated “in an inclusive environment with children who do not have SEN”, unless this is inconsistent either with the best interest of the child, or with effective provision for the other children.

Identification & Assessment

When a student is identified to a principal as not benefiting from the educational programme being provided in their school, the principal “shall take such measures as are practicable to meet the educational needs of the student concerned.” Having taken such measures, if the student continues not to benefit, because of their SEN, the principal will arrange for the student to be assessed. The principal must
consult the parents prior to making this arrangement. Assessment must commence not later than one month after the principal’s decision and be completed no later than three months after that decision. Where an assessment establishes that a student has SEN, the principal must, within one month, “cause a plan to be prepared for the appropriate education of the student” – called and ‘education plan’ (EP).

Parents, the National Council for Special Education or the relevant health board may refer a child for assessment. An assessment “shall include an evaluation and statement of the nature and extent of the child’s disability… and an evaluation and statement of the services which the child will need so as to be able to participate in and benefit from education and, generally, to develop his or her potential.”

**Preparing the Plan**

In preparing an EP the principal must ensure that the parents, the local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO), and other “appropriate” people are consulted. Furthermore, s/he must ensure that parental involvement “is facilitated”. As soon as the plan is prepared the principal must provide a copy to the
parents and the SENO. It is usually the responsibility of the principal to ensure that a plan is prepared. However, where a child has a severe or complex SEN, or where, following review, it is determined that their needs are not being met, the principal can request the Council to prepare a plan for the child.

When the Council is asked by a principal or health board to prepare an education plan for a child, the Council can agree or disagree to grant this request. If the Council refuses to prepare the plan then the principal or child’s parents may appeal to the Appeals Board. If the Council accepts the request it will direct the relevant SENO to prepare the plan. Preparation of the plan should begin no more than one month after direction, and be completed no more than two months later. The SENO must convene a team to provide advice in relation to preparing the plan. The team should include parents (where consenting) and the principal or teacher. It may also include: the child (where SENO deems appropriate); a psychologist (NEPS or otherwise suitably qualified); and any other person whom the parents or SENO consider appropriate and who is suitably qualified.

Content of the Plan

The format of EPs has yet to be determined by the Council. The
specific content of plans will include: the nature and degree of the child’s abilities, skills and talents; the nature and degree of the child’s SEN and how those needs affect his/her educational development; the child’s present level of educational performance; the support services to be provided to the child to enable him/her to benefit from education and to participate in the life of the school; where appropriate, the transition services to be provided to the child; and the goals that the child is to achieve over a period not exceeding 12 months.

**Placement**

The Council may designate, of its own volition or upon the request of the parents, the school that a child with SEN will attend, and the school must admit the student upon the Council’s direction. In deciding this, the Council must consider the needs of the child, the parents’ wishes, and the capacity of the school to accommodate the child and meet his/her needs. The board of management of the school may appeal against this designation.

**Review**

The principal must initiate a review of the EP at regular
intervals and at least once a year. The purpose of the review is to establish if the child has received the services set out in the EP, and that s/he is achieving the goals specified therein. This is done with a view to amending the plan for the following period. The principal must provide a copy of a review report to the parents and the relevant SENO.

**Appeals**

There are a number of grounds upon which the relevant parties may appeal to the Special Education Appeals Board, including:

- Principal and parents may appeal against the Council’s refusal to prepare a plan following a request from the principal or health board (EPSEN Act, Section 3.13)
- Parents may appeal against the Council or health board’s refusal to undertake an assessment (Section 4.7)
- Parents may appeal against an assessment on the grounds that it wasn’t carried out in accordance with the relevant standards (Section 6.1)
- The board of management of a school may appeal a decision by the Council to designate its school as the recipient of and provider for a specific child with SEN (Section 10.3)
• Parents may appeal against the Council’s refusal or failure to designate a school for their child (Section 10.6)
• Parents may appeal against a principal’s refusal to arrange a review of their child’s education plan (Section 11.6)
• Parents may appeal against the discharge of duties in relation to their child’s education plan, by the Council, principal, school or health board (Section 12)

Resources

The school principal is responsible for implementing a child’s EP within the school. The Council is responsible for providing to the child the necessary services identified in his/her plan. The Minister for Education and Science has a duty to provide the resources identified as necessary for the delivery of EPs, pending the consent of the Minister for Finance, and in keeping with the principle of allocating resources in a manner consistent with the common good (therefore, the allocation of resources is not unconditional once needs and their related services have been identified).

Figure 1 below gives an overview of the structure of the IEP system and process that the EPSEN Act 2004 has provided for.
Fig. 1: EPSEN Act Provisions for Individual Planning:

Special Education delivered in an ‘Inclusive Environment’

1. Identification
2. In-school ‘practicable’ measures
3. Assessment
4. Confirmed SEN
5. Education Plan

Planning Team

Review

Implementation

Plan
Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations are based on an examination of IEP policies in countries with substantial histories and progressive track records regarding special needs education (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and USA), and an analysis of research literature that has been produced, largely in the USA and UK (see the full report for an outline of both the policies and research). Recommendations are structured according to the elements of education plans identified in the EPSEN Act 2004.

Identification & Assessment

(i) Good communication between a student’s home and school, parents and teachers/principals, will help to identify potential SEN as early as possible.

(ii) In-school measures used prior to full assessment should include screening for sensory impairments. They should also include the use of varied teaching methods by teachers – which should reflect a degree of flexibility with the general education programme, especially within the mainstream environment.
Before individualised adaptations are made to the curriculum, teachers should be satisfied that other alternative strategies have been attempted – such as small group work, buddy systems, or active/experiential learning.

No single method of assessment should be used as the sole means of identifying the needs of a student.

Assessment methods and contexts may vary according to individual needs. As such, assessment should be appropriate to the age and development level of individual students. They should also have credibility with all IEP team members.

Both informal and formal methods of assessment should be utilised, rather than relying only on standardised tests, as these can be unsuitable for certain disability types (e.g. Autistic Spectrum Disorders). Such assessment methods may include observation, interview, task analysis, or environmental assessment.

Identification, assessment and later planning procedures/tools should be cognisant of each individual student’s language and culture, as these comprise a vital context for learning and development.
Planning

This incorporates information gathering, the IEP team and team meeting, planning and design of the IEP.

(i) IEPs should be designed only to identify modifications to the general educational programme that are necessary, rather than to completely rewrite the programme or curriculum.

(ii) Individual plans may incorporate the following strategies:
- Adaptations to the physical environment
- Adaptations to the content and delivery of the lesson
- Modifications to resources and materials
- Use of equipment or assistive technology
- Provision of support personnel

(iii) All those, and only those, who know the child should be involved as part of his/her IEP team. This should not preclude outside professionals. However, where professionals are involved they should have at least spent time with the child or time observing him/her.

(iv) The core IEP team should include:
- The student, the parent or primary care giver and the classroom teacher.
The wider team may further include:

- Other family support (e.g. relative, advocate)
- Other school personnel (e.g. principal, special needs teacher, resource teacher)
- Specialist service providers (e.g. Council staff, rehabilitation and special needs specialists)
- Therapists (e.g. speech-language, occupational or physical therapists)
- Teaching assistants.

(v) Information should be gathered in both formal and informal settings, including the school, home and in the community. This will ensure a more rounded assessment of the child’s strengths and needs.

(vi) Team members should prepare by considering their priorities and goals for the student. Long-term goals can help maintain a clearer focus on priorities over a period of time. These can be established for the following years, and be tied into specific transition points in the student’s education where relevant.

(vii) Each team member should have the opportunity to give his/her input, and this should be valued by the other members and reflected in the plan.
In addition to the ‘contents of the plan’ identified in the EPSEN Act 2004, the IEP design should also incorporate the following information:

- Specific timeframes – start and review dates
- The roles and responsibilities of each IEP team member
- Statements of measurable goals for prioritised learning in the subsequent learning period
- Links to class curriculum, key learning and competency areas
- Key teaching strategies, including resource materials, specialist support, and classroom management
- Duty of care aspects relating to health, medical and therapy support and student safety
- Monitoring procedures to be used

The person who has most involvement with a student (usually the class teacher) should complete the IEP, even though the principal is ultimately responsible.

Statements of measurable goals for prioritised learning should:

(a) Identify the student’s learning outcome (i.e. a skill, activity or piece of knowledge)
(b) Outline the conditions which apply (e.g. specialised equipment, environment), and

(c) Set the criteria by which the student will demonstrate the learning outcome (e.g. level of accuracy, quantity correct)

(xi) Goals established in the IEP should be set at a high but attainable level, thereby encouraging parents, students and school staff to hold relatively high expectations. Goals should also contain objectives to facilitate better progression towards the goal as well as enabling easier review and evaluation.

(xii) Learning outcomes should be identified for each goal and objective in the IEP. The team must ensure that learning outcomes are directly relevant to the specific goals, and that they are specific, achievable and measurable.

(xiii) Careful and systematic transition planning is crucial between educational settings and levels – considerations include establishing links between the sending and receiving settings, facilitating access to the new environment, and ensuring participation in the new environment.
Transition planning is especially important for post-school outcomes, and as such transition planning should be established at least by the end of compulsory school age, and preferably sooner.

Communication is an essential part of the planning process, which should be collaborative by nature and ongoing.

**Implementation**

(i) Team members should be skilled with the appropriate teaching strategies and monitoring procedures.

(ii) It is helpful to appoint a lead person within the team to co-ordinate implementation of the plan. Usually this will be the class teacher, or person with whom the student has most regular contact.

(iii) All those involved in implementing the IEP should know and understand their responsibilities as identified in the plan.

(iv) Good communication is also essential between the school and parent during implementation of the IEP. Parents can report on what happens at home and try to build on work from school.
(v) It is important to maintain good progress reports.

(vi) The implementation of IEPs can only be realised properly where the relevant authorities support the policy with the necessary resources and supports identified in planning.

**Evaluation/Review**

(i) Students with SEN should be evaluated on all parts of their education programme using the same established standards for other students whenever possible.

(ii) The effectiveness of an IEP should be evaluated in terms of: student performance and progress; implementation issues (e.g. time/staff available); team co-ordination issues; and any additional outcomes, positive or negative.

(iii) Adequate progress may be measured (as in the UK) as that which:

- Closes the gap in attainment between the student and his/her peers – or stops the gap growing
- Is similar to that of peers starting from the same baseline
- Matches or improves a student’s previous progress
• Ensures access to the curriculum
• Demonstrates increased independence, behaviour, or social or personal skills
• Is likely to lead to appropriate accreditation
• Is likely to lead to participation in further education, training and/or employment

(iv) Evaluation procedures should accommodate the type and range of adaptations and modifications identified in each individual student’s plan. Any requirement for and use of adapted evaluation procedures should be recorded in the plan.

(v) Plans should be formally reviewed at least once a year, and ideally more often. More frequent evaluation may be necessary, especially for younger children. In general, frequency of review should be guided by the individual needs of each student and the provision made to meet those needs.

(vi) Ongoing monitoring should be part of the IEP process between formal evaluation/review periods, with ongoing communication and feedback between IEP members an essential feature.
General

- Parents and students should be included to the fullest extent possible at all times.
- There should be a shared responsibility for planning and collective accountability for outcomes amongst members of the IEP team.
- There should be a consensus on educational and other goals.
- Socialisation and behavioural contexts, priorities and targets should be central elements of each child’s plan. Inclusion within peer groups can become more of a barrier to educational inclusion in mainstream settings as students move beyond primary level.

For further information on the implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in Ireland, and for contact details of your local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO), contact:

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