

# “Integration & inclusion – a growing burden”

## What are the arguments against small classes and special needs schools?

by Michael Felten,\* Germany

(CH-S) At the beginning of the new year, the author held a lecture at a “Swiss Standpoint” event on this hotly debated topic, which is also being discussed in our schools and universities. He summarises the essential points for us.

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Regular schools are struggling with numerous problems: not enough teachers, poor equipment, ill-conceived teaching reforms, unruly or inattentive students. In this context, the integrative schooling of children with special educational needs is often experienced as an additional and particular burden.

That is why there are growing calls to rethink inclusion in schools. According to a survey in 2024, “Zurich residents want small classes.” At least this canton introduced “school islands”, i.e. temporary separate schooling. And in Basel, the city parliament created the possibility of also allowing fundamentally separate teaching.

In Germany, federal states are also gradually returning to (at least in phases) separate learning: Schleswig-Holstein speaks of “temporary learning groups” and “campus solutions”, Baden-Württemberg of “remedial classes”.

Apparently, the extent and severity of special educational needs has been massively underestimated by the proponents of inclusive schooling. Nevertheless, this new pragmatism seems a little bashful – after all, for a long time, it was said that joint classes were a quasi-inalienable human right. And it does sound almost idyllic: that it would be best if all children, regardless of their background and ability, learned together at school. In any case, the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD, 2006) demands this – doesn’t it?

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Michael Felten at the lecture of „Swiss Standpoint“.  
(Picture sv)

### UN-Convention: misunderstood

The aim of the CRPD was to ensure that people with disabilities could participate as fully as possible in society. Regarding education, the convention states that “[...] States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability [...]” Rather, “[...] effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.” (Art. 24.2)

This passage was important because in some countries – unlike in German-speaking countries – thousands of children with disabilities did not attend school at all just a few decades ago. But it does not mean that special schools or classes should now be abolished – quite the opposite. Because – according to the CRPD elsewhere:

“Special measures which are necessary to accelerate or achieve de facto equality of persons with disabilities shall not be considered discrimination under the terms of the present Convention.” (Art. 5.4)

And what would special schools or classes be other than institutions that use their specific expertise to help children with special educational needs to develop? The CRPD also considers the case that parents are unsure whether their child is better off in inclusive or separate schooling: “In

all actions concerning children with disabilities, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” (Art. 7.2)

Parental responsibility therefore also includes the option of being able to choose between inclusive and separative schooling.

### **Research: sceptical**

Contrary to a position paper on inclusion by the *Intercantonal University of Applied Sciences for Special Needs Education* (HfH),<sup>1</sup> the research situation on the benefits of joint learning is unclear to sceptical. The evidence cited by the HfH is not very reliable, and critical studies are simply ignored there. In fact, only some of the special education students (the “easier” cases) benefit from inclusive schooling, and from puberty onwards, (inner) separation also occurs in inclusive classes.<sup>2</sup>

There are certainly good experiences with joint learning – namely where a special education professional was constantly involved in school trials, and where the children’s special educational needs exactly matched their expertise. But the hope of being able to individualise learning to a high degree in everyday school life has largely been dashed; the extent of emotional stress and the importance of protected spaces was widely underestimated. Different educational needs simply require different educational approaches. In any case, nowhere in the world has separation been completely abandoned.

### **Why are they doing this?**

But if “joint learning” often results in “benevolent neglect” (*Ahrbeck*),<sup>3</sup> it is fair to ask why integration and inclusion were launched so thoughtlessly and inadequately.

Were hopes pinned primarily on huge savings? Or was it aimed at humanely disguise the general educational misery? Did people want to indulge in a grand utopia once again?

In any case, simultaneity does not seem to be the optimal way out for heterogeneity. “One school for all” may sound fair – but isn’t it about “the best school for every child”? In inclusive settings, disabled children may be present – but they are not really in the midst of it. The question is: when exactly and for whom does joint learning make sense?

### **One perspective: dual-inclusive thinking**

Because inclusive schooling brings with it advantages and disadvantages, *Otto Speck* argued in “Dilemma Inklusion” (2019) for a pragmatic solution, the “dual track approach”:

- maintain regular and special schools and classes, but ensure a high degree of permeability between them;
- the expertise of regular schoolteachers in terms of teaching and support should be greatly improved to avoid children being unnecessarily referred to special schools;
- also to enable constant exchange with special needs teachers at regular schools;
- practise inclusion only at the best-equipped specialist schools;
- remedial classes at regular schools (“campus solution”, “temporary time-out”).

Source: © Felten 2025 (“Die Inklusionsfalle”, [“The inclusion trap”], 2017)

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.hfh.ch/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06\\_schulische-inklusion\\_dossier\\_final.pdf](https://www.hfh.ch/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06_schulische-inklusion_dossier_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://walcher1.magix.net/index\\_htm\\_files/HfH%20behauptet.pdf](http://walcher1.magix.net/index_htm_files/HfH%20behauptet.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://inklusion-als-problem.de/literatur/>