



Breaking Barriers to Inclusive Education

**What education for learners with disabilities
looks like throughout the European Union**

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental right for every person, with or without disabilities. The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** acknowledges that every person (under 18 years old) should have access to education, including persons with disabilities.

The **Salamanca Statement**¹ approaches the term 'Inclusive Education', aiming to support all children and their specific needs, while recognising the right of every child to attend regular schools. It states the importance of adapting the curriculum to meet everyone's needs, and highlights that all children should receive the same education, especially children with disabilities.

The **CRPD** (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), also recognises 'Inclusive Education' as an environment of respect for diversity. It should be a space for learners with disabilities to fully participate and have the opportunity to strengthen and enhance their skills and identity. The **CRPD**³ reinforces that persons with disabilities should access education the same way as their peers, without being discriminated against because of their disability. It also underlines that

¹ UNESCO (1994). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education.

different formats of communication are a part of inclusive education, such as sign language and braille.

A practical way of observing some of these principles of inclusive education is through **Universal Design for Learning**². It aims to remove barriers for all learners using an array of approaches, such as by presenting information in alternative formats.

Lastly, the **CRPD**³ states that both 'inclusive education' and 'independent living' allow persons with disabilities to be actively involved in their communities. In this regard, it is important to see (inclusive) education as a fundamental part of their lives.

In this paper, we will explore the policies in place to support inclusive education for persons with disabilities in different EU Member States. Our goal is to understand if the CRPD is taken into account in their educational systems. We will explore 5 countries that are working towards the inclusion of students with disabilities. To understand how well these policies are implemented, we have interviewed disability organisations in each country.

Overview of educational systems across the European Union³

Croatia

The **Croatian** educational system is designed to be flexible and is based on an individual assessment of each student's needs. Students with disabilities may follow the mainstream curriculum and, where necessary, receive individualised support. The system also allows for models in which students follow academic subjects in smaller classes while participating in educational and social activities with their mainstream peers. In addition,

² CAST. (2024). [The UDL Guidelines](#). Retrieved 7 May 2026.

³ Testimonies from EDF members and guests, based on the information available on [Dotcom](#).

there are special classes attended exclusively by students with learning difficulties.

The system continues to evolve and improve. The Education and Teacher Training Agency was established to provide support to educational professionals regarding the specific needs associated with different types of disabilities. Agency experts visit mainstream schools to assist teachers and other professionals in areas such as disability awareness and reasonable accommodation. However, these visits are conducted only upon request, which may be considered a limitation of the system.

In addition, the Croatian Union of Associations of Persons with Disabilities (SOIH) and several other organisations of persons with disabilities provide non-formal education programmes for teachers, parents, and students. These programmes focus on raising awareness and improving understanding of the specific needs of children with developmental difficulties who are included in educational settings. Students with disabilities also have access to adapted learning materials, including enlarged and bold-print texts, modified textbooks, reduced written content, adapted examination questions, and other forms of accommodation.

In 2010, Croatia introduced a pilot programme for teaching assistants, and in 2018 the first official regulation governing this service was adopted. In 2023, the service was incorporated into the country's Personal Assistance Act.

Marica Mirić from SOIH, when questioned on this as part of our research, emphasised that the strong legislative framework ensures access to teaching assistants for all students with disabilities, regardless of whether they attend mainstream or special classes. These professionals are employed directly by the schools.

Students with disabilities are assigned to specific educational programmes according to the type and degree of their disability, and schools are

required to consult parents throughout this process. However, challenges arise when the views of professionals and parents differ. Parents generally advocate more strongly for inclusive education, while professionals still tend to favour the placement of children with developmental difficulties in special classes.

With regard to the education of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, mainstream schools are required to provide resources such as sign language interpreters. Similarly, preschools that include children with developmental difficulties must ensure professional support and maintain smaller group sizes. Unfortunately, these measures are not always implemented effectively due to a shortage of qualified professionals.

Particular attention should also be given to the education of students with visual impairments. These students have access to various accommodations, including large-print materials, braille resources, audio materials, assistive technology, and support from assistants. The successful implementation of these measures depends heavily on the adequate training of teachers and educational professionals.

Despite significant progress, several areas still require further improvement. In terms of reasonable accommodation, some schools successfully respond to the needs of students with disabilities, while others are unable to provide the necessary conditions due to physical inaccessibility, rural locations, or insufficient knowledge and training. Furthermore, although the legislative framework is strong, the transition from preschool to primary education could be better organised. More effective communication and coordination between institutions are needed to ensure a smoother transition for children and their families.

When we spoke to her, Marica also pointed out that while the legislative framework is of high quality, it should be further aligned with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Finally, she highlighted the importance of expanding

the use of assistive technology and continuing to prioritise mainstream education over special schooling whenever possible.

Overall, Croatia appears to be on the right path, demonstrating a clear commitment to the continued implementation and improvement of its inclusive education policies and practices.

Estonia

Estonia stands out due to their strong legislation on the education and inclusion of students with disabilities. Mari Puuram and Maarika Maasikas-Tokke from Estonian Chamber of People with Disabilities (EPIKoda), shared some insights with us on the reality for Estonia's learners with disabilities. They also reflected on the country's view of 'inclusive education', and how it is still perceived as simply providing 'additional support'.

Our members stated that Estonia wants to make improvements by recognising that 'every child should be able to study in their local community'. However, implementing this has proven difficult. The 'Education Development Plan 2021-2035' appeared to be a positive sign, advocating for a flexible and inclusive educational environment. Nevertheless, our members identified some gaps, such as the fact that it can indirectly promote segregated settings.

Mari also recognised positive aspects, such as how 'inclusive education' is addressed in universities, and the foreseen accommodations in exams for students with disabilities. However, one issue is that teachers do not mediate the process for students to access these adaptations.

On the subject of reasonable accommodations, our members stated that there is an educational counselling network that gives advice on adaptations for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, translating this advice into actual results can be difficult.

Regarding Estonia's position on special schools, there have been improvements. Our members state that even though some of these schools are still functioning, the number of pupils with disabilities in regular schools has been increasing, from 64,9% (in 2020), to 76,8% (in 2024). However, it is not guaranteed that all mainstream schools have the knowledge and expertise to fully support learners with disabilities.

Some special schools that are still in place are the schools for Deaf and hard of hearing pupils, such as the *Tallinn Helen's School*, or the *Porkuni School*. Our members recognise that these schools provide an inclusive environment to a certain level by teaching Deaf and hard of hearing pupils in Estonian Sign Language. However, these settings aren't completely in sync with the CRPD's principles on 'inclusive education'. In this regard, our members advocate for better conditions in regular schools for all students, as it would also be empowering for students with disabilities.

The adaptations made to the curriculum were another relevant topic that stood out in our research. Maarika explained that at national level there are a lot of measures, such as additional time for assignment and exams, alternative assessment methods, reduced workload, or adoption of learning materials into simplified visual or accessible formats. However, our members mention that these measures might not be enough. According to them, only 59% of students following an individualised curriculum continue their educational pathway after lower-secondary education, compared to 96.6% of students following the standard curriculum.

Our members also explained that it is still hard for Deaf and hard of hearing students to access Estonian Sign Language interpretation, especially because of a shortage of interpreters and the fact that most of the teachers do not know sign language themselves. However, the availability of interpretation is facilitated somewhat by sharing the school's schedule with interpreters in advance so they can plan their working hours in advance. A good example was given of a high school

that promotes the learning of Estonian Sign Language not only for Deaf and hard of hearing students, but also for hearing pupils.

In Estonia, students with disabilities have the right to support from specialised professionals, such as speech therapists. Our members recognised that some schools may be well organised and have these professionals at their disposal. However, there are cases where this doesn't happen due to problems related to financing and the ability to meet the number of hours the student needs.

Some positive improvements were shared by our members. This autumn, in one municipality, an educational space (previously a kindergarten) will be opened for children with disabilities. This space is located very close to the main school building and students with disabilities will continue to be included with their peers. However, for more specific needs, the students have the opportunity to find the necessary support in the new space. For example, they can rest and lie down if needed, or simply have access to a quieter space. Another good practice mentioned by our members refers to a municipality in Estonia where children with disabilities receive support based on their individual needs, while also allowing for smaller groups and classes both in kindergartens and schools. Additionally, there is a strong collaboration and support between parents and educational professionals.

Despite all the positive improvements and achievements in inclusive education, both Mari and Maarika reflected on the areas that need more work. One issue remains the lack of accessibility of the physical environment. However, this appears to be more evident in older buildings, rather than in newer buildings where there are better conditions.

Funding appears to be insufficient to ensure the presence of specialists in schools (for example: sign language interpreters), or material in braille.

Accessibility for visually impaired students remains a struggle. According to our members, key issues include the delay in adapting material in

braille, or problems with digital resources not being compatible with screen readers.

Our members also highlighted the issue of lack of resources and services, especially in rural areas.

Teacher training on disability is still an issue and, as Maarika pointed out, “teachers still feel insecure when they need to teach students with special needs”. Organisational aspects could be improved, such as the number of students per class. It is also important to improve collaboration with families and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, as well as to focus on an individual approach. Our members point out the importance of following the principles of Universal Design in the educational system and including accessibility from the beginning. Furthermore, they reinforced the relevance of monitoring the educational system and understanding the path students with disabilities’ take after compulsory education.

Despite the issues and struggles Estonia still faces, we believe in the country’s potential and will to improve the educational system to be more inclusive and accessible.

Italy

Italy is particularly strong on encouraging pupils with disabilities to attend mainstream schools. Our member Giampiero Griffo from Disability People International Europe (DPI Europe), shared with us his expertise in the field, along with insights he gathered from other specialists in education.

In 1977, Italy recognised the right of students with disabilities to attend regular schools, but some special schools for blind and Deaf students still continued to exist. There has been significant progress throughout the years. Nowadays, blind and visually impaired students can attend regular schools. However, there are some aspects in the Italian educational system that still facilitate segregated settings. Special schools for Deaf

students are still in place, but the family has the right to choose what school a pupil with disabilities will attend (special or regular). In practice, most families choose to enrol their children in mainstream schools. Deaf-blind students that need additional support, however, will typically go to a special school.

In 2022-2023 the number of students with disabilities in mainstream education increased by 7% in comparison with 2021-2022. Giampiero explained the reasons behind this growth, such as the increase in children with disabilities in kindergarten, and changes in financial help from the state. Additionally, there has been an increase in disability diagnoses, as they are necessary for students to receive support in regular schools.

Nevertheless, the positive impact of Italy's efforts in education is still evident and impressive. Since 1977, their inclusive practices have resulted in a continuous growth of students with disabilities in mainstream education.

Regarding reasonable accommodation, regular schools usually have the capacity to address students' needs. For example, there is a special education teacher that will support pupils with disabilities. Municipalities are responsible for providing transport between home and school. In this regard, the school has the responsibility to ensure that these students have all the adapted material they may need. In fact, the state has been committed to providing reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities since before the adoption of the CRPD.

Mainstream schools have the responsibility to ensure that students with disabilities are fully included and participating in the activities. To achieve this, each learner with disabilities has an 'individualised education plan' (IEP) which provides students with a personalised and flexible outline for what their education will look like in practice. This IEP allows student with disabilities to identify goals, sometimes independent of the national educational programmes, and to obtain an official diploma in recognition

of their studies. Additionally, a special-education classroom assistant will collaborate with the class to facilitate the learning process of the pupil with disabilities, aiming to promote inclusion and acceptance of diversity.

The family's opinion is also taken into consideration, as they can request for their child to continue with the same classroom assistant for the following school year.

Deaf students have the right to reasonable accommodation to ensure that they can participate in school activities. These students may receive support from a communication assistant, as well as a sign language interpreter provided by the municipality. Teachers are trained to speak in a way that facilitates lipreading. This work is supported by various Deaf associations in Italy that defend the rights of the Deaf community, providing support and assistance, including through the provision of cochlear implants, sign language training, and oralism training. Giampiero Griffo underlined the importance of quickly assessing the accommodations a student with disability might need.

Despite all progress that has been made in Italy to promote inclusive education, there are some aspects that need improvement. The Legislative Decree 66 from 2017 outlines the requirement to assess all schools' inclusive practices. However, it is not being implemented. This is due to a lack of assessment methods, since the decree is vague when it comes to inclusive education. Giampiero underlined that Italian organisations of persons with disabilities are committed to reaching out to the government and making a proposal on an assessment method that could be used in education. Another issue that needs attention is that schools do not have enough funding to support pupils with disabilities.

Giampiero reinforces the importance of teacher training based on the CRPD instead of the medical model, highlighting a general lack of knowledge from teachers about disability.

While Italian legislation on inclusive education is mostly very well designed, there are still issues with its implementation. The lack of physical accessibility in schools is also a concern, but Italy is already allocating funds to improve this.

To conclude, despite the areas that need more work, Italy is committed to working towards a more inclusive environment in mainstream schools for pupils with disabilities.

Luxemburg

Luxemburg has made some progress in promoting inclusive education over the past years, particularly through its mainstreaming approach and the development of support for pupils with disabilities. However, according to the observations of the national council of persons with disabilities, *Info-Handicap - Conseil national des personnes handicapées*, a fully inclusive education system in line with the UN CRPD remains a goal.

To support their learning process, pupils with disabilities may get help from different Competence Centres ('Centres de Compétences'), according to their disability and needs. These centres can work in different ways, acting as special schools themselves for pupils with disabilities, by sending professionals to regular schools to give extra support, or both.

These centres are also responsible for doing diagnoses and preventive testing, teaching important skills and creating accessible material. For example, the Centre for the Development of Visual Competence would be responsible for creating material in braille for students with visual impairments.

If pupils with disabilities attend mainstream education, they will follow the same educational programme as their peers but can have access to reasonable accommodation. In this regard, they may have more time to

finish a test, do the exams in another room or have access to assistive material. However, if the student is receiving their education directly in a Competence Centre, they will have a 'differentiated education', meaning they follow a different curriculum. These cases may apply, for example, for pupils with an intellectual disability who have high support needs. Unfortunately, these pupils are not entitled to a valid diploma.

Within mainstream education, there are support teachers to help pupils with disabilities. This can happen in a regular class, or in a separate room. However, even if educated in a separate room, the students would only be away for a few hours at a time and they would still be included in mainstream education with their peers.

Students with visual impairments in mainstream education receive materials adapted in braille through the Centre for the Development of Visual Competence, as well as access to assistive materials. There can be some issues with this process, such as the need to adapt the materials well in advance and the ongoing issue of waiting times to provide such materials.

Deaf pupils can attend mainstream education or be schooled in one of the competence centres, the Centre for Language Development, Hearing and Communication Skills. The centre is the only place in the education system where German Sign Language is taught. In mainstream education, reasonable accommodation may include a sign language interpreter, even if this is often difficult to provide because of limited resources. This competence centre has the responsibility to support all Deaf students that may need it, whether in the Competence Centre or in mainstream education, regardless of their sign language knowledge. An important thing to note is that Luxemburg has also taken a significant step forward by recognising German Sign Language as an official language by law in the country.

Despite all the progress so far, our member from Luxemburg mentioned that the country still faces significant challenges, which are explained below:

- There is clearly a shortage of opportunities and support mechanisms to facilitate the transition from Competence Centres to mainstream education.
- There is a general shortage in human resources, including support teachers and interpreters.
- Teachers feel pressured and overwhelmed because they are generally not trained in specific educational needs. This makes teachers feel unprepared to deal with disability issues, especially because the support teacher is only with the class for a few hours.
- Even though German Sign Language is recognised as an official language, it is not taught in mainstream education.

Our members from Luxemburg therefore advocate for a better and more transparent organisation of the educational system, by improving its procedures and documentation.

Luxemburg is already working to improve these areas of education. At the moment, the country is focusing on recruiting more professionals to address the lack of human resources. Our members underlined that there is potential to improve, as long as the necessary resources are made available.

Despite the current issues and barriers, Luxemburg appears to be committed to improving their educational practices. This is an example of a country that values diversity and makes inclusion in mainstream education a priority, even if often thanks to pressure from civil society.

Portugal

Portugal appears to be on the right path towards inclusive education, through the Decree-Law 54/2018. To explore in more depth how well the

Portuguese educational system works, we spoke with the following representatives of organisations of persons with disabilities in Portugal:

- Vera Bonvalot and Sara Neto from the 'Me-CDPD - Mecanismo Nacional de Monitorização da Implementação da Convenção sobre os Direitos das Pessoas com Deficiência' (National Mechanism for Monitoring the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities);
- Rui Coimbras and Catarina Martins from the 'Federação das Associações Portuguesas de Paralisia Cerebral' (Federation of Portuguese Cerebral Palsy Associations), and;
- Diana Lisboa from 'Associação do Porto de Paralisia Cerebral' (Porto Cerebral Palsy Association).

Portugal recognises the right of students with disabilities to study in their local school or another school of preference. Vera and Sara highlighted this good practice because it follows the CRPD principle that children should not be excluded due to their disability. Diana stated that this represents a positive impact and progress for children with disabilities to be fully included in their local community.

However, Vera and Sara also mention that this is only possible as long as schools can provide the necessary accommodations to meet all students' needs.

Catarina noted that some parents still face challenges when enrolling children with disabilities in school. One contributing factor is the lack of resources needed to adequately support students' needs. Although such situations remain a concern for certain families, they are becoming increasingly rare.

Portugal has structures called 'reference schools for early childhood intervention'. Diana explained that these reference schools support the coordination of educational responses through Local Early Childhood

Intervention Teams (ELI), which provide support to children in their natural settings, such as kindergartens and homes.

Vera and Sara underlined that these structures should collaborate with the community in mainstream schools, as well as with families, to promote a more inclusive and supportive environment. Diana mentioned some limitations, such as the shortage of resources and poor communication between institutions.

When it comes to the education of Deaf students or those with visual impairments, reference schools provide the necessary accommodations, while following the mainstream curriculum. Our members in Portugal agreed that access to Portuguese Sign Language and braille are key factors for the education of these students. It allows them to develop their sense of identity while interacting with their community. With sign language in particular, it is essential to recognise its linguistic and cultural impact in the education of Deaf students. Moreover, reference schools implement inclusive practices, such as schools where bilingual education reaches both Deaf and hearing students. However, EDF's Portuguese members reiterated that one negative aspect of this system is that resources are allocated to specific schools, and not evenly throughout the country. This means that a Deaf or visually impaired student may not be able to study at their local school. Me-CDPD (The Portuguese National Mechanism for Monitoring the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), understands that LGP (Portuguese Sign Language) should be recognised as a condition for access to education, and not merely as a one-off adaptation.

Inclusion Resource Centres also provide specialised support directly to schools. Professional from the centre will adapt the amount of time they dedicate to this support depending on the students' needs.

In addition to this, the Decree-Law 54/2018 represented an important advance in the Portuguese legal system. It introduced relevant principles

such as universal education, equity, personalisation, flexibility, self-determination, and inclusion. It brings Portugal closer to the inclusive education model foreseen in Article 24 of the CRPD. But implementation remains the critical point. Weaknesses persist at the level of:

- Human and material resources;
- Training of the educational community;
- Physical and digital accessibility;
- Consistent application of universal, selective and additional measures, and monitoring of results;

Therefore, the position of the ME-CDPD is balanced. Portugal appears to have a good legal framework but needs to consolidate the material and organisational conditions for inclusion.

Even though EDF's Portuguese members agree on the potential of this decree-law, as it marks significant progress, they pointed out the need for stronger monitoring mechanisms.

However, Diana explained that the Ministry of Education has been developing monitoring mechanisms and indicators regarding inclusive education practices in schools. Schools are also expected to report on support that students with disabilities are receiving. Additionally, Me-CDPD made a proposal to the Portuguese Government in 2025 to monitor the impact of the State Budget on the education of persons with disabilities.

For students requiring significant curricular adaptations, the Decree-Law 54/2018 foresees an Individualised Educational Programme (PEI). It also foresees an Individual Transition Plan (PIT) for students preparing for post-school life. The members explain that the PEI focuses on the adaptations to the curriculum and the PIT on the person's life after compulsory education. However, these documents are still too

bureaucratic and technical to be understood not only by the families, but also by education professionals.

Despite all the barriers, Portugal appears to have the right mindset when it comes to inclusive education, but still lacks good practices.

The priority in Portugal should be to ensure that inclusion exists in learners' day-to-day experiences, and not just in the law. Portugal needs to consolidate improvements in some areas, such as:

- Strengthening the placement of special education teachers and other disability specialists;
- Ensuring practical and continuous training for teachers, school assistants and the rest of the educational community on the human rights model advocated for by the CRPD;
- Improving physical, digital, communication and curricular accessibility;
- Reducing regional disparities in access to support;
- Ensuring the consistent application of universal, selective and additional measures;
- Reducing the early school leaving rate for students with disabilities and ensuring their progression to other levels of education, such as access to higher education;
- Promoting and ensuring the consultation and participation of students with disabilities in all areas of educational life;
- Strengthening the participation of families of learners with disabilities.
- Monitor results, not just activities, continuously and accessibly;
- Improve the articulation between education, health, social security, and the community;
- Ensure effective transitions to post-school life that are inclusive and based on community models, avoiding situations of institutionalisation;
- Ensure that specialised responses do not result in direct or indirect segregation;
- Guarantee predictability for students with disabilities and their families at the beginning of each school year.

Recommendations

Considering the testimonies we received through our interviews with EDF members Croatia, Estonia, Italy, Luxemburg and Portugal, we would like to present the following recommendations:

- Improve teacher training to include comprehensive and compulsory modules on disability and specific educational needs;
- Provide training on disability and specific educational needs for all school staff;
- Provide more funding to ensure the presence of educational specialists and resources in schools;
- Make the CRPD central to the educational process, particularly when it comes to allowing learners the possibility to be included in the general educational system with all the support and accommodations they require;
- Move away from the medical model of disability and adopt a human rights-based approach in line with the CRPD;
- Improve monitoring of how legislation is implemented.

Conclusion

Considering the importance of inclusive education, it has become increasingly relevant to highlight good practices in this field. All of the countries that were mentioned in this report appear to show promise and to have the right mindset to contribute to a more accessible society.

There have been some setbacks, but also significant progress. These countries are aware that there is still a lot of work to do, but they have the motivation to keep improving.

It is fundamental for mainstream schools to be well prepared to welcome students with disabilities with all the reasonable accommodation they may

need. Students should be able to attend the school they prefer, without worrying if the school has the appropriate conditions and knowledge on disability to welcome them and facilitate learning.

This research has allowed us to understand that some issues are common among the countries we explored. It is urgent to address these problems because they are affecting the learning of pupils with disabilities and having a significant impact on their future prospects.

We believe that the implementation of inclusive policies in education should be considered an ongoing priority in the countries we have studied. However, we still consider them to be positive examples regarding their approaches to the education of persons with disabilities.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all the members and guests who contributed to this work with their knowledge and expertise.

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