

COUNTRY SYSTEM MAPPING

Country Report: Bulgaria

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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INTRODUCTION

The goal of the Country System Mapping (CSM) activity is to identify, map and analyse the key features that impact the effective implementation of inclusive education policy in practice in all Agency member countries' education systems. In a departure from previous thematic activities undertaken by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency), CSM considers the **whole** education system from the perspective of implementing policy for inclusive education in practice. However, within this system-wide view, there is a focus on the specific priorities Representative Board members (RBs) have already identified in relation to monitoring and evaluation, cross-sector working and quality assurance.

The main output from the CSM work is a systematic mapping of information on each country's education system.

Information from the individual CSM Country Reports has been analysed in two ways:

- **Thematic Analysis** to highlight issues (challenges and opportunities) emerging from the reports to use as the starting point for the Agency's Thematic Country Cluster Activities (TCCA).

Challenges for inclusion are defined as things the country needs to work on to reach an inclusive education system. Strengths for inclusion are things that encourage and reinforce inclusive practice in the country and could potentially be shown as an example to other countries.

- **Mapping** to inform TCCA groupings, based on the system structures and processes countries have (or do not have) in common.

The agreed goal for the mapping element of the CSM analysis work was to highlight parameters, or comparative factors, that indicate which country systems are structured and/or working in different – or similar – ways.

The information from the CSM work will be used within the remainder of the [Multi-Annual Work Programme 2021–2027](#) (MAWP). As of autumn 2024, country cluster activities will be organised which are closely aligned to individual country approaches to key issues for inclusive education, as well as system structures and processes countries have in common.



Work within a shared vision for inclusive education systems

All Agency work is aligned with the [position on inclusive education systems](#). This agreed position states that the ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that:

All learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers ([European Agency, 2022, p. 1](#))¹.

Agency work focuses on supporting the development of inclusive education systems in member countries to ensure every learner's right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. This aim is directed at all learners. However, all aspects of Agency work clearly recognise that some groups of learners face obstacles and barriers that mean they should be considered **learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education in mainstream schools in their local community, alongside their friends and peers**.

UNESCO identifies the possible obstacles and barriers to education learners may face as arising from:

... gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion and other beliefs and attitudes ([UNESCO, 2020, p. 4](#))².

Many learners may face a combination of these factors and the intersectional (inter-connected) nature of learners' needs must be acknowledged. Every learner has their own unique experiences of discrimination and/or barriers to learning. Everything and anything that can marginalise learners and increase their chances of exclusion from mainstream inclusive education must be understood and recognised.

All Agency member countries are committed to working towards ensuring more inclusive education systems. They do so in different ways, depending on their past and current contexts and histories. Inclusive education systems are a vital component within the wider aspiration of more socially inclusive societies that all countries align themselves with, both ethically and politically. However, all Agency work clearly recognises that countries have differences in their ways of thinking about, identifying and making provision for different groups of learners who may be considered vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education.

All countries have undergone key conceptual changes in their thinking and policy priorities for developments as they move towards inclusive education as an approach that ensures high-quality education for all learners. Across countries, the first shift was made from the concept of special educational needs to special needs education. This shift represented a focus away from the learner (identified as having special educational needs) towards a focus on the provision they receive (special needs education for learners who experience difficulties at school). The term 'special needs education' has also widened the focus

¹ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022. *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems*. Odense, Denmark

² UNESCO, 2020. *Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and education: all means all*. Paris: UNESCO



beyond learners with disabilities to include learners who appeared to be failing in school for a wide variety of reasons.

It is worth emphasising here that there have never been agreed definitions of the concepts of special educational needs or special needs education that can be consistently used across countries. The groups of learners considered as having special educational needs which require additional provision largely differ across countries.

The most recent shifts emphasise a move away from a concern with types of special needs or the categories a learner may or may not fall into, towards thinking of inclusion and inclusive education as an approach for all learners. They emphasise the barriers experienced by learners and focus overall on learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion from educational opportunities for different reasons.

Agency work focuses on supporting the development of inclusive education systems in its member countries to ensure every learner's right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. This aim is directed at all learners, while recognising the need to specifically address learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education.

Overview of the Country System Mapping

The information collected in the CSM activity aims to provide evidence of and reflection on **where countries currently are** in their inclusive thinking, policy and provision for all learners, but in particular for those learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education.

CSM work focuses on the **whole** education system and how certain structures, mechanisms and processes may impact on the implementation of policy for inclusive education in practice. It aims to get insights into how the needs of all learners – including individuals or groups of learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education – are being considered. Many questions refer to learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education. Countries have opportunities to clarify what 'learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education' means for them and their systems.

However, it is acknowledged that it may not be possible for countries to provide information covering all learners and all learner groups.

The questions specifically focus on four priorities RBs have identified for wider future Agency work in relation to:

- Monitoring and evaluation
- Cross-sector working
- Quality assurance
- Effective policy implementation.

There are six main sections:

Section 1. Background to the inclusive education system

Section 2. Overview of the education system

Section 3. Legislative and policy framework



Section 4. System governance

Section 5. Quality assurance and accountability

Section 6. Stakeholder collaboration, co-operation and effective communication

Where countries have provided additional comments and reflections, these are included in a separate Section 7.

In each of these sections, relevant information was collected covering International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 02 (pre-primary education) to 3 (upper-secondary education).

Each section has two subsections which require different types of country information, as outlined below.

All questions were rephrased into statements for the purpose of this report.

System description

Sections 1 to 6 include specific questions that aim to provide a factual description of key aspects of the legislation and policy framework for inclusive education in the country. The system information aims to accurately describe the relevant policy frameworks in countries.

Different types of questions are used to collect information that describes important system features – structures, mechanisms and processes – relating to governance, monitoring, quality assurance and collaboration. The descriptive information includes sources of original material and, where possible, is supported with quotes and citations from relevant policy documents and published work.

The descriptive information will be analysed to highlight parameters, or comparative factors, that indicate how countries are structured and/or working. This mapping will be used to inform country cluster groupings based on system structures and processes that countries have in common.

The descriptive information will also be used to prepare thematic cluster activities with Agency member countries. These activities will elaborate and collect even more detailed country information for the different priority areas from 2023 onwards.

Evaluative commentary

An important element of the questions is the evaluative, qualified and evidenced-based reflection on the factual information provided in sections 1 to 6.

The evaluative commentaries aim to provide a qualified reflection on the implementation of the legislation and policy framework for inclusive education in practice. They provide observations on and interpretations of the system factors that impact positively or negatively on inclusive education.

The evaluative commentaries reflect on **where and why the practice of inclusive education differs from or actively supports the stated policy intentions and goals** in the system description.



For the evaluative commentaries linked to each section, the following general questions are posed:

- What have been the perceived main challenges (barriers and hindrances) for inclusive education? Why do they exist and what are the consequences?
- What have been the perceived opportunities (support and ways forward) for inclusive education? What areas for development are identified and how can they be successfully implemented?

In addition, specific topic-related questions are also suggested.

The analysis of the evaluative commentary information will take a grounded approach. It will aim to identify issues that emerge as barriers to or supporting factors for meeting the needs of all learners in inclusive systems.

This analysis will be used to inform future Agency activities with member countries regarding country-specific and common system challenges and opportunities.



SECTION 1. BACKGROUND TO THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM

This section provides key background information in relation to inclusive education in the country.

1.1 Overview of the historical development of inclusive education

The historical development of inclusive education in Bulgaria is directly linked to the concept of ‘special educational needs’. It was introduced in 2002 by the Ordinance on the education of children with special educational needs and/or chronic diseases of the Minister of Education and Science, which defined the philosophy of ‘integrated education’ in Bulgaria for the first time. In practice, this stimulated the possibility of teaching learners with special needs among other learners, within the framework of the mainstream school. The 2009 Ordinance on the education of learners with special educational needs and/or chronic diseases built on the understanding of integrated education, making it the dominant form of education for these learners. Their education in a special environment has been significantly reduced ever since. At that time, regional centres were established as the main provider of special educators and specialists for learners with special needs in kindergartens and schools.

In 2004, the state proposed a National Plan for the integration of learners with special needs and/or chronic diseases in the public education system (2004–2007). It was the first to set forth the philosophy of the reform that took place in these years. This was the start of the second stage in the development of inclusive education. The Ministry of Education and Science ([MoES](#)) piloted a large project financed by the ‘Human Resources Development’ Operational Programme of the European Union (EU), worth BGN 10 million. The overall goal of the project was equal access to education and opening the education system up to inclusive education. One of the particular goals of the project was to increase the role of mainstream schools in building an inclusive educational environment. Having run this project across 84 pilot schools, the Ministry has managed to identify a number of challenges related to the individual assessment, educational infrastructure and availability of specialists, organisation and delivery of the support activities, etc.

All this presupposed the reconstruction of the resource centres into regional centres to support the process of inclusive education on the eve of adopting the new educational legislation, including under the pressure from those working in the then resource centres, who united within the [National Association of Resource Teachers](#) (NART). Their new functions are precisely related to overcoming the weaknesses identified above, as they already have expert capacity in the assessment of special educational needs, and at the same time preserving the possibility of providing special educators and specialists in kindergartens and schools, who were not able to provide such on their own. With this, a balance was achieved in the Bulgarian model for inclusive education and thus the country reached the third stage, namely ‘inclusive education through additional support for personal development’. In this period, support for learners with special needs was once again a dominant paradigm, as specific criteria were achieved for external assessment of



special educational needs, referral to professional training, and a specific maximum number of learners with special needs per special educator. This assessment, however, remained a complex pedagogical one, and not a functional one, as attempts are being made to develop such at present.

In 2017, the state proposed a separate Ordinance on inclusive education, which was reflected the requirements of the new [Pre-school and School Education Act \(PSEA\)](#)³ and regulated the various procedures for implementing general and additional support for personal development in detail. In this document, the requirement for functional assessment for special educational needs is set out for the first time. That is why already-tested models of assessment of separate groups of learners with special needs are used here, under the project 'Inclusive education' and 'Support for equal access to education' with European funding, which the Ministry of Education and Science developed in the previous several years and has been piloting this learning model in pilot schools across the country. In this third stage of development of inclusive education, another important moment is the acceptance of Bulgaria into the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (Damyanov, 2022⁴).

1.2 Legislation and policy definitions linked to key concepts within inclusive education systems

Inclusive education

The Pre-school and School Education Act defines 'inclusive education' as:

The process of understanding, accepting and supporting the individuality of each child or pupil and the variety of needs of all children and pupils through involvement and inclusion of resources aimed at removing the obstacles to teaching and learning, and creating opportunities for development and participation of children and pupils in all aspects of life in the community (Section 1, item 26 of the Supplementary provisions).

Special needs education

No information.

³ Since its adoption in 2016, the Pre-school and School Education Act has been amended on a number of occasions. The English version cited here refers back to the text adopted in 2016. No other official translation of the Act is available on the Ministry of Education and Science website.

⁴ Damyanov, K., 2022. '15 (2022) Years Bulgarian Model of Inclusive Education and the Role of the Regional Centres in Supporting the Process'. In [Development of Inclusive Education in Bulgaria – 15 Years Later. Collection of reports](#), Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Publishing House



Learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

Section 1, item 6 of the Supplementary provisions in the Pre-school and School Education Act (PSEA) defines a 'child or pupil at risk' as learners who:

- are deprived of parental care or have parents who are deceased, unknown, deprived of parental rights or exercise restricted parental rights;
- are victims of abuse, violence, exploitation, or any other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment within or outside the family;
- are exposed to the threat of damage to their physical, mental, moral, intellectual and social development.

The [Child Protection Act](#) (CPA) adds to the definition, which is elaborated under the PSEA, by including children for whom there is a risk of dropping out of school or who have already dropped out of school.

Last but not least, according to the Ordinance on financing institutions in the pre-school and school education system⁵ (Decree 219/2017), 'Children and pupils from vulnerable groups' are:

Children and pupils in primary education and in the first and second stage of secondary education, who are at risk of dropping out of the pre-school and school education system or whose access to education is at an increased risk due to a low educational level of their parents/guardians and the associated disadvantaged position on the labour market and the risk of social exclusion (Section 1, item 3).

Learners with special educational needs

PSEA defines 'special educational needs' (SEN) as :

The educational needs that may arise in the case of sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, multiple impairments, intellectual disabilities, speech and language impairment, specific learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders (Section 1, item 33 of the Supplementary provisions).

[\(GEM Report\)](#)

⁵ Where there was no official translation, references to different legislative and policy documents (e.g. ordinances, strategies, etc.) have been unofficially translated into English in the course of preparing this document.



1.3 Individuals or groups of learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education focused on in the report

This report focuses on:

- learners with special educational needs, in line with the definition listed in Section 1, item 33 of the Supplementary provisions in the PSEA;
- migrant children (children whose parents are citizens of the EU, the European Economic Area or Switzerland) – increasing mobility within the EU/EEA may well bring more children with different backgrounds to the education system in Bulgaria;
- asylum-seeking children or children who have been granted international protection – due to a number of international crisis and subsequent migration flows in recent years, these children need geared support to fully benefit from inclusion in education in Bulgaria;
- learners with an ethnic minority background although the participation of Roma children has increased in all levels of education since 2011, they continue to be more vulnerable to structural inequalities and limited educational opportunities;
- learners who are victims of violence, in line with the definition of ‘children at risk’ listed in the PSEA and the CPA;
- learners that have dropped out of formal education.

The Pre-school and School Education Act and the [Ordinance on inclusive education](#) discuss inclusive education as a process that starts with understanding, accepting and supporting the individuality of each learner and the variety of needs they may have. This recognition is then coupled with offering conditions and resources in order to remove the obstacles to teaching and learning, which shall ultimately result in the learners’ full development and participation in all aspects of life. Therefore, the Act calls for provision of two types of personal development support – general and additional – to all learners.

General support for personal development can include any or a combination of the elements below:

- teamwork between teachers and other pedagogical specialists;
- additional training on school subjects;
- additional modules for learners who do not speak the Bulgarian language;
- additional guidance on school subjects outside of regular classes;
- career guidance for learners;
- activities based on personal interests;
- library and information services;
- health care;
- accommodation;



- stimulation through material and moral rewards;
- violence-prevention activities and overcoming problem behaviour;
- early assessment of needs and prevention of learning difficulties;
- speech therapy.

Additional support for personal development is provided to learners with special educational needs, learners at risk, learners with outstanding talents, and learners with chronic diseases. It can include:

- working with a learner on a specific case;
- psycho-social rehabilitation, speech and language rehabilitation, visual impairment rehabilitation, communication impairment rehabilitation, and physical rehabilitation;
- providing accessible environment, general and specialist supporting environment, technical aids, specialist equipment, teaching materials, methodologies and specialists;
- providing training on special school subjects for the learners with sensory impairments;
- resource support.

1.4 Development of thinking around learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

The adoption of the Pre-school and School Education Act in 2016 allowed for the introduction of state educational standards, school curricula and programmes, which together aim to introduce a competency-based model in schools. Focusing education on a set of key competencies is linked to a shift towards acquiring knowledge and skills, and implementing these in life. The focus is then strongly placed on identifying and considering the individual needs of a learner and tracking their individual progress.

This is also where there is a steady shift towards functional assessment of children's individual need for additional support for personal development. When assessing learners with possible special educational needs, disability and functioning are considered as a consequence of the interaction between the health condition and the environmental factors. This is in accordance with the World Health Organization (WHO)'s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), and takes into account WHO International Classification of Diseases ICD-10. This is also well-reflected in how the definition of 'special educational needs' is framed in the PSEA:

'special educational needs' of a learner are the educational needs that **may** arise in the event of sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, multiple disabilities, intellectual disabilities, language–speech disorders, specific disorders of the ability to learn, autistic spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders.



In this most up-to-date understanding of SEN in Bulgaria, it is assumed that SEN **may** occur in connection with the indicated disabilities and conditions, but it is also possible that this **may not** happen. In other words, the presence of a disability is not always a reason for the presence of special educational needs. This is a radical new understanding in the national policy in this area, which also predetermines the subsequent procedure and concept for the support of personal development. The PSEA also clearly regulates the philosophy of inclusive education, which not only replaces the previously existing 'integrated education' with 'inclusive education', but also develops it further, directing the overall concept towards all learners, not only to certain groups of learners.

At the moment, it can be said that Bulgaria is on the eve of entering the fourth stage of development of inclusive education, which can be conditionally named 'inclusion of the diversity of needs as a result of global crises'. This is presupposed by a number of events in the last few years, specifically the global COVID-19 pandemic and the migration processes related to military conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and currently Ukraine. It is expected that economic inequalities will deteriorate further as a result of inflation and the political situation on a global scale. This provokes all experts in the field of inclusive education worldwide to conceptualise new models of support in public education based on linguistic diversity, risk situations in families at a global level, health status of the population, and the manifestation, identification and prevention of new causes of increasing risk of dropping out of school education, and the constant digitisation of the process.

With regard to the Bulgarian model of inclusive education specifically, a continuation of strengthening the capacity of the support teams for personal development at school level is outlined on one hand, but on the other hand is the serious need to change the general pedagogical methods, which should be modified – and sometimes outright replaced – with ones which are adequate to reality and the current challenges (Damyanov, 2022).

1.5 Future education system developments that may impact positively or negatively on inclusive education

In 2021, the Bulgarian government adopted the [Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030](#). The document outlines nine priority areas, which are accompanied by a set of objectives and an extensive list of actions aimed at guiding the country's education improvement efforts.

These priority areas are:

1. Early childhood development
2. Competences and talents
3. Motivated and creative teachers
4. Cohesive school communities and systematic work with parents
5. Effective and lasting inclusion and educational integration
6. Educational innovation, digital transformation and sustainable development
7. Realisation in the professions of the present and the future



8. Lifelong learning

9. Effective management and participation in networks.

There is a clear commitment to continue implementing and building on the policies towards early and equal access to education, prevention of dropping out and reintegration in the education system. It is a priority to carry out measures that guarantee the sustainability of the process of educational integration, to help decrease inequalities, to encourage social inclusion, to motivate children and parents for education, and to engage parents as fully fledged participants in the educational process.

More importantly to inclusive education, the Strategic Framework calls for widening the opportunities for effective inclusion of learners with special educational needs, learners from vulnerable groups, including Roma children, asylum and refugee children, and migrants. This should happen in the context of an enhanced co-operation between the pre-primary and school education system, the state and local authorities in the social and health domains, educational mediators, parents and local communities. The overarching notion is to provide an inclusive, supportive, secure and safe educational environment that enables an effective educational process, health protection and promotion, and full personal development of the learners.

However, there is currently no implementation plan formally adopted, so it is yet to be seen how this vision will be detailed and operationalised.

The Ministry of Education and Science has approved the [Education Operational Programme](#) for the period 2021–2027. The first priority area is precisely Inclusive Education and Educational Integration. The new programme cycle certainly builds on the activities and results achieved during the previous operational programme, and it is also quite well in line with the other legislative and policy documents in Bulgaria. Comprehensive inclusive education is outlined as a priority across the different educational levels and also in the framework of the socio-economic integration of learners from vulnerable groups, including Roma children and migrants. The approach relies on the general and additional support for personal development, early diagnostics of learning difficulties and individual approach.

There is also policy continuation with regard to the inclusion of Roma, which is evident by the adoption of the [National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation \(2021–2030\)](#). The new strategy focuses on the priority areas of education, employment, housing and health, with equality, inclusion and participation being cross-cutting issues. In the area of education, the Ministry of Education and Science is identified as a key stakeholder that will ensure, inter alia:

- increased access to compulsory education;
- inclusive environment for learners from vulnerable groups, including Roma, according to their individual needs and interests;
- improved quality of education, upbringing and socialisation in educational institutions with concentration of learners from vulnerable groups.



Evaluative commentary

This section provides a qualified, evidenced-based reflection on the **challenges, opportunities and consequences** of developments towards inclusive education. It specifically considers political decisions that have impacted (positively or negatively) upon the vision for and implementation of inclusive education in the country. It also considers how changes in thinking around learners who are vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education have impacted upon policy and practice.

There has been a greater coherence between the elaboration and implementation of national policies in the area of education since the adoption of the Pre-School and School Education Act in 2016. The Act has guaranteed a set of circumstances needed for the comprehensive implementation of policies, as well as for co-ordination between the goals set in the PSEA and the strategic documents, and the social and economic goals of the state policy.

Pre-primary education has become a priority area in the past couple of years. A number of measures have been implemented to increase the access to pre-primary education, to motivate parents to co-operate actively with kindergartens, and to apply innovation in pre-primary education. Increasing the access of learners in compulsory pre-primary and school education, as well as decreasing the school drop-out rates, have been among the most important tasks in the educational area. There has already been a success in the case of increasing the access of learners from vulnerable groups, including Roma, to pre-primary and school education, as well as increasing their participation in secondary and tertiary education.

Against that context, the overall inclusion policy has been focused on creating the right conditions for personal development of each learner by eliminating the barriers to education and by creating opportunities for child development and participation in all aspects of life. At the same time, the system has enhanced the provision of support for the personal development of learners with special educational needs. This responsibility has been entrusted to the Regional Centres for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education. Special schools have also been reformed and modernised (there are currently five special schools in Bulgaria that provide education to learners with sensory disabilities).

The inclusive education policy is also supplemented by the implementation of other measures, such as to support all learners who have difficulties in acquiring the educational content, to offer career guidance so that learners are ready to transition to the next educational level, to motivate learners to continue their education and join the labour market.

Another positive development has been the set of digitisation measures that have been effectively adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic – this has allowed teaching and learning to continue in a digital environment and has guaranteed that no future disruptions due to different factors (e.g. flu outbreaks, climate and other factors) will disrupt the education process.



Remaining challenges

There are still a number of challenges to a comprehensive inclusion in the pre-primary and school education system in Bulgaria. Some of these can be summarised as follows:

- There are still difficulties to personalise education in accordance with the needs and interests of the individual learner, and the multicultural environment in general.
- Continuous existence of the so-called 'segregated schools' in bigger cities – these types of schools tend to form in separate neighbourhoods/areas of the city where there is a majority of Roma people. 'Secondary segregation' tends to occur as well, but rather in smaller localities where there is a majority of Roma population – in these cases, there is often only one school and Roma children are predominantly enrolled there.
- Young graduates experience difficulties on the labour market due to a mismatch between the attained skills and the requirements of the current economy.
- There is still a low participation in lifelong learning forms of education.

There is a lack of sustainable culture of creativity and innovation in the management of the institutions of the pre-primary and school education system, as well as in terms of co-operation and resource sharing among them.



SECTION 2. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

This section provides information on the structures and features of the whole education system that influence the development and implementation of inclusive education in the country.

2.1 Overview of the education system

The right to education is regulated in Article 53 of the [Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria](#). To complement, the Pre-school and School Education Act defines education as a process that brings learning, upbringing and socialising together. Since 2020, participation in education is compulsory from the age of 4 up to the age of 16 years. Education is free of charge at state and municipal kindergartens and schools.

Pre-primary education

In addition to the provisions of the Pre-school and School Education Act, pre-primary education is governed by the state educational standard set out in the respective [Ordinance on pre-school education](#). Pre-primary education shall lay the foundations for lifelong learning, providing for the physical, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, moral, social, emotional and creative development of learners, taking into consideration the importance of games in the pedagogical interaction process. Pre-primary education is provided by kindergartens, but it may also be provided by schools, which can arrange the necessary conditions for it.

Pre-primary education is compulsory from the school year in which a child reaches the age of 4 years, but not earlier than the school year in which the child reaches the age of 3 years. It is organised in four age groups: 3–4 year olds, 4–5 year olds, 5–6 year olds and 6–7 year olds. The school year lasts 12 months. Pre-primary education is provided on a full-day, half-day, hourly or individual organisation basis.

Pre-primary education creates conditions for the overall development of the child's personality and the acquisition of a set of competencies – knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for the child's successful transition to school education. It is a process of education, socialisation and training of children that is carried out as an interaction and co-operation with parents. Parents are participants and partners in pre-primary education together with children, teachers, principals and other educational professionals.

According to the [National Statistical Institute](#), there are 1,817 kindergartens as of the 2021/2022 school year.

School education

In addition to the provisions of the PSEA, school education is governed by the state educational standard set out in the respective Ordinance on the organisation of activities in school education.

All schools are co-educational. School education starts at the age of 7 years. At the parents' or guardians' decision, 6 year olds may enrol in school if their physical and mental



development allows this. School education according to the level is primary and secondary. Depending on the type of instruction, school education shall be general education, special profile education, and vocational training.

Therefore, the types of general education schools include primary (grade 1–4), basic (grade 1–7), integrated (grade 1–10), upper secondary (grade 8–12), or secondary (grade 1–8). In addition, the PSEA outlines three types of special schools:

- schools for teaching and supporting learners with sensory disabilities – impaired hearing or impaired vision;
- correctional boarding schools;
- social and pedagogical boarding schools.

Last but not least, there are also specialist schools that provide education in the fields of sports, arts, culture and for the needs of religious denominations.

The basic stage of education is divided into the primary stage (grade 1–4) and lower secondary stage (grade 5–7). Secondary education is divided into the first secondary stage (grade 8–10) and second secondary stage (grade 11–12). General upper secondary education is conducted in comprehensive schools (three and four years of education) and in specialised schools (four and five years of education).

Source: *European Commission, [Education and training monitor 2020](#)*

The objectives, school subjects and curricula, as well as the expected outcomes and competencies in school education are detailed in the state educational standards set out in the respective Ordinance on general education and Ordinance on special profile education. (Eurydice, [Legislation and official policy documents](#)).

According to the [National Statistical Institute](#), there are 1,948 general education schools, 417 vocational education schools and eight special schools (five schools for learners with sensory disabilities, two correctional boarding schools and one social-pedagogical boarding school) as of the 2021/2022 school year.

2.2 Specific features that are present within the education system

Early tracking of learners into a particular educational pathway (i.e. streaming learners by abilities into different types of provision or school; this includes placing children into separate schools)

The general and additional support for personal development, set out in the Ordinance on inclusive education, cannot be considered early tracking of learners into a particular educational pathway per se.

However, the formal assessment of individual needs of the learner, which precedes the provision of either type of support, allows for a timely identification of possible learning difficulties, but also the opportunities of the learner. Should general or additional support be needed, this assessment helps determine the specifics and duration of the individual plan.



In broader secondary education terms, some schools offer lower secondary vocational education and training, as well as specialised education too. Upon completing grade 7 and after sitting national standardised tests, learners can enrol at vocational or profiled schools ([GEM report](#)).

‘Double-shift’ patterns to the school day (i.e. learners attend for either a morning or afternoon session)

There are schools in Bulgaria where learners are taught in two shifts (morning and afternoon). The Ministry of Education and Science endeavoured to organise the one-shift school system in this regard, and the full-day training and activities for learners’ interests were introduced ([GEM report](#)).

Grade retention (i.e. holding learners back to repeat school years, instead of providing flexible support that enables learners to progress with their peers)

A learner who has an annual grade of ‘poor’ in a subject or module shall pass an examination for changing the grade for the subject or module under the terms and procedures established by the state educational standard for evaluating the learning outcomes of learners. A learner who did not pass the grade change exam repeats the class. Learners cannot repeat successfully completed classes and retake the same education in schools, except in the cases provided for in a normative act.

According to the PSEA Article 126 , paragraph 1, a learner with special educational needs shall not repeat the class. Furthermore, the same article details that:

- paragraph 2: For the training of a learner with special educational needs who has an annual mark ‘poor (2)’ in a school subject, upon the estimation of the support team for personal development, an individual school programme may be developed in the following grade in the relevant school subject;
- paragraph 3: In the cases under paragraph 2, where for the learner no individual school programme has been developed in a school subject in which they have a poor mark, during the following school year they shall sit an examination for a change of the mark in this subject ([GEM report](#)).

Multiple languages of instruction

The official language of instruction in kindergartens and schools is Bulgarian. However, schools where foreign languages are intensively studied can offer teaching of particular subjects in the given foreign language. These provisions are detailed in the state educational standard set out in the Ordinance on education curriculum.

Furthermore, Article 16 of the PSEA stipulates that learners whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian shall be provided with additional conditions – additional (extra-curricular) classes in Bulgarian – to assist the process of learning the language and integrating in the education system.

A dedicated state educational standard set out in the [Ordinance on mastering Bulgarian literary language](#) identifies the following groups of learners who can benefit from these additional conditions:

- learners from ethnic minority backgrounds;



- migrant children whose parents are citizens of the EU, the European Economic Area or Switzerland;
- asylum-seeking children or children who have been granted international protection;
- learners who are third-country nationals.

Lastly, learners whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian shall have the right to study their mother tongue as well.

Specific policies on access to compulsory education in local schools (i.e. school selection policies)

The PSEA creates conditions for equal access to education and training for all learners, including those with SEN and/or chronic diseases. The legislation recognises the right of every citizen to receive education and ensures its realisation without discrimination, not allowing restrictions or privileges based on race, sex, ethnic or social origin, religion or social status.

The Act also clearly defines that for learners seeking or granted international protection under the [Asylum and Refugees Act](#) (ARA), who are subject to compulsory pre-primary and school education, education is provided free of charge in the state and municipal schools in Bulgaria ([Policy reference](#)).

2.3 Public and private authorities responsible for different types of provision

Responsibilities for education in Bulgaria are organised across four governance levels: national, regional, municipal and school level. The basic characteristics of the administration of education are its further democratisation and decentralisation, as well as broadening the autonomy given to the educational institutions.

Public authorities/entities

Education policy is co-ordinated by the **Ministry of Education and Science**, which is responsible for informing and implementing strategic priorities and legislative acts, as established by the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers prepares and initiates laws, develops and adopts national programmes and strategies, and prepares and adopts secondary legislative acts, such as decrees, decisions, and regulations aimed at implementation of laws and other strategic documents.

Administrative territorial division of Bulgaria by the Constitution stipulates that the territory of the country is divided into regions and municipalities. The Council of Ministers determines and appoints the Regional governors who are bodies of the executive power in the relevant administrative units (regions). Each of Bulgaria's 28 administrative regions has a **Regional Department of Education** that reports to the MoES, and is responsible for helping to implement national pre-primary and school education policies.



Regional Centres for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education are specialist units at regional level for the promotion of inclusive education. According to the Regulations on the structure and activities of the Regional centres, these units:

- implement the state policy in support of the inclusive education process;
- provide organisational and methodological support to kindergartens and schools in terms of providing additional support for the personal development of learners;
- have responsibilities in reference to the qualification of pedagogical specialists relevant to inclusive education and additional support for the personal development of learners;
- provide resource support for learners.

The Regional centres have a co-ordinating, consultative, educational, diagnostic and methodological function in the field of inclusive education and additional support for the personal development of learners in the institutions of the pre-primary and school education system. The Regional centre responsible for the capital (Sofia city) can perform functions and activities at national level related to assisting the Ministry of Education and Science in organising and co-ordinating activities to provide additional support for the personal development of learners by consulting and offering methodological support to the Regional centres in the country.

The administrative territorial units in which local self-government takes place are called **Municipalities** – major administrative territorial units, where local self-government takes place as a legal person. Their status is settled in the local government legislation. The legislatively defined public political status of the municipality has three aspects: political, territorial and juridical. From the point of view of education, the most important is the status of the municipality as a legal entity. This status entitles the municipality to have its property and budget, such as municipal kindergartens and municipal schools ([Eurydice](#)).

The PSEA (Article 49) also discusses the **Personal development support centres** and their role in providing personal development support to all learners. Depending on their activity, the centres focus on:

- development of interests, capacities, competences and realisation in the field of sciences, technologies, arts and sports;
- career orientation and consultation;
- preventive, diagnostic, rehabilitative, correctional and re-socialising work with learners;
- resource support to learners with special educational needs;
- pedagogical and psychological support;
- implementation of support and educational programmes for the families of learners with disabilities.

Private entities

Private kindergartens and schools are those established by natural and/or legal persons as commercial companies, non-profit-making legal persons or co-operatives, or as companies



under the legislation of a member state. They are established, transformed, modified and terminated in accordance with the requirements of the PSEA and under the conditions and in accordance with the Commercial Act, the Non-Profit Legal Entities Act or the Co-operatives Act. As legal entities, they may have no other activity than that of a kindergarten or school, and must comply with the state educational standard for pre-primary and school education. They may carry out their activities only after being entered in the Registry of pre-primary and school education institutions under the conditions and in accordance with the PSEA. The Minister of Education and Science issues a certificate of registration.

Private kindergartens and schools are obliged to comply with the requirements of the PSEA and its implementing regulations. They may conduct education and issue documents for the completion of pre-primary education, or respectively for the completion of a grade, stage or level of school education in accordance with both the requirements of the PSEA and the legislation of another member state.

Private schools' curricula must meet the requirements of the state curriculum. However, they are free to supplement their curricula with additional activities, e.g. intensive foreign language teaching, music, arts, ecology, management, trade and marketing.

Private kindergartens and vocational colleges have been on the increase over the past few years. This is a result of market demands and a shortage of municipal kindergartens and pre-primary groups in schools ([Eurydice](#)).

2.4 Levels of autonomy open to educational institutions – schools, local authorities, school maintainers, etc. – within the system

According to Article 22 of the Pre-school and School Education Act, the state educational standards define the compulsory requirements for the outcomes of pre-primary and school education, as well as the terms and conditions to attain those. Therefore, the procedural and content part of the educational framework in Bulgaria is very well-regulated at the central level.

As part of broader decentralisation reforms, Bulgarian schools have been given autonomy to determine how they spend resources. Since 2008, schools have had a delegated budget, which means that although school funding is still dependent on government allocation, schools have full control over how to use their allocated budget. School principals are also responsible for appointing teachers and any other decisions related to managing the pedagogical staff.

In terms of organisation and school syllabus, kindergartens, schools and personal development support centres have been given certain autonomous rights within the overall context of the normative framework. Article 28 of the PSEA indicates that the institutions can determine their own development policies and rules of procedure, and choose the organisation and methods of education. They can also decide independently on the national and international programmes and projects they participate in. Furthermore, the institutions in the pre-primary and school education system have the right to define the profiles and professions they offer, to develop their own syllabi and distribute the education curriculum according to the needs of the learners. If needed and



relevant, state and municipal secondary and specialist schools can enter into agreements with state tertiary schools to provide joint education on profile and/or professional subjects. This also allows university academics to teach some or all subjects pertaining to the profile, professional or specialist school training.

Moreover, the PSEA (Article 38) allows for a stratum of schools (the so-called ‘innovative schools’) that can design and implement innovative elements in the entire school life, from the organisation and management to teaching environment and/or content of education. These schools can focus on using new teaching methods and developing new content, curricula or syllabi based on learner needs. There were 504 schools in all 28 regions of the country that have been granted ‘innovative school’ status in the 2020/2021 school year ([Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030](#)).

2.5 General mechanisms for funding schools

Public expenditure on education has reached 4.5% of GDP in 2021, which is in line with a positive trend in this area. Government spending on education increased by 14% between 2010 and 2018 – significantly faster than the EU average of 3.7%. However, Bulgaria remains among the countries with the lowest rates of government expenditure on education in the EU ([OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Bulgaria](#)).

The funding mechanisms in the pre-primary and school education system in Bulgaria are regulated in the Pre-school and School Education Act and further in the Ordinance on financing institutions in the pre-primary and school education system. According to the PSEA, activities in the pre-primary and school education system are currently financed by the state budget (around 97%), municipal budgets, European funds and programmes, and other sources.

The funds from the state budget are planned annually. The amount, as an absolute number and percentage of the gross domestic product, must not be lower than the amount set in the state budget for the previous year. The funds are allocated among the primary budget spending units, which finance state and municipal kindergartens and schools, based on:

- the number of learners;
- the number of groups and classes;
- the type and number of educational institutions;
- the standard per learner;
- the standard per group and class;
- the standard per educational institution.

The activities as per standards, which are financed entirely or partially by the state budget, are determined by the state educational standard for financing institutions in the pre-primary and school education system, which is detailed in the respective Ordinance.



The amount of funding as per standards are determined by a Council of Ministers act. They are determined based on:

- the content of the activities for learners' education and training;
- the type and specifics of the kindergarten or school;
- the form of training;
- the professional direction of the training;
- the geographical and demographic characteristics of the settlement, the municipality and the region where the educational institution is located, which lead to differences in the costs needed to ensure equal access to education;
- the need for pedagogical specialists to implement activities for the learners' education and training.

In order to ensure funding for the public institutions in the pre-primary and school education system, the PSEA established a 'conceptual' funding framework based on four pillars defined according to the purpose of funding:

1. carrying out activities aimed at the education and upbringing of learners;
2. ensuring equal access to schooling and supporting the development of the learner's personality;
3. developing kindergartens, schools, and personal development support centres;
4. implementing national programmes for education development.

Within each pillar, there are different funding streams aimed at providing the resources needed to achieve the defined purpose.

The **first pillar** constitutes the main funding stream for school education. Most of these funds are allocated to the municipalities based on unified cost standards (UCS) for each type of educational institution. Each municipality receives its own allocation based on a per learner UCS disaggregated by different types of educational institutions. Once the municipality receives the funds, it transfers them to schools based on its own formula. In addition to the stream of funds for the provision of basic education, this pillar also covers additional streams of funds for learners from vulnerable groups, for the maintenance of protected schools, and for the maintenance of technical and vocational education and training classes that provide training in protected professions and in professions that are expected to experience a shortage of workers in the labour market.

Within the **second pillar**, various specific-purpose grants are transferred to municipalities to ensure equal access to education and foster personal development. These grants cover:

- scholarships;
- transportation for learners;
- the provision of free textbooks and educational materials;
- the full-day organisation of education and meals;
- recreation and sports;



- personal development support;
- support for talented learners.

The funding streams within the **third pillar** are intended to support the development of educational institutions. This includes funding for improving school facilities, purchasing or funding capital repairs of fixed tangible assets, resourcing libraries and information services, funding teacher in-service training and development, providing teachers with support for transportation and rent, and meeting other costs aimed at improving the physical environment and the quality of the educational process.

Under the **fourth pillar**, funding is provided for the implementation of centrally defined national programmes for the development of education. This is a flexible mechanism for resourcing interventions and school activities that cannot be financed by the institutional funding provided under the first three pillars. The terms and conditions for the allocation of funds are set out in each national programme. Funds are transferred from the state budget to the MoES budget and from the MoES one to the respective municipality for approved school projects. Municipalities then transfer the funds to schools but have only a limited say in how the funds are allocated.

Funding per type of educational institution

Almost all **kindergartens** and preparatory groups at schools are municipal and they are funded by the municipal budgets. Their annual budget is individual – formed on the basis of the UCS and the number of enrolled learners.

Schools providing **general education** are mainly municipal – 90%. They are also funded by the municipal budgets individually by the UCS based on the number of enrolled learners in the school. The amount of the standard differs according to the specification of the location of the school, the existing profile (music, art, choreography, etc.), forms of education (day, evening, extramural, correspondence, individual, independent, distant), existing dormitories, etc.

Arts, culture and sport schools are also funded based on the number of enrolled learners but their UCS is set differently.

Vocational schools are mainly state-owned – approximately 90%. They are funded by the state budget through the Ministry of Education and Science. Their budgets are individual according to the amount of the UCS and the number of enrolled learners. The form of education is daily and the amount of the standard differs generally according to the vocational area (transport, agriculture and livestock breeding, forestry, reserve, fish industry, veterinary medicine, architecture, ICT, administration, social services, etc.).

The schools for learners with special needs are funded by standards according to the special needs, health care services and hostel accommodation ([Eurydice](#)).



2.6 Specific mechanisms for funding the inclusion of learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

Based on the existing funding modalities in the education system, learners in public pre-primary and school education can benefit from a number of financial support types:

- scholarships and support for talented learners;
- transportation for learners;
- educational materials, textbooks and study materials for free use and for the school library;
- all-day organisation of school and meals;
- activities related to general and additional support for personal development;
- activities related to learners' recreation and sports;
- school programmes to prevent school drop-out and reduce the number of early school leavers;
- support for the payment of fees due by the parents for feeding children in compulsory pre-primary education, outside the one financed by the state;
- compensation of expenses for the upbringing and education of children who cannot attend pre-primary education due to a lack of places in state and municipal kindergartens and schools;
- other activities, which help increase the scope and equal access to education.

There are few types of scholarships/grants that learners in the state and municipal schools can benefit from after the completion of grade 8:

- learners with special educational needs and learners without parents or with one parent;
- learners with monthly income per family member under the official minimum salary rate and grade point average higher than 'Very good 4.50';
- learners with grade point average not lower than 'Excellent 5.50' during the last school term (the highest mark is 'Excellent 6.00').

When the learner covers more than one or all of the above mentioned criteria, they have to choose only one of the grant options.

There are also scholarships and grants for talented learners:

- one-year scholarships for talented learners who have achieved first, second or third place at national or international Olympiads and competitions;
- single grant at the amount of three-fold the guaranteed minimum monthly salary for the country for talented learners, who have achieved first, second or third place at national or international Olympiads and competitions;
- social benefits (accommodation, meals, transportation).



Where a school has its own dormitories, the state budget covers the expenditures concerning the hostels and the learners accommodated there pay a minimum fee.

In most of the schools there are canteens. The budget can cover part of the amount concerning these expenditures and the learners pay the rest by buying a coupon. Through the national programmes for development of school education, additional budget resources are given for breakfast or lunch in schools for the learners from grades 1 to 4.

The municipalities provide to learners up to 16 years of age, in a populated area where there is no appropriate school, a free transportation and/or boarding school education in a central school in the closest populated area in the territory of the municipality or of a neighbouring municipality. Learners from grades 1 to 7 are also entitled to free textbooks ([Eurydice](#)).

Funds for implementing resource support for learners with special educational needs are provided to the kindergartens and schools where they are educated. This is also applicable to private kindergartens and schools. If kindergartens or schools cannot provide resource support according to the state educational standard for inclusive education, the funding is provided to the respective municipality, which organises the resource support at personal development support centres, at centres for special educational support in the respective municipality, or for assignment under the terms and conditions in Article 198 of the PSEA. If the municipality cannot provide resource support according to the state educational standard for inclusive education, the funding is provided to the respective Regional Centre for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education. The funds for implementing activities related to general and additional support for personal development may sometimes be provided to children's social services, licensed by order of the Social Services Act (European Agency, [Country information](#)).

Evaluative commentary

This section provides a qualified, evidenced-based reflection on the **challenges, opportunities and consequences** of system features and structures for the implementation of inclusive education in practice. It specifically considers the impact of policy-making, structures and processes at national, regional, local and school levels on inclusive education practice.

Legislation and policy framework

Bulgaria has undertaken several large-scale education reforms over the past years to address inefficiencies and inequities in the system. In 2007, the country began to rationalise its school network in the context of demographic trends. Another cycle of major reforms was introduced in 2016 with the Pre-school and School Education Act, which has sought to modernise the country's curriculum – through a new emphasis on competencies and learner-centred approaches – and make education more inclusive. This trend has been preserved in the high-level policy documents that guide the vision for socio-economic development of the country in the coming years.



Education and skills development have been identified as one of the 13 national priorities under the government's 10-year national development strategy, [National Development Programme Bulgaria 2030](#), adopted in 2020. In line with overall objectives set by Bulgaria 2030, the Ministry of Education and Science has developed a [Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030](#), which is a more detailed long-term strategy focused exclusively on the education sector. One of the identified priority areas in the strategic framework is focused on effective and lasting inclusion, with specific objectives in the areas of eliminating regional, social and economic barriers to education, supporting the development of education professionals, applying an individualised approach to the needs of every learner, supporting meaningful participation of learners with special educational needs in the education process, and educational integration of learners from vulnerable groups, among others.

However, there is no clear prioritisation of the most important issues and actions under these broad areas and there are a limited number of indicators to help direct and monitor progress. At the time of writing, the Ministry had not yet put in place an implementation plan for the strategy. However, in December 2021, the government announced plans for a new education programme to start revising and updating laws regulating the sector with the goal of making education more inclusive and improving co-ordination among stakeholders at the school level, state and local authorities, as well as across society.

Financing

Bulgaria's new school funding model aims to direct more financial resources towards small kindergartens and schools, helping to smooth out disparities in the pre-tertiary school system. However, educational infrastructure in many regions remains under-funded, with schools often lacking basic facilities or equipment. Although the government has plans to link external school evaluation results to additional funds, this will not be made available until all schools have been inspected, which will take time. Finally, governance issues contribute to the misalignment between the provision of quality education and funding. For example, municipalities have no real decision-making power when it comes to questions related to school quality, such as hiring municipal school principals or teaching staff ([OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Bulgaria](#)).



SECTION 3. LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

This section provides information on the overall framework of legislation and policy governing the whole of the education system in the country.

3.1 Is there a single legislation and policy framework covering all learners in all educational settings?

Yes.

3.1a Description of the single legislation and policy framework

The **Pre-school and School Education Act** was promulgated in 2016, regulating all aspects of education in Bulgaria. It regards education as a national priority, guided by the following principles:

- single state policy to guarantee the right to pre-primary and school education;
- focus on the the interest and motivation of the learner, as well the social and age changes in their life, and their capacity to put the attained capacities in practice;
- equal access to quality education and inclusion of each learner;
- equality and non-discrimination in delivering pre-primary and school education;
- preservation and development of the Bulgarian educational tradition;
- humanism and tolerance;
- preservation of the cultural diversity and inclusion through Bulgarian language;
- innovation and effectiveness of the teaching practices and in the organisation of the educational process based on scientific evidence and predicted innovation outcomes;
- transparency of the governance process and predictability of the pre-primary and school education development;
- autonomy of the education policy implementation, self-governance and decentralisation;
- commitment of the state, municipalities and not-profit entities, employers, parents and other relevant stakeholders, and a dialogue among them on educational matters.

In addition, raising participation in early childhood education and care is a central priority for Bulgaria. The benefits of having children enrol in education at a young age in terms of long-term development and equity are recognised in the decision to make pre-primary education compulsory for children from 4 years of age as of 2021. The compulsory pre-primary education is carried out in kindergartens and schools, where there are effective conditions for this. This measure aims to facilitate access to education by removing barriers and addressing inequalities, thus working towards prevention of social



exclusion and subsequently dropping out of school by learners from vulnerable groups. This step can also help ensure support for addressing learning difficulties through early needs identification.

According to Article 22 of the PSEA, the **state educational standards** define the compulsory requirements for the overall results in the pre-primary and school education system, as well as the terms and conditions to achieve those. These standards cover all learners in pre-primary and school education, but also contain provisions to address specific needs of different groups of learners, e.g. learners with special educational needs, learners at risk, etc. Currently, there are 19 standards covering the following areas:

1. pre-primary education;
2. mastering Bulgarian literary language;
3. curriculum;
4. general education;
5. special profile education;
6. vocational qualification attainment;
7. inclusive education;
8. civic, health, environmental and intercultural education;
9. assessment of the results of learners' education;
10. information and documentation;
11. institutions;
12. physical environment and information and library services at kindergartens, schools, and personal development support centres;
13. knowledge books, textbooks and teaching aids;
14. status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists;
15. quality management in institutions;
16. inspections at kindergartens and schools;
17. financing institutions;
18. labour rating and remuneration;
19. organisation of activities in school education.

3.1b Overview of the general education legislation and policy framework guiding the whole system

Not applicable.



3.1c Overview of the specific education legislation and policy framework impacting on the inclusion of learners who are vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

Various legislative acts have provisions for learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education. The **Pre-school and School Education Act (PSEA)** is the primary source of provisions related to inclusive education, which is identified as one of the foundational principles of the Act:

[Inclusive education is] the process of understanding, accepting and supporting the individuality of each learner and the variety of needs of all learners through involvement and inclusion of resources aimed at removing the obstacles to teaching and learning, and creating opportunities for development and participation of learners in all aspects of life in the community.

Section 1, item 6 of the Supplementary provisions in the PSEA identifies different groups of learners at risk, which may contribute to unfavourable development and risk of exclusion from the education system. As per definition, 'learners at risk' are learners who:

- are deprived of parental care or have parents who are deceased, unknown, deprived of parental rights or exercise restricted parental rights;
- are victims of abuse, violence, exploitation, or any other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment within or outside the family;
- are exposed to the threat of damage to their physical, mental, moral, intellectual and social development.

Following the spirit of the definition of inclusive education, the state educational standard set out in the respective **Ordinance on inclusive education** discusses the provision of two types of support for personal development – general and additional, which are offered according to the individual educational needs of each learner. Both types of support are provided at kindergartens, schools and the personal development support centres. Teachers and pedagogical specialists are, by and large, responsible for the general support, while the additional one is delivered by professionals relevant to the individual support plan for the learner (these professionals can be teachers, teaching advisors, resource tutors, psychologists, speech therapists or other specialists, if needed).

In addition to the provisions about general and additional support, the Ordinance on inclusive education determines the terms and conditions for:

- approval of individual syllabus and curriculum for learners with special educational needs or learners with outstanding talents;
- admission and organisation of education for learners with special educational needs in special schools for teaching and support of learners with sensory disabilities;
- education of learners in special educational support centres;
- referral of learners with special educational needs graduating from grades 7 and 10 to profile classes, such as foreign languages, natural sciences, information technology, etc., or to vocational training.



The general or additional support for personal development is detailed after an assessment of the individual needs of each learner. In pre-primary education, the pedagogical specialists are responsible to assess the following aspects:

- early development assessment of the learner and the risk of learning difficulties;
- need for additional modules for learners who do not master the Bulgarian language;
- assessment of individual needs for additional support for the development of the learner, carried out by a team for support of personal development;
- difficulties in the physical, cognitive, linguistic, social, sensor, emotional and creative development of the learner in relation to learners in the same age group;
- presence of risk factors and circumstances in the learner's environment;
- presence of chronic diseases that hamper the learner's education and inclusion in the activities at the kindergarten;
- presence of pronounced strengths of the learner in the area of arts and sports.

Later on, within the school education stage, the Ordinance introduces the possibility for an assessment of individual needs, which is carried out by a team for support of personal development. This assessment looks at a learner's strengths, difficulties, potential for optimal development, participation in the educational process, and opportunities for realisation.

The [People with Disabilities Act](#) reiterates the role of the Ministry of Education and Science in providing conditions for equal access to quality education and inclusion of learners with disabilities, including learners with special educational needs. This commitment is to be carried out by the institutions in the pre-primary and school education system according to the provisions for general and additional support for the optimal development of each learner.

In addition, there are several other legislative documents that address the risk of exclusion from the education system. They regulate different educational, social and other measures in order to ensure conditions and opportunities for all learners to learn and develop their potential, to live and participate as full citizens in a modern society, regardless of their origin, health condition, abilities and special needs:

The **National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (2021–2030)** was adopted in 2022. The Ministry of Education and Science is the leading institution responsible for implementing the objectives of the Strategy in the 'Education and Training' priority area. The Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities, which is a secondary budget spending unit at the MoES, supports the implementation of the policy for educational integration, intercultural education, and work with parents and community representatives, including educational mediators.

The [Asylum and Refugees Act](#), together with the thematic Ministry of Education [Ordinance on the terms and conditions for admission and training of persons seeking or having received international protection](#), guarantee that people seeking asylum or having



a refugee status are guaranteed the same rights and conditions of education as Bulgarian citizens.

3.2 Is there a single curriculum framework covering all learners in all educational settings?

Yes

3.2a Description of the single curriculum framework

The overall education curriculum in Bulgaria is developed and adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science as a state educational standard, set out in the respective Ordinance on education curriculum. This standard defines:

- the characteristics, content and structure of the education curriculum;
- the framework education curricula depending on the level and type of education and the specifics and form of education;
- the structure of school and individual plans, as well as the terms and conditions of their adoption;
- the requirements to the school education curricula at the innovative schools.

The structure of the school syllabus covers three groups of school classes:

- Section A – compulsory school classes – general education preparation in accordance with the state standard for general education;
- Section B – elective school classes – designed for a number of subjects in the area of profile, specific, general extended or professional preparation and contribute to content that is already integrated in other school subjects;
- Section C – optional school classes – additional preparation through subjects, modules and/or activities that the school can offer in response to the learners' interests and in support of developing their talents; these can be mother tongue instruction, religion, choreography and a foreign language;
- Section D – special school subjects – applicable to special schools for learners with sensory disabilities and intended to strengthen their overall development.

Furthermore, the detailed results in terms of attained knowledge, skills and attitudes in the array of school subjects are listed per subject area in the two state educational standards, set out in the respective Ordinance on general education and Ordinance on special profile education.

All learners are taught according to the curriculum set out in this state educational standard. However, Article 20 provides for an individual learning plan for a given learner in a particular grade. This is possible for learners following an individual form of education, learners with special educational needs, and learners with outstanding talents. Individual plans must follow the provisions of the general curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education and Science in the respective subjects.



3.2b Overview of the general curriculum framework

Not applicable.

3.2c Overview of specific curriculum framework(s) for different groups of learners who are vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

In the case that a learner's assessment of individual needs indicates a need for an individual learning plan, the school authorities and specialists must follow the provisions in the Ordinance on inclusive education. Individual learning plans are possible for learners with special educational needs and learners with visual and hearing impairments. The latter can enrol in special schools, where teaching covers both general education subjects and special subjects, related to the type of impairment or disorder of the learner.

The provisions for an individual plan for learners with hearing impairment include both subjects from the general education curriculum (Bulgarian language and literature, mathematics, environment, arts/tactile art, music, etc.) and special subjects covering hearing and speech rehabilitation, development of verbal speech, phonetic rhythm, music stimulation, sign interpretation of songs and rhythm, pronunciation, speech and object activity. They are designed to support the overall development of learners with impaired hearing, and help the development of skills for independent life by means of total communication.

Similarly, learners with visual impairment follow some of the general education subjects (Bulgarian language and literature, mathematics, environment, arts/tactile art, music, etc.) and also benefit from special subjects – such as visual support, orientation and mobility, and social skills – whose goal is to help them develop skills for independent life.

Only learners with multiple mental impairments and multiple disabilities are taught at schools for learners with intellectual disabilities. Individual educational programmes for learners with multiple impairments focus on the following areas: general motor development (fine and gross motor skills), self-service skills, cognitive skills, speech-language development and communication, social skills, artistic activity, labour therapy and earning activity.

3.3 Is there a single legislation and policy framework for all teacher education and professional development?

Yes.

3.3a Description of the single legislation and policy framework for teacher education and professional development

The Ordinance on the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists (Eurydice, [Legislation and official policy documents](#)) defines:

- the functions, education and professional qualifications that are needed to exercise the responsibilities of teachers, principals and the other pedagogical specialists in the pre-primary and school education system;
- the powers of the principals in the pre-primary and school education system;



- the terms and conditions of organising and implementing the practical preparation of trainee teachers;
- the professional profiles;
- the terms and conditions of enhancing the qualification of the pedagogical specialists, attaining professional qualification levels and system of qualification credits;
- the goals, functions and content of the professional portfolio;
- the terms and conditions of career development of pedagogical specialists;
- the terms and conditions of appraisal of pedagogical specialists.

In addition, the Strategic Framework for Development of Education, Training and Learning in Republic Of Bulgaria (2021–2030) outlines that investments in the development and qualification of pedagogical specialists are a priority in the education system. The goal is not only to increase their remuneration, but also to enhance the status of the teaching profession in the medium and long term. It is also essential to provide the system with trained and motivated teachers. Effective implementation of a sustainable policy for overcoming the shortage of teachers in the education system has already started. In this regard, as well as to motivate young people to choose the teaching profession, one of the main measures is the government's policy to gradually increase funding for the period from 2017 to 2021. Funds have been doubled for the four-year term.

3.3b Overview of the general legislation and policy framework for teacher education and professional development

Not applicable.

3.3c Overview of specific legislation and policy framework for teacher education and professional development and what and who this specific framework focuses on

The Ordinance on the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists sets the prerequisites for enhancing the recognition and social status of the pedagogical specialists, and builds a system for continuous qualification for professional improvement and career development.

According to the Pre-school and School Education Act, pedagogical specialists are obliged to improve their skills annually, improve the quality of their work and the results and quality of learners' education. Principals in kindergartens, schools and personal development support centres must provide the necessary conditions for continuing professional development of the pedagogical specialists. Continuous professional development activities for teachers are organised and co-ordinated by universities and their qualification departments, by schools, the Regional Department of Education and the Ministry of Education and Science. A system of qualification credits and certification documents measures improvements in pedagogical specialists' qualifications.

The state requirements to obtain the professional qualification 'teacher' have been amended. Alternative ways to enter the teaching profession are provided. The curricula and programmes of the higher education institutions are being updated in order to introduce the competence approach in the education of the learners in the pedagogical



specialties. Courses such as ‘Competence approach and innovations in education’, ‘Inclusive education’, ‘Information and communication technologies in teaching and working in a digital environment’ and others, have been introduced. Measures are also implemented to increase the competencies of academics at public universities preparing future teachers, which are aimed at encouraging teamwork between teachers in pedagogical specialties, and the creation of inter-university centres and networks for sharing personal experience and successful practices ([Eurydice](#)).

3.4 Is there a single legislation and policy framework to ensure support for all learners throughout their school careers?

Yes.

3.4a Description of the single legislation and policy framework that ensures support for all throughout their school careers

It is the Pre-School and School Education Act and its state educational standards, particularly the one on inclusive education, that ensure and define the type of support that all learners can receive throughout their entire pre-primary and school career.

3.4b Overview of the general legislation and policy framework that ensures support for the majority of learners throughout their school careers

Not applicable.

3.4c Overview of the specific legislation and policy framework that ensures support for learners who are vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education throughout their school careers

All the legislative and policy framework documents mentioned under section 3.1c ensure support for learners who are vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education throughout their entire school career.

Legislation:

- Pre-school and School Education Act and state educational standards set out in the respective Ordinances
- People with Disabilities Act
- Child Protection Act
- Asylum and Refugees Act.

Policy framework documents:

- National Development Programme: Bulgaria 2030
- Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030
- National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (2021–2030).



3.5 Is there a single legislation and policy framework to ensure support for all learners at times of transition between phases of education and into adult life?

Yes

3.5a Description of the single legislation and policy framework that ensures support for all learners at times of transition between phases of education and into adult life

The adoption of the Pre-school and School Education Act allowed for the promulgation of state educational standards, school curricula and programmes, which aim to introduce a competency-based model in school. Focusing education on a set of key competencies is linked to a shift towards attaining knowledge and skills, and implementing these in life. This changes the role of the teacher from a provider of information to a partner and mentor. The main goal of teaching is to apply new methods and approaches, and make education more attractive and practice-oriented, and encourage a positive attitude to lifelong learning. However, participation in different lifelong learning opportunities remains rather limited.

The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030) outlines lifelong learning in a separate priority area, aimed at creating attractive and flexible opportunities for the acquisition of basic skills, new competences, qualifications and retraining in the formal education system and in non-formal learning, as well as creating conditions for non-formal learning. Each choice of individual education, training and learning strategies will be encouraged, supported and developed. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Science will take initiatives and synchronise its actions with other institutions, such as the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Employment Agency, as well as organisations, municipalities, vocational schools and local businesses to ‘close the circle’ of services – providing support for literacy and learning content, obtaining qualifications for employment.

There are two specific objectives within the lifelong learning priority area:

Objective 1

To expand the opportunities for lifelong learning, the following activities will be implemented:

- update and effectively implement a national qualification framework for lifelong learning;
- improve the mechanisms for validation of knowledge and skills in vocational education and training attained through non-formal or informal learning, as well as on the basis of work experience;
- offer systematic career guidance and counselling of learners at each stage of their studies to identify their vocational interests;
- create an integrated system of career guidance and vocational education and training for learners and adults;



- promote learning among all segments of the population to participate in forms of lifelong learning;
- develop and expand the adult literacy system to develop individual skills for access to the labour market;
- include persons who have not completed secondary education in forms of education and training;
- encourage and implement measures to ensure a permeability between secondary and tertiary education, allowing flexible and motivating pathways for research interests and vocational training;
- ensure access to open educational resources for lifelong learning for all.

Objective 2

To provide conditions for promoting lifelong learning, the following activities are planned:

- expand the range of learning opportunities by promoting formal education, non-formal learning and informal learning, and motivating individuals;
- involve pedagogical professionals in qualification courses to master teaching techniques for youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training, with priority given to the acquisition of digital skills and digital learning methods;
- raise awareness among stakeholder communities of the opportunities offered by lifelong learning;
- offer qualification of the population to allow re-integration into the labour market;
- create professional communities of teachers/trainers for the exchange of good practices in adult learning, mutual learning through open educational resources, content creation and sharing;
- create a network of 'second chance' schools;
- encourage mobility within European and international programmes of learners and staff, and transnational co-operation of education and training providers;
- use learning platforms and share effective models to support high-quality and inclusive education and lifelong learning;
- develop a methodology for quality assurance in adult education and training;
- promote partnerships with stakeholders related to youth and adult learning and education.

In terms of result or impact indicators for the priorities and activities set out in the Strategy, we can see a pattern of:

- increasing participation in formal education (e.g. increased percentage of 4-year-old learners in pre-primary education, increased percentage of 7-year-old learners in school education, increased number of years within the formal education system, etc.);



- decreasing risk factors or unfavourable outcomes (e.g. decreasing school drop-out rates).

3.5b Overview of the general legislation and policy framework that ensures support for the majority of learners at times of transition between phases of education and into adult life

Not applicable.

3.5c Overview of the specific legislation and policy framework that ensures support for learners who are vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education at times of transition between phases of education and into adult life

One of the core national priorities that requires the unified efforts of Bulgarian society is concerned with the transition of Bulgarian education into an efficient system, which forms an integral part of pan-European educational space. Therefore, the state policy in the field of education is directed towards the acceleration of its modernisation and development, and at the same time, keeping the traditional values of the Bulgarian education system. In the last couple of years, a number of concrete steps have been taken to harmonise Bulgarian legislation with European legislation, in view of opening up the Bulgarian education system and assuring equal access to quality education for every learner.

Along with the legislative changes in the sphere of pre-primary education and training, school and higher education, certain conditions and basic principles were regulated to provide a supportive environment for learners with different kind of disabilities and of disadvantaged position, to allow their equal and full participation in the educational process, in external evaluation of learners of grades 4, 7 and 8, and at state matriculation examinations. Measures for building a supportive environment are related both to the provision of architectural, information and communication access at schools and universities, and to the development of special syllabi and educational programmes, printing adapted textbooks and teaching aides, teacher training, etc. ([Eurydice](#)).

Evaluative commentary

This section provides a qualified, evidenced-based reflection on the **challenges, opportunities and consequences** of the legislative and policy framework for inclusive education in practice. It specifically considers the main challenges and opportunities for effectively translating policy into regional, local and school level practice.

Investment in the development and professional qualification of the pedagogical specialists is another key priority of the education system in Bulgaria. The national-level policies are in accordance with the current trends in modern education – there is a conceptual shift from the notion of a direct transfer of knowledge from teachers to learners, to a paradigm that allows development of critical thinking skills, teamwork and personal development.

The aim is not only to increase the income of the professionals, but also to elevate the status of the teaching profession in the mid- and long term. The need to have prepared and motivated teachers has been definitively identified in the strategic documents in the



education area. Certain amendments to the state requirements to obtain the professional qualification of a ‘teacher’ have been made to this end, in terms of increased practical preparation, alternative routes to the teaching profession, enhanced further qualification and career development, etc. These measures are considered a step in the right direction but their long-term results on improving the quality of education remain to be seen. The Ministry of Education and Science will also have to effectively address the emerging shortages of teachers, particularly in rural areas, where the concentration of learners from vulnerable communities is higher.

In addition, the past couple of years have been marked by higher engagement with pre-primary education, as a key milestone in child development. Increasing the access to pre-primary education has been central, coupled with measures to motivate parents to contribute actively to the co-operation between the family unit and the kindergarten, and to encourage innovation at that education level. A 2020 amendment to the Pre-school and School Education Act called for compulsory pre-primary education of 4-year-old children. This goes hand in hand with supporting parents with kindergarten-related fees and financial compensations for children who are not enrolled in state or municipal kindergarten due to lack of places.

However, there is a continuous challenge to implement quality and integrated policies in pre-primary education due to the fragmented ecosystem of institutions and care and education services at this level. There is also room for improvement in terms of co-operation and co-ordination between the different institutional levels when providing support, which is focused on the individual progress of any learner. The educational stakeholders are yet to intensify their efforts to personalise education according to the individual needs and interests of the learner and the multicultural environment in general.



SECTION 4. SYSTEM GOVERNANCE

This section provides information on aspects of governance across and between different system levels, bodies and stakeholders in the country.

4.1 Shared responsibilities across and between central and local government

The basic characteristics of the administration of education are its further democratisation and decentralisation as well as broadening the autonomy given to the education establishments. The administration of school education is organised at four levels: national, regional, municipal and school level. For the purposes of the current mapping, we enlist authorities with special powers for promotion and implementation of inclusive education in Bulgaria.

The state policy in the area of pre-primary and school education is performed by the Council of Ministers. Once every two years, within the term of up to 31 March, the Minister of Education and Science introduces to the National Assembly a report on the application of the principles and on the achievement of the objectives of pre-primary and school education in compliance with the Pre-school and School Education Act.

Information on the powers of different bodies and authorities within the education system is provided in section 4.2 below.

At central level

The Minister of Education and Science directs and co-ordinates the conduct of the state policy in the area of pre-primary and school education. The Minister of Education and Science is a specialised authority for governing the pre-primary and school education system. The Minister of Education and Science exercises control over the activity of all institutions in the pre-primary and school education system (Article 251, PSEA).

According to the [Rules of Procedure of the Ministry of the Education and Science](#), the respective Minister is a central sole body of the executive power for the implementation of state policy in the field of education and science. The Minister exercises their powers in accordance with the Constitution and laws of the country by:

- conducting state policy and developing a strategy for the development of education and science that is also in line with EU-wide policy;
- conducting the state investment policy in the field of education and science;
- preparing draft international treaties and agreements and ensuring the implementation of international agreements in the field of education and science to which the Republic of Bulgaria is a party;
- representing the Republic of Bulgaria in international education and science organisations;



- allocating and controlling the spending of the financial resources allocated by the state budget for education and science;
- leading and co-ordinating the development of models for management, structure, control and resourcing in the field of education and science;
- organising the development and implementation of national programmes for the development of secondary and tertiary education and of qualification and retraining programmes;
- co-ordinating the implementation of national programmes and projects for scientific research and the development of scientific potential in accordance with trends in the development of science;
- managing, organising and co-ordinating programmes and projects in the field of education and science funded by international and foreign organisations and financial institutions;
- managing and co-ordinating the management of state property and the development of the material and technical base for the education and science systems;
- co-ordinating the implementation of social policy on employment and income levels in the field of education and science;
- managing, organising and supervising the staffing and administrative support of the education and science systems, and the introduction and functioning of information technology in education and science.

The [National Inspectorate of Education at the Council of Ministers](#) is a body for external inspection of kindergartens and schools for independent assessment of the quality of the provided education.

The Regulations on the structure, activities and organisation of work of the [Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities](#) provides the following powers to the centre:

- to develop, implement and finance programmes and projects for educational integration aimed at promoting equal access to quality education and improving the learning outcomes of learners from ethnic minorities;
- to ensure the equal access to quality education through joint education of learners from different ethnic backgrounds, through creation of an inclusive environment for the education and socialisation of learners from different ethnic backgrounds.

At regional level

[28 Regional Departments of Education](#) – The Regional Departments of Education are territorial administrative structures under the authority of the Minister of Education and Science. They are located in the administrative centre of each of the 28 regions of the country. Their main task is to create the conditions for the implementation of the state education policy on the territory of the region. They ensure the conditions for the functioning of the institutions in the pre-primary and school education system on the



territory of the district. They also co-ordinate the interaction between the institutions in the pre-primary and school education systems, the territorial bodies of the executive power, the bodies of the local self-government, the leaderships of the regional structures of the representative organisations of employees and employers. They monitor the compliance with state educational standards, the Pre-school and School Education Act, the [Vocational Education and Training Act](#) (VET Act) and other regulations in the pre-primary and school education system by the institutions in the territory of the respective region ([Eurydice](#)).

Regional Centres for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education – specialist units at regional level for the promotion of inclusive education. In accordance with the [Regulations on the structure and activities of the Regional Centres for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education](#), these units:

- implement state policy in support of the inclusive education process;
- provide organisational and methodological support to kindergartens and schools in terms of providing additional support for personal development of learners;
- have responsibilities in reference to the qualification of pedagogical specialists relevant to inclusive education and additional support for the personal development of learners;
- provide resource support for learners.

The Regional centres have a co-ordinating, consultative, educational, diagnostic and methodological function in the field of inclusive education and additional support for the personal development of learners in the institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education. They also have functions related to the qualification activity of pedagogical specialists in the field of inclusive education and additional support to the personal development of learners.

The Regional centre responsible for the capital (Sofia City) can perform functions and activities at national level related to assisting the Ministry of Education and Science in organising and co-ordinating activities to provide additional support for the personal development of learners by consulting and supporting methodologically the Regional centres in the country.

At local level

Education governance at the local level is carried out by municipalities. The municipality is the basic administrative-territorial unit of local self-government in the Republic of Bulgaria. Municipal education authorities are part of the state territorial structure and are involved in the implementation of the municipalities' education policy. Municipalities are territorial administrative bodies that are not included in the management structure of the education system, but by the terms of the Pre-school and School Education Act, they perform important functions and assume responsibilities for the education in their locality. They conduct and supervise:

- compulsory school education up to the age of 16 years;
- health and security provision in kindergartens and schools;



- funds for the maintenance, construction, furnishing and major repairs of schools, kindergartens and service units;
- facilities for canteen meals, dormitories, recreation, sports facilities and transportation of learners and teachers, and free transportation of learners up to the age of 16 years for central schools;
- scholarships and special allowances to learners.

Municipal institutions in the pre-primary and school education system are financed through the municipal budget. Within the powers available to it, municipalities monitor the enrolment of learners in schools and the coverage of children subject to compulsory pre-school education before their entry in the first grade. They take measures to prevent adolescents from dropping out of the education system, allocate earmarked funds, and create appropriate conditions for the development of learners' abilities and interests.

The municipalities shall pursue an active policy in the education sector in accordance with their statutory powers, which shall promote:

- equal access to quality education and inclusion of every learner;
- equality and non-discrimination in pre-primary and school education;
- co-ordinated and efficient allocation of learners to appropriate classes;
- support for pre-primary education in all eligible areas;
- stimulation of development in centre schools;
- upgrading of school facilities and equipment.

At school level

The **school principal** is the authority for management and control of state and municipal institutions in the pre-primary and school education system. The school head manages and represents the institution concerned, and organises and supervises the overall activities of the institution in accordance with the powers laid down in the state educational standard on the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists. In the exercise of their powers, the school head issues orders. In the management and control of teaching, learning, teaching and creative, sporting and administrative activities, the school head may be assisted by one or more deputy school heads.

The **Pedagogical Council (PC)** is a specialised body for discussing and tackling major pedagogical issues in the kindergarten, school and personal development support centre. The PC includes all pedagogical specialists and deputy principals without teaching responsibilities. The principal is the chairperson of the Pedagogical Council.

Representatives of the Public Council, the Board of Trustees, the medical personnel serving the school, kindergarten or personal development support centre, learners and other persons may participate in the meetings of the PC with the right to vote in an advisory capacity. The school's PC adopts:

- the school's development strategy for the next four years with an action and financial plan annexed to it;



- the school's rules of procedure;
- the school syllabus;
- the forms of education;
- the school's annual activity plan;
- the curricula for individual education;
- measures to improve the quality of education;
- a programme for the prevention of early school leaving;
- a programme for the provision of equal opportunities and for the inclusion of learners from vulnerable groups.

It also proposes to the principal the opening of interest activities, makes proposals to the principal for the awarding of learners and the imposition of appropriate sanctions, and determines school symbols and rituals and other distinctive signs and activities.

The **Public Council** is a body which supports the development of the kindergarten and the school and acts as civic control of their management. It is established to create the conditions for active and democratically functioning communities at each kindergarten and each school.

Boards of Trustees are independent voluntary associations to support the activities of the educational institution. Only one Board of Trustees may be established at each kindergarten, school or personal development support centre. They shall be established as non-profit-making legal entities for the purpose of carrying out activities of public benefit, and shall organise their activities in accordance with the terms and conditions of the Non-Profit-Making Legal Entities Act and in accordance with the provisions of the Pre-school and School Education Act, the statutes or their founding act. The Board of Trustees is established on the initiative of the principal or of parents, teachers or members of the public. The bodies of the Board of Trustees shall be a general assembly and the Board of Trustees. The main purpose of the Board of Trustees is to support, assist and promote the development of the kindergarten, school or personal development support centre ([Eurydice](#)).

It should be highlighted that complex issues such as tackling drop-outs, cases of violence, migrant and refugee children, Roma issues, etc., require joint work of different state authorities. Therefore, different tools have been developed to foster co-operation, exchange of information and bringing efforts together in order to achieve synergy and a robust response to common challenges. Some of these tools are:

[Mechanism for joint work of institutions](#) on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of drop-out from the education system of learners of compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 8 June 2018.

The Minister of Education and Science organises the implementation of the Mechanism and:

- ensures the participation of regional education departments and institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education in the Mechanism;



- implements, creates, develops, maintains and manages an Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;
- organises the preparation of regular analyses of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Mechanism on the basis of information from the Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;
- develops and proposes to the Co-ordination Unit a system of measures to optimise and improve the effectiveness of the Mechanism.

The Minister of Labour and Social Policy, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, the Chairman of the Central Commission for Combatting Juvenile Delinquency, mayors of municipalities and regional governors ensure participation in the Mechanism of subordinate institutions and monitor the implementation of the Mechanism within their institutional competence.

The municipal mayors determine the areas of coverage within the territory of the municipality and inform the head of the respective Regional Education Department accordingly and:

- designate municipal staff to participate in outreach teams, including mayors, mayors of small towns and representatives of the Local Commission for Combatting Juvenile Delinquency;
- co-ordinate outreach teams at the municipal level;
- familiarise parents of children at compulsory education age with the appropriate ways and forms, their legal obligations to enrol children in education at home or abroad, and the obligations to register under the Civil Registration Act upon changing their current address in the country or abroad;
- impose fines on parents who impede their children's education.

As a result of the Mechanism's activities in the period from 2017 to February 2020, the outreach teams have returned or enrolled for the first time 51,460 learners. The proportion of learners aged 5 to 16 years not covered during the 2019/2020 school year has been reduced significantly compared to the previous 2018/2019 school year (from 8.47% to 4.73%). The number of drop-outs who were enrolled in grade 7 from the 2005 intake but not enrolled in grade 7 as of 15 September 2019 is 1,238. The result is better compared to the previous 2018/2019 school years when 2,300 seventh graders from the 2004 intake did not continue their education in grade 7 (Strategic Framework 2021–2030).

[National Council for Co-operation on Ethnic and Integration Issues](#)

The Council is a specialised co-ordinating and consultative body under the Council of Ministers and it assists the Council of Ministers in the development and implementation of the state policy on ethnic and integration issues. The National Council facilitates the co-operation, co-ordination and public consultations between the state authorities and the non-profit legal entities of Bulgarian citizens belonging to ethnic minorities and other non-profit legal entities registered under the Non-Profit Legal Entities Act working in the field of inter-ethnic relations and the protection of human rights.

[\(Regulations on the structure and activities of the Council\)](#)



A nationally representative survey ‘Educational Achievement of Roma Communities in Bulgaria’ commissioned by the Trust for Social Achievement and conducted by Global Metrics in 2019 shows:

- A growing proportion of Roma believe that young people from the community should stay in the education system as long as possible. ‘This is referring to the first completion of secondary education and the second completion of higher education’.
- The proportion of Roma children attending school has increased in all age groups compared to 2011.
- The proportion of Roma graduates is twice as high among those who attended kindergarten.
- The proportion of Roma in employment is twice as high in 2019 compared to 2011.

Despite the improvement in the educational structure of the population, some challenges persist, as well as worrying signals about the quality of education. The proportion of Roma learners attending schools with a mixed ethnic composition of learners has almost doubled. The proportion of learners in schools where there is a concentration of learners of Roma origin is increasing – almost one in two children of Roma ethnicity is educated in a school where Roma predominate.

[National Council of People with Disabilities](#)

It is an advisory body to the Council of Ministers for co-operation in the development and implementation of disability rights policy, with a secretariat at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The National Council of People with Disabilities:

- provides support and assistance in the development and implementation of disability rights policy in accordance with the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, national legislation and the priorities of relevant strategic documents;
- gives opinions on all draft regulations, strategies, programmes, plans and other acts affecting the rights of persons with disabilities;
- facilitates co-ordination between state and local authorities, employers’ and trade unions’ organisations, and organisations of and for persons with disabilities, in order to provide the necessary support for the implementation of their activities and to create conditions for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities;
- interacts with other bodies on co-operation, co-ordination and monitoring on issues affecting the rights of persons with disabilities;
- interacts with international organisations active in support of persons with disabilities;
- organises the promotion of measures taken to overcome identified barriers to the enjoyment of disability rights in particular areas of support through active co-operation with the media;
- discusses and adopts a summary annual report on the activities carried out by and for organisations of and for persons with disabilities, with recognised national



representation and financial support in the form of a subsidy from the state budget and the results achieved in the field of disability rights;

- reports annually to the Council of Ministers on its activities.

[Algorithm for interaction between institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education and 'Social Assistance' Directorates](#)

The purpose of the Algorithm is to improve the co-operation between schools and kindergartens and the Social Assistance and Child Protection Departments, as well as to clearly distinguish and co-ordinate the duties of teachers and social workers in the work on cases of learners at risk, learners with special educational needs, etc.

The document is set out in five main points, with corresponding measures and steps to support the implementation of the measures and activities to implement the Mechanism for the joint work of the institutions on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropping out of the education system of learners in compulsory pre-school and school age (see above):

- Support for personal development of learners in kindergartens, schools, personal development support centres and specialised service units;
- Identification of the needs of reporting to the Child Protection Department of the Social Assistance Directorate;
- Interaction between social service providers for learners in the community and institutions in the pre-school and school education system;
- Case work in kindergartens, schools and personal development support centres;
- Co-ordination of the implementation of the Algorithm for interaction between the institutions in the system of pre-school and school education and the Social Assistance Directorates.

[Co-ordination mechanism on violence and the Mechanism for counteracting bullying and violence in institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education](#)

The Ministry of Education also has its own mechanisms for coping with bullying and violence at school: the Mechanism for counteracting bullying and violence in institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education. If the case is more severe, other institutions may also intervene through alerting the police and/or Child Protection Units, thus activating the so-called Co-ordination mechanism in cases of violence in place (Article 36d, Child Protection Act).

A multi-disciplinary team is gathered by a social worker, appointed by the director of the Social Assistance Directorate. The team must include a representative of the Regional Administration of the Ministry of Interior, the Regional Prosecutor's Office and a representative of the municipality. At the discretion of the team leader, a representative of the Regional Health Inspectorate, the child's personal doctor or a representative of the hospital where the case was first registered, a **representative of the Regional Department of Education and the school, kindergarten or other educational institution** and a representative of the provider of state-funded social service(s) provided to the child are



invited to participate. The mayor of the municipality shall support the co-ordination of the activity of the multidisciplinary team.

National Council for Child Protection

The Minister of Education and Science is a child protection body in accordance with Article 6 of the Child Protection Act. Article 18 of the Child Protection Act established a **National Council for Child Protection** with consultative and co-ordination functions at the State Agency for Child Protection. Representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, **Ministry of Education and Science**, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Social Assistance Agency, National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, National Council on Narcotic Substances, National Statistical Institute, National Social Security Institute, Central Commission for Combatting Juvenile Delinquency and the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as non-profit legal entities that have child protection in their mandate, are members of this Council.

A new co-ordination mechanism for unaccompanied minors was adopted in May 2022. Though it was officially announced in the media, there is restricted access to the document. The Ministry of Education and Science has its own mechanisms for [enrolment of migrant children](#) and [additional lessons in Bulgarian for learners](#) whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian (Article 16). The Pre-school and School Education Act provides for the right of every learner to learn their mother tongue. (Article 13).

4.2 Specific areas for shared responsibilities across and between central and local government

Policy development, implementation and co-ordination

Nationally, the overall approach in the development and adoption of any policy paper and legal act is based on evidence, transparency and consultations with all relevant stakeholders. Working groups are gathered at the earliest stage of drafting, and all interested persons and groups can participate at every stage.

Each municipality develops a Municipal strategy to support personal development each year, and sets out local inclusive education activities that are consistent with national policy in this area ([GEM report](#)).

Each school adopts its own school syllabus, which is firstly adopted by the Pedagogical Council and then approved by the school principal.

Identification of needs / referral for services

All schools have the possibility to co-operate with the relevant local authorities and to seek assistance from other institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

There are several officially adopted mechanisms for interaction at the level of an individual learner, depending on the situation:

- Through the Institutional Collaboration Teams (Outreach Teams) for Inclusion of Compulsory Pre-primary and School-Age Learners in the Education System, as part



of the Institutional Collaboration Mechanism for the Inclusion and Prevention of Drop-out of learners of compulsory pre-primary and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 08 June 2018 ([GEM report](#)).

- co-ordination mechanism on violence, and the Mechanism for counteracting bullying and violence in institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education;
- the new mechanism for unaccompanied minors;
- Algorithm for interaction between institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education and 'Social Assistance' directorates;
- Ordinance on inclusive education, adopted by Decree 232 of 2 October 2017.

Additional support for personal development is provided by the kindergarten and school through a support plan prepared for a learner with SEN, with chronic diseases, at risk or with outstanding talents. The support plan identifies the resources – the specialists needed, the form of training, the need for individual training programmes, the need for support from social services, the necessary technical means and equipment, etc., which are needed for the particular learner. The parent is acquainted with the learner support plan and is obliged to assist in its implementation ([GEM report](#)).

Data collection and sharing

Through the Information System for the Implementation of the [Mechanism for joint work of institutions](#) on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of drop-out from the education system of learners of compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 8 June 2018. The Mechanism mandated an Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism, which provides an integrated electronic environment and tools. The Information System serves as an environment for the exchange of information and co-ordination between the persons involved and institutions under the Mechanism. This system includes an information card for schools and kindergartens, where the risk of dropping out is particularly high ([GEM report](#)).

There is an [official database](#) for all learners in the country.

A new [information system for inclusive education](#) was launched in 2022.

[A Co-operation Agreement](#) between the Ministry of Education and Science and the Agency for People with Disabilities for the exchange of statistics on learners with disabilities, for pedagogical specialists involved in the education of learners, and for social services that assist parents of learners with disabilities.

Monitoring and evaluation

The national strategies are operationalised via programmes and plans. The Ministry of Education and Science prepares reports for their implementation and the Minister is responsible for providing reports on the compliance with the principles and implementation of the Pre-school and School Education Act to the Council and Ministers and the National Assembly.



The Municipal strategy is voted on by the Municipal council, which is directly elected by the local community. The Council can monitor the Municipal strategy through the Information System for the Implementation of the Mechanism for the joint work of the institutions on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropping out of the education system of learners in compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 08 June 2018 ([GEM report](#)).

The school syllabus is monitored by the mayor, the Regional Department of Education and by the School Public Council.

Quality assurance and accountability

Reports and analyses are conducted regularly to measure results.

Each inter-agency mechanism has a responsible authority, which collects information and conducts internal monitoring and quality assurance.

Through the Information System for the Implementation of the Mechanism for the joint work of the institutions on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropping out of the education system of learners in compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 08 June 2018 ([GEM report](#)).

Funding

The shared responsibilities and actions are usually funded by the budget of each responsible institution.

Several specially dedicated projects were also implemented in the field of Inclusive education, e.g. Project BG05M2OP001-3.018-0001 'Support for Inclusive Education'.

4.3 Formal and informal collaboration across ministries

Nationally, the overall approach in the development and adoption of any policy paper and legal act is based on evidence, transparency and consultations with all relevant stakeholders. Working groups are gathered at the earliest stage of drafting and all interested persons and groups can participate at every stage.

As highlighted, the Council of Ministers performs the state policy in the area of pre-primary and school education. Besides the already explained mechanisms, we should highlight that some of the policy and legislative documents prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science should be adopted by the Council of Ministers. This is the case with the [Ordinance on inclusive education](#). This means that these documents should be conciliated with all Ministries before their official adoption. As stated in section 4.1 above, there are numerous officially adopted mechanisms and procedures for collaboration.

The COVID-19 crisis provoked rapid adaptation to online teaching and learning. In order to foster sharing of online resources and tools, the Ministry of Education and Science created its own [platform](#).

The platform contains a wide range of digital educational content; quick and easy access to virtual classrooms, homework, assessments and attendance in one place, and a focus



on individual attention from teacher to learner. It was further enriched with additional platforms like the Support Me website.

Two levels of collaboration within the Ministry of Education and Science have been identified:

At national level: The Directorate for Inclusive Education at the MoES is responsible for inclusion and support policies for the personal development of learners with special educational needs, for educational integration and intercultural education for learners from ethnic minorities, as well as for learners seeking or having received international protection (refugees).

At regional level: In 2006, resource centres were created to support the inclusion of learners with SEN. They are state units with additional curricula and activities like ‘corrective’ therapies, and include consultation with parents and teachers. They function in each region and receive state funding, but can also have their own income.

With the entry into force of the Pre-school and School Education Act in 2016, resource centres have become Regional Centres for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education with more and more expanded functions to support the inclusion of learners and to train teachers to train learners with special educational needs ([GEM report](#)).

4.4 Specific mechanisms for formal and informal collaboration that impact on inclusive education

Development of a shared vision for inclusive education

The current definition of inclusive education reflects the community dialogue on education for children with special educational needs and the shift of the paradigm from integration to inclusive education.

The main arena for discussions of the terms and reforms was the process of development and drafting of the new Pre-school and School Education Act. The whole process is described in Section 1 above.

The Pre-school and School Education Act defines ‘inclusive education’ as:

The process of understanding, accepting and supporting the individuality of each child or pupil and the variety of needs of all children and pupils through involvement and inclusion of resources aimed at removing the obstacles to teaching and learning and creating opportunities for development and participation of children and pupils in all aspects of life in the community (Section 1, item 26 of the Supplementary provisions).

A conference, ‘[Development of Inclusive Education in Bulgaria – 15 Years Later](#)’, took place on 30–31 May 2022 in Sofia. [During the conference](#), Professor M Zamfirov presented research on the usage of the four forms of education for learners with special needs in Bulgaria and their development in recent years in academic papers: special education, integration, inclusion, and special classes. Publication activity between 1995 and 2000 was mainly related to two concepts – special education and integrated



education. From 2000 onwards, the concept of inclusive has also entered the discourse. Quite logically, as from 2006 onwards, and the following years, are crucial for the system – Bulgaria has been admitted to the EU and there are no more excuses for the lack of reforms in the field.

Naturally, in the years from 2016 to 2022, the main terms used are inclusive and integrated education.

Policy development, implementation and co-ordination

All already listed mechanisms have an impact on inclusive education. For example, in accordance with the Mechanism for the joint work of the institutions on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropping out of the education system of learners in compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 08 June 2018, the Minister of Education and Science:

- organises the implementation of the Mechanism;
- ensures the participation of Regional Departments of Education and institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education in the Mechanism ;
- implements, creates, develops, maintains and manages an Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;
- organises the preparation of regular analyses of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Mechanism on the basis of information from the Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;
- develops and proposes to the Co-ordination Unit a system of measures to optimise and improve the effectiveness of the Mechanism.

The Minister of Labour and Social Policy, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, the Chairman of the Central Commission for Combatting Juvenile Delinquency, mayors of municipalities and regional governors ensure participation in the Mechanism of subordinate institutions and monitor the implementation of the Mechanism within their institutional competence.

The municipal mayors determine the areas of coverage within the territory of the municipality and inform the head of the respective Regional Education Department accordingly. They:

- designate municipal staff to participate in outreach teams, including mayors, mayors of small towns and representatives of the Local Commission for Combatting Juvenile Delinquency;
- co-ordinate outreach teams at the municipal level;
- familiarise parents of children at compulsory education age with the appropriate ways and forms, their legal obligations to enrol children in education at home or abroad, and the obligations to register under the Civil Registration Act upon changing their current address in the country or abroad;
- impose fines on parents who impede their children's education ([GEM report](#)).



Identification of needs / referral for services

All schools have the possibility to co-operate with the relevant local authorities and to seek assistance from other institutions and NGOs.

There are several officially adopted mechanisms for interaction at the level of the individual learner depending on the situation:

- Through the Institutional Collaboration Teams (Outreach Teams) for the Inclusion of Compulsory Pre-school and School-Age Learners in the Education System, as part of the Mechanism for the joint work of the institutions on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropping out of the education system of learners of compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 08 June 2018. ([GEM report](#));
- Co-ordination mechanism on violence and the Mechanism for counteracting bullying and violence in institutions in the system of preschool and school education;
- The new mechanism for unaccompanied minors;
- [Algorithm for interaction between institutions in the system of pre-school and school education and 'Social Assistance' directorates](#);
- Ordinance on inclusive education, adopted by Decree 232 of 20 October 2017. Additional support for personal development is provided by the kindergarten and the school through a support plan prepared for a learner with SEN, with chronic diseases, at risk or with outstanding talents. The support plan identifies the resources - the specialists needed, the form of training, the need for individual training programs, the need for support from social services, the necessary technical means and equipment, etc., which are needed for the particular learner. The parent is acquainted with the learner support plan and is obliged to assist in its implementation. ([GEM report](#));
- Special professions like educational mediators and assisting teachers also foster inclusive education.

Data collection and sharing

Through the Information System for the Implementation of the Mechanism for the joint work of the institutions on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropping out of the education system of learners of compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 8 June 2018 ([GEM report](#)).

Monitoring and evaluation

Each region has its own Regional Department of Education under the authority of the MoES. The Regional Departments of Education are responsible for education policy and are also working on 'inclusion'. They are expected to report annually to the Ministry on the process of inclusive education in the region ([GEM report](#)).



Quality assurance and accountability

The municipalities provide and control:

- the resources for the maintenance, construction, furnishing and the major repair of kindergartens and schools;
- health servicing and security of the kindergartens and schools;
- resources for implementing state education requirements, as well as financial provision for all sections of the curriculum for the municipal kindergartens and schools;
- conditions for canteen catering, dormitories, recreation, sport basis and transportation of learners and teachers, as well as a free transportation and full-day organisation of the studies and canteen boarding;
- scholarships and special supports for learners (Eurydice, 2012d).

The National Education Inspectorate provides the Minister of Education and Science and the Council of Ministers with an analysis of the quality of education in inspected kindergartens and schools for a specified period, in a particular region or country ([GEM report](#)).

The Regional Departments of Education also have functions to monitor and assure the quality of inclusive education in schools.

As per different available mechanisms, all of them have either secretariats or other implementing structures that prepare annual reports for their work and impact. In addition, tools like research and analyses are conducted to measure achievements.

Funding

The shared responsibilities and actions are usually funded by the budget of each responsible institution.

Evaluative commentary

This section provides a qualified, evidenced-based reflection on the **challenges, opportunities and consequences** of system governance for the implementation of inclusive education in practice. It specifically considers the impact of levels of decentralisation/centralisation in the country on inclusive education in practice.

Challenges

There are still attitudes against inclusive education. In addition, there is a shortage of specialists, especially in remote and small localities. The country's unfavourable demographics exacerbates inequalities.

Opportunities

Collaboration and partnership both between the Ministry of Education and Science and other Ministries, and between different levels within the education system itself, is well developed and functioning.



Amid the increasingly complex issues facing our education system, a collaborative approach with other institutions has been adopted. For some of the most pressing issues, such as the drop-out rate, a special Mechanism for joint work of institutions on coverage and inclusion in the education system of learners of compulsory pre-school and school age has been established. More and more platforms and databases are being set up for the exchange of information both between institutions from different sectors, and between different structures in the field of education.

[The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030](#) identifies as a challenge the lack of an established culture for creativity and innovation in the management of the institutions of the pre-primary and school education system, for co-operation and resource sharing between them. Thus, as a result of the SWOT analysis, nine priority areas for the development of education and training until 2030 have been identified, notable number five: 'Effective inclusion, sustainable inclusion and educational integration'.

The education system is now entering a more mature phase of work after the 2016 reform. Practice proves that more and more co-ordination efforts between different institutions from different sectors and levels are needed for effective support. It is a strength that the strategic documents include actions and measures towards the implementation and upgrading of policies to ensure early and equal access to education, drop-out prevention and reintegration into the education system. Priority is given to the implementation of measures aimed at ensuring the sustainability of the process of educational integration of learners from vulnerable groups, reducing inequalities, promoting social inclusion, motivating children and parents for education, and systematic work with parents to involve them as full participants in the educational process. Measures will be implemented to expand opportunities for effective inclusion in the education system of learners with special educational needs and from vulnerable groups, including Roma and those seeking or granted international protection and migrants. Co-operation between pre-primary and school education institutions with state and local social and health authorities, educational mediators, parents and local communities is being strengthened. An inclusive, supportive, safe and secure educational environment will be provided for effective education, for the protection and enhancement of the health of learners, and for their full personal development (Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2020–2030).



SECTION 5. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This section provides information on the general and specific quality assurance and accountability frameworks and mechanisms informing the country's education system.

5.1 School inspection processes and structures for all forms of educational provision

Quality management is defined in the Pre-school and School Education act as a permanent process of organisational development, based on analysing, planning and performing the activities, assessment and introduction of improvements in the operation of kindergartens and schools (Article 271).

Analysing, planning and performing the activities, and introducing improvements in the operation of kindergartens and schools should be carried out according to the terms and conditions defined by the state educational standard for quality management in institutions. Such a standard was adopted but later repealed, and as of November 2022 there is no such standard in force. It is important to highlight that the quality assessment is performed both by self-assessment and inspection. Self-assessment aims to produce an internal assessment of the quality of the education provided through activities, procedures and criteria defined by the kindergarten or school.

There is an adopted state [educational standard for the inspection of kindergartens and schools](#): Number 18 of 9 September 2021 on the inspection of kindergartens and schools, issued by the Minister of Education and Science. The inspection is the process of making a comprehensive independent expert assessment of the quality of education provided by a kindergarten or school at a particular point in its operation, and determining guidelines for improvement. Inspections are carried out according to criteria and indicators grouped by areas to be inspected. At least one inspection of each kindergarten and each school shall be carried out every five years. An inspection shall consist of the following inter-related, sequential activities:

- informing about the inspection;
- gathering information on the areas to be inspected;
- assessing the quality of education provided by the kindergarten or the school at a particular point in time, which consists of comparing data obtained from the inspection with the preliminary set indicators;
- defining guidelines for improving the quality of education provided by the kindergarten or school;
- establishing the results of the implementation of the recommendations and guidelines made by previous inspections.

The **National Inspectorate for Education within the Council of Ministers** is the authority for external supervision of kindergartens and schools.



At **regional level**, quality assurance in the school system is carried out by **28 Regional Departments of Education**, which are the territory administrations for management and control of the pre-primary and school education system under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Education and Science. Their specialised administration also provides methodological support to the kindergartens and schools. Concerning the municipal kindergartens and schools, the mayors of the municipalities conduct the control.

At **school level**, quality assurance is carried out by the principals and deputy principals of kindergartens and schools. The schools are obliged to apply measures for enhancing the quality of education. The Public Council suggests policies and measures for improving the quality of the educational process based on results of self-assessment and external evaluation – for the schools and of inspection reports. On the other hand, the Pedagogical Council adopts measures for enhancing education quality. The principals of the kindergartens approve the measures.

The entire education system is governed by 19 state educational standards (listed above). Based on these standards, the curriculum is developed and adopted. Framework and model school curricula exist and each school is obliged to adopt its own school syllabus.

There are also innovative schools (defined as innovative according to criteria set by the state educational standards), which achieve improvement of education quality by:

- preparing and implementing innovative elements concerning the organisation and/or content of the education;
- organising in a new or improved way the management, learning process and study environment;
- applying new methods of teaching;
- preparing in a new way the curricula, content and plans.

In this process, pedagogical specialists also actively take part. One of their obligations is to maintain and improve their qualification so as to improve the quality of teaching, increase the results and the quality of the learners' preparation. The heads of schools are obliged to ensure the necessary conditions for this ([Eurydice](#)).

5.2 Other quality assurance processes for all forms of educational provision

According to the Pre-school and School Act, the state implements policies for enhancing the quality of education. The Regulatory documents oblige education and training to be implemented under ensured quality in the education system. Quality assurance in the pre-primary and school education is carried out by the responsible institutions at national, regional and school level.

The **Ministry of Education and Science is the** responsible institution at national level and executes control functions in the school system via its specialised administration and units. It implements a mechanism for transparency, publicity and annual analysis of the results obtained from the national external evaluations, which is used for preparation of policies and measures to guarantee durable enhancement of education quality. The



activities in the pre-primary and school education system are funded by the state budget, as the transfers for development of kindergartens and schools incorporate funds for enhancing quality ([Eurydice](#)).

[The Centre for assessment in pre-primary and school education](#) within the structure of the MoES is a state specialised unit for activity related to the organisation, preparation and conduct of internal and external assessment, of school-leaving examinations and related to participation in international studies intended to evaluate education systems. It is involved in:

- the process of assessment of learners' study results in school education and in the process of diagnostics of a learner's readiness for school in pre-primary education
- methodological support of the organisation, and preparation and conduct of regional external assessments;
- the preparation of exam materials for various exams;
- the preparation of procedures and instruments for internal assessment in school education;
- the preparation and supply of analysis of the study and readiness results in pre-primary and school education and the influencing factors;
- the conduct of the international studies, and analyses and disseminates their results, etc.

Learners' achievements in Bulgaria are evaluated with quantitative marks. Learners with special educational needs who study to an individual plan may be evaluated qualitatively. Through evaluation, the achieved results in education and the level of preparation of the learners for their future can be defined and measured. One of the main goals is to monitor the educational process for applying policies and measures, aiming for quality improvement. The evaluation is carried out during the learning process, at the end of a grade or education level. It can be internal – when the mark is given by the teacher in class, or external – when the mark is given by commission or expert/teacher but not the teacher in class.

The aims of the external evaluation at the end of a grade or education level are:

- diagnostics of individual progress and of the learner's educational needs;
- monitoring of the educational process for applying policies and measures contributing to quality improvement;
- defining the degree of achievement of results for each study subject in the curricula for each grade.

The national external evaluations in the school system are carried out at the end of grades 4, 7 and 10.

The exams within the national external evaluation at the end of grade 4 are in Bulgarian language and literature and in mathematics; those at the end of grade 7 are also in Bulgarian language and literature and mathematics, but voluntarily the learners are allowed to pass an examination in foreign language and some learners can even pass exams for a specific abilities check (usually for vocational schools, sports or arts schools);



those at the end of grade 10 are compulsory exams also in Bulgarian language and literature and mathematics, but voluntarily exams can also be sat in foreign language and IT subjects.

Learners who have successfully finished grade 12 shall obtain secondary school education and shall have the right to sit matriculation examinations and stage examinations to obtain vocational qualification. Secondary school learners trained in a school learning plan which provided a profile preparation, shall obtain secondary school education after a successful pass of compulsory state high matriculation examination in the school subject 'Bulgarian language and literature' and a compulsory state matriculation examination in a profile school subject. Secondary school learners trained under a school syllabus which provided vocational preparation, shall obtain a high school education after successful passing of a compulsory state matriculation examination in Bulgarian language and literature and a compulsory state matriculation examination to obtain a vocational qualification in the theory and practice of the vocation. Voluntarily, a third exam in another subject is allowed. Some universities enrol learners solely based on the matriculation examination performance.

Quality has other dimensions in addition to marks. Special attention should be given to two instruments for ensuring the quality of teaching: on the state requirements for the acquisition of professional qualification 'teacher' and Ordinance 15 of 22 July 2019 of the Minister of Education and Science on the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists (Eurydice, [Legislation and official policy documents](#)). Both legal acts set out the main framework for the teacher occupation and the personal development of each teacher. It should be highlighted that the attestation system in Bulgaria includes components on training and courses attained. The teachers in each school can support each other methodologically. Resource teachers are a special group of teachers who support learners with special educational needs in mainstream schools. They should also meet the criteria set out in the acts listed above. Methodological support is an integral part of their work, too.

Though a relatively small country, Bulgaria has very diverse geography, and so the needs of the different cities and places of residence can be very diverse. Another measure to ensure equality and equal access to education is the diverse approach towards financing based on the individual characteristics of the school.

5.3 Evaluation mechanisms used to monitor outcomes at different system levels

General outcomes (academic, social, well-being, etc.) for all learners

The academic outcomes are evaluated at school, but also externally at state external evaluation after grades 4, 7 and 10 and matriculation examinations after grade 12.

The Ministry of Education and Science executes control functions in the school system via its specialised administration and units.

The Centre for assessment in pre-primary and school education within the structure of the MoES is a state specialised unit for activity related to the organisation, preparation and



conduct of internal and external assessment, of matriculation examinations and related to participation in international studies intended to evaluate education systems. It is involved in:

- the process of assessment of learners' study results in school education and in the process of diagnostics of a learner's readiness for school in pre-primary education
- methodological support of the organisation, and preparation and conduct of regional external assessments;
- the preparation of exam materials for various exams;
- the preparation of procedures and instruments for internal assessment in school education;
- the preparation and supply of analysis of the study and readiness results in pre-primary and school education and the influencing factors;
- the conduct of the international studies, and analyses and disseminates their results, etc.

The gathered data informs the policy-makers of the quality of the educational process. An analysis is conducted after the exams in order to identify the strengths and gaps in the learning outcomes, and to adapt the curriculum accordingly.

Specific outcomes (academic, social, well-being, etc.) for learners vulnerable to exclusion

Learners with special educational needs have the right to more time during the state external evaluation after grades 4, 7 and 10 and matriculation examinations after grade 12. They also have the right to an additional assistance – a specialist who can adapt the assignment to their needs.

Learners with SEN who have an individual plan are assessed on the achievement of the goals set in that plan.

Outcomes for schools (professional development, staff and personal well-being, etc.)

Each educational specialist reflects in their professional portfolio the competences achieved in accordance with the professional profile for the position held. The establishment of a professional portfolio includes the presentation of performance and professional development. The professional portfolio is compiled by the education professional and includes materials that demonstrate:

- the dynamics of the pedagogical specialist's professional performances with the learners with whom they work;
- the results achieved and the acquisition of competences by the learners and the progress they make in the educational process;
- their participation in the implementation of the institution's policies;
- their professional development and career progression.

Teachers are assessed during the attestation process once every four years. A special attestation commission is nominated in each school and one of the main tools is so-called



'credits' – a system for improving competences. Teachers gather credits during their attendance at different seminars, trainings and workshops. The self-assessment and inspections are also tools for measurement of the outcomes.

Outcomes for parents and families (support, participation, family well-being, etc.)

Not present.

5.4 Evaluation mechanisms used to monitor the effectiveness of processes at different system levels

Effectiveness of teaching and learning processes

The learners' achievements in Bulgaria are evaluated with quantitative marks. Learners with special educational needs who study to an individual plan may be evaluated qualitatively as well. Through evaluation, the achieved results in education and the level of preparation of the learners for their future, can be defined and measured. The academic outcomes are evaluated at school, but also externally at state external evaluation after grades 4, 7 and 10 and matriculation examinations after grade 12.

The Centre for assessment in pre-primary and school education is a state specialised unit for activity related to the organisation, preparation and conduct of internal and external assessment, of matriculation examinations and related to participation in international studies intended to evaluate education systems.

It is involved in:

- the process of assessment of learners' study results in school education and in the process of diagnostics of a learner's readiness for school in pre-primary education
- methodological support of the organisation, and preparation and conduct of regional external assessments;
- the preparation of exam materials for various exams;
- the preparation of procedures and instruments for internal assessment in school education;
- the preparation and supply of analysis of the study and readiness results in pre-primary and school education and the influencing factors;
- the conduct of the international studies (e.g., PISA), and analyses and disseminates their results.

The gathered data informs policy-makers on the quality of the educational process. An analysis is conducted after the exams in order to identify the strengths and gaps in the learning outcomes and to adapt the curriculum accordingly.

The Director of the National inspectorate of education provides the Minister of Education and Science and the Council of Ministers with an analysis of the educational quality in the inspected kindergartens and schools for a certain period in a region or for the country, and publishes on its official internet site a summarised report about the assessment and directions on fields of inspection (Article 274, PSEA).



The Regional Departments of Education can also assess the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes and provide methodological support and recommendations for improvements.

Effectiveness of school management processes

The Regional Departments of Education carry out methodological support to the kindergartens and schools, support Regional centres in the process of inclusive education, and assist the personal development support centres in the relevant region. The methodological support is also carried out through participation of experts from the Regional Departments in conducting lessons and in the activities for inclusive education.

The areas of inspections are:

Educational process

Learning outcomes, the effectiveness of interaction and the application of the competence-based approach in the learning process, education and socialisation, classroom and group management, assessment, support provided for personal development and the teamwork between teachers and other pedagogical specialists for the individual progress of each learner.

Management

Human resource management, including the management of human resources, including qualification effectiveness, appraisal of pedagogical specialists, management of financial, information and technological resources, management of partnerships for the development of the kindergarten or school for improving educational outcomes, and effective leadership.

Institutional environment

The physical environment and the information and library resources of schools and kindergartens, development of the organisational culture of the kindergarten or school, development of a supportive environment and effective interaction between all those involved in the educational process and with all stakeholders, and satisfaction of the participants in the educational process.

Self-assessment is aimed at producing an internal assessment of the quality of the education provided through activities, procedures and criteria defined by the kindergarten or school.

Effectiveness of teacher professional development processes

The professional profile and learning outcomes of learners are the basis for setting priorities for professional development, as well as for supporting the self-assessment and attestation of pedagogical professionals.

Effectiveness of teacher professional development is measured during the attestation process officially. Attestation is the process of assessing the conformity of an activity of teachers, principals and other educational professionals with their job profile, job performance requirements and strategy for development of the kindergarten, school,



personal development support centre or the Regional Centre for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education; and for principals, their managerial competence.

The objectives of the attestation process are:

- to establish the performance of pedagogical professionals in the achievement of the performance of the teacher educators;
- to improve the quality of education of learners;
- to motivate pedagogical professionals for professional development by improving their qualifications;
- to identify the need for methodological and organisational support for the pedagogical specialist and provide mentorship support.

The results of the attestation are used for:

- career development;
- rewarding pedagogical specialists who have obtained good results;
- guidance for the further training of teaching staff to update, supplement or extend the professional, updating and extending their competences;
- providing methodological and/or organisational support and ensuring mentor(s).

There is a special system for teachers' training and their provision. The Minister of Education and Sciences organises the creation and maintenance of information centres of approved training programmes for increasing the qualification of the pedagogic specialists. The qualification credits are introduced as a measurer of time, in which the pedagogical specialist has been trained for increasing their qualification in programmes. One qualification credit shall be given for 16 academic lessons, of which not less than eight academic lessons are in-person, including synchronous distance learning in a digital environment.

Efficiency and effectiveness of funding mechanisms

The Minister of Education and Science allocates and controls the spending of funds allocated by the state budget for education and science.

The activities in the pre-primary and school education system are financed by state budget funds, municipal budgets, EU funds and programmes, and other sources. The state budget finances wholly or partially the activities which are subject to state policy; it is for:

- payment of the activities of education and training of learners;
- support for equal access and support for personal development;
- development of kindergarten, school and personal development support centres;
- implementation of national programmes for the development of education.

Although expenditure on education has increased over time, it is still one of the lowest in the EU. The latest available data show that in 2018, general government expenditure on education was equivalent to 3.5% of GDP, significantly below the EU average of 4.6% and one of the lowest in the EU. Nevertheless, compared to 2010, Bulgaria's expenditure on



education has increased in real terms by 14%, significantly faster than the EU average (3.7%). The increase has primarily benefitted secondary education (+23%) and pre-primary and primary education (+18%), whereas spending in tertiary education decreased by 11%. A third of the increase went to finance teachers' salaries, while the amounts invested in goods and services and for gross capital formation (e.g. school infrastructure) have decreased compared to their 2010 level. In 2020, additional funds were allocated to increase teachers' pay and to finance four new national programmes that aim to attract and train teachers in subjects for which shortages are expected, support schools to innovate, provide career development and boost the use of IT in teaching and learning. ([European Commission, Education and training monitor 2020: Bulgaria, 2020](#)).

Besides the general rules for budget distribution, it is important to mention that more funds are planned for work with learners from vulnerable groups, support for classes to obtain qualification in protected professions and specialties in professions where there is an expected shortage of specialists on the labour market, and maintenance of protected kindergartens and schools.

The mayor of the municipality and the Regional Departments of Education have the powers to monitor the effectiveness of efficiency of the spendings of the school/kindergarten. The Public Council also has such powers.

Effectiveness of (vertical) co-operation between stakeholders at different system levels

There are strict requirements for reporting and monitoring the quality of the exercised activities between the different vertical levels in the education system. Quality is ensured by inspections, provision of recommendations and methodological support.

Effectiveness of (horizontal) co-operation between ministries and ministerial departments

As stated before, different co-operation mechanisms exist in Bulgaria and the respective authorities are obliged to analyse the effectiveness of their work.

Besides the concrete mechanisms, there are several strategic documents approved: Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030), and others.

5.5 Specific monitoring mechanisms relating to learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

For learners with special educational needs, including learners with disabilities

In the Regional Centres for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education, local teams support the personal development of learners with special educational needs. The teams include resource teachers, special educators (including from centres for special educational support), psychologists, speech therapists and other specialists. Representatives from the Regional Department of Education act as team leaders.



The regional teams:

- request support for learners with special educational needs from the Regional Centre for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education. The principal approves or disapproves additional support, based on the assessments by the personal development support teams;
- evaluate individual needs for additional support for learners with special educational needs when personal development support teams are unavailable. In this case, they request support from the Regional Centre for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education based on an application from the learner's kindergarten or school head teacher;
- re-evaluate the individual needs of learners with special educational needs when parents disagree with the assessment by the personal development support team or the proposed additional support. The director of the Regional Centre for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education approves or rejects additional support for learners with special educational needs;
- assess the individual needs of learners with special educational needs when parents apply for referral for training in special schools;
- support the provision of additional support;
- propose and organise, if necessary, the provision of methodological support for working with learners with special educational needs in kindergartens, schools and personal development support centres;
- inform parents of learners with special educational needs about opportunities for continuing education to obtain a professional qualification after grades 7 and 10;
- perform other functions provided for in the state educational standard for inclusive education (the Ordinance on inclusive education).

As from 2022, a [new information system](#) is in operation. It should inform the experts and policy-makers for the personal development of each learner and it can also provide information for the general trends, strengths and weaknesses.

Learners at risk of dropping out

[Mechanism for joint work of institutions](#) on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of drop-out from the education system of learners of compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 8 June 2018

The Minister of Education and Science organises the implementation of the Mechanism and:

- ensures the participation of regional education departments and institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education in the Mechanism;
- implements, creates, develops, maintains and manages an Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;



- organises the preparation of regular analyses of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Mechanism on the basis of information from the Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;
- develops and proposes to the Co-ordination Unit a system of measures to optimise and improve the effectiveness of the Mechanism.

The Minister of Labour and Social Policy, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, the Chairman of the Central Commission for Combatting Juvenile Delinquency, mayors of municipalities and regional governors ensure participation in the Mechanism of subordinate institutions and monitor the implementation of the Mechanism within their institutional competence.

The municipal mayors determine the areas of coverage within the territory of the municipality and inform the head of the respective Regional Education Department accordingly and:

- designate municipal staff to participate in outreach teams, including mayors, mayors of small towns and representatives of the Local Commission for Combatting Juvenile Delinquency;
- co-ordinate outreach teams at the municipal level;
- familiarise parents of children at compulsory education age with the appropriate ways and forms, their legal obligations to enrol children in education at home or abroad, and the obligations to register under the Civil Registration Act upon changing their current address in the country or abroad;
- impose fines on parents who impede their children's education.

5.6 Specific evaluation mechanisms relating to learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

The assessment of learners' individual need for additional support for personal development is functional. When assessing learners with possible special educational needs, disability and functioning are considered as a consequence of the interaction between the health condition and environmental factors. This is in accordance with the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) and takes into account the WHO's International Classification of Diseases ICD-10.

Learner assessment is carried out according to the assessment card outlining the individual needs of the learner. The parent consents or disagrees with the assessment of individual needs and with the proposed additional support for personal development in the learner's assessment card. The assessment card is an integral part of the learner's personal educational file in the National electronic information system for pre-primary and school education. It is submitted together with other documents during the learner's transition from one institution to another through pre-school and school education (European Agency, [Country information](#)).



5.7 Specific accountability mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education

[Mechanism for joint work of institutions](#) on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of drop-out from the education system of learners of compulsory pre-school and school age, adopted by Decree 100 of 8 June 2018.

The Minister of Education and Science organises the implementation of the Mechanism and:

- ensures the participation of regional education departments and institutions in the system of pre-primary and school education in the Mechanism;
- implements, creates, develops, maintains and manages an Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;
- organises the preparation of regular analyses of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Mechanism on the basis of information from the Information System for the implementation of the Mechanism;
- develops and proposes to the Co-ordination Unit a system of measures to optimise and improve the effectiveness of the Mechanism.

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- co-ordinate outreach teams at the municipal level;
- familiarise parents of children at compulsory education age with the appropriate ways and forms, their legal obligations to enrol children in education at home or abroad, and the obligations to register under the Civil Registration Act upon changing their current address in the country or abroad;
- impose fines on parents who impede their children's education.

As a result of the Mechanism's activities in the period from 2017 to February 2020, the outreach teams have returned or enrolled for the first time 51,460 learners. The proportion of learners aged 5 to 16 years not covered during the 2019/2020 school year has been reduced significantly compared to the previous 2018/2019 school year (from 8.47% to 4.73%). The number of drop-outs who were enrolled in grade 7 from the 2005 intake but not enrolled in grade 7 as of 15 September 2019 is 1,238. The result is better compared to the previous 2018/2019 school years when 2,300 seventh graders from the



2004 intake did not continue their education in grade 7 (Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030).

Evaluative commentary

This section provides a qualified, evidenced-based reflection on the **challenges, opportunities and consequences** of quality assurance and accountability for inclusive education in practice. It specifically considers the implications of how different stakeholders across the education system are accountable for ensuring the effective implementation of policy for inclusive education in practice.

Challenges

A challenge with regard to the quality assessment and monitoring system is the repealed and currently missing quality management in institutions standard.

The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030 also highlights as challenges the underdeveloped system of organisational culture between the different institutional levels for methodological support focused on the individual progress of the specific learner, as well as an underdeveloped system of uniform indicators for reporting institutional progress (of the school) on a specific topic in the context of learning outcomes.

Another challenge is the poor performance of Bulgarian learners on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The 2018 OECD PISA shows that 47% of Bulgarian 15 year-olds struggled to understand texts of moderate length and complexity or unfamiliar material. Additionally, 44% had difficulties in interpreting and recognising how simple situations can be represented mathematically and 47% lacked basic understanding in sciences. These underachievement rates are among the highest in the EU and twice the EU average (22.5% for reading, 22.9% for mathematics and 22.3% for science). Mean performance in reading has remained flat since the start of participation in PISA; it improved in mathematics between 2006 and 2012 and dropped significantly in science between 2015 and 2018, recording one of the largest declines over this period (OECD, 2019b). The proportion of learners classed as top performers – who demonstrated complex knowledge in the subjects tested – is very low: 2% in reading (EU average 8.5%), 4% in mathematics (EU average 11%) and 2% in science (EU average 6.3%). The impact of the on-going education reform on learning outcomes will only be measurable in future testing rounds, when PISA will assess the competencies of learners who have followed the new school curriculum and received individualised support to overcome learning gaps ([Education and training monitor 2020 – Bulgaria](#)).

Opportunities

Bulgaria has a rigorous system for monitoring and evaluating the quality of education for all learners. For learners who are at risk of dropping out of school, who are not included in the education system or have special educational needs, additional support measures are put in place.

The Mechanism for joint work of institutions on the coverage and inclusion in the education system of learners of compulsory school age can also be noted as a strength. In



the context of efforts for successful inclusion and drop-out prevention and for inclusive education, an Ordinance on inclusive education has been adopted. These measures have resulted in an enrollment rate of 94.69% at the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year. There has been a particularly large increase in the enrollment rate of 5, 6 and 7 year-olds in the second term of the 2019/2020 school year compared to the beginning of the same school year. Another effective practice that has been implemented is the introduction of educational mediators to work with parents and the community of learners from vulnerable groups, as well as the introduction of a teaching assistant to support teachers in their work with learners with special educational needs in kindergarten groups and classrooms in schools. In addition, the role of methodological support provided to mainstream teachers is being strengthened in order to successfully include learners, especially those with special educational needs, in the educational process.

As a result of the measures taken, the quality of inclusive education is improving and more learners at risk of exclusion from the education system are completing their education. The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030 and the new Education 2021–2027 Operational Programme provide for measures to address a number of the remaining challenges related to inclusive education.



SECTION 6. STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION, CO-OPERATION AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

This section provides information on the structures, mechanisms and opportunities for stakeholder collaboration and co-operation in the country.

6.1 Does the legislation and policy framework specify learner voices are used to inform the development of learning and teaching environments?

Yes.

6.1a Description of the legislation and policy framework around the use of learner voice

The Pre-school and school Education Act provides for learners' participation in the life of the school. More concretely, the law focuses on the opportunities for learners' self-governance in Article 171. Learners have the right to give opinions and proposals about the school activities, including the selective and facultative school lessons, and to participate in discussions while solving issues referring to school life and school community, including the school learning plan through the forms of learners' self-governance. Learners shall participate in the school life and in the organisational development of the school through various forms of learner self-governance at the level of a class and school, determined by the Rules of the school upon proposal of the learners.

The Standard for Civil, Health, Environmental and Intercultural Education, adopted with Ordinance 13/2016 (Eurydice, [Legislation and official policy documents](#)) issued by the Minister of Education and Science elaborates further the forms and processes of learners' self-governance:

Institutional policies to support civil, health, environmental, and intercultural education also include supporting learners' initiative and participation through age-appropriate inclusive democratic practices, such as:

- participating in various forms of learner self-governance and representation;
- organising volunteer activities inside and outside school;
- maintaining school media with active learner participation (e.g. newspapers, radio, television, magazines, websites, etc.);
- organising school campaigns supporting health, tolerance, social sensitivity, human rights, environmental protection, etc.;



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- organising school holidays and events according to the calendar of world, international, European, national, municipal, local, professional and cultural dates and holidays;
 - organising peer-to-peer trainings;
 - developing youth leadership;
 - participating in clubs and informal interest groups;
 - implementing forms of mediation, conflict resolution, aggression prevention;
 - introducing the practice of learner mentors to prevent conflicts, drop-outs, etc.;
 - researching learners' opinions, attitudes and expectations regarding the process and content of school education and suggestions about school life;
 - promoting informal learning on the school campus for 'learning by doing' outside of formal education hours and non-formal learning (Article 17).

Besides the legal framework, school self-governance has deep roots in the Bulgarian education system. It is one of the most popular forms for civic education while applying the 'learning by doing' approach. The established mechanism provides for the participation at class and school level but it is also linked to the existing mechanisms for child participation at national level such as the Child Council - a consultative body to the Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection.

6.2 Does the legislation and policy framework ensure curriculum development processes take account of all learners and their communities?

Yes.

6.2a Description of how the legislation and policy framework around curriculum development processes take account of all learners and their communities

The Pre-school and School Education Act lists a framework or model curriculum and each school shall work out its school syllabus in accordance with the learners' interests and its opportunities (Article 94, PSEA). On the basis of the adopted school syllabus, an individual learning plan is developed for learners in individual form of education, as well as, if necessary, for:

- learners with special educational needs who study in day, evening, combined, distance form or dual training system;



- learners with outstanding talents, who are taught in a combined, distance form or dual training system (Article 95, PSEA).

The school syllabus is developed in accordance with the interests of the learners and the school's capacity; for this purpose, each school year the school provides a list of subjects for each year from which learners and their parents/caregivers indicate their subject choices by completing applications at the end of the previous school year or before the learner enters the school. The school syllabus shall be adopted by a decision of the Pedagogical Council and after co-ordination with the Public Council of the school.

The individual syllabus is approved by an order of the principal and its implementation is monitored on a monthly basis by the regional education department. The individual syllabus for learners with sensory disabilities may also include a section D – lessons provided for the study of special subjects. The individual syllabus is developed for the school year except as provided in the state educational standard for the curriculum. The individual syllabus may determine the distribution of study time by one or more subjects, which is different from the framework, type and school syllabus. The individual syllabus of learners with special educational needs may contain only a part of the subjects defined in the framework, type or school syllabus. For the training in each subject in the individual syllabus, the personal development support team develops an individual syllabus, which is approved by the principal. The individual syllabus for learners with special educational needs is developed on the basis of the framework requirements set by the state educational standard for inclusive education. The individual curricula are developed by the teachers in the respective subjects together with the specialists who are in the team to support the personal development of the particular learner ([GEM Report](#)).

Though the Ministry of Education envisages one common curriculum on subjects for all learners, the legislation also provides for opportunities for the adaptation of the curriculum after an individual assessment of the needs of learners. The learners with special educational needs, for whom the assessment of individual needs has shown the need for training in individual curricula, are trained in such. Individual curricula are in accordance with the general curriculum approved by the Minister of Education and Science in the respective subjects. Learners who have chosen or have shown the need to learn in an individualised form of education are taught on an individual syllabus.

Access to the curricula and syllabus content is guaranteed by:

- providing support for the personal development of learners to ensure continuity in their transition through the various stages and levels of education;
- adaptation of the educational content to the individual needs of learners with special educational needs;
- provision of aids and specialist technologies in the educational process;
- provision of therapeutic support and rehabilitation of learners;
- provision of training in curricula on special subjects for learners with sensory disabilities;
- use of appropriate training materials and teaching aids.



6.3 Does the legislation and policy framework support the active involvement of different stakeholders in ensuring inclusive learning environments?

Parents and families

Yes. Parents can participate in the Public Councils of the school. Article 269 of the PSEA lists the powers of the Public Council, namely:

- approve the strategy for development of the kindergarten or school and adopt the annual report of the principal on their performance;
- participate in the operation of the Pedagogical Council in discussing the programmes and the selection of school uniforms;
- propose policies and measures for improvement of the quality for the educational process on the basis of the results of the self-assessment of the institution, the external assessment for the school, and the inspection of the kindergarten or school;
- give opinion about the distribution of the budget in activities and the amount of the capital costs, as well as on the report on its performance for the institutions of delegated budget and for the private kindergartens and schools, which receive funds for the state budget;
- co-ordinate the proposal of the principal about the distribution of the funds at the end of the previous year;
- co-ordinate the school syllabus;
- participate with representatives in the attestation commissions of the principals under the terms and conditions of the state educational standard for the status of the professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists;
- co-ordinate the selection of teachers in the school, the textbooks and school kits;
- alert the competent bodies if violations of the normative acts are identified;
- give opinion on the school syllabus – admission;
- participate in creation and adoption of a code of ethics of the school community.

Parents of learners with special educational needs actively participate in the individual assessment of their child and the creation of the individual learning plan. Parents have the right to agree with or appeal the conclusions and proposals of the specialists included in the learner's individual learning plan and to amend it.

School-leaders/leadership teams, teachers and specialist staff

Yes. Besides the opportunities for participation in different working groups for policy development and legislation setting up, the school leadership, teachers and specialists can actively influence the development of an inclusive environment.



The Pedagogical Council is the collective decision-making mechanism in the school. It is a specialised body for examining and solving major pedagogical issues in the kindergarten, school and personal development support centre. The Pedagogical Council shall include all pedagogical specialists and the deputy principals without regard to their teaching work. In schools with an agreement under Article 28, paragraph 3, persons holding academic positions who provide training at the school may also attend the meetings of the Council with the right to an advisory vote.

The Pedagogical Council at the school has the following powers:

- adopt a strategy for development of the school for the following four years with an action and financial plan attached to it;
- adopt Rules of procedure of the school;
- adopt a school syllabus;
- adopt the forms of training;
- adopt the annual plan for the school activity;
- adopt school plans for individual forms of training;
- adopt measures for raising the quality of education;
- adopt a programme for prevention of early dropping out from school;
- adopt a programme for provision of equal opportunities and for inclusion of learners from vulnerable groups;
- propose to the principal to initiate interest activities;
- make proposals to the principal about learner awards and impose relevant sanctions in the relevant cases provided by the Act;
- define school symbols and rituals and other unique signs;
- define a school uniform;
- participate with its own representatives in the creation and adoption of an ethical code of the school community;
- get acquainted with the budget of the kindergarten, school or personal development support centre, as well as with the reports on its performance;
- periodically, at least three times per school year, check and discuss the level of learning of competencies of the learners and propose joint measures among the teachers in view to improvement of the educational results;
- exercise other powers, provided by the normative acts.

Stakeholders in the local communities

Yes. Stakeholders in the local communities can participate either via the Public Council or in the development and implementation of the Municipal strategy for education.



Local-level decision-/policy-makers

Yes. The Pre-school and School Education Act stipulates in Article 196 that the regional governor organises the development of a two-year regional strategy for support of the personal development of learners on the basis of an analysis of the need for support in every municipality in the territory of the region. The strategy shall also include a description of the challenges, strategic purposes and needed actions in the area of support. For the development of the strategy, the regional governor shall provide the participation of representatives of every municipality in the territory of the region, of the Regional Department of Education, the regional support centre of the process of inclusive education, the regional health inspection, and non-profit legal persons working in the area of inclusive education, and other interested bodies, persons and organisations, having relation to the development of support for personal development.

On the basis of the regional strategy, a municipal strategy for personal development of learners shall be adopted by the municipal council for a period of two years.

The municipal mayor, after a decision of the municipal council, may assign support activities for personal development to a personal development support centre in another municipality, if in the municipality there is no personal development support centre to do them. The municipal mayor, after the decision of the municipal council, may assign provision of activities to providers of social services for children, licensed under the Social Services Act.

Non-governmental organisations, disabled people's organisations or other organisations representing vulnerable groups

Yes. The Public Council is the main mechanism for community participation in school life.

Schools are also free to implement different programmes with the help of different NGOs or academics. Both NGOs and academics can participate in the development of state policies for education, and the drafting of different legal acts and policies.

Other(s)

The Pre-school and School Education Act provides for the inclusion of the following participants and institutions in the educational process, as well as the relations and contacts among them for achieving the objectives of education:

- Participants in the educational process are the learners, teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists, as well as the parents.
- The institutions in the pre-primary and school education system are the kindergartens, schools, personal development support centres and specialist service units.

The participants in the educational process and institutions co-operate with the municipalities and with other interested parties.

The autonomy of state and municipal high schools, secondary and specialist schools also includes the right to conclude co-education agreements with state higher schools training in subjects and/or modules for the acquisition of the profiled and/or vocational training in



the second high school stage, as well as in subjects for the acquisition of specialist training in secondary education.

We should highlight the existence of several mechanisms for inter-agency co-operation: the one for prevention of dropping out, a mechanism in cases of violence where the Ministry of Education and Science plays an important role, etc. (see section 4.1 above).

It is important to say that the MoES is a child protection body in accordance with Article 6 of the Child Protection Act. This means that the Ministry is entrusted with ensuring that all children exercise their right to education in a safe environment.

6.4 Does the legislation and policy framework ensure that curriculum development processes involve the participation and contribution of different stakeholders?

Yes.

6.4a Description of the legislation and policy framework ensuring the involvement of stakeholders in curriculum development processes

Many current teachers, as well as university professors, are involved in the curriculum development process. For this purpose, working groups are created in the Ministry of Education and Science with orders from the Minister of Education and Science; in these, in addition to the experts on subjects from the MoES, teachers in these subjects are involved, as well as lecturers from higher schools, to prepare teachers in these subjects. Curricula in general subjects are approved by orders of the Minister of Education and Science ([GEM Report](#)).

6.5 Does the legislation and policy framework support the development of learning communities in local/regional areas?

Yes.

6.5a Description of the legislation and policy framework that supports the development of learning communities

There are no legal obstacles for involvement of academia and university in school life. On the contrary:

- schools are encouraged to invite representatives of academia to the meetings of the Pedagogical Councils;
- schools can pilot and implement innovative school syllabi;
- schools have the right to conclude co-education agreements with state higher schools training to work on different projects and to constantly maintain and raise the capacity of the teachers.

Moreover, the qualification of the pedagogical staff is a matter of strict regulation and is linked to the career development and attestations.



Article 174 of the Pre-school and School Education Act envisages that the institutions in pre-primary and school education shall independently develop and apply thorough policies for the development of the school community. Further, the Act says that every school shall have an ethical code of the school community, which shall be adopted by representatives of the Pedagogical Council, the Public Council, the Board of the school self-government in a procedure determined by the school rules of procedure.

The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030 identifies as a challenge the lack of an established culture for building and developing effective school communities and of systematic interaction with parents to improve learning, education and socialisation outcomes.

Evaluative commentary

This section provides a qualified, evidenced-based reflection on the **challenges, opportunities and consequences** of stakeholder collaboration, co-operation and effective communication for the implementation of inclusive education in practice. It specifically considers how effectively different stakeholders across the education system are supported to increase their personal and collective ability to be inclusive in practice.

National level

Different stakeholders can be involved in the processes of developing and adopting regulations and policies. This can happen at the earliest stage – by informing the Ministry of Education and Science about new analyses that provide new evidence for gaps or potential positive developments in the field of education, thus initiating a new amendment or supplement to the legislation; it can be in working groups while drafting documents; it can be during public consultation (all strategic documents and proposals for legislative changes are published for public consultation on [an online portal](#)), before their adoption by the Council of Ministers, or before their submission to the National Assembly.

Municipal level

Municipalities are obliged to develop a municipal strategy for the personal development of learners based on a needs analysis and in line with the regional strategy. Regional strategies for personal development of learners are adopted by the regional governors of the 28 administrative regions in the Republic of Bulgaria.

School level

The legislation allows for the participation of different stakeholders in school life. The invitation of academics to the meetings of the Pedagogical Councils is encouraged. The Public Council is a new actor in Bulgarian legislation, established with the new Pre-school and School Education Act (2016), which aims at a more active involvement of the local community in school life. Special mechanisms have been developed – such as the one for drop-out prevention, which is inter-agency – and the evidence proves its effectiveness.



Challenges

- Some difficulties in co-operation between the school and families of vulnerable children.
- Involvement of families from ethnic communities in school life.
- There is still some resistance within teachers and communities about including all children in mainstream school.
- Lack of an established culture of building and developing effective school communities and of systematic engagement with parents to improve learning, education and socialisation outcomes.

Opportunities

The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030 recognises that while there is an established legislative framework for cohesive school communities, there is still a need for better implementation of the principles and objectives of the law. The route to more attractive and better quality education is through effective school communities united by a shared system of educational values. Policies will be implemented to create and deepen links and interactions within the school community between all actors in the educational process (learners, teachers, other professionals and parents), with local authorities and the local community, as well as with institutions and civil society organisations concerned with the educational and personal development of learners. They will be carried out in a climate of equality and dialogue, and will aim to achieve a shared vision for the development of the kindergarten/school. At the heart of these policies will be the promotion of a safe school environment, a sustainable, positive school climate, an atmosphere of trust, respect and care for the other, a sense of community belonging and a striving for better achievement for learners.



SECTION 7. FINAL COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS

Significant efforts are directed towards the inclusion and educational integration in the education system of learners from vulnerable groups, including Roma, and of learners seeking or granted international protection. To support the process of educational integration, a Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Learners from Ethnic Minorities has been established, and an investment priority ‘Socio-economic Integration of Marginalised Communities such as Roma’ has been included in the Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Programme.

Successes have been achieved in terms of increasing the coverage of learners from vulnerable groups, including Roma, in pre-primary and school education, and increasing their participation in secondary and higher education. Measures to promote and implement the process of educational desegregation have been implemented and, together with measures to build tolerance and intercultural dialogue skills, have had a positive impact in terms of equal access to quality education for all learners. Despite these efforts, inclusion and educational integration of learners from vulnerable groups, including Roma, remains a challenge that requires sustained efforts by the state and stakeholders over the next ten years.

In recent years, sustainable policies have been implemented to prevent and intervene in cases of violence and bullying, and to create a supportive and safe educational environment. As part of measures in this area, the number of school psychologists and pedagogical counsellors has been increased. As of November 2020, a total of 966 psychologists and 725 pedagogical counsellors have been recruited in schools with 350 or more learners. The Ministry of Education and Science is also piloting a programme aimed at preventing violence and promoting a safe school environment through a whole-school approach called ‘Steps Together’. At the same time, systemic interaction remains a challenge insofar as its implementation depends on the specific educational institution. A key point for preventing and addressing aggression and violence in educational institutions is to involve parents as an active partner of educational professionals, educational mediators and social workers.

The policy for inclusive education is also built upon by implementing measures: to support all learners who have difficulties with learning content; for career guidance to prepare them for transition to further education and for vocational training; to motivate them to continue their education and to participate in the labour market.

We should highlight the great impact of the (adopted in 2015, in force since August 2016) Pre-school and School Education Act which reflects the shift of the paradigm from medical to social and functional model. Since then, we are witnessing other challenges: migrant crisis, global pandemics, digitalisation, economic inequalities which are analysed in an academic article and called there ‘the fourth stage of development of inclusive education, which can conditionally be named, ‘inclusion of the diversity of needs as a result of global crises’ (Damyanov, 2022, pp. 279–280).



Therefore, the MoES and the respective authorities analyse the situation constantly in the long and short-term, and take measures to provide a robust response to the new challenges.