

## **Audit reveals major gaps in disability education programmes**

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A recent audit by the Royal Audit Authority (RAA) has revealed major delays and gaps in the disability education programmes in the country, revealing severe challenges in planning, budgeting, and implementation of planned activities across the schools in the country.

The audit, covering 13 schools in 10 dzongkhags and two schools in Thimphu and Phuentsholing Thromdes, examined progress made between the financial years 2018-19 and 2020-21.

The report was submitted to the Ministry of Education and Skills Development in September this year.

The audit findings underscore serious gaps between policy objectives and actual outcomes for students with disabilities. The audit report highlights that the country's efforts to implement inclusive education have faced multiple obstacles, including a lack of alignment between the national policy and on-the-ground realities.

The erstwhile Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat (GNHCS) was initially tasked with coordinating disability-related policies and programmes. While the Commission's Plan Monitoring and Coordination Division developed an action plan for implementing and monitoring the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (PWD), full execution of these plans is pending. This has resulted in delays that have deferred key deliverables intended to support PWD.

The ministry's 'Ten-Year Road Map for Inclusive and Special Education' was launched in 2019, aimed to strengthen programmes derived from the policy on education for PWD.

However, action plans within this road map have also faced setbacks, preventing the intended outcomes.

The audi report states that inclusive schools were selected based on criteria such as the number of children with special needs, population size, grades offered, and proximity to infrastructure and health facilities. Despite these considerations, the schools were unable to cater to all children with disabilities in their areas due to resource constraints and proximity challenges.

The road map also called for formula-based budgeting to ensure equitable allocation of resources for special needs education. However, this funding mechanism had not been established at the time of the audit.

In addition, it was found that dzongkhags and thromdes did not allocate separate budgets to accelerate the Special Education Needs (SEN) programme. As a result, schools were unable to improve accessibility in infrastructure and educational materials to accommodate students with disabilities.

As of July 2024, 1,253 students with disabilities were enrolled in 44 inclusive schools. This accounts for 77.39 percent of the 1,619 individuals aged 0-24 identified in the 2017 Population and Housing Census. The remaining 22.61 percent of children with disabilities were either not enrolled in inclusive programmes or had not accessed special education.

The audit report also highlighted a critical gap in early childhood intervention. None of the 583 Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres in the country offer services for children with disabilities.

Currently, early intervention is only provided when children reach school age at five, which the report stated is too late.

Further, collaboration among agencies involved in inclusive education was found to be inadequate. The RAA observed a lack of coherence among institutions, resulting in fragmented efforts.

Inclusive schools faced shortages of SEN teachers and teaching materials. The absence of collaboration between health and education ministries also meant that medical services needed for children with disabilities were unavailable in schools.

The transition practices for students were categorised as class-to-class and school-to-school. While class-to-class transitions were systematically managed, challenges were recorded in school-to-school transitions due to the distance of receiving schools and the lack of SEN programmes, particularly in vocational training. Transportation facilities in inclusive schools were also found to be insufficient.

Infrastructure development, guided by standards such as the School Design Guidelines 2020 and Differently-Abled Friendly Construction guidelines, often failed to comply with inclusivity requirements during construction. As a result, schools built before the SEN programme lacked the necessary infrastructure for accessibility.

The audit also pointed to deficiencies in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These mechanisms focused primarily on academic performance, neglecting other essential areas such as infrastructure accessibility. Reporting formats varied across monitoring teams, and there was no clear system in place to track and follow up on recommendations made in previous evaluations.