

RESEARCH REPORT

Learning is For Everyone

Paving the pathway for inclusive education for children with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DIPAS	Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy
EMIS	Educational Management Information System
ESA	Education Sector Analysis
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
LiFE	Learning is For Everyone
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OPDs	Organizations of Persons with Disabilities
PNIs	Psycho-Neurological Institutes
PMPC	Psychological Medical Pedagogical Consultation
SDGs	Sustainable Developmental Goals
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UNDP	UN Development Programme

Executive summary

Children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups globally. They face some of the highest rates of exclusion from education, underscoring the critical need for inclusive education. As defined in General comment 4 on Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), inclusive education requires systemic changes in educational content, teaching methods, approaches, structures, and strategies to ensure all learners can participate equitably and meaningfully, in line with their individual needs and preferences.

Kyrgyzstan, along with other countries in the region, has taken strides toward promoting inclusive education. The ratification of the CRPD in 2019 marked a significant step in aligning national policies with international standards. However, despite these achievements and the relatively low reported percentage of children with disabilities (approximately 7 per cent), which is below the global average of around 10 per cent, many still face substantial barriers to accessing inclusive education. These include attitudinal, institutional and physical obstacles that limit their full participation in the education system.

In this context, the LiFE (Learning is For Everyone) research project – conducted by UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of the Kyrgyz Republic – aims to assess the current state of inclusive education in the country. The study employed a mixed-method approach, including policy analysis, a review of census and Educational Management Information System (EMIS) data, and primary data collection. The latter involved interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders, such as teachers, children – with and without disabilities – and their parents, in the regions of Naryn, Osh and Chui, as well as a nationwide survey targeting teachers, head teachers and district officials.

UNICEF and MoES representatives, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) have developed four policy recommendations based on the findings. Each recommendation includes specific actions and short-, medium- and long-term goals to guide implementation and ensure sustainable progress towards inclusive education.

Policy recommendations



1. Strengthen the rights-based and social model of disability to overcome barriers to inclusive education and improve the participation of people with disabilities in education and society

Findings indicate that the medical model of disability still prevails. This was evident in the policy analysis and primary data collected. Eight of the 12 policies reviewed reference segregated settings. EMIS data corroborate this, showing that 52 per cent of students with disabilities enrolled in the education system attend special education institutions.

In addition, most participants defined disability solely as a biological or physical condition, overlooking the role of environmental barriers. Findings show that access to education is especially challenging for children with intellectual and physical disabilities. Stigma and discrimination are more pronounced for children with intellectual disabilities, with many participants expressing low expectations for their inclusion in mainstream settings. Meanwhile, EMIS data reveal that children with physical disabilities make up the largest share (36 per cent) of children who are out of school, highlighting significant physical barriers, including inaccessible infrastructure and limited accessible transportation options.

Action 1: Improve understanding of disability and strengthen data collection aligned with the CRPD and the social model of disability

- **Short term:** Develop and disseminate a national operational definition of disability aligned with the social model.

- **Medium term:** Complete the integration of disability-inclusive indicators into EMIS.
- **Long term:** Establish robust feedback loops to ensure that EMIS data inform decision-making at all levels of the education system.

Action 2: Design and implement accessibility guidelines for school infrastructure

- **Short term:** Implement practical, low-cost measures that can quickly enhance physical accessibility in schools for students with disabilities, such as assigning classrooms for students with physical disabilities to the ground floor and prioritizing the most spacious and accessible rooms.
- **Medium term:** Develop and pilot comprehensive accessibility guidelines and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that existing legal mandates are effectively implemented.
- **Long term:** Refine the accessibility guidelines and enforcement mechanisms based on the results of the pilot phase and then proceed to implement them across schools nationally.

Action 3: Promote inclusive education in mainstream schools

- **Short term:** Assess the current educational system to identify existing resources that can be leveraged to strengthen the capacity of mainstream schools in delivering inclusive education.
- **Medium term:** Operationalize the transition plan by beginning the transformation of selected institutions into inclusive education support centres.
- **Long term:** Expand the network of inclusive education support centres nationwide.



2. Update and adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of children with various types of disabilities, using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles as a guiding framework

Parents, teachers and children with disabilities report that a rigid curriculum and lack of differentiated instruction and teaching methodologies hinder the learning process. Moreover, there is a lack of assistive devices, flexible learning materials and inclusive assessment approaches. As a result, teachers frequently rely on their own experience to determine which teaching methods are most effective. The most commonly mentioned strategies include using praise to motivate students, presenting information in multiple formats, simplifying content and repeating key concepts to ensure understanding.

Action 1: Provide teachers with structured, practical guidance and training on how to create inclusive learning opportunities and accessible resources aligned with UDL principles, enabling them to effectively accommodate the curriculum and teaching to meet the diverse learning needs of children with disabilities in the classroom

- **Short term:** Develop a centralized national digital platform – coordinated by the MoES – to provide teachers with high-quality resources on inclusive education.
- **Medium term:** Deliver structured professional development on inclusive pedagogy, aligned with national standards and based on UDL principles.
- **Long term:** Institutionalize inclusive education by fully integrating the national digital platform and inclusive pedagogy into the core of the education system.

Action 2: Promote inclusive curriculum development by progressively applying UDL principles within Kyrgyzstan’s education system

- **Short term:** Conduct a comprehensive review of the national curriculum, instructional materials and assessment standards to identify barriers to inclusion for students with disabilities.
- **Medium term:** Develop centrally approved curriculum guidelines to support teachers in adapting (modifying and accommodating) the national curriculum based on students’ needs, and ensure ongoing professional development grounded in UDL principles.
- **Long term:** Institutionalize UDL as a cornerstone of education system modernization by embedding inclusive design principles into national education strategies.



3. Development of a comprehensive inclusive education teacher training package for pre-service and in-service teachers

There is a lack of training in disability-inclusive education. Specifically, pre-service teacher training programmes include little content on the subject. As a result, many teachers have sought in-service training focused on strategies for teaching students with specific types of disability, but these courses tend to be brief.

Teachers in mainstream schools appear to face more challenges than those in special schools, as the latter often receive more training and possess greater knowledge of disability. The nationwide survey data found only 14 per cent of teachers and 25 per cent of headteachers across all types of school had received comprehensive training in this area. The majority of those who had been trained – 75 per cent of teachers and 75 per cent of head teachers – had received in-service training. Most of this was provided by the MoES, accounting for 75 per cent of trained teachers and 69 per cent of trained head teachers.

Action 1: Strengthen pre-service and in-service teacher training in disability-inclusive education

- **Short term:** For pre-service training, begin by mapping existing gaps and opportunities in teacher education programmes related to inclusive education. Meanwhile, for in-service training, organize regular, structured collaboration training between teachers from special and mainstream schools to foster peer learning and mutual support.
- **Medium term:** Develop and roll out mandatory courses on disability-inclusive education in collaboration with the Institute for Advanced Training for Teachers.
- **Long term:** Establish a sustainable system for pre-service and in-service teacher professional development on inclusive education.

Action 2: Strengthen foundational courses on inclusion across various other university degrees

- **Short term:** Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment and stakeholder engagement to identify existing gaps in inclusion content across various university faculties.
- **Medium term:** Develop foundational courses tailored to each discipline.
- **Long term:** Institutionalize and integrate these courses into the mandatory curricula of all relevant disciplines.



4. Raise public awareness and sensitization towards disability and inclusive education

Research participants held mixed attitudes towards disability and inclusive education. Although there were positive attitudes towards disability – mostly from children without disabilities – some parents of children without disabilities expressed more reservations. They cited concerns about potential classroom disruption affecting their children’s learning, as well as worries that children with disabilities might be bullied. Parents of children with disabilities also raised concerns, primarily about discrimination and stigmatization their children

might face in mainstream schools, often referring to discriminatory experiences in public spaces they already faced in their day-to-day lives. Children with disabilities described both positive experiences of support from friends and instances of discrimination. Similarly, surveys and interviews revealed that teachers also have mixed attitudes towards disability and inclusive education. Some believe that children with disabilities usually lag behind in mainstream schools, while others advocate for more support to help children with disabilities learn and thrive in mainstream settings.

Action 1: Design and implement systematic actions to raise awareness on disability

- **Short term:** Promote opportunities for inclusion in the community and society that prioritize direct interaction with persons with disabilities.
- **Medium term:** Institutionalize these awareness-raising efforts by developing national guidelines that define the objectives, structure and responsibilities of intersectoral partnerships.
- **Long term:** Implement the developed guidelines and awareness strategies nationwide, embedding inclusive practices across all regions and institutions.

Action 2: Strengthen legislation and enforcement for disability-inclusive education

- **Short term:** Conduct a comprehensive review of existing laws related to disability, education, employment and health to identify gaps and inconsistencies with the CRPD.
- **Medium term:** To operationalize the legislative shift, introduce a government decree or amendment that explicitly outlines inclusive education provisions.
- **Long term:** Finalize and institutionalize the revised legal framework.

Concluding remarks

This report provides key insights and recommendations to progressively advance towards a more disability-inclusive education system, outlining actions for the short, medium and long term. The recommendations build on the current state of disability-inclusive education and highlight promising practices identified during the research. Among these practices, the report emphasizes the critical role of teachers and the importance of collaboration – teachers supporting one another, working alongside specialists and actively engaging parents and families in the children’s learning process. The research also identified the value of assessment approaches that focus on children's strengths while addressing areas for improvement. This underscores the need for a flexible curriculum, complemented by universal measures that adapt to the diverse learning pace of students, both with and without disabilities.

Actions to further enhance disability-inclusive education in Kyrgyzstan outlined in the report include promoting an enabling environment that embraces diversity and fosters positive attitudes towards disability. The report advocates for the transfer of effective practices – currently observed mostly in special schools – into mainstream schools, ensuring that these schools are equipped with the necessary human and material resources to support all students, both with and without disabilities, in actively learning and thriving.



CHAPTER 1

Background

An estimated 16 per cent of the world’s population have a disability.¹ Among children, approximately 240 million – or 10 per cent of all children aged 0–17 years – are estimated to have a disability.² The exclusion of children with disabilities from society is particularly high in low-income countries, impacting all areas of life, including education. Reduced educational opportunities limit labour market prospects and quality of life for children with disabilities.³ In response, inclusive education has become a global priority, supported by international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as detailed in General comment 4 on Article 24,⁴ and the UN Sustainable Developmental Goal (SDG) 4 commitment to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. To further this goal, UNICEF’s Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) provides a comprehensive roadmap for cross-sectoral coordination to support children with disabilities worldwide.⁵

In Europe and Central Asia, around 10.8 million children aged 0–17 years have some kind of disability, accounting for 6 per cent of the region's children.⁶ Analysis from the latest Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) shows there are no significant differences in the proportion of boys and girls with disabilities. It also reveals that most children have functional difficulties in at least one domain, with psychosocial difficulties being the most predominant across all countries.⁷

Over the past two decades, significant progress has been made in advancing inclusive education and the rights of persons with disabilities across Central Asia. This progress is reflected in the adoption of key international frameworks, such as the ratification of the CRPD and alignment with international bodies like the Council of Europe and the European Union. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this commitment is evident in the ratification of the CRPD in 2019. Since then, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic has taken concrete steps to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities. These include the establishment of the Council for the Affairs of Persons with Disabilities to coordinate cross-sectoral and multilevel efforts, ongoing discussions to transition from a medical to a social model of disability, and the 2023 launch of the national Accessible Country programme, which aims to improve both physical and attitudinal accessibility while enhancing access to inclusive education, healthcare and employment.⁸ Furthermore, the implementation of the SDGs – particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education – has been integrated into national policy frameworks. This is notably reflected in the National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018–2040, which emphasizes inclusive education as a key priority for long-term development.⁹

Kyrgyzstan has made progress towards inclusion within the field of education. The country has revised its education legislation and launched curriculum reforms under the Altyn Kazyk (Polar Star) initiative, which emphasizes inclusiveness, gender equality and climate resilience in teaching and learning. This reflects a strong government commitment to delivering quality, inclusive education. Additionally, the Law on Education 2003 (Amended by the Law 09 August 2023), the national education concepts and programmes for 2019–2023 and the 2012–2020 Education Development Strategy, which promote access

for children with disabilities in regular schools, stress progress made in this field. Notably, the National Plan on Early Identification and Early Intervention focuses on detecting health and developmental issues in young children, while the National Concept of Inclusive Education aims to transform the education system to ensure access to quality education for all children, including those with disabilities.^{10,11}

Despite these advancements, children with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan face significant barriers to accessing quality education. The country reports a relatively low percentage of children with disabilities – 7 per cent of those aged 2–17 years – compared with the global average of 10 per cent among those aged 0–17 years.¹² This does not necessarily indicate a low incidence, but rather reflects challenges in identification stemming from a lack of well-established screening mechanisms and persistent stigma surrounding disability. This issue is not unique to Kyrgyzstan; it is also present in other countries across the region.¹³ Furthermore, existing research shows that children with disabilities experience lower school attendance rates and are less likely to demonstrate foundational numeracy skills compared with their peers without disabilities.¹⁴ These disparities are driven by multiple systemic barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, unclear school admission procedures and limited availability of necessary accommodations. Only 8 per cent of public buildings in Kyrgyzstan are accessible, reflecting broader issues in public infrastructure, transportation and communication systems.^{15,16}

Education provisions for children with disabilities are varied but not all of them are inclusive. These include mainstream schools, residential special schools, special preschools and homeschooling.¹⁷ Different types of residential facilities for children with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan include special schools, psycho-neurological institutes (PNIs), private residential facilities and religious institutions. These institutions face several challenges: insufficient personnel to care for children; lack of specialized staff (mainly medical professionals); segregation by type of disability; and the absence of curricula or quality standards for special education.¹⁸ Homeschooling is organized by general education institutions and is available for students in grades 1 to 11 who require individualized instruction due to health conditions. In this schooling

option, teachers visit the child's home and provide instruction during morning hours, tailored to the student's needs (Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 477, 2018 – Regulation on the organization of individual home-based education for children). However, this option faces several challenges, including that the time allocated is often significantly less than what is stated by law.¹⁹ Moreover, the Psychological Medical Pedagogical Consultation (PMPC), which is responsible for determining a child's educational provision, has faced criticism regarding the fairness and accuracy of its assessments.²⁰

In terms of care and support services, Kyrgyzstan offers a range of programmes for children and persons with disabilities. However, many of these are inpatient services, raising concerns about continued institutionalization. The high rate of institutionalization, particularly among children with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, is closely linked to the limited capacity of inclusive education and community-based services.²¹ Although in 2012 the country created a plan to transform or close residential institutions for children by 2018, known as the Resolution on the Optimization of the Management and Financing of Residential Institutions for Children of the Kyrgyz Republic, progress has been slow.²² For this reform to succeed, it must be closely coordinated with inclusive education initiatives. Both efforts should work towards reallocating existing resources and specialized expertise from institutions into mainstream settings. Strengthening community-based services and inclusive education will not only support the implementation of the deinstitutionalization strategy but also promote independent living and reduce reliance on institutional care.²³

Despite policy commitments, practical barriers – physical, institutional and attitudinal – hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education in Kyrgyzstan. Negative perceptions of disability, often rooted in the outdated medical model of disability, remain widespread within the education system and broader society. These misconceptions limit access to essential services such as healthcare and education for children with disabilities. Resistance to inclusive education persists among some teachers, parents and staff

in residential institutions, many of whom believe that inclusion may negatively affect the learning outcomes of children without disabilities or fail to meet the needs of children with disabilities due to a perceived lack of individualized support.^{24,25,26}

Institutionally, legislative and policy frameworks often do not include the necessary mechanisms and services to support inclusive education. Regulatory gaps and fragmented responsibilities among stakeholders, including teachers, parents, civil society, government agencies and medical professionals, limit coordinated action. Many initiatives rely on donor funding, which can lead to inconsistent implementation and limited sustainability.^{27,28} Finally, pedagogical barriers are also present. The shortage of teacher training in inclusive education means many teachers do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to support diverse learners. This is compounded by the limited availability of adapted learning materials, assistive technologies and accessible teaching resources.²⁹

This report was developed as part of the Learning is For Everyone (LiFE) research within this landscape. The LiFE research aims to explore the extent to which education systems are disability-inclusive and has been implemented in seven countries: Cambodia, Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger and Paraguay. In Kyrgyzstan, the research was conducted through a partnership between UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, UNICEF Kyrgyzstan and the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of Kyrgyzstan, with an overarching goal of providing system-level recommendations to ensure equitable learning opportunities for children with disabilities. The research uses the third volume of the education sector analysis (ESA) guidelines as a conceptual framework.³⁰

The LiFE research in Kyrgyzstan explored the education system with



CHAPTER 2

Methodology

an inclusive lens defined by the third volume of the ESA guidelines (see *Box 1*). This included analysis of aspects relating to the provision of educational services for children with disabilities, such as infrastructure and teacher training, as well as the analysis of the quality of services provided and elements relating to the demand for education, such as community perceptions of inclusive education and associated costs.

BOX 1

Conceptual framework for disability-inclusive education

SUPPLY	QUALITY	DEMAND
Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial and in-service training - Pedagogical support - Classroom support 	Curriculum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relevance - Flexibility and adaptability - Exam accommodations 	Attitudes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers and administrators - Parents and communities - Peers and other students
Infrastructure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classrooms and playgrounds - Toilet and washing facilities - Transport to and from school 	Student assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Screening - Referrals - Continuous learning assessment 	Costs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct and hidden costs - Additional support costs - Opportunity costs
Learning material <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Braille audiobooks - Sign language resources - Easy-read versions 	Learning support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assistive products - Individual learning plans - Individual support 	Benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities for progression - Social inclusion and citizenship - Economic empowerment

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Laws and policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constitutional provisions - International conventions - Rules and regulations - National strategies 	Data and evidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Definition of disability - EMIS and other database - Household surveys - Research studies - Monitoring, evaluation and inspection 	Leadership and management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Management capacity at central, sub-national and school levels - Procedures and compliance - Cross-sectoral coordination - Partnerships, including with disabled persons organizations 	Finance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allocation to mainstream system - Allocation to targeted support - Resources from other sectors
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Source: Adapted from Education Sector Analysis Methodological Guidelines: Volume 3.³¹

Research questions

The research questions that guided the LiFE research were:

1. What is disability-inclusive education and what does it mean for children with disabilities?
2. Are children with disabilities accessing learning opportunities? How?
3. Is the current education system appropriate for the implementation of disability-inclusive education?
4. What needs to be done and what resources need to be allocated to enable the implementation of disability-inclusive education?

Methodological approach

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to explore these questions, including:

1. **Policy and landscape analysis (January–April 2024):** This included a desk review of policy documents and literature on Kyrgyzstan’s education system. A total of 12 policies were analysed, encompassing general education guidelines and those specific to disability and inclusive education (*see Annex A*).
2. **Secondary data analysis (April–November 2024):** This involved analysis of existing datasets, including the child functioning module in the 2022 census data and EMIS data from the 2023/24 academic year.
3. **In-depth mixed-method research (September–April 2025):** This included the administration of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) (*see Annex B*). All tools used were based on the questionnaires in the third volume of the ESA guidelines and were contextualized and validated with the MoES. The research instruments and fieldwork protocols were reviewed and approved by an independent institutional review board.

- a. Surveys:** Questionnaires were developed and administered through an online platform to teachers, head teachers and district officials. Participating schools were randomly selected, and the questionnaire was sent to teachers and head teachers at the pre-primary, primary and secondary education levels (for details on the sampling strategy, *see Annex B*). In addition, surveys were distributed to all 58 educational departments in the country. The final sample included 1,464 teachers, 343 head teachers and 438 district officials. Consent was obtained via the survey platform, requiring participants to approve their participation before proceeding with the survey.

- b. Qualitative research:** Qualitative data collection took place in Chui, Naryn and Osh by a data collection firm, following training by UNICEF Innocenti in September 2024. This phase involved semi-structured interviews with both in-school and out-of-school children with disabilities, as well as their parents/ caregivers and teachers. FGDs were also held with children without disabilities who attend school and their parents (for details on the sampling strategy, *see Annex B*). A total of 99 interviews and 15 FGDs were carried out across 13 schools, five preschools and 12 households. Accommodations, including sign language interpreters, were provided for all students with disabilities who required them. The sampled children were aged 10–16 years. All respondents provided verbal and written consent before participating, and parental consent was obtained for children’s participation along with the child’s assent.

Limitations

The survey disseminated by the MoES received a significant number of responses. However, the response rate from head teachers was low compared with that from teachers and district officials. While respondents represented various regions, areas and school types, the distribution was uneven. Most responses came from the Chui, Issyk-Kul and Jalal-Abad regions, whereas the Osh region, including Osh city, had the fewest respondents. Similarly, most participants were from rural areas and mainstream schools.

Interviews and FGDs were conducted in Russian/Kyrgyz and translated into English, which could have contributed to losing some of the language nuances. Accommodations were made during interviews with children with intellectual disabilities, including simplified questions and support from teachers and/or parents when needed. Support from parents and teachers was provided only when the child requested it, and was limited to emotional support or rephrasing questions when necessary. Interviewers briefed adults in advance on the importance of centring on the child's voice and kindly asked them to refrain from answering on the child's behalf. Nonetheless, their presence may still have influenced the interview process. Despite these efforts, additional accommodations were needed. Similarly, the research team was not always able to complete interviews with homeschooled children with disabilities. In these instances, caregivers were interviewed, and their perspectives were reflected in the research to the extent possible.



CHAPTER 3

Policy recommendations

The policy recommendations presented in this section were developed during a technical workshop held in Bishkek, with the participation of technical representatives from the MoES, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). Each recommendation includes a summary of the main findings that support its formulation, as well as specific actions and short-, medium- and long-term goals for its implementation. Best practices from three cases studies identified in the Chui region during data collection are also included across the four recommendations. Although these practices come from different types of educational provision – such as a special school, a special preschool and a mainstream school – the focus is on the practices themselves as implemented in the Kyrgyz context. The aim is to highlight how these approaches can be adapted and applied within mainstream schools to foster inclusive practices.



1. Strengthen the rights-based and social model of disability to overcome barriers to inclusive education and improve the participation of people with disabilities in education and society.

The medical model of disability continues to dominate Kyrgyzstan’s education system, influencing policy and practice at multiple levels. This is evident in the terminology and conceptual frameworks used in current legislation, the methods for collecting and categorizing data on children with disabilities, and the general public’s understanding of disability. At the school level, this model shapes how education is delivered to students with disabilities – often focusing on deficits rather than systemic barriers – and is further reflected in the lack of accessible infrastructure, adapted learning environments and inclusive learning opportunities.

Which findings support this policy recommendation?

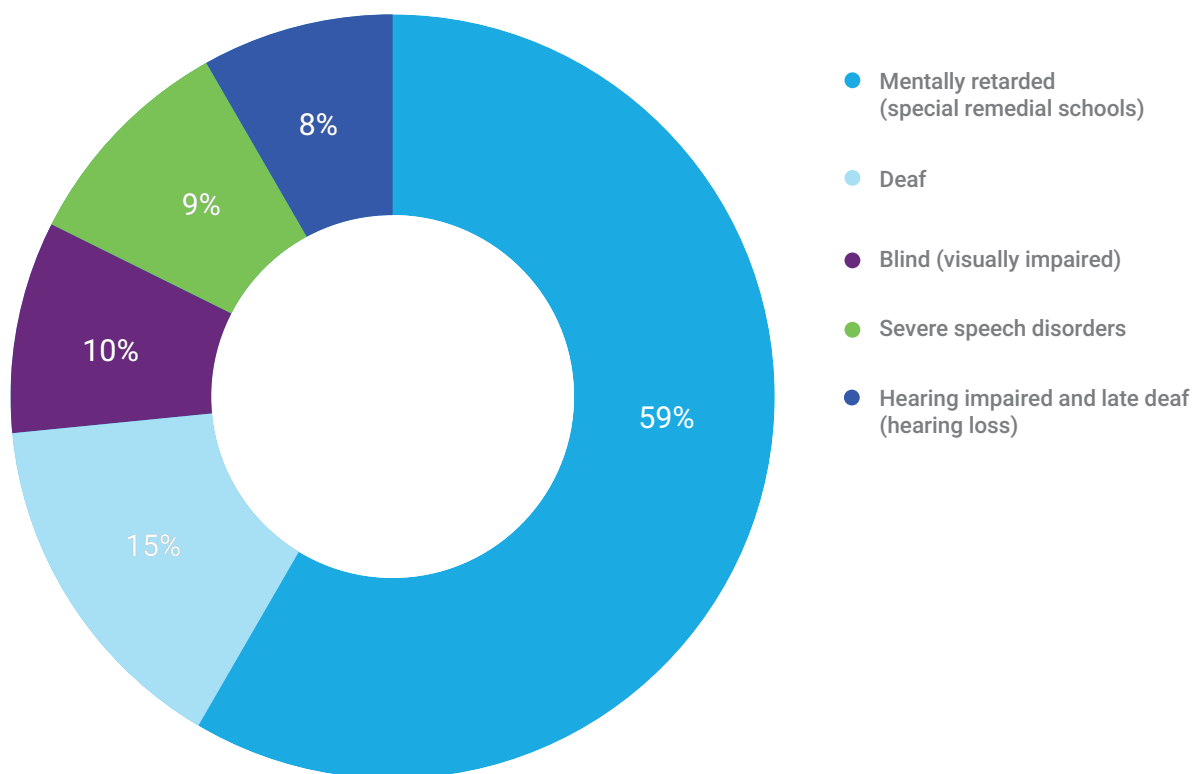
While nine out of 12 policy documents reference inclusive education, eight also include provisions for segregation through special schools. For example, the 2023 Law on Education³² states that “students with disabilities have the right to receive education in the form of special education, inclusive education, or home education”, illustrating the coexistence of inclusive and segregated models within the legal framework. Furthermore, disability is often framed through a medical or rehabilitative lens, focusing on individual deficits rather than considering the interaction between personal and environmental factors. The medical lens contrasts with the CRPD and the principles of the social model of disability.

Perceptions gathered through interviews and surveys further confirm the dominance of the medical model. Most participants – including teachers, parents and students without disabilities – defined disability primarily as a biological or physical condition. Children without disabilities tended to associate disability with visible impairments, such as mobility or sensory limitations. Teachers and parents generally acknowledged visible and invisible disabilities, but their understanding often remained rooted in individual deficits. Notably, a few parents

of children with disabilities expressed a more nuanced view aligned with the social model, emphasizing the role of environmental barriers and the need for support. Teachers also described the importance of adapting teaching methods and providing individualized support, suggesting a partial shift towards inclusive thinking.

EMIS data from the 2023/24 academic year further illustrate the persistence of segregated practices and the influence of the medical model. Out of 1,490,830 students enrolled in primary and secondary education, only 6,575 (0.4 per cent) were officially identified as having a disability. Of these, 54 per cent (3,522 students) attended special educational institutions, while 46 per cent (3,053 students) were enrolled in mainstream schools (see *Figure 1*). This distribution highlights the continued reliance on special schools and suggests underrepresentation of children with disabilities in the education system overall. Notably, it is worth noting that there were further differences in special institutions, where 59 per cent of students were boys, compared with 41 per cent of students who were girls, pointing to possible gender-based differences in identification, referral or access to education. Furthermore, the EMIS classification system itself also reflects the medical model, as it categorizes students based on types of impairment (see terminology used in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*) rather than focusing on functional difficulties or environmental barriers. Moreover, the disability-related data collected by EMIS are limited. They record only the type of disability – again, aligned with the medical model – and do not include information on functional assessments, the barriers children face, the support they require or the extent of teacher training on inclusive education.

Figure 1: Students in special institutions according to disability type, based on the country's EMIS classifications



Note: The terminology used in Figure 1 aligns with that of the EMIS data and does not reflect or align with either UNICEF's approach to categorizing disability and its views, or the authors' perspectives.

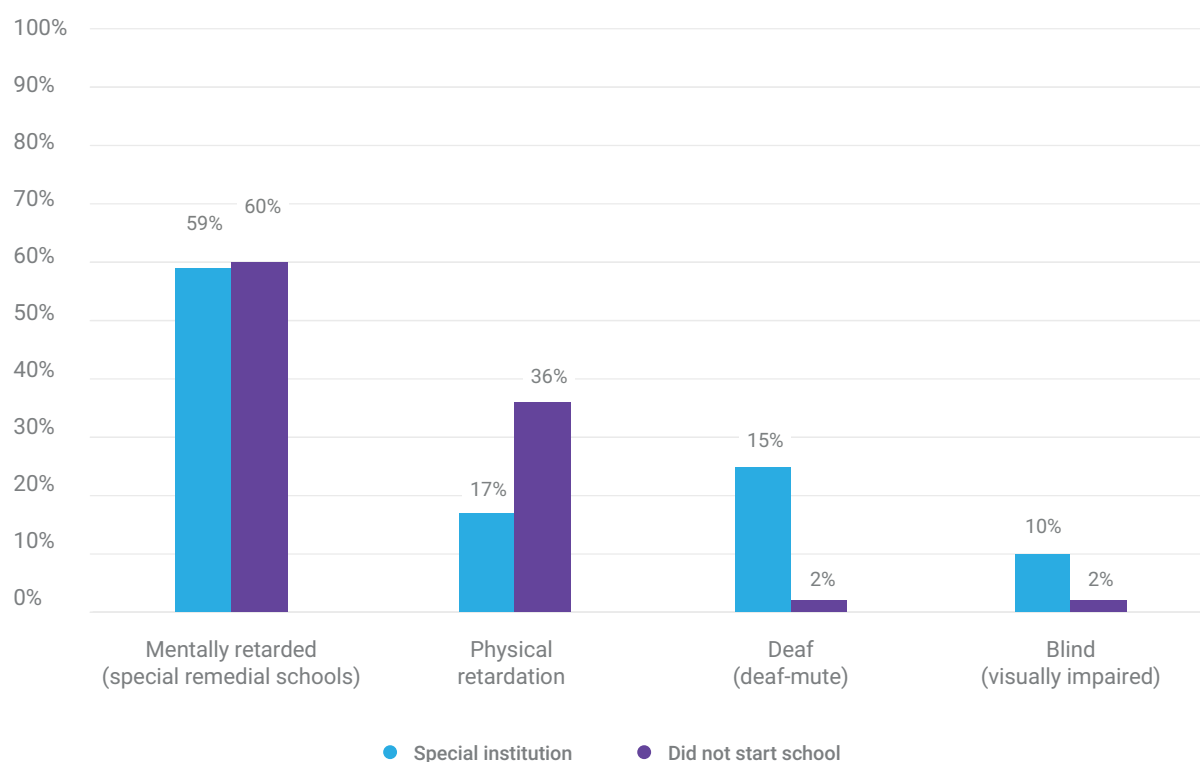
Source: EMIS data 2023/24.

The data also show that children with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately placed in special schools, while children with physical disabilities face the highest risk of exclusion: 36 per cent are not enrolled in any school, compared with 17 per cent who attend special schools (see Figure 2). Although both groups encounter barriers to mainstream education, the underlying reasons differ.

Children with intellectual disabilities often face greater stigma. Interviews and surveys indicated that participants generally hold more positive attitudes and expectations towards students with physical disabilities in mainstream settings than towards those with intellectual disabilities. Parents of children with intellectual disabilities expressed a preference for special or boarding schools, believing these

environments offer more suitable learning conditions. Some teachers also noted that while students with physical disabilities may only require physical accommodations, those with intellectual disabilities often need content adaptations, which can pose additional challenges for teachers and students in mainstream classrooms.

Figure 2: Students in special institutions vs. non-enrolled children according to disability type, based on the country’s EMIS categorizations



Note: The terminology used in Figure 2 aligns with that of the EMIS data and does not reflect or align with either UNICEF’s approach to categorizing disability and its views, or the authors’ perspectives.

Source: EMIS data 2023/24.

On the other hand, the high percentage of children with physical disabilities who are out of school highlights the significant impact of physical barriers to accessing quality education (see *Box 2* for more information about out-of-school children with disabilities). Out-of-school children with disabilities in rural areas, as well as their parents, reported greater difficulties in going to school, primarily due to the long distances to the nearest schools and the lack of accessible and affordable transportation. Insights from surveys and interviews

revealed that physical infrastructure remains a major obstacle to inclusion. While newer school buildings often have ramps, lifts and adapted toilets, older or repurposed facilities frequently lack basic accessibility features. Teachers, parents and students themselves reported mobility issues with narrow hallways, staircases and long distances to toilets or playgrounds. Although some students with disabilities participate in physical education and reported adequate space for movement, others face challenges with stair navigation, limited playtime and inaccessible toilet facilities.

QUOTE

The cafeteria was on the 1st floor; my class was on the 3rd floor! Other classes were on other floors; you had to go down and up!



Out-of-school child with disabilities, Naryn



Out-of-school children with disabilities

Children with disabilities who are out of school in Kyrgyzstan face significant barriers to accessing education. The main reasons why many remain out of school include the limited availability of specialists to support their specific needs, a shortage of qualified teachers, lack of accessible and affordable transportation, and inadequate school infrastructure. Many schools are not fully accessible, making it difficult for children to attend independently without relying on their parents for support to attend or move around within the school.

“His classroom is on the second floor and there are no conditions. There are no conditions whatsoever for taking him. We can’t take him, no one gives a guarantee, so we can’t include him. Because when we asked, there are 30 or 32 classmates in the class and ‘we can’t take him down to the first floor’, they said. There are few buildings and classrooms and only those up to the fourth grade study on the first floor, and the rest study on the second floor. The school has two shifts because there are a lot of children, they said that they can’t take him down and that’s why he is at home.”



Parent of out-of-school child with disabilities, Naryn

Children with disabilities who are out of school reported spending most of their time on mobile phones, doing household chores or engaging in leisure activities. Few are involved in educational activities. When such activities occur, they typically involve basic reading or life skills, usually facilitated by family members. In many cases, these family members serve as the primary caregivers, not only offering daily care but also providing informal therapeutic support, such as massages or basic therapy, due to the lack of affordable specialists. Some parents – most often mothers – shared that they had to leave their jobs to provide the necessary care for their children.

“Since she was born premature, I gave up everything, sold everything and devoted all my time to her. Now I also help my husband, since he also has a private job, when I have the opportunity, I help. But otherwise, I am at home.”

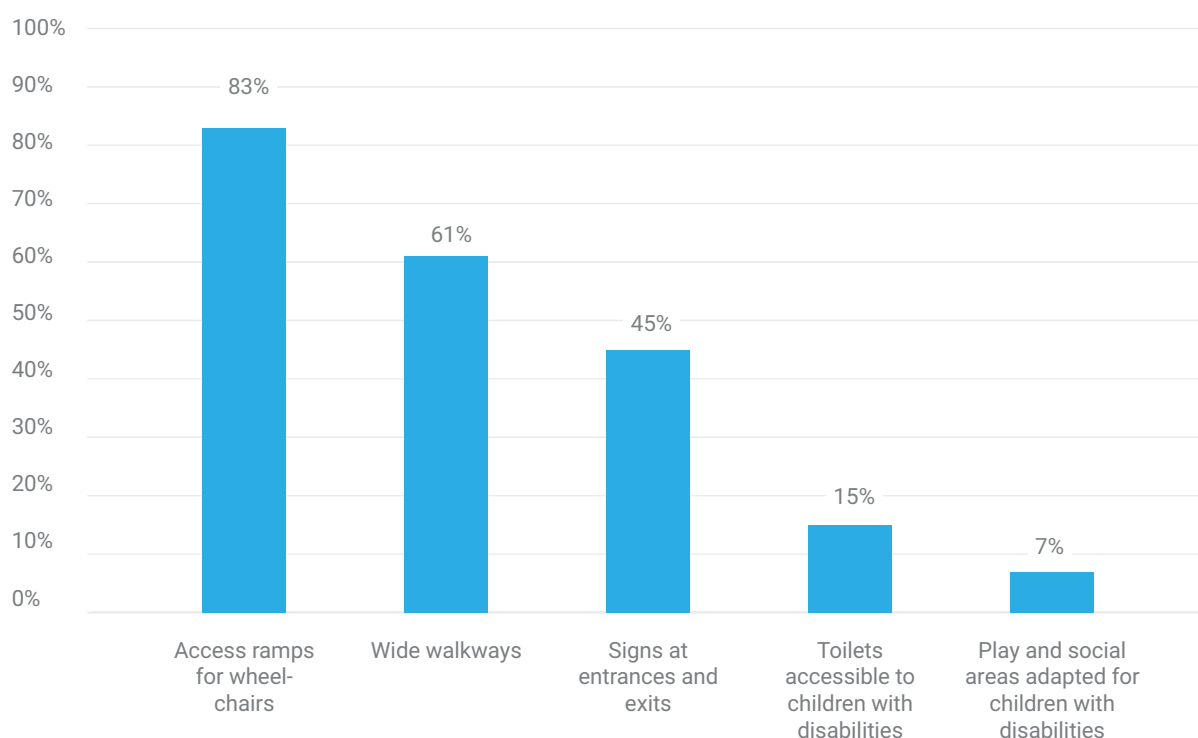


Parent of out-of-school child with disabilities, Chui

Parents of out-of-school children with disabilities expressed that having organized transportation to and from school would greatly help ensure their children’s safety and regular attendance. This is particularly important for families who cannot afford private transport. Additionally, some parents mentioned that their children would benefit from having someone accompany them to school daily to ensure they arrive safely.

Surveyed head teachers confirmed accessibility issues by reporting that while ramps and wide hallways are relatively common, other essential features – such as accessible toilets and play areas – are still largely absent from school premises (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 3: School accessibility features



n=343 head teachers

Source: Head teachers' survey.

What path should be followed to implement this recommendation?

Action 1: Improve understanding of disability and strengthen data collection aligned with the social model of disability

Short term

Develop and disseminate a national operational definition of disability aligned with the CRPD and the social model – focusing on a child's functioning, context and barriers to learning – to guide all education data, including in the country's EMIS. This will require raising awareness among school and education staff to ensure



consistent understanding and application of this definition. At the same time, begin integrating key disability-inclusive indicators into EMIS, including enrolment rates and availability of resources to support children with disabilities.

Medium term

Complete the integration of disability-inclusive indicators into EMIS, including indicators that assess the support and learning outcomes of all students, including those with disabilities. To ensure accurate data collection, provide targeted training for all staff involved in data entry and management, and quality assurance mechanisms to verify the accuracy and consistency of data inputs.

Long term

Establish robust feedback loops to ensure that EMIS data inform decision making at all levels of the education system. Establish clear and consistent guidelines and mechanisms that allow for regular review and use of data to guide decisions in policy, planning and school-level practices.

Action 2: Design and implement accessibility guidelines for school infrastructure

Short term

Implement practical, low-cost measures that can quickly enhance physical accessibility in schools for students with disabilities.

These actions include assigning classrooms for students with physical disabilities to the ground floor and prioritizing the most spacious and accessible rooms. Schools should also reduce the need for students with disabilities to move between classrooms by organizing schedules so that most or all classes take place in the same room. Additionally, ensure that essential facilities such as toilets, libraries and cafeterias are easily accessible.

Medium term

Develop comprehensive accessibility guidelines and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that existing legal mandates are effectively implemented.

Although current legislation – such as the Law on the Rights and Guarantees of Persons with Disabilities³³ and the amended Law on Education³⁴ – requires accessible infrastructure, it lacks specific technical standards and enforcement tools. To address this, new guidelines should be created, based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, ensuring that school environments are usable by all students, regardless of ability. Effective implementation should be accompanied by a dedicated budget and the establishment of enforcement protocols, including monitoring systems and accountability measures. Before nationwide implementation, these guidelines should be piloted in a representative sample of schools to evaluate their feasibility, cost and impact.

Long term

Refine the accessibility guidelines and enforcement mechanisms based on the results of the pilot phase and then proceed to implement them across schools nationally.

This includes integrating the standards into national education infrastructure policies

and school authorization criteria, ensuring that accessibility becomes a permanent and non-negotiable feature of the education system. Invest in capacity building by training school administrators, architects, infrastructure regulators, construction teams and accreditation agencies on inclusive design principles. This should be accompanied by the establishment of a national monitoring and evaluation system to track progress, ensure compliance and support continuous improvement.

Action 3: Promote inclusive education in mainstream schools

Short term

Assess the current educational system to identify existing resources that can be leveraged to strengthen the capacity of mainstream schools in delivering inclusive education.

This includes a comprehensive reassessment of the PMPC role, special schools and all residential care facilities, including PNIs. Drawing from international examples, particularly countries with similar contexts like Kazakhstan, a key step towards inclusion involves transforming segregated and specialized settings into resource centres that support inclusive practices.³⁵ This transformation should be guided by a national plan that clearly defines the new roles of these institutions. The plan should outline how special schools and residential facilities will function as support centres and how the PMPC will evolve to assist these centres in delivering inclusive education.

The national plan must also include an actionable roadmap for the provision of additional support services to ensure a smooth and successful transition of students with disabilities into mainstream schools. These support services should include:

- assistive technologies and devices
- a range of specialists and support personnel (e.g., personal assistants, psychologists, physiotherapists, speech therapists and medical professionals)
- transportation services for students with disabilities

The plan must ensure equitable access across urban and rural areas and include a realistic, phased timeline. These new resource centres should: provide support to teachers in adapting curricula, teaching methods and materials; offer specialist guidance for inclusive instruction; assist in the development and implementation of individualized education plans; deliver teacher training; and collaborate closely with families. As detailed in Box 3, collaboration among teachers, specialists and parents is key to promoting inclusive education, and support centres could play a role to further promote these actions within mainstream schools. Additionally, the PMPC should shift from determining eligibility for segregated education to conducting functional assessments, using tools like the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, to help teachers plan their lessons and meet the diverse learning needs of all students effectively, including those with disabilities.

Medium term

Operationalize the transition plan by beginning the transformation of selected institutions into inclusive education support centres.

This should begin with pilot centres, which must be integrated into mainstream schools that offer a supportive and inclusive environment. To ensure the success of these centres, their implementation must be accompanied by comprehensive teacher training initiatives – as outlined in Policy recommendation 3, Action 1 – to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge for inclusive teaching. In addition to deploying qualified teachers, efforts should be made to recruit more teachers with disabilities, recognizing their lived experience and expertise. Support must also be provided to ensure that teachers with disabilities are fully enabled to teach effectively.

The additional support services plan should also be piloted within the initial inclusive education support centres. It is essential simultaneously to assess the budget required to scale up these services and initiate intersectoral collaboration, particularly with social services, the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Health and other relevant departments within the education sector. The roll-out of these support centres and services must follow a phased and strategic approach,

prioritizing areas with the most urgent needs while ensuring balanced regional coverage and equity. To guide and monitor this process, a robust quality assurance framework should be established to track implementation progress, evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot centres and ensure that the transformation is aligned with its intended objectives. This phase is critical in laying the foundation for a scalable and sustainable model of inclusive education across the country.

Long term

Expand the network of inclusive education support centres nationwide, ensuring that all regions, including rural and underserved areas, have access to specialized guidance and resources, including the additional support services. This expansion should be supported by continuous professional development for teachers and specialists, sustained monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and strong policy and financial commitments. By embedding inclusive education into the national educational infrastructure – as recommended in Policy recommendation 1, Action 2 – the system will be better positioned to address the diverse needs of all learners and uphold the principles of equity and inclusion across the country.



Best practice 1 – Cooperation among parents and professionals

Cooperation is key to achieving disability-inclusive education. One special preschool and a special boarding school in the Chui region stand out for cooperating with different key stakeholders.

At a special preschool in Bishkek, teachers emphasize how important it is to keep in frequent communication with families. To do so, the teachers regularly share students' progress and record videos explaining how to do homework and how to help students in their studies. These videos are sent to parents so they know what support they can provide to their children. Additionally, parents are asked to record short videos of their activities with the children at home, allowing teachers to provide more tailored feedback.

At a special boarding school in Chui, teachers highlight the importance of working alongside other teachers and professionals to have a complete understanding of every child's needs and developmental progress. Subject teachers, specialists such as the school psychologist, residential care staff and practical skills teachers provide each other with a brief update on the students every day. Teachers also update and keep in contact with parents via messaging applications. The head teacher is also committed to the progress of all the students and fosters a positive environment towards disability and cooperation among professionals.



2. Update and adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of children with various types of disabilities, using UDL principles as a guiding framework.

Kyrgyzstan's education system currently operates under a single, standardized curriculum for all students. The absence of a flexible and competency-based curriculum, along with regulations that would allow for such flexibility, and lack of inclusive assessment practices create challenges for an inclusive teaching process for educators and for the learning experience of children with disabilities.

Which findings support this policy recommendation?

Interviews with teachers, parents of children with disabilities and the children themselves consistently highlighted the lack of tailored educational approaches. Teachers emphasized the need to adapt the curriculum to better meet the needs of students with disabilities. They reported that the curriculum is not flexible enough and following it without any adaptations often causes students to fall behind, as they struggle to keep pace with their peers. Furthermore, students with and without disabilities have diverse educational needs and learning speeds. Addressing these differences requires not only a tailored curriculum but also a flexible and inclusive learning environment that adapts to the individual needs of each student.

There is also a lack of flexible assessment systems designed for students with disabilities. Teachers expressed uncertainty about how to evaluate students with disabilities fairly and effectively. They often feel compelled to follow standardized assessment procedures, making only minimal accommodations, such as extended time for tasks, to support these children. This approach aims to ensure equality among students but does not necessarily address equity. As a result, students with disabilities are often assessed inaccurately, which can hinder teachers' ability to understand their learning progress and further inhibit children's academic progress and motivation.

Moreover, in most cases students with disabilities end up using the same learning materials as their peers, despite teachers advocating for more engaging and accessible resources. Assistive tools – such as adaptive desks, Braille machines and hearing aids – are either scarce or entirely unavailable. The availability of resources varies widely between schools; while some are equipped with digital tools like projectors and laptops (especially private institutions in urban areas), others lack supplies such as textbooks. Teachers often create or purchase learning materials themselves and use personal devices such as laptops or smartphones to supplement lessons with visual or audio content. In some cases, parents also provide financial support to help in the provision of learning materials.

QUOTE

I'll tell you about my student. The child has very poor perception. We try to conduct lessons with visual materials, first of all, we ask about the child's mood. We brought books, illustrated fairy tales. ... The child cannot speak, but when she sees pictures, she is very happy and asks what it is. We print out more visual materials, we do not limit ourselves to books. We are talking about digitalization. We try to have them listen to audio recordings, cartoons. Cartoons also have educational aspects. Mainly audio recordings and photographs. Also drawing. Because the child loves drawing. We print out more such drawings, and they really need drawing. We print out visual materials.



Teacher, mainstream public school, Osh

Due to the absence of unified or agreed adapted guidelines for teaching students with disabilities, teachers rely on their own experience to determine what methods work best. The most frequently mentioned methodologies include motivation through praise, where teachers make positive comments to boost students' confidence and self-esteem, helping them feel they can learn and succeed. Teachers also use multiple ways to provide information, such as visual aids, hearing tools, manipulatives (objects or materials that can be touched or moved) and songs to support different learning needs. Simplifying tasks is another common approach, when teachers provide easier tasks to ensure that children with disabilities learn something in class. Repetition is also used, where teachers repeat content to reinforce learning and ensure students retain information. However, some teachers do not adapt tasks to the child's level, sometimes giving them activities unrelated to the lesson, like drawing or colouring. The range of inclusive teaching approaches is generally more limited in mainstream schools, as teachers lack training in inclusive education, and tend to be more advanced in special schools, where teachers are better prepared professionally.

This disparity underscores the value of transferring knowledge and practices from special schools to mainstream settings. Such a transfer should encompass not only teaching strategies but also assessment procedures. For example, Box 4 describes assessment practices implemented at a special preschool that focus on identifying and building on students' strengths and skills. Adopting such assessment approaches in mainstream schools would provide substantial learning support and could enhance learning outcomes for students with disabilities.

BOX 4

Best practice 2 – Assessment

At a special preschool in Bishkek that primarily enrolls children with speech disorders, teachers implement a structured and continuous assessment process to support each child's development. At the start of the academic year, they conduct a comprehensive initial assessment to evaluate each child's current knowledge, skills and developmental milestones. This helps identify what the child has already achieved and the areas where they need further support. Based on the results, teachers set the child individualized goals and milestones for the year and carry out assessments every two months to track how much progress has been made towards these goals. In addition, each child has a personal folder where teachers document their progress across all classroom activities. This ongoing, individualized assessment approach allows teachers to gain a deeper understanding of each child's unique development and provide the tailored support they need to thrive.

What path should be followed to implement this recommendation?

Action 1: Provide teachers with structured, practical guidance and training on how to create inclusive learning opportunities and accessible resources aligned with UDL principles, enabling them to effectively accommodate the curriculum and teaching to meet the diverse learning needs of children with disabilities in the classroom.

Short term

Develop a centralized national digital platform – coordinated by the MoES – to provide teachers with high-quality resources on disability-inclusive education. The platform should include:

- practical strategies for differentiated instruction and disability-specific accommodations;
- sample inclusive lesson plans and classroom management tips;
- tools to support collaboration with parents and caregivers; and
- a moderated online forum or community of practice to encourage peer learning and teacher-to-teacher exchange within a guided and quality-assured environment.

In parallel, disseminate user-friendly, quick-reference materials (e.g., infographics, short how-to videos and printable checklists) to help teachers begin applying inclusive practices immediately, even while broader training and resource systems are developed.

Medium term

Deliver structured professional development on inclusive pedagogy, aligned with national standards and based on UDL principles. Training should focus on:

- how to use available tools for adapting teaching and learning for diverse student needs;
- how to assess the learning needs of children with disabilities and provide additional support for learning from special school practices; and
- classroom-based assessment techniques that support ongoing observation, feedback and adaptation.

This training should be embedded within the existing professional development framework managed by the Institute for Advanced Training for Teachers – the national institution in Kyrgyzstan responsible for ongoing professional development.

Long term

Institutionalize inclusive education by fully integrating the national digital platform and inclusive pedagogy into the core of the education system. This includes expanding and maintaining the centralized digital platform as a dynamic, evolving hub for inclusive education resources, ensuring it remains up to date, user-friendly and accessible to all teachers, including those in remote and underserved areas.

Action 2: Promote inclusive curriculum development by progressively applying UDL principles within Kyrgyzstan's education system

Short term

Conduct a comprehensive review of the national curriculum, instructional materials and assessment standards to identify barriers to inclusion for students with disabilities. This review should be aligned with the ongoing Altyn Kazyk curriculum reforms led by the government, coupled with consultations with a technical working group comprising the MoES, curriculum developers, teacher training institutions, inclusive education specialists and representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs).

Medium term

Develop centrally approved curriculum guidelines to support teachers in adapting (modifying and accommodating) the national curriculum based on students' needs and ensure ongoing professional development grounded in UDL principles, to support schools and teachers in adapting instruction and assessment to better meet the needs of students with disabilities while remaining aligned with national education standards. This guidance should include:

- illustrative examples of differentiated lesson plans with clearly defined learning outcomes – including long-term and short-term goals – that demonstrate practical strategies for adapting instruction to diverse learner needs; and
- clear guidance on implementing reasonable accommodations in classroom and national assessments, ensuring fairness and accessibility for all students.

Long term

Institutionalize UDL as a cornerstone of education system modernization by embedding inclusive design principles into national education strategies. This includes:

- curriculum development processes, such as revision cycles, content standards and instructional material approval;
- teacher education and continuous professional development, ensuring that all educators are equipped with the skills and tools to support diverse learners; and
- monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive practices across all levels of the education system.

This reform should be supported by the development of nationally recognized UDL implementation standards and gradually rolled out through model schools and teacher training colleges as innovation hubs. Positioning UDL as a tool for enhancing quality, equity and relevance in twenty-first century education will help ensure sustained institutional commitment and policy coherence.

BOX 5

UDL framework

UDL is an educational approach that aims to make learning accessible and effective for all students by recognizing that learners have diverse needs, strengths and preferences. Instead of using a one-size-fits-all methodology, UDL encourages teachers to design flexible lessons by implementing three main principles:

- **Multiple means of engagement:** Stimulate interest and motivation for learning in different ways.
- **Multiple means of representation:** Present information in various formats to support understanding.
- **Multiple means of action and expression:** Offer diverse ways for students to demonstrate what they know.

Source: Adapted from Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0.³⁶



3. Development of a comprehensive inclusive education teacher training package for pre-service and in-service teachers

In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has taken important initial steps towards advancing disability-inclusive education, as reflected in the 2019 Government Resolution No. 360,³⁷ which calls for the integration of inclusive education modules into teacher training programmes and the enhancement of teacher qualifications in both general and special education settings. However, despite these policy commitments, structured training on disability-inclusive pedagogy remains limited, and many teachers lack access to practical tools and methodologies aligned with the key principles of disability-inclusive education.

Which findings support this policy recommendation?

Lack of training was the challenge most frequently cited by teachers of children with disabilities in public mainstream schools. Teachers reported that inclusive education courses are not available at universities, leaving them to rely on intuition and on-the-job experience. Most teachers interviewed agreed that more training is needed, particularly in: practical methodological strategies for teaching students with various disabilities, especially those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD); adapting learning activities to students' levels; and effective communication techniques.

QUOTE

If we talk about the blind and visually impaired [students], there are no special teachers, it is only because there are creative people, from among our teachers they adapt themselves, they themselves develop different methods of working with such children, more experienced ones help these teachers to adapt among such children.



Teacher, special boarding school, Chui

Teachers in mainstream schools reported several challenges in teaching children with and without disabilities in the same classroom. A commonly cited issue was the inability to give individual attention to children with disabilities, who often fall behind during classroom activities. In public mainstream schools – more so than in private ones – large class sizes and classroom management were identified as significant barriers to supporting learners with disabilities. As a result, these students are sometimes given unrelated tasks while the teacher concentrates on the rest of the class. Some teachers also recognize that children with disabilities may disrupt lessons due to their behaviour, and managing these behaviours is seen as time-consuming, ultimately affecting overall teaching effectiveness.

QUOTE

There are teachers who have practical experience for 5-6 years. But, I think they also need to be trained. This is a big problem. Because teachers themselves must be trained to effectively transfer knowledge to children. I think teachers need to be trained first. Know the strategies of inclusive education, what are the features. Inclusive education is currently weak. Basically, our theoretical part is more developed, we give recommendations and wishes. But I would like teachers to also study and master the practical part well.



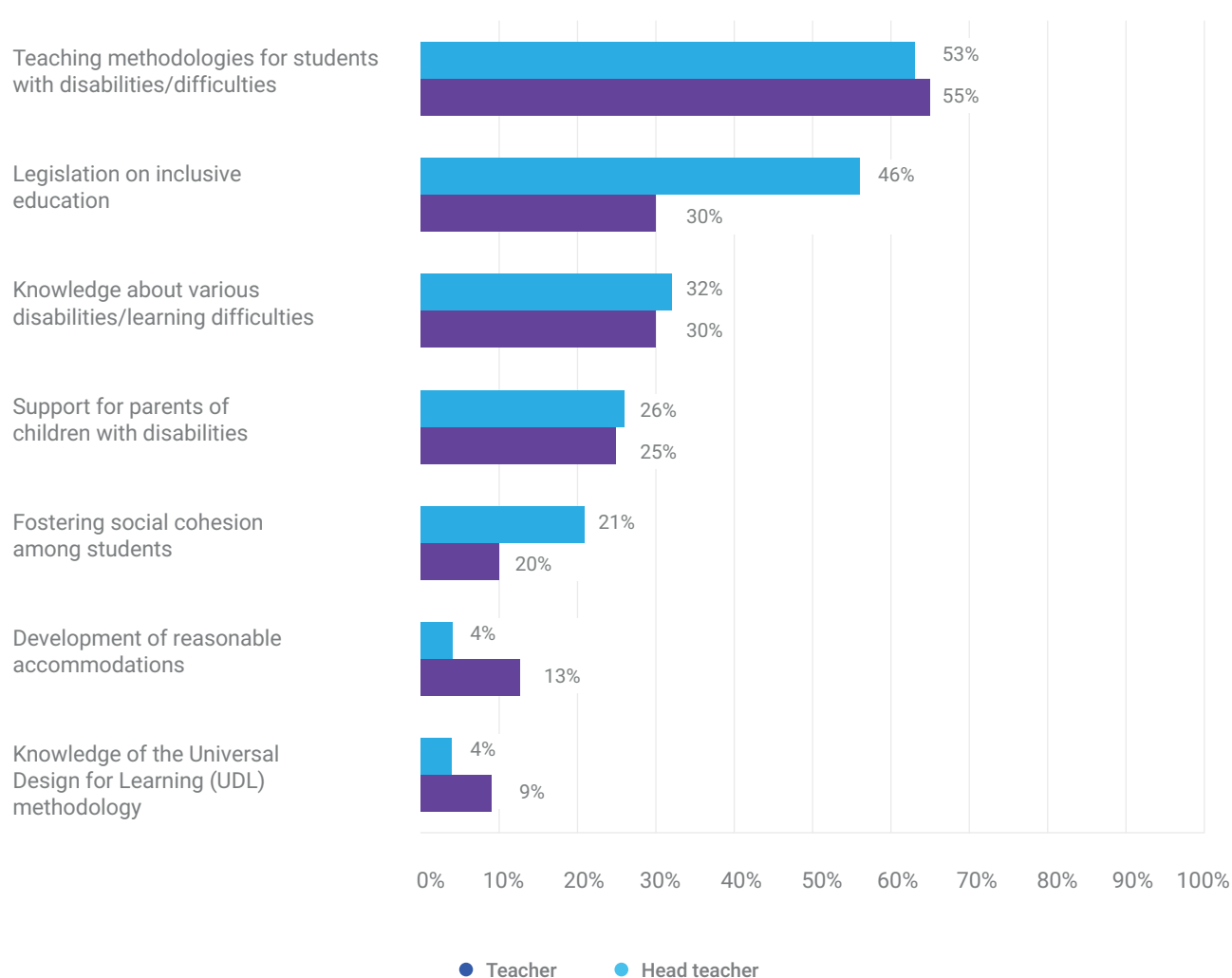
Teacher, Mainstream public school, Osh

To compensate for the absence of inclusive education content in their pre-service training, some teachers in mainstream schools have attended in-service programmes focused on strategies for teaching students with specific types of disability. However, these are mostly short-term interventions, often limited to one-off sessions or workshops lasting only a few days. In special preschools and schools, in-service training on disability-inclusive education is provided more frequently throughout the academic year than in mainstream schools. Teachers in these settings also have more opportunities to exchange knowledge and experiences with colleagues from other special schools. The training they receive focuses on highly specific and practical strategies for teaching children with disabilities. For example, it includes guidance on interacting with children with different types of disability, adapting classroom activities and materials, collaborating with sign language interpreters and providing recommendations to teachers in subsequent grades.

Survey results support the concerns raised by interviewed participants regarding inadequate teacher training in disability-inclusive education. Only 13.7 per cent of teachers surveyed and 24.8 per cent of head teachers reported having received comprehensive training in this area. Among those who had been trained, the majority received in-service training – 74.6 per cent of teachers and 75.3 per cent of head

teachers. Most of this training was provided by the MoES, accounting for 74.8 per cent of teachers and 69.1 per cent of head teachers who had undergone training. Surveys also shed light on the content of the training received by teachers and that little of this covers UDL and reasonable accommodations. However, legislation on inclusive education and teaching methodologies for students with disabilities is covered in most courses completed by trained teachers (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Content coverage in teacher training on disability-inclusive education



n=1,464 teachers and 343 head teachers

Source: Survey of teachers' and headteachers'

What path should be followed to implement this recommendation?

Action 1: Strengthen pre-service and in-service teacher training in disability-inclusive education

Short term

For pre-service training, begin by mapping existing gaps and opportunities in teacher education programmes related to inclusive education. Engage key stakeholders – including the MoES, higher education institutions and the Institute for Advanced Training for Teachers – to assess the availability and quality of disability-inclusive content. The objective is to develop a clear roadmap that identifies missing elements, highlights best practices and pinpoints courses and training opportunities that can be scaled or replicated across all relevant study programmes.

A key area of focus should be the current bachelor's and master's degree programmes in Kyrgyzstan. This requires a thorough assessment of existing curricula to evaluate how well they integrate inclusive education principles. In particular, the curriculum of the Defectology bachelor's degree should be reviewed to identify opportunities for better alignment with inclusive education approaches. Additionally, it is important to assess whether there is a need to create new master's programmes or adapt existing ones to offer specialized, in-depth training on disability-inclusive education for teachers.

For in-service training, organize regular, structured collaboration sessions between teachers from special and mainstream schools to foster peer learning and mutual support. These sessions could include workshops, co-teaching demonstrations, classroom observations and joint lesson planning. The aim is to enable mainstream teachers to benefit from the specialized expertise of special education teachers while promoting a shared understanding of inclusive practices.

Medium term

For both pre-service and in-service training, **develop and roll out mandatory courses and/or programmes on disability-inclusive education in collaboration with the Institute for Advanced Training for Teachers.** These courses should cover key topics such as: the principles and benefits of inclusive education; inclusive pedagogies such as the application of UDL principles; implementation of competency-based curricula; and the implementation of differentiated instruction to meet the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. The content must be practical, contextually relevant and aligned with best international practices, offering opportunities for hands-on application and peer exchange.^{38,39}

To ensure equitable access for teachers in remote or underserved areas, the training system should incorporate flexible delivery methods, including mobile training teams, distance learning modules and blended learning approaches, supported by local facilitators and digital platforms. These efforts will ensure that both future and current teachers are equipped to embrace diversity and promote inclusive education in mainstream settings.

Long term

Establish a sustainable system for pre-service and in-service teacher professional development on inclusive education, led by the Institute for Advanced Training for Teachers. This could include bachelor's and master's degree programmes, a structured series of certified modules, peer mentoring programmes and learning hubs at the regional level to ensure sustained improvement in inclusive teaching practices and alignment with national and international standards.

To encourage teacher participation and long-term engagement in in-service training, link the completion of professional development activities to career incentives, such as certification renewal, promotion opportunities or salary progression, in coordination with national teacher qualifications and career frameworks.

To support continuous improvement, integrate a monitoring and evaluation framework with clearly defined indicators, feedback loops and accountability mechanisms. These should track teacher participation, changes in classroom practices and perceived effectiveness of training, and should inform periodic revisions of course content and delivery methods. Collaboration with the proposed resource centres (as outlined in Policy recommendation 1, Action 3) will be essential to ensure that training is continuously available for all teachers.

Action 2: Strengthen foundational courses on inclusion across various other university degrees

Short term

Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment and stakeholder engagement to identify existing gaps in inclusion content across various university faculties. Recognizing that inclusive education must extend beyond teacher training, it is essential to sensitize and equip professionals in related fields – such as physiotherapy, speech therapy, psychology, medicine, architecture, social work and public administration – with foundational knowledge on disability and inclusion. This assessment should explore how these disciplines currently address (or overlook) inclusive practices and identify opportunities for integration. Key stakeholders, including curriculum developers, accreditation bodies and faculty leadership, should be engaged early in the process. Equally important is the involvement of ODPs to ensure that course content is relevant, responsive to current needs and grounded in the authenticity of lived-experience perspectives.

Medium term

Develop foundational courses tailored to each discipline, ensuring they include both theoretical knowledge and practical, hands-on components related to disability, accessibility and inclusion. These courses should be piloted across faculties in universities from different regions to ensure they are contextually adapted and responsive to local

realities. Simultaneously, faculty members should receive training to effectively deliver the new content. Feedback from the pilot phase should be used to refine course materials and delivery methods.

Long term

Institutionalize and integrate these courses into the mandatory curricula of all relevant disciplines. This process should involve obtaining the necessary accreditation standards and embedding disability-inclusion courses as a core requirement in professional preparation. Ongoing evaluation should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of the courses, identify areas for improvement and determine whether additional disciplines should be included in future phases. This long-term commitment will help ensure that all graduates – regardless of their field – are equipped to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.



4. Raise public awareness and sensitization towards disability and inclusive education

Negative attitudes towards disability and inclusive education persist in Kyrgyzstan. Despite ongoing efforts to raise awareness and foster a more inclusive environment, these initiatives have not yet resulted in widespread change. To drive meaningful progress, more systematic reforms are needed, including national awareness campaigns designed and led by people with disabilities, as well as reviewing and updating the current legislative framework to ensure full support and active promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities and disability-inclusive education.

Which findings support this policy recommendation?

Across interviews and surveys, a complex picture emerged of how respondents perceive disability and inclusive education. The findings reveal a landscape of mixed attitudes, shaped by personal experiences, cultural norms and systemic challenges.

In many interviews, children without disabilities expressed positive views towards their peers with disabilities. They spoke about fairness

and inclusion, emphasizing that children with disabilities should not be treated differently or excluded. Parents of children without disabilities often echoed these sentiments. Many recognized the right of every child to education, regardless of ability. They saw inclusive education as a way for children with disabilities to learn through observation and interaction. However, not all views were optimistic. Some parents still held reservations, citing concerns about bullying, classroom disruption and whether inclusive settings were appropriate for children with intellectual disabilities.

On the other side, parents of children with disabilities shared a more cautious perspective. While they valued education, many feared how their children would be treated in mainstream schools. They spoke of discrimination, stigmatization and the emotional toll of navigating public spaces where their children were not always welcomed. These parents described facing attitudinal barriers not only from society but also from within the school system itself.

QUOTE

Disability still causes certain difficulties, for example, when we go out into society, people look at us differently. When I push her in a wheelchair, they look at us so differently, also in some cases the buses do not stop, now it is still good, the new buses stop, before 2 years ago we could not even get off the minibuses. Because they never stopped for us, and we could not get on them. This is precisely why I could not send her to school, because we could not ride public transport.



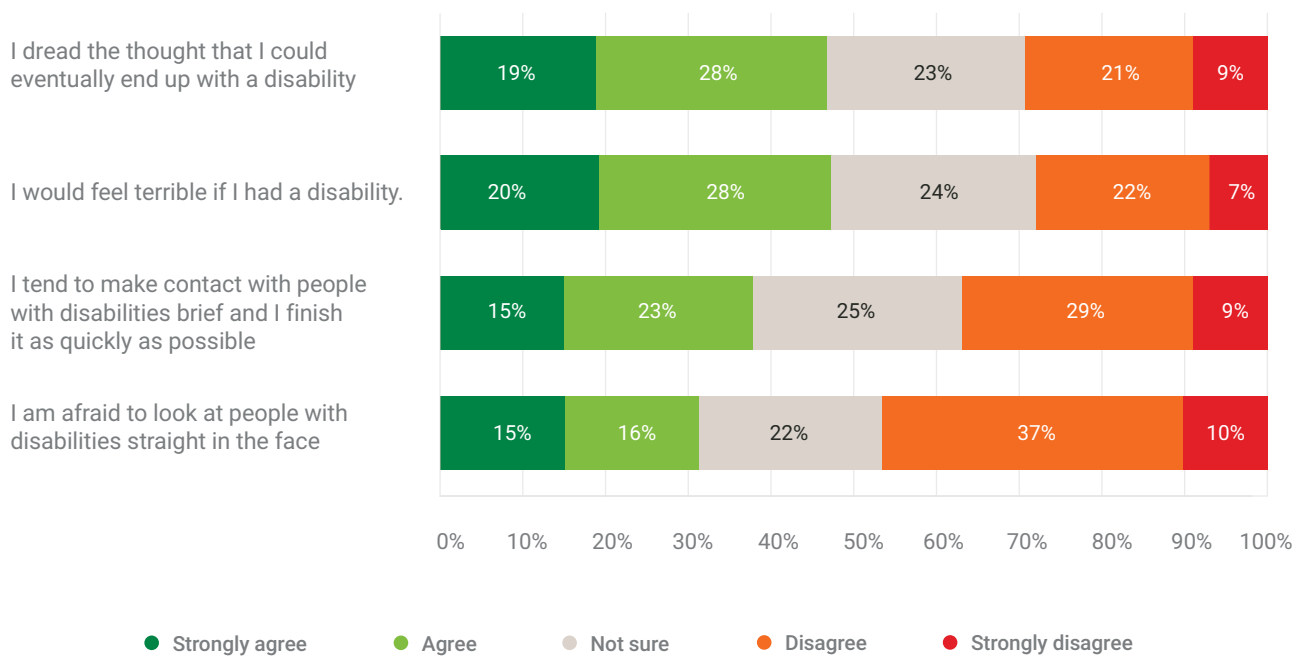
Parent of out-of-school child with disabilities, Chui

Teachers at special and mainstream schools also revealed a spectrum of attitudes. Some were strong advocates for inclusion, emphasizing the importance of treating all children equally and raising awareness about disability. They believed in the potential of every child and the value of inclusive classrooms. Yet others expressed uncertainty and discomfort. Some described children with disabilities as “lagging behind” or “unable to do anything”, reflecting deep-rooted stereotypes. A few even noted that some parents were in denial about

their child’s condition, which further complicated efforts to support inclusive education.

Survey data reinforced these findings. When asked about disability, 40–50 per cent of teachers reported feeling fearful or uneasy when interacting with people with disabilities or thinking about having a disability themselves. Only about 30 per cent reported not feeling uncomfortable. This discomfort often translated into hesitation or resistance when it came to implementing disability-inclusive practices in the classroom.

Figure 5: Perceptions around persons with disability



n=1,464 teachers

Source: Teachers’ survey

The experiences of children with disabilities were equally mixed. Some described positive school environments, where they made friends, received support and felt included. Others, however, spoke of loneliness, difficulty forming friendships, lack of support from teachers and occasional bullying.

QUOTE

To be honest, no, other teachers didn't explain, they just gave assignments, sat and looked at phones. And my classmates made fun of me because of that, I didn't like them.



Child with disabilities, mainstream school, Naryn

Teachers also hold mixed attitudes towards inclusive education. Many teachers perceive it as a way to integrate children with disabilities into society. They believe inclusive education fosters a cohesive environment where children without disabilities care for and protect those with disabilities. They also see benefits in children with disabilities learning from their peers how to socialize and communicate. However, teachers also have some concerns about inclusive education, such as the higher risk of bullying from children without disabilities and the belief that specialized teachers can respond better to children's needs.

QUOTE

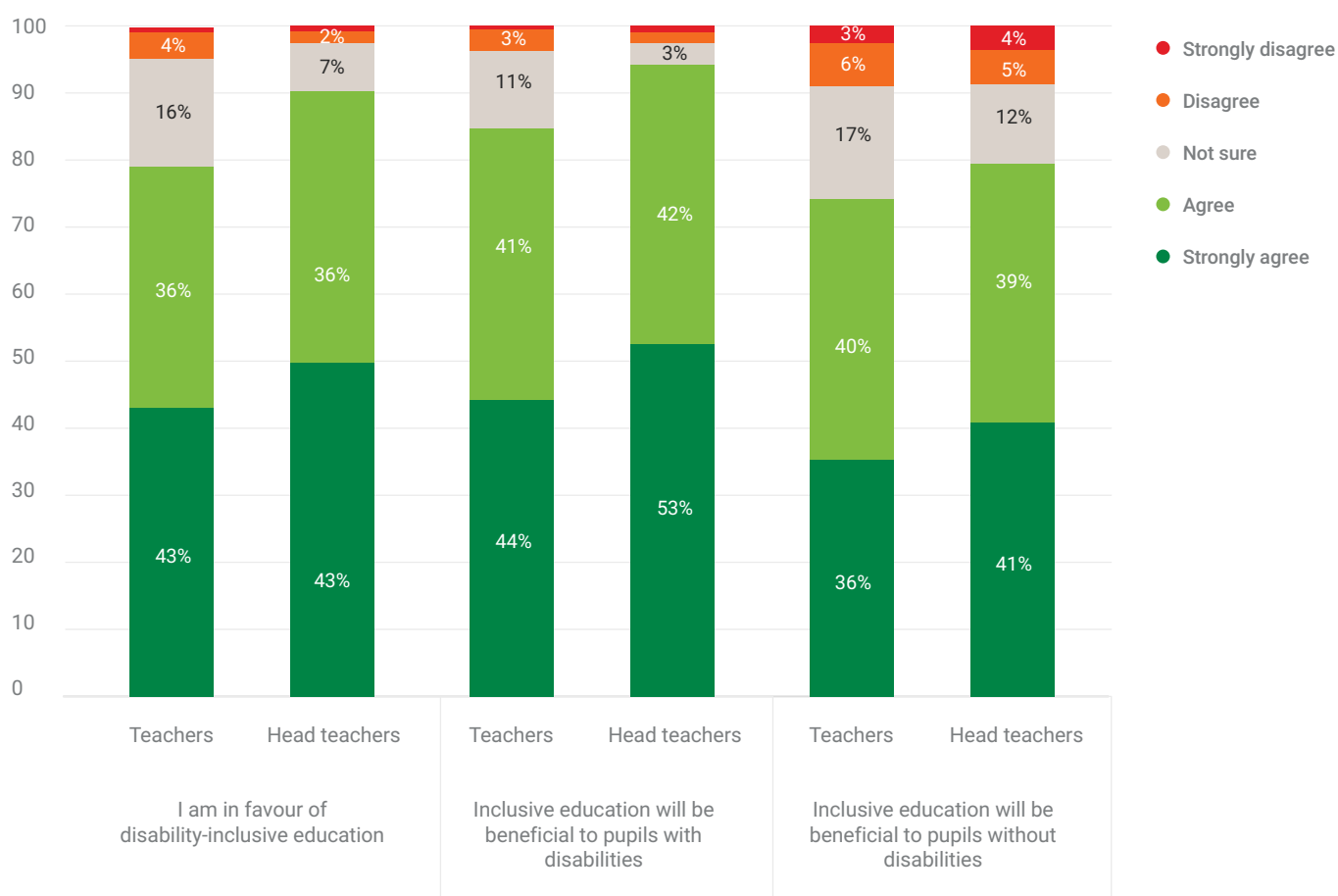
I don't have a class now, but from experience I can say that many teachers are dissatisfied, they say that such children interfere with the lesson, they make noise, some even throw them out of the class, saying that they don't want to teach such children.



Teacher, special boarding school, Naryn

While most surveyed teachers and head teachers expressed support for inclusive education, their understanding of its benefits can be strengthened. They tended to focus on how it helps children with disabilities, with less awareness of how it can also benefit children without disabilities by fostering empathy, cooperation and diversity. This limited perspective may hinder the full implementation of inclusive practices, as educators may not fully grasp the broader value of inclusion for all students.

Figure 6: Views on disability-inclusive education



n=1,464 teachers and 343 head teachers

Source: Survey of teachers' and headteachers'

Best practice 3 – Opportunities for progression

Future educational and employment opportunities play a crucial role in students' development. At a private mainstream school in Bishkek, professional guidance and support are provided to all students – both with and without disabilities. Recognizing the importance of education and employability, the school begins identifying students' skills and interests from early grades. Based on these insights, they offer specialized training to help students start preparing for careers aligned with their aspirations. In addition to skill development, the school provides comprehensive guidance on the university enrolment process. It maintains partnerships with universities in countries such as Russia, Korea and China, and across Europe. The school actively communicates with these institutions from the beginning of the admission process, supporting students through each step and ensuring that any necessary accommodations are arranged so that students with disabilities can study and thrive in inclusive higher education environments.

What path should be followed to implement this recommendation?

Action 1: Design and implement systematic actions to raise awareness on disability

Short term

Promote opportunities for inclusion in the community and society that prioritize direct interaction with persons with disabilities, as this is one of the most effective ways to shift perceptions.⁴⁰ It is also necessary to create inclusive spaces that enable these interactions, not only in schools but also through intersectoral collaboration across the education, health and protection sectors at central, provincial and district levels. This should also include organizing inclusive events such as joint play days, sports competitions and cultural activities that bring together students from mainstream and special education institutions. Actively engage OPDs and parent advocacy groups in the planning and implementation of these events to ensure they are meaningful, respectful and accessible. Use these early efforts to build momentum and visibility for broader inclusion.

Medium term

Institutionalize these awareness-raising efforts by developing national guidelines that define the objectives, structure and responsibilities of intersectoral partnerships. Formalize collaboration between sectors to ensure inclusive events are consistently planned, implemented and evaluated. Integrate positive and authentic portrayals of persons with disabilities into mass media, school curricula, textbooks and children’s literature, drawing on local initiatives like the UN Development Programme (UNDP) *Disability in the Media guide*,⁴¹ which offers context-specific recommendations for Kyrgyzstan. Provide training for educators, journalists and content creators on inclusive language and representation to avoid stereotypes, promote dignity and ensure that persons with disabilities are portrayed as active and valued members of society. Responsibilities should be clearly defined across sectors to ensure cohesive and effective cross-sectoral collaboration. Efforts must be aligned to avoid fragmented or inconsistent approaches.

Long term

Implement the developed guidelines and awareness strategies nationwide, embedding inclusive practices across all regions and institutions. Establish a robust monitoring and evaluation system to track progress, measure changes in public attitudes and assess the impact of campaigns. Use the data collected to refine strategies, share success stories and continuously improve practices.

Action 2: Strengthen legislation and enforcement for disability-inclusive education

Short term

Conduct a comprehensive review of existing laws related to disability, education, employment and health to identify gaps and inconsistencies with the CRPD. This includes updating terminology to reflect an inclusive approach – for example, replacing outdated or medicalized language with person-first, empowering

terms. The review should build on the work already initiated by UNICEF, UNDP and other UN partners⁴² and involve consultations with OPDs. A key output of this phase should be the drafting of enforcement guidelines to accompany existing laws, ensuring that legal provisions are actionable and measurable. These guidelines should clarify institutional responsibilities, timelines and accountability mechanisms for implementation.

Medium term

To operationalize the legislative shift, introduce a government decree or legal amendment that explicitly outlines inclusive education provisions. This should involve revisions not only to education-related laws but also to legislation in other key sectors. In education, this includes formalizing the action plan for additional services as proposed in Policy recommendation 1, Action 3. In the health sector, measures should focus on improving early identification of persons with disabilities through the implementation of standardized and well-established screening protocols. In the field of social protection, this should include allowances or targeted support for persons with disabilities, building on existing policy frameworks. In the area of employment, legal provisions should promote incentives for hiring persons with disabilities and ensure reasonable accommodations are available. This could build on existing work, such as the accessibility and inclusion guidelines for employment developed by UNDP.⁴³

Long term

Finalize and institutionalize the revised legal framework. This includes formally adopting the inclusive education and employment provisions into national law and integrating enforcement mechanisms into the mandates of relevant ministries (e.g., education, health, labour, social protection). Establish a national monitoring body or strengthen the existing Council for Persons with Disabilities to oversee implementation, track compliance and provide technical support.



CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

Over the past decades, Kyrgyzstan has made notable progress towards disability-inclusive education by ratifying the CRPD, initiating educational reforms that place inclusion at the centre and updating legislation to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right to quality education for children with disabilities. Despite these efforts, barriers to learning and participation remain.

The LiFE research project has contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the status of disability-inclusive education in Kyrgyzstan. Using an inclusive education framework aligned with Volume 3 of the ESA guidelines,⁴⁴ the study analysed the education system from the perspectives of supply, demand and quality. The findings revealed strengths and efforts being made to deliver disability-inclusive education, in addition to gaps that require further action. These insights informed four policy recommendations, developed in collaboration with national stakeholders, along with a detailed pathway outlining short-, medium- and long-term actions to strengthen inclusive education across the country.

To ensure successful implementation of this pathway, several key considerations must be addressed. First, disability-inclusive education should be recognized as an ongoing, dynamic process that requires strong collaboration and coordination across sectors. While the education sector plays a central role, sustainable progress also depends on the involvement of health, labour, social services, transport, infrastructure and other sectors. For systemic change to occur, cross-sectoral collaboration must be institutionalized, formalized, synchronized and sustained over time, with clearly defined shared responsibilities and goals.

Although multisectoral engagement is essential, the MoES must lead the way in shaping pedagogical and curricular decisions. This leadership should be backed by long-term commitment and sustained funding, as well as prioritization of inclusive education at all educational levels, across public and private institutions and in all regions. Special attention should be given to addressing disparities in underserved urban and remote areas.

As outlined in the report, disability-inclusive education relies on integrated and coordinated actions in several key areas. These include raising public awareness, ensuring adequate physical and human resources, improving accessibility, training teachers and adopting flexible curricula and teaching methodologies to meet the needs of all learners – both with and without disabilities. A smooth and effective transition to inclusive education must build on existing resources and good practices. For instance, the expertise of teachers in special schools, along with the experience of specialists who support children with disabilities, should be leveraged to guide and collaborate with teachers in mainstream schools.

The overarching objective should be to strengthen inclusive education within mainstream schools. In this context, efforts towards deinstitutionalization and inclusive education must be strategically aligned and mutually reinforcing, underpinned by common goals and coordinated implementation.

Actions across all sectors and system levels must be implemented simultaneously and in coordination. Fragmented or isolated efforts will not have the same impact. For example, training teachers in inclusive education is essential to ensuring a skilled workforce capable of fostering inclusive learning environments. However, this must go together with the provision of appropriate learning materials, assistive technologies and improvements to school infrastructure, so that all children can access and participate fully in education.

These reforms should be supported by a strong legal framework that establishes mechanisms for quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation. This is particularly critical for Policy recommendation 1, Action 3, which proposes the transformation of special schools into resource centres and outlines an action plan for providing the additional support required to make inclusive education in mainstream schools effective.

Finally, ongoing research and analysis – particularly using disaggregated data by geographic location and education level – will be essential for identifying specific needs and tailoring interventions. This deeper level of understanding will help refine the findings of the LiFE research and support more targeted, evidence-based decision-making going forward.

Annexes

Annex A: List of policies, legislation and reports reviewed

DOMAIN	YEAR	DOCUMENT
General	2021	National Development Programme of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2026
	2023	Kyrgyz Republic 2023–2027 Partnership Compact: Towards Equitable Access to Quality School Education and Learning Opportunities in the Kyrgyz Republic
	2019	Law of the Kyrgyz Republic dated 13 March 2019, No. 34 'On ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities'.
	2012	Education Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012–2020
MoES	2021	Education Development Programme in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2021–2040
	2023	Law on Education 2003 (as amended by the Law of 9 August 2023, No. 171)
	2019	Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic on the development of inclusive education in the Kyrgyz Republic
	2017	The Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On the Rights and Guarantees of Persons with Disabilities' 2008 (as amended, 2017)
Report	2021	Global Education Monitoring Report for Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia
	2021	Children and adolescents with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan. situational analysis. UNICEF
	2023	Understanding Learning Differences Across Schools 2030 Contexts: Country profiles: Kyrgyzstan
	2021	Situation Analysis on Children and Adolescents with Disabilities in Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF

Annex B: In-depth research sample

Survey sample

Surveys were administered by the MoES. The MoES widely shared the surveys with head teachers and teachers of pre-primary, primary and secondary schools across all regions of Kyrgyzstan. The surveys were disseminated through various official channels, including a WhatsApp group comprising MoES focal points, head teachers and teachers from all regions. The MoES sent regular reminders to participants to complete the survey over a period of approximately two months. Participation was voluntary, with emphasis placed on the importance of the research and its potential impact on improving disability-inclusive education in the country.

Tables B.1 to B.3 provide a summary of the sociodemographic data of the participants in the online surveys. These data include sociodemographic information and education-related characteristics of district officials, head teachers and teachers.

Table B.1: Sociodemographic data of district officials, head teachers and teachers

PARTICIPANT	N	GENDER			AREA	
		Female	Male	I prefer not to say	Rural	Urban
District officials	438	84%	15%	1%	—	—
Head teachers	343	93%	6%	1%	63%	37%
Teachers	1464	77%	22%	1%	64%	36%

Table B.2: Teacher education-related characteristics

SCHOOL TYPE		TEACHER TYPE		SCHOOL LEVEL		EXPERIENCE TEACHING	
Special boarding school	9%	Special school teacher	15%	Preschool	2%	0–2 years	10%
Mainstream school	86%	Teacher at mainstream school	83%	Primary	42%	3–5 years	12%
Special school	5%	Temporary teacher	2%	Lower secondary	8%	6–9 years	13%
				Upper secondary	56%	10–15 years	17%
						15+ years	48%

Table B.3: Head teacher education-related characteristics

SCHOOL LEVEL		HIGHEST ACADEMIC DEGREE		EXPERIENCE AS HEAD TEACHER	
Preschool	5%	Bachelor's degree	12%	0–2 years	39%
Primary	23%	High school diploma	5%	3–5 years	34%
Lower secondary	21%	Master's degree	73%	6–9 years	13%
Upper secondary	85%	Other	10%	10–15 years	8%
				15+ years	7%

Qualitative research sample

A total of 13 schools and five preschools participated in the qualitative data collection. These included special boarding schools, private and public mainstream schools, and special and general preschools located in both rural and urban areas of the Chui, Naryn and Osh regions. In each school, teachers, children with and without disabilities and their parents were interviewed. For children without disabilities and their parents, FGDs were conducted instead of individual interviews. Each FGD consisted of five to seven participants.

Additionally, 12 households were included in the sample, involving out-of-school and homeschooled children, primarily from the Naryn region. Initially, the aim was to include nine households in the sample, but due to difficulties interviewing children with severe disabilities, three more households were added to ensure that nine out-of-school or homeschooled children could be interviewed. In cases of severe disability, interviews were conducted with the parents on behalf of their children. Both the child and their primary caregiver were interviewed whenever possible.

Efforts were made to ensure balanced representation in terms of gender and type of disability among the children included in the study. The number of participants in each category was sufficient to gain a detailed understanding of their experiences and perspectives on disability-inclusive education. This also allowed for effective triangulation and helped achieve thematic saturation, as the average sample size recommended to reach saturation was obtained for all types of participant category. Table B.4 provides a detailed breakdown of the number and type of participants across different regions and school types.



Table B.3: Head teacher education-related characteristics

KEY INFORMANT	N° OF INSTITUTIONS	N° OF PARTICIPANTS PER INSTITUTION ON AVERAGE	TOTAL N° OF PARTICIPANTS
Children with disabilities in school	13	3	30
Parents of children with disabilities in school	13	3	30
Children with disabilities out of school	12	1	9
Parents of children with disabilities out of school	12	1	9
Children without disabilities in school	6	5	30
Parents of children without disabilities	9	5	45
Teachers	13	1	13
		TOTAL	166

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