

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: STRENGTHENING SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS AND SUPPORT FOR ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

by:

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Inclusive education stands as one of the most important foundations of equitable learning in the Philippines. Yet, despite years of advocacy, children with special needs—particularly those from low-income families—still struggle to access quality education. While the Department of Education (DepEd) promotes education for all, the realities faced by learners with disabilities in economically disadvantaged communities reveal deep inequalities that require urgent attention.

Every Filipino child has the right to learn, grow, and achieve their fullest potential. However, for many children with special needs, this right remains difficult to realize. Learners who have physical, intellectual, emotional, or developmental conditions often need specialized teaching strategies, adaptive materials, and continuous emotional support. In many public schools, these resources remain insufficient. Teachers face challenges in providing individualized attention due to large class sizes and limited training, while infrastructure gaps—such as the absence of ramps, visual aids, or assistive tools—further hinder accessibility.

Poverty magnifies these difficulties. Many families of children with special needs cannot afford therapy sessions, medical check-ups, or learning materials suited to their child's condition. Even transportation to school can be a struggle. For these families, daily survival often takes precedence over educational needs. This situation highlights the essential role schools must play not only as centers of learning but also as safe spaces of

care and support. Education should not end within the classroom walls – it should extend to compassion, advocacy, and collaboration with families and communities.

Schools must therefore be better equipped and prepared to handle the diverse needs of children with disabilities. Preparedness begins with the training of teachers and staff. Professional development programs should strengthen educators’ ability to manage behavioral challenges, design differentiated lessons, and use inclusive strategies that benefit all learners. A well-trained teacher who understands diversity can transform a classroom into an environment where every learner feels seen and valued.

Infrastructure also plays a crucial role in inclusion. Schools that provide barrier-free environments—such as ramps, widened walkways, clear signage, and accessible restrooms—allow learners with disabilities to move safely and confidently. These physical adjustments send a strong message that schools welcome every child, regardless of physical condition or learning ability. Equally important is the collaboration between teachers, parents, and local stakeholders. Open communication with families allows schools to tailor interventions to specific needs, while partnerships with local government units and non-government organizations can provide technical, medical, or financial assistance.

DepEd’s existing initiatives, such as the Special Education (SPED) Program, the Inclusive Education Policy Framework, and the Child Find System, are valuable foundations for inclusive practice. However, these programs must be implemented more effectively at the local level. Schools can strengthen inclusion by creating committees that focus on advocacy and policy enforcement, integrating inclusive education in their School Improvement Plans (SIP), and partnering with private institutions to acquire assistive technology and learning materials. These localized efforts ensure that inclusion becomes part of the school culture, not just a compliance measure.

Equally essential is the focus on the mental and emotional well-being of both students and teachers. Inclusion is not limited to physical access—it also means creating an environment where everyone feels accepted and respected. Promoting mental health awareness, social-emotional learning, and kindness in schools helps build empathy and reduces stigma against children with disabilities. When teachers and students alike are aware of the importance of compassion and acceptance, inclusion becomes a shared value.

Ultimately, education for children with special needs is not a privilege but a fundamental right guaranteed by law and moral responsibility. Schools must be equipped not only with learning materials and proper facilities but also with understanding hearts and inclusive mindsets. Through collective action—among teachers, administrators, parents, and the community—schools can ensure that no learner is left behind, especially those who are most vulnerable.

An inclusive school is one that reflects the true spirit of public service and social justice.

It acknowledges diversity not as a challenge but as a strength. When every learner is given the opportunity to participate, learn, and be respected, education fulfills its purpose as the great equalizer. As the Department of Education continues its commitment to inclusive learning, every teacher, every school head, and every member of the community becomes a key partner in ensuring that children with special needs—no matter their background—find a home in our public schools. In doing so, we move closer to a society that values equality, empathy, and the boundless potential of every Filipino child.

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