

## **Locked Out: The NCPD decries the Systemic Exclusion of Children with Disabilities as Schools Reopen**

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA 14 January 2026: As thousands of South African learners celebrate the first week of the new academic year, **thousands of children with disabilities** are being **left behind**, not by choice, but by a system that continues to deny them their constitutional right to education. The National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD), which is in direct contact with parents of children who have not yet been placed in schools, warns that for these families, "back-to-school" is not a moment of hope, but a painful reminder of doors that remain firmly closed.

While the South African Constitution guarantees a right to basic education for all, children with disabilities remain the most invisible and under-served population in our country. Families are **routinely turned away** from local schools and "special schools" with lists that span years, effectively ending a child's intended educational journey before it even begins.

When a school turns away a child because of a disability, they aren't just saying 'no' to a student; they are sentencing that child to a **lifetime of dependency**. We are witnessing a quiet crisis where the Department of Basic Education (DBE) treats the rights of these learners as optional extras rather than constitutional mandates.

### **The consequences of denied or inappropriate schooling are lifelong and profound**

- The Poverty Trap: Without foundational education, these children are funnelled into a **cycle of permanent unemployment and economic vulnerability**.
- Social Erasure: Exclusion from schools **prevents children from integrating** into their communities, fostering stigma and lifelong isolation.
- Developmental Stagnation: **Prolonged exclusion** from school placement violates children's right to **foundational learning**, as key learning opportunities within critical developmental windows are often irreversibly lost while children wait for school placement, frequently without resolution.

Information currently before the NCPD, drawn from documented enquiries submitted by parents and caregivers over an extended period, **reveals a persistent and systemic pattern of exclusion from schooling for children with disabilities**. These records reflect **repeated attempts by families to secure placement, frequent referrals between schools and education authorities, and routine rejection** on the basis of alleged **lack of capacity, resources, or "appropriateness" of placement**. In many instances, **children remain out of school for prolonged periods during critical developmental years**, despite clear expressions of willingness to enrol and documented engagement with the system. Collectively, this evidence confirms that the **exclusion of learners** with disabilities from education is neither isolated nor incidental, but a **structural failure** that continues to deny children their right to basic education.

### **Our Demands for Immediate Intervention to End Exclusion**

The **ongoing exclusion** of children with disabilities from school placement is not an administrative oversight, but the **predictable result of systemic failures across infrastructure, staffing, transport, and curriculum delivery**. To address both the immediate crisis of unplaced learners

and its root causes, the NCPD demands the following urgent actions from the Department of Basic Education:

#### Immediate Access and Placement:

- A Zero-Waitlist Policy: Every child currently excluded from schooling must be **screened and placed appropriately** without delay. Waiting lists constitute a direct denial of the constitutional right to basic education.
- Immediate Placement Pathways: Clear, **time-bound placement mechanisms** must be implemented for learners currently at home, in informal centres, or cycling unsuccessfully between schools.
- Radical Inclusion: Mainstream and special **schools** must be urgently retrofitted with **accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies**.

#### Removal of Systemic Barriers That Cause Exclusion:

- **Disability-Disaggregated Data:** Disability-disaggregated data remains largely absent, inconsistent, or unreliable, rendering persons with disabilities effectively invisible in policy formulation, planning, monitoring, and budgeting. Addressing this gap is urgent and essential for evidence-based decision-making and accountability.
- **Infrastructure Repair and Upgrading:** Immediate repair and upgrading of infrastructure at special schools, including the rectification of systemic failures that undermine safety, dignity, and learning.
- **Mandatory Training of School Personnel:** Immediate and compulsory training for all teachers and school-based staff, including hostel personnel, to ensure appropriate support, care, and inclusive practice.
- **Safe and Dignified Scholar Transport:** Immediate provision of adequately resourced, safe, reliable, and dignified transport for learners with disabilities, aligned to individual access and support needs.
- **Curriculum Adaptation and Support:** Immediate review and adaptation of curriculum delivery to ensure that learners with diverse impairments can meaningfully participate in shared classroom environments, supported by appropriate accommodations and assistive resources.
- **Fiscal Transparency and Accountability:** Full disclosure of inclusive education budget allocations and expenditure, with demonstrable evidence that resources reach classrooms serving learners with high support needs.

### A Call to Accountability

South Africa cannot claim to be a nation of equality while our school gates remain a barrier for the most vulnerable. Education delayed is education denied. The NCPD will continue to hold the Department accountable until universal access is not merely a policy slogan, but a lived reality for every child regardless of physical, sensory, intellectual, psychosocial, and neurological impairments.

### About the NCPD

Established in 1939, the NCPD is a premier non-profit Disabled Persons organisation and a cornerstone of South Africa's disability rights movement. The NCPD is dedicated to the full inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities, ensuring a society where diversity is celebrated and equity is the standard.

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