



**SPECIAL OLYMPICS
GLOBAL CENTER**
FOR INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

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,

Last year, in our [first annual assessment of inclusion in education](#), I wrote about the progress we have led and seen since our founding in 1968, as well as the immense challenges left that still demand our immediate action as a society. The overwhelming response to that letter reinforced what we've long known: the aspiration for genuine inclusion transcends borders, cultures, systems and, most importantly, disability status.

While governments worldwide have signed declarations and conventions promising an inclusive education system that accommodates diverse learning needs, the reality remains stark: according to [UNICEF](#), children with disabilities are nearly 50% more likely never to have attended school than children without disabilities. Children with severe disabilities are almost four times more likely never to have attended school. These aren't just statistics—they represent millions of broken promises to children and their families.

And now, as artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes education, we face the risk of leaving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)—3% of the world's population—locked out of the most revolutionary technology since the personal computer.



As we took stock of the past year—consulting with experts in inclusion, government officials, and people with IDD—**three significant developments** stood out that require our urgent attention.



First, despite ratifying international treaties that guarantee the right to inclusive education, governments consistently fail to provide sufficient financing for inclusive policies and evidence-based practices. This remains the most significant barrier to inclusion at a time of growing recognition that inclusion drives student learning. Real systemic change requires the dramatic expansion of evidence-based inclusive practices—such as [Special Olympics' Unified Champion Schools program](#)—which serve as positive disruptors or catalysts to systemic change.



Next, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has created both promise and challenges for the inclusion of children with IDD in education systems. While educators and parents see AI's potential to foster more accessible and personalized learning experiences, they worry about the real risk that this revolution could deepen existing inequities, leaving these children even further behind. To avoid this outcome, deliberate action must be taken to ensure the inclusion of and meaningful collaboration with the IDD

community. While G7 nations recently pledged to ensure accessible, affordable technology and inclusive innovation for people with disabilities, it is on all of us to hold them accountable to ensure these commitments yield tangible results.



Finally, while building capacity for inclusion among teachers and school leadership is critical to accelerating reform, governments and education systems lack frameworks that clearly define inclusion. This prevents inclusive practices from being embedded in teaching, classroom practices and professional development training for educators. As a lifelong teacher, I have experienced this firsthand. Special Olympics [has begun to tackle this challenge](#) in partnership with the Harvard Graduate School of Education's EASEL Lab and CAST (formerly known as the Center for Applied Special Technology).

As we assess the state of inclusion in education, we issue this letter in solidarity with millions of parents, siblings and children with IDD who have been denied the right and dignity of access to school for too long. And with them, **we challenge policymakers, educators and community makers to keep their promise: let every child come to school and fully participate to the best of their ability.** Let every child come to school to learn. Choose to include all children, no exceptions.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS THE POSITIVE DISRUPTOR WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR—SO WHY AREN'T WE FUNDING IT?

The Special Olympics movement comes to life in literally tens of thousands of communities around the world every day. The mission of our sports programming is to change attitudes and drive inclusion. But when we meet with leaders from governments and international organizations—many of whom are reforming their education systems, planning complex humanitarian responses or charting a pathway for their country to move from stagnation to prosperity—the question I often hear is: “Why sport?”

At first glance, sport may not seem like a priority for education, especially with school buildings in disrepair, a shortage of teachers and overcrowded classrooms. Yet, our movement chooses sport for one central reason: nothing else has been proven as effective as sport in removing barriers of prejudice, ignorance and humiliation, while advancing attitudes of dignity and inclusion. And for our community, changing attitudes is critical. It is the necessary first step toward changing everything else. That's why we choose sport.



The data supporting the role of sport is clear. Sport can [change hearts, minds and behaviors](#). In sport, we learn to emphasize ability, not disability; teamwork, not isolation; empathy, not exclusion. Our Unified teams—having students with and without intellectual disabilities—worked with researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education to help define the critical emotional and behavioral qualities that can emerge as [Inclusive Mindsets and Behaviors](#)—a combination of empathy, cognitive perspective taking, courageous action and the value of universal human dignity. When we bring students together on Special Olympics Unified teams, inclusive mindsets and behaviors are learned and practiced, and the outcome is remarkable: young people naturally learn to see each person’s inherent dignity and worth. They see common humanity and they become advocates for it, too. That changes everything.

For all these reasons, we recognize that Special Olympics Unified Sports, at scale, becomes a “positive disruptor” that can shift the cultures of schools in ways that encourage both social and academic development. And we are not alone in this belief. Last year, Special Olympics International joined the Brookings Institution Center for Universal Education and the Global Partnership for Education to convene a [global symposium](#) examining the role of inclusion in the large-scale transformation of education systems. This gathering brought together policymakers, researchers, practitioners and learners with IDD to explore how inclusive practices such as sport transform learning structures and promote accessibility.

We found that governments are “talking the talk” on policy, but not yet “walking the walk” by financing the kind of social infrastructure that creates inclusive attitudes and mindsets. [In many cases](#), countries have inclusive education policies that specifically target children with disabilities, yet they continue to rely on

segregated systems. This is particularly the case in countries experiencing humanitarian crises or conflict, where children with disabilities face compounded barriers that can permanently exclude them from learning opportunities without early intervention. But it is true in countries with mature economies, too.

It is almost impossible for attitudes to change when segregation persists.

This counterproductive approach to reform falls short of building fully inclusive education systems, addressing broader issues of equity and quality, and enhancing the capacity to support diverse learners. It also reflects a limited understanding of how inclusion benefits all learners, not just those with learning challenges. **That’s why many stakeholders are working to overcome this fragmented view by reframing inclusion as a cornerstone of systemic change that drives better educational outcomes for all students.**



The **concept of systemic change** is the foundation of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and is at the heart of its promise to leave no one behind. It makes **inclusive policies imperative for eliminating all barriers leading to exclusion in education.** The need for systemic transformation is also reflected in **CRPD General Comment 4**. This concept drives the work of Special Olympics, underscoring the need to provide practical support to countries in identifying and implementing strategies for transforming their education systems in alignment with their inclusive education commitments.



This is why I was particularly inspired by the symposium’s keynote speaker Yasmine Sherif, Executive Director of Education Cannot Wait, who argued that investing in disability-inclusive education during emergencies helps build more resilient and equitable education systems over the long term. She argued that education for children with disabilities in fragile environments is not a luxury that can wait for more stable times—it is a fundamental right that becomes even more critical during crises. She concluded by reinforcing Special Olympics’ call for national governments to allocate

3% of domestic education funding to evidence-based inclusionary practices in schools—referring to this benchmark as a “modest minimum” that governments can easily reach—while urging even loftier ambitions.

The dialogue at Brookings helped us to reconsider the status quo—where inclusive education policies are often substituted for practices—and to recommit to developing the tools and training needed to translate education policy into inclusive practice.

AI AND INCLUSION: OPPORTUNITY AND RISK AT A CROSSROADS

AI has the potential to address major challenges in education, innovate teaching practices and accelerate progress toward the commitment of SDG4 to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” It is critical for everyone involved in supporting AI in education to emphasize its potential to reduce inequities in access to knowledge for vulnerable children, ensuring it remains accessible to all without widening [technological divides](#). Improving a child’s access to assistive technology is a driver of economic development, potentially generating [an additional US\\$100,000](#) in lifetime income, yet only 10% of people with disabilities in low-income countries can access the required support.

Special Olympics has a global footprint in over 190 countries, and we want to see every country benefit from advances in AI, particularly in the Global South where educational disparities are most acute.

This revolutionary technology thus stands at a crossroads: it can either help to level the playing field for learners with IDD or exacerbate existing inequalities.

Our organization champions inclusive education globally, and it sees both immense promise and significant risk in this moment. To understand the full implications, the Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education [conducted pioneering research](#)—one of the first studies to include the voices of educators, parents and students with IDD—on attitudes toward AI. The findings are both hopeful and cautionary.



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One third of educators believe that developers of AI currently take into account the needs and priorities of students with IDD.



Educators



Parents of students with IDD

Think AI will promote more inclusive classrooms and close educational gaps.

Both teachers (78%) and parents (66%) express concerns about AI's potential to replace genuine human connection.

Source: [Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion](#)

On the one hand, educators and parents recognize AI's potential to transform education for students with IDD. **Nearly two-thirds of educators and more than three-quarters of parents believe AI could create more accessible educational opportunities as well as better health and sport opportunities.** They see promise in AI's ability to simplify lectures, adapt classroom curricula and make information more accessible—benefits that could help dismantle long-standing barriers to inclusion.

However, the research also exposes deep concerns. Many educators and parents fear a loss of human connection in schools—a connection fundamental to fostering inclusion and improving the quality of education for all. **Even more troubling, only one-third of educators believe that AI developers are currently considering the needs of students with IDD.** Parents

and teachers alike worry that AI models, trained without sufficient representation of individuals with IDD, may only perpetuate exclusion.

The risk is clear: without deliberate action, students with IDD—3% of the global population—could be left behind once again.

Over the next year, Special Olympics will engage with leading AI companies to better understand how they are designing for diverse learners and to galvanize a greater focus on and investment in technology that is accessible to our community—and, by extension, all communities.



GLOBAL EFFORTS TOWARD INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: PROGRESS AND PERSISTENT GAPS

In October 2024, our CEO Mary Davis had the great privilege to attend the first-ever G7 Ministers' Meeting on Inclusion and Disability, hosted by Italy. This historic gathering brought together government officials, civil society leaders, experts from G7 nations, and observers from countries such as Kenya, South Africa, Tunisia and Vietnam. The summit culminated in the signing of the [Solfagnano Charter](#), which commits G7 nations to advance disability inclusion across education, employment and other critical sectors. This institutionalization of disability rights within the G7 framework marks a notable step forward.

But, as Mary [underscored](#), the first Ministers' Meeting on Inclusion and Disability should not be the last. Determined leaders such as Sara Minkara, the former U.S. Special Advisor on International Disability Rights, and Alessandra Locatelli, Italy's Minister for Disabilities, have promoted the mainstreaming of disability inclusion through not only the G7 but a growing number of multilateral forums, including the G20, APEC and ASEAN. This is a promising trend that we applaud and commit to support and sustain.

Other recent global initiatives such as the [United Nations Transforming Education Summit \(TES\)](#), the [30th Anniversary of the Salamanca Statement Summit](#) and the forthcoming [Global Disability Summit \(GDS\)](#) have reaffirmed the importance of inclusive education. The systemic change envisioned in these forums requires good data, reinforcing the persistent challenge posed by the long-term gap in the quality and availability of data on children with disabilities. However, this barrier is being gradually addressed by the creation of new data



collection tools, such as the [Child Functioning Module](#) developed by UNICEF and the Washington Group on Disability Statistics.

Countries should be encouraged to use these tools to capture data on the status of children with disabilities, which will help inform action to ensure the right of every child to a quality education. Data availability and countries' capacities to rigorously monitor quality improvements for children with disabilities are promising developments for the growing community of educators, scholars and government officials seeking to implement more ambitious reforms.

The [WHO-UNICEF Global Report on children with developmental disabilities](#) and [UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5](#) reflect continued attention to inclusive education and the policy changes needed to strengthen inclusion. Encouragingly, countries are beginning to take positive steps to address the needs of children with IDD, including by supporting a [gradual attitude shift toward inclusion](#) and taking the initiative to improve domestic education financing.

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Financing inclusion is not a sunk cost—it stimulates GDP and strengthens economies. A recent [publication](#) from the Special Olympics Global Center underscored the research demonstrating that inclusion in education leads to higher educational attainment, improved social-emotional well-being, and better mental and physical health for children with and without IDD. Specifically, [the evidence shows](#) that **each additional year of schooling yields a wage return of up to 25% for learners with disabilities**. For example, in Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Senegal, and the Gambia, adults with disabilities who have completed at least some primary school earn up to 56% higher wage returns.

The overall analysis is clear: **while global platforms and frameworks demonstrate that inclusion is achievable, governments have not yet kept their promises**. Action is now essential and achievable—even if just by implementing the priorities that Special Olympics has been demanding for decades:

- Training teachers and coaches on inclusive practices;
- Empowering young people to be agents of inclusion;
- Teaching inclusive mindsets and practices in classrooms and on the playing field;
- Engaging parents and community leaders as agents of inclusion;
- Inviting all children to play and train together from the earliest possible ages.



OVERCOMING BARRIERS: NATIONAL PROGRESS ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

No comprehensive monitoring system exists where we can track the rate of progress on inclusion around the world. And as the 2030 deadline to achieve the SDGs looms, stark disparities in education still persist. Compounding this crisis is a [global shortage of 44 million teachers](#)—a crisis that undermines the quality of education and students' learning outcomes. National and international investment in education [is also declining](#), along with foreign assistance dedicated to education.

These challenges are exacerbated by economic downturns, climate change, global health crises, conflict, migration and fragility. Tragically, children with disabilities bear the consequences of these challenges at [disproportionately high rates](#). Moreover, as education slides down the list of global priorities, the decades-long momentum for inclusive education risks stalling.

Nonetheless, there are bright spots and models worth emulating that prove that social inclusion is [possible and attainable](#).

Looking first toward the Middle East, the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** has emerged as a leader in inclusion. Since the 2019 Special Olympics World Games in Abu Dhabi, and under the leadership of His Highness President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emirates has transformed its approach to inclusion in education, pledging to implement the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools model across all public schools. The [Abu Dhabi Strategy for People of Determination](#), of which inclusive education is a core pillar, also provides a comprehensive framework that emphasizes personalized learning, pre-service teacher education and continuing professional learning, and collaboration among educators, families and

communities. The recent [Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion Summit in Abu Dhabi](#) brought together educators from over 33 countries to share this strategy and discuss other inclusive practices, research and policies.

The **UAE** is also rigorously addressing the educational needs of students with IDD—whom it calls “people of determination”—through its focus on pre-service teacher education and continuing professional learning, including through an emerging initiative by the Ministry of Education to offer training opportunities for educators on inclusion. Separately, the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge is ensuring that educators in private schools have continuing professional learning opportunities in inclusive pedagogy through its new [Policy on Inclusion](#), to be implemented beginning with the 2025/26 academic year. Higher education institutions and nonprofit groups are also taking up the mantle of inclusion: the Emirates College for Advanced Education requires a focus on inclusion in its teacher education and continuing professional learning programs, while the Dubai-based Al Jalila Foundation's [Ta'alouf Teachers' Training Program](#) ensures a rigorous focus on inclusion. With its commitment to teacher education and professional learning, the UAE has set an example for how nations can scale inclusive education models.

In Africa, **Sierra Leone** has begun implementing a national policy on [radical inclusion in schools](#) through a five-year implementation plan (2021–2026). The plan targets the most vulnerable learners, including children with disabilities, and places inclusion at the center of the education system, aiming to benefit all learners and their broader communities.



In **Chad**, UNICEF implemented disability-inclusive interventions by developing individualized learning plans (ILPs) to support the participation and learning of 200 pupils with disabilities. [This experience demonstrates](#) how to enhance access to education for children with disabilities during complex emergencies through targeted services (e.g., rehabilitation, psychosocial support) and disability mainstreaming (e.g., training teachers in inclusive education and improvements to accessibility).

In the Asia Pacific region, President of the **Maldives** Dr. Mohamed Muizzu announced that his administration would prioritize addressing the needs of learners with disabilities. This has led to tangible action by the Ministry of Education in partnership with UNICEF and the World Bank, which [mobilized US\\$9.5 million](#) through the Global Partnership for Education to ensure a more equitable and inclusive approach to education and learning.

The World Bank's Inclusive Education Initiative and multiple funders are supporting **Ethiopia's efforts to enhance education** for students with IDD. This partnership has led to the development of 800 inclusive education resource centers (IERCs) across the country, providing teaching materials on inclusive pedagogy as well as assistive devices and expert teacher support. The country plans to establish 600 more IERCs in the coming years.

In 2024, approximately 650 schools in **China** completed Unified Schools training, with an additional 600 community sites implementing Unified initiatives, thanks to the support of the China Disabled Persons' Federation. Over the past year, over 100,000 people were engaged in these activities, contributing significantly to the advancement of inclusion and creating more equitable and inclusive environments for people with IDD.

The USAID-funded All Children Succeeding program is [working closely with](#) the Government of **Uzbekistan** to promote inclusive education by empowering local communities, involving all teachers in teaching all children, and centering the voices of people with disabilities.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, **Paraguay's** transformative ["Open Schools" initiative](#) is changing the educational and community landscape through sports, cultural and youth leadership activities, thereby fostering a culture of respect and empathy toward people with IDD.

The **Organization of American States (OAS)** has also made notable progress by incorporating disability into its sports indicators for development, an achievement long promoted by civil society organizations such as Special Olympics. These frameworks provide critical tools for monitoring change, though they highlight isolated progress rather than broadscale, transformative reform.



**The infrastructure of exclusion
wasn't built in a day, and it won't
be dismantled in a day.**

- Timothy Shriver, PhD, Chairman, Special Olympics International

CONCLUSION

These developments, while encouraging, must be viewed in the context of generational change. **The infrastructure of exclusion wasn't built in a day, and it won't be dismantled in a day.** Moving beyond incremental steps in transforming education systems will require **urgent, coordinated action**—led by governments, civil society and international organizations—to transform education systems and deliver true inclusion for all learners.

We must ensure:

- Genuine commitment from the highest levels of policymaking, underpinned by **bold leadership and robust financing**;
- The adoption of **rigorous standards** to ensure adherence to evidence-based models and practices in support of inclusion;
- An enhanced focus on the **training and mentoring of educators** and the empowerment of school staff and leadership to address long-standing barriers to inclusion;
- The **empowerment of young people** to take the lead on inclusion and become changemakers in their communities;
- **Putting the needs of young people with IDD at the forefront of the AI revolution**, allowing this technology to benefit all learners and address disparities in education access;
- The **urgent improvement of global data collection** on children with IDD, especially those excluded from education and affected by humanitarian crises. In this vein, I plan to report next year about the growing global focus on the research gaps and limitations affecting countries' ability to measure inclusion in education systems for children with IDD.

And most of all, we must turn our words into immediate, measurable action. **All children must be included, and no one should be left behind. This is how we will ensure that promises made become promises kept.**

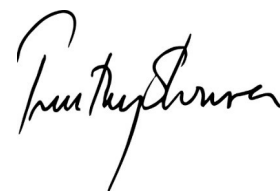
At Special Olympics, our model is simple but revolutionary. We are not interested in determining who is the best; we are focused on helping each athlete achieve their best. Sport, in this context, becomes a teacher of values—effort, resilience and personal growth. When we embrace this perspective, we stop seeing differences as deficits and start seeing the incredible abilities and potential in every individual.

There's a lot to do, and we must act now and inspire others to act. By acting now, we can help governments translate global commitments into tangible improvements in classroom practices.

In the year ahead, I encourage you to continue challenging exclusive practices in your community, support inclusive initiatives on the playing field and in the classroom, and join us in ensuring that the next generation of technological and educational advancements serves learners of all abilities.

The path to inclusion remains long, but it grows clearer with each passing year. Thank you for walking it with us.

With hope and determination,



Timothy Shriver, PhD

Chairman, Special Olympics International

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NATIONAL PROGRESS RECAP

These countries took positive steps in 2024 to strengthen their commitment to inclusion in education, showing that progress is both possible and attainable.



The **UAE** enhanced its national focus on teacher training on inclusive practices, setting an example for how nations can scale inclusive education models.



Sierra Leone began implementing a national policy on radical inclusion in schools, placing inclusion at the center of the education system.



China trained 650 schools and engaged over 100,000 people in Unified initiatives for inclusion.



Uzbekistan advanced inclusive education with community empowerment and teacher training via USAID.



Chad worked with UNICEF to implement Individualized Learning Plans for students with IDD, setting an example for inclusion in complex emergencies.



The **Organization of American States** integrated disability into its sports indicators for development, advancing critical monitoring tools.



Ethiopia established 800 inclusive education resource centers, with plans for 600 more.



Maldives secured US\$9.5 million to enhance education equity and inclusion for learners with disabilities.



Paraguay transformed its educational landscape by means of its “Open Schools” initiative, fostering a culture of respect toward people with IDD through sports and youth activities.