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TOS: First Person Building Momentum for Inclusion

Taking the first steps to include persons with disabilities into the education system

Data from the 2005 National Statistics Institute shows that there are approximately 400,000 people with disabilities living in Guatemala. Of these, 23% are between six and 17 years old and 42% are between 18 and 59. The fact that only 14% of these 400,000 people go to school and 86% never went through school, implies the enormous amount of work required to transform this society into one of inclusive education.

Inclusive education means that people with disabilities have equal access to services. It means that they are placed in the grade that is appropriate to their chronological age which is vital because many children are held back unnecessarily and find themselves in grades with younger children which, in the end, stunts social learning and academic progress. Inclusive education also means that students with disabilities are taught by trained “transdisciplinary” teams and have the same opportunity for social interaction as students without disabilities. Inclusion allows children without disabilities to understand and know children with disabilities as human beings--this counteracts social stigmas and prejudices and simultaneously allows children with disabilities to model children without disabilities and thus learn to expand their limits and develop skills they might not otherwise be exposed to or have had expected of them.

In 2006, the USAID Standards and Education Research Program began work with the Ministry of Education (MOE) on a strategy for inclusive education. The strategy is designed to jumpstart processes to open education opportunities for people with disabilities as well as begin to change societal attitudes and perceptions the need for and value of inclusive education.

To strengthen the fledgling strategy, USAID invited Jane Falls, an inclusive education specialist from Mobility International (MIUSA), to come to Guatemala to provide technical assistance to the MOE as they embark on implementing the policy for inclusive education for populations with special needs (persons with or without disabilities). Attention to special needs is a novel concept in a country where most youngsters do

not even get to school, where the average number of years of schooling is merely four and only 39% complete primary school.

During her pivotal visit, Jane Falls met with authorities from DICADE, the MOE's Quality and Education Development Office, which is responsible for implementing the new policy to attend special needs. She also visited rural schools in Santiago Atitlán, San Pedro and Antigua that offer services for students with special needs. At these schools Ms. Falls held workshops with special education teachers, "regular" teachers, parents, and non-governmental organizations that offer services to persons with disabilities.

In order to share the experiences that other countries have with inclusive education, as well as her impressions from her Guatemala school visits, Ms. Falls gave three conferences during her visit: the first with the special education leaders and providers, the second with the general public held at the *Universidad del Valle de Guatemala*, and the third with university students and professors working in special education field.

These collective actions are sure to increase the opportunities for education among children and youth that have traditionally been excluded from them. They are also sure to increase public awareness and understanding of the needs that persons with disability have and the advantages society will glean from inclusive education.

"USAID's assistance helps us put our new policy and strategic plan for inclusive education into place. Thanks to Jane Falls' recommendations, the budget for special education for 2007 will increase." Jeannette de Cacacho, Ministry of Education Special Education Unit Coordinator



USAID/MIUSA consultant, Jane Falls sits with students with disabilities, their teachers, school director, Dina Carrillo; and the departmental coordinator for the Special Education program, Zoila Shaul de Gallardo, in front of their special education school, Escuela de Educación Especial Hermano Pedro in Antigua, Guatemala. June 2006