Honoured members of the Committee,

It is my privilege to be here today to address the Opening of the 16th Session of the CRPD Committee on behalf of Inclusion International. This will be the last time we have the opportunity to address some of you whose terms will end soon and we want to thank each and every one of you for your hard work and commitment to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and persons with intellectual disabilities in particular.

Among the work you will do this week will be the consideration of a General Comment on Article 24. We urge you to keep in mind the millions of children with intellectual disabilities who are currently out of school and denied a quality education. You are aware that Inclusion International has consistently argued that for children with intellectual disabilities to get a quality education, they must be educated in regular classes, in regular schools, with their non-disabled peers.

Allow me to remind you how we came to that position. Most of our 200 national associations in over 115 countries were formed by parents of children with intellectual disabilities because their children were not accepted by the regular schools, and so the parents came together to start special schools. However, as adults with intellectual disabilities began to speak up on their own, they insisted that going to separate schools was segregation and discrimination. Their parents realized that going to separate schools led to lives apart from the rest of the community. Together, parents and self-advocates realized that the way to prepare for a full life in the community was to go to school with their brothers and sisters, neighbours, and non-disabled peers. An unexpected bonus was that when schools started to include students with intellectual disabilities, and teachers learned to individualize their teaching methods and were supported to respond to a diverse student body, the quality of education improved for ALL students.

Our members are also pragmatists. In countries with large populations of children out of school we realized that there would never be enough resources to create special schools for children with intellectual disabilities. The only way for them to get an education would be to be included with all the other children. The same holds true in wealthier countries. As long as resources are directed to special programs – based on gender, ethnicity, refugee status, labour status -- there is not enough to ensure quality in the mainstream schools.

We have been heartened by many of the Concluding Observations of this Committee on Article 24. However, we have seen some inconsistencies, particularly with regard to the
issue of “choice”. As long as separate schools exist, they draw on resources which are needed in the mainstream system. It becomes a false choice for families to chose between a segregated system which has many resources for supporting individual needs and a mainstream system which lacks them. That is why we strongly support the call in your draft General Comment for a “process that transforms culture, policy and practice in all educational environments”. That is consistent with the IDA position paper on education which stipulates that achieving inclusion “requires a transformation of existing systems, not simply incremental changes.”

We urge you to recognize that some groups are more likely to be excluded from education than others. Many still consider that people with intellectual disabilities should be sent to special schools or that their inclusion should be limited to art, physical education and other “non-academic” classes. Particular efforts to ensure that people with intellectual disabilities – regardless of support need – are included may be required.

Education cannot be considered independent of other rights entrenched in the CRPD. You have issued strong General Comments on both Article 12 and 9. For students with intellectual disabilities, school is where the relationships are forged that will enable both support for decision-making and living and being included in the community become realities.

We urge you to ensure that the General Comment on Article 24 serve as a proud legacy of the current members of your committee and guarantee that all children with disabilities can be fully included in education.