

THE GLOBAL STATE OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION: PROMISES MADE MUST BECOME PROMISES KEPT

International Day of Education – January 24, 2025

A Message from Timothy Shriver, PhD, Chairman of Special Olympics International



DEAR FRIENDS,

I am writing this letter because we have important work to do.

And **YOU can help.**

All over the world, people with disabilities want to be included.

They want to be included in everything that other people do.

They want to have jobs, shop at stores, and have fun with friends.

Their families want them to be included, too.

But in many places around the world, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are still excluded.

They are left out.

We need to change this.

But HOW do we start?

We start at the beginning—with children.

And WHERE do we start?

We start where children are—in school.



Countries have governments.

Governments are the people who make rules for the country.

Many countries have laws promising that children with disabilities can go to school.

But in many countries the governments are not keeping their promise.

Many children with IDD never go to school.



They are left behind.

They do not go to school, and they do not learn important things.

And when they grow up, they cannot get jobs.

They cannot earn money to buy the things they need and the things they want.

Why don't governments keep their promise to allow children with IDD to go to school?

There are 2 reasons.



Reason number 1, the governments do not want to spend the money it takes to include children with disabilities.

Some children with IDD need extra teachers or special learning materials or a way to get to school.

These things cost money.

We think governments need to keep their promises even if it costs money.



Reason number 2, the countries are not using programs that work—programs such as Special Olympics.



Special Olympics uses sport to help people see that children with IDD can learn. And that children with disabilities are mostly just like children without disabilities. And that children with disabilities have value.

Special Olympics has Unified teams with youth who have IDD and youth who do not.



They swim and run races together.



They play basketball and football together.

They become friends.

Unified Sports looks at what people can do together—not what they cannot do alone. Unified Sports changes the way people think and feel and act.

Special Olympics knows that Unified Sports is not just about sports.

It is a way to teach people about inclusion.

It is a way to help young people with IDD be included in schools and other activities.

Special Olympics went to a big meeting with some other groups that also want schools to be inclusive.

They found that some countries say they want inclusive schools.

But the governments still send students with IDD to separate schools—or no school at all.

They are not keeping their promise.

It is not good enough for countries to just have laws for inclusive schools. The governments must follow the laws and spend the money to have these schools. Special Olympics and the other groups at the meeting decided to work harder. Next year, the groups will work to get more countries to use Unified Sports and other programs that change the way people think and feel and act about inclusion.



The groups will work to get all countries to spend money for inclusive schools because inclusive schools are best for **all** students.

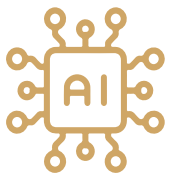


Technology is very important to people with disabilities.



Technology helps people see better, hear better, move better, and learn better.

Technology helps schools be more inclusive. With the help of computers and other technology, students with and without IDD can be in the same classrooms and learn about the same things.



There is a new kind of technology called AI—artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is like a team of computers working together to do jobs in a new way.

AI can do things that only people used to do. And AI can do these jobs much faster than people can.

Most teachers and parents think AI could be a good thing for people with IDD. AI could make it easier for students with IDD to learn new things in school. AI could make it easier for people with IDD to have jobs and earn money.



But AI could lead to classrooms with more computers and fewer teachers.
And teachers are important.

They help us learn about things that computers do not understand.

For schools to be inclusive, students with and without disabilities need to be working with teachers and students most of the time, not just with computers.

Most people who are making AI are not thinking about what students with IDD need.
So AI could leave these students out and leave them even more behind.

Next year, Special Olympics is going to work with the people who are making AI.

Special Olympics will ask these people to think more about how AI can help inclusion.

Most countries do not have enough teachers.

And many countries are spending less money on education than they used to.

Still, some countries are working hard to support inclusion.



These countries show that inclusion can happen when countries keep their promises and use money for inclusive schools.

For example, in the United Arab Emirates (the UAE), the government is doing a lot for students with disabilities.

After Special Olympics held World Games there in 2019, His Highness the President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed made schools include “students of determination.”

That is what they call students with IDD.



The UAE government is spending lots of money to help teachers know how to include students with IDD.



Special Olympics leader Mary Davis
(far left)

In 2024, Special Olympics leader Mary Davis was at an important Meeting on Inclusion and Disability.

At the meeting, these seven countries agreed to support inclusion in schools and in jobs: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, United States.

Other groups have also been meeting to support inclusion.

Some groups are working to get more data about inclusion.

Countries need these numbers to do a better job with inclusion.



They need to know how many students with disabilities go to inclusive schools.

They need to know how many are not in school at all.

They need to know how much money the countries are spending on inclusive education.

Spending money on inclusive schools helps countries in many ways.



Students with and without disabilities stay in school longer.

They have better social skills and emotional skills.

Their minds and bodies have better health.

Countries don't waste money building separate schools.

More people get jobs and can buy what they need.

In some places, inclusion is getting better.
But we still have much work to do.
And we need your help.



Children with and without disabilities need to start playing together and being friends from the age of one year old.

Can you help us do this?



More teachers and coaches need more training in working with all students.

Can you help us do this?



Students with and without disabilities need to spend more time together in the classroom and on the playing fields, learning to see each other's abilities.

Can you help us do this?



Young people need to become youth leaders and advocate for inclusion.

Can you help us do this?



Parents and community leaders need to help people change the way they think and feel and act about inclusion.

Can you help us do this?



Government leaders need to be reminded to make laws for inclusive education and spend money to do what these laws say.

Can you help us do this?



Schools and towns and countries need to collect data about what they are doing to support inclusive education.

Can you help us do this?



AI needs to meet the needs of young people with IDD.

Can you help us do this?



Schools need to use inclusion programs that work, such as Special Olympics.

Can you help us do this?

Most of all, each of us must stand up against exclusion wherever we see it.
We must help the people around us think and feel and act
in ways that honor the ability in every person.
We must ask everyone to promise to work for inclusion
and to keep that promise.

Together, I know we can do this! Thank you!



Your friend,

Tim

Timothy Shriver, PhD
Chairman, Special Olympics International

