



## A School Where Everyone Belongs

*To School Together* ('Samen naar School') classrooms make it possible for children with severe disabilities to learn in a mainstream school with support specially tailored to their needs. *To School Together* is an initiative of the NSGK, the Dutch Association for Children with a Disability, and aims to stimulate the founding, professionalization and use of these classrooms. What began as a few scattered classes has turned into a national movement.

### Every Child Can Learn

An estimated 13,000 children with a disability never see the inside of a school. Some sit at home all day, others go to day care centers. NSGK believes that every child, regardless of their disability, should be encouraged to develop to their maximum potential. Every child can learn, as long as education is tailored to a child's specific needs and abilities. Preferably in the company of peers without a disability. It is much more natural for people to live in an inclusive society when children with diverse abilities grow up learning together.

### Together Wherever Possible

That's why in 2015 NSGK kicked off the project *To School Together*. The foundation helps set up *To School Together* classrooms around the country. These are classrooms where children enjoy education adapted to them, with the care and support they need. And where possible they join the regular activities of the school with other children, in the show-and-tell circle, music lessons, play time, eating and drink breaks, reading time; you quickly see that children can do a lot together.

### It Started in Alkmaar

*To School Together* was inspired by the 'Classroom on Wheels' in Alkmaar, where since 2011 children with and without disabilities have been attending mainstream school together. The instigator, Roeland Vollaard, wanted to do something about the societal barrier that all too often exists between children with and without a disability. 'At our school I see daily how much children with and without disabilities can learn from each other. Interaction is really important for both sides. Regular learners learn what it means to have a disability and how to work with it. And vice versa, children with a disability come out of their isolation. Not only are they more stimulated, they can also handle more stimulation. They grow before your eyes.'





## A Start for Life in an Inclusive Society

Not only are children learning from each other; by going to school together they are also laying the foundation for an inclusive society. Roeland Vollaard: 'Where children from a young age grow up together, they find it natural later on to live in the same communities. How can you possibly learn to live together if you never run into each other? Education should play a much bigger role in this. A school that teaches that everyone belongs, prepares us for a society where everyone counts.'

## Building on Success

Following the Classroom on Wheels concept, slowly but surely five other classrooms got set up, all with financial support by NSGK. But more was needed. More classrooms, more financial support, and also more coordination. The new classes had to constantly reinvent the wheel, negotiate with schools, municipal government, care insurers and other relevant parties. That's why NSGK initiated *To School Together*. With *To School Together* we provide financial support and give good advice for setting up more of these classrooms. There are now sixteen of them, already double the number of when we started. Our dream is to set up a *To School Together* class in every municipality. So that children with a severe disability all over the Netherlands can go to a school in their own neighborhood.

## From a Few Classes to a Movement

*To School Together* not only aims to expand the number of classrooms, the project also provides an umbrella organization for new and existing classes. Within *To School Together*, participants exchange knowledge and experience, combine their strengths, help newcomers and provide information to those interested in starting their own *To School Together* class. We see that people are starting to recognize *To School Together* classrooms that were set up earlier are happy to call themselves *To School Together* classes. Various politicians have visited a *To School Together* classroom to see firsthand how we are giving form to inclusive education in the Netherlands.

## Scientific Research

It's clear to the parents of children attending *To School Together* classrooms: they experience that their children are more alert during the daytime and sleep better at night. They see their children making developmental leaps as they learn from their non-disabled peers. The Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care of the University of Groningen is now doing research into the effects of *To School Together* on the development of children with severe multiple disabilities and the factors that contribute to these effects. The research will continue to 2020.

