



“Bright Start” and *“Success for You”*: Lessons from the implementation of inclusive education projects in Bulgaria

OECD Support for the Evaluation Plan of Bulgaria’s Programme “Education” 2021-2027

Inclusive education: interim evaluation #1

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OECD support for the evaluation plan of Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027

EVALUATION OUTPUTS	2024		2025		2026		2027		2028		2029	
	Q1-Q2	Q3-Q4	Q1-Q2	Q3-Q4	Q1-Q2	Q3-Q4	Q1-Q2	Q3-Q4	Q1-Q2	Q3-Q4	Q1-Q2	Q3-Q4
Planning and project management	Implementation plan				Update				Update			
Interim Evaluation Reports and Final Evaluation Reports for main thematic areas												
REACT		FINAL	Dissemination & COMMS									
1. Inclusive education				INTERIM (1)	Dissemination & COMMS			INTERIM (2)	Dissemination & COMMS	FINAL	Dissemination & COMMS	
2. Integration of marginalised communities						INTERIM (1)	Dissemination & COMMS		INTERIM (2)	Dissemination & COMMS	FINAL	Dissemination & COMMS
3. Digitalisation and competency-based model								INTERIM (1)	Dissemination & COMMS		FINAL	Dissemination & COMMS
4. Vocational Education and Training				INTERIM (1)	Dissemination & COMMS			INTERIM (2)	Dissemination & COMMS		FINAL	Dissemination & COMMS
5. Higher Education		INTERIM (1)	Dissemination & COMMS			INTERIM (2)	Dissemination & COMMS			FINAL	Dissemination & COMMS	
Ad hoc needs based reports				Evaluation thinking report								
Summary report												

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Research design and data collection methods



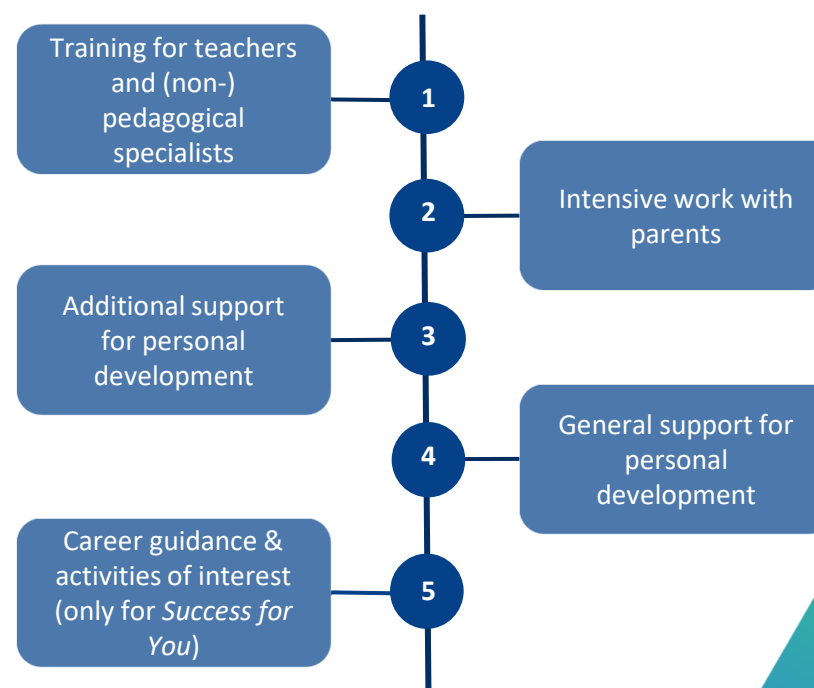


Purpose and scope of the interim evaluation

- OECD interim evaluation #1 of inclusive education
- ***Bright Start*** and ***Success for You***
- February-December 2025
- To inform current practices and future inclusive education initiatives
- The evaluation covers all activities, especially 1-4

To what extent the management and coordination of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* at national, regional, and kindergarten/school level enable the effective delivery of high-quality, well-matched support to vulnerable students.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES





Overview of the evaluation criteria

Relevance

Are the activities relevant for enhancing inclusive education in kindergartens and schools in Bulgaria?

Coherence

Do they align with broader inclusive education measures in Bulgaria and European strategies?

EU added-value

Do they bring additional benefits that would not have been possible without EU support?

Effectiveness

Do management and coordination facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive education? What changes are visible in kindergartens and schools? How are activities delivered to different target groups, and for whom do they appear effective?

Efficiency

Do project management and coordination support the efficient implementation of quality inclusive education for different groups of learners?

Sustainability

Are measures in place to ensure the continuity of quality inclusive education beyond the current funding programme?

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Mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data across national, district and institutional levels



Document review: Analysis of policy documents, projects guidelines, technical and financial reports, participation microdata, and early outcome indicators



Survey of regional project teams: Online survey, 84% response rate. Closed and open questions, informed by interviews with four diverse REDs



Interviews & focus groups: Conducted with ~100 stakeholders, including Ministry staff, regional and institutional project teams, civil society representatives, and final beneficiaries (teachers, students, parents)



Site visits: Visits to 2 kindergartens and 5 schools across 3 districts, selected for diversity in size, location, and student composition; included interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in the projects



Limitations: Site visits and interviews were not nationally representatives; limited outcome data (most data focused on inputs/outputs); voluntary participation may cause selection bias, but triangulation of data helped offset some limitations

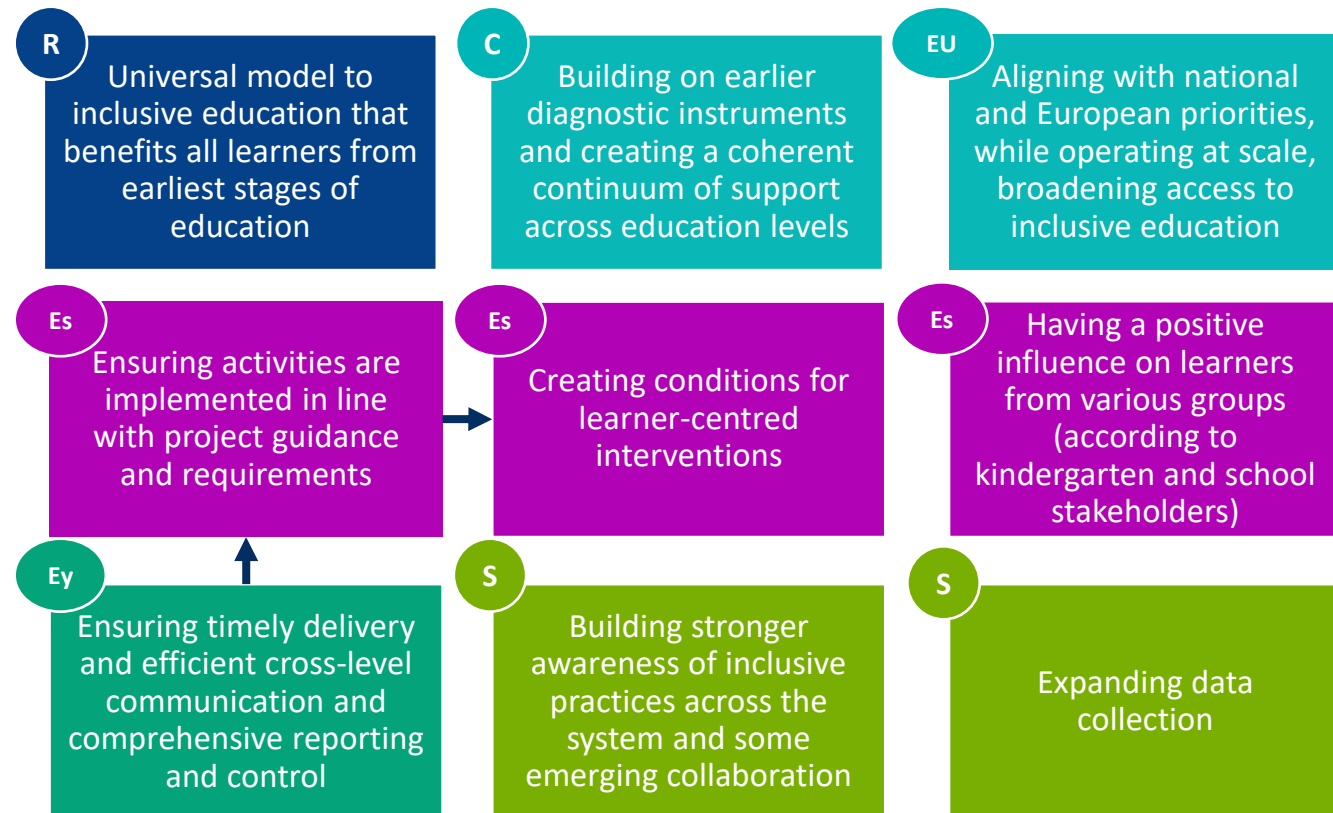


Key findings





The projects are achieving many of their objectives...





But there is also room for improvement

The educational effectiveness and sustainability of project activities can be strengthened

Capacity

- Training activities for staff are too narrow in scale and scope.
- There is no capacity-building for kindergarten/school leaders despite their critical role

Support

- Lack of clarity on engaging parents, supporting gifted learners and those whose first language is not Bulgarian
- Methodological guidance and support is a gap in project design
- Reporting and control are focus of project implementation

Evidence

- Data does not yet inform inclusive practice or guide decision making
- School visits are typically compliance-oriented
- Efforts to allocate resources by need only cover kindergartens and schools who apply to participate

Recommendations





Overview of recommendations

Goal: Strengthen the educational effectiveness and sustainability of project activities

1. Enhance measures to strengthen professional capacity for inclusive education

2. Create the conditions for methodological support by assigning responsibility, developing expertise and making time

3. Improve guidance on support for learners by better defining practical approaches

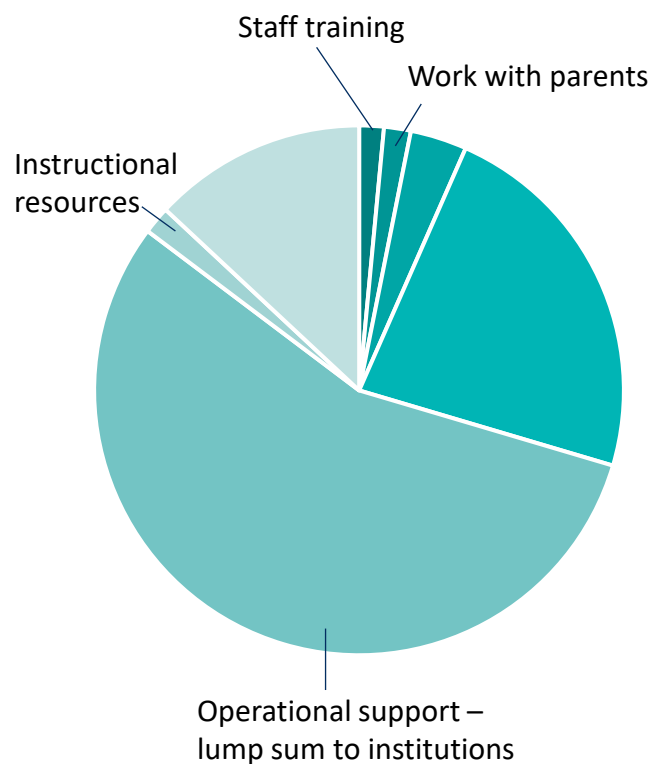
4. Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes to facilitate more learning across the system





Recommendation #1: Enhance measures to strengthen professional capacity for inclusive education

Share of project funds for capacity building



THE PROJECTS INCLUDE RELEVANT MEASURES TO INCREASE CAPACITY...

Engage key
stakeholders

Intensive parental
engagement

Funding for
specialists

...BUT GAPS REMAIN

Staff training
(especially *Success
for You*)

Recruitment of
specialist
professionals

Leadership
capacity-building

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Recommendation #1: Enhance measures to strengthen professional capacity for inclusive education

Improving the relevance and quality of the training offered to teachers and specialist professionals under Activity 1:

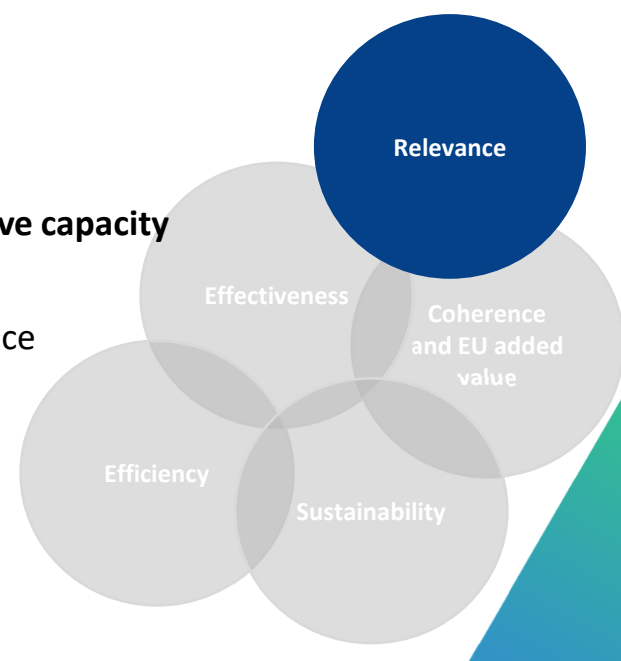
Now | Expand scope of topics, beyond needs identification (Success for You)
Survey teachers and specialists to understand needs (Success for You)
Monitor training outcomes

Later | Invest in school-embedded professional development and expand budget

Introducing structured collaboration and training opportunities to build inclusive capacity among kindergarten and school leadership teams:

Now | Formalise and expand some of the ad-hoc collaboration already taking place

Later | Develop a well-structured training offer for leaders with different formats (e.g. coaching, mentoring, networking etc.)

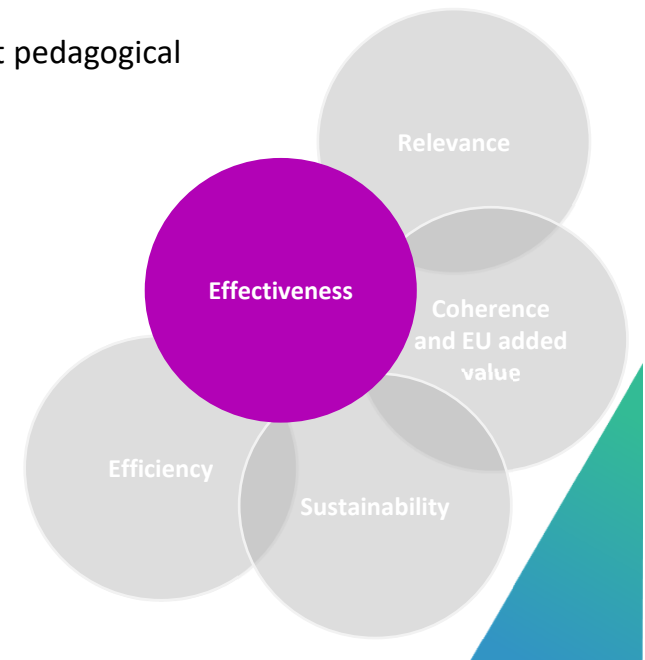




Recommendation #2: Create the conditions for methodological support by assigning responsibility, developing expertise and making time

PROJECT DESIGN DOES NOT FORMALLY INTEGRATE METHODOLOGICAL SUPPORT INTO ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR PROJECT TEAMS AT ANY LEVEL DESPITE THERE BEING A NEED

- **No formal responsibility for methodological support** at any level, despite clear need
- **Project teams at all levels are oriented towards reporting and control**, with little direct focus on implementing activities for enhanced educational outcomes
- **Institutional coordinators are selected for project management experience**, not pedagogical expertise, reinforcing a gap in instructional support

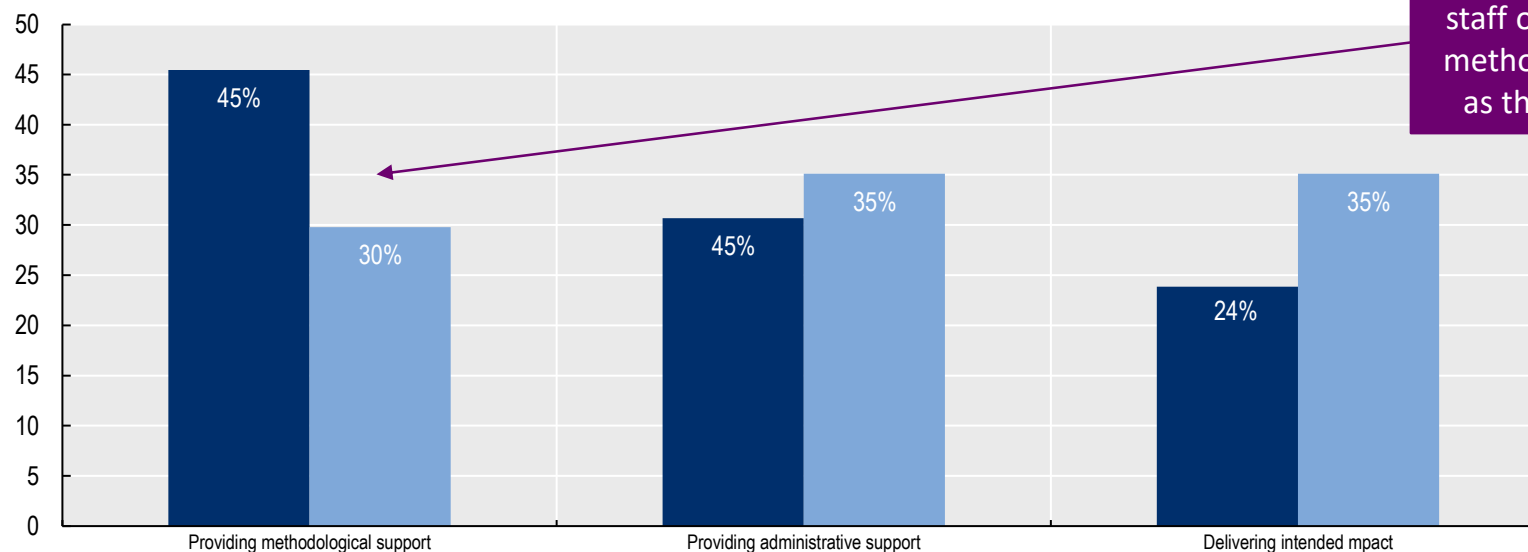




Recommendation #2: Create the conditions for methodological support by assigning responsibility, developing expertise and making time

Those working in regional project teams having unclear and divergent views on their objectives

% Share of staff reporting what they see as their key objective or goal in supporting implementation, by project



Many regional project staff on *Bright Start* see methodological support as their key objective

Note: Based on open responses to the question: What do you see as your key objective(s) or goal(s) in supporting the implementation of Bright Start and/or Success for You? Each response was assigned one or more initial codes based on its content; these codes were then refined and validated by an additional coder. The percentage values indicate the share of total assigned codes as some responses were assigned multiple codes. N=88 for Bright Start; N=94 for Success for You. Results are shown in descending order based on the share of Bright Start responses coded in each category.

Source: OECD (2025[6]), Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams, unpublished.

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Recommendation #2: Create the conditions for methodological support by assigning responsibility, developing expertise and making time

Developing clear responsibilities for methodological support, and guidance on the type of activities it can involve:

Now

Define tasks for activity coordinators in national project teams, for regional project teams and for other public institutions

Later

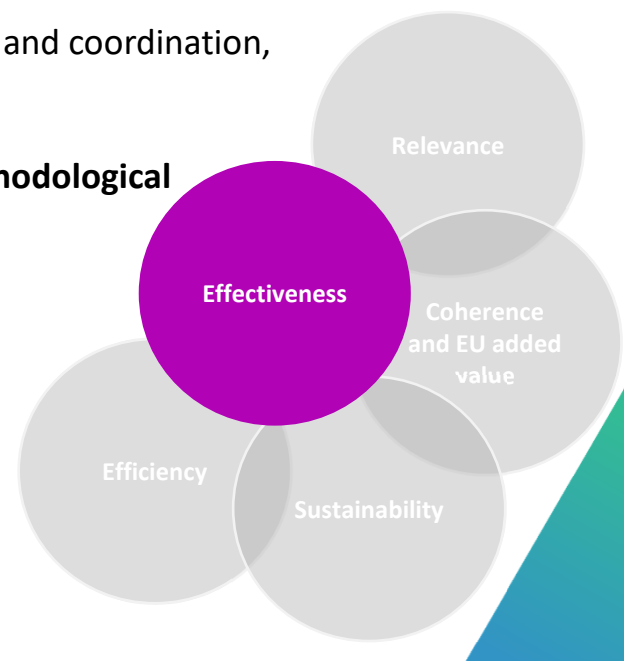
Integrate methodological support into every level of project management and coordination, with clearly defined roles for each

Providing opportunities for regional project teams to develop capacity for methodological support under Activity 1 or through peer learning

Now

Expanding regional teams in key districts, particularly where there are gaps in inclusive education expertise

Now





Recommendation #3:

Improve guidance on support for learners by better defining practical approaches

- Institutions implement highly structured interventions that can facilitate a learner-centred approach
- The *projects* emphasis diagnosing learner needs, but give less guidance on response
- Project teams, parents, and students view the activities and their immediate outcome for learners of different ages or needs positively...

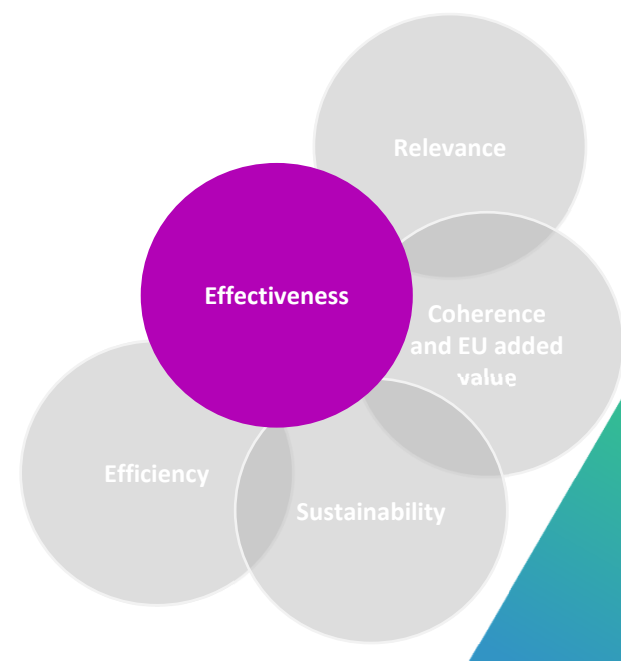
...But there are some gaps in use and understanding

General support under *Success for You* is diverted to exam preparation

Parental engagement is broadly defined, resource-intensive, and requires skills most staff lack

Gifted learner support lacks clarity and buy-in

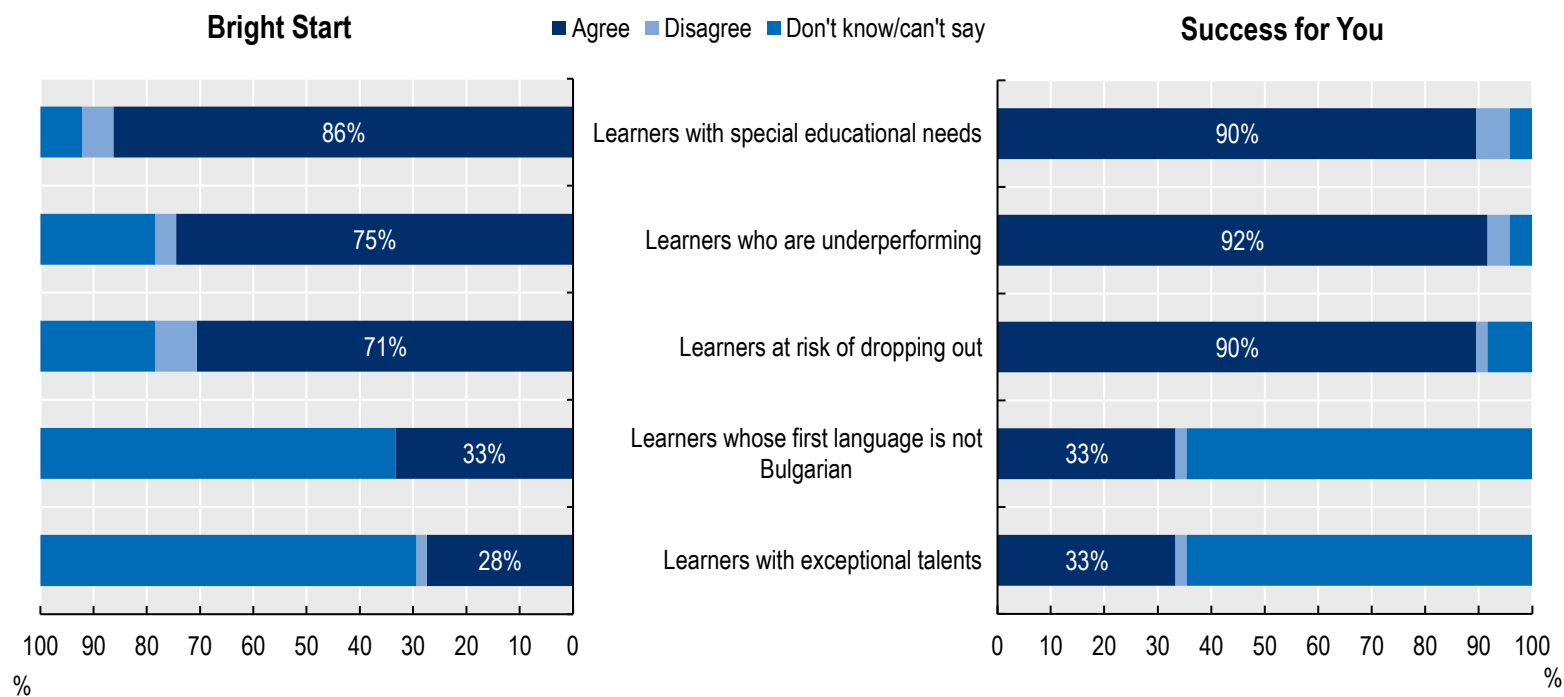
Language support is generic, not tailored to non-Bulgarian speakers





Recommendation #3: Improve guidance on support for learners by better defining practical approaches

Opinions among regional project teams regarding the quality of support learners are receiving, by project



Note: Survey items are ranked in descending order based on the share of Bright Start respondents reporting that they agree or strongly agree that each group of learners receive support that is well-matched to their needs.
Source: OECD (2025), Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams, unpublished.

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Recommendation #3:

Improve guidance on support for learners by better defining practical approaches

Identifying and sharing good practices from kindergartens and schools:

Now

Make this a feature of regular meetings and monitoring visits
Develop a compendium

Engaging with other professionals working on inclusive education:

Now

E.g. Civil society organisations, national and regional institutions, practice or action-oriented researchers

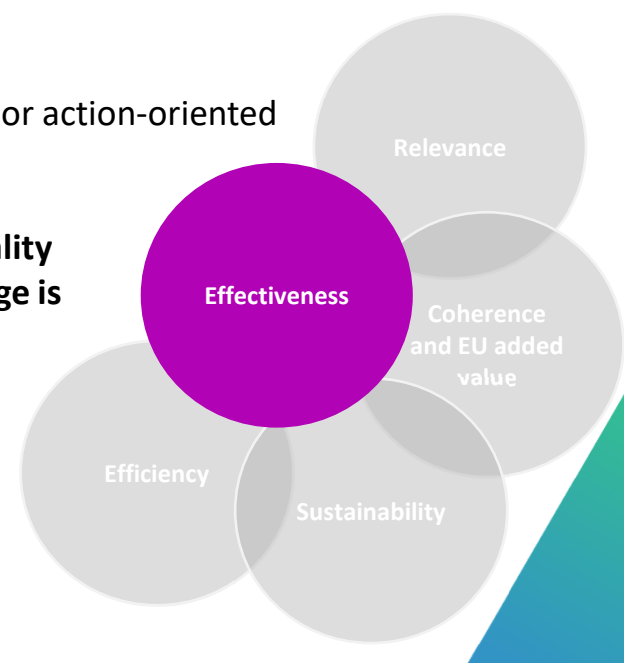
Develop practical guidance, methodologies and training for delivering high quality interventions for parents, and for gifted students and those whose first language is not Bulgarian, as well as for general support

Now

Gather input from the actions above and, perhaps, a group of selected kindergartens and schools
Include these topics in training offered under Activity 1

Later

Strengthen presence of these topics in initial teacher education





Recommendation #4: Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes to facilitate more learning across the system

THE EXECUTIVE AGENCY AND THE MINISTRY HAVE STRENGTHENED PROJECT DATA COLLECTION...

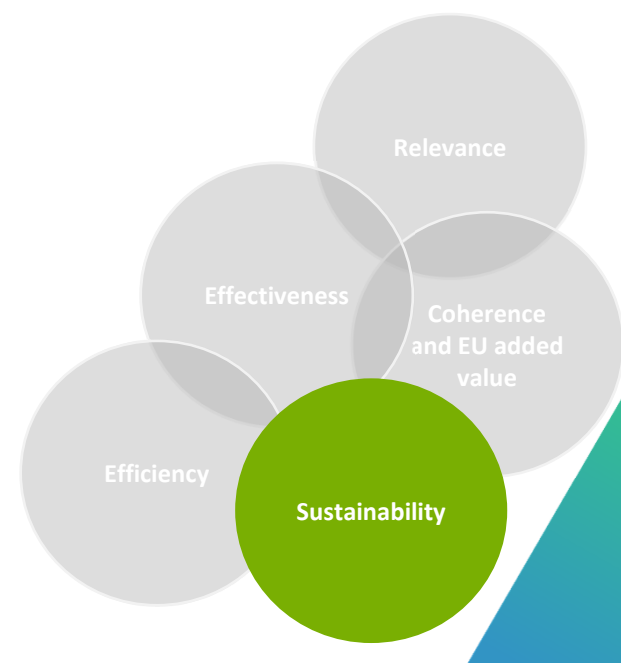
- **Cross-directorate expert group established**, creating a formal structure for coordination and technical oversight, ensuring monitoring is integrated and decisions draw on multiple perspectives
- **Annual questionnaires introduced to complement KPIs**, expanding the dataset beyond headline indicators to capture implementation details from institutions and improve visibility of progress

BUT USE OF DATA FOR QUALITY-ORIENTED LEARNING IS LIMITED

Some key gaps in data collection (especially beyond students)

Unclear responsibilities and time constraints

Kindergarten and school visits are a major missed opportunity





Recommendation #4: Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes to facilitate more learning across the system

Clearly defining the mandate of the expert group, with a focus on learning-oriented project monitoring:

Now

Improving and increasing learning-oriented kindergarten and school visits:

Now

Revise the forms filled in by those conducting the visit to include identification of good practices, constructive feedback and agreed action steps
Develop guidance on how selection of institutions for visits and frequency
Develop qualitative reference standards to guide feedback

Enhancing data collection on work with teachers, specialists and parents:

Now

Define indicators for outcomes related to activities 1 and 2

Later

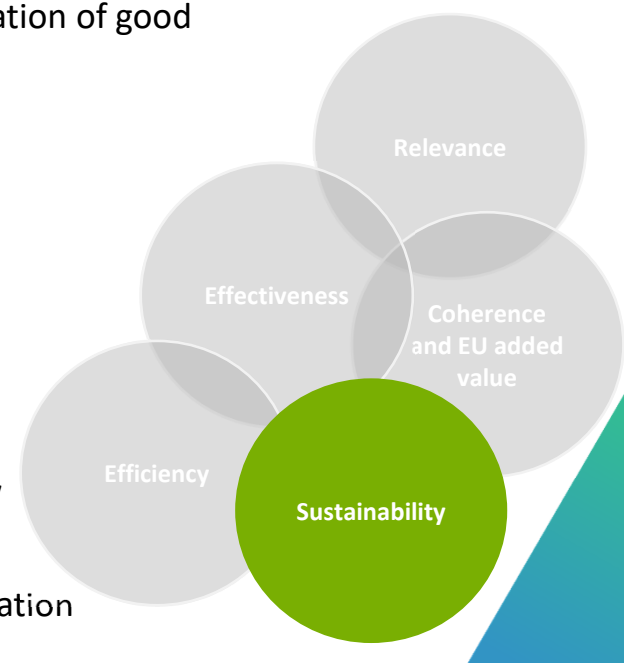
Fully define the project logic model as a first step in establishing the monitoring and evaluation framework

Supporting kindergartens and schools to better understand outcomes and how to improve implementation

Now

Establishing a formal expectation and structured process for regular evaluation

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Moving forward





The projects featured several promising practices that can be carried forward

Across levels:

- Ensured **strong coordination** through clear processes for **communication, reporting, and verification**, enabling smooth implementation and quick adaptation to guidance changes
- Promoted **quality, validated tools** for **learner-centred interventions**, supported by training for teachers and specialists to ensure effective use and wider uptake

National level	District level	Institutional level
> Convened cross-directorate expert teams at national level, spreading awareness of inclusive education and aligning expertise with policy priorities > Facilitated regular interaction between national and regional teams through monthly meetings under <i>Bright Start</i>, enabling timely problem-solving and collaboration	> Leveraged regional expertise in inclusive education to support implementation and methodological guidance > Encouraged institutional learning by promoting data-driven reflection and sharing of good practices at district level	> Achieved high institutional participation, showing strong relevance > Identified innovative interventions like multi-grade peer learning, parental engagement, and student-led literacy support > Enhanced school collaboration through online communities, regional meetings, informal exchanges and peer visits



Overview of recommendations

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Questions for discussion

- Based on the findings, what do you see as the top 3 priorities for the final years of implementation of *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You*?
- Identify 1 way in which the projects could build on their current strengths to deliver on these priorities
- Identify 1-3 new things that that will have to be introduced/changed
- Based on this, identify key actions to be taken as follows:
 - ◆ Within 3 months
 - ◆ Within 6 months
 - ◆ Within 12 months





Thank you!

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