Building Quality and Accountability: A Historical Analysis of Innovation in Early Childhood Special Education and Early Intervention

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ABSTRACT

We examine major innovations that have shaped early childhood special education and early intervention over the past 50 years. Framed within a historical perspective of federal legislation, professional standards, and evolving preparation systems, we trace how the field has moved from access-focused mandates to an emphasis on quality, accountability, and child and family outcomes. Key innovations are highlighted, including family-centered practices, the integration of evidence-based practices, embedded instruction within natural routines, and the systematic use of data-based decision making. Attention is given to procedural fidelity and the role of fidelity measures as tools for educator reflection, professional growth, and continuous improvement rather than compliance alone. We also explore the influence of professional organizations, advances in personnel preparation, and the expansion of professional development systems that support high-quality implementation. Implications are discussed for teacher candidates, practitioners, and faculty committed to sustaining and advancing the field in ways that enhance outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood special education, early intervention, evidence-based practices, IDEA, family-centered practice

In this article, we offer a 50-year reflection on the evolution of the field to illuminate how federal law, empirical research, professional organizations, and preparation systems have shaped contemporary practice. By tracing this trajectory, we position teacher candidates and practitioners working within early intervention (EI) and early childhood special education (ECSE) not only as learners of the field, but as active stewards of its ongoing advancement. Equally important is recognition of the diverse systems and children served within EI and ECSE. Services span multiple delivery systems and funding streams and address the needs of infants, toddlers, and young children with a wide range of developmental delays and disabilities. Practice is shaped by intersecting federal agencies, state infrastructures, accrediting bodies, and professional standards. Understanding this complex ecosystem is essential for professionals who must navigate policy, collaborate across disciplines, and implement evidence-based practices within dynamic and evolving systems.

Reflection on the field's evolution must begin with the federal legislation that fundamentally transformed access, accountability, and professional responsibility. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its legislative predecessors established not only the right to services, but also the structural and ethical foundation upon which EI and ECSE systems continue to operate. Across five decades, IDEA has evolved through reauthorizations and amendments that reflect shifting national priorities, expanding definitions of equity, and increasing expectations for evidence-based practice and outcomes.

The following section traces these IDEA milestones from 1975 to the present, highlighting how each legislative shift reshaped systems, clarified professional roles, and deepened our collective responsibility to children and families.

TABLE 2: Innovations in ECSE and EI

Innovation	Why It Emerged	What It Looks Like in Practice	What It Changed
Family-centered practice	Family rights and meaningful participation	Family concerns, priorities, hopes, and routines guide IFSP and IEP planning and service delivery	Families became partners and primary decision-makers
Evidence-based practice	Need for effective intervention and improved outcomes	Professionals use research, standards, assessment data, family priorities, and professional judgment to select and adapt practices	Research increasingly guided instruction and intervention
Embedded intervention	Natural and inclusive environments	Systematic learning opportunities are embedded within everyday routines, activities, materials, and relationships	Learning moved from isolated sessions into meaningful routines
Coaching	Persistent research-to-practice and implementation gaps	Coaches use observation, modeling, reflection, and specific, affirmative, and suggestive performance feedback	Professional development shifted from one-time training toward ongoing, job-embedded support
Procedural fidelity	Need to understand whether practices are implemented as designed	Educators, practitioners, and families use fidelity tools to reflect on implementation and identify needed supports or adaptations	Fidelity became a tool for professional inquiry and continuous improvement rather than compliance alone
Data systems and accountability	Increased focus on measurable child and family outcomes	Teams review child outcome and implementation data to determine whether intervention is sufficient and effective	Systems shifted from procedural compliance toward results-driven accountability and data-based decision making

Key milestones in the evolution of the IDEA from 1975 to the present have progressively strengthened the rights of young children with disabilities and their families while shaping the systems that serve them. Beginning with Public Law 94-142 (1975), children gained the foundational right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). A major expansion came with the 1986 amendments (PL 99-457), which established early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities (birth–2) under what is now Part C and created incentives for states to serve preschoolers with disabilities (ages 3–5), emphasizing family-centered services and services in natural environments. The 1990 reauthorization formally named IDEA and reinforced transition planning from early intervention to preschool. Subsequent reauthorizations in 1997 and 2004 strengthened inclusion, accountability, access to the general curriculum, functional and developmental outcomes, and the use of evidence-based practices, while elevating the role of families as partners and decision-makers. Complementing these statutory advances, the joint U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023) policy statements on the inclusion of young children with disabilities reaffirmed inclusion as a civil right and a defining feature of high-quality early childhood systems, emphasizing access, participation, and supports within everyday early learning environments. Across these milestones, IDEA has increasingly centered early identification, inclusive participation, coordinated services, and smooth transitions—advancing a vision in which young children with disabilities and their families are supported early, holistically, and within their everyday routines and communities.

MAJOR ADVANCES AND PRACTICE-CHANGING INNOVATIONS

While federal legislation established rights and structures, it was the evolution of practice that translated policy into lived experiences for children and families. Several practice innovations have fundamentally altered how ECSE and EI professionals conceptualize their roles, relationships, and responsibilities (see Table 1). These include family-centered practice; evidence-based and embedded intervention approaches; fidelity and coaching infrastructures; data systems and accountability; and workforce preparation and professional leadership.

Family-Centered Practice

First, family-centered practice represents one of the most significant conceptual and practical shifts in ECSE over the last 50 years. The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) codified families as partners in decision-making rather than passive recipients of services. Over time, the field moved from "parent training" models toward capacity-building approaches that recognize families and caregivers as primary intervention agents within children's everyday routines and as primary decision-makers. Additionally, best practice aligns with caregiver implementation and decision making, and family collaboration in ways that are responsive to the uniqueness of each family through models such as Family Guided Routines Based Intervention (FGRBI, n.d.). Family-centered

practice aligns with both developmental science and legal mandate (Dunst, 2002; IDEA, 2004). It reflects a recognition that outcomes for young children are inseparable from the contexts in which they live, learn, and play. For ECSE and EI professionals this means partnership is a professional stance, not an add-on.

Family partnership models draw upon IDEA's mandate for meaningful parent participation and collaborative decision making and should be evident in both IFSP and IEP program planning and service delivery. During program planning, it is imperative to incorporate family voice by asking questions such as (a) "What are your hopes and dreams for your child?" (b) "If your child could _____, it would change your life forever." And/or (c) "What are your concerns and priorities?" Family responses to these questions or other similar questions should guide program planning and be apparent within outcomes and goals identified to ensure family-centered practice. During service delivery it is important to revisit family concerns and priorities on an ongoing basis, and ensure families are active participants as they are the individuals spending the most time with their children and the individuals who know their children best. Revisiting family concerns might look like educators asking questions like, "I know one of your priorities has been for Julio to walk. Last time we met you said Julio is starting to navigate the environment by pulling to stand. How has that been going since we met last?" Active participation can look like providing families opportunities to share information and try strategies you have identified together to work toward goals or outcomes within the program plan. Checking in with them to see how they feel and determining whether any changes might be needed is also important. It is also important to identify a mode of communication (e.g., notes, phone, email, text) that works well for the family to ensure a communication system is identified hat supports ongoing, bidirectional communication.

Innovation in Action: Family Voice in Action

During an IFSP meeting, the early interventionist asks Julio's family, "What would make the biggest difference in your daily life?" Julio's family shares that their greatest priority is for him to walk to navigate his environment because he is becoming heavy to carry. Together, the family and team develop a functional outcome focused on Julio independently taking steps during everyday routines.

Evidence-Based Practice as a Legal and Ethical Imperative in ECSE

As educators partner with families in program planning and service delivery, it is important to remember the growing emphasis on evidence-based practice, ensuring that these partnerships are grounded in scientifically based practices designed to promote improved child and family outcomes. ECSE and EI, like the broader field of special education, carries both an ethical and legal responsibility to implement practices identified as evidence based. This obligation is not optional or aspirational; it is embedded within the structure of IDEA, which emphasizes scientifically based instructional practices and measurable outcomes. The urgency of this responsibility is amplified in early childhood. Earlier access to effective intervention improves developmental trajectories (Guralnick, 2011; Shonkoff et al., 2000). Children cannot benefit from practices they do not receive. Thus, timely access to effective, evidence-based intervention is not merely a matter of professional competence—it is a matter of equity.

It is important to note that in some contemporary discourse, social justice and evidence-based practice are framed as competing priorities. However, many scholars have argued persuasively that evidence-based practice itself is a form of social justice (Wahman et al., 2023). Ensuring that children with disabilities have access to the strongest available evidence for promoting developmental outcomes reflects a commitment to fairness, opportunity, and human dignity. From this perspective, withholding evidence-based practices—or failing to implement them with quality—constitutes an inequity. Some contemporary discourse suggests that evidence-based practice limits professional creativity and autonomy. Although evidence-based practices are supported by research, professional judgment remains essential for selecting, adapting, and implementing those practices in ways that respond to the unique needs of learners, families, and contexts.

With the best of intentions, educators often rely upon non-scientific sources to guide their practice. This can lead to further increasing the research to practice gap, and ultimately, children not receiving practices rooted in evidence. For this reason, identifying where evidence can be found, how it can be consumed, and how it can move from knowledge into practice is important in ensuring use of evidence-based practices (Coogle et al., 2025).

Innovation in Action: Choosing Evidence Over Convenience

In partnership with Julio's family, the early interventionist identifies evidence-based motor interventions that can support Julio's ability to take steps and navigate his environment. Rather than selecting strategies based on convenience or non-scientific sources, the interventionist uses the strongest available evidence, professional standards, assessment data, and the family's priorities to guide intervention planning.

Embedded Interventions: Aligning Law, Research, and Natural Environments

Of importance is not only *what* practices are effective, but *how* those practices can be delivered in ways that honor developmental science and federal mandates. Over the past fifty years, one of the clearest lessons in ECSE and EI has been that effective intervention aligns with both federal law and developmental science. IDEA emphasizes services delivered in natural and inclusive environments. Research has consistently demonstrated that practices embedded within everyday routines, materials, and relationships are particularly powerful (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2001; Snyder et al., 2015; Wolery & Hemmeter, 2011). For candidates, the key question becomes: where in daily routines can instruction happen frequently, naturally, and meaningfully?

Within ECSE and EI, these practices are often described as embedded interventions or activity-based instruction. Embedded interventions provide systematic practice opportunities aligned with individualized goals or outcomes within the child's everyday environment and with everyday partners. These interventions typically follow an antecedent–behavior–consequence (A-B-C) sequence or learning trial:

- An antecedent is a prompt or cue that creates a meaningful opportunity to practice a target skill within the goal or outcome.
- The behavior reflects the child's attempt or approximation of the outcome or a response.
- A consequence strengthens, weakens, or otherwise affects future behavior.

The strength of learning trials within embedded interventions lies in their ecological validity. They are designed to occur within natural routines and inclusive settings and can promote generalization and maintenance when implemented intentionally and systematically.

Given the demonstrated effectiveness of embedded interventions, it is essential that their implementation be intentional and systematically designed to support meaningful child learning. Effective embedded intervention begins with well-developed, developmentally appropriate goals or outcomes that are aligned with multiple sources and types of assessment data (e.g., family priorities, authentic, observation, formal). Goal (ECSE) or outcome (EI) selection should be conducted in partnership with families and focus on functional skills that enhance children's participation across settings and those that support lifelong social and academic outcomes. Families are primary experts regarding their children and are critical intervention agents.

Once goals (ECSE) or outcomes (EI) are identified, educators and practitioners—working in partnership with families and caregivers—should examine the child's everyday routines and the people with whom the child regularly interacts. Learning opportunities are then intentionally planned within and across naturally occurring activities and aligned with the identified goals or outcomes to increase the frequency of practice and support maintenance and generalization across environments and partners. Within these routines, learning trials are purposefully embedded and must be thoughtfully planned and designed to be both sufficient and effective. Antecedents should be directly connected to the targeted goals or outcomes and integrated into authentic interactions so that learning is meaningful rather than artificial. This approach differs from isolated discrete-trial instruction; instead, learning opportunities follow the child's lead and interests and occur within everyday routines and interactions with familiar people. This process is used across both EI and ECSE systems with the distinguishing factors including the setting and people with whom the child is interacting, and the processes used to support implementation.

Finally, progress monitoring is essential. Practitioners should collect and use data to determine whether learning opportunities are producing meaningful progress and make ongoing adaptations to instruction as needed. Progress monitoring involves regularly collecting and using data to evaluate child outcomes. Data will show how the child is responding to learning opportunities and if learning opportunities are sufficient and effective so that adaptations can be made as needed. Systematic progress monitoring allows teams to determine whether instructional adjustments are necessary to ensure continued growth.

Innovation in Action: Learning During Everyday Routines

During transitions between meals, bath time, and outdoor play, Julio's mother creates opportunities for him to take several supported steps toward a preferred person, toy, or activity. When Julio attempts to step, she provides the agreed-upon support and encouragement. Rather than scheduling isolated practice, the family embeds repeated learning opportunities within the routines and environments that are already meaningful to Julio.

Procedural Fidelity: From Access to Quality

Over the past five decades, it has become clear that identifying effective practices is insufficient without attention to implementation quality including data-based decision making. Fidelity—the extent to which an intervention is delivered as designed—has therefore emerged as a core construct in both research and practice. Child outcome data alone are inadequate to evaluate effectiveness. Without fidelity data, it is not possible to determine whether child progress (or lack

thereof) reflects the intervention itself or variability in its implementation. Fidelity data also serve as a foundation for coaching, guiding goal setting, performance feedback, and ongoing refinement of practitioner supports. Together, fidelity and child outcome data enable more accurate interpretation of progress monitoring and support data-based adjustments to instruction and intervention and guide coaching.

The growing emphasis on fidelity reflects an advancement of the field. We have moved beyond asking, *"Does this practice work?"* to also asking, *"Is this practice being delivered as designed?"* This shift mirrors IDEA's evolution from access-focused mandates toward accountability for results. At times, fidelity has been portrayed as a *pitfall*—suggested to constrain educator or practitioner autonomy or diminish their voice. We contend that such critiques often stem from misunderstandings of the purpose of fidelity measurement or from instances in which fidelity systems are imposed without collaboration. Fidelity was not designed to function as surveillance or compliance monitoring. Fidelity data are a mechanism for professional inquiry, continuous reflection, and improvement. When used as intended, fidelity data inform data-based decision making and support responsive adaptations, allowing implementation to remain flexible while guided by both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

When implemented as intended, fidelity tools are developed, adapted, and interpreted by educators or practitioners themselves. They provide educators and practitioners with actionable data to support data-based decision-making, refine instructional delivery, and interpret child progress more accurately. Fidelity measurement strengthens—rather than diminishes—professional agency by equipping educators and practitioners with information necessary to align their observations, intentions, and instructional practices. In this way, fidelity is not antithetical to educator or practitioner expertise; it is an extension of it. For example, fidelity tools might be used to determine whether behavioral and academic intervention plans are implemented as intended and, when they are not, to prompt reflection on barriers to implementation. This process helps educators and practitioners ensure that selected evidence-based interventions are both appropriate and feasible. When fidelity data indicate that implementation is as designed, focus shifts to child outcomes. If progress is limited, data guide reflection and inform adjustments to instructional strategies, intervention intensity, or supports to better align with the child's needs.

Innovation in Action: Using Fidelity to Improve Practice

Progress-monitoring data show that Julio is making limited progress toward independently taking steps. Before changing the intervention, the family and early interventionist review fidelity data and realize that practice opportunities are occurring only once or twice each day rather than across several routines as planned. Together, they identify routines in which additional opportunities can be embedded and continue monitoring both implementation and Julio's progress.

Coaching as Infrastructure for Implementation

Recognizing fidelity as essential has shifted the field from asking why practices are not used to examining what systems must provide to support sustained, high-quality implementation. Educators and practitioners often need ongoing supports to build and maintain implementation over time. Ensuring fidelity of implementation remains a persistent challenge in ECSE and EI. Workforce shortages, limited preparation in specific evidence-based practices, high turnover, and systemic capacity constraints all influence the consistency with which practices are delivered.

Professional development is a way in which systems have attempted to address issues surrounding fidelity. Professional development has often been implemented as a one-size-fits-all approach. Although one-day trainings may be effective for information sharing, they are generally ineffective in transforming practice. For this reason, ongoing, job-embedded coaching as part of the professional development system has been identified the most effective and efficient way to share information and support ongoing practice change. Consistent with IDEA's emphasis on effective implementation, the field acknowledges that educators and practitioners need differentiated supports to enact evidence-based practices with fidelity. The literature provides a menu of coaching and implementation models that systems can leverage and scale in ways that are responsive to their infrastructure and workforce capacity.

Ongoing, job-embedded coaching has demonstrated effectiveness in both preparation and induction contexts (Barton et al., 2020; Coogle et al., 2017; Snyder, Hemmeter, & Fox, 2015). While coaching models vary, a consistent feature across approaches is performance-based feedback. Feedback that is specific, affirmative, and suggestive has been shown to improve educator and practitioner implementation (Artman-Meeker et al., 2015; Scheeler et al., 2004).

Research has examined multiple delivery formats for coaching, including (Coogle et al., 2022, 2024):

- Face-to-face coaching
- Delayed technology-enhanced feedback
- Immediate technology-enhanced feedback

Studies have also explored diverse coaching agents, including researchers, supervisors, and peers (Coogle et al., 2024). This body of research provides the field with a flexible menu of options related to supporting implementation of practice across varied service contexts. The significance of coaching in a 50-year reflection is this: the law established the right to services; research identified effective practices; implementation science—and particularly coaching—provides the mechanism through which those rights and practices become lived realities for children and families.

Innovation in Action: Performance Feedback in Action

During a home visit, the early interventionist observes Julio's mother supporting him as he moves between play and mealtime. Together, they identify strengths, including following Julio's lead and using motivating activities, and identify one strategy to strengthen: pausing to allow Julio time to initiate a step before providing assistance. The early interventionist models the strategy, observes Julio's mother trying it, and provides specific, affirmative, and suggestive feedback.

Putting It All Together: A Practice Vignette in EI

This example illustrates how the major innovations that have transformed ECSE and EI over the past 50 years operate as an integrated system of practice: family-centered planning, evidence-based intervention, learning opportunities embedded within natural routines, caregiver coaching, fidelity of implementation, and ongoing data-based decision making to improve child and family outcomes.

During an IFSP meeting, Julio's family shares that their greatest priority is for Julio (24 months) to walk to navigate his environment because he is becoming heavy to carry. Together, the family and early interventionist develop a functional outcome centered on Julio independently taking steps to navigate his environment during everyday routines. Rather than scheduling isolated therapy, the early interventionist partners with Julio's mother and sister to identify naturally occurring opportunities during transitions between meals, bath time, and outdoor play where taking steps can be intentionally embedded. During each home visit, the early interventionist models embedded, evidence-based strategies, observes the caregiver implementing them, provides specific performance feedback, and collaborates on refinements based on Julio's responses. Data collected across routines show steady increases in motor development while fidelity data indicate the caregiver is consistently implementing the agreed-upon strategies. As Julio's skills improve, the team adapts the intervention by increasing expectations and expanding opportunities across home and community settings. This single example illustrates many of the innovations that have transformed ECSE and EI over the past 50 years: family-centered planning, evidence-based practice, intervention embedded within natural routines, caregiver coaching, fidelity of implementation, and ongoing data-based decision making to improve child and family outcomes.

Accountability, Data Systems, and Results-Driven Accountability

As practice matured, federal accountability systems simultaneously evolved to measure whether these efforts were producing meaningful results. The increased emphasis on accountability in IDEA reauthorizations introduced state performance planning, child outcomes measurement, and Results-Driven Accountability. These systems shifted the focus from procedural compliance to measurable results for children and families. Child Outcomes Summary (COS) processes and State Systemic Improvement Plans (SSIPs) reflect this evolution toward continuous improvement and data-informed decision-making.

Innovation in Action: Letting Data Guide Decisions

Data collected across routines show that Julio is increasingly taking steps inside the home but is not yet using the skill during outdoor or community activities. Rather than continuing the same intervention in the same routines, the family and early interventionist identify additional opportunities for Julio to practice on the porch, in the yard, and when moving toward family members in community settings.

Workforce and Preparation Innovation

Yet accountability systems alone cannot improve outcomes; they depend on a prepared and supported workforce capable of translating data into action. Workforce challenges represent one of the most pressing concerns in EI and ECSE. Indeed, EI and ECSE are among systems with the greatest national shortages. Traditional preparation pathways remain critical; however, alternative certification and licensure routes are growing to include competency-based models and micro credentialing in response to shortages and evolving service demands.

Professional Leadership and Organizational Milestones

Beyond federal law and preparation programs, professional organizations have played a key role in shaping the field's identity and direction. A major professional force shaping ECSE's identity and direction has been the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), established in 1973 as a division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). DEC focuses on "advancing equity and supporting families, young

children with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities, and those who care for and educate them" (DEC, 2023). One way in which DEC engages in its mission is through the development and dissemination of resources to support educators and practitioners serving children ages birth to eight and their families. These resources include recommended practices, personnel preparation standards, racial equity positions, and formal position statements.

DEC Recommended Practices

Among DEC's most influential contributions is the articulation of practices that translate principles into observable professional action. The Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices (DEC RPs, 2014) provide an essential bridge between policy, research, and everyday professional practice by identifying evidence-based actions that support the learning, development, and inclusion of young children with or at risk for disabilities. First introduced in the 1990s and periodically revised to reflect advances in research, policy, and implementation science, the DEC RPs have evolved alongside the field's growing emphasis on inclusion, family partnership, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and systems-level supports, with the most recent comprehensive update released in 2014. Organized across key topical areas—leadership, assessment, environment, family, instruction, interaction, teaming and collaboration, and transition—the DEC RPs translate foundational principles from IDEA and the EI/ECSE standards into observable, actionable practices that can be implemented across early intervention, preschool, and early elementary settings. Grounded in family partnership, inclusive participation, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and data-informed decision making, the DEC RPs emphasize what professionals do in partnership with families and colleagues to create meaningful access, engagement, and learning within natural and inclusive environments. For teacher candidates, the RPs offer a practical and enduring framework for linking knowledge to action, reinforcing the field's commitment to equity, relationship-based practice, and improved developmental and social-emotional outcomes for young children and their families.

Racial Equity Point of View

As the field matured, attention expanded beyond practice quality alone to examine whose voices are centered and whose outcomes are prioritized. DEC has developed, disseminated, and embedded the Racial Equity Point of View (RE POV) to "dismantle disparities and advance racial equity within its culture and work" (DEC, 2023). DEC's RE POV identifies intentional practices to address policies, systems, and structures to ensure commitment to positive outcomes for people of color. This document provides a rationale along with actionable guidance for centering racial equity across organizational leadership, research, publications, conferences, and products.

Position Statements

In addition to equity commitments, DEC has provided formal guidance across emerging and complex areas of practice through a series of position statements. Position statements are designed to provide guidance for educators and practitioners across critical topics such as multi-tiered systems of support, personnel standards, and inclusive practices. These statements can be used to inform program policies, guide professional development and coaching efforts, support alignment with recommended practices, and anchor data-based decision making at the classroom, program, and systems levels.

Preparation and Professional Development

Reflecting on these milestones prompts a forward-looking question: How can this history inform the field of ECSE and EI, so it is positioned to continue to advance? One way to ensure advancement is through preparation and professional development. Preparation has traditionally occurred within higher education settings—whether face-to-face or virtual—while authentic application unfolds in community programs and schools. This separation can result in fragmented learning experiences and competing interpretations of best practice. Strengthening intentional, reciprocal partnerships between preparation programs and practice contexts offers a pathway toward greater coherence, fidelity of implementation, and improved outcomes for children and families.

Interdisciplinary Preparation

The evolution of ECSE and EI over the past fifty years suggests that sustainable impact requires alignment among law, research, preparation, and systems infrastructure. As professional learning evolved, so too did recognition that effective service delivery and attainment of child goals and outcomes depend on collaboration across disciplines (Murphy et al., 2025). IDEA emphasizes the need for teaming and collaboration across disciplines in partnership with families in developing service plans and implementing intervention (Yell & Bateman, 2025). Preparation programs must emphasize implementation competence, professional development should include job-embedded support and performance feedback, and interdisciplinary collaboration must be structured rather than incidental (Murphy et al., 2025). In many ways, EI and ECSE often operate in disciplinary silo and there is a need for more interpersonal collaboration to enhance child and family outcomes (Murphy et al., 2025).

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EI/ECSE Preparation Standards

Preparation standards serve as the connective tissue between policy expectations and professional competence. The DEC Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) Personnel Preparation Standards (2020) articulate the foundational knowledge and skills expected of professionals serving young children (birth–8) with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities. Organized across seven domains—child development and early learning, partnering with families, collaboration and teaming, assessment processes, application of curriculum frameworks, responsive and reciprocal interactions and instruction, and professionalism and ethical practice—the standards provide a coherent framework for preparing candidates to support positive developmental and learning outcomes. In writing for teacher candidates, these standards offer an opportunity not only to communicate expectations, but to celebrate the field's collective accomplishments in advancing inclusive, family-centered, and evidence-based practice. Faculty are encouraged to integrate this work within preparation programs, so candidates see themselves as part of an evolving professional community grounded in reflection, equity, and partnership. Importantly, this perspective is aspirational rather than predictive—highlighting enduring principles and commitments so the work remains relevant and generative for future educators and practitioners, rather than bound to momentary trends or at risk of becoming obsolete.

Preparation, however, does not end at graduation; it extends into sustained professional learning across the career span. The history of professional development in EI/ECSE reflects a shift from compliance-driven training toward sustained, practice-based, and systems-oriented capacity building. In the early years following the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), professional learning largely focused on understanding legal requirements and discrete instructional strategies. With the expansion of EI under Part C of IDEA in 1986 and subsequent reauthorizations, professional development increasingly emphasized family-centered practice, service delivery in natural and inclusive environments, and interdisciplinary teaming. As previously described, the field has moved beyond one-time workshops toward ongoing coaching, reflective supervision, and data-informed improvement cycles, influenced by implementation science and frameworks such as practice-based coaching and competency-based personnel preparation. More recent approaches situate professional development within broader systems of support—linking leadership, fidelity, equity, and child and family outcomes—so that learning is embedded in daily practice rather than treated as an isolated event. This evolution underscores a central lesson for teacher candidates and faculty alike: high-quality services for young children depend not only on what professionals know, but on how systems invest in sustained, relational, and equity-driven professional growth.

A 50-Year Arc: From Entitlement to Implementation

Taken together, these developments reveal a clear trajectory in the field's evolution. Over the last five decades, ECSE has progressed along a discernible trajectory:

- Entitlement — securing the legal right to early intervention and preschool services.
- Inclusion and Natural Environments — ensuring participation in everyday settings.
- Evidence-Based Practice — identifying interventions that produce measurable outcomes.

- Fidelity and Coaching — building systems that ensure those interventions are delivered effectively.

The next era of ECSE and EI will likely hinge less on new statutory language and more on strengthening the infrastructure that supports high-quality implementation. Evidence-based practice, delivered with fidelity in natural and inclusive environments, represents not only best practice—but the realization of the law's original promise.

Forward-looking Recommendations to Inspire the Next Fifty Years

Understanding this trajectory allows us to look ahead—not to predict the future, but to articulate the commitments that should guide it. As ECSE enters its next era, the central question is not whether effective practices exist—but whether systems are equipped to ensure equitable access to high-quality implementation. Strengthening preparation pathways, embedding coaching infrastructures, advancing racial equity commitments, and aligning accountability systems with meaningful child outcomes will determine whether the promise of IDEA continues to be realized for future generations. For professionals entering the field, this history is not merely retrospective; it is an invitation to participate in the ongoing work of refining, strengthening, and advancing ECSE and EI in ways that remain grounded in evidence, partnership, and progress.

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