

Special Needs Education

Special forms of schooling are available for children and young people who are unable to meet the usual school standards or who need special educational programs to do so. General compulsory education also applies to children and young people with visual and hearing impairments, physical and learning disabilities, mental retardation, speech and behavioral disorders.

There are currently about 100 centers for early childhood special education (e.g., special needs education services, specialized early childhood education and treatment guidance centers, etc.), which are sponsored not only by associations and foundations but also by the municipal and cantonal authorities.

In French-speaking Switzerland and in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino, there are also itinerant educational services (SEI), but their organization differs from one canton to another. However, all the professionals involved have postgraduate training in early childhood education. The SEI look after the educational and psychological needs of young children with developmental difficulties as well as providing help and advice to parents in their educational task.

Types of Special Needs Schooling

The cantons are responsible for special needs schooling, which includes:

- Special needs schools subsidized by invalidity insurance (IV-AI) (schools for children and young people with mental impairments, physical disabilities, behavioral disorders, deafness and hearing impairments, serious speech deficiencies, visual impairments or chronic illnesses);
- Special needs classes closely linked to the regular school, in some cantons only (providing notably introductory classes for compulsory education, introductory or transition courses, classes with a limited number of pupils in primary education, known as support classes in certain French or Italian-speaking cantons, schools or classes of manual activities in secondary education, not available in all cantons);
- Outpatient help, guidance and therapy counseling (notably, educational support, such as specialized teaching support, speech therapy and treatment of dyslexia, therapeutic exercise, school psychological counseling, etc.).

General Legal Requirements

Legal regulations for the educational support of the disabled, besides the invalidity insurance legislation (IVG-LAI and IVV-RAI), are primarily contained in the cantonal education and school laws as well as in the corresponding implementation rules. The Federal Law on Overcoming the Inequalities affecting Handicapped People (LHand), in force since January 1st, 2004, guarantees equality of rights; Art. 20, paragraph 1, reads: "The cantons shall ensure that handicapped children and young people enjoy the benefit of a basic education adapted to their specific needs." Paragraph 2 reads: "They shall encourage the integration of handicapped children and young people in the regular school system through appropriate forms of schooling to the extent that it is possible and beneficial for the handicapped child or young person concerned."

Financing

Special needs schooling is financed primarily by the cantons and by invalidity insurance (IV-AI). Invalidity insurance (IV-AI) benefits may be claimed if there is a physical or mental injury to health, which was caused by birth, illness, or accident and which will lead presumptively to an inability to earn a living.

The Swiss people accepted the Financial Equalization and Task Allocation Reform governing relations between the Federal government and the cantons (RPT), which in future will have repercussions on financing, with particular regard to the financing of specialized teaching as well as the education and therapy services provided by the cantons.

External Links

[Swiss Institute for Special Education \(SZH\)](#)

[Federal Social Insurance Office](#)

[Federal Law on Overcoming the Inequalities affecting Handicapped Persons \(LHand\)](#)

[Federal Invalidity Insurance Law \(IVG\)](#)

[Ordinance on Invalidity Insurance \(IVV\)](#)

[Financial Equalization and Task Allocation Reform \(RPT\)](#)

1. Special Needs Education: What's New?

Special needs education in Switzerland came into being in the 19th century. The first institution for blind children and young people was opened in Zurich in 1810, the first institution for deaf mutes in Yverdon in 1811, and the first special needs class for children and young people with learning disabilities in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1882.

With the introduction of invalidity insurance (IV-AI) in 1960, private foundations and associations along with the municipalities and cantons were able to build special needs schools with comprehensive coverage throughout Switzerland.

Increased Parental Involvement

Today, the education and training of handicapped children is also provided largely by their parents. Private organizations, especially parental associations, have created the essential momentum for this development.

Increase in Special Needs Schooling

In recent years, the proportion of children attending special classes has increased constantly. The same applies to special schools, albeit to a lesser extent. Indeed, the number of pupils with behavioral disorders, difficulties at school and learning disabilities is increasing in the specialized facilities, such as classes with a limited number of pupils or special classes. In particular, the proportion of children and young people speaking a foreign language as their mother tongue is increasing constantly in these classes. The numbers of foreign-language speakers are increasing in the special schools too.

The provision of outpatient support has also increased in the regular schools. This trend can be explained by the growth of special educational needs, the greater effectiveness of diagnostic tools revealing the increased complexity of the difficulties or the handicap, or perhaps a lower threshold of tolerance on the part of the regular school system in relation to pupils' difficulties. That is why differentiated educational approaches that are more capable of coping with the greater heterogeneity of school classes are increasingly necessary.

Integration of Handicapped Children or Young People in the Regular Schools

The integration or inclusion of handicapped children or young people in the regular classes is increasing, not only in Switzerland but also internationally. Thus, at both cantonal and local levels a great variety of integrated schooling practices are deployed. However, in spite of these integration efforts, the number of pupils attending special schools is also increasing.

External Links

[Swiss Institute for Special Education \(SZH-CSPS\)](#)

[French-language Swiss network for exchanges on educational support](#)

2. Special Needs Education Figures

In Switzerland, in the 2003/2004 school year, 50,431 pupils attended schools with a special needs curriculum: this includes pupils in special needs classes at the primary and lower secondary levels as well as pupils in special needs schools recognized by the invalidity insurance scheme. The majority of pupils (about two-thirds) in special needs schools have learning disabilities. That is about 6.6% of all pupils at the primary and lower secondary levels (2.2 to 10.3% of all pupils attend special needs schools, depending on the canton).

Additional Data

The proportion of girls and young women in special needs schools is 37.8%; the proportion of foreign pupils is 45.7%. There is an average of 9.2 pupils per class (7–13 pupils, depending on the canton). 1.6% of the special needs schools are unsubsidized private schools.

Financing

The costs for early childhood special needs education are covered largely by federal invalidity insurance.

The costs for schools with a special needs curriculum amount to CHF 850.8 million per year (0% federal government, 46.6% cantons, and 53.4% municipalities). That represents about 4% of all public educational expenditure.

However, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO) figures do not consider the invalidity insurance contributions. According to the invalidity insurance statistics published in 2004, the total educational expenditures for 2003 amounted to CHF 360.9 million (Federal Social Insurance Office data).

External Links

[Statistical data of the Federal Social Insurance Office](#)

3. Special Needs Education: Who decides?

There are specific agencies in the cantons (including school psychological services) that provide situation assessment, diagnosis and treatment, as well as guidance counseling. Special needs schooling is offered after an application, an assessment of the case and an admittance decision. Applications may be made, in the first instance, by teachers, physicians, special services (e.g., school psychological services), school authorities, and guardianship authorities. In more than half of the cantons, the parents can also submit applications for admittance to a special needs school.

Assessments and Decisions

In all cantons, the school psychological services, child and adolescent psychological services, or other specialists are responsible for making the assessments.

There are no uniform national regulations governing the decision as to whether a child with special educational needs will attend a regular school (integrative schooling) or a special needs school.

As a rule, the parents, the school authorities and the teachers, as well as the specialized centers, take part in the decision-making process. Ultimately, the cantonal school authorities decide if special needs schooling is appropriate.

External Links

[Invalidity insurance-special schools and professional training centers](#)

4. Special Needs Education: What is Learned and Where?

As in the regular school system, the special schools are composed of different grades and types of classes. The classes are formed according to the type of handicap. Children and young people of different ages may attend the same class. Various divisions may be distinguished: elementary division (grades 1 to 3), middle school division (grades 4 to 6) and upper school division (grades 7 to 9), whose classes are often referred to as practical classes.

Curricula

Special needs teaching curricula are based on the curricula of the cantons concerned. The teaching dedicates particular attention to the aspects of motor function, perception, language development, and emotional and social development.

Special teaching for handicapped children and adolescents, as defined by invalidity insurance, is targeted to the individual: if appropriate, supplementary treatment measures are proposed (individual course, speech therapy, physiotherapy, etc.). What is necessary, above all, is to encourage the development of the personality and autonomy of handicapped people.

Some children learn to read and to count, while others learn just the bare necessities of daily life (e.g., dressing themselves or eating on their own).

Learning Objectives and Content

Learning objectives and content are increasingly determined in the context of individual teaching projects designed for each pupil. This requires planning of the individualized measures capable of ensuring the adequate progress of a pupil and close collaboration between all the partners involved in providing teaching

and treatment to the handicapped pupil (regular schoolteachers, specialized support teachers, and other teaching and treatment personnel). Individual teaching projects are being increasingly offered in both special schools and special classes, as well as forms of integrative schooling.

5. Special Needs Education: What Needs are satisfied?

Sensory-impaired and Physically Handicapped Children and Adolescents

Sensory-impaired and physically handicapped pupils must basically satisfy the same needs as non-handicapped children and young people (cf. primary and lower secondary level schooling).

Speech-impaired Children and Adolescents

Speech-impaired children and adolescents receive speech therapy care, usually once or twice a week. There is a network of outpatient therapy centers as well as an increasing number of special needs school placements for seriously speech-impaired children and adolescents.

Mentally Impaired Children and Adolescents

Mentally impaired children and adolescents receive encouragement in their development to the extent possible and according to their abilities. Advantage is increasingly being taken of the possibility for mentally impaired children and adolescents to receive integrative schooling. It is financed by the invalidity insurance system if the canton has adopted a cantonal integration scheme and if the integration measure is implemented by teachers specialized in educational support hired by a specialized institution and authorized by the canton, etc.). With the introduction of the changes following the adoption of the RPT (see above), it remains to be clarified how the integrative schooling of handicapped pupils will be provided in the future.

Evaluation of Learning Objectives

Teachers in special needs schools and classes conduct regular evaluations of individual learning objectives. Examinations at the end of the school year are instead rare, as are selective conditions for transfer to the next grade. At the end of the school year, evaluation reports are issued. Grade reports are quite uncommon, but they are used nevertheless in the setting of integrative schooling in the regular school, if the cantonal compulsory education regulations require it (starting from the last classes of the primary school).

6. Special Needs Education: What Opportunities are created?

Compared to special needs schooling at the primary and lower secondary levels (compulsory education), professional and vocational education for disabled persons is not as well developed. The opportunities for more advanced training and access to professions differ depending on the type of disability.

Overcoming Education and Training Disadvantages

For adolescents who benefited from integrative schooling during their compulsory education, since the new law on professional training came into force on January 1st, 2004, individual support may be provided by competent people. Young people may follow initial vocational training with federal certification (in lieu of basic training).

Sensory Impairment

There are special vocational schools for the sensory impaired (not available in all language regions). Other training options such as specialized high schools, teacher training and university level institutions sometimes provide facilities for the hearing impaired or physically handicapped people.

A visual impairment severely limits the choice of a trade or profession and gainful working opportunities in general. It should be noted, however, that the choice of trades and professions for the blind and visually impaired is progressively expanding. Special libraries and bookstores with books in Braille and audio books are available for personal continuing education.

Hearing-impaired persons are somewhat limited in their choice of a trade or profession, but they can choose from a relatively wide range of options. The majority of hearing-impaired persons complete an apprenticeship (3–4 years). In addition to this, they attend the inter-cantonal vocational school for the hearing impaired (this

opportunity is available in the German language region only). In the future, more emphasis will be placed on their vocational continuing education.

Mental Impairment

The mentally impaired may be introduced to working activity. As a rule, these are simple activities not needing the training required for the award of a recognized vocational certificate (work in sheltered workshops, unskilled work, etc.). Since 1979, mentally impaired young people have also been able to complete practical vocational training within the framework of integration measures and can extend their specialized schooling until 20 years of age.

Mentally impaired adults also have opportunities for continuing education. To be sure, the continuing education opportunities for the handicapped are much more limited than those available for people without disabilities. A majority of the mentally impaired finds work in sheltered workshops or in occupational group settings.

Financial Support

Invalidity insurance supports vocational training for the handicapped. Notably, it provides vocational guidance counseling and takes care of professional integration.

External Links

[Swiss Institute for Special Education \(CSPEC-SZH\)](#)

[Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology \(OFFT-BBT\)](#)

[Vocational Guidance](#)

[Swiss Association for Vocational Guidance \(ASOSP-SVB\)](#)

[New Vocational Training Law \(nLFP\)](#)