

# Global State of Inclusion in Education: A Review of the Literature

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

## Executive Summary

This brief aims to provide an overview of the global state of disability inclusion in education settings—and of the progress that has been achieved to date. As demonstrated by the evidence, much work still needs to be done. While many countries have made significant strides to meet the needs of children with intellectual disabilities (ID), many others have not taken even the first steps. Despite the extensive global policy conversations, and to a lesser extent country-level policy action, policy-related talk and action are not being supported by government financing for inclusive education.

**Only about 40 percent of low- and middle-income countries have education budgets designated for children with disabilities.**

And no nation has come close to achieving the widespread scale of truly inclusive classrooms and school communities—where children with intellectual disabilities experience social inclusion, where schools go beyond physical inclusion to create accessible and meaningful learning settings for all, and where students with disabilities are valued as full members of their school communities.

## The Benefits of Inclusive Education

High-quality education is a basic human right of every child. The fundamental principle of inclusive schools is that all children should learn together, wherever and whenever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive education invites children to play with and learn from each other, introducing at an early age the principle of inclusion as a norm. The evidence base for inclusive practices in education is clear. It begins with the academic and social-emotional benefits for the individual student—including those with and without disability—and extends to the social and economic benefits for countries.

Multiple studies have documented the academic benefits of inclusive education for all students. Students with disabilities

demonstrate greater overall gains in academic outcomes when included in mainstream education, compared to their peers with similar challenges in segregated classrooms. For those who say inclusive education impedes the progress of students without disabilities, the research indicates that children without disabilities are likely either to benefit academically from inclusive education or at least not be negatively affected by it.

Research shows when students are taught how to play and learn together—whether on the playing field or in the classroom—all students benefit. Learning settings become richer with reduced fear, hostility, prejudice, and discrimination as well as increased tolerance, acceptance, understanding, and appreciation. Schools also experience decreased bullying, more trusting student relationships with teachers and staff, improved peer-to-peer relationships, and students who are more helpful and empathetic toward peers with ID.

The economic value of inclusive education is considerable. The World Bank estimates that **excluding people with disabilities** from educational and other opportunities **may lower a country's GDP by 3 percent to 7 percent**. Access to education through inclusion also translates into workforce and social service benefits. Children with disabilities are more likely to secure sustained employment and stay out of poverty as adults, contributing to their own productivity and a country's GDP.

## The Global State of Inclusion

Among policy makers and education practitioners, inclusive education has emerged as a key concept to address the exclusion of children with disabilities—as well as other marginalized populations such as gender and ethnic minorities—from mainstream education systems. In the past 30 years, governments and international organizations have increasingly espoused their support for inclusive education, enshrining it in international agreements. Most critical among these agreements are the **Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action** in 1994; Article 24 of the

United Nations **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** in 2006; **CRPD General Comment No. 4** in 2016, which elaborated on the practical implications of implementing inclusive education; and Goal 4 of the United Nations **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** in 2015, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030.

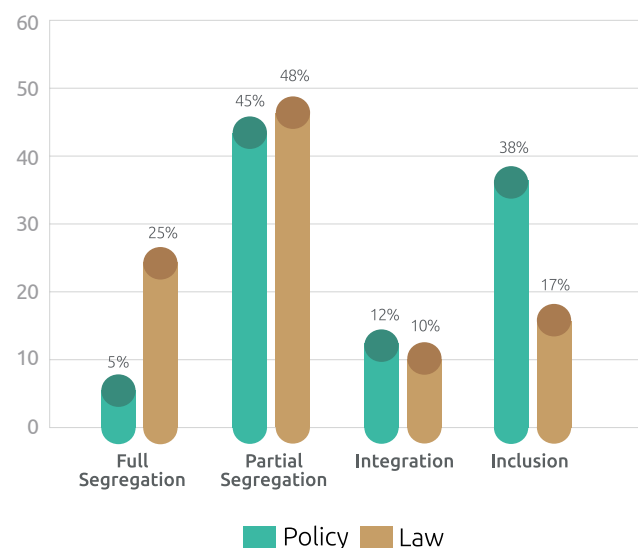
Yet despite widespread support for the ideals of inclusive education, the available data reveal that millions of children with disabilities continue to be denied their right to education. In the most recent and comprehensive effort to standardize and document such data, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reports that children with disabilities are nearly 50 percent more likely than their peers without disabilities to have never attended school, and that children with *severe* disabilities are almost four times more likely than their peers without disabilities to have never attended school. Other sources suggest that specifically in low- and middle-income countries, as many as half of all children with disabilities who are of primary and lower-secondary school age do not attend school, making them five times more likely to be out of school than their peers without disabilities—and this disparity only increases with education level.

UNESCO’s comparative analysis of the state of inclusion in 209 countries and territories underscores the disparity between education laws and education policies, the latter having been considerably quicker to move toward inclusive education.

Specifically, the percentage of countries whose laws protect the right to inclusive education is a mere 17 percent, whereas those whose policies encourage inclusion is more than twice that at 38 percent. Even more alarming, five times as many countries provide enabling language for fully segregated education in their laws (25 percent) as in their policies (5 percent). Clearly, when it comes to protecting the rights of learners with disabilities, good intentions alone are insufficient to the need.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the best metric to assess the global state of inclusion is governments’ financial support for inclusive education policies and practices. Only about 40 percent of low- and middle-income countries have education budgets designated for children with disabilities. Even when children with intellectual disabilities are in physically integrated educational settings, the reality

## Types of School Organization for Students With Disabilities as Defined in Policy Versus Law, Global, 2020



**Note:** Data sourced from *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all* (pp. 36 and 39), by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020, (<http://bit.ly/2020gemreport>).

for many is that they continue to be marginalized and isolated from the social fabric of the school community. These disparities also negatively impact students without intellectual disabilities; inclusive learning environments help all students develop their social-emotional learning skills and help schools improve the climate for learning, which in turn produce improved academic performance.

## Concluding Thoughts

This executive summary encapsulates the full brief, which offers an in-depth review of the progress toward establishing inclusive education laws and policies worldwide. The full brief provides multiple country snapshots in major regions of the world. It reveals a state of global inclusion in education that is characterized by global policy conversations, and to a lesser extent country-level policy action, which are not currently translated into education laws or government financing. Until we support inclusive education policies with corresponding funding commitments, we will fall short of the promise of achieving the widespread scale of truly inclusive classrooms and schools where students with disabilities are not just physically integrated but are socially valued as full members of their school communities. Negative attitudes around disability afflict every society and community. The need is great and the time to act is now. Wasting time means wasting lives.

## About the Authors

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## About the Global Center

The Global Center for Inclusion in Education began in 2020 as a conceptual framework: it would serve as a centralized resource of support for the expanding network of Special Olympics Unified Schools with their three components of school-based Unified Sports®, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole-School Engagement. The foundational goal of the Global Center is to illuminate, broaden, and intensify the impact of the 2019 World Games in Abu Dhabi by driving targeted, grassroots change for social inclusion across the globe using the Middle East/North Africa Region as a base. This work includes serving as a hub for evaluation research on inclusive programming, as well as for basic research on the development of inclusive mindsets across cultures. To help achieve this goal, the Center supports a series of research and policy briefs on topics critical to inclusion in education. These briefs bring Special Olympics experts together with thought partners in the research and policy fields related to education and youth development and their intersection with Unified Sports programming.

Complete citations and references may be found in the [full brief](#).

or visit [www.flipsnack.com/specialolympicsglobalyouth/global-state-of-inclusion-in-education-brief-108.html](http://www.flipsnack.com/specialolympicsglobalyouth/global-state-of-inclusion-in-education-brief-108.html)



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