

## **Strengthening inclusive education in Poland**

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Welcome to the Inclusive Education Law course.

In this tutorial, we focus on the development of the rights in education of children with disabilities in Poland.

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Here's a quick overview of the content of the tutorial. The tutorial discusses the Polish legislative framework, the development of integration and inclusion policies, and challenges to overcome and decisions on the necessary measures to be taken.

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With all the changes going on in the country, getting disability systems change in Poland can be difficult to achieve.

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It started with the establishment of the 1997 current constitution.

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A powerful stimulus for legal reforms, was the accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004.

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In 2012 Poland ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

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How is the performance of a country measured in terms disability policies?

The OECD clusters countries against detailed indicators describing their disability policies and draw a distinction between integration policies and compensation policies.

The integration score is a composite indicator of legal provisions to enhance labour market integration and access to rehabilitation services. For the integration score, 50 points indicate highly developed and accessible rehabilitation services.

On the other hand, the compensation score is a composite indicator of rules of access to and level of cash transfers. A compensation score of 50 points indicates very generous provisions that are likely to reduce incentives to work.

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Let us have a look at the Polish legal framework

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Article 70 of the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland guarantees everyone the right to education. Education in public schools is free. Parents have the right to choose schools other than public for their children. Citizens and institutions shall have the right to establish schools. Public authorities shall ensure universal and equal access to education.

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The main Acts concerning school education in Poland, covering all levels from pre-primary to post-secondary non-tertiary education, are:

the Law on School Education and the Provisions introducing the Law on School Education of 2016,

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the School Education Act of 1991,

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the Teachers' Charter of 1982.

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Who are considered students with special educational needs in Polish law?

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The first group are students with a special education certificate.

A special education certificate is delivered to students with disabilities and students at risk of social maladjustment and socially maladjusted.

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The second group are students with a certificate recommending individual learning paths whose health condition makes it difficult or impossible to attend school.

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The third group are students with special needs but without a special education certificate.

This group include:

specialty gifted students,  
students who are chronically ill,  
students facing a crisis or traumatic event,  
students who failed to success in education,  
students affected by neglected environments,  
students adapting to a new environment.

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Special Educational Needs (SEN) is used both in relation to:

students who need special conditions during learning, corresponding to their individual abilities and limitations,  
and highly gifted students and their needs that differ from those of children with developmental disabilities.

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The Regulation of 9.8.2017 contains the principles for organising and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions

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The Regulation establishes Counselling and Guidance Centres (CGCs).

These centres aim at:

helping teachers to identify the individual needs and abilities of learners,  
providing support for teachers in solving learners' educational and behavioural problems,  
providing activities to prevent addictions and other problems for children and young people,  
bringing mental health education for children and young people, parents and teachers,  
providing support for teachers through co-operation with teacher training institutions and pedagogical libraries.

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Compulsory primary and secondary education in Poland runs from ages 5 till 18, 19, or 20

For children with special educational needs, compulsory education starts from age 7 up to age 24 with individual learning paths.

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Psychological and educational support comprises:

classes to develop aptitudes, learning skills or emotional and social competences,  
corrective and compensatory or remedial classes,  
speech therapy classes,  
individual learning paths or programmes or individual teaching at home for learners who cannot attend school due to their health.

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Special education schools are established for children and young people holding a special education

certificate.

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The decision on special education and the delivery of a special education certificate, is issued by a counselling and guidance centre and provided to children:  
with a mild, moderate or severe intellectual disability,  
deaf and with hearing impairment,  
blind and with visual impairment,  
with a physical / motor disability, including aphasia,  
with autism, including Asperger's syndrome,  
with multiple disabilities,  
socially maladjusted children and young people,  
children and young people at risk of social maladjustment.

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How to move from integration to inclusion in Poland?

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Inclusive education is central to the UNESCO's Education For All movement and to the European Union Agenda for Change.

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'Beyond Integration' reveals steps taken towards inclusive education.  
Students with disabilities study in mainstream environments,  
Inclusion gives students the right to a high qualitative education.

While in integrated settings, students need to adapt to the existing curriculum and are at risk for marginalization if they cannot adapt, in inclusive settings, the curriculum is adapted to respond to student diversity making use of for example Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

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What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?  
UDL views learning differences as variabilities rather than disabilities.  
UDL provides multiple means  
of representation to optimize understanding for all students,  
of expression to allow students to demonstrate what they know,  
of engagement to appeal to different learning-styles and motivational preferences of students.

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Progressing from an integrated to an inclusive education system for students with disabilities requires a transformation of special education from an integration concept to an inclusive concept.  
In inclusive education, students with disabilities and special needs spend all their time in general education classes.

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The situation in Poland can be summarized as follows:

In Poland, inclusive education is seen as contingent, that is, students with disabilities are educated in mainstream schools if certain conditions are met.

Special Education serves as an auxiliary and is applicable in those situations when students with disabilities cannot attend public schools.

Special educators refer to types and degrees of disability, as well as other variables to determine the

functioning of the student.

Special education is designed for pupils with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities and those with profound and multiple disabilities, including students with mental illness and with aggressive behaviour.

Most educators share the opinion, that the possibility of inclusion is also determined by other personal factors such as level of physical, emotional development, level of psychological resilience, cognitive abilities, motivation.

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Within the Education for All movement:

the role of psychological-educational counselling centres and special schools is strengthened,

comprehensive assistance for each child and student - especially students with disabilities - and their families should be provided,

innovative formula of support was developed by experts and practitioners,

standards for the employment of a psychologist in schools and institutions are defined,

standard of employing a psychologist, special educator, vocational counsellor and speech therapist in schools and institutions is established.

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The specialised inclusive education centres in Poland started piloting their activities from September 2021 on with 16 centres across Poland, located at special schools.

They support schools in establishing a better organisation to enhance inclusive education.

They provide training and counselling for teachers and parents.

They support teachers in choosing methods of working with students with special educational needs.

They provide specialised activities with children using resources of special schools.

They support a pupil in obtaining adapted textbooks, learning materials and equipment adapted to their needs.

They provide for parents, opportunities for consultation, counselling, support groups and even therapeutic classes.

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Why does Poland need further changes?

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Over 2 million students (approximately 34%) are identified by psychological and pedagogical assistance.

Every year the number of pupils diagnosed with the need for special education is increasing. Currently the number is more than 200,000, i.e. almost 4% of the school population.

80% of persons with autism examined by the Polish Supreme Audit Office (NIK) do not find employment.

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The conclusion is that there is still a need in Poland to ensure that disabled students have access to quality education and are prepared for adulthood, for work and for independent living.