

# THE GLOBAL STATE OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

## THE YEAR OF THE TEACHER: TEACHING INCLUSION IN A DIVIDED WORLD

International Day of Education – January 24, 2026

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



## TEACHERS ARE THE KEY

In my first days as a “practice” teacher in New Haven, Connecticut, I remember being overwhelmed by the complexity and quantity of the work—preparing lessons, grading papers, communicating with families and connecting with students. I had been taught to be a teacher, but once in the classroom, I realized I was almost entirely unprepared. I quickly learned what every teacher knows: being a teacher is a huge responsibility that demands enormous effort and comes with precious little support.

In recent years, I’ve seen teachers doing more than I could ever have imagined. I’ve visited dozens of schools supporting Special Olympics’ efforts to make schools more inclusive and have seen teachers working miracles. In places as different as rural India and suburban Rhode Island, I’ve watched teachers lead inclusive classrooms, coach Unified Sports teams, facilitate student leadership programs, organize pep rallies, lead schoolwide campaigns for inclusion and dignity and do everything imaginable to nurture each child entrusted to their care. The challenges of teaching and, in particular, of teaching inclusively, remain enormous. The good news is that teachers are stepping up in ways we may have once thought beyond the realm of possibility.

The bad news is that teachers continue to get little support, and that lack of support is taking its toll, leading to a worldwide shortage of qualified, trained and well-equipped teachers. We should all be alarmed and awakened to a crisis building right before our eyes: **We face an urgent global teacher shortage, and the future of all our children is at stake.**



## THE MATH IS STARK

Teacher quality is the most significant school-based predictor of student achievement. Today, the nearly [44 million teacher vacancies worldwide](#) mean millions of children are denied the instruction they need to master fundamental skills. For students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)—who require consistent, skilled teaching—the impact is devastating. Fewer teachers mean less learning, more social isolation, and a greater likelihood of not attending school at all. When children lack qualified educators, they fall behind in reading, mathematics, and core skills—deficits that compound with each passing year. In classrooms with chronic shortages, literacy rates drop, proficiency declines and achievement gaps widen—especially for students who need the most support.

Teacher shortages are creating overcrowded classrooms, diminished teaching quality, and limited learning opportunities. The problem is most acute in sub-Saharan Africa, which will require an [estimated 15 million new teachers by 2030](#). The most marginalized learners—[particularly in those countries with the deepest need for education reform](#)—bear the greatest burden. Without adequate teaching capacity, the vision of an inclusive, equitable education system cannot be achieved.

Education systems are facing converging shocks, including armed conflicts, climate challenges, and rising mental health challenges, leaving an estimated [234 million school-aged children in crisis settings](#), with more than 85 million of them out of school. The negative impact of these settings is exacerbated for children with disabilities, particularly learners with IDD. [In low-income countries, 90% of school-aged children with IDD are not in school. \*\*Ninety percent.\*\*](#)

What is often overlooked is that inclusive education [benefits all learners](#) academically. Research shows that **when teachers are trained in inclusive practices, achievement improves across the board—for students with and without IDD**. Inclusion is an evidence-based strategy for raising academic outcomes. But it only works when we have enough well-trained teachers to deliver it.

### *Something must change.*

Well-trained, well-supported and valued teachers can help counterbalance these challenges. This demands greater public respect, recognition and investment in educators, treating teaching as the essential profession it is.

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*- Timothy Shriver, PhD, Chairman, Special Olympics International*

## DEFINING THE CRISIS

The numbers tell a devastating story. In countries facing severe teacher shortages, average class sizes have ballooned to [nearly 60 students](#) in primary schools, compared to the [OECD average of 21](#). Student-teacher ratios in sub-Saharan Africa now [exceed 40:1](#), making individualized attention—essential for students with IDD—virtually impossible. [Research consistently shows](#) that larger class sizes are associated with lower student achievement, especially among students who require additional support.

School closures compound these challenges. In the United States alone, hundreds of schools close each year, with [rural communities disproportionately affected](#) by staffing shortages and resource constraints. Globally, teacher shortages are a key driver of school closures in underserved areas, forcing students—especially those with disabilities who already face transportation barriers—to travel greater distances or drop out entirely.

Even when children with IDD do attend school, they often fall far behind their peers—not just due to access barriers, but because of persistent gaps in learning. The evidence is clear: simply attending school is not enough. Without trained and supported educators, students—especially those with IDD—are denied the quality education they deserve.

### *The 2025 Funding Collapse*

The past year marked a turning point. Globally, development assistance for education [fell by 12%](#) in real terms, with a further 14% decline expected by 2027. These cuts have devastated teacher training programs—the very interventions demonstrated to improve outcomes for students with IDD.

The message is unmistakable: at a time when students with IDD need support most, international commitment is weakening. Every dollar cut from teacher training is a child with IDD denied their future.

### *The Invisibility Crisis: Why Data Gaps Perpetuate Exclusion*

The continued lack of disaggregated data on students with IDD isn't just a technical problem—it reflects priorities and decisions that perpetuate exclusion. When governments and multilaterals fail to count students by disability type, students with IDD become invisible in policy discussions. Without data, we cannot measure enrollment gaps, identify which students are being left behind or hold systems accountable for failures.

A [UNESCO review of 49 countries](#) found that only 18% disaggregated education data by disability type, and just 6% specifically tracked students with IDD, making it nearly impossible to advocate for appropriate resources, design targeted interventions or demonstrate what works. This deficit is even more stark in emergency and crisis settings.

The data gap ensures the status quo: students with IDD remain last in line for limited resources, their needs unacknowledged, their exclusion unmeasured and therefore unchallenged.





## WHAT WORKS: INVESTING IN TEACHERS DRIVES RESULTS

Despite these challenges, several countries demonstrate that investing in teacher preparation and support delivers measurable progress.



Inclusive educator training in **the Philippines** focuses on empowering teachers to support diverse learners through programs addressing inclusive policies (e.g., RA 11650, which mandates inclusive learning resource centers in every community), differentiated instruction, assistive technology and collaborative strategies, including alongside Special Olympics. Building on this momentum, a strategic partnership between the Department of Education and Special Olympics Pilipinas catalyzed the Philippines' inclusion in the Special Olympics Global Coalition for Inclusion, which will include the direct training of 2,000 teachers in inclusive classroom practices.



In 2024, **Argentina** implemented reforms requiring inclusive education coursework in all teacher training institutions, while neighboring **Chile's** [School Integration Program \(PIE\)](#)—now in place in nearly 70% of public schools—is strengthening inclusive teaching competencies.



As a member of the Special Olympics Global Coalition for Inclusion, **Montenegro's** Ministry of Education is investing €180,000 into expanding the Unified Champion Schools program, training 500 new teachers in inclusive practices.



The Government of **Tanzania's** [Task Order 51 \(TO51\) project](#) is piloting the Mentoring, Coaching and Community of Learning approach in 49 schools across the country, aiming to strengthen teachers' capacity to create inclusive learning environments.



**South Africa's** [White Paper 6](#), a national policy document outlining the government's official vision for education reform, sets out the country's commitment to building an inclusive education and teacher training system that guarantees equal opportunities for every learner.



Inclusive educator training in **Mongolia** is growing, focusing on differentiated instruction, individualized plans, and new technologies. One key innovation includes [Medle.mn](#)—Mongolia's national e-learning platform—which is digitizing education and improving access for students with IDD while strengthening teacher training.

These examples prove that meaningful inclusion is achievable when systems prioritize teacher preparation, professional development and sustained support.



## THE SOLUTION: RECRUIT BOLDLY, TRAIN INCLUSIVELY, SUPPORT HOLISTICALLY

More than any other school-based factor, it is the teachers who drive student learning. Yet we pay them poorly, support them weakly and wonder why they leave. Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions—and right now, those conditions are failing our students.

The issue of teacher attrition has reached a critical point, transitioning from a local staffing hurdle to a systemic global crisis. According to the [UNESCO Global Report on Teachers](#), attrition rates for primary teachers nearly doubled globally from 4.6% in 2015 to 9% in 2022. In the United States, this attrition rate is [between 7% and 10% annually](#), with

[44% to 50% of teachers leaving](#) within the first five years. [Common issues cited](#) by teachers for their departure from the profession include poor administrative support and low professional autonomy.

Critically, when teachers disappear, opportunity disappears, and the most marginalized students suffer the greatest. Educators do more than deliver a curriculum; they shape inclusive mindsets, build belonging and sustain hope. As such, we need to recruit boldly, train inclusively and support holistically.

### *Recruit Teachers with Disabilities: A Call for True Inclusion*

The inaugural [Global Report on Teachers](#)—the first to position educators as central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4—makes a compelling case for inclusivity in the teaching workforce. Yet it also reveals a troubling reality: data and support for teachers with disabilities remain “extremely scarce globally.” Exclusionary recruitment policies, lack of workplace accommodations and inaccessible school environments prevent a valuable talent pool from entering and thriving in the profession.

Teachers with disabilities are powerful role models who model inclusion daily. If we are serious about inclusion, we must start by including teachers with different abilities themselves. We can accomplish this through clear recruitment policies, accessible infrastructure and inclusive training for school leaders. Supporting entry into the profession by teachers with disabilities is critical to addressing the teacher shortage crisis. Additionally, we must ensure support for those educators who acquire disabilities during their careers.



### *Train All Teachers in Inclusive Practices*

Inclusive practices in classrooms must be a standard, with requisite training for every educator. Effective inclusion depends on both skillset and mindset. Teachers need practical strategies—differentiating instruction, using Universal Design for Learning (UDL), employing assistive technologies and collaborating with support staff. But technical skills alone aren't enough. Teachers must also believe that all children can learn and that outcomes are determined by the system's adaptability, not by student deficits.

To make this vision actionable, I drew on my experience as a classroom educator and years leading Special Olympics International, where I saw again and again that inclusion must go beyond physical access. I began asking a deeper question: What qualities lead some young people to actively include others, even at personal or social risk? That inquiry led me to articulate what I call an “[inclusive mindset](#),” rooted in empathy, universal dignity, and moral courage—a way of thinking, feeling, and acting that enables children to be truly inclusive, not just present together.

In recent years, Special Olympics—in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education—has advanced this thinking dramatically by developing a full framework of

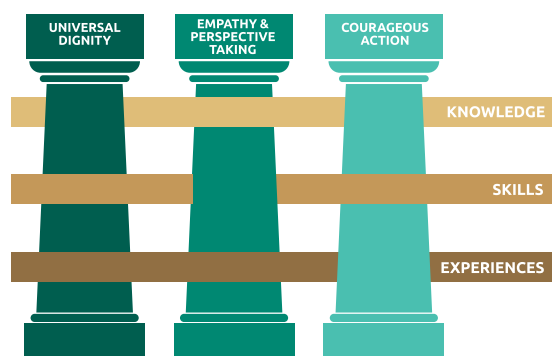


inclusive skills, values and behaviors. We now understand what it means to adopt [Inclusive Mindsets and Behaviors \(IMB\)](#), and we now understand how to use UDL methods to teach education professionals how to develop an inclusive mindset and how to become agents of inclusion.

The IMB and UDL frameworks are mutually reinforcing. UDL provides the instructional approach for designing accessible learning environments, while **IMB reveals the skills, values and experiences that make inclusion teachable, observable and scalable through clearly defined mindsets and behaviors.** Together, they move practice beyond mere accommodation and toward the intentional cultivation of classrooms and school cultures where all students belong.

To refine this approach in real school settings, Special Olympics and Harvard University's EASEL Lab collaborated with teachers, coaches, administrators and youth leaders in El Salvador, the United Arab Emirates, China, South Africa and the United States. Those collaborations produced new tools for teaching inclusion that will be launched in pilots in the United States and ten additional countries. Special Olympics is also translating these tools into a “Unified Champion Schools Inclusion Academy,” launching in 2026 in Abu Dhabi. We welcome and invite scholars, educators and funders to join us in building international research partnerships to develop evidence-based teaching tools to support teachers, students and families who are hungry for a more inclusive future. The Academy will also advance the inclusion of teachers with disabilities, including in school-based sports activities, leadership development and self-advocacy.

### Framework for Inclusive Mindsets and Behaviors



#### *What is IMB?*

Inclusive Mindsets and Behaviors (IMB) is a framework for teaching inclusion that develops the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to foster inclusive environments: Universal Dignity, Empathy & Perspective Taking, and Courageous Action.



## CLEAR DEMANDS TO LEADERS

Teachers are the frontline builders of empathy, inclusion and stability. But their ability to bridge divides and foster belonging is under threat, and they cannot shoulder this responsibility alone.

Inclusion must be recognized as a critical human right and a key building block for a just and flourishing future. Governments, foundations, corporations and multilateral development organizations must urgently change their levels of commitment if a deeper crisis is to be averted. Inclusion must be funded, measured and maintained with the same urgency as roads, bridges and health systems. The solutions are clear:



**Commit to minimum 5-year funding cycles with 3% annual increases indexed to inflation** for teacher recruitment and retention, including pathways for teachers with disabilities.



**Make inclusive practice a required component of all teacher licensure and credentialing programs by 2028.** This means rooting preparation in UDL and organizing it around a coherent, teachable framework for inclusion—whether that is the emerging IMB model now under pilot by Special Olympics or other approaches that can be implemented and scaled.



**Protect teacher well-being and elevate the profession**, so every educator is respected, resourced, and retained. This means ensuring that teachers are included in the room when government or district policies are being written. Governments must also match educator salaries to the market, ensuring that teacher pay becomes and stays competitive with other professional jobs.



**Invest in school-based inclusion programming**—such as Special Olympics Unified Sports, student leadership activities and peer mentoring—that builds belonging for students of all abilities. Recreation and sport are critical to the physical, emotional and cognitive development of children and are enormously effective tools for promoting social inclusion, teamwork, discipline and grit. Yet, these activities are frequently cut and dismissed as nonessential. The Special Olympics Global Coalition invites and welcomes countries willing to partner and invest in these proven inclusion tools.

## TAKING ACTION

When children with intellectual and developmental disabilities are excluded because teachers are absent, unsupported or unprepared, we lose more than potential—we erode the foundation of our shared humanity.

The promise of every child—and the hope of every society—depends on bold, sustained and holistic action.

History will judge us not by what we promised children, but by how we invested in the teachers who serve them.

**With hope and determination,**



**Timothy Shriver, PhD**

*Chairman, Special Olympics International*



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