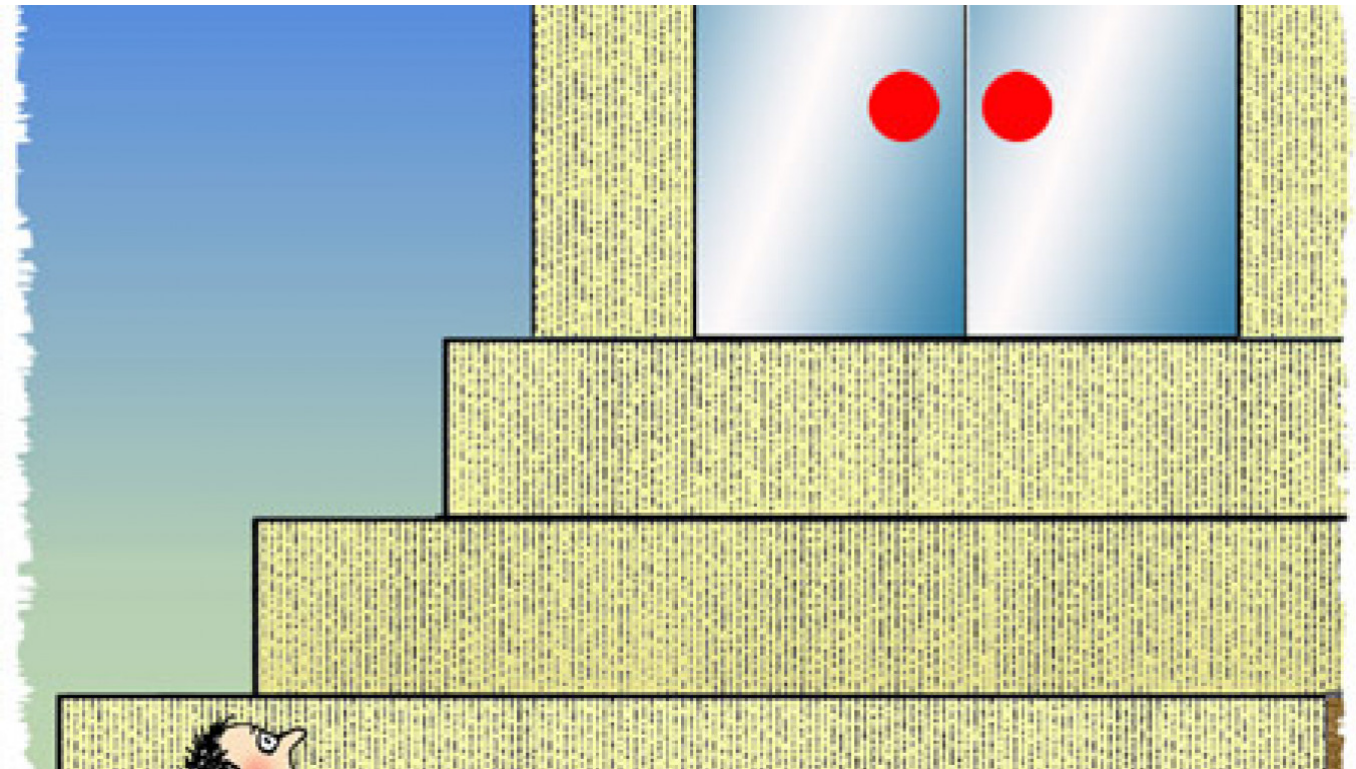


Making Russia's 'Back to School' More Inclusive (Op-Ed)

By [Jane Buchanan](#)

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Millions of children across Russia experience the excitement this week of going back to school: reuniting with friends, tackling new subjects, and expanding their knowledge and skills. But for Russia's more than 540,000 children with disabilities, back to school week may mean very little.

Physical barriers in schools and communities, discrimination, and a history of isolating children with disabilities in state orphanages and special "corrective" schools mean that many children with disabilities here have limited chances to receive a good education near home.

Russia's progress on disability rights has come under increased public scrutiny in recent weeks following an incident where supermodel Natalia Vodianova's sister, who has autism and cerebral palsy, was thrown out of a cafe in Nizhny Novgorod on Aug. 11. That revealed, among other things, that children with disabilities in Russia are too often perceived as having no right to be out in public.

In fact, people with disabilities have an explicit right, guaranteed under international law, to be included in their communities equally with others. And this should begin with their education, at all levels. Inclusive education is a system in which people with and without disabilities study together, with adequate support, based on their individual learning needs.

Many Russian policymakers have recognized the importance of education in promoting disability rights, and the government has made some important commitments.

The government is expanding inclusive education in schools across Russia, revising curricular standards for children with disabilities, and training teachers. Russian law guarantees everyone the right to education, and since 2012, children with disabilities and their parents have the right to choose for children to enroll in their local schools. Good news indeed.

However, Human Rights Watch research reveals the Russian government still has a long way to go to make these pledges a reality. First, a range of physical barriers in schools: from a lack of ramps or lifts to help children enter and move around buildings, to the absence of assistive technology or qualified teachers' aides leave most schools effectively closed to children with disabilities.

Many children are trapped at home because they can't get in and out of apartment buildings, or because there's no suitable transport to school. Some school administrators have refused to admit children with disabilities based on false assumptions that they are unable to learn, unsafe around other children, or disruptive.

Many children with disabilities in Russia remain segregated in specialized schools for children with certain types of disabilities, often located far from home and in some cases offering limited academic programs. Others are isolated in their homes, with visits from teachers just a few times a week and few opportunities to make or see friends.

In Moscow, we met Yuliana G., a girl with low vision, who said she wanted to study at a mainstream school near her home. But, because her local school did not have accommodations to support her needs, her only option was to enroll in a specialized boarding school. "I had friends from the neighborhood where I lived, whom I missed when I went [away] to school," she said. "How do you keep up a friendship if you don't live in the community? I missed my family, too."

While the law guarantees children the option of studying in a specialized school or at home should they wish to do so, this should be a genuine choice, and not because local schools fail to provide reasonable accommodations or other barriers to enrollment.

Even more isolated are the tens of thousands of children with disabilities living in state orphanages, who often receive poor quality or little education or skills development. Human Rights Watch researchers visited 10 orphanages for children with disabilities in Russia in 2013-14 and found that many children suffered serious abuse and neglect on the part of staff.

For many years, children with certain types of disabilities in the orphanages received no education at all, having been deemed "uneducable," and spent nearly the entirety of their days in so-called lying down rooms, with only their basic needs met. Although the term "uneducable" was eliminated by law in 2012, institutions are still in the early stages

of providing education and life skills to all children, regardless of disability.

Because they have not received a decent education, upon reaching adulthood, people with disabilities frequently struggle to enroll in universities or gain professional skills needed to get a job. This leads to further isolation and segregation, as well as poverty.

A survey last fall by the state-run pollster VTsIOM, found that more than 70 percent of parents and grandparents support children with and without disabilities studying together in inclusive classrooms. An overwhelming majority also recognized that opportunities for education and employment for people with disabilities are still limited.

These numbers show that public attitudes are shifting for the better, sending a clear signal to the government that it should fulfill its pledge to guarantee access to inclusive education at all levels and strive to end frequent segregation of children with disabilities — whether in orphanages, separate schools, classrooms, or at home.

Russia's policy efforts should focus on eliminating the barriers to education for children with disabilities, while building up the capacity and resources of mainstream schools to provide high-quality, inclusive education. This means ensuring that mainstream schools have the necessary staff, training, and accommodations for children with disabilities.

Sending children with disabilities to mainstream schools without these in place would risk sabotaging inclusion. Nor should they be included in local schools but taught in separate classrooms just for children with disabilities. Calling a school "inclusive" by enrolling children with disabilities is not the same as implementing genuinely inclusive education.

While some children may require particular individual or small group coursework, children should be included in the school environment as much as possible. Programs to develop a culture of inclusive education in schools are also essential, including classes and activities to promote disability awareness, in collaboration with disability rights groups and parents.

With thoughtful policies and robust inclusive education initiatives, the government can begin to create communities in which children with and without disabilities learn and grow as equals, so that the only thing children regret on Sept. 1 is the end of the carefree summer.

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