



For an Equitable Sharing
of National Revenue



POLICY BRIEF

Incorporating Learners with Special Educational Needs into the Education System



The Financial and Fiscal Commission

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The vision of the Commission is to provide influential advice for equitable, efficient and sustainable intergovernmental fiscal relations between the national, provincial and local spheres of government. This relates to the equitable division of government revenue among the three spheres of government and to the related service delivery of public services to South Africans.

Through focused research, the Commission aims to provide proactive, expert and independent advice on promoting the intergovernmental fiscal relations system, using evidence-based policy analysis to ensure the realisation of constitutional values. The Commission reports directly both to Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures, who hold government institutions to account. Government must respond to the Commission's recommendations and the extent to which they will be implemented at the tabling of the annual national budget in February.

The Commission consists of women and men appointed by the President: the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson; three representatives of provinces; two representatives of organised local government; and two other persons. The Commission pledges its commitment to the betterment of South Africa and South African's in the execution of its duties.

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Policy Brief

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21 January 2021

Executive Summary

An inclusive education system ensures that all children with special needs have access to education in any type of school. South Africa's Constitution entrenches the right to education for all, including those with special educational needs. The 2001 Education White Paper 6 embraces inclusive education, but progress has been slow. Research by the Financial and Fiscal Commission (the Commission) identified four barriers that are impeding the roll-out of inclusive education for all: out-of-date and unreliable data on learners with special needs, an incomplete policy process, a lack of appropriate funding framework and insufficient teachers able to assess learners with special needs. These barriers urgently need to be addressed, as they affect some of South Africa's most vulnerable learners. The Commission recommends that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) finalise legislation on inclusive education, prioritise the assessment of how many learners have special needs, develop a uniform funding framework, adjust its reporting to include performance on inclusive education, and (together with the Department of Education and Training) prioritise the training and development of teachers.

Background

Inclusive education refers to when students with special educational needs are integrated across all types of schools (Figure 1) and not forced to attend only special needs schools. Central to an inclusive education system is ensuring that children with special needs have access to safe, quality education.

Figure 1: Different types of schools

Ordinary schools	Full-service schools	Special needs schools	Special care centres
Low level of support	Moderate level of support	High level of support	Learners with severe and profound intellectual disabilities

South Africa's Constitution entrenches the right to basic and further education, which includes access to quality education for learners living with disabilities. However, the provision of special needs education is inadequate. To understand the underlying reasons, the Financial and Fiscal Commission (the Commission) undertook research to assess the reasons for the slow progress in rolling out quality and truly inclusive education.

Research Findings

The Commission identified four key barriers that, if overcome, could assist in improving the roll-out of quality inclusive education.

1. **Lack of accurate data on learners with special needs.** Achieving inclusive education requires accurate and up-to-date data on learners with special educational needs and their needs. According to the data available, just under 600,000 children with disabilities are not in school, and only about 121,500 learners with disabilities are integrated across the schooling system. However, these figures are based on data from 2015 that is out-of-date. Without accurate, up-to-date data, it is unclear on what basis national and provincial education department are making decisions on this crucial area of education.
2. **Incomplete policy process.** Legislation not only allocates a legal mandate but also assigns accountability for inclusive education. However, almost two decades after the publication (in 2001) of the Education White Paper 6, which outlines government's aspirations for inclusive education, the policy process is still not concluded. The White Paper moves away from the historical focus on disabled learners and learners who needed high-level support in dedicated facilities, i.e. special schools, to an expanded perspective of special needs education that responds to a broader range of learning needs. Yet although the White Paper's vision is for inclusive education, its focus tends to be on "special needs education". This conflation of special needs education and inclusive education, coupled with an incomplete policy process, has maintained the "ordinary school" vs "special needs school" dichotomy established in the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996).

3. **Lack of an appropriate funding framework.** The lack of legislation has also stunted the development of an appropriate funding framework. Currently, funding tends to focus disproportionately on special needs education and schools, with fewer resources allocated to public ordinary schools for inclusive education. In addition, the lack of a uniform funding framework results in learners with special educational needs who are based in public ordinary schools being funded in line with the national Norms and Standards for School Funding, whereas there are no equivalent norms and standards for learners with special educational needs based in special needs schools. A uniform funding framework would ensure that learners with special educational needs are funded irrespective of the type of school they attend.
4. **Insufficient teachers able to assess learners with special needs.** According to South Africa's policy framework, the more learners with special needs, the more teachers a school should get. However, this is based on learners being classified as having special educational needs, which requires an assessment in terms of the Policy on Screening, Identification Assessment and Support (the SIAS policy). The problem is that many teachers are not trained to implement this policy, and so learners are not properly assessed, which results in the provisioning of posts not properly reflecting the needs of learners.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If South Africa is to make inclusive education a reality, the barriers to learning for all learners, especially those with special educational needs, must be addressed. Government needs to take urgent action to address these barriers because inclusive education concerns some of South Africa's most vulnerable learners.

The Commission recommends that:

- The Department of Basic Education (DBE) finalise legislation for rolling out inclusive education and take the lead in developing a detailed, time-bound and costed implementation plan that promotes awareness of inclusive education.
- The DBE, together with relevant stakeholders, assess the extent of learners with special educational needs, as a matter of priority. This will ensure more evidence-based policy-making and implementation. The assessment should be aligned to the 10 domains of support identified in the Education White Paper 6.
- The DBE spearhead the development of a holistic funding framework to ensure a uniform approach to funding learners with special educational needs, irrespective of the type of school they attend.
- The DBE take steps to adjust its reporting, to allow for disaggregation of funding and performance information related to the roll-out of inclusive education.
- The DBE and the Department of Higher Education and Training prioritise the development of teacher capacity at higher education level and as part of ongoing professional development to assess special educational needs.

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