



GLOBAL STATE OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

A LETTER, AN INVITATION AND A CHALLENGE

*From Timothy Shriver, Ph.D.
Chairman of Special Olympics*

To understand why Special Olympics has such a fundamental stake in inclusive education, it helps to recall the world that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities inhabited in 1968, the year our movement was born.

Exclusion was the norm back then. Exclusion was universal. Exclusion was taken for granted, so much so that a simple inclusive act — in our case, gathering some young people with intellectual disabilities for a sports competition in Chicago — was all but revolutionary. A few dozen kids leaving their institutions for a day to run, swim, kick and jump. To have fun, but also to compete, for real, with spectators and referees. Times and scores recorded. Medals and ribbons awarded. Amazing!

A few experts and even parents objected — some angrily. Just the outdoor exertion, in summer sunlight, was controversial. “Too strenuous.” “They’ll be humiliated.” After the games went off splendidly, some experts expressed pleasant surprise. “Ninety percent of them seem to run normally,” an official with the Chicago Park District told the Chicago Tribune.

That day in Chicago, the athletes of Special Olympics secured a public win for inclusion long before inclusion became our north star. Those early games were the modest beginning of the long, slow, unfinished process in which millions of people with intellectual disabilities — ID, for short — have declared their right to belong.

Inclusion has come a long way since 1968. But how far — and how fast is it moving? This letter is Special Olympics’ first yearly assessment of the world’s successes and failures in building true education inclusion for all.

INCLUSION IN EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

OCEANIA

50% of countries have laws and **62%** have education policies that emphasize inclusion

EAST ASIA & SOUTHEAST ASIA

6% of countries have laws and **15%** have education policies that emphasize inclusion

NORTHERN AFRICA AND WEST ASIA

9% of countries have laws and **27%** have education policies that emphasize inclusion

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

16% of countries have laws and **23%** have education policies that emphasize inclusion

EUROPE & NORTH AMERICA

24% of countries have laws and **55%** have education policies that emphasize inclusion

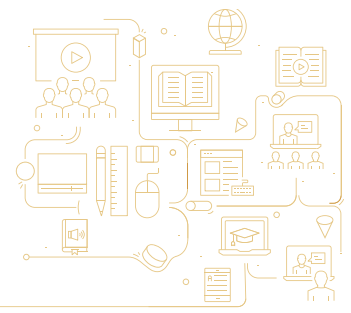
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

17% of countries have laws and **42%** have education policies that emphasize inclusion

CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA

No countries have legal provisions for inclusive education, but **27%** have education policies that emphasize inclusion

UNESCO. (2020). Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all.



Why education? Our movement marshals the power of sport to deepen social inclusion through stronger relationships, deeper friendships, and more welcoming communities where inclusive mindsets are actively cultivated. Schools are the setting for the most meaningful progress in these areas.

In the last 30 years, governments and international organizations have increasingly voiced support for inclusive education, enshrining it in international agreements like the United Nations [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#). But [according to UNESCO](#), only 16 countries broadly refer to “inclusive education” in their general education laws. And only about 40 percent of low- and middle-income countries even have education budgets for children with disabilities. Beyond treaties and policies, data on actual inclusive practices – the proof that governments are truly implementing the laws they have on their books – is sparse and inconsistent.

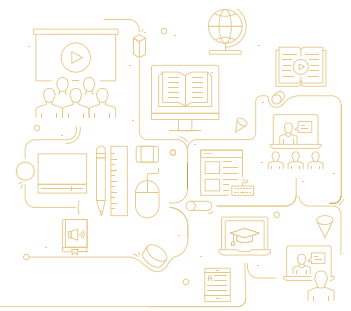
High-quality education is a universal right. Yet it remains out of reach for many people with ID, who make up an estimated 3 percent of the world population. Globally, nearly 240 million children live with disabilities — physical or intellectual or both. UNICEF estimates that half have never attended school.

Solid schooling — academic as well as social and emotional learning — is the surest way to set someone on a path toward that sweet spot in life where dreams, skills and potential rise and converge. Yet for people with ID, schooling opportunities are hard won and often substandard. To understand the landscape, some terminology can be helpful:

- **Institutionalization** — The old model, not yet extinct: People with ID living in confined settings, separated from the world outside.
- **Segregation** — Students with ID being taught in their own schools, inherently unequal.
- **Integration** — Students with and without ID attending the same schools but going to classes and activities separately.
- **Inclusion** — The ideal situation, based on the principle that “all children should learn together, wherever and whenever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have.”

According to the [2020 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report](#), laws emphasize segregation in 25 percent of countries, partial segregation in 48 percent, integration in 10 percent and inclusion in 17 percent.

From the vantage point of Special Olympics International, [the state of inclusion in education in 2023](#) was a global mixed bag. Some governments made modest progress in advancing more inclusive practices in their education systems. But far too few countries had laws on their books mandating inclusive schools, and too few countries had policies translating those mandates into sustainable practices. In the end, too few schools had the resources necessary to implement an education model that is truly inclusive. And even in countries that are leading in inclusive practices generally, the cruel infrastructure of institutionalization has not yet been fully dismantled.



Countries in Europe, North America and Oceania have the greatest number of disability-inclusive education policies, though quality varies wildly. For countries in Oceania, about half have laws that emphasize inclusion, while nearly two-thirds have such policy provisions. In Europe and North America, only one quarter of countries have laws that emphasize inclusion, but 55 percent of countries pursue education policies that support inclusion. And while we must celebrate countries that have advanced so far along the continuum from institutionalization to inclusion, we must also recognize that inclusive education laws and policies will not automatically create schools where families and children feel included. High-quality programs that imbue children with greater empathy and moral courage, support for teacher training and staff development, and rigorous measurement and evaluation of school culture and climate, as well as resources commensurate with the needs of communities, are all critical elements of the inclusive practices that usher in lasting change.

East Asia and Southeast Asia have the most work to do in establishing inclusive education systems. Only 6 percent of countries in this region have laws that promote inclusive education. While segregation is a practice that produces shocking disparities in schools, 44 percent of countries across Asia still have laws that advocate this archaic model. Even without

stronger legal and policy infrastructure, there are communities and schools across the region that are implementing best practices in inclusion (many in partnership with Special Olympics), but they need more reliable support and commitments from their national governments.

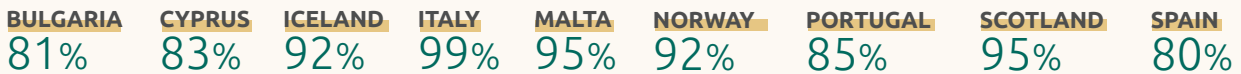
Only 17 percent of countries in sub-Saharan Africa have laws emphasizing inclusive education, despite the fact that 42 percent of the region's countries have education policies that promote inclusion. This means that countries are 'talking the talk' on policy, but not yet 'walking the walk' by codifying these policies into law with mandatory funding.

Yet inclusive practices are also found where governments make bold funding commitments and demand high-quality implementation. For example, by 2015, South Africa established 715 inclusive schools, surpassing a goal set in 2001, while Malawi is transforming special schools into resource centers so that more students with disabilities can pursue integration into mainstream education settings.

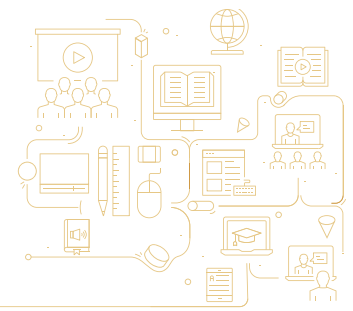
Many countries are making progress toward removing legal, policy and financing barriers to inclusive education. The percentage of special-education learners in primary and lower-secondary grades who are being served in inclusive education is over 80 percent in several countries.

TOP PROVIDERS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Percentage of special-education learners in primary and lower-secondary grades who are being served in inclusive education



EASIE. European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. European agency statistics on inclusive education: 2018 dataset cross-country report (p. 88).



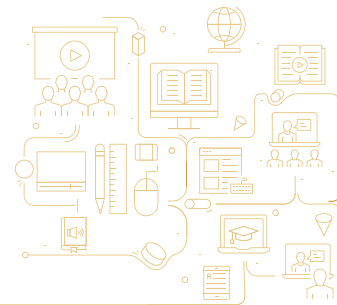
We were also encouraged last year by positive developments like these:

- The **Philippines** began to implement its landmark [inclusive education act](#) which mandated that all cities and municipalities have at least one Inclusive Learning Resource Centre that works to remove barriers to accessible and quality education for learners with disabilities.
- **Bhutan's** National Assembly began discussions to ratify the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD). In 2022, Bhutan's Ministry of Education and UNICEF inaugurated a [model](#) inclusive Early Childhood Care and Development Centre focused on providing early intervention services for children with developmental delays or disabilities.
- Following the **Republic of Rwanda's** [approval](#) of the Revised Special Needs and Inclusive Education Policy, significant progress has been made in advancing inclusive practices in schools, with the number of teachers trained in special needs and inclusive education increasing by 29.7 percent in 2022.
- The **Canadian House of Commons** unanimously passed [Motion 78 \(M-78\)](#), which critically noted, "in the opinion of the House, where the federal government spends money on education, domestically or internationally, clear consideration must be given to the maximum inclusion of people with disabilities, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities."
- **Montenegro** was the first nation to ratify its commitment to the [Special Olympics Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion](#), which advances the implementation of the government's Inclusive Education Strategy 2019-2026 and the National Youth Strategy 2022-2026, both aligned with national commitments to the CRPD.

- The **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) successfully implemented Special Olympics Unified programs — which bring together children and young people with and without disabilities to play sports and build leadership skills — [in schools nationwide](#), with 195 schools in the UAE achieving Unified Champion School status, engaging over 18,000 students.

That is the kind of trend we're looking for: bringing education inclusivity to scale at the national level.

This is why Special Olympics began to develop programming that would permit young people to lead their peers and their schools in creating Special Olympics Unified Sports teams, while simultaneously challenging their schools to make inclusion a part of everything they do. After years of evolution and challenging first steps, the first wave of 600 Unified Champion Schools launched across the U.S. in 2008. Today, there are over 30,000 Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools in 152 countries that reach approximately one million students, and many more educators, coaches and families.



While this growth is significant, it represents only a fraction of the need. And that is why:

- Last year, 177 countries and jurisdictions worked with Special Olympics to expand social inclusion programs in their communities and schools.
- In June, we launched the [Special Olympics Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion](#), funded by a grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), which brings together 14 countries and several leading international organizations and foundations in a pioneering multilateral effort to create more inclusive schools and communities, as well as commit significant resources to implement its goals.
- [The Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education](#), supported by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, has established the first-ever body of global scholars that is releasing a call-to-action for research demonstrating the social, economic and academic value of inclusion in education.

I look forward to a time when countries and communities make bolder commitments to creating welcoming, effective and safe learning environments. 2024 can be the year in which more governments commit to training special educators, implement evidence-based programs that promote inclusive learning, demand accountability on school culture and climate, and prepare a generation of young people to lead their communities with an abiding belief in equality and universal dignity.

As Special Olympics continues to work toward these goals, I want to hear from you. What are you bearing witness to that deserves to be shared and celebrated? And just as importantly, where are your leaders, your educators or your schools falling short, and what role would you like to see Special Olympics play in demanding better outcomes and higher standards?

Special Olympics' education programming rests on the premise that inclusion is a learned behavior that can be taught alongside academic skills. And that building an inclusive school brings measurable benefits to all students, both with and without ID – from an improved sense of community, to reduced bullying, to better reading and math scores.

We are dedicated to expanding our programs and growing our Unified Champion Schools program to reach 150,000 schools in 180 countries, and to bring 2 million young people with and without ID into Special Olympics programs in schools around the world.

For any one student among those 2 million, in any one school, being included, making a friend, feeling equal, can change their life — a life of infinite value and meaning. Knowing how such changes compound across time, across many lives, schools, communities and countries, is enough to stagger the imagination.

And that's how a revolution works.

