



# The State of Special Education



# LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER



We are Unitopia, a high-school run 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization that focuses on improving the current situation for students with learning differences. We do this by including them in various social activities that usually do not offer equal opportunities for everybody. Over the past six months, Unitopia has branched out through working in peer-to-peer settings as well as afterschool programs set up throughout the Fremont Unified School District. In addition, we have also partnered with local organizations to increase outreach measures and to incorporate our allies' curriculum through our student interaction. Some of the events that are currently being planned by our volunteer team include a movie night in mid-October, a winter-themed festival in December, and much more.

The reason I founded this organization is ever since elementary school, I spent many of my lunch periods with students in special education classes. I realized they were often isolated from the "general education" students who were able to spend recess and lunch with friends and other class. Special needs students were rarely given the opportunity to get out of their congested classrooms and interact with others. I regularly spent time with them, usually three days a week, asking them about their day, interacting with their teachers and paraeducators, and helping them feel slightly more included with our interaction. After reaching high school, I found the perfect opportunity and platform that I had always felt so passionate about. I finally decided to take the initiative to combat this issue that so often flies under the radar.

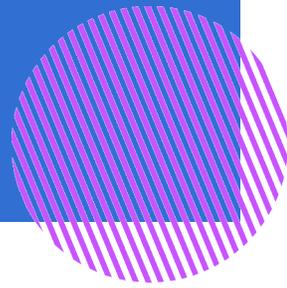
Through Unitopia, I hope to build a social platform for students with learning differences who'll thrive in a society that can be exclusive at times. In many developing countries, the traditional culture encourages discrimination of individuals who have disabilities from a young age. I personally hope that we can expand and reach out internationally to help all students with learning disabilities.

In this report, you will find a plethora of statistics depicting the struggles in special education, including teacher shortages, funding, and lack of social interaction. Unitopia hopes to continue to advocate against these issues, but your public support is required for us to make a substantial difference. Thank you for your time, and we look forward to working with you soon!

Best,

**Aaryan Shah**  
**Founder and Chief Executive Officer**

# INTRODUCTION



**H**istorically, discrimination in the world of special education and people with disabilities perpetuated heavily.

In the early 1900s, common learning disabilities such as autism and ADHD were looked down upon, as ADHD was looked at as an abnormal defect and were often isolated from society, and autism was used to describe schizophrenic patients who were withdrawn and self-absorbed.

In 1967, before most legislation had been passed, a book on infantile autism written by British researcher Bruno Bettelheim assumed deficits in the children's functioning to be linked to poor attachment and/or absentee parenting. Since parents were often blamed for their children's disorders, many experienced great shame for having a child with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Due to this research, the term "Refrigerator Mother" arose, in which people assumed it was horrid parenting that led to children with autism, even though now it is universally known that autism is caused by genetics.

Since research has been conclusive on the genetic source of mental impairment, we have seen legislation being passed to support those with disabilities. Here are some of the key acts and laws passed:

- 1. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):** Under the ADA, after its signing in 1990, the act prohibited multiple discriminatory acts in other settings, including

employment and the workforce, government activities at the state and local levels, public transportations and accommodations such as testing, written communication in alternative formats, etc., and telecommunications with alternatives for actual conversational tools available and providing access to all whenever possible. This is one of the most important and revolutionary laws passed because it was the most comprehensive pieces of legislation and is historically known to be modeled after the Civil Rights Act in 1964 which prevented discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

- 2. Rehabilitation Act:** Passed in 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was the first piece of civil rights legislation specifically addressing the rights of people with disabilities, illegalizing federally funded program to discriminate on the basis of a disability. Another important aspect of the act was that the definition of disabilities was provided, defined as those who have an impairment, mentally or physically that limits major life activities such as walking, learning, sensory details, etc. They must also have had a record of their disability to make sure no one would be able to take advantage of these supportive laws to those impaired.

### 3. Individuals with Disabilities

**Education Act (IDEA):** Passed in 1975 under a different name ("Education for All Handicapped Children Act"), the law mandates children that have disabilities to receive free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment possible, along with the opportunity to be educated alongside their non-disable peers whenever appropriate. Amendments in 97 and 04 emphasized the idea of individual education programs (IEPs) and services must be provided in elementary and middle schools and not force assimilation into other school areas, which originally placed excessive burden on parents and guardians to travel more just to receive a free and appropriate education. Individual education programs are especially crucial because they provide opportunities for individualized care and learning. Each public school child who

receives special education and related services must have an Individualized Education Program. IEPs creates an opportunity for teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and students (when appropriate) to work together to improve educational results for children with disabilities. The IEP is the cornerstone of a quality education for each child with a disability.

Despite all these laws and regulations as well as forward progress in special education, there are a plethora of issues in special education and continued ignorance of disadvantaged individuals.

These problems are further perpetuated at a young age by ineffective curriculum, and these issues are not provided with clear solutions. The gap between students with learning differences and students in general education curriculum is gradually increasing, leading to further inequality and disparity in the quality of education.



# Learning Knows No Bounds

# THE ISSUE



In this report, there are three specific issues that are outlined: ineffective curriculum, funding shortfalls, and teacher shortages that impair special education heavily. While there are many more issues, these three specifically have played the largest role in the educational disparity between general education and the individualized curriculum provided to students with learning differences.

## Curriculum

The current curriculum that is set for special needs students is inadequate. Many of the special needs students are falling behind their other classmates even though the curriculum is made specifically to help them be on track with general students. According to The National Center on Education Outcomes, fourth-graders in special education trailed their peers on standardized math tests by 11 to 40 percentage points[10]. Further than that, experts estimate that, if students with learning differences received support along their childhood, up to 90 percent of students with disabilities are capable of graduating high school with a traditional diploma, fully prepared to tackle college or a career. But only 65 percent of special education students actually graduate on time, compared to 83 percent of general education students[11]. Only a third of students with disabilities who enroll in four-year colleges graduate within eight years, according to a 2011 federal study[11].

**"Only a third of students with disabilities who enroll in four-year colleges graduate within eight years"**

This is simply unacceptable and is a problem that should not be taken lightly. Along with that, teachers are not being taught the curriculum and often have to make it up themselves. This is a major issue because every student is being taught something different in comparison to other students. The continuation of this can lead to discrepancies in the level of education around the country.

## Funding

Budget cuts from the complete federal education department have led to endless problems including lack of materials, technology, and teachers, placing an unbearable burden on local districts to provide for special needs students, which can be difficult due to limited state funding.

**"In 2013, sequestration eliminated more than \$2 billion from the U.S. Department of Education's budget"**

Another major issue that special needs students are facing is a lack of funding which is used

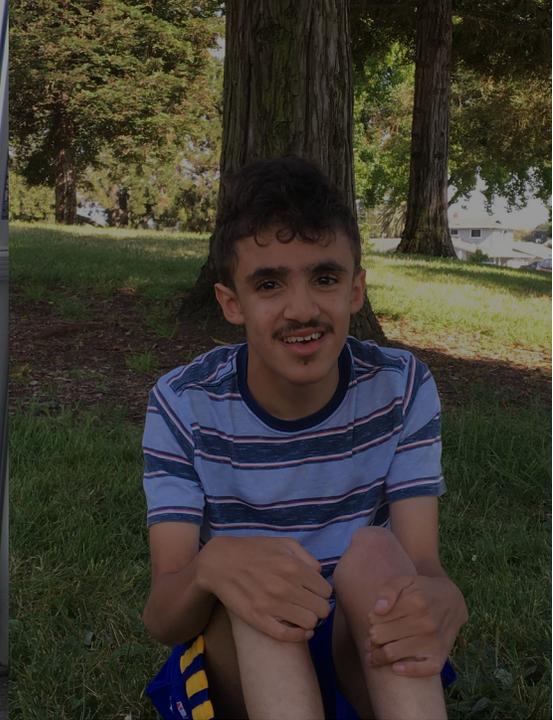
to support many of the programs that are run. Most of the money that special needs programs receive is used for materials, technology, and teachers. In 2013, sequestration eliminated more than \$2 billion from the U.S. Department of Education's budget, cutting more than \$600 million from special education programs and IEPs, individualized education programs[12]. An alarming 83% of respondents stated that budget cuts have already impacted the delivery of special education services[13]. To add on, the federal law has promised to pay 40% of the average per-student cost for every special education student[14], yet however, the federal government is only providing school districts with just under 20%, resulting in a \$10.6 billion shortfall for states and local schools[15]. The amount of special needs students keeps on rising but the funding for them continues to decline resulting in considerable debt.

One example is the San Bernardino City Unified School District. Jayne Christakos, chief business officer for the district, told legislators that district enrollment dropped by 398 students, leading to a loss of \$4 million in general funding and \$210,000 in special education funding[16]. However, the number of students identified with disabilities increased by 189 students, hence leading to a lower amount of funding and quality of education for the students who need it most.

## Teachers

The lack of funding leads to a substantial decrease in the amount of teachers for special needs students. In fact, 82% of special educators and (SISP) specialized instructional support personnel from across the nation report that there are not enough professionals to meet the needs of students with special needs[13]. To be more specific, the amount of special needs teachers has dropped nearly 20% nationally in the last decade[18]. The number of students keeps on increasing but there are not enough teachers to help them, so the ratio of students to teachers keeps on increasing. This makes it extremely difficult for the student to grasp all the information that they need to learn. In a recent survey, more than 1,000 special education teachers from all 50 states reported that there is not enough teachers in the classroom and the main source of this problem is the very little funding they receive[19]. Along with the numerous teachers, 98% of all states in the United States of America agree that there is a shortage of special needs educators and related service personnel[20]. It is up to people like us in the community to make a difference for these students and give them a chance to be the best version of themselves. In a 2016 national survey of districts, colleges, and universities, the American Association for Employment in Education found that districts reported shortages in every special education sub-field and considerable shortages in 10 out of 12 districts[21].

**"The amount of special needs teachers has dropped nearly 20% nationally in the last decade."**



## PUBLIC ACTION

**U**nfair treatment of special needs children is a major problem and is one that is rising exponentially. Some of the causes of this include lack of funding, unmotivated teachers and shortage of teachers despite higher salaries, and poor curriculum. Even though much of the change required is needed from the government and school system, the public can still do numerous things to help special needs children feel important and treated fairly.

For starters, one of the main things that can be given is simply the public's time. All special needs children require is someone that simply wants to spend time with them and make them feel loved. If the public decided to help volunteer with special needs children once a week, it would help children feel more confident in their skin and will make them want to come outside of their rooms and enjoy the world for what it is. If this is not feasible, the next best thing the public can do is volunteer at monthly or quarterly events. There are many non-profit organizations around the Bay Area and country that host events for special needs children which allows them to step out of their comfort zone in a safe environment where they feel loved. If the public decided to come to these events and help out in any way possible. One thing the public can do in these events is to help kids feel comfortable because they are new to the area and might feel scared.

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"Special education in California is in deep trouble exacerbated by outmoded concepts and an extreme shortage of fully-prepared teachers" - Linda Darling-Hammond, California Education Board President

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Additionally, the public can help set up for the events a few hours before they happen.

Along with donating time, another thing the public can do is donate money to organizations that aim to help special needs children. Most of the money received by the organization goes into creating inclusive events where children can get a chance to meet new people and have some fun. Most events done by organizations are free, which means that the organization has to pay for everything including rent, equipment, and food. The public's donations can make it a lot easier for organizations to execute these events and provide for kids in need. Along with executing the events better, the organization would also be able to simply make more events. An organization can go from four events a year to seven or eight if they had more funding.

Finally, the public can help spread awareness about the issues in special needs programs. This can be done through things like word of mouth or social media. The more people know about the issue, the faster it is going to be solved, allowing special needs kids a better life. Currently, many new organizations are forming to help special needs children because the problem is being more noticed in the communities. If this rate of awareness continues to grow, soon special needs kids all around the world will feel like they are loved and treated the same as any other kid regardless of their condition.

**"[The public] plays a major role in shaping society and its views...[they] can give their time to help kids or set up events, donate money to help organizations, and help raise awareness."**

Special needs kids deserve a life in which they feel comfortable around other people and feel like they can be in public without being treated unfairly. This goal can be reached with the help of the public as they play a major role in shaping society and its views. For starters, the public can give their time to help kids or help set up events. Next, they can donate money to help organizations set up events for the children in the communities. Finally, the public can help raise awareness about the issue so it is resolved faster. Overall, with the public's help, unfair treatment of special needs children can finally come to an end.

# CONCLUSION



In total, the state of special education has improved over the past few decades, but requires much improvement in order to bolster the performance of students in special education programs. As seen by poor standardized test scores and dissatisfaction of individualized education programs (IEPs), special education curriculum has been unsatisfactory and deteriorating with larger classes. Inherently, class sizes increasing are due to teacher shortages across the nation, with a 20% decrease in the nation's public school special education teachers in the past decade alone. Due to fewer teachers, funding gradually decreases, forcing districts to choose between the majority of students and the slim minority. More often than not, public school districts choose to focus on the majority, that being the general education curriculum, teachers and funding. All of the aspects of the issue are interconnected, affecting each other directly and indirectly.

To combat the variety of issues that special education programs and students face on an annual basis, people must be willing to advocate and take public action against the frustrating bodies of government causing restrictions for special education programs. Through interactions with students themselves, in the way that Unitopia, our non-profit organization, it allows for better advocacy groups to form through a stronger understanding of what these students go through on a daily basis. You can visit [unitopia.foundation](https://unitopia.foundation) for more information on our story.

Not only that, but the interactions with special education students are empowering for volunteers, learning a completely new perspective on society, as well as students themselves, who gain valuable connections and bonds that they will be able to carry throughout their life. Furthermore, it is imperative to publicly advocate and spread awareness for this little known issue to bring attention that students with learning differences need.

Through your support, we can build a supportive society where everybody is given the same opportunity to access a high quality education.



**Made by Unitopia**

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