

Kyrgyzstan has 31 thousand children with disabilities registered officially. Only one fifth of them have access to education.

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Stella is turning 9 years old soon and this year she's going into first grade. When she was five, she was diagnosed with autism and psycho-speech delay. An attempt to get her into the public school at the age of seven failed at the stage of passing a psychological-medical-educational examining board. Children with such diagnosis are not admitted to public schools.

Contraindications to admission of children to public school:

- Epilepsy with frequent seizures, with marked behavioural disorders and developing dementia. Schizophrenia with marked behavioural disorders, developing emotional-volitional defect and cognitive deficiency.
- Locomotor system disorders (paralysis, palsy, hyperkinesia, etc.) combined with mental retardation and hindering self-care of a student.
- Deaf-blind children.
- Mild mental retardation with behavioural disorders, moderate, severe and profound mental retardation.
- General development disorders (except for Asperger's syndrome).

Mother of Stella, **Nurzhamal**, had been applying to various educational institutions for two years before her daughter was admitted to private school.



Nurzhamal with her daughter Stella. Courtesy of Nurzhamal

“[Doctors] wanted to register her as a disabled person, but we refused. It was difficult psychologically and we were afraid that the disability status would make it hard for us to enter any school. She just seemed like a timid girl,” Nurzhamal said.

She and her daughter went to a special needs pedagogy centre, where Stella studied for 1.5 years. She learned how to speak, write, read and count. She socialised with other children in the group and made friends with a girl, who entered a school afterwards. Stella’s parents also decided to have her admitted to that school but she was refused admission.

We went to Rostok, took letters of recommendation from all the teachers saying that the child can study, is attending a psychologist concurrently, is not going to make troubles to anyone. Everyone signed the letters. So, I took these letters and asked them to admit my child. Moreover, the school is private.

They conducted a two-day examination – verbal and written. She passed the written exam, but had difficulties with the verbal one because she didn’t make contact. Finally, they gave permission but said they won’t be held liable if some crisis happens to the child.

We wanted to take her to a public school because classes there are from morning till dinner time. But they didn’t admit her. So, we had to take her to the private school, which was from morning till evening with three meals daily.

The biggest problem is having meals. She doesn’t eat for a week, and she fells down at some point, so we go to a hospital with her. We have hired a school psychologist for her and she will be with her all the time, taking her to dinner, supper, trying to persuade her to eat and she’ll get used to it slowly.

Statistics does not show real picture

Currently, according to official statistics, Kyrgyzstan has over 31 thousand children with disabilities at the age of 0 to 18 years old. However, there’s no data about school and

preschool children.

The reasons for the increase may be both real growth in the number of disability cases, and raised awareness of people and frequent consultations of parents with health and social development facilities.

However, only one fifth of children with disabilities are covered by the educational system – 6,362 out of 31,000, according to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic.

According to the National Statistical Committee, over 4,000 newly registered disability cases occur among children every year. But the statistics doesn't show the real picture because 31 thousand people are only those whose disability is registered officially, i.e. who have a disability certificate. However, many parents don't go to respective bodies to get a disability certificate.

The reasons are various: low awareness of parents on social guarantees, social stigmatisation, numerous formalities, lack of funds, low efficiency of interagency and intersectoral coordination.

About 500 girls and 700-800 boys with disability will never attend public schools.

Legislation gaps

Inclusive education has been discussed in Kyrgyzstan since 1996, and since then there have been many projects and initiatives for its implementation. However, pilot projects in individual schools have never spread throughout the country.

“We needed to combine efforts of the state, the public and the parent community, the movement of people with disabilities and the international (donor) community in order to finally introduce an inclusive approach, not within the framework of any project in a single place, but everywhere – in each educational organisation of Kyrgyzstan,” **Rakhat Orozova**, a researcher in inclusive education, said.

Until now, a rather medical approach has been applied to children with disabilities – they are trying to correct them, cure them and adjust them to the standards of the world around them. Now experts are talking about a social approach, when the environment must adapt

to the needs of a person with disability.

But before introducing inclusive education, it is necessary to revise the legal framework and adapt it to the standards of an inclusive environment. According to the lawyer of the Association of Parents of Disabled Children (ARDI), **Seinep Dyikanbaeva**, there are many gaps regarding terminology in the current legislation.

“For example, a person with cerebral palsy, but mentally safe, needs only accessible infrastructure – ramps and lifts, perhaps a consultation, if they perform poorly in certain disciplines. But if a person has cerebral palsy and mental peculiarities, then they need another support. And if this is a child with Down syndrome or autism, then they need an individual approach and tutor support, plus an assistant teacher. In order to do all this, we need a regulatory framework,” Dyikanbaeva said.



Photo courtesy of Seinep Dyikanbaeva.

According to her, it is necessary to determine legally: who is a person with disability, categories of disabilities and what conditions are required for which category. Also, the legislation does not specify the basic concepts of inclusive education and there are no mechanisms for its implementation, which sometimes leads to misinterpretation. For example, confusion with integrated education – an attempt to integrate a person into an existing system without taking into account educational needs.

“Inclusion is when they look at the child’s educational needs, assess their level of knowledge, what kind of life competences they need, what individual program is needed taking into account their peculiarities, which educational environment to create, what kind of specialists are needed to help them learn in the created general educational environment,” Dyikanbaeva said.

Only mentally safe people enter universities

Every year, the Ministry of Education and Science allocates 100 quotas for persons with disabilities in universities. But, as a rule, only mentally safe people with physical disabilities can enter them. And, of course, those who manage to get a secondary education.



Photo courtesy of Viktoria Biryukova

One of them - **Viktoria Biryukova** - entered the department of Russian and Slavic philology of KNU and successfully completed it in 2018. The girl acquired disability due to an ischaemic stroke that occurred 10 years ago.

Viktoria studied perfectly in the capital's gymnasium until a stroke occurred to her at the age of 14. The school did her a favour and she managed to finish 11 grades. After school, she had mental depression for two years, did not know about quotas in universities and believed she would not be admitted anywhere.

"And then I told my mother that I do not want, when she dies, to stand in the passage and beg with an outstretched hand. I need a profession. And then we started looking for what to do and chose KNU. I scored enough on the republican test (ORT) and was admitted according to the quota. The group was wonderful, everyone was very understanding, I've never had problems. The teachers evaluated me equally, did not give leeway due to my disability," Biryukova said.

According to Seinep Dyikanbaeva, if a person with a disability gets a passing score on ORT and provides the necessary documents on time and according to all the rules, they cannot be refused admittance to the university. But only 10-20 people go to universities under the quota, according to the Ministry of Education.

"The quota allocated by the state is functioning. Universities have no reasons to not admit a person if they have finished school and have all the necessary documents. But the guys who graduate from schools not always know about this quota. And the concept of education has a section on the opportunities provided by the state," Dyikanbaeva said.

According to her, many people do not submit documents to universities because they are not sure that they will be able to enter and pass an interview, others are afraid of the inaccessibility of the environment.

"It was difficult for me, for example, to climb the fourth floor by stairs, although there are elevators, but they never worked. It was also difficult to go to the restroom. A hole in the floor - that's the whole restroom. Excuse me for the details but I cannot use a squat toilet," Viktoria Biryukova said.

After graduation, she entered the master's programme, but it turned out to be problematic. Universities do not provide quotas for master's programmes. But a more serious problem was compulsory two-year work for government-subsidised students, which is why the university refused to accept the girl.

Viktoria had to refer to the minister of education and science many times, and only after an official letter from Gulmira Kudaiberdieva, they made an exception for her and enrolled her to the master's programme on a grant basis.

Systemic changes are on the way

In mid-March this year, the president of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Zheenbekov ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And on July 19, the government approved the concept and programme for development of inclusive education. This is the main document where all the necessary measures for the implementation of the programme are set forth, the basic concepts of inclusive education are defined and an action plan for five years is written (2019-2023).



How Kyrgyzstan Will Implement UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

According to the expert in inclusive education, **Rakhat Orozova**, who took part in development of the concept, in the first two years they plan to focus all efforts on development of legislation in the field of inclusive and special education.

Another large-scale area is retraining and advanced training of teachers, training of special teachers, psychologists and other specialists, development of methods of work with children with different educational needs.

“Development of inclusive education is a complex and not rapid process because the child and their needs are at the centre of this process. You can’t just put your child in a regular school, you need to prepare everything so that the child feels comfortable and safe in it and receives a quality education in accordance with their needs,” Orozova said.

If the first stage of the programme is more focused on legitimisation of inclusive education and testing of various models, the second stage will include the introduction of an inclusive approach into all educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan: from pre-school to vocational education. However, the success of its implementation depends on the leader, the expert believes.



Photo courtesy of Rakhat Orozova

“How real this will actually be in 5-10 years depends on a person who will be the head of the department. If it’s a person who is committed and understands what inclusion is, then the process will go faster. If a person is not interested, then the process will be rather slow,” Seinep Dyikanbaeva said.

Expert in inclusive education Rakhat Orozova noted that the introduction of inclusive education does not mean the disappearance of special educational institutions for children with disabilities. According to her, parents should have a choice: choose a public school or special school for their child.

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