

Implementing inclusive education projects in Bulgaria

*Lessons from an evaluation of Bright Start and Success for
You*

Foreword

This report is an output under the OECD's agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme "Education" 2021-2027 with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (MES) and the Executive Agency "Programme Education". Programme "Education" 2021-2027 is financed by the European Social Fund Plus and Bulgaria's national budget.

This report was prepared by the OECD Secretariat's Directorate for Education and Skills between February and December 2025. Christa Rawkins was lead evaluator and Zhasmin Avetisyan was co-evaluator. Julian Rojas contributed to the analysis of survey responses. The evaluation was carried out according to the overarching framework for the OECD's evaluation support, prepared by Cassie Hague and Zhasmin Avetisyan. Administrative support was provided by Diana Egeli, and Rachel Linden coordinated the overall production of the report.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CPDS	Centres for Personal Development Support
CSES	Centres for Special Educational Support
EAPE	Executive Agency “Programme Education”
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus (previously ESF)
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross domestic product
IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
MES	Ministry of Education and Science
NEA	National External Assessment
NEIS	National Education Information System
OPSESG	Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth”
PE	Programme “Education” 2021-2027
PIRLS	IEA Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	OECD Programme for International Student Assessment
PSEA	Pre-school and School Education Act
RED	Regional Education Department
RSCPIE	Regional Centres for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education

SEN	Special education needs
STPD	Support Team for Personal Development
TALIS	OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey
TIMMS	IEA Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

Executive Summary

From February to December 2025, the OECD conducted an interim evaluation of Bulgaria's implementation of two inclusive education projects: *Bright Start* (2024-2029) for pre-school education and *Success for You* (2023-2028) for primary to upper secondary. The projects support the personal development (i.e. academic progress, emotional well-being and social skills) of all learners, placing a focus on those who may need more support, such as learners with special education needs, chronic illnesses, outstanding talents or learners from marginalised groups, with learning gaps or at risk of dropping out.

Both projects are being implemented under Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027 (PE), financed by the European Social Fund Plus and national budget. The OECD is providing evaluation support under the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of PE with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (MES), the Executive Agency "Programme Education" (hereafter, Executive Agency), and the OECD.

This interim evaluation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, aims to support the Executive Agency, the MES and project teams to better deliver the projects' intended learning and well-being outcomes. The evaluation adopted a mixed methods approach, including analysis of project documentation and data; an online survey for regional project teams; semi-structured interviews with national, regional and institutional project teams and final beneficiaries (i.e. students, parents and staff); and site visits to participating kindergartens (i.e. pre-primary education settings which, in Bulgaria, includes kindergartens and pre-schools) and schools. The OECD evaluations follow a realist approach, reporting on what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how.

Key findings by evaluation criteria

Relevance: *Bright Start* and *Success for You* are well-aligned with international principles for inclusive education, adopting a universal, early-start approach and engaging teachers, specialists, parents and learners. However, efforts to build professional capacity do not explicitly target institutional leaders, despite their key role. Moreover, teacher and specialist training are relatively small scale, receiving around 1.5% and 0.5% of the project budgets although relevant training also exists under national programmes. Under *Success for You*, training is narrow in scope; the topics listed in project guidance focus mainly on needs identification not developing inclusive pedagogies. This is with the intention of supporting the sustainability of outputs from previous projects but is not sufficient in meeting professional development needs.

Coherence: The projects show strong internal and external coherence. They align with national and European strategic priorities and complement other initiatives under PE by offering a continuum of integrated support across compulsory education. They also build on previous projects, including *Active Inclusion in the Pre-school System*, *Support for Success* and *Support for Inclusive Education*, helping to extend their reach and impact.

EU added value: The projects offer a considerably broader scope and scale of intervention than national programmes, integrating multiple actions within a single framework. This can support more strategic thinking in schools and kindergartens. Some overlaps in interventions exist, but provisions are in place to avoid duplication, and this does not undermine the added value of the projects.

Effectiveness: Thanks in large part to their relevant expertise, national and regional teams effectively ensure activities meet project requirements. Uptake has been rapid, with many learner-focused activities nearing or exceeding output targets, highlighting their perceived relevance and positive perceptions of their effect on learners. The projects are prompting behavioural changes in kindergartens and schools, including improved diagnosis of learner needs and the implementation of structured, small-group supports. However, gaps in project design may inhibit desired educational outcomes: guidance on practical approaches to interventions for different learners is limited and responsibilities for project teams do not cover the provision of methodological support to kindergartens and schools. As a result, some activities are not sufficiently understood by those implementing them. This includes intensive work with parents and support for gifted learners or those whose first language is not Bulgarian, as well as general support under *Success for You*.

Efficiency: In both *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, communication between project staff at different levels is efficient, enhancing implementation. All project teams spend a lot of time on reporting and control, which are important for transparency. Simplification efforts, such as the introduction of the simplified cost option and dedicated project information systems, have reduced the administrative load. However, administrative tasks remain intensive, deterring project participation and diverting time and expertise from enhancing educational outcomes. Financial allocation mechanisms are well-designed to reach high-need learners and institutions but only cover kindergartens and schools who apply to participate. Recruitment efforts and implementation support are not targeted enough to pro-actively reach those that do not apply.

Sustainability: The projects contribute to the long-term adoption of inclusive education by building greater awareness across national and regional administrations and kindergartens and schools. However, the growing role of in-house specialists is not financially sustainable and emerging collaboration initiatives, which can promote knowledge sharing and capacity building, lack formalisation, making them vulnerable post-project. Monitoring processes have improved, with more data collected and used. However, it remains compliance-driven; data is not yet being used to support learning about what works and why. In particular, monitoring visits to kindergartens and schools are currently a major missed opportunity.

Lessons and recommendations

Based on the key findings, and informed by international evidence and examples, the OECD identifies five recommendations to strengthen the implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, enhancing educational and well-being outcomes for learners.

1. The Executive Agency and MES should work together to **enhance measures to strengthen professional capacity for inclusive education** by broadening the scope, format and quality of the training offer and expanding the target groups to include kindergarten and school leaders.
2. National project teams should **improve activity guidance for staff in kindergartens and schools by better defining relevant practical approaches** to parental engagement, supporting gifted learners and those whose first language is not Bulgarian, and general support in schools.
3. In future programming periods, project implementation design could **create the conditions for project teams to provide methodological support** by establishing clear responsibilities, expertise and time for such work.
4. **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes**, including kindergarten and school visits and the design and use of project questionnaires, to facilitate more learning across the system.

5. National and regional project teams could collaborate to **develop targeted efforts to increase project participation and enhance implementation** among high-need kindergartens and schools, starting with key districts before expanding nationally.

1 Overview

Since 2016, Bulgaria has built a strong institutional framework for inclusive education, making it a core pillar of national education policy. However, several ongoing challenges inhibit implementation across compulsory schooling, including the large share of learners with systematic gaps in learning, limited professional capacity for inclusive education and low student and parental engagement.

Alongside other efforts to address these challenges, Bulgaria is currently implementing two large-scale inclusive education projects: *Bright Start*, for pre-school education, and *Success for You*, for primary and secondary education. The projects are implemented under Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027 (PE), financed by the European Social Fund Plus and national budget. The OECD is providing evaluation support under the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of PE with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (MES), the Executive Agency "Programme Education" (hereafter, Executive Agency), and the OECD.

As part of the evaluation support, this report presents findings from an interim evaluation examining the initial implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. It aims to support project teams to better deliver intended learning and wellbeing outcomes. The report is organised as follows:

- **Chapter 1** provides an overview of the main findings from across the report and definitions of key terms used throughout.
- **Chapter 2** outlines the evaluation context and research design.
- **Chapters 3-5** present key findings by evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence and EU added value (Chapter 3); effectiveness (Chapter 4); efficiency and sustainability (Chapter 5).
- **Chapter 6** identifies promising practices, recommendations and suggested actions that Bulgaria can draw on to enhance implementation during the current programming period and beyond.

Evaluation design

Bright Start and *Success for You* provide additional resources to kindergartens (i.e. pre-primary education settings which, in Bulgaria, includes kindergartens and pre-schools) and schools to support learners' personal development (i.e. academic progress, emotional well-being, social skills and cognitive growth). They are available to all kindergartens and schools and include activities for all learners, particularly vulnerable ones. This includes those with special educational needs (SEN) and those who are at risk, have chronic illnesses or are gifted as well as learners from marginalised groups, those with gaps in their learning or those at risk of dropping out of education.

By participating in the projects, kindergartens and schools can implement the following activities:

- Activity 1: Training on inclusive education for teachers and specialist professionals.
- Activity 2: Intensive work with parents.
- Activity 3: Additional support for learners with SEN, chronic illness, identified as at risk or gifted.

- Activity 4: General support for those with learning gaps and/or whose first language is not Bulgarian. Under *Bright Start*, this activity includes extracurricular activities of interest.
- Activity 5 (*Success for You* only): Career guidance, inter-school activities and extracurricular activities of interest.

Bright Start has been implemented from 2024 with a budget of around BGN 140.5 million (7.45% of the total PE budget); it will conclude in 2029. *Success for You* has been implemented from 2023 with a budget of around BGN 201.5 million (10.68% of the total PE budget); it will conclude in 2028. Both are designated projects of strategic importance.

In line with all of the OECD's evaluation support, this interim evaluation seeks to understand what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how. It follows six evaluation criteria via key questions as follows:

- **Relevance:** Are the activities envisaged under *Bright Start* and *Success for You* relevant for enhancing inclusive education in kindergartens and schools in Bulgaria?
- **Coherence:** Do they align with inclusive education measures in Bulgaria and European strategies?
- **EU Added Value:** Do they bring benefits that would not have been possible without EU support?
- **Effectiveness:**
 - Do project management and coordination at national, district and institutional levels facilitate effective implementation of quality inclusive education?
 - What changes can be observed in kindergartens and schools as a result of implementation?
 - How are activities for different target groups being implemented and for whom do they appear more or less 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?

The evaluation adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data. Data collection methods include analysis of project documentation and data; the administration of an online survey for regional project teams; semi-structured interviews with representatives from national, regional and institutional project teams and final beneficiaries (i.e. students, parents and staff) and site visits to participating kindergartens and schools.

Aspects of the research design shape how the evaluation findings should be interpreted. First, the evaluation team applied purposive sampling to select individuals and organisations to participate in data collection meaning they are not nationally representative. Participation was also voluntary, raising the risk of selection bias. In addition, at this stage in implementation, outcome data are limited; the evaluation therefore focuses primarily on facilitating factors and barriers in implementation processes as well as early indications of behavioural change and outcomes, based on the perspectives of those involved.

Key findings

This section outlines the key findings of the interim evaluation, organised by evaluation criteria (see Table 1.1). As an interim evaluation, there is a stronger focus on effectiveness; this is considered in terms of outcomes as opposed to long-term impact, due to the relatively early-stage implementation of both projects. Findings typically apply to both *Bright Start* and *Success for You*; where there are specificities by project, these are clearly identified. To enhance implementation going forward, the findings on effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability can be particularly instructive. Engaging with them can help

those in project teams, kindergartens and schools understand strengths and weaknesses with regards to the achievement of the projects' goals for the short and longer term.

Overall, the evaluation finds that the projects are highly **relevant** to the implementation of inclusive education in Bulgaria and **coherent** with previous and ongoing national and regional strategies to promote inclusion. Their unprecedented scale – with activities that target teachers, specialist professionals, parents and all learners and that are available to all kindergartens and schools across compulsory education – would not be possible via national funding alone, creating notable **EU added value**.

The evaluation identifies several positive features of project management and coordination under *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. National and regional project teams effectively ensure that activities are implemented in line with guidance and requirements. Thanks to **efficient** communication and extensive reporting and control, they are doing so at an impressive scale in a relatively short period, particularly for activities targeting learners. These activities are viewed positively by project teams and final beneficiaries, and there is evidence to suggest they help establish more learner-centred interventions in kindergartens and schools. Finally, by appointing staff with varied expertise to project teams and integrating a broad selection of stakeholders within kindergartens and schools, the projects are also spreading awareness of inclusive practices and their importance across administrations and institutions.

However, the evaluation also highlights certain aspects that may be inhibiting the educational **effectiveness** and **sustainability** of the projects. Firstly, there are gaps in efforts to enhance professional capacity for inclusive practice. There are no explicit provisions for kindergarten or school leaders and the training for teachers and specialist professionals is relatively small scale; as defined in the project guidelines for *Success for You*, it is also narrow in scope. Training available under national programmes can complement and supplement the specific trainings offered under the project, but this requires teachers and specialists to accurately identify and seek out training that meets their needs for activity implementation. Project implementation design does not assign formal responsibility for methodological support (i.e. technical support provided to kindergartens and schools to help them implement quality education interventions) within project teams at any level. This is relatively typical of EU-funded projects in Bulgaria (and elsewhere), where work can be more oriented towards reporting and control. However, Bulgaria is now implementing these projects with such administrative efficiency that renewed efforts to enhance their educational outcomes via increasing methodological support can be envisaged.

Compounding this, or perhaps as a result, some activities are not sufficiently understood by those implementing them. This is particularly true of those for which there is less experience and expertise within the system (i.e. support for gifted students and those whose first language is not Bulgarian, intensive work with parents). It is also the case for general support under *Success for You*, used by many schools to support examination preparation as opposed to addressing foundational learning gaps, as intended. Finally, monitoring and evaluation is compliance-oriented with little opportunity for reflection and learning, particularly within kindergartens and schools. This means that while the projects are doing a lot to support staff to recognise and identify the different needs of learners, and to create learner-centred instructional environments, there is much less support for them to develop the inclusive pedagogies and differentiated instruction that are ultimately required to enhance outcomes for these learners.

Table 1.1. Overview of key findings by evaluation criteria

Chapter	Evaluation criteria	Key findings
3	Relevance	By adopting a universal approach to inclusive education that starts early, the projects align with international good practice. But support declines as students age, despite challenges to inclusive education in Bulgaria's upper secondary schools.
		The projects include relevant measures to increase professional capacity for inclusive practice but with some

		limitations: the projects see strengthening the knowledge and skills of teachers and specialists as key, but limited funding and narrow focus (particularly under <i>Success for You</i>) reduce the relevance of planned activities, while both projects overlook more complex recruitment challenges for specialists and the development needs of kindergarten and school leaders.
	Coherence and EU added value	<i>Bright Start</i> and <i>Success for You</i> complement other inclusive projects under Programme “Education” 2021-2027 and help embed key resources developed under previous projects, showing strong internal coherence.
		The projects show a high level of external coherence with the broader policy landscape, delivering interventions at a much larger scale than national programmes.
4	Effectiveness	National and regional project teams effectively ensure that activities are implemented as intended, in part due to their relevant expertise.
		Project implementation design does not assign formal responsibility for methodological support to project teams at any level; although this is relatively typical of EU-funded projects, integrating such roles in the future could enhance the educational effectiveness of activities
		While the uptake of activities aimed at learners is high, implementation is slower for activities that target staff and parents, particularly under <i>Success for You</i> .
		The projects are creating the conditions for learner-centred interventions but could better support staff to know how to respond effectively to learners’ identified needs.
		Project teams, parents and students view the activities and their immediate outcomes for learners of different ages or needs very positively.
		There is a risk that general support under <i>Success for You</i> is primarily used for examination preparation as opposed to catching and addressing foundational learning gaps, as originally intended.
		Some activities are not always sufficiently understood by those implementing them. Parental engagement is highly valued, but is currently broadly defined, resource intensive and requires skills that many staff lack. Kindergartens and schools lack clarity on the aims and scope of support for gifted learners and support for learners whose first language is not Bulgarian may not be sufficiently tailored to their specific needs, particularly under <i>Success for You</i> .
5	Efficiency	Communication between project teams is clear, timely and responsive, supporting efficient implementation.
		Project teams at all levels dedicate a lot of time to reporting and control. Despite some successful simplification measures, this can deter participation and divert time and expertise from enhancing educational outcomes.
		Efforts to target financial resources and increase participation cannot currently ensure all institutions and learners who should benefit from the projects do so.
	Sustainability	The projects raise awareness of inclusion across the system – an outcome that can endure – but the financial sustainability of the work of specialists is uncertain.
		Some emerging collaboration initiatives at district, kindergarten and school level that may support inclusive education practice beyond project duration but are not yet systematic.
		The Executive Agency and MES have improved the collection of output and outcome data, but this is not yet being used systematically to enhance inclusive practice.

Promising practices, recommendations and possible actions

The evaluation identifies several promising practices in implementation at different levels of the system (see Figure 1.1). This includes strong foundations in project management and coordination across all levels and emerging collaboration initiatives at national level and in some districts. Moreover, some regional project teams have the necessary expertise in inclusive education and the motivation to provide methodological support to kindergartens and schools, and some teachers and specialists are already developing more innovative approaches to certain activities. Bulgaria can build on these promising practices to further enhance implementation going forward.

Based on the key findings, the report also identifies five recommendations to strengthen the implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, with a view to enhancing outcomes for learners.

Recommendation 1: Enhance measures to strengthen professional capacity for inclusive education, including among kindergarten and school leaders, by expanding the scope, format and quality of training under the project

Bulgaria can improve the relevance and quality of the training offered to teachers and specialist professionals under Activity 1 in *Success for You* by broadening the topics explicitly covered in the guidelines to put stronger focus on inclusive pedagogies. In addition, both projects could introduce structured collaboration and peer learning opportunities that help build inclusive capacity among kindergarten and school leadership teams. *For the next programming period*, Bulgaria could invest in more kindergarten- or school-embedded professional development that promotes collaboration between staff, such as professional learning communities and peer observation, to strengthen the link between training and practice. In addition, the Executive Agency and the MES could formally integrate training opportunities for leaders on areas such as setting a shared vision for inclusive education and monitoring and evaluating related interventions into project activities.

Figure 1.1. Promising practices in project management, coordination and implementation

Across levels	National level	
• Project management and coordination has strong foundations, meaning key processes run smoothly, project teams ensure implementation in kindergartens and schools aligns with guidance and requirements. • The projects promote the use of quality resources for learner-centred interventions that were developed under previous EU-funded projects, helping to spread their use further across the system.	• National project teams convene experts from across the Ministry of Education and Science helping spread awareness of inclusive education and its importance. • There is regular interaction between national and regional project teams, particularly under <i>Bright Start</i> where monthly meetings are supporting knowledge sharing and collaboration.	
	<th data-bbox="544 1037 1453 1093">District level</th>	District level
	• Some regional project staff have strong expertise in implementing inclusive education and they view their role as being more methodologically-oriented. • Some regional project teams promote effectiveness and institutional learning, supporting kindergartens and schools to reflect on the effectiveness of project implementation in their context.	
	<th data-bbox="544 1249 1453 1305">Institutional level</th>	Institutional level
	• There has been large-scale participation in both projects among kindergartens and schools in the first years of implementation, highlighting the perceived relevance of their activities. • Some teachers and specialist professionals are designing innovative interventions to support learners and parents. • Some kindergartens and schools collaborate with each other to enhance inclusive education.	

Recommendation 2: Improve activity guidance by better defining relevant practical approaches to parental engagement, supporting gifted learners and those whose first language is not Bulgarian, and general support in schools

National and regional project teams could usefully undertake work identifying and sharing good practices currently implemented in kindergartens and schools. Project teams could identify these during regular national and district level meetings and via kindergarten or school visits and should show evidence of positive outcomes. Engaging with others working on inclusive education to draw on their expertise could also be of value. This should focus on those with practical experience, engaging with experts in national and regional public institutions involved in the implementation of inclusive education and with relevant civil society organisations. Building on these two actions, national project teams could strengthen activity guidance, making it more practical and sharing methodologies for delivering high-quality interventions.

Recommendation 3: In the next programming period, create the conditions for project teams and other public institutions to provide methodological support by establishing clear responsibilities, expertise and time for such work

With a view to enhancing educational effectiveness, the MES should develop clear responsibilities for methodological support, and guidance on the type of activities this work may involve. This can cover the work of activity coordinators in national project teams, regional project teams and other public institutions at national and regional level. Bulgaria could also helpfully provide opportunities for regional project teams to develop capacity for methodological support and expand regional teams in districts with high-need and/or low participation rates with a focus on appointing staff with inclusive education expertise. *For the next programming period*, project documentation should clearly integrate both methodological and administrative support into project management and coordination structures from the start.

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

The MES could revise the approach to kindergarten and school visits, putting greater emphasis on activity monitoring and making related visits more focused on identifying implementation strengths and weaknesses with related follow-up actions targeting the content of interventions as opposed to project coordination. More clearly defining the mandate of the MES' expert group, incorporating tasks related to learning-oriented evaluation could also be valuable. National and regional teams should also be encouraged to support kindergartens and schools to better understand outcomes in their context and use this information to improve implementation.

Recommendation 5: Develop targeted efforts to increase project participation and enhance implementation among high-need kindergartens and schools, starting with key districts before expanding nationally

The Executive Agency and MES ensure project funding is targeted to less developed regions and allocated through needs-based selection, which stakeholders view as fair and constructive. However, these measures only reach those that apply to participate while recruitment efforts favour a universal approach that does not sufficiently target and support those that may benefit most. National and regional project teams could helpfully identify high-need non-participants and barriers to their participation, developing tailored approaches to overcoming them.

Key terms

This section outlines how key terms are used in this report, adapted from Bulgaria's legal framework for (inclusive) education:

Additional support– Additional support is provided to learners with SEN, those at risk or with chronic illnesses, and those with outstanding talents. Activities include case-based interventions, psycho-social rehabilitation, and support for disabilities. It also involves the provision of accessible learning environments, specialised equipment and materials, and teaching in special subjects for students with sensory impairments. Support is typically delivered by specialists including, psychologists or pedagogical advisors, speech therapists, resource teachers, teaching assistants, educational mediators and social workers.

General support – General support aims to promote learning and well-being and covers all learners. For those receiving learning support, target groups include learners whose first language is not Bulgarian and, in schools, students with systematic gaps in a given subject or who have been absent and those with low

grades. Activities include additional instruction and language support, career guidance, behavioural interventions, extracurricular activities, and access to library and information services, health care, and dormitory accommodation. They are typically implemented by teachers.

Kindergartens and schools – Kindergartens and schools, as referred to throughout this report, are educational institutions participating in *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. Most are public institutions, but some may be private. While some kindergartens in Bulgaria may also run nursery groups for children from the age of 10 months, *Bright Start* covers children in pre-school education (i.e. from the age of three years old). Schools in Bulgaria can provide compulsory pre-school education, in which case they are also eligible to participate in *Bright Start*.

Methodological support – Methodological support refers to the structured pedagogical, scientific, and practical assistance provided to educators, kindergartens and schools to enhance the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning. It includes guidance on curriculum implementation, teaching methods, and educational technologies; support for lesson planning and the selection of appropriate pedagogical approaches; capacity building; monitoring and feedback; and advisory services that ensure alignment with national education standards and policies.

Personal development – Personal development refers to the individualised support provided to children to foster their learning, emotional, social and cognitive growth, ensuring their full participation in the educational process and community life. This support is part of Bulgaria's inclusive education framework and integrates both general support and additional support (see below).

Specialist professionals – Specialist professionals are the pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff that support kindergartens and schools to implement inclusive education. They can deliver general or additional support and may work directly with learners or also with families and the broader community. They can be in-house (i.e. employed by the kindergarten or school) or based in Regional Centres for Inclusive Education or private practice. Common roles include psychologists or pedagogical advisors, speech therapists, resource teachers, teaching assistants, educational mediators, social workers, guidance counsellors etc.

Vulnerable learners - Vulnerable learners are those who can benefit from inclusive education processes. They belong to one or more of the following categories: (i) those with SEN; (ii) those at risk (i.e. without parental care, victims of abuse, violence, exploitation, or degradation; (iii) those with chronic health conditions; and (iv) gifted learners. Additionally, it includes learners from marginalised groups, such as Roma children and those seeking or granted international protection, and those with academic gaps or at risk of dropping out.

2 Evaluation context and approach

This report provides an interim evaluation of two projects – *Bright Start* and *Success for You* – co-financed by the European Social Fund Plus under Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027 (PE). The evaluation was carried out under the framework of the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme "Education" 2021-2027 between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (MES), the Executive Agency "Programme Education" (hereafter, Executive Agency), and the OECD. It is the first of two interim evaluations focused on inclusive education; a final evaluation is planned for the end of the programming period.

This chapter provides the context for this interim evaluation. It first outlines key features of inclusive education in Bulgaria and identifies the ongoing challenges that the two projects aim to address. It then sets out key information on *Bright Start* (2024-2029), which targets pre-school children and offers support to ease transitions into primary school, and *Success for You* (2023-2028), which focuses on strengthening inclusive practices and providing tailored support to students in primary and secondary education. The chapter also presents a reconstructed logic model that shows how project activities are expected to create impact and describes the evaluation design underpinning this report.

Inclusive education in Bulgaria

This section outlines key developments and ongoing challenges in inclusive education in Bulgaria.

Since 2016, Bulgaria has built a strong institutional framework for inclusive education

Since 2016, Bulgaria has made inclusive education a core pillar of national education policy. The *Pre-school and School Education Act* (2016) provides the legal basis for inclusive education, marking a major shift away from a system in which learners with diagnosed needs were segregated into specialised settings to one which requires all kindergartens (i.e. pre-primary education settings which, in Bulgaria, includes kindergartens and pre-schools) and schools to provide both general and additional supports for the personal development (i.e. academic progress, emotional well-being, social skills and cognitive growth) of all learners. Related processes are defined in the Ordinance on Inclusive Education (2017) (see Box 2.1).

More recently, the *Strategic Framework for Education, Training and Learning (2021–2030)* has reaffirmed Bulgaria's commitment to inclusive, high-quality education, including measures to reduce regional and socio-economic barriers, strengthen parental engagement, and support vulnerable groups through targeted outreach and integrated services (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[1]). Bulgaria has also been strengthening the financial framework for inclusive education, directing more funding to small, remote schools and those with a high concentration of disadvantaged students (OECD, 2025^[2]).

The MES sets national priorities, policies and standards for inclusive education, providing overall governance and oversight (see Figure 2.1). Regional Educational Departments (REDs) and municipalities support implementation in kindergartens and school: REDs provide methodological support, while municipalities organise and sometimes fund local support services for vulnerable learners (i.e. learners from any of the target groups for general and additional support, see Table 2.1). Other public institutions

provide staff training, educational materials, and direct support to learners in a range of inclusion-related areas. Within kindergartens and schools, Pedagogical Councils develop inclusive education strategies and approve individual learning plans. For additional support, they can form a Support Team for Personal Development, bringing together in-house and external specialist professionals (RCSF, 2023^[3]).

Box 2.1. Key concepts for inclusive education in Bulgaria

According to Bulgaria's *Ordinance for Inclusive Education* (2017), inclusive education is defined as:

“a process of awareness, acceptance and support for the individuality of each learner and the diversity of needs of all learners through the activation and inclusion of resources aimed at removing obstacles to teaching and learning and at creating opportunities for the development and participation of children and students in all aspects of community life.”

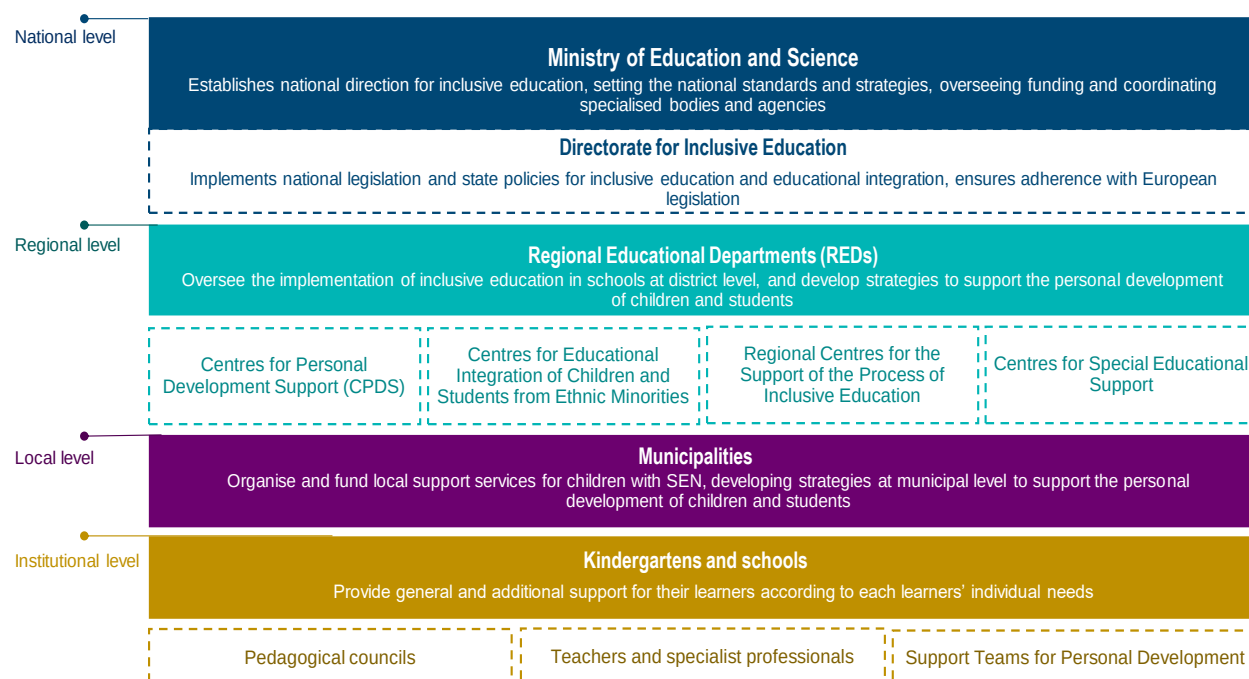
To implement inclusive education, kindergartens and schools are expected to provide general and additional support for the personal development of all (see Table 2.1). Personal development encompasses learners' academic progress, emotional well-being, social skills and cognitive growth.

Table 2.1. Overview of general and additional support in kindergartens and schools in Bulgaria

		Kindergartens and pre-school	School
General Support	Key activities	• Early needs assessment and activities for the prevention of learning difficulties in Bulgarian language. • Activities for the prevention of violence and problem behaviour. • Participation in extra-curricular activities. • Health care, speech therapy, reward schemes.	• Additional instruction in academic subjects. • Career guidance. • Activities for the prevention of learning difficulties. • Activities for the prevention of violence/problem behaviour. • Participation in extra-curricular activities. • Health care, speech therapy, reward schemes. • Library and information services, provision of a dormitory.
	Target groups	All children. For those receiving support for the prevention of learning difficulties: - Children whose first language is not Bulgarian.	All students. For those receiving support for learning difficulties: - Students who have systematic gaps in a given subject. - Students who have been absent. - Students whose first language is not Bulgarian. - Students who have received low grades.
	Responsible staff	Teachers, sometimes in collaboration with other pedagogical specialists.	
Additional Support	Key activities	- Working with a child and student on a specific case. - Psychosocial rehabilitation, hearing and speech rehabilitation, visual rehabilitation, rehabilitation of communication disorders and physical disabilities. - Providing an accessible architectural, general and specialised supporting environment, technical means, specialised equipment, didactic materials, methodologies and specialists. - Providing training in special subjects for students with sensory disabilities. - Resource support. - Activities to nurture outstanding talents.	
	Target groups	- Children and students with special education needs. - Children and students at risk of dropping out due to economic hardship and other factors reducing engagement. - Children and students with outstanding talents. - Children and students with chronic illnesses.	
	Responsible staff	Specialist professionals including, but not limited to psychologists or pedagogical advisors, speech therapists, resource teachers, teaching assistants, educational mediators, social workers.	

Source: Ministry of Education and Science (2017^[4]), *Ordinance on Inclusive education*, https://www.mon.bg/regulation/naredb_a-za-priobsthavasthoto-obrazovanie/ (accessed on 09 July 2025).

Figure 2.1. Governance of inclusive education in Bulgaria



Source: Authors based on Ministry of Education and Science (2017^[4]), *Ordinance on Inclusive education*, https://www.mon.bg/regulation/naredb_a-za-priobsthavasthoto-obrazovanie/ (accessed on 09 July 2025).

Several ongoing challenges inhibit Bulgaria's implementation of inclusive education

Despite major progress in establishing an institutional framework for inclusive education, there are several ongoing challenges. The first and perhaps most significant is low educational outcomes. While this reflects broader structural issues in teaching and learning, the disproportionate difficulties faced by disadvantaged students underscores the importance of inclusive education. Addressing this challenge at the scale it necessitates complicated by other challenges: narrow support for gifted learners, gaps in professional capacity for inclusion among kindergarten and school teams and low parental and student engagement.

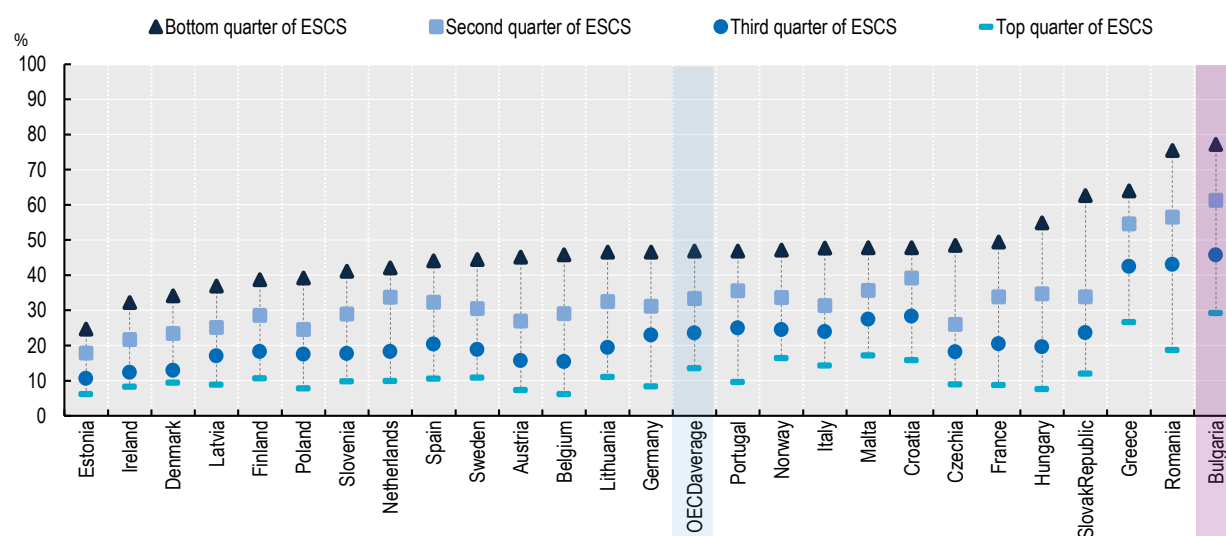
Many learners, particularly from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle to master basic skills – a challenge exacerbated by structural characteristics of the system

Data from international assessments provide insight into the scale and complexity of the inclusion challenge in Bulgaria. Although learners in primary education perform relatively well in international assessments, performance declines in later stages. By age 15, about half of Bulgarian students do not reach basic proficiency in mathematics, reading and science, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 (OECD, 2023^[5]). This means that there are many students across the system with systematic gaps in learning, a key target group for general support (see Box 2.1).

Among the most socio-economically disadvantaged students, the share of 15-year-olds performing below basic proficiency rises to 78% in mathematics (see Figure 2.2) and reading, and 74% in science. These performance disparities emerge early and widen as student progress through the education system. By Grade 4, advantaged students outperform their disadvantaged peers in international assessments by 133 in science, 120 points in reading and 83 points in mathematics (IEA, 2021^[6]; Mullis et al., 2020^[7]).

Figure 2.2. Nearly 80% of the most disadvantaged 15-year-olds in Bulgaria perform below the basic proficiency level in mathematics – the highest share in the EU

Low performers in mathematics, by socio-economic status (PISA 2022)



Note: Countries are ranked in ascending order of the share of low performers in mathematics for students in the bottom quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS). Low performers refer to the percentage of students who score below proficiency Level 2. Source: OECD (2023^[8]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

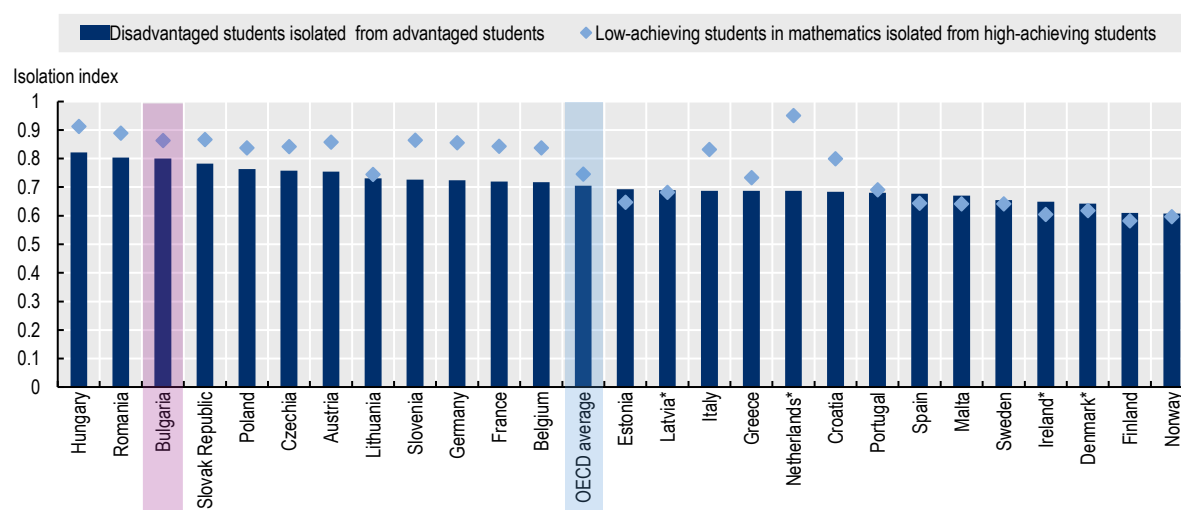
Certain structural features of the education system contribute to both performance decline and gaps. As students enter upper secondary education in Bulgaria (Grade 8, age 14), they are tracked into separate pathways based on performance. These pathways are relatively rigid and result in stratified learning environments where students with similar socio-economic status, background and academic performance are concentrated (OECD, 2025^[2]). PISA 2022 data show that, compared to other European Union (EU) countries, Bulgaria has a particularly high isolation index between disadvantaged and advantaged students, and between low- and high-achieving students (see Figure 2.3). Students from Roma communities, whose first language is not Bulgarian, typically learn in schools with other Roma students: in 2021, this was the case for 64% of all Roma students having increased from 59% in 2016 (Farkas et al., 2023^[9]). Meanwhile, learners with SEN often informally concentrate in schools with sufficient professional capacity and infrastructure to support them (Hristov, 2024^[10]). This has consequences for inclusive education as the concentration of students in schools by certain characteristics can reinforce disparities and inhibit tolerance (OECD, 2023^[5]).

Students living outside of Sofia and other cities have poorer learning outcomes and are less likely to complete upper secondary education than their urban peers. This gap is especially pronounced in remote areas and where there are high concentrations of Roma or Turkish communities. For example, while only 4% of students failed the Grade 12 State Matriculation Examination at first sitting in Sofia in 2024, failure

rates far exceeded this in rural districts, such as Shumen, which has a high concentration of Roma communities and where the share was 18% (Regional Profiles, 2024^[11]).

Figure 2.3. Bulgaria has high levels of student concentration in schools by socio-economic status and academic performance

School isolation index, by socio-economic status and mathematics performance (PISA 2022)



*Caution is required when interpreting estimates for these countries/economies because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met. Note: Countries are ranked in descending order by the isolation index of disadvantaged students from advantaged students. A socio-economically disadvantaged (advantaged) student is a student in the bottom (top) quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) in his or her own country/economy. A low (high) achieving student is one who scores among the bottom (top) 25% of students within his or her own country or economy on the PISA test.

Source: OECD (2023^[5]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

Gifted learners in Bulgaria are narrowly identified and receive limited support

Giftedness is formally recognised in Bulgaria's education policy: the *2021–2030 Strategic Framework for the Development of Education* includes a focus on developing abilities and talents (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[1]), and the Ordinance of Inclusive Education acknowledges learners with outstanding talent in arts, sports, science and technology as a target group for additional support (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017^[4]). However, in practice, support for gifted learners is narrow in scope.

Firstly, despite progress under the previous EU programming period, challenges regarding the identification of gifted learners remain. The *Support for Inclusive Education (2021-2023)* project under the Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth” 2014-2020 (OPSESG) resulted in the development and validation of a diagnostic tool for identifying gifted learners. It provides a structured approach to identifying talents in science, arts, and sports across age groups and provides some guidance on stimulating potential (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[12]). While innovative, its scope remains confined to academic and artistic domains, however: abilities often recognised in other international contexts, such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving (Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021^[13]), receive little attention in Bulgaria. Moreover, teacher training linked to the tool has focused on its technical application, rather than on how to nurture gifted learners once identified.

Secondly, support for gifted learners is limited. Formal support measures exist, including scholarships, specialised programmes and access to national and international competitions. Yet these focus primarily

on providing financial or logistical support rather than on promoting pedagogical approaches that nurture talent through teaching and learning. There is little provision of differentiated instruction, accelerated pathways, or deep exploration in areas of strength - elements that research identifies as essential for talent development (OECD, 2023^[14]; Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021^[13]). National programmes such as *Together in Arts and Sports* (2025-2026) aim to expand students' participation in cultural and sports activities and promote teamwork, discipline, and engagement (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[15]). As broad enrichment efforts, this can contribute to inclusion and student motivation but is not tailored to the advanced needs of gifted students.

Finally, resources for gifted education are heavily concentrated on supporting participation in Olympiads and other national and international competitions. These opportunities typically benefit a small number of "elite" schools, which have a strong tradition of success but mainly serve advantaged students in urban areas. This leaves many gifted learners – particularly those from disadvantaged and rural backgrounds – without structured support.

Schools in Bulgaria often struggle to engage and motivate students

Schools in Bulgaria do not consistently create the positive climates necessary for nurturing a sense of belonging among learners. Evidence from PISA 2022 shows that Bulgaria scored -0.32 on the index of disciplinary climate, based on 15-year-olds' reports of frequent disruptions and inefficient use of lesson time. This was significantly below the OECD average of 0.02. Students' sense of belonging at school was also low at -0.2 nationally, and even lower among rural (-0.3) and disadvantaged schools (-0.4) (OECD, 2023^[5]). This likely influences academic performance: 15-year-olds in Bulgaria who reported feeling lonely or like an outsider at school scored 20 points lower in mathematics in PISA 2022 than their peers who did not (OECD, 2023^[5]). The OECD has previously noted that traditional teaching and assessment practices in Bulgaria, which are often not sufficiently learner-centred, can undermine student engagement and contribute to this decline (Guthrie et al., 2022^[16]).

Nevertheless, there have been improvements in recent years: according to PISA, Bulgaria's index of sense of school belonging increased between 2015 and 2022. There were significant declines in student truancy and lateness over the same period and a notable reduction in early school leaving (OECD, 2023^[5]). While the system has become more successful at getting students to attend school, the fact that large shares report poor classroom discipline indicates that more can be done to engage them in learning once there.

Many teachers, particularly less experienced ones, lack the skills, confidence and resources to respond to all learners' needs

In Bulgaria, teacher capacity for inclusive education is uneven, with many feeling underprepared to support students with diverse needs. According to the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS) 2024, relatively high shares of lower secondary teachers in Bulgaria continue to identify professional learning needs in areas such as supporting students with SEN and teaching in multicultural environments (see Figure 2.4) (OECD, 2025^[17]). These shares showed little change between 2013 and 2024, despite numerous capacity building efforts under the previous European programming period and national programmes (see Chapter 3, Findings 3 and 4). Early-career teachers may face the biggest challenges: in TALIS 2024, the share of teachers with less than five years' experience reporting a need for professional learning on supporting students with SEN was six-points higher than that of their more experienced peers (OECD, 2025^[17]). This points to potential gaps in initial teacher education.

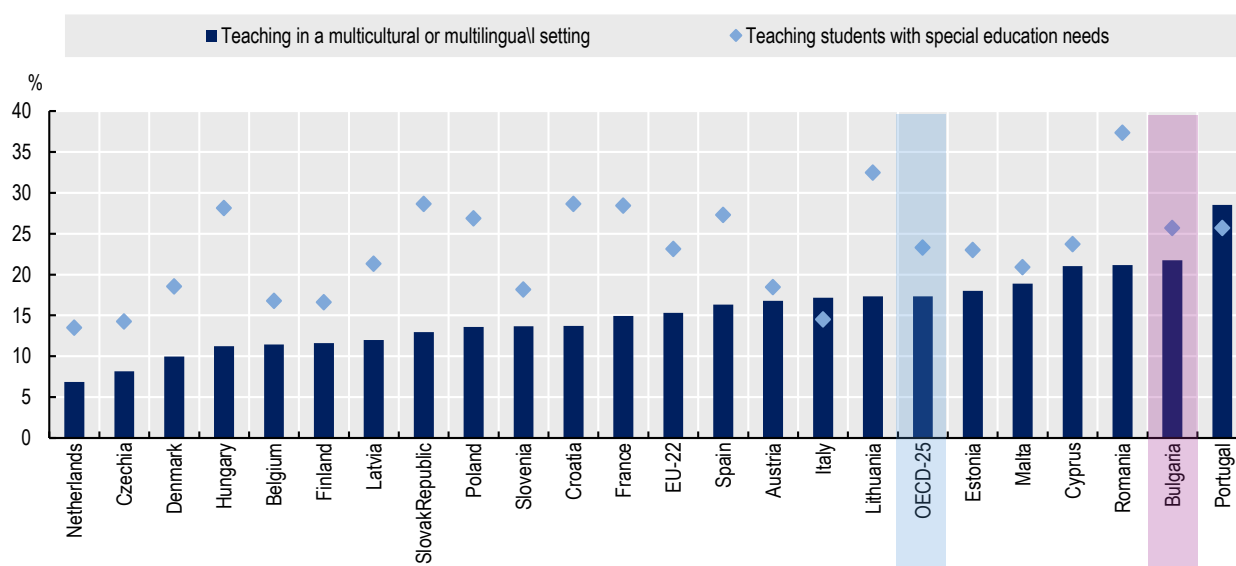
Moreover, the continuous professional development teachers engage in on topics related to inclusive education may not be adequately addressing their needs. Some 15% of lower secondary teachers in Bulgaria who reported participating in training to support students with SEN during the 12 months prior to TALIS 2024 continued to identify this as a training need (OECD, 2025^[17]). This aligns with previous OECD

analysis that has raised concerns about the impact of teacher professional development in improving teachers' knowledge and practices in general in Bulgaria (OECD, 2025^[2]).

In addition to gaps in professional capacity, there are also shortages in learning resources adapted to support diverse learners despite improvements in general education materials like textbooks and digital devices (OECD, 2025^[18]). According to an OECD survey conducted in 2024, 41% of school leaders in Bulgaria reported that their school lacked adapted materials for students for whom Bulgarian is not their first language, and 27% lacked tools to identify those at risk of dropping out (OECD, 2025^[19]). Analysis by the Bulgarian Ombudsman estimates that over two-thirds of mainstream kindergartens and schools lack accessible environments, adapted learning resources, or trained staff, leaving them unprepared to provide effective support (Hristov, 2024^[10]).

Figure 2.4. Many teachers in Bulgaria report learning needs in inclusive practices

Professional learning needs for lower secondary teachers (TALIS 2024)



Note: Countries and economies are ranked in ascending order of the share of professional development needs in teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting.

Source: OECD (2025^[17]), *Results from TALIS 2024: The State of Teaching*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/90df6235-en>.

Shortages of specialist professionals limit support for learners with more intense needs in some kindergartens and schools

Under Bulgaria's legal framework, specialist professionals such as resource teachers, psychologists and speech therapists play a key role in identifying learners' needs, tailoring support, and working with teachers and families (see Box 2.1). Bulgaria has expanded this workforce, with 67% of school leaders in 2024 reporting sufficient access to at least some specialists (OECD, 2024^[20]).

Nevertheless, the distribution of specialists across districts is uneven. Regulations set a maximum caseload of 12 SEN students per resource teacher, but in practice, ratios can be much higher in some more rural districts – particularly those with large concentrations of Roma or Turkish communities – where the availability of specialists is low. When kindergartens or schools are not able to appoint their own in-house specialists, they can seek support from Regional Centres, but these can face similar staffing

constraints. This means that some learners cannot access the individualised support they are entitled to under the Ordinance for Inclusive Education (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017^[4]). At the same time, better-resourced schools may attract more children with complex needs, creating high demand and heavy caseloads for staff.

Parents in Bulgaria are not always meaningfully engaged in their children's learning

International evidence indicates that school-family ties have weakened in Bulgaria in recent years. In PISA 2022, only 26% of school leaders said parents-initiated discussions about their child's progress, down from 33% in 2018 (OECD, 2023^[5]). Teacher-initiated feedback to parents also fell by 16 percentage points in the same period. Home support is also relatively weak and strongly linked to socio-economic disparities. About 10% of 15-year-olds in Bulgaria reported never discussing school progress or future plans with their parents in PISA 2022 (OECD, 2023^[5]). A national, non-representative survey of around 800 parents found that parents are often unsure how to help and feel that schools rarely offer structured ways for involvement (Association Parents, 2024^[21]).

Parental engagement is also uneven, with particularly low levels in urban schools and among fathers, Roma families, single-parent and low-income households (OECD, 2025^[17]; Association Parents, 2024^[21]). PISA data confirm these gaps, with a 0.5-point difference in the family support index between advantaged and disadvantaged students and schools (OECD, 2023^[5]). These patterns indicate that learners facing the greatest challenges often receive the least support at home, increasing risks of disengagement and early school leaving – key barriers to participation and achievement.

Parental engagement has only recently become a focus of policymakers in Bulgaria. In the *Strategic Framework*, a more structured approach to parent-school collaboration is outlined, including measures such as training sessions, feedback mechanisms, and parental participation in school governance. These initiatives aim to strengthen families' role in supporting children's learning and preventing dropout (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[1]). Parental engagement is also a major focus of reform efforts under PE, with most projects having activities focused on increasing parent-school communication or collaboration.

Evaluation approach

This section offers an overview of the scope, objectives and design of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. It then presents the approach followed for this interim evaluation, including a description of the key evaluation criteria and questions, and research design.

Background to Bright Start and Success for You

Bright Start and *Success for You* are implemented as part of Priority 1 of PE, which focuses on *Inclusive education and educational integration*. This priority aims to ensure equitable access to – and completion of – quality education and training across all education levels, from early childhood to adult learning.

For evaluation purposes, the Executive Agency has grouped the eight projects under Priority 1 into two thematic areas:

1. **Inclusive education**, which focuses on building inclusive learning environments in formal education, where all learners, especially vulnerable ones can succeed. This group of projects includes *Bright Start* and *Success for You*.
2. **Integration of marginalised communities**, which targets child poverty and barriers inhibiting learners' access to education and participation and quality provision.

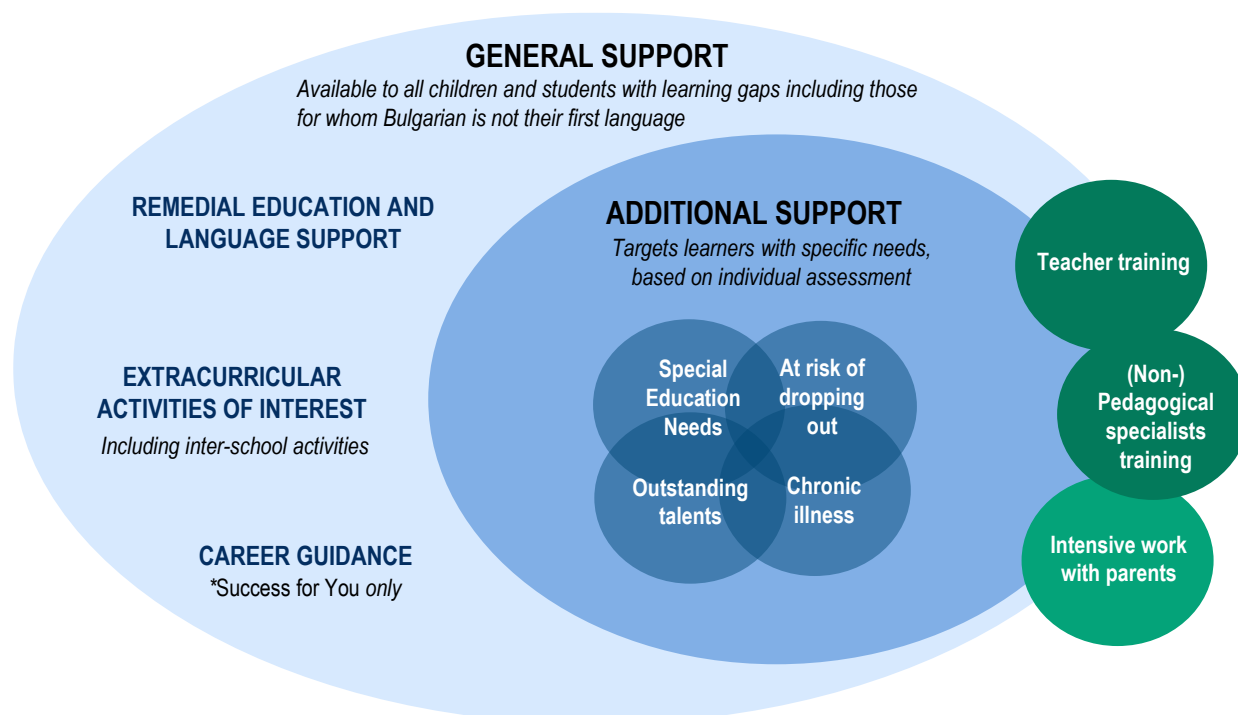
Bright Start and *Success for You* are the projects with the largest scale and budgets under the inclusive education thematic area. They have a combined budget of EUR 174.9 million, constituting 7.5% and 10.7% of the total PE budget, respectively. They target pre-school (*Bright Start*), and primary and secondary (*Success for You*) education and are open to all kindergartens and schools in Bulgaria, aiming to reach those that face the greatest challenges. The projects are designated operations of strategic importance, meaning they receive enhanced monitoring and communication (European Commission, 2024^[22]).

Bright Start and *Success for You* build on and extend earlier inclusive education projects under OPSESG, which focused on expanding access to early education and developing new diagnostic tools to identify and address learners' needs (see Chapter 3, Finding 3). The projects bring together elements of projects from the previous programming period, offering more integrated approaches to inclusive education that recognise the needs of all learners, not just those with diagnosed needs. They also go beyond increasing access, ensuring learners are sufficiently supported and motivated to continue their education.

The overall objective of the projects is to support the personal development of children and students from early childhood through to upper secondary education. This entails fostering their academic progress, emotional well-being, social skills and cognitive development. The projects aim to help all learners, with particular attention to vulnerable ones (see Figure 2.5). To achieve this, they aim to strengthen the inclusive nature of pre-school and school education, ensuring they provide tailored support, engage learners and build stronger relationships with parents. The projects cover the following key activities:

- **Activity 1:** Training that aims to strengthen professional capacity to implement inclusive practices among teachers (especially novices) and other pedagogical and non-pedagogical specialists.
- **Activity 2:** Intensive work with parents to build positive attitudes and support their active involvement in their child's learning.
- **Activity 3:** Additional support for personal development tailored to learners with SEN or chronic illness, or those identified as at risk or gifted, aiming to ensure their lasting inclusion in education.
- **Activity 4:** General support for personal development, including remedial education focused on those with learning gaps and/or whose first language is not Bulgarian. Under *Bright Start*, this activity includes extracurricular activities of interest.
- **Activity 5** (*Success for You* only): Career guidance, activities of interest, inter-school activities.

Figure 2.5. Target groups and activities under *Bright Start and Success for You*



Source: Authors based on Executive Agency "Programme Education" (2023^[23]), Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.001 "General and additional support for personal development in school education"; (2024^[24]), Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.003 "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education".

Although project documentation does not set out an explicit theory of change, the hierarchy of the projects' objectives and activities can be expressed in a reconstructed theory of change (see **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.**). This illustrates how the interventions aim to respond to key challenges to inclusive education in Bulgaria, and how the activities intend to lead to desired outcomes and long-term impact. The logic model rests on several assumptions:

- Training for teachers and other professionals will lead to stronger, more confident kindergarten and school teams, who are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of learners.
- Early and regular engagement with parents will foster more trusting relationships and make families active partners throughout their children's education.
- Early and sustained support, tailored to learners' needs, will prevent disengagement and reduce drop-out among vulnerable groups.
- Targeted support in foundational subjects will improve learning outcomes.
- More varied and broader learning experiences through formal education will enhance student motivation and engagement.

Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference. sets out the intended causal links between activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts under both interventions. The problem statements reflect the persistent challenges to inclusive education discussed earlier in this chapter. Actions summarise the planned activities under both projects. Outcomes and impact refer to the desired changes in the short and longer term expected to result from the implementation of key actions. While the reconstructed logic model provides plausible pathways towards desired outcomes and impact, there are some important gaps or

limitations which are examined as part of the evaluation findings (see Chapter 3 Findings 1 and 2, and Chapter 4 Finding 7).

Table 2.2. Reconstructed theory of change for *Bright Start and Success for You*

Intended logic linking activities, outputs, and outcomes under both interventions

Problem statements	Aims	Actions	Outcomes	Long-term impacts
Many teachers, particularly less experienced ones, lack the skills, confidence, and resources to respond to all learners' needs (academic, social, emotional and physical).	Strengthen the skills of teachers and other specialist professionals in kindergartens and schools to better support learners' development.	Train teachers to provide general and additional support, including socio-emotional learning.	Teachers and specialist professionals have stronger skills and more confidence to respond to and support learners' different needs.	Inclusive education becomes the norm and is supported by educators, parents, and students alike.
Specialist professionals need better support to help children and families.		Train specialist professionals for their professional and career development.		
Parents are not always adequately engaged in their children's learning	Improve parent engagement from the earliest age and throughout formal education.	Provide information to parents and organise regular activities to build their trust and strengthen their role in education.	Parents are active partners with kindergartens and schools in their children's learning.	The education system becomes more equitable and better able to support each learner's potential.
Shortages of specialist professionals can limit effective support for learners with more intense needs	Ensure early and sustained support for children with SEN, chronic illnesses, or those at risk.	Offer (early) support and tailored plans for children with diagnosed needs and outstanding talents.	Vulnerable learners are identified early and supported consistently throughout their education.	Families feel connected to and supported by the education system.
Gifted learners are narrowly identified and not consistently supported.	Recognise and support gifted learners from an early age.	Strengthen specialist capacity to deliver targeted support.	Gifted learners are systematically recognised, and their potential is nurtured through tailored support.	Early support leads to better educational and wellbeing outcomes for all learners.
Many learners - particularly vulnerable ones - struggle to master basic skills	Provide academic support to learners with gaps, particularly in basic skills.	Identify learners with gaps in foundational subjects and provide remedial support in Bulgarian language and mathematics.	Learning outcomes in foundational subjects increase.	More children in Bulgaria consistently progress through early education and schooling, especially among those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
Schools often struggle to engage and motivate students in their learning, especially as they age	Provide meaningful and motivating learning experiences that support personal development (i.e., emotional, social, and cognitive growth).	Organise interest-based clubs, inter-school events, career guidance, and counselling to support student engagement and personal growth.	Learners access a broader range of learning opportunities and receive improved guidance as kindergartens and schools create more motivating and engaging learning environments.	

Source: Developed by the OECD after reading project documentation: EAPE (2024^[24]), *Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.003 "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education"*; EAPE (2023^[23]), *Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.001 "General and additional support for personal development in school education"*.

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

This interim evaluation examines the initial implementation (one-to-two years) of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. Its primary aim is to support project teams at national, regional, and kindergarten or school levels to enhance project implementation with a view to better delivering intended outcomes and impact. While focused on current implementation, the evaluation also offers insights that may inform the design and execution of future activities under Priority 1 of PE and the next programming period.

The evaluation covers all five activities implemented under *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, with a primary focus on the implementation of the support provided to learners. It presents common findings across both projects and, when relevant, project-specific findings or recommendations.

To inform judgements related to the quality of inclusive education implemented via the projects, the evaluation draws on past and ongoing OECD work on diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. This research frames inclusive education as a system-wide process that requires measures spanning governance, resourcing, capacity development, institution-level interventions and monitoring and evaluation (see Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6. The OECD's analytical framework for diversity, equity and inclusion in education systems helps inform the evaluation of quality inclusive education

Governing	Resourcing	Developing management capacity	Supporting institution-level interventions	Monitoring and evaluating
Project goals and activities	General distribution	Awareness raising	Matching resources to individual needs	Project-level monitoring and evaluating
Project's regulatory framework	Targeted distribution	Recruitment, preparation and evaluation of staff	Learning strategies that address diversity	Institutional/local level monitoring and evaluation
Project responsibilities and administration		Preparation of students for diversity	Non-instructional support and services	
Education provision that accounts for diversity			Parental/community engagement	

Note: The original analytical framework refers to inclusive education at the system-level. For the purpose of the evaluation, it has been adapted to project level.

Source: OECD (2023^[14]), *Equity and Inclusion in Education: Finding Strength through Diversity*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e9072e21-en>.

Research design

As agreed by the OECD and Bulgaria for the OECD's support with the evaluation of PE, the interim evaluation follows a realist approach, seeking to understand what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how (Pawson and Tilley, 1997^[25]). It follows six evaluation criteria via key questions agreed by the OECD and the Executive Agency:

- **Relevance:** To what extent are the activities envisaged under *Bright Start* and *Success for You* relevant for enhancing inclusive education in kindergartens and schools in Bulgaria?
- **Coherence:** To what extent do the activities align with broader inclusive education measures in Bulgaria, including national priorities and programmes, as well as European strategies?
- **EU Added Value:** To what extent do the activities bring additional benefits that would not have been possible without EU support?

- **Effectiveness:**
 - To what extent do project management and coordination at national, district and institutional levels facilitate effective implementation of quality inclusive education?
 - What changes can be observed in kindergartens and schools as a result of implementation?
 - How are activities for different target groups being implemented and for whom do they appear more or less effective?
- **Efficiency:** To what extent do project management and coordination support the efficient implementation of quality inclusive education for different groups of learners?
- **Sustainability:** To what extent are measures in place to ensure the continuity of quality inclusive education beyond the current funding programme?

In the reporting, emphasis is placed on effectiveness to help generate insights that can help improve implementation with a view to ultimately enhancing outcomes for learners. As an interim evaluation, the research does not assess impact.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of implementation and outcomes, the evaluation uses a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data. The key findings presented in Chapters 3-5 are based on insights drawn from data collected via two or more of the data collection methods used by the evaluation team. Data collection reflects perspectives and experiences of project implementation across three levels: national, district, and institutional (kindergartens and schools). The evaluation team applied purposive sampling to select individuals and organisations directly involved in project implementation to participate. Research design allowed for iteration, with early findings shaping data collection tools and sampling. The methods used were as follows:

- **Project documentation and data** formed the basis for understanding the project's intended design, theory of change, and implementation status. This included project guidance from the Executive Agency and MES, packages of reporting documents (technical and financial reports and microdata on participation) and some early data outcomes (see Annexes A and C).
- A **Survey for Regional Project Teams** was distributed to project teams in all 28 REDs (see Annex B). The survey mixed fixed- and open-response questions to explore perspectives within districts, kindergartens and schools. Survey design was informed by interviews with staff from four REDs with varied profiles (urbanisation, economic development, concentration of Roma communities). The survey was conducted online via LimeSurvey in April 2025. It was sent to 118 people, of whom 99 responded yielding an overall response rate of 84%. The evaluation team examined responses at individual level, preserving district and project identifiers. Results are integrated throughout the report; headline data to fixed response questions is summarised in Annex B.
- **Semi-structured interviews and focus groups** were held with project teams at national, district and institutional level. This included approximately 25 individuals from the MES (project leaders, coordinators, and experts); 8 regional project coordinators and experts; and about 20 school-level stakeholders, including project coordinators, leaders, teachers and specialist professionals in kindergartens and schools. The evaluation team interviewed 5 representatives from relevant civil society organisations and around 45 final beneficiaries of project activities including teachers, students and parents. The report includes selected quotations from interviews to help illustrate key findings. These are reproduced verbatim, with minor adjustments for clarity. Where responses were provided in Bulgarian, the quotations reflect the interpreter's translation.
- **Site visits** allowed the team to observe how the project works in practice. In collaboration with the Executive Agency, the evaluation team selected two kindergartens and five schools, including one vocational school and one united school, across three districts. Selection aimed to reflect diversity in size, geographic location and student composition, including high concentration of marginalised

communities and socio-economically disadvantaged populations. During each visit, the team held semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders (see previous bullet point). The team aimed to interview people with diverse roles and backgrounds within each kindergarten or school. In reporting, participating kindergartens, schools and interviewees have been anonymised to the extent possible. The report includes selected quotations following the process described above.

Research limitations

Certain limitations shape how the evaluation findings should be interpreted. First, site visits and interviews were not nationally representative; participants were selected to reflect diversity rather than to achieve statistical balance. Findings should not be generalised across the system but rather provide examples of how the projects work in different settings, and factors that help and hinder implementation across contexts.

Second, at this stage in implementation, outcome data are limited. Few quantitative indicators of change in student learning, engagement, or inclusion were available to the evaluation team. Instead, most of the available data focuses on activities and inputs, or immediate outputs such as the number of teachers trained or learners receiving support. In the absence of outcome data, the evaluation focuses on facilitating factors and barriers in implementation processes, as well as early indications of behavioural change and outcomes, based on the perspectives of those involved.

Third, participation was voluntary; interviews and site visits relied on individuals and institutions willing to take part. In most cases, teachers, student, and parents were selected by kindergarten or school leaders. This raises the risk of selection bias as participants may not reflect the full range of views.

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3 Key findings: Relevance, coherence and EU added value

Key messages

- *Bright Start* and *Success for You* **adopt a universal approach to inclusive education that starts from early childhood**. This aligns strongly with international evidence of good practice for inclusion.
- **Students' access to support declines as they progress into upper secondary education**, despite international evidence on the importance of inclusion during adolescence and an increased risk of disengagement and early school leaving among this age group in Bulgaria.
- **Both projects include relevant measures to increase inclusive capacity but with important gaps**: capacity building efforts do not include kindergarten and school leaders and training for teachers is small in scale and scope, particularly under *Success for You*. Training provided under national programmes can supplement these measures, but they are more likely to engage those that need them if integrated under the project.
- *Bright Start* and *Success for You* **are coherent with previous and current EU-funded projects on inclusive education**. They help institutionalise resources developed during the previous funding period and complement other efforts, providing a coherent continuum of support for learners' personal development throughout compulsory education.
- The projects show strong coherence with the broader policy landscape, both national and European; **they deliver support at a much larger scale than national programmes achieve**.

This chapter assesses the relevance, coherence and European Union (EU) added value of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. It first explores the question: **To what extent, particularly under *Success for You* are the activities envisaged under the projects relevant for enhancing inclusive education in kindergartens and schools in Bulgaria?** In doing so it considers how well the projects are designed to respond to core challenges to inclusive education in Bulgaria and whether they follow international evidence on inclusion.

The chapter then asks: **To what extent do the project activities align with broader inclusive education measures in Bulgaria while also bringing additional value?** The analysis examines the internal coherence of the projects with other initiatives under Programme “Education” 2021–2027 (PE) as well as previous EU-funded projects, and their external coherence with national and European priorities. It also considers the added value of the projects, which is made possible through European funding.

Relevance

This section focuses on the internal logic and structure of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, examining how relevant they are to meeting the needs of kindergartens (i.e. pre-primary education settings which, in Bulgaria, includes kindergartens and pre-schools), schools, teachers and learners, and to addressing the specific barriers to inclusive education in Bulgaria. It also evaluates their alignment with international evidence on effective approaches to inclusive education.

Finding 1: By adopting a universal approach to inclusive education that starts early, the projects align with international good practice. But support declines as students age, despite challenges to inclusive education in Bulgaria's upper secondary schools

The evaluation finds that the projects align with foundational principles of inclusive education, internationally, by making general support available to all learners from the earliest stage of their education and supplementing this with additional support targeted towards specific groups. This combination strengthens the projects' overall relevance. However, the availability of support under the projects declines as learners progress through schooling, overlooking the relatively high risk of disengagement and dropout as students move into upper secondary education in Bulgaria, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

1.1. The projects expand the scope of inclusive education interventions in Bulgaria in line with European frameworks and international practices

Bright Start and *Success for You* are built on the premise that inclusive practices must benefit all learners, while also providing targeted support to those with additional or diagnosed needs. This marks a shift in how Bulgaria approaches inclusive education interventions. Earlier EU-funded projects or national programmes targeted kindergartens and schools with higher shares of vulnerable learners (see Chapter 1 for full definition). Moreover, measures for additional support (i.e. tailored interventions for learners with diagnosed needs) were treated separately from those for general support (i.e. learning and well-being support for any learner). *Bright Start* and *Success for You* make funding available to all kindergartens and schools, integrating general and additional support within a single project framework so that some activities are open to all learners, and others are more purposefully targeted to those with individual needs (EAPE, 2023^[1]; 2024^[2]). The projects are therefore universal by design – though not by participation which ultimately depends on other factors (see Chapter 5, Finding 3).

In interviews carried out for this interim evaluation, national project staff welcomed the move towards a universal approach as a key innovation of this programming period.

"It is important [to integrate general support] because we have so far focused on additional support. Through the project, we are trying to make [kindergartens and schools] realise that there is a comprehensive policy for inclusive education and, before we get to additional support, we need general support that helps all learners develop their capacities to the full. By providing academic support we can potentially prevent the need for additional support [in some cases]." – National project team

The shift in approach aligns with national and international frameworks for inclusive education. Bulgaria's legal framework establishes a clearly universal stance, defining inclusive education as, "a process of awareness, acceptance and support for the individuality of every child or student and the diversity of needs of all" (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017^[3]). This emphasis on universality, learner diversity and individualised support is also broadly consistent with the principles embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24), which presents a rights-based vision that positions inclusive education within mainstream settings and to which Bulgaria is a signatory (United Nations, 2006^[4]). Similarly, the EU defines inclusive education as a holistic process that supports the full

range of learners' needs (i.e. academic, social, emotional and physical), not only those formally diagnosed (Cefai, Downes and Cavioni, 2021^[5]; Teschers, 2020^[6]). For the OECD, inclusion is a process that helps all learners, and in which every learner matters, equally (Cerna et al., 2021^[7]). Moreover, the *OECD Framework for diversity, equity and inclusion in education systems* identifies a combined general and target distribution of resources as a key pillar of diversity, equity and inclusion in education (OECD, 2023^[8]).

Bulgaria is supporting the expanded scope of the projects through a notable increase in project funding compared to the 2014-2020 programming period. Previous inclusive education projects – *Active inclusion in the pre-school system*, which targeted pre-school education; *Support for Success*, which covered primary and secondary education; and *Support for Inclusive Education*, which covered both – had a total budget of BGN 241.3 million. In contrast *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, two of the four inclusive education projects included under PE, have a combined budget of BGN 342 million. This represents an increase of 42% compared to the previous programming period, not accounting for inflation.

The allocation of funds within project budgets aligns with the universal-by-design approach. Around three-quarters of total funding goes directly to providing additional and general support to learners. By far the larger share is dedicated to the latter, for which the target group (i.e. any learner with low performance in basic skill areas or that can benefit from more varied learning and guidance experiences) is much larger than for additional support. Under *Bright Start*, 23% of total funds are allocated to the provision of general support; for *Success for You*, under which this budget line includes Activity 5 – career guidance and activities of interest – the share is greater at 42% (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. By far the largest share of project funding is allocated to general support for learners

Project funding allocations as a share of total project funding for *Bright Start* and *Success for You*

Activity		<i>Bright Start</i>		<i>Success for You</i>	
		Allocated (BGN)	Share of total (%)	Allocated (BGN)	Share of total (%)
Training and capacity-building	Training for pedagogical staff	1 455 586.00	1.04	845 402.00	0.42
	Training for non-pedagogical staff	666 820.00	0.47	44 880.00	0.02
Work with parents		2 296 632.80	1.63	5 505 664.00	2.73
Student support	Additional support for personal development	4 878 802.50	3.47	13 479 725.00	6.68
	General support for personal development ¹	32 287 992.00	22.97	83 682 940.00	41.53
Operational support	Lump sums to institutions ²	78 254 616.00	55.68	64 719 860.00	32.12
	Materials (i.e., specialised didactic materials, curricula, or teaching aids)	877 175.92	0.62	1 000 000.00	0.50
	Tangible assets for additional support (i.e., physical equipment)	1 490 000.00	1.06	6 036 967.69	3.00
Indirect costs (covering project management and administration at district and institutional levels)		18 331 143.78	13.04	26 181 438.55	12.99
Total project funding		140 538 769.00		201 496 877.24	
Share of total funding for Programme "Education" 2021-27		7.45%		10.68%	

1. The budget allocated to General support for personal development under *Success for You* includes Activity 4: General support for personal development and Activity 5: Career guidance and activities of interest.

2. Lump sums to institutions cover pre-defined packages of activities or services delivered by kindergartens and schools. These include staff costs – such as the monthly flat rates for specialist professionals, as well as inter-school activities like joint events or workshops. This differs from funding for student support, which is based on per-student unit costs and paid out as output-based funding linked to learners' participation. Source: Executive Agency "Programme Education" (2025^[9]), Contract No. BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001-C02, Financial Report No. 3; Executive Agency "Programme Education" (2025^[10]), Contract No. BG05SFPR001-1.001-0001-C02, Financial Report No. 5.

1.2. Bright Start reinforces the importance of embedding inclusion from the earliest age, but, under Success for You, the scope of support reduces as students age

By expanding the scope and scale of inclusive education in pre-school, *Bright Start* aligns strongly with international evidence on the importance of early inclusion. Research shows that inclusive early years settings help narrow learning gaps, especially for disadvantaged children, promoting cognitive growth language development, and social-emotional skills – all key to school readiness (OECD, 2025^[11]; 2023^[12]).

Under general support (Activity 4), *Bright Start* also prioritises early support for Bulgarian language – a key barrier for many children from Roma and other marginalised communities, who often enter education with limited exposure to the language. This aligns closely with international findings on the role of language-rich environments in improving children’s academic, social and emotional outcomes, and reducing later disengagement (Finders, Wilson and Duncan, 2023^[13]; Riad, 2024^[14]; Bartos, 2023^[15]). Members of the national project team recognised the importance of *Bright Start* in this respect:

“Bulgarian language is very valuable as it helps a smoother transition, especially in the final pre-school year. Interventions are more effective from this early age.” – National project team

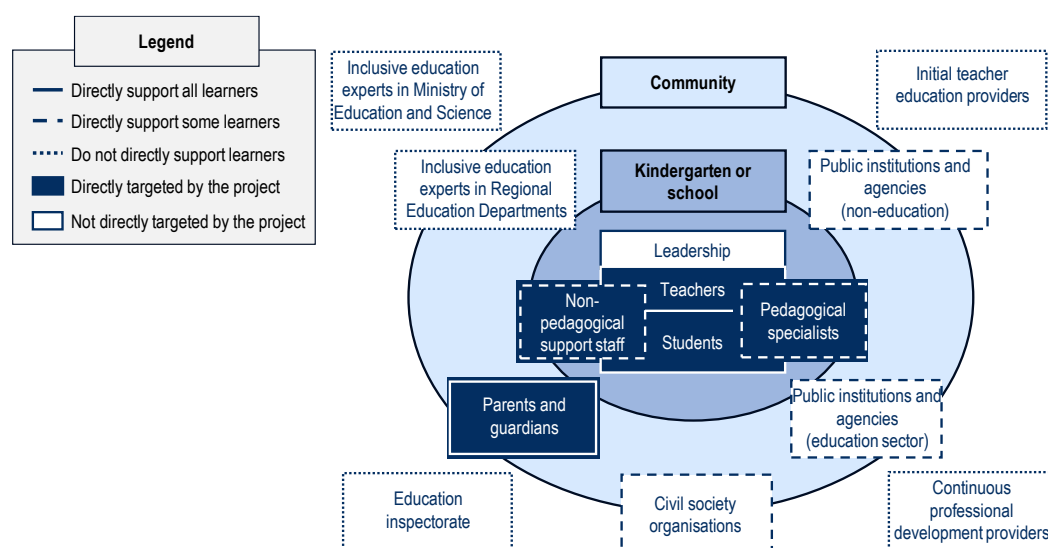
While *Success for You* targets learners across school education, resources for general support (Activity 4) – the activity with the largest scope – are concentrated in primary and lower secondary (Grades 1-7). Provision during upper secondary is limited to learners with identified needs; examples provided in the Application Conditions (Section 13) refer to those preparing for national assessments in Grade 10 or State matriculation examinations in Grade 12 (EAPF, 2023^[1]). Participation data from 2024/25 confirm a drop-in support from Grade 8 onwards with peaks in Grades 10 and 12 (see Chapter 4, Finding 6).

This runs counter to national needs and international evidence. In Bulgaria, student engagement typically declines at this education level, and dropout risk is high, particularly among the disadvantaged (OECD, 2025^[16]). International research highlights adolescence as a critical stage for maintaining engagement to prevent early school leaving (Engels et al., 2021^[17]; Burns and van Bergen, 2025^[18]). The OECD emphasises the need to help upper secondary students deepen their skills across a range of topics to facilitate their transition to further education or employment (Stronati, 2023^[19]). A narrow focus on examination preparation, whether by design or implementation, reduces opportunity for this.

Finding 2: The projects include relevant measures to increase professional capacity for inclusive practice but with some limitations related to scope, scale and coverage

Promoting an inclusive kindergarten or school climate involves a range of stakeholders including parents, teachers, specialist professionals and leaders (see Figure 3.1). The evaluation finds that the projects include several relevant measures to engage and support many – though not all – of the most influential of these groups (i.e. those who directly support all or some learners and are located within kindergartens or schools). However, there are limitations in the design of efforts to build professional capacity, as currently included under the projects.

Figure 3.1. A range of stakeholders contribute to inclusive capacity in kindergartens and schools



Source: Authors based on the *OECD Framework for diversity, equity and inclusion in education systems* available in OECD (2023^[8]), *Equity and Inclusion in Education: Finding Strength through Diversity*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e9072e21-en>.

2.1. Including efforts to enhance parental engagement within the projects is highly relevant for inclusive education, especially in the Bulgarian context

Bright Start and *Success for You* take a deliberate step towards addressing low and declining parental engagement in Bulgaria's education system, particularly among vulnerable learners. Kindergartens and schools must inform all parents whose children receive support under the projects, explaining the aims, content and results of related interventions. In addition, as an innovation for this programming period, the projects include intensive work with parents (Activity 2), which aims to develop more positive attitudes toward education, a more multicultural and stimulating educational environment and greater parental responsibility for children's learning (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[20]; 2024^[21]).

Such efforts are highly relevant for strengthening inclusive education. Research indicates that parental engagement is one of the strongest levers for improving equity in education, fostering higher achievement, confidence and learning habits, especially for disadvantaged learners (Sandhya, 2024^[22]; OECD, 2023^[8]). Active parental engagement in school life is also associated with improved attendance, behaviour and school climate (European Commission, 2021^[23]; OECD, 2023^[8]).

Increasing parental engagement is particularly relevant for Bulgaria. Interviewees at national, district and institutional level identified low engagement as a key barrier to the implementation of inclusive education. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 confirm this: in Bulgaria, students whose parents regularly talk with them about school score 26 points higher in mathematics, even after accounting for socio-economic factors; they also report higher motivation, engagement and well-being (OECD, 2023^[24]). Moreover, active parental involvement may help offset disadvantage: low performing students in Bulgaria who interact frequently with their parents are 15 percentage points more likely to report proactive learning behaviours than their peers who interact less frequently. This relationship is far less pronounced among high-performing students.

The projects' use of educational mediators or social workers to undertake some or all the intensive work with parents aligns with promising practices internationally. In many education systems, dedicated liaison workers have been used successfully as a tool to strengthen communication between schools and parents

while cultural mediators are considered to be one of the most effective practices for fostering connections between marginalised communities - particularly Roma - and public institutions (Rutigliano, 2020^[25]).

2.2. The projects see strengthening the knowledge and skills of teachers and specialists as key, but limited funding and narrow focus reduce the relevance of planned activities

Both *Bright Start* and *Success for You* fund training on aspects of inclusive education for teachers, pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff (Activity 1). During data collection, interviewees across the system recognised that this responds to one of the key barriers to inclusive education in Bulgaria.

"Some teachers feel uncertain and struggle to accept diverse learners in their class – not out of discrimination, but due to a lack of capacity. It's about having the skills to cope with diversity." – National project team

It's still very hard for teachers and schools to support [children with special education needs]. Most do not have the mindset, knowledge or skills to help them feel included." – Civil society representative

However, the scale and scope of the training is small relative to the challenge. *Bright Start* allocates around 1.5% of total project funding to Activity 1; *Success for You* allocates less than 0.5% (see Table 3.1). Based on target participation numbers, this is around BGN 160 per participant although actual cost varies depending on the training selected. It is not clear why a smaller share is allocated under *Success for You*: under previous EU projects, more training for inclusive education was available to staff in primary and secondary education as compared to those working in pre-school, but the evaluation team did not identify evidence of a difference between these groups in terms of need. While there are other projects under PE that offer training to teachers and other staff, covering areas such as reducing bullying and intercultural education, (see Finding 3 below), their scale is even smaller than that of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. Training offered under national programmes can complement and supplement that offered under the projects. However, this requires teachers and specialists to accurately identify and seek out training that meets their needs for activity implementation.

In addition to the small scale of Activity 1, the training offer for *Success for You*, as set out in project guidelines, is also narrow in scope, focusing primarily on identifying students' learning needs. This is based on sound logic: the Ministry took the decision to explicitly promote the use of tools developed under previous projects as a means of strengthening their sustainability (see Finding 3). However, while needs identification is a necessary step in providing tailored support, international research indicates that strengthening inclusive capacity also involves equipping teachers with practical strategies for adapting teaching and fostering collaboration with colleagues with diverse specialities (Brussino, 2021^[26]). While *Success for You* provides some guidance on instructional strategies in some areas, practical support for adapting instruction is limited (see Chapter 4, Finding 4). The projects do allow staff to request to use resources under Activity 1 for relevant training not included in the guidelines; however, this assumes that they can accurately identify their own professional development needs and that such training exists. This may not be the case: the OECD has previously reported that although the MES determines policy topics for professional development annually, they are not based on a robust assessment of teachers' needs (OECD, 2025^[16]). Clearly identifying a broader offer in the project guidance would be a first step in enhancing the relevance of the training staff undertake via Activity 1.

Furthermore, there are concerns regarding the quality of the training on offer. Under Activity 1, staff can participate in training ranging from short, uncertified online sessions to multi-day, in-person courses with overnight stays and accreditation (EAPE, 2023^[11]). However, in Bulgaria, limited quality assurance and use of data and evidence to inform the training offer limits the impact of this type of professional development on teachers' knowledge and practice (OECD, 2025^[16]). Such concerns were raised by some interviewees.

The added value of a two-day training workshop is very low. Teachers need mentoring, school visits, classroom observation, follow ups etc... If the trainings don't introduce anything new...and teachers are not supported to

implement new practices, they will just recreate what they already know is not working.” – Civil society representative

2.3. While the projects recognise that specialist professionals are essential for inclusion, they overlook recruitment challenges faced by some kindergartens and schools

In addition to training opportunities, the projects also seek to expand professional capacity by allocating a substantial share of funding to supporting kindergartens and schools to hire professionals with specialised knowledge and skills. This includes pedagogical advisors, resource teachers, teaching assistants, educational mediators, social workers, psychologists and speech therapists, to support parental engagement (Activity 2) and provide additional support (Activity 3) (see Table 3.1). These efforts align with international good practice, reflecting a clear understanding that kindergartens and schools need appropriate and sufficient expertise to deliver differentiated support as needed (Brussino, 2021^[26]).

This allocation of funds also aligns with kindergartens and schools’ identified needs. Specialist professionals have a key role in providing inclusive education in Bulgaria and can be based in institutions themselves or in the Regional Centres for the Support of Inclusive Education. During interviews with project staff at national, district and institutional level, there was consensus that in-house teams are preferable, as the specialists better understand learners, staff, and their contexts, and are likely to have greater availability to provide support. Several stated that in-house support would not be possible without project funds.

However, the projects may not go far enough in supporting the expansion of in-house specialist expertise. Several interviewees in kindergartens and schools raised concerns that they would like to be able to fund more hours of support under the projects or appoint more professionals on full-time contracts but there are multiple barriers. Firstly, interviewees in some kindergartens and schools reported that they do not receive sufficient funds for appointing specialists. Secondly, ratios are in place to limit the funding of in-house specialists based on the number of students requiring support: some regional project staff identified these as too restrictive. Thirdly, while the projects provide resources for the recruitment of specialists, they do not sufficiently address the underlying issue of availability. In many rural and remote areas, certain types of specialists are simply not present in the local labour market. Although there are typically more specialists in urban centres, competition from the private sector creates an additional challenge. One school leader described turning to universities to connect with students for internships or entry-level roles in the hope of building future capacity. However, this was on individual initiative as opposed to being part of the projects.

“We had funding for a psychologist, but no one applied. In this town, there just are not specialists available to take on these roles.” – Kindergarten project team

2.4. The projects do not include capacity building initiatives for kindergarten and school leaders despite their importance; this is a notable gap in project design

Although *Bright Start* and *Success for You* invest in strengthening teacher knowledge and skills and expanding specialist expertise, neither explicitly offers support for building leadership capacity for inclusion. Although, in principle, kindergarten and school leaders could seek out training under Activity 1, they are not a named target group for this activity in project documentation. This is a critical gap: leaders play an essential role in creating inclusive environments, directly supporting the inclusion of all learners, while also coordinating the engagement of other stakeholders involved in inclusive capacity (see Figure 3.1). To fulfil this role, they must access professional learning, resources and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021^[27]).

Building leadership capacity for inclusion is an identified area of need in Bulgaria, where expertise on inclusive practices – and instructional leadership more broadly – are identified weaknesses. All institutional leaders interviewed for the evaluation reported not being aware of any formal training on inclusive

education currently available through national programmes or European funding. Leadership development more generally is also limited: in recent years, there has been a greater focus on school leaders as pedagogical leaders, but capacity building and accountability mechanisms are not yet sufficiently developed or aligned to sufficiently support them to drive quality improvement (OECD, 2025^[16]).

International evidence is conclusive that leaders are key in shaping an inclusive institutional climate and ensuring that related policies and legislation are carried into effect (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021^[27]; Cerna et al., 2021^[7]). Therefore, their role in the projects needs to go beyond the current focus on monitoring project implementation (see Chapter 5, Finding 2) to include strategic, institution-wide leadership responsibilities. This means:

- *Setting a shared vision*: Positioning inclusion as core to the (pre-)school's mission and relevant for all learners – not only those with diagnosed needs (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021^[27]; 2020^[28]).
- *Building collaborative culture*: Building trust, shared responsibility and professional dialogue to foster teamwork between teachers, specialists, families and other key stakeholders in the community (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021^[27]; 2020^[28]).
- *Empowering staff and managing resources*: Making strategic decisions on staff deployment, allocating funding effectively, and using data to monitor progress toward inclusion goals (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021^[27]) – not just tracking project outputs.
- *Embedding change over time*: Aligning project activities and short-term interventions with (pre-) school development plans and sustaining inclusive practices beyond the project timeline (Villaver, 2025^[29]; Ramango and Naicher, 2022^[30]).

Some interviewees at regional level and among civil society identified the importance of leaders and their personal commitment to inclusion in ensuring high quality project implementation.

If the principal wants change, it happens... Where principals take initiative, things move...where they don't, projects are formal only" – Civil society representative

Coherence and EU added value

The analysis in this section considers whether the design of the activities under *Bright Start* and *Success for You* aligns with current and previous inclusive education efforts in Bulgaria, including those funded by national and European resources. It also identifies the added value the projects bring to the broader policy landscape for inclusive education that would not be possible without EU funding.

Finding 3: Bright Start and Success for You complement other inclusive projects under Programme "Education" (2021-2027) and help embed key resources developed under previous projects, showing strong internal coherence

The evaluation finds that *Bright Start* and *Success for You* complement each other and other inclusive education projects under PE, providing coherent support for inclusive education across early childhood and schooling. They also require the use of needs-assessment tools developed under previous EU-funded initiatives, both in the implementation of additional and general support. As such, *Bright Start* and *Success for You* are supporting the institutionalisation, at scale, of major outputs delivered under previous projects.

3.1. The projects complement each other and other inclusive education projects under Programme “Education” (2021-2027)

Bright Start and *Success for You* are strongly aligned. They cover three different stages of the education continuum – pre-school, primary and secondary education – while sharing a very similar design that emphasises supporting learners, engaging parents and building professional capacity. This alignment creates a coherent support structure across compulsory education, which can, in theory at least, ease transitions from early childhood to school and support inter-institutional collaboration and facilitate implementation in settings that serve both pre-school and school-age learners. Site visits during data collection provided evidence of the latter but interviewees felt it was too early to respond to questions about the transition from pre-school to school education under the projects.

Bright Start and *Success for You* are two of eight initiatives under Priority 1 of PE: *Inclusive education and educational integration* (see Table 3.2). All share the overarching goal of promoting equal access to inclusive education and increasing participation and completion, especially for vulnerable learners. The universal approach of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* complements the other interventions which target learners with specific characteristics, such as those from rural or marginalised communities, those at risk of dropout or out-of-school learners. By making resources available to all kindergartens, schools and learners, the two projects operate at a scale that far exceeds other initiatives. Their budgets constitute 7.5 % and 10.7 % of the total budget of PE, respectively; the next biggest project under Priority 1 – *Overcoming barriers to participation* – has a budget that is equivalent to 1.8% of total funding.

In addition to scale, *Bright Start* and *Success for You* build on other projects’ efforts to increase participation in formal education (providing transport, food or learning materials, for example) by implementing activities that focus on keeping learners sufficiently engaged and adequately supported to continue their education. They do this through supporting personal development and engaging parents.

The projects also fill some key gaps. Most notably, *Bright Start* is the only project under Priority 1 fully dedicated to pre-school education. Both projects do more to extend professional capacity for inclusion than other projects, funding the recruitment of in-house specialists and supporting teachers to develop inclusive practice, although, as expressed above, there are some related gaps (see Finding 4).

There are two notable areas of overlap. Language support and adapted teaching materials for learners whose first language is not Bulgarian constitutes a key activity under the *School desegregation* project but is also a main area of support under general support (Activity 4) in both *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. Furthermore, the Executive Agency has included parental engagement efforts in all the projects under this priority area.

These overlaps pose an opportunity rather than a problem. PE rules prevent final beneficiaries from receiving the same type of support under multiple projects (EAPE, 2023^[1]; 2024^[2]). Furthermore, as both intervention areas are relatively new for kindergartens and schools, their integration under multiple projects creates opportunity for knowledge sharing. This is notable given that this evaluation identifies some barriers to effectiveness in the provision of these activities, including insufficient tailoring of support for those whose first language is not Bulgarian under *Success for You* and unclear objectives combined with limited staff capacity for parental engagement under both projects (see Chapter 4, Finding 7).

Table 3.2. *Bright Start* and *Success for You* have a unique position within inclusive education efforts under Programme “Education” as universal projects directly supporting all learners

Comparative overview of projects under Priority 1 of Programme “Education” 2021-2027

Thematic area	Inclusive education	Integration of marginalised communities
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Project	Inter-institutional work to prevent dropout	Bright Start	Success for You	Prevention of bullying	Overcoming barriers to participation	School desegregation	Intercultural education
Key activities	Increasing school participation through identification of at-risk students and parental outreach.	Providing general and additional support to learners , developing professional capacity for inclusive education, enhancing parental engagement.		Creating positive institutional climates through anti-bullying measures, student involvement in school management and teacher training.	Addressing structural barriers to participation for rural or marginalised communities, parental engagement and strengthening school communities.	Providing support to learners from vulnerable groups, through language interventions, inter-school activities, and communications campaigns.	Enhancing institutional climates through collaboration between schools, professional learning for teachers, and organising parental communities and cultural exchange.
Scope	Universal				Targeted	Targeted	Targeted
Administrative level	Municipality	Pre-school	School				
Share of total budget	0.9%	5.6%	8%	1.8%	1.8%	1.4%	1.6%

Source: EAPE (2023^[31]), Programme “Education” 2021-2027, <https://sf.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=3676> (accessed 11 July 2025).

3.2. Both projects exhibit coherence with the previous EU programming period, including through the mobilisation of resources developed under predecessor projects

Bright Start and *Success for You* show strong internal coherence by making direct use of identification tools developed under previous European programmes. For example, to assess need for additional support, the projects require staff to use the Individual Needs Assessment Map, developed under the *Support for Inclusive Education* project (2021-2023). The tool provides a structured, functional approach to assessing learning, health, and participation barriers and was supported by a cross-sectoral implementation model linking education, health and social services (EAPE, 2015^[32]). Now a formal tool for needs assessment integrated into the *Ordinance on Inclusive Education*.

In parallel, the *Support for Success* project (2019-2022) created the Early Identification Toolkit for students at risk of dropout and to support the implementation of a differentiated approach to general support in schools (EAPE, 2015^[33]). This toolkit has 14 different assessment tools, tailored to different age groups and subjects, each with the aim of identifying learning gaps (Epitropova et al., 2020^[34]). This then informs the provision of remedial instruction (see Chapter 4, Finding 4).

By promoting validated tools and methodologies, the projects help carry forward knowledge and practices, extending the durability and expanding the scope of previous projects, as well as reinforcing continuity.

Finding 4: The projects show strong external coherence with the broader policy landscape, delivering interventions at a much larger scale than national programmes

The evaluation finds that the aims and design of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* are highly coherent with European and national strategic priorities and related policy efforts in Bulgaria. Moreover, the projects have the potential to be implemented at much greater scale than national programmes can, thanks to their more substantial budgets and greater scope.

4.1. *The projects are well-designed to advance key national and European education goals*

Bright Start and *Success for You* contribute to the implementation of Bulgaria's *Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning (2021–2030)*, which itself reflects European priorities of high-quality, value-based and inclusive education for all (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[35]). The projects advance three of the Framework's nine priority areas: early learning, school-family partnerships and inclusion, helping to translate them into targeted action in kindergartens and schools.

Bright Start strengthens early learning by supporting kindergartens to identify learner needs early, ease transitions into school, and target support to children at risk of exclusion (Objective 1.2). Both projects advance school-family partnerships, promoting structured collaboration between staff and parents and more inclusive communities (Objective 4.2). They also reinforce inclusion by funding the recruitment of in-house educational mediators and psychologists (Objective 5.1) and tailoring support for learners with specific needs and creating stronger links with families and external services (Objective 5.5).

The projects also offer a concrete national response to wider European commitments on equity and social cohesion in education. They support Bulgaria's implementation of the *European Child Guarantee*, which commits Member States to ensuring access to quality education and support for the most vulnerable children (National Network for Children, 2022^[36]). By strengthening professional capacity within kindergartens and schools to provide adequate support that meets the diverse needs of learners, the projects aim to help break the cycle of disadvantage through education – a core objective of the Guarantee. They also align with the *European Pillar of Social Rights*, which upholds the right to quality and inclusive education for all (European Commission, 2017^[37]).

4.2. *There are some overlaps between Bright Start and Success for You and activities financed via national funding, but the scale of the projects surpasses national programmes*

The Ministry of Education and Science implements several national programmes to foster more inclusive learning environments in pre-schools and schools. These focus on reducing barriers for vulnerable learners by improving infrastructure and physical accessibility, increasing the professional capacity of teachers and other staff, and improving collaboration with families (see Figure 3.2). *Bright Start* and *Success for You* align with these policy efforts; many of their activities, such as hiring non-teaching staff, providing targeted learner support, and engaging parents, mirror those financed via national funding. This creates both a coherent approach and overlaps. To avoid the latter, a demarcation mechanism is in place, preventing duplication in funding across people, activities, or costs. Declarations at the application stage, verification at contracting stage, and regular monitoring during implementation help uphold this.

A key difference between *Bright Start* and *Success for You* and related national programmes lies in their scale. With a combined five-year budget exceeding BGN 340 million, the projects operate at nearly ten times the size of the most recent one-year national funding envelope for inclusion (see Figure 3.2). This allows them to cover more kindergartens, schools and learners, and to fund a broader range of activities. During site visits, some interviewees indicated that while national programmes help establish a foundation for inclusive education, they do not provide sufficient resources to meet all learners' needs. Through national funds alone, some institutions feel unable to deliver support at the same scale or intensity as is possible via European funding. This underscores the EU-added value of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* and highlights the importance of efforts to enhance their sustainability (see Chapter 5). Ongoing support for inclusion beyond the life of the projects will be essential if investment is to result in desired outcomes.

The second key difference is the extended scope of the projects as compared to national programmes. Enabled by EU funding, both *Bright Start* and *Success for You* address a variety of activities whereas national programmes which tend to address more targeted, specific topics. This may help kindergartens and schools take a more integrated, holistic view of inclusive education in line with international evidence

(Cerna et al., 2021^[7]). However, this is by no means automatic: those receiving project funds do not necessarily implement all activities and resource capacity and administrative load can deter the implementation of multiple activities (see Chapter 5, Finding 2). Meanwhile, the lack of leadership capacity for inclusion makes a more strategic approach to inclusive education at institutional level challenging.

Figure 3.2. The scope and scale of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* exceed national programmes

	Budget in BGN (2025 or latest data available)	Activities														
		Support work with children/students	Anti-bullying workshops	Work with parents	Support for inclusion teams	Hiring pedagogical specialists	Hiring non-pedagogical staff	Hiring STEM teachers	Teacher training	Improving teaching practices	Creating foreign language materials	Providing learning materials	Didactic materials	School equipment	Infrastructure	Free transport
National programmes																
Ensuring a modern, safe and accessible educational environment	8 980 000											x	x	x	x	
It's good in kindergarten	1 000 000								x	x		x				
Motivated teachers and qualification	2 509 452							x		x						
T ogether for every child	2 260 000			x	x											
Textbooks, training kits and learning aids	500 000										x					
Supporting municipalities for educational desegregation	700 000	x		x			x					x				x
No free hour	3 986 064					x						x				
Support for personal development	1 300 000	x	x	x					x					x	x	
Support for educational mediators and social workers	10 000 000	x		x			x									
EU-funded projects																
Bright Start	28 107 754	x		x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	
Success for You	40 299 375	x		x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	

Pre-school and school levelPre-school levelSchool Level

■ Pre-school and school level ■ Pre-school level ■ School level

Note: All national programmes were created in line with the *Strategic Framework of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030)*, covering several priority areas.

Source: Ministry of Education and Science (2025^[38]), *National programmes and projects*, <https://www.mon.bg/dokumentatsiya/programi-i-proekti/naczionalni-programi-2025/> (accessed on 17 July 2025).

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4 Key findings: Effectiveness

Key messages

- Thanks in large part to their relevant expertise, **national and regional project teams effectively ensure that activities are implemented in line with guidance and requirements.**
- As determined by project design, **project teams do not provide methodological support to kindergartens and schools.** In the future, assigning responsibility for this type of work could help enhance desired educational outcomes.
- **Project activities aimed at supporting learners are being implemented at scale,** but progress is slower for activities that target staff and parents, particularly under *Success for You*.
- **The projects are well-structured to facilitate learner-centred interventions.** However, guidance for staff on the inclusive pedagogies that can help meet learners' needs is limited.
- When it comes to support for learners, representatives from **project teams, and parents and students, view the activities and their immediate outcomes positively.**
- Despite being designed as an intervention to address learning gaps, **general support for students under *Success for You*, is primarily used for examination preparation.**
- Newer activities - such as **parental engagement, and support for gifted learners or those for whom Bulgarian is not a first language – are not sufficiently understood** by those implementing them, both in project teams and in kindergartens and schools.

The principal objective of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* is to promote the personal development (i.e. academic progress, emotional well-being, social skills and cognitive growth) and engagement of vulnerable learners (see Chapter 1 for full definition).

This chapter explores the extent to which the projects are achieving or advancing towards this aim identifying obstacles to progress that could be addressed in the coming years. Given the timing of this interim evaluation – one-to-two years into a five-year implementation period – the analysis does not directly assess the impact of the projects. However, by considering effectiveness along the causal pathway established by the reconstructed theory of change (see Figure 4.1 and Chapter 2), it highlights whether the steps that are intended to lead to long-term change are being achieved and where gaps may be emerging. It also considers differential results across target groups and the relative importance of achievements, in line with OECD evaluation practice (OECD, 2019^[1]).

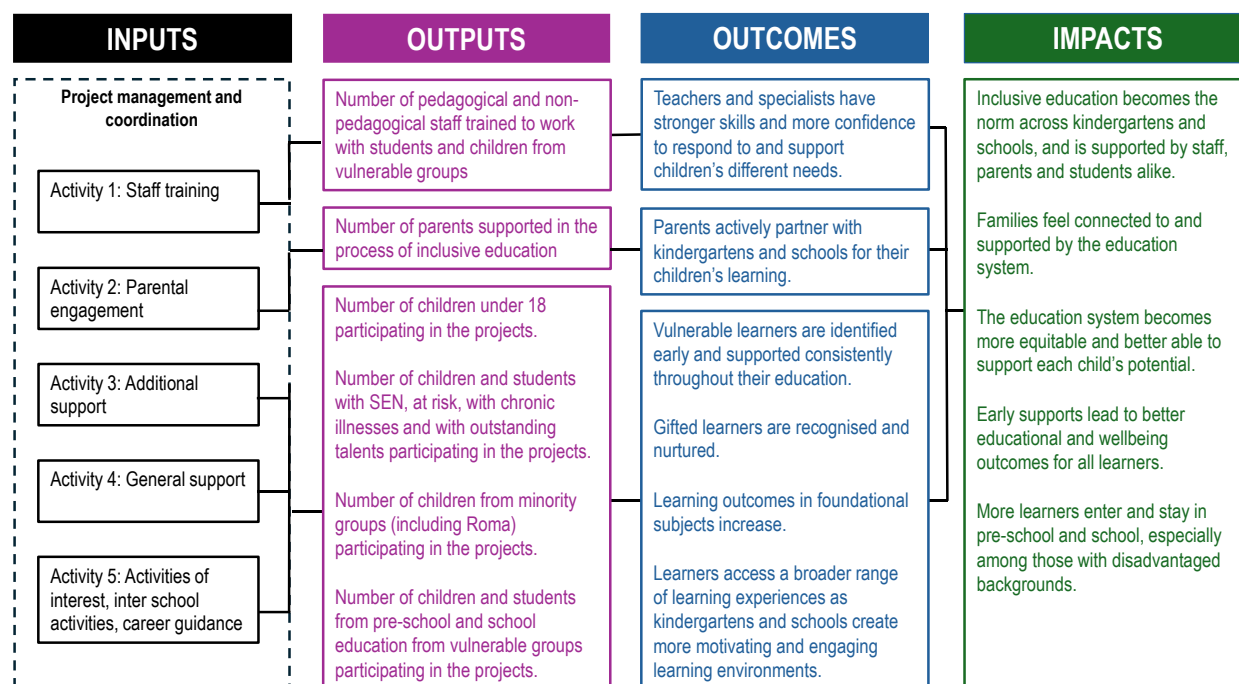
The chapter explores three key questions as follows:

- **Inputs:** To what extent do project management and coordination at national, district and institutional levels facilitate the effective implementation of quality inclusive education?
- **Outputs:** What changes can be observed in kindergartens and schools due to implementation?

- **Outcomes:** How are activities for different target groups being implemented and for whom do they appear more or less effective?

Figure 4.1. The intended effects of the projects are considered as outputs, outcomes and impacts

Reconstructed theory of change for *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, focused on aspects related to effectiveness



Note: Inputs differ slightly between the two projects. Activities 1-3 are the same under *Bright Start* and *Success for You*; Activity 5 does not exist under "*Bright Start*" and activities of interest are therefore integrated into Activity 4. For full reconstructed theory of change, see Chapter 2.

Source: Authors based on EAPE (2024^[2]), *Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.003 "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education"*; EAPE (2023^[3]), *Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.001 "General and additional support for personal development in school education"*.

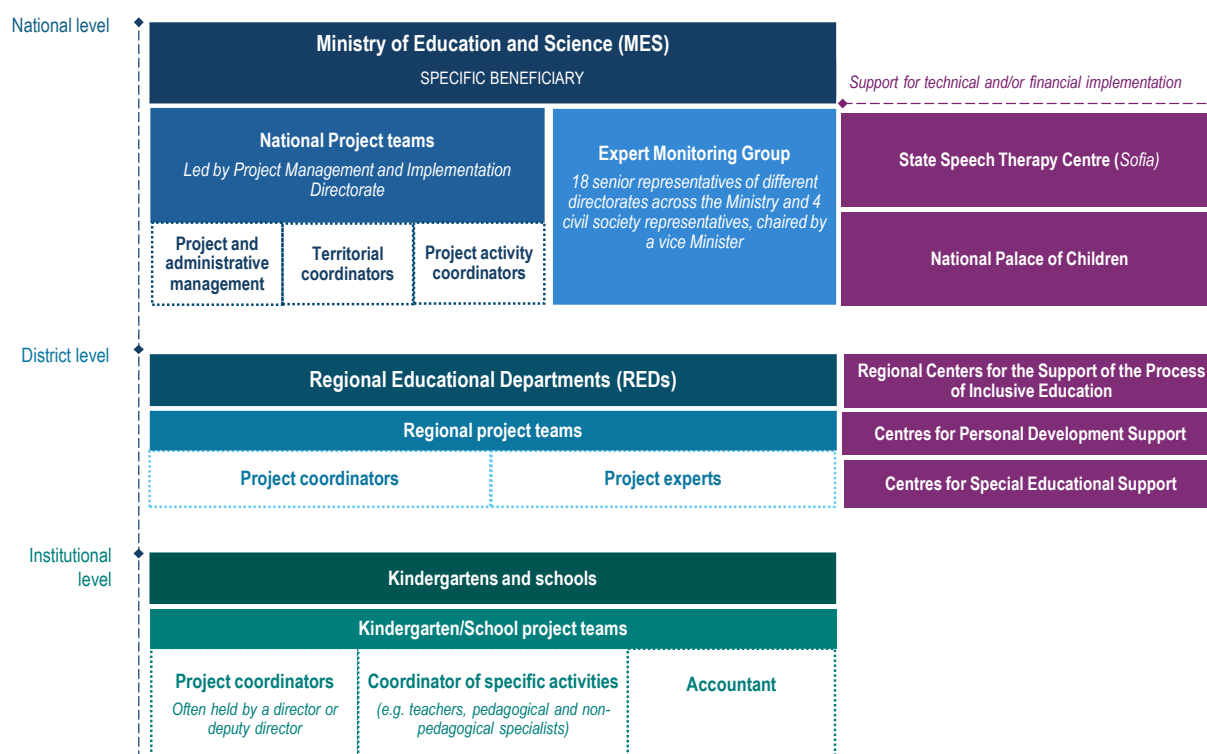
INPUTS: Project management and coordination

Project management and coordination is a key factor in determining how Activities 1-5 are implemented. It is therefore crucial in creating the conditions under which key inputs lead to desired outcomes. This section focuses on the role of project teams at national, district and institutional levels in supporting the implementation of inclusive education under the projects. In terms of effectiveness, it considers the role of project management and coordination in ensuring that activities are implemented in line with the intentions set out in project design, and in ways that support progress towards desired educational outcomes. For evaluation findings related to reporting and control, another key task of project teams (see Chapter 5, Finding 2).

Bright Start and *Success for You* are implemented by separate project teams formed at three levels (see Figure 4.2). The Ministry of Education and Science (MES), as specific beneficiary, is directly responsible for the overall management, implementation and monitoring of the projects. Teams based in the Regional Education Departments (REDs) and in kindergartens (i.e. pre-primary education settings which, in Bulgaria, includes kindergartens and pre-schools) and schools are involved in administrative, and financial

management and coordination at district and institutional levels (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[4]; 2024^[5]). The findings presented in this section cover all three levels.

Figure 4.2. Responsibility for project management and coordination is shared across teams at national, district and institutional levels



Source: Authors based on Ministry of Educational and Science (2024^[4]), *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Activities of Project BG05SFPR001-1.003 "Bright Start"*; (2024^[5]) *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Activities of Project BG05SFPR001-1.001 "Success for you" – Version 2*.

Finding 1: National and regional project teams effectively ensure that activities are implemented as intended, in part due to their relevant expertise

During site visits to kindergartens and schools, the evaluation team observed that project activities are being implemented as set out in project guidance and in accordance with European Union (EU) requirements. This is largely due to project teams having sufficient expertise and resources to manage the implementation of EU-funded projects. It is also supported by efficient communication and comprehensive – though less efficient – reporting and control (see Chapter 5, Findings 2 and 3).

The national teams for both projects consist of people with expertise in the implementation of EU-funded projects and/or inclusive education. This includes some who previously worked on the implementation of predecessor projects under the previous programming period. As required in the guidelines for Programme "Education" 2021-2027 (PE), the national project teams were selected through a transparent, competitive process, with minimum experience and competence requirements for most positions (EAPE, 2024^[2]; 2023^[3]). When asked in interviews whether they could identify gaps in their team's knowledge and expertise, national project staff typically could not. The only exception was with regards to modern project management skills; the Executive Agency "Programme Education" (hereafter Executive Agency) has allocated a share of overall PE funding to related training for the MES.

"We do not have a lack of knowledge or expertise in the team, but we need more experience to adopt good practices in project management, such as agile methods and other modern practices. Our project management is a bit conservative." - National project team

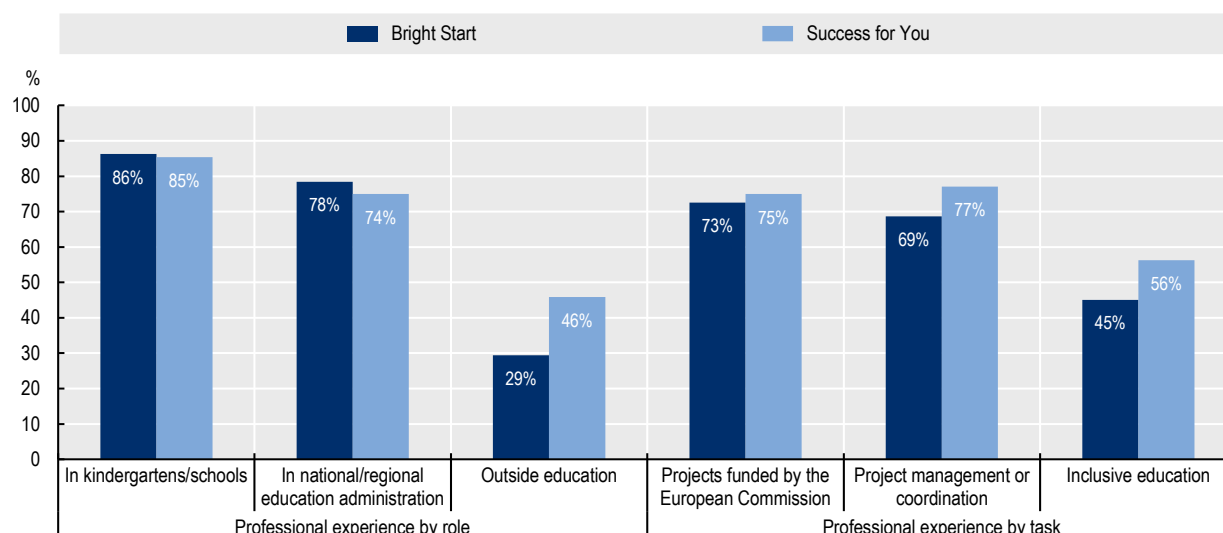
Within the national project team, the MES appointed activity coordinators in cross-directorate sub-teams for Activities 2-5; Activity 1 is under the responsibility of the Department for Qualification and Career Development. They help ensure that implementation aligns with project guidance and are responsible for clarifying that guidance and responding to related queries from regional, kindergarten and school teams. They typically have professional experience relevant to the activity they coordinate: the sub-teams for additional support (Activity 3) come principally from the Directorate for Inclusive Education while those for general support (Activity 4) include staff from curriculum and subject-based teams, for example. The exception is for intensive work with parents (Activity 2) as there is currently no related institutional expertise within the MES. This contributes to some conceptual challenges for this activity (see Finding 7).

Regional project teams also play a crucial role in supporting activity implementation, principally as an intermediary in the transfer of guidance, requirements and other information from the MES to kindergartens and schools. The OECD's *Survey for Regional Project Teams* conducted in April 2025 for this evaluation (hereafter "regional survey") asked respondents for their perspectives on the capacity of their RED generally, and themselves specifically, to fulfil this role. Very high shares (over 90%) of respondents agreed with a range of related statements, including that they have sufficient knowledge, skills and expertise as well as autonomy and flexibility, and that they receive sufficient information and guidance (OECD, 2025^[6]).

Like their counterparts in the national team, most regional project staff have professional expertise relevant to their role. The regional survey indicates that most have experience in kindergartens or schools: 85% of those working on *Bright Start* and 86% of those on *Success for You* had previously worked as a teacher, leader or non-pedagogical professional. Expertise in the implementation of EU-funded projects is high with around three-quarters of respondents reporting it and similar shares reporting previous experience in project management (see Figure 4.3). Although the teams consist of project coordinators (who hold management functions) and project experts (responsible for the implementation of specific tasks and responsibilities) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[5]), survey responses indicate little variation in expertise by role. This means many regional teams combine a strong understanding of the everyday challenges facing kindergartens and schools with project management expertise.

Figure 4.3. A large share of regional project staff has experience working in kindergartens or schools, but fewer have previously worked on tasks related to inclusive education

Share of staff reporting relevant previous professional experience by role and task, by project



Note: Survey items are ranked in descending order based on the share of *Bright Start* respondents reporting having professional experience.
Source: OECD (2025^[6]), *Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams*, unpublished.

Finding 2: Project design does not assign responsibility for methodological support to project teams at any level; integrating such roles in the future could enhance the educational effectiveness of activities

Ensuring that activities are implemented in line with requirements set out in project documentation is important, however, it is not sufficient for effective implementation. Project teams must also help kindergartens and schools access the support they need to implement activities in a way that leads to quality educational outcomes in their context (i.e. methodological support). The evaluation identifies that this type of support is not currently integrated into project management and coordination responsibilities for the projects. Strengthening methodological support therefore represents a major opportunity for increasing educational effectiveness in the future.

2.1. Project design does not formally integrate methodological support into roles and responsibilities for project teams at any level but there is evidence of there being a need

Project leadership within the MES reported that project teams at national, district and institutional levels do not have a formally assigned role in the provision of methodological support to those implementing project activities. At national level, although the activity sub-teams would, theoretically, be well placed to provide related support such as strengthening activity guidance; developing quality standards or identifying, curating and disseminating good practices, such tasks are not explicitly assigned to them.

The role of regional project teams as set out in the implementation guidelines prepared by the MES does not include methodological support. Regional teams should participate in the organisation, implementation, and control of project activities while technical implementation (i.e. the specific content of activities) is considered the responsibility of kindergarten and school teams (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[4]; 2024^[5]). This contrasts with information in the Executive Agency's Application Conditions which note that REDs should be involved in technical implementation. In addition, the Executive Agency included staff

from the REDs (as experts providing methodological assistance) in the list of target beneficiaries of the training under Activity 1 (EAFE, 2024^[2]; 2023^[3]). In the MES' implementation guidelines, Activity 1 is focused only on pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff in kindergartens and schools.

Project guidelines do mention the role of other public institutions at national and regional level – such as the Regional Centres for the Support of the Process of Inclusive education and the Centres for Personal Development – in technical implementation, aligning with their role in the broader inclusive education ecosystem (see Chapter 2) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[4]; 2024^[5]). However, the evaluation team found little evidence that they are actively involved, beyond providing some training under Activity 1.

There is also no provision for a methodological role within institutional project teams, which consist of the kindergarten or school leader, a project coordinator and an accountant. Leaders are ultimately responsible for organising and monitoring the planning, implementation and timely reporting of project activities. This includes overseeing human resources and financial management. Much of their work on the projects, though not all, can be delegated to the coordinator although in kindergartens or very small schools, the leader often takes on that position themselves. However, staff taking on the role of project coordinators are typically selected based on their familiarity with EU-funded projects as opposed to expertise in inclusive education, indicating that their role is more organisational than technical.

It is common across EU-funded projects in Bulgaria, and elsewhere, to focus project implementation responsibilities on administrative tasks such as reporting and control (see Chapter 5, finding 2). In this respect, the absence of methodological support provided by project teams under *Bright Start* and *Success for You* is not unusual. However, the lack of formal responsibility for methodological support within the project design suggests that the need for it may not be sufficiently recognised. Some interviewees from kindergartens and schools did feel that such support would be relevant; some regional project teams also identified a need, while reiterating that they do not provide it.

"We are often asked how to conduct these lessons or support. But it is up to the teachers to decide what materials they need to use and what gaps in students' knowledge need filling. Our support is for the organisation of the activities, communicating with parents, making sure students attend etc." – Regional project team

Meanwhile, civil society representatives identified the lack of a recognised need for methodological support as a system-wide challenge and major obstacle to the implementation of quality inclusive education.

"The very concept of methodological support is a barrier – teachers and other professionals need to be supported... It is not just the regional teams that do not get this, even kindergarten and school leaders lack this understanding." – Civil society representative

Some staff within the national and regional project teams expressed a reluctance to encroach on teachers' professional autonomy in determining what support for learners might involve. However, regular feedback and support from a variety of sources are crucial conditions for local autonomy and flexibility to function effectively (Burns and Köster, 2016^[7]). This is particularly true in the Bulgarian context where inclusive education is still an emerging process and relevant professional capacity among teachers and school leaders is low – as recognised in the intervention logic for the projects (see Chapter 2).

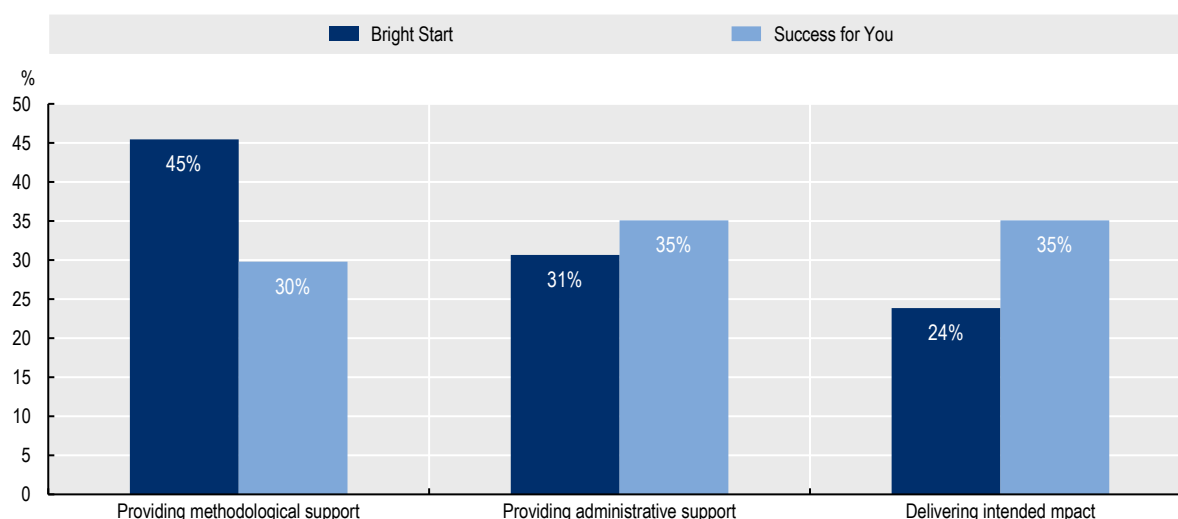
2.2. Some regional project staff informally adopt a methodological role, but the absence of formal responsibility means provision is uneven and inhibited by time and skill constraints

Despite no formal allocation of responsibility, regional survey data reveals that some staff in regional project teams, particularly under *Bright Start*, perceive their role to be methodologically oriented. When asked about their key objectives, close to half of those working on *Bright Start* referred to an aspect of methodological support, such as supporting the implementation of inclusive education and enhancing capacity for inclusive education or parental engagement (see Figure 4.4). For *Success for You*, on the

other hand, respondents more typically focused on informational, administrative tasks (e.g. verifying implementation, reporting progress, and ensuring adherence to national regulations) or delivering the final goals of the project, particularly with regards to improving student performance in examinations (OECD, 2025^[6]).

Figure 4.4. Those working in regional project teams have different views on their key objectives

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



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.

Similarly, there was evidence of mixed opinions with regards to the responsibilities of regional staff among national project teams. While some interviewees from national teams, described the regional role as largely informational and administrative, others saw them as having a more direct, supportive function thanks to their expertise in inclusive education and experience in kindergartens or schools. In practice, the mixed perspectives on the role of regional project teams results in inconsistencies between districts in type of support provided.

Although the project guidance is clear that regional teams have not been formally assigned a methodological role, some of the confusion may arise from the fact that regional project teams are a logical provider of methodological support. They are based within Bulgaria's REDs, whose broader role includes providing hands-on methodological support for school improvement (Guthrie et al., 2022^[8]). Moreover, international evidence indicates that devolving technical support for kindergartens and schools to district and local levels is an effective response to the complexity of implementing inclusive education, allowing for increased responsiveness to local realities – at least in theory (OECD, 2023^[9]).

“The regional project teams...have a viable connection to the kindergartens and schools. They know the institutions and their contexts, and they are experts. We do not have the same capacity that they have.” - National project team

In addition, because methodological support is only being provided on the initiative of some regional project staff, its scope and effectiveness is constrained by gaps in expertise and time. Among those working on *Bright Start*, only 45% reported having at least some experience on tasks related to inclusive education and only 56% for those on *Success for You*. Furthermore, a small number of teams for each project have no reported inclusive education experience between them. This indicates that, in line with role descriptions, recruitment for project teams prioritised EU project experience over inclusive education, and thus more administrative skillsets over methodological ones. It may also signal that inclusive education expertise is harder to recruit. Either way, it contributes to uneven provision of support when responsibilities for methodological support are not formalised.

Moreover, regional project teams perceive staff time and numbers as major barriers to the provision of greater support to kindergartens and schools. The regional survey asked respondents to identify one thing they would wish for that would enable them to better help institutional teams to deliver high quality support to vulnerable students. Around one fifth of responses for each project related to more time. In *Success for You*, a further 13% referred to having a larger project team (OECD, 2025^[6]). Such views were shared by some interviewees from kindergarten and school teams, and civil society.

"The members of the RED where there are not that many schools will be more effective. There are too many schools in this district. Their workload and number of staff is different. I don't believe they have the physical capacity to become any more active than they currently are." – School project team

OUTPUTS: Observable changes in kindergartens and schools

This section explores changes observed in kindergartens and schools as a result of project implementation and considers how these align with the causal pathway set out in the reconstructed theory of change (see Figure 4.1). It considers outputs in terms of participation levels and the nature of implemented support.

Finding 3: While the uptake of activities aimed at learners is high, implementation is slower for activities that target staff and parents, particularly under Success for You

The evaluation finds that kindergartens and schools are enthusiastic about involving learners in the projects, with high uptake across the system. However, activities targeting staff and parents have lower uptake, in part due to delays in their implementation but also due to some implementation barriers at institutional level. These include low perceived relevance of Activity 1 among some staff and uncertainty within kindergartens and schools about how to implement Activity 2.

3.1. A substantial share of kindergartens and schools are implementing support for learners under both projects including through appointing specialist professionals

Both *Bright Start* and *Success for You* have considerable reach across Bulgaria. Around two-thirds of eligible institutions participate in activities under the projects. By April 2025 (latest available data), 63% of kindergartens and pre-schools were participating in *Bright Start* and 66% of schools in *Success for You*. At learner level, 70% of children in kindergarten or preschool and 54% of school students attended participating institutions (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[10]). However, in most cases, although the project is designed to have universal coverage only a minority of learners within each institution participate in related activities.

Under *Bright Start*, work with children is the most advanced aspect of implementation with 91% of the final target number of children under 18 receiving supports already reached, 3 years ahead of the final deadline in 2029 (see Annex A: Table A.1). Implementation progress for *Success for You* is also strong, with several key final targets for student participation set for December 2027 already fulfilled by April 2025. This raises

questions about whether the initial targets were too low and whether the allocation of funds within the projects is sufficiently targeted to reach those with greatest need (see Chapter 5, Finding 3).

General support (Activity 4) is a popular activity under both projects with by far the largest numbers of participating learners although it also has the largest target group. By April 2025, 25 885 children in kindergartens and pre-schools had received general support under *Bright Start* – 47% of the final target for December 2028. Under *Success for You*, 87 740 students from Grades 1-12 had received general support, 97% of the final target.

For additional support (Activity 3), many kindergartens and schools are using the projects to fund additional hours for specialist professionals on pre-existing contracts or to appoint new ones. Data indicate that, for both projects, participating institutions are more likely to have in-house specialists than those not participating, and to have more of them, with lower ratios of specialists to learners with special education needs (SEN) (see Table 4.1). Although promising, this data comes with important caveats: data is not available to confirm that this situation differs from the situation prior to project implementation. Furthermore, given that many specialist professionals are on part-time contracts, the number of specialists per institution may be a misleading output indicator; number of hours or full-time equivalent specialists could provide a more accurate picture.

Table 4.1. The projects support kindergartens and schools to appoint specialist professionals

Prevalence of in-house professionals in participating and non-participating kindergartens and schools (April 2025)

Indicator	Bright Start (Kindergartens and pre-schools)		Success for You Schools	
	Participating	Non-participating	Participating	Non-participating
Share of institutions with specialist professionals	97%	92%	82%	59%
Average number of specialist professionals ¹	6.5	5.0	2.5	1.5
Number of children with special education needs per specialist professional ²	1.5	1.8	4.6	5.8

1. Calculation based on institutions which have at least one in-house specialist.

2. Calculation based on institutions which have at least one child with SEN and at least one in-house specialist.

Source: Ministry of Education and Science (2025^[10]), Project Data for *Bright Start* and *Success for You*: April 2025, (unpublished).

The OECD's *Framework for diversity, equity and inclusion in education systems* highlights the importance of recruiting, retaining and developing specialist and other support staff as a means of enhancing professional capacity for managing diversity, equity and inclusion (OECD, 2023^[9]). This means education systems have a responsibility to ensure that kindergartens and schools have the right staff mix to address diversity needs and student profiles. In 2022, a survey undertaken by the OECD revealed that the allocation of additional staff to students with SEN was by far the most common approach across Member Countries, with many fewer appointing staff to support students from certain ethnic groups or national minorities, or gifted students, both of which are target groups under *Bright Start* and *Success for You* (OECD, 2023^[9]). This indicates that, under the project, Bulgaria's efforts to appoint in-house specialist teams have greater scope in terms of breadth of expertise than similar efforts in many OECD countries.

3.2. Activities targeting staff and parents have been a slower to implement across both projects and currently have limited reach under Success for You

Under both projects, activities targeting teachers, specialist professionals and parents have had a lower uptake than those targeting learners thus far. In April 2025, staff training (Activity 1) through *Success for You* had reached only 1% of the target set for 2028 and intensive work with parents (Activity 2) had reached

only 9%. For *Bright Start*, respective values were higher at 20% and 33% (though progress was still lower than for activities targeting learners), even though it was launched a year after *Success for You* and that project leadership delayed the implementation of Activity 1 to first administer a staff survey of training needs. For both projects, implementation may also have been slower for Activity 2 because it took longer to recruit activity coordinators for intensive work with parents within the national project teams due to fewer expertise in this area. Meanwhile, as a new activity, many institutional teams lack experience of working intensively with parents, in contrast to implementing additional and general support, with which they are much more familiar.

Further to these planning constraints, the evaluation team identified some additional barriers which may currently be inhibiting uptake at the scale required to meet implementation targets:

- For staff training (Activity 1):
 - Several interviewees in schools indicated that some staff perceive the training offer under *Success for You* as lacking relevance. Others had undertaken the same training under previous projects and so felt the offer was no longer relevant to them. While it is positive that the project supports the institutionalisation of resources developed under the previous programming period (see Chapter 3, Finding 2), it is also critical to ensure the offer is broad enough to appeal to a wide variety of teachers and specialists.
 - Some staff in kindergartens and schools reported that a delayed start for training activities under both projects meant they became available after the launch of the projects which, considering their focus on building teachers' capacity to identify learners' needs, came too late to be useful to those participating in the first years of implementation.
 - Some kindergarten and school staff, and civil society representatives, explained that the format of training offered under the projects causes staffing challenges that can deter participation as leaders need to provide substitute staff for those participating in the one-to-three-day trainings.
- For intensive work with parents (Activity 2), kindergartens and schools indicated a lack of understanding about what such work should entail (see Finding 7.1 below).

Examining the relative importance of achievements is an important dimension when evaluating effectiveness. The implementation of direct support to learners at the pace and scale that both projects have so far delivered is a major achievement that outweighs the slower uptake of the smaller scale activities of staff training and intensive work with parents. However, sufficient uptake of staff training is necessary going forward to ensure that the support being delivered to learners are of high quality.

Finding 4: The projects are creating the conditions for learner-centred interventions but could better support staff to know how to respond effectively to learners' identified needs

Data collected for the evaluation indicates that support for learners implemented under the projects follows very clear structures that help establish a more learner-centred environment in which individual needs are identified and progress tracked. However, under *Success for You* particularly, it seems that teachers and specialists receive little support on how to adapt their practice to meet learners' identified needs. This may in turn limit the effectiveness of additional instruction or extra support.

4.1. Following detailed project guidance, kindergartens and schools implement highly structured interventions that can facilitate a learner-centred approach

Interviewees across levels reported that the projects facilitate the implementation of more learner-centred pedagogies and learning environments. They perceive this as a major contrast between the projects and other support provided to learners as part of requirements under the *Ordinance on Inclusive Education*,

such as consultations on academic subjects that take place outside of regular instruction time (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017^[11]).

Three key features of the projects facilitate a learner-centred approach. Firstly, project guidelines establish clear structures for activities with learners, to which project teams ensure adherence through thorough reporting and control processes. Although this entails a considerable number of resources (see Chapter 5, Finding 2), it ensures the implementation of very structured interventions, including a needs diagnosis, preparation of a personalised development plan and progress tracking.

“I provide consultations (i.e. remedial support outside the project), but they are just consultations and...I don’t always know who understood the lesson or not. But [under the project] ... I follow their development much more carefully, I know their needs at each moment, I have clear expectations for their results.” – School project team

“In the regular academic programme teachers typically require something from students; in Success for You, it’s the other way round – the students get what they require from the teachers.” – School project team

Secondly, the projects impose limits on group sizes: additional support (Activity 3) is implemented in groups of up to two students while general support (Activity 4) is for groups of around five. Research indicates that small or one-to-one learning groups can encourage learners to progress at their own pace with fewer time constraints and less pressure (OECD, 2023^[9]).

Finally, teachers receive additional remuneration for implementing the activities, which is not the case for the support they are required to provide under the *Ordinance for Inclusive Education*, nor for most of those implemented under national programmes. Although nearly all teachers and other professionals interviewed reported that they would provide the support without remuneration, several leaders and project coordinators recognised that it positively influences the learning environments created under the projects.

“[In consultations] some children say that teachers are very quick to just tell them what they need to know and that’s it. As part of Success for You, teachers are not in a hurry to leave the school. We can establish the right environment for the children because we can motivate the teachers.” – School project team

That the projects facilitate a shift from traditional teacher-led pedagogies to more learner-centred approaches is valuable given that this is an identified ongoing challenge in the Bulgarian context (see Guthrie et al. (2022^[8])). It is particularly important in the context of inclusive education: international evidence indicates that approaches that put students’ personal characteristics, needs and interests at the centre of teaching and learning are crucial for effective remedial education and other inclusive aims (Minea-Pic, 2023^[12]; Council of the European Union, 2025^[13]).

4.2. The projects place strong emphasis on diagnosing learner needs, thanks in part to tools developed in the previous programming period, but there is less guidance regarding how to respond to needs, particularly under Success for You

Identifying learners’ needs is a central focus of the projects and staff across levels perceive that this aspect is working well. Project guidance for both *Bright Start* and *Success for You* emphasises the importance of identifying learners’ needs when implementing support. Needs diagnosis occurs both at the application stage (see Chapter 5, Finding 3) and the implementation stage. For the latter, kindergartens and schools are required to use specific diagnostic tools developed under the 2014-2020 programming period. This includes tools designed for learners with SEN or chronic illness, those at risk, gifted learners, those whose first language is not Bulgarian and those falling behind or at risk of disengagement (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[4]; 2024^[5]).

During interviews, project teams at national, district and institutional levels acknowledged the advantage of having these diagnostic tools available to them. Identifying learners’ needs is fundamental to promoting

equity and inclusion in education (OECD, 2023^[9]) and having validated tools that support professionals to do so can be very helpful. In the regional survey, high shares of respondents agreed that the kindergartens and schools in their district are adhering to requirements around needs diagnosis. Among *Bright Start* teams, 84% agreed or strongly agreed that children's needs are accurately assessed before they receive support; the share for *Success for You* was similar at 88% (OECD, 2025^[6]).

"We now have instruments for identifying students with different learning needs. These go in the right direction and the application of those instruments has improved under the two projects." – Regional project team

However, needs diagnosis is just the first step in the inclusive education process. Having identified the needs of learners, teachers and other staff need to know how to provide evidence-informed, tailored interventions that ensure those needs are addressed (OECD, 2023^[9]; Council of the European Union, 2025^[13]). This means understanding the different pedagogies that can support them to meet the needs of different learners.

The projects, particularly *Success for You*, risk limiting the focus to the first step (i.e. needs identification) with much less guidance and support given to school staff with regards to the next steps (i.e. inclusive pedagogies). Although the Early Identification Toolkit being used under *Success for You* to identify students at risk of early school leaving does include general and subject-specific guidance on appropriate learning activities (Epitropova et al., 2020^[14]), the same is not true of other tools used under the project. For example, the tool for identifying gifted students includes just one paragraph of very general recommended activities per subject area (Pankova et al., 2023^[15]).

Meanwhile, staff training under *Success for You* relates almost exclusively to assessing needs: four of the five eligible topics are on the use of diagnostic tools, with little support on effective pedagogical responses (see Chapter 3, Finding 2.2). The exception is training targeted specifically at novice teachers, which provides an introductory qualification on how to provide additional support (Activity 3) and general support (Activity 4) in accordance with the *Ordinance on Inclusive Education*. In contrast, staff training offered under *Bright Start* covers a range of topics, including needs identification, curriculum adaptation for students with SEN and chronic diseases, methodologies for implementing support for Bulgarian language and an introduction to the National Framework for Quality in Education and Care.

In addition, civil society representatives emphasised that the format of trainings – one-to-three-day external workshops – does not adequately supporting staff to adapt practice and adopt new pedagogies. This aligns with broader challenges identified for Bulgaria: the quality of training is not always assured and there are limited opportunities for applied, school-based development, which research associates with greater impact on practice (OECD, 2025^[16]).

Evidence collected for the evaluation reveals some concerns regarding the quality of the interventions kindergarten and school teams implement. At district level, while respondents to the regional survey were almost unanimous in agreeing that learners' needs are assessed and progress is tracked under the project, there was less consensus with regards to the quality of support learners receive with considerable variation depending on their characteristics (see Figure 4.5) (OECD, 2025^[6]). Although this is based only on their perspective, it is at least indicative of a less clear understanding of what quality might look like in these activities, which are newer. At the time of the evaluation, it was not possible to assess the quality of support using project data.

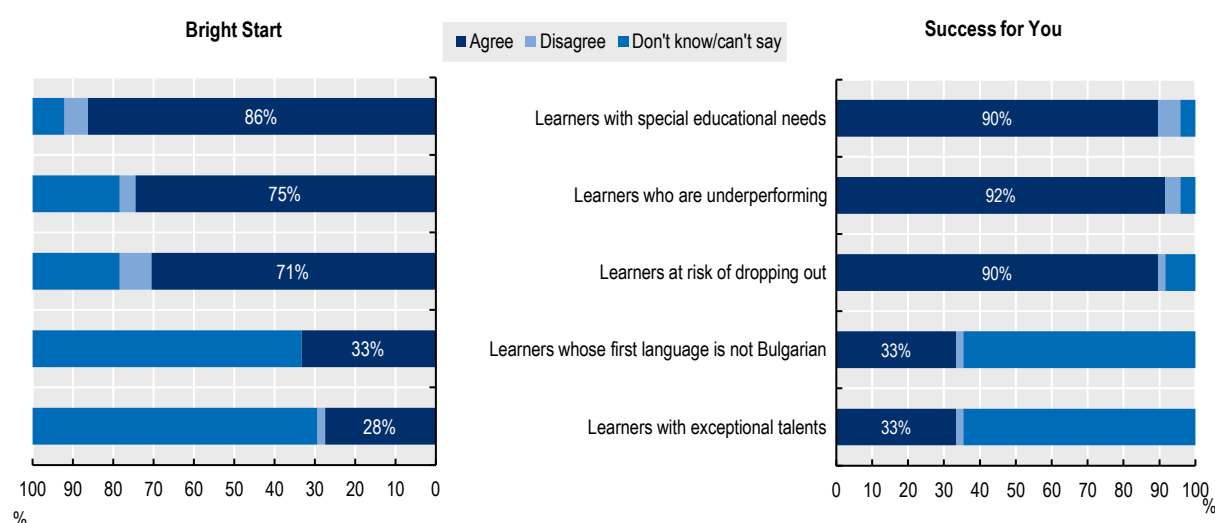
Interviewees from civil society identified that a key challenge in project implementation is not that teachers do not identify or understand learners' needs but that they are not always sure how to plan and implement teaching activities that respond to them. This creates a risk that general support in Bulgarian language and mathematics, for example, is limited to providing extra hours of instruction, rather than new pedagogical approaches. This is unlikely to lead to desired outcomes efficiently: there is strong evidence that extending instruction time alone does not translate into higher achievement, without specific provisions on the

effective use of additional time (Radinger and Boeskens, 2021^[17]). This is a matter for teacher professional capacity – staff in kindergartens and schools have sufficient autonomy to adapt pedagogy but may not have sufficient knowledge and skills to do so confidently.

“The implementation of Success for You at school level is not responsive enough to students... We have to show teachers that they can use different approaches.” – Civil society representative

Figure 4.5. Among regional project teams, confidence about the quality of support that learners receive varies according to their different needs

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^[6]), *Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams*, unpublished.

This section offers deeper insights into the effectiveness of specific activities implemented under the projects. It does not cover all activities but rather those where notable findings emerged, including general support (the activity with the largest scope) and newer activities (parental engagement, and support for gifted students and those for whom Bulgarian is not their first language). As elsewhere, findings in this section are principally based on the perspectives of key stakeholders; project data does not currently provide adequate information about educational outcomes (see Chapter 5, Finding 5).

Finding 5: Project teams, parents and students view the activities and their immediate outcomes for learners of different ages or needs positively

Across interviews at national, district and kindergarten or school level, there was consensus that the projects have a positive effect on learners. Interviewees typically focused on attitudinal outcomes, reporting that children and students feel more engaged, more confident, and happier because of their participation. In kindergartens and schools, interviewees spoke of learners' enthusiasm to participate in the projects, with examples of students with low attendance coming to school just for project activities, or the projects being used to motivate families to keep up children's attendance in kindergarten and extend their hours. These positive perspectives were expressed for learners of all ages and with a variety of needs.

“The projects help children’s attendance. Whenever there is a project (like Bright Start) there is more eagerness on the part of the children to come and the parents see that it is good for them and so also make sure they keep coming.” – Kindergarten project team

Project data for *Success for You* indicates that school attendance among participating students does improve. On average across districts, one-fifth of students improved their attendance during the school year of their participation in comparison to previous ones (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[18]). Across districts the share ranged from 9% (Gabrovo) to 41% (Pleven). However, the data does not allow for comparison with non-participating students in the same school, nor does it isolate the effect of project participation from other potential factors. Equivalent data for *Bright Start* was not available.

Interviewees in kindergartens and schools also provided anecdotal evidence of improved educational and developmental outcomes for learners participating in the projects, including progress in core academic disciplines, improved speech and language acquisition and better social and behavioural skills.

“My daughter can now express herself more clearly, she’s communicating and talking more. At home she would use the phone and the tablet...but since participating in the additional support she’s been expressing herself more freely” – Kindergarten parent

This anecdotal evidence from interviews with staff and parents in kindergartens and schools requires careful interpretation (see Limitations in Chapter 2) and should be complemented by other findings regarding strengths and challenges in the implementation of activities. Nevertheless, the volume of positive perceptions is notable and consequential: ensuring students, parents and teachers have positive experiences of inclusive education can help change mindsets across the system, a key step towards inclusive education becoming the norm (OECD, 2023^[9]).

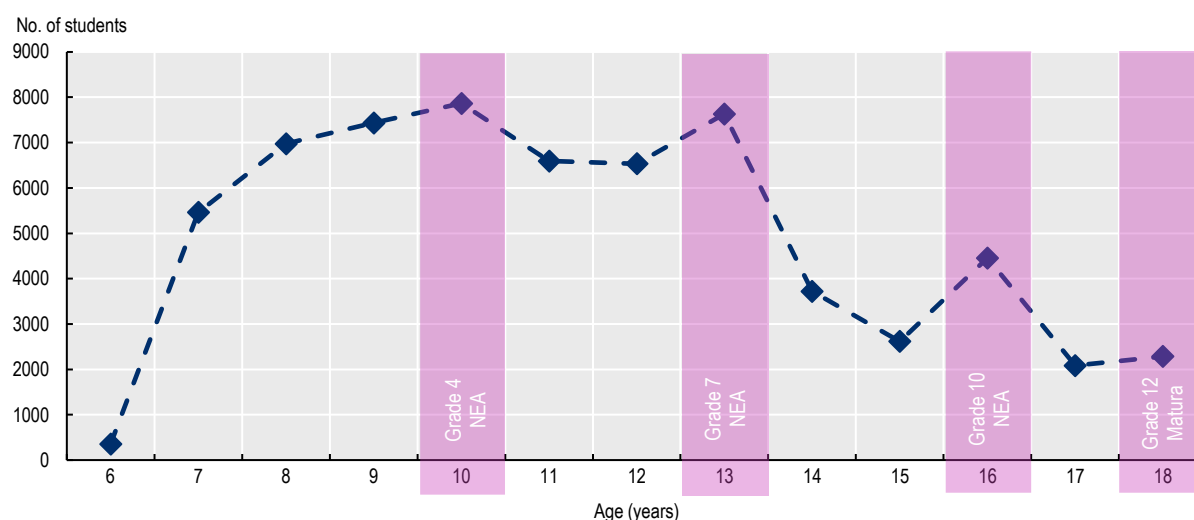
Finding 6: There is a risk that general support under Success for You is primarily used for examination preparation as opposed to catching and addressing foundational learning gaps, as originally intended

Under *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, general support (Activity 4) targets learners who have difficulties and gaps in their learning or development and are at risk of leaving the education system. Project guidance outlines several groups for whom general support is intended and at which moment in their education. Although the focus is on Bulgarian language and literature and mathematics, other subject areas become available as students progress through their education. As stated in the MES’ implementation guidelines for *Success for You*, the key target group for general support is learners at risk of dropout and those who have systemic difficulties mastering educational content (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[5]).

However, school visits conducted for this evaluation indicate that leaders and teachers often see general support under *Success for You* as a way of funding supplementary preparation for high-stakes examinations, notably the National External Assessment in Grade 7 that determines upper secondary school placement. In every school visited, general support groups existed for low performing students who would imminently be taking national examinations or assessments (i.e. students in Grades 4, 7, 10 or 12). This is also evident in the project data: participation rates are highest in those grades (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6. Peaks in student participation under Success for You coincide with high stakes assessments

Number of students receiving support under *Success for You* by age and timing of the National External Assessments (NEA) and State Matura, April 2025



Note: Grade levels correspond to the modal age of students in each Grade.

Source: Ministry of Education and Science (2025^[10]), *Project data for Success for You: April 2025*, unpublished.

The decision taken by school teams to use general support for examination preparation is undoubtedly well-intentioned. In Bulgaria, national assessments determine students' educational pathways and so success has high value. Some teachers and leaders described being motivated to provide this support for equity reasons, explaining that the project allows them to provide additional examination preparation to students whose parents cannot afford increasingly prevalent private tutoring. However, this approach to general support risks exacerbating a wider problem in Bulgaria. The OECD has previously reported that, as currently designed, national assessments and examinations – the Grade 7 NEA in particular – do not constitute a constructive focus for teaching and learning (Guthrie et al., 2022^[8]). Rather, they tend to narrow the focus to rote learning and basic recall; it is important for teachers to have a wider reference framework to guide support to students, given that many important competencies are not covered in the examination.

The evaluation team identified evidence of the distortive effect a focus on examination preparation can have on the provision of general support in schools. For example, in one school visited, general support for Grade 7 students had been delayed until the second semester to take place in the weeks preceding the NEA. In another, teachers described including practice tests and rote learning of key rules in their general support sessions. Such approaches may deliver quick wins but are less likely to help students master basic skills or develop complex competencies for the long term. Although evidence indicates that such practices are widespread, they are not universal: the evaluation team also identified some examples of schools implementing general support to raise basic skills, as intended (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1. Enhancing functional literacy through general support for Bulgarian language

Although project data indicates that many schools implementing general support under *Success for You* are orienting that support towards examination preparation, there are exceptions to this trend.

In one school visited for the evaluation, a teacher who provides general support to students in Grade 10 described how she purposefully avoids content related to the National External Assessment (NEA) preferring to focus her support on literacy skills that are more relevant to her students' needs.

"I opened the curriculum and asked them what will be useful for you, what do you want to be left with. They said things like filling in job applications or drafting CVs. So that's what I have included in the extra sessions. They don't have the opportunity [to develop those skills] in regular classes as there are so many different things they need to comprehend and because they are preparing for the NEA, which includes things they will never use after school." – School project team

This teacher has purposefully chosen to avoid content related to the NEA, doubting that it will sufficiently engage those receiving general support. Instead, by asking the students to identify their learning needs, she can make support for basic skill development much applied, highlighting its practical relevance to students' lives beyond school. The example highlights that there are pockets of good practice already taking place in the system that can be usefully identified and shared.

Source: Information collected by evaluation team during kindergarten and school visits.

Part of the challenge is that the guidance provided to schools regarding general support is neither sufficiently targeted nor developed to support schools to implement higher-potential interventions. As defined in project documents and in the *Ordinance for Inclusive Education*, general support can cover a very large share of students in a range of subject areas, but project documentation offers little advice as to what it could entail. For upper secondary students, the only example of support provided within the guidelines makes explicit reference to support for examination preparation (see Chapter 3, Finding 1). This means schools have a lot of autonomy with little support, particularly given the limited methodological support (see Finding 2) and gaps in efforts to strengthen professional capacity (see Chapter 3, Finding 2) noted previously.

In this respect, *Success for You* contrasts with *Bright Start*. The interventions offered under general support for *Bright Start* are more specific, focusing on Bulgarian language support only. Moreover, project documentation is more instructive, indicating that kindergartens must implement specialised methodologies for supporting children whose first language is not Bulgarian, based on guidance set out in the ordinances for *Inclusive Education*, for *Pre-school* and for the *Acquisition of Bulgarian Language*. In addition, training activities related to strengthening inclusive pedagogical approaches for these learners are included in the training offered under Activity 1. While this more targeted and holistic approach to providing general support under *Bright Start* may be more conducive to educational effectiveness, there is currently no available data to compare developmental and educational outcomes in the two projects.

Finding 7: Newer activities – such as parental engagement, and support for gifted learners or those whose first language is not Bulgarian – are not always sufficiently understood by those implementing them

The evaluation identifies several factors that inhibit the effectiveness of some of the newer activities included under *Bright Start* and *Success for You* – namely intensive work with parents, additional support

for gifted learners and general support for learners whose first language is not Bulgarian. Identified barriers include a lack of detail in the project guidance as well as low professional capacity or buy-in.

7.1. Parental engagement is highly valued by kindergarten and school teams, but Activity 2 is currently broadly defined, resource intensive and requires skills that many staff lack

Interviews carried out for this evaluation indicate broad consensus across national, regional and institutional project teams that efforts to engage parents are of high value and address a major barrier to inclusive education in Bulgaria (see Chapter 3, Finding 2.1).

“Help with parents is crucial... the greatest challenge for schools in the inclusion of students is to manage to persuade parents that education is important and of value.” - National project team

This approval is evidenced by the number of educational mediators and social workers appointed via the projects to work with parents and students. By April 2025, 1 148 non-teaching staff had been hired under *Success for You*, representing 112% of the final target for the end of 2027. Under *Bright Start*, this figure was 350, 86% of final target. These staff play an important role in helping schools to engage parents generally; previous evaluations of other projects in the Bulgarian context have found educational mediators are critical in bridging communication gaps between schools and marginalised communities and engaging hard-to-reach families (OECD, 2025^[19]). However, in contrast to this impressive increase of staff, the actual implementation of intensive work with parents has been slower (see Finding 3).

When asked about whether kindergartens and schools effectively engage parents under the projects, around 90% of regional project staff agreed or strongly agreed. The evaluation team heard positive anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents alike including some interesting example initiatives although these were implemented as activities of interest as opposed to intensive work with parents (see Box 4.2).

“We have previously noticed that parents of children with SEN had been excluded from other engagement activities, so we have a really strong goal of including them through Bright Start, helping them to build trust in the specialists working with their children and ensuring they feel accepted, included and heard” – Kindergarten project team

We feel very happy our son is included and socialised in this kindergarten. We get feedback everyday about what support he is getting here and what we can do at home...we all work together.” – Kindergarten parent

Box 4.2. Involving parents as active partners in the broader kindergarten or school community

The evaluation team identified a lack of clarity among many kindergarten and school representatives and some project teams regarding what high-quality parental engagement could look like. However, some schools Bulgaria are engaging parents in innovative ways, treating them as active members of an extended learning community.

In one school visited, the school leader emphasised the heavy involvement of parents in the extracurricular lives of students. Parents accompany students on the many school trips, excursions and competitions that take place. They also provide teachers and other staff with ideas for additional activities that can engage students and offer their expertise. For example, as part of *Success for You*, the school organised an activity of interest for a group of Grade 1 students in collaboration with a parent who works in a printing company. The activity involved the students, teacher and parent working together collaboratively to write, design and print a book. Teachers spoke of a very high level of engagement among students in the activity which helped enhance their literacy as well as their capacity to collaborate with each other.

The examples highlight that parental engagement does not have to be limited to passing on information to parents; rather, they can be a valuable partner in developing and implementing learning activities.

Source: Information collected by evaluation team during kindergarten and school visits.

There was less consensus regarding whether schools are successfully supporting parents to understand the aims of *Success for You* however, with just over two-thirds agreeing or strongly agreeing. An important share (29%) responded “Don’t know/Can’t say” signalling a lack of understanding among project teams as to what effectiveness may look like. This indicates a related challenge that was clear in interviews: project teams across levels do not have a clear sense of what intensive work with parents should look like and what changes it could bring about. Civil society representatives reported that there is a “*lack of clear vision*” when it comes to parental engagement under the project. Staff within the MES indicated the same.

“This is the first time that parental engagement is included as an activity. We have tried to informally engage in conversations [to better understand what it should entail] but we would like to have more formal meetings for this” – National project team

A lack of clear project guidance for Activity 2 plus limited experience and knowledge within the education system with regards to high-quality, high-impact parental engagement, may be contributing to the low uptake relative to other activities under the projects. Within the project guidelines, the interventions under Activity 2 are very broadly defined. Meanwhile, initial teacher education in Bulgaria does not prepare teachers for parental engagement and the topic is not included within the training offered under the projects. This is also an area of lower capacity in public administration: parental engagement has not previously been a dedicated area of work within REDs or the MES. While several large civil society organisations in Bulgaria do have relevant expertise and experience, the projects do not formally integrate these organisations into project implementation.

Compounding the lack of guidance and experience, is the fact that parental engagement is perceived among project teams as being particularly challenging. Several interviewees talked of an antagonistic relationship that can exist between teachers and parents in Bulgaria, particularly among parents of students with SEN and those from Roma communities.

“Talking to parents can be the most difficult part of the job. Especially the parents who don’t want to talk to us.” – School project team

“Work with parents is a challenge – parents need to realise how important collaboration with the school is and modern parents don’t always have time or bandwidth for that... particularly in cities.” – Regional project team

Project data illustrates the complex characteristics of parents engaged under *Success for You* (equivalent data is not available for *Bright Start*). Most (71%) have only basic, or no education and two-thirds come from vulnerable groups. Meanwhile, 40% are unemployed (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[20]). While it is positive that the project is targeting the right parents and managing to engage them in related activities, the complexity of these parents’ own needs further increases the resource intensity of working with them. This was evidenced in conversations with those working in kindergartens and schools.

“We try to raise awareness among parents during the project, we call them, we engage them from the beginning...we have some children who we need to track so we call parents and put pressure on their attendance... We have bought additional materials to facilitate participation and engagement, we plan cultural activities. But we get disappointed – of 15 mothers, only 3 or 4 turn up.” – Kindergarten project team

7.2. Kindergartens and schools lack clarity on the aims and scope of support for gifted learners

Both projects include gifted learners as a specific target group for additional support (Activity 3). Interventions may include implementing learning models that help stimulate and develop artistic or sporting talent, or participation in contests and competitions. Under *Success for You*, schools can also fund support for science-related activities, scholarships, or alternative programmes.

However, data collected for the evaluation reveals some skepticism or uncertainty around the provision of support for gifted learners within kindergartens and schools, particularly for younger ones. A small number of interviewees questioned the concept of including gifted learners under the projects. This included some who felt that all learners are gifted, and so certain ones should not be singled out, and others who felt that the concept of giftedness itself is misleading. This indicates that there is a lack of understanding and buy-in which the projects will need to overcome before being able to reach desired scale. Gifted learners are included in international frameworks for inclusive education (OECD, 2023^[9]): the evaluation indicates that more effort is required to communicate this to key stakeholders and build related expertise.

The regional survey suggested less confidence among regional project teams with regards to the support provided to gifted learners, too. Only 28% of respondents working on *Bright Start* agreed or strongly agreed that children with outstanding talents receive quality support matched to their needs under the project; 33% of those working on *Success for You* reported the same. In both cases, around two-thirds of respondents reported “Don’t know/Can’t say” suggesting project staff lack a clear understanding of what quality support should look like (see Figure 4.6).

Kindergarten and school teams also raised questions about identifying gifted learners. Under both projects, teachers and specialist professionals are expected to use tools developed under previous projects to identify gifted students. Under *Success for You*, schools must also use rankings from national and international Olympiads or other competitions. However, some school teams described this approach as overly rigid, meaning some gifted students miss out. Moreover, identification via this approach risks exacerbating inequities, knowing that the high achieving students in Bulgaria likely to participate in such competitions come disproportionately from the most advantaged backgrounds (see Chapter 2) but also that many gifted students may not yet compete in national and international competitions. Conversely, under *Bright Start*, one kindergarten leader explained that they had stopped delivering additional support to gifted children as the identification tool did not yield useful results: “*it said all [the children] were gifted.*”

7.3. Support for learners whose first language is not Bulgarian may not be sufficiently tailored to their specific needs, particularly under *Success for You*

Under both projects, learners for whom Bulgarian is not their first language can access general support (Activity 4) at any age across kindergarten and school. Interviewees at kindergarten and school level confirmed the importance of supporting these learners and nearly all institutions visited for the evaluation were implementing related interventions. Support is particularly targeted to the youngest learners as it is the only subject for which general support can be provided under *Bright Start*, although activities of interest may touch on other areas of early development.

While interviewees in kindergartens and schools appeared confident in the type of support they provide to these learners, representatives from civil society raised concerns. They highlighted that such support requires different instructional approaches compared to those for remedial support for Bulgarian language and literature but that this is not recognised under the projects. They cited pedagogical approaches such as intercultural awareness and interactive learning as being particularly important. This aligns with findings from research: generic accommodations designed for other groups, such as low-performing students or those with disabilities are less effective than those that combine targeted, inclusive, and individualised

approaches, building upon existing linguistic and cultural knowledge (Yeh, 2019^[21]; Lee et al., 2015^[22]; Altherr, 2022^[23]). In the Bulgarian context where the majority of learners whose first language is not Bulgarian are from the Roma community, the integration of Roma culture and translanguaging may also be important (Neminska and Borisova, 2021^[24]).

Data collected for the evaluation indicate that, under *Success for You* in particular, there is little awareness of the need for different pedagogical approaches for learners whose first language is not Bulgarian, a situation exacerbated by other challenges identified above including a lack of methodological support (Finding 2) and limited focus on developing inclusive pedagogies (Finding 4.2). Some interviewees from the national team stated that, while teaching practices may be different for these children in kindergartens, in schools, challenges are more subject-related than language-related. Furthermore, during school visits, general support was sometimes provided to mixed groups of students for whom Bulgarian is not their first language and those underperforming in Bulgarian language and literature. While this may be unavoidable – resource constraints can inhibit making separate groups – it could also impede the provision of more tailored support. In contrast, staff in the kindergartens visited for the evaluation were implementing tailored support for children who speak a different language at home (see Box 4.3).

Box 4.3. Tailoring support to children whose first language is not Bulgarian in kindergartens

During kindergarten visits, the evaluation team identified some highly tailored examples of general support for children whose first language is not Bulgarian. In each case, the teachers involved had attended related trainings, either under *Bright Start* or the previous programming period, which prepared them for using teaching resources specifically designed for these learners.

Teachers in one kindergarten explained that the training they received introduced them to specific pedagogies as well as a dedicated textbook with teaching and assessment resources. The kindergarten then bought these textbooks which included resources for teachers and children. These resources are now used in general support groups dedicated to small groups of learners whose first language is not Bulgarian. The teachers spoke very positively about how the training and the materials had helped them to understand how to adapt their practice to meet the needs of these learners:

“Years ago, it was much more difficult [to support children first language is not Bulgarian] because we had to find the topics, we had to come up with the curriculum. Now the booklet makes it much easier, the resources are well structured and there are electronic resources too.” – Kindergarten project team

Source: Information collected by evaluation team during kindergarten and school visits.

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5

Key findings: Efficiency and sustainability

Key messages

- In both *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, **communication between project teams at different levels is efficient**, helping to ensure responsiveness and enhance implementation.
- **All project teams spend a lot of time on reporting and control**, which are important for transparency. However, the demands of these tasks can also deter project participation and divert time and expertise from efforts focused on enhancing educational outcomes.
- **The allocative efficiency of the projects is limited**, meaning that more could be done to reach all the kindergartens, schools and learners who could benefit. Project design includes efforts to match resources to need but does not account for kindergartens and schools that do not apply.
- **Both projects build greater awareness across administrations and institutions of inclusive practice**, helping to establish the foundations for inclusive education long term.
- **Emerging collaboration efforts at regional and institutional level** could support inclusive practices beyond the duration of the project, but they are currently ad hoc and small scale.
- The scope of **data collection under the projects has been increased, but data is not yet being used to support learning about what works and why**, which is crucial for sustainability.

The first half of this chapter presents evaluation findings related to efficiency, exploring the question: **To what extent do project management and coordination support the efficient implementation of quality inclusive education for different groups of learners?** It examines the operational efficiency of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, with a focus on how communication, reporting and control support efficient implementation. It also considers allocative efficiency, assessing whether resources are directed to the learners, kindergartens (i.e. pre-primary education settings which, in Bulgaria, includes kindergartens and pre-schools), schools and districts that could benefit most.

The second half of the chapter offers insights into the prospective sustainability of the projects, asking: **To what extent are measures in place to ensure the continuity of quality inclusive education beyond the current funding programme?** It explores whether implementation is strengthening the capacity of staff in national, regional and kindergarten or school teams to implement inclusive practices once the project has concluded and facilitating the type of learning that supports upscaling and institutionalisation.

Efficiency

This section explores aspects of efficiency in the implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. It looks at communication between project teams, reporting and control processes and the allocation of resources across districts, kindergartens, schools and learners.

Finding 1: Communication between project teams across levels is clear, timely and responsive, supporting efficient implementation

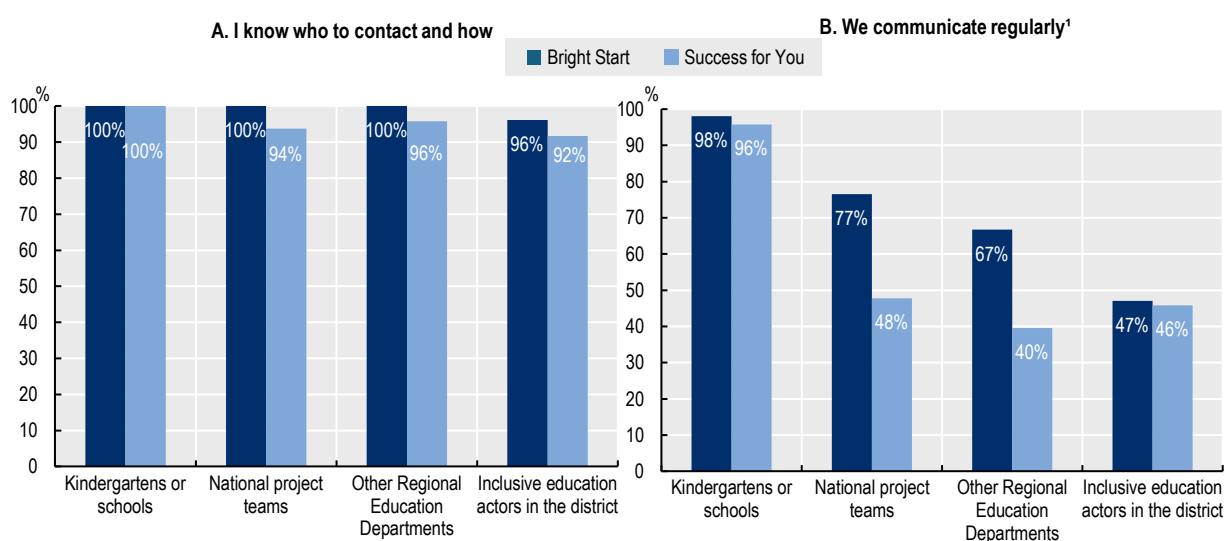
Evidence collected for the evaluation indicates that there is efficient communication between project management and coordination teams at different levels of the system. Through interviews and the OECD's *Survey for regional project teams* conducted in April 2025 for this evaluation (hereafter "regional survey"; see Annex B), participants across national, regional and kindergarten or school project teams reported knowing who to contact and how, and satisfaction with the timeliness of responses. This supports implementation, helping to align efforts at national, district and institutional levels; enable prompt troubleshooting and reduce misunderstandings.

Survey and interview data show that efficient communication takes place in three directions:

- **Top-down communication** – which typically clarifies requirements for activity implementation, reporting and monitoring – passes efficiently from national to regional project teams via territorial coordinators. Over 90% of participants in the regional survey reported receiving responses from national project teams (OECD, 2025^[1]). Information flows from regional to kindergarten and school teams via regional project staff. Among those participating in the regional survey all reported knowing who to contact in participating institutions and how. In addition, 98% of those working on *Bright Start* and 96% on *Success for You* reported communicating with kindergartens or schools in their district for a large or moderate share of their project time (see Figure 5.1) (OECD, 2025^[1]).

Figure 5.1. Regional staff report a high level of clarity regarding communication channels and frequent interaction with kindergarten and school teams

Share of regional project staff agreeing that they know who to contact and how, and are in regular communication



1. Regular communication refers to respondents who reported spending a moderate amount (i.e. 20%) of project time or more on this task.

Note: Survey items are ranked in descending order based on the share of *Bright Start* respondents reporting that they agree or strongly agree that they know who to contact and how.

Source: OECD (2025^[1]) *Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams*, unpublished.

- **Bottom-up communication**, in which kindergartens and schools contact regional or national project staff for support is facilitated by regular contact between institutional and district levels. During kindergarten and school visits, interviewees raised no concerns about the availability of regional project staff, referencing regular communication via phone, e-mail, the project information system, and online or in-person meetings. However, this only captures the experience in 4 of 28 districts. Communication between regional and national teams is also relatively common among regional project staff working on *Bright Start* but less so for *Success for You* (see Figure 5.1). This may be due in part to *Bright Start* – a project with fewer antecedents and which was launched more recently – being less familiar to those working in Regional Education Departments (REDs).
- **Horizontal communication** at district level between REDs and with others working on inclusive education in the same district is less frequent (see Figure 5.1). Nevertheless, it remains efficient: survey respondents reported a high level of clarity in who to contact among these groups and how.

Via interviews, the evaluation team identified evidence that efficient communication has helped create feedback loops that improve implementation. For example, national project teams reported updating project guidance in response to recurring questions or feedback from regional and institutional teams.

Finding 2: Project teams at all levels dedicate a lot of time to reporting and control. Despite some successful simplification measures, this can deter participation and divert time and expertise from enhancing educational outcomes

The evaluation finds that reporting and control tasks (e.g. financial and administrative reporting, document checks and audits), while important, are taking up a lot of project time at every level with implications for both efficiency and effectiveness. Although there have been some successful efforts to reduce the burden for this programming period, there is scope for further efficiency gains at institutional level, in particular.

2.1. Reporting and control tasks constitute a large amount of work for project teams at all levels, creating some inefficiencies and reducing focus on educational outcomes

Interviews carried out for the evaluation revealed that reporting and control processes are a key focus of project management and coordination at national, district and institutional levels. While such processes are undoubtedly important in ensuring transparent, responsible use of European funding, and are being carried out effectively in the context of these projects, the evaluation team identified evidence that the focus on them may be creating inefficiencies elsewhere in project implementation with implications for outcomes.

Firstly, reporting and control are clearly a main task of project teams across levels, regardless of role:

- Within **national project teams**, all those interviewed – ranging from activity coordinators to project managers, territorial coordinators to financial management coordinators – identified reporting and control as a principal task for them under the project.
- Among **regional project teams** participating in the regional survey, reviewing project documentation from kindergartens or schools for compliance was the task most-commonly reported as making up a large or very large share of the time spent on the project among those working on *Success for You*. It was the second most reported task for those working on *Bright Start* (OECD, 2025^[1]). For both, there was no clear variation in time spent on the task between project coordinators and project experts.

- For **institutional project teams**, leaders and/or project coordinators noted during site visits that reporting and control take up a lot of their time. Indeed, of the 17 responsibilities ascribed to kindergarten or school leaders by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) in project guidance for *Success for You*, 8 focus on control and reporting. This includes organising data entry for the project information system, storing project documentation and ensuring technical and financial reporting of activities (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[2]). In interviews, teachers and other staff also noted that they spend time fulfilling reporting requirements.

While reporting and control are necessary at every level of project implementation, the current distribution of responsibilities – where all or most of those working on the project are oriented towards these tasks – appears to create overlap, resulting in unnecessary duplication. This is a recognised problem of EU-funded projects more broadly. Recent analysis from Germany found that the emphasis on control at European level leads to the creation of error-avoidance strategies at national level. This may lead to an inefficient over-fulfilment of requirements (Moysies & Partners GmbH, 2025^[3]).

Secondly, reporting and control absorb valuable resources, including staff skills and time. At least some of these resources may be more efficiently directed elsewhere: while reporting can support the achievement of outputs it is unlikely to contribute to realising desired outcomes. Again, this issue has been noted in broader evaluations of EU-funded projects, where reporting requirements have been found to shift attention away from quality outcomes (Moysies & Partners GmbH, 2025^[3]). In the implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, this manifests most clearly at district level: the MES has made efforts to appoint inclusive education experts to regional project teams, but the potential added value of their expertise may be constrained if their work is primarily focused on reporting and control. In interviews and open responses in the regional survey, several regional staff expressed related concerns.

“[I wish] ...to have the time to visit [kindergartens or schools] more frequently and to focus on improving the effectiveness of the activities themselves, rather than most of my time being spent on monitoring the documentation of project activities.” – Regional project team

At kindergarten and school level, interviewees revealed that the administrative load associated with project management may be discouraging broader activity uptake or involving more staff and learners. One school reported having reduced the scope of their participation for this reason. For some teams – particularly first-time or less-experienced participants and smaller institutions – this administrative burden was also described as a source of stress. Although some interviewees recognised that the burden of extensive reporting and control reduces as familiarity with the project increases, interviewees from national and regional teams and civil society identified it as a likely barrier to participation, particularly for those not familiar with project antecedents or EU-funded projects.

“The design of Success for You and Bright Start requires schools and kindergartens to administratively manage the process which is a huge addition to their teaching load. The activities mainly take place outside normal instruction time. Some schools do have the capacity – they have good enough strategies that consider their own specific needs. But it's really difficult.” – Civil society representative

2.2. Simplification efforts, including the introduction of the simplified cost option and project information systems, bring efficiency gains with scope for further progress for institutions

Recognising the high administrative load that reporting and control carry, the Executive Agency “Programme Education” (hereafter Executive Agency) and the MES have taken steps to improve the efficiency of related processes during the current programming period.

The first main approach is the introduction of the simplified cost option across Programme “Education” 2021-2027 (PE) which replaces reimbursement based on the ‘real costs’ of project management, instead allocating predetermined amounts. Kindergartens and schools participating in *Bright Start* and *Success for*

You receive a lump sum of 15% of their total allocation to dedicate to project management. This has helped streamline financial reporting, no longer requiring institutional teams to document spending by highly granular categories. It also offers them more flexibility in the use of funds. The simplified cost option is generally recognised across national beneficiaries of European funding as having significantly reduced the administrative burden for both managing authorities and beneficiaries (European Commission, n.d.^[4]). In Bulgaria, national and institutional project teams for both *Bright Start* and *Success for You* spoke positively of its consequences.

The second major simplification effort is the introduction of a dedicated project information system for each project implemented under PE, designed to centralise information, streamline reporting and enhance coordination. The respective systems for *Bright Start* and *Success for You* have been well received: over 85% of respondents to the regional survey reported that they facilitate communication with national and institutional project teams. In interviews, one regional team member noted that the information system supports reporting efficiency, allowing them to quickly identify issues in the way schools are documenting activities and resolve them. Many interviewees in kindergartens and schools also expressed support.

“It’s good to have the [project information system], it’s all in one place, it makes us disciplined and protects transparency. [It] means everything is regulated and we all know exactly what is required and what is happening.” – School project team

Nevertheless, site visits indicated that kindergarten and school teams continue to feel that they undertake some unnecessarily burdensome tasks. Firstly, there is some confusion regarding the need to keep paper versions of documents in addition to what is uploaded online. The MES’ project guidelines state that paper-based reporting must be stored at the kindergarten or school until the launch of the digital platform (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[2]); however, site visits revealed that institutional teams continue to store paper versions and believe this remains a requirement. Moreover, some required documentation, such as consent forms and attendance sheets are administered via paper but then must be uploaded to the system, creating an additional, unnecessary step. There is also a lack of clarity as to whether paper versions of key documents are required during kindergarten and school visits (see Finding 6.3).

Other interviewees in kindergartens and schools noted that the reporting processes within the platform are still time-consuming, experience frequent glitches, and create unnecessary duplication of information through a lack of integration with the National Education Information System (NEIS). The national project teams recognised that the platforms require ongoing adjustments.

“In 2019, when the first project with these activities started, the platform would just require me to write the name of the teacher and the NEIS would link the info necessary. Then the teacher could take over. But in the current platform, the principal is supposed to input names of teachers, children, topics of all groups...and all of the days of the week for the activities. That took a lot of time.” – Kindergarten project team

Finally, kindergarten and school teams explained that certain reporting processes, and the platform itself, were either not ready or not fully functional when the MES launched the projects. As such, over time, they have received different instructions on how to carry out tasks. Putting new processes into practice entails multiple learning curves, which may have slowed down implementation or used valuable resources.

Finding 3: Efforts to target financial resources and increase participation cannot currently ensure all institutions and learners who should benefit from the projects do so

The Executive Agency and the MES take important steps to target the projects’ financial resources to districts, institutions and learners that need them most. However, the evaluation identifies related shortcomings: efforts to match funds to needs currently only capture the kindergartens and schools that apply to participate; this is compounded by a lack of targeted efforts to recruit high-need institutions.

3.1. Efforts targeting financial resources to regions, kindergartens and schools of highest need function efficiently, but their scope is limited to institutions motivated to participate

Allocating funding to the institutions and learners most in need is a key element of fostering equity and inclusion in education (OECD, 2023^[5]). It is also crucial for efficiency, ensuring public resources are directed towards services or interventions that will generate the greatest social value. The Executive Agency and the MES have introduced two main mechanisms to target funding under *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. Firstly, via the allocation of funding across regions and, secondly, via the application process. Although these approaches are helping to assign resources efficiently, they have limitations.

In line with EU requirements, higher relative shares of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* funds are allocated to “less developed” regions (i.e. gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is less than 75% of the EU average). This accounts for five of Bulgaria’s six regions. They receive around 80% of total funding but serve only around two-thirds of all learners. Key performance indicators are broken down accordingly.

This targeting mechanism can only work if the regions receiving additional resources can manage them efficiently and effectively. Positively, by April 2025, implementation in less developed regions had outstripped that in the transition region (i.e. southwestern Bulgaria where GDP per capita is between 75% and 100% of the EU average) for the participation of people from marginalised groups, including Roma and the number vulnerable children receiving support. However, the less developed regions were lagging for the overall participation of children under 18 and the number of those with special education needs (SEN), at risk, with chronic illness or outstanding talents receiving support (see Annex A: Table A.1). This means that, for some activities at least, design efforts to channel more resources to less developed regions are currently not resulting in more support for high-need learners.

The second mechanism is the application and selection process. Kindergartens and schools interested in participating in one of the projects submit a needs-based plan, setting out what support they require and why. Regional project teams review and rank these applications against needs-based criteria; the MES finalises the selection, using the regional rankings and additional criteria (EAPE, 2023^[6]; 2024^[7]). This is an efficient way of allocating resources and is perceived as such by interviewees across levels, who viewed the application process as clear and fair, helping institutions determine needs and how to direct resources.

However, as a means of targeting resources to those who need it most, the approach has limitations, as it only covers those that apply to participate. During interviews, national and regional project teams noted that it is uncommon for applicants to be rejected entirely, although the scope of proposed activities may be reduced. This means that, of the one-third of eligible institutions across Bulgaria not participating in the projects in 2024/25, most did not apply to participate.

While it is not assumed that these institutions would benefit from the projects, there are some indications they could. More than one-fifth of participants in the regional survey reported that the projects are not yet reaching all learners or institutions that could benefit (OECD, 2025^[1]). Meanwhile, half of non-participating kindergartens and 70% of schools provide for learners with SEN; 9% of non-participating kindergartens and 17% of schools are categorised as having a high concentration of vulnerable learners (see Chapter 1 for full definition) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[8]; 2025^[9]). These institutions may see the additional national funding they receive due to this categorisation as sufficient; however, this was not the case for participating institutions visited by the team with the same categorisation. Data collection did not cover non-participating institutions.

3.2. Efforts to increase kindergarten and school participation favour a universal approach that does not sufficiently target or address the needs of those that may benefit most

Given that the mechanisms for targeting resources to high-need regions, institutions and learners only apply to those kindergartens and schools that choose to participate in the projects, effective project

promotion and recruitment are an essential component of allocative efficiency (i.e. directing resources to the learners, kindergartens, schools and districts that could benefit most).

Regional project teams are responsible for promotion and recruitment. However, survey data indicate that, relative to other tasks such as communicating with kindergartens and schools and document review, regional staff do not spend much time promoting the project. Some 67% of those working on *Bright Start* and 54% working on *Success for You* reported regularly (i.e. for a large or moderate share of their project time) undertaking such tasks – among the lowest reported shares for the 8 tasks included (OECD, 2025^[1]). Although, in theory, allocating responsibility to regional project teams can draw on local knowledge to target recruitment efforts, the evaluation team identified no evidence that this happens systematically in practice. Interviewees at national and regional level suggested that efforts to increase participation are universal by design as opposed to targeted. Both national and regional project teams expressed that their role is to ensure all institutions are informed about the projects, while the decision to apply rests with the institutions.

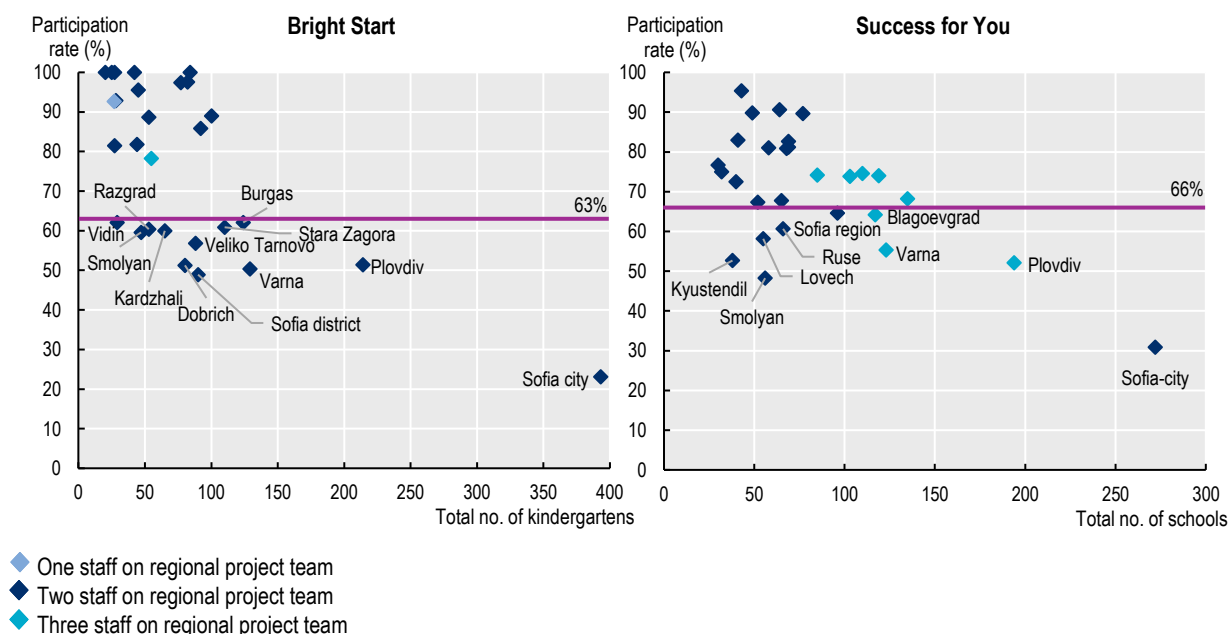
“We send detailed information to all schools encouraging them to participate. They decide if they need it and if they can administer it. We don’t push them to be involved, it’s on a voluntary basis” – Regional project team

A universal approach trusts kindergartens and schools to employ professional judgement based on the needs of their learners, which is positive. It also aligns with the universal-by-design nature of the two projects (see Chapter 3, Finding 1). However, it implicitly assumes that the decision to participate is based entirely on needs. In practice, there are many other deciding factors. In interviews, national and regional project teams highlighted that a lack of familiarity with EU-funded or predecessor projects may act as a barrier to participation, noting that some kindergartens and schools may not access sufficient information or support to overcome this uncertainty. Resource shortages are also a factor: interviewees from kindergartens and schools identified this as a key reason for not expanding their own participation, despite seeing the need for it.

International evidence raises another relevant factor: kindergartens and schools with lower professional capacity in inclusive education, particularly among leadership, may be less able to identify related needs among their learners. The OECD’s *Framework for diversity, equity and inclusion in education systems* emphasises that leaders play a critical role in vision setting for inclusion, engaging the school community in self-review processes. However, this requires them to be equipped with sufficient expertise to accurately analyse the barriers and facilitators of an inclusive culture in their own context (OECD, 2023^[5]). This is an identified gap among kindergarten and school leaders in Bulgaria (see Chapter 3, Finding 2.4).

Figure 5.2. For *Bright Start*, under which the size of regional project teams varies little, the more institutions there are in a district, the lower that district's participation rate is likely to be

District-level institutional participation rates by total number of kindergartens or schools in the district (2024/25)



Note: Only districts with participation rates that fall below the national average are labelled.

Source: Ministry of Education and Science (2025^[8]), *Project data for Bright Start: April 2025*, unpublished; (2025^[9]), *Project data for Success for You: April 2025*, unpublished.

A universal approach to project recruitment is also difficult to implement given resource constraints among regional project teams. Project data indicates that resource shortages can affect participation rates in more populous districts, particularly for *Bright Start* for which nearly all regional project teams have two staff members despite the number of kindergartens per district ranging from 20 in Gabrovo to 393 in Sofia City (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[8]). Districts with a higher total number of kindergartens tend to show participation rates below national average (see Figure 5.2). In contrast, in *Success for You*, the provision of a third staff member in districts with more than 100 schools appears to help keep their participation rates in line with the national average (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[9]).

Sustainability

This section considers prospective sustainability, examining whether the projects create the conditions for inclusive education efforts to continue beyond the funding period. It first looks at the sustainability of selected activities. It then considers emerging collaboration initiatives and learning-oriented monitoring efforts, both of which can support the institutionalisation of inclusive practices over the longer term.

Finding 4: The projects raise awareness of inclusion across the system – an outcome that can endure – but the financial sustainability of the work of specialists is uncertain

The OECD's *Framework for diversity, equity and inclusion in education systems* highlights that building awareness of diversity across education administrations and kindergarten or school communities is key to

embedding inclusion long-term (OECD, 2023^[5]). Both *Bright Start* and *Success for You* are contributing to this process in Bulgaria.

Firstly, project management and coordination structures support awareness-building within national and regional administrations. The cross-directorate nature of the national project teams and expert group within the MES exposes staff across the organisation to inclusive education. Interviews with the national team demonstrated a strong understanding of what inclusive education entails and implementation challenges. A similar process occurs at regional level where inclusive education experts and administrators working on other areas of education cooperate on regional project teams.

Secondly, Activities 2 and 3 are contributing to awareness-building at kindergarten and school level. This is critical for sustainability of inclusive practices as inclusive learning environments depend on the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders (OECD, 2023^[5]) (see Chapter 3, Finding 2). Under *Success for You*, intensive work with parents seeks to “increase the skills of parents... to contribute to building a multicultural and stimulating educational environment” (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[2]). While guidance for *Bright Start* contains similar advice.

In addition, increasing the number of in-house specialist professionals for inclusive education helps ensure that the perspectives of high-need learners are better represented in staff teams. To promote knowledge transfer between specialists and teachers, *Success for You* guidelines require that the preparation and implementation of additional support be carried out collaboratively and that specialists consult teachers on adapting instructional content (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[2]). Similar provisions are not included in the guidance for *Bright Start*.

While awareness-building efforts and their outcomes are likely to endure, some activities will be more vulnerable once EU funding ends. The large-scale hiring of specialist professionals under Activities 2 and 3 – a positive change under the projects (see Chapter 4, Finding 3) – may not be financially sustainable. Interviewees at all levels noted that, while kindergarten and school teams would try to reallocate funds to retain these staff, this may not be feasible. Reduced funding could also lead to more part-time contracts, a concern given that staff in every kindergarten or school visited for the evaluation reported a desire or need to fund more hours of specialist support and appoint more full-time specialists. The OECD has previously observed that, internationally, the work of specialist professionals that support high-need learners is often vulnerable to financial instability (OECD, 2023^[5]).

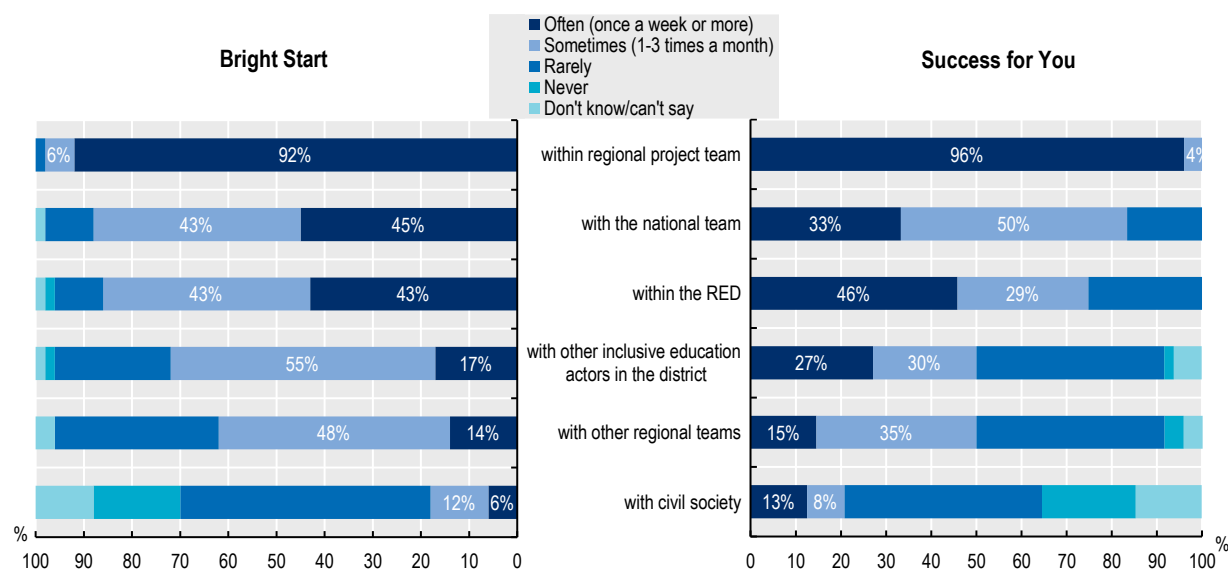
Finding 5: Some emerging collaboration initiatives at district, kindergarten and school level may support inclusive practice beyond project duration, but are not yet systematic

The OECD’s *Framework for diversity, equity and inclusion in education systems* identifies collaborative relationships between teachers, kindergarten or school leaders and administrators as essential in mitigating stereotypes, promoting acceptance and inclusion and creating a system environment conducive to quality inclusive education long term (OECD, 2023^[5]). Collaboration also enables sustainability more generally, helping establish collective responsibility that holds people accountable and supports systematic knowledge sharing.

Under the projects, collaboration is evident at both district and institutional level. In the regional survey, 86% of respondents working on *Bright Start* and 75% of those on *Success for You* reported collaborating with other staff in their RED to enhance project implementation and address shared challenges at least once a month (OECD, 2025^[1]). There is also frequent collaboration within regional teams: over 90% of respondents for both projects reported collaborating with each other at least once a week to enhance project implementation and address shared challenges (see Figure 5.3) (OECD, 2025^[1]).

Figure 5.3. Collaboration within regional project teams and with the national team is frequent, but horizontal collaboration in the district and beyond is much less common

Share of regional project staff reporting the frequency of different types of collaboration



Note: Survey items are ranked in descending order based on the share of *Bright Start* respondents reporting often collaborating with each group.
Source: OECD (2025^[11]), *Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams*, unpublished.

Collaboration between regional teams and the broader ecosystem (i.e. with inclusive education actors in the district, other regional project teams and civil society organisations) is less regular but still occurs. In interviews, regional project staff reported having formed relationships with other project teams through attending meetings with the national team and informally continuing their exchanges on an ad hoc basis. However, interviewees from the national project team noted that there is variation between districts, with some teams more proactively drawing on existing relationships than their colleagues in other districts.

Some regional project teams bring together kindergartens and schools in their district to collaborate on the projects. The evaluation team heard of one which runs ‘master classes’ for teachers to present their approach to different activities, identify good practices and address shared problems. However, these do not exist in all districts. In the regional survey, 74% of those working on *Bright Start* reported organising such meetings at least once a month; for *Success for You*, the share was lower at 42% (OECD, 2025^[11]).

The evaluation team also identified some bottom-up collaboration under the projects. For example, some kindergarten and school leaders reported participating in online discussion groups in which colleagues troubleshoot shared problems. Others mentioned visiting other schools or receiving visitors, sharing good practices, and asking for help from peers with whom they have previously established connections. However, all these identified examples were informal arrangements, typically small scale and ad hoc. This may make them more vulnerable to ending when the projects reach their conclusion.

Finding 6: The Executive Agency and MES have improved the collection of output and outcome data, but this is not yet being used systematically to enhance inclusive practice

In addition to project monitoring for control (see Finding 2), learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation are crucial for the institutionalisation of inclusive education, eliciting information about what is working and why and helping to disseminate it across the system (OECD, 2023^[5]). The evaluation finds that, despite

improvements since the previous programming period in the scope of data collected, the use of data for learning - including through analysis, reporting and kindergarten or school visits - is limited.

6.1. The Executive Agency and MES have strengthened project data collection but there are some weaknesses in the type of data collected and gaps in coverage of key outcomes

Compared to inclusive projects under the previous programming period, the Executive Agency and MES have introduced several measures to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*. Their designation as projects of strategic importance subjects them to stronger monitoring requirements and has led to the appointment of an expert group within the MES and a standing agenda item in bi-annual meetings of PE's monitoring committee. In addition, to complement the projects' key performance indicators, the Executive Agency has established project questionnaires through which kindergartens and schools report key data, annually. While these efforts to strengthen monitoring help enhance visibility of implementation progress, the evaluation team did not identify clear evidence that they currently support learning about what is working in implementation and why.

Firstly, while the Executive Agency is collecting a lot of project data, there are important gaps (see Figure 5.25.1). The key performance indicators for the project (listed in full in Annex A) cover the main outputs for each activity (e.g. number of learners receiving additional support, number of parents participating). The data collected via project questionnaires (listed in full in Annex D) includes additional output data as well as some data on impact, such as attendance, grade progression and learning or developmental outcomes. However, overall, there is limited data on outcomes making it very difficult to determine whether the steps that are intended to lead to impact are being achieved and where gaps may be emerging. Moreover, there is currently no collection of data related to the outcomes or impact of the training for staff and intensive work with parents (Activities 1 and 2), such as, for example, participant satisfaction or changes in knowledge, confidence or behaviours.

In addition, some indicators are misleading. For example, one key performance indicator for both projects is phrased: "*Pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff who have acquired or upgraded skills to work with children with learning difficulties*" but the information only captures the number of staff trained (EAPE, 2023^[10]; 2023^[11]), meaning the indicator definition and the data collected under it are misaligned.

Moreover, data on grade progression or attendance as collected via the questionnaire for *Success for You* does not allow for comparison of participating and non-participating students, making it hard to determine the added value of the project. Year-on-year comparisons of average scores in the National External Assessments (NEAs) are used to indicate improvements in learning outcomes but the scoring system used in the NEAs does not generate data that are comparable across years (Guthrie et al., 2022^[12]).

Table 5.1. There are important gaps in data collected for the projects, particularly regarding activities aimed at teachers, specialist professionals and parents

Coverage of outputs, outcomes and impacts in key performance indicators and kindergarten/school questionnaires

Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
Activity 1: Staff training	Number of pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff trained to work with learners from vulnerable groups	Teachers and specialists have stronger skills and more confidence to respond to and support learners' different needs	Inclusive education becomes the norm across kindergartens and schools, and is supported by staff, parents and learners alike
Activity 2: Parental engagement	Number of parents supported in the process of inclusive education	Parents actively partner with kindergartens and schools for their child's learning	Families feel connected to and supported by the education system
Activity 3:	Number of children under 18 participating in the projects	Vulnerable learners are identified early and supported consistently throughout	The education system becomes more equitable and better able to support

Additional support		their education	each child's potential
Activity 4: General support	Number of learners with SEN, at risk, with chronic illnesses and with outstanding talents participating in the projects	Gifted learners are recognised and nurtured	Early support leads to better educational and wellbeing outcomes for all learners
	Number of children from marginalised groups, including Roma, participating in the projects.	Learning outcomes in foundational subjects increase	More learners enter and stay in pre-school and school, especially among those with disadvantaged backgrounds.
Activity 5: Activities of interest, inter school activities, career guidance	Number of learners in pre-school and school education from vulnerable groups participating in the projects.	Learners access a broader range of learning experiences as kindergartens and schools create more motivating and engaging learning environments	

■ Captured by data collected for *both* key performance indicators *and* questionnaires to kindergartens and schools.

■ Captured by data collected for *either* key performance indicators *or* questionnaires to kindergartens and schools.

□ Not captured by data collected under the projects.

Note: See Annex A for full list of key performance indicators; see Annex D for full list of indicators from the kindergarten and school questionnaires. Source: Ministry of Education and Science (2025^[13]), *Project Questionnaire for Bright Start* (unpublished); (2025^[14]), *Project Microdata for Success for You: April 2025*, (unpublished); EAPE (2023^[10]) General and additional support for personal development in preschool education: Eligibility criteria and key indicators (unpublished); (2023^[11]), General and additional support for personal development in school education: Eligibility criteria and key indicators (unpublished).

6.2. Across project teams and levels, the use of monitoring data for learning remains ad hoc; identified barriers include limited scope of data, lack of time and unclear responsibilities

Despite some outcome data being collected, there are currently two missed opportunities for learning-oriented analysis and dissemination at national level. Firstly, reporting on project progress in the monitoring committee and elsewhere has thus far focused solely on outputs. This may relate to timing: the questionnaires are submitted at the end of each academic year meaning that, at the time of this evaluation, only one set of questionnaires had been submitted for *Success for You* and none for *Bright Start*. However, even with this initial information there is scope to undertake some analysis that would generate early, tentative insights into outcomes that could help enhance efficiency and effectiveness. This includes, for example, analysis of changes in school attendance or participation by district or institutional characteristics.

Secondly, while the expert group within the MES is well-placed to drive learning-oriented evaluation, their mandate is currently very unclear. When asked to explain the aims and role of the expert group, interviewees from the group gave varied responses, from general project oversight to internal collaboration and knowledge transfer, with no reference to learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation.

Nevertheless, in the regional survey, project staff were generally positive about the use of monitoring data. Over 95% of respondents for both projects agreed that they find monitoring and reporting helpful for identifying ways to improve implementation. Respondents for *Bright Start* were similarly positive when asked if kindergartens and schools find them useful although only three-quarters of those from *Success for You* agreed (OECD, 2025^[1]). The evaluation team observed some good practices in data analysis at school level but on the initiative of the school or regional team not system-wide practices (see Box 5.1).

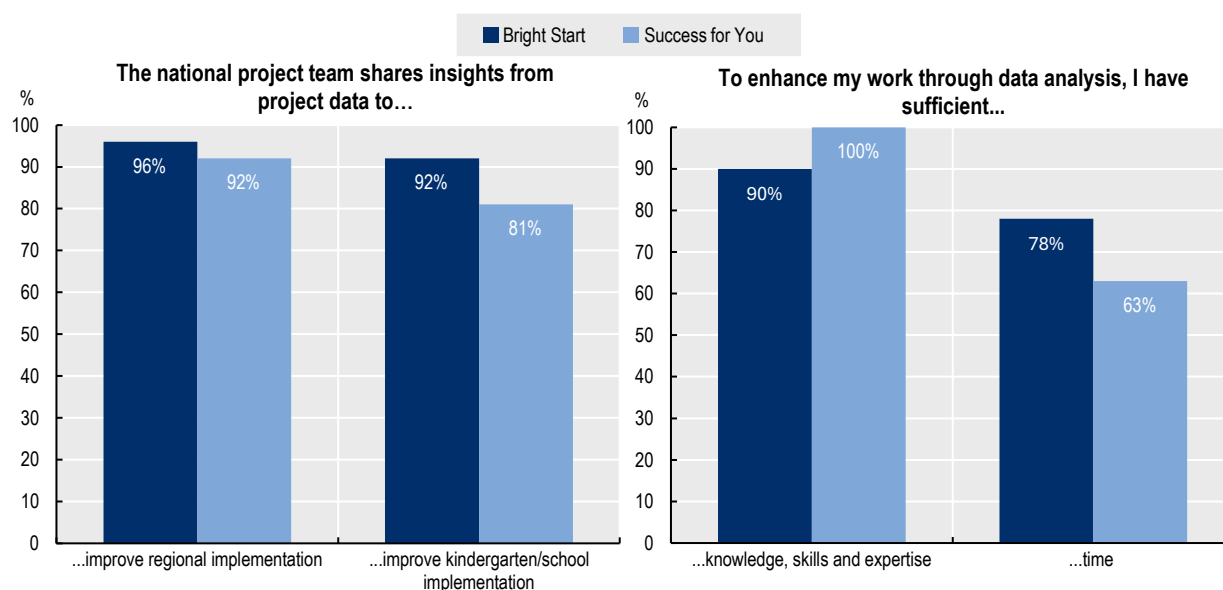
Many survey respondents also reported that the MES shares data insights to help improve implementation (see Figure 5.4-A). However, examples given during interviews tended to focus more on compliance-oriented aspects, such as reporting requirements, use of the platform, or eligibility requirements, than quality-oriented aspects, such as examples of good practice or early indications of outcomes.

Meanwhile, time constraints limit the capacity of some regional teams to engage with project data: in the regional survey, one-quarter of those working on *Bright Start* and one-third of those on *Success for You* did not agree that they have sufficient time to analyse project data to enhance implementation (OECD, 2025^[1]) (see Figure 5.4-B). This is notable given that 66% of those working on *Bright Start* and 75% on

Success for You reported spending a large or very large share of their time analysing documents or data. This indicates that both general time constraints and the task intensity (i.e. the amount of time data analysis requires) present a challenge for regional teams.

Figure 5.4. Regional project staff report that the national team uses monitoring data to enhance implementation, but many do not have the time to engage with data to enhance their own work

Share of regional project staff agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements about the use of monitoring data



Note: Survey items are ranked in descending order based on the share of *Bright Start* respondents agreeing with the statements.
Source: OECD (2025^[1]), *Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams*, unpublished.

Box 5.1. Engaging with data to enhance the quality of general support under *Success for You*

During site visits, the evaluation team identified two examples of school teams engaging with school monitoring data to enhance the implementation of general support (Activity 4).

At school one, staff described undertaking systematic analysis of student assessment data to understand learners' progress and identify when they can transition out of general support, freeing up the place for someone else. This data also informs discussions at the Pedagogical Council about the quality of project implementation. The staff had not been trained to use data in this way; rather, they developed these systems based on extensive experience implementing EU projects. The staff did not report engaging in similar data analysis for Activities 3 and 5 which they also implemented.

At school two, staff explained that their regional project team supported them to log and track performance in mock assessments among students receiving general support. They will eventually compare this with performance in external assessments. Staff noted that this makes to better predicting final performance and understand the effects of the project at student and school level.

These examples highlight an interest at both district and school level in engaging more systematically with outcome data to support effective implementation. However, by relying only on assessment data, neither approach captures a holistic view of the potential student outcomes under the project.

Source: Information collected by evaluation team during kindergarten and school visits.

6.3. The design and implementation of kindergarten and school visits are compliance-oriented, making them a major missed opportunity for learning and sustainability

Kindergarten and school visits provide national and regional project teams with first-hand insights of project implementation. As such, they play an important role in control processes, ensuring implementation aligns with guidance and requirements. They are also a prime opportunity for learning about what is working and why, which could inform improvements in project outcomes and longer-term impact. As currently designed, visits serve the compliance function, while several factors limit their learning potential.

At the time of the evaluation, kindergarten visits for *Bright Start* were still in development but are expected to follow the model established for *Success for You*, under which visits had already begun. Data collection revealed disagreement among project staff at different levels as to the purpose and value of the visits. In the regional survey, respondents shared positive perspectives, with over 95% consistently agreeing that they serve a range of different purposes – from control through to enhancing quality. Disaggregating responses by strength of agreement indicates that the former surpasses the latter (see Figure 5.5) (OECD, 2025^[1]). At institutional level, one school described a visit that they felt had supported them to enhance the quality of support being implemented, while another recognised their value for accountability purposes.

However, generally, kindergarten and school staff did not view visits positively, identifying several factors that inhibit learning:

- Some interviewees reported **that visits focus on critiquing the work of kindergartens and schools** and how they implement the projects, viewing them more as inspections than as improvement-oriented visits. The form completed by staff conducting a visit aligns with this interpretation, requiring them to document deficiencies in implementation, unmet requirements or documents that have not been submitted (EAPE, 2024^[15]).
- Some institutional staff remarked **that visits are entirely compliance-oriented with limited constructive feedback**. While the form requires visiting staff to identify challenges and deficiencies, it is not clear whether this leads to a discussion about possible solutions: follow-up actions are not recorded but follow-up visits can be scheduled. Absence from the form does not preclude the identification of follow-up actions but does mean this learning-oriented step is dependent on the initiative of the visiting team.

“The regional team has not visited for Bright Start but they did come for [a previous project]. We receive a monitoring card to fill in with things like the number of children in the project, the number of specialists hired etc. They met the team and watched lessons, they met the children and looked at documents and then they issued a statement saying we need to do more publicity.” – Kindergarten project team

- Some interviewees in kindergartens and schools reported that visits **increase administrative work** for kindergartens and schools, requiring additional preparation and extensive paper-based documentation before and during the visit.
- The evaluation team identified **a lack of guidance to support visiting staff** in determining the purpose, timing, and target institutions for visits, contributing to a lack of strategic coherence of visit planning. Under *Success for You*, there are four types of school visits – two focused on control, one on “activity monitoring”, while one examines the alignment of the implementation of specific

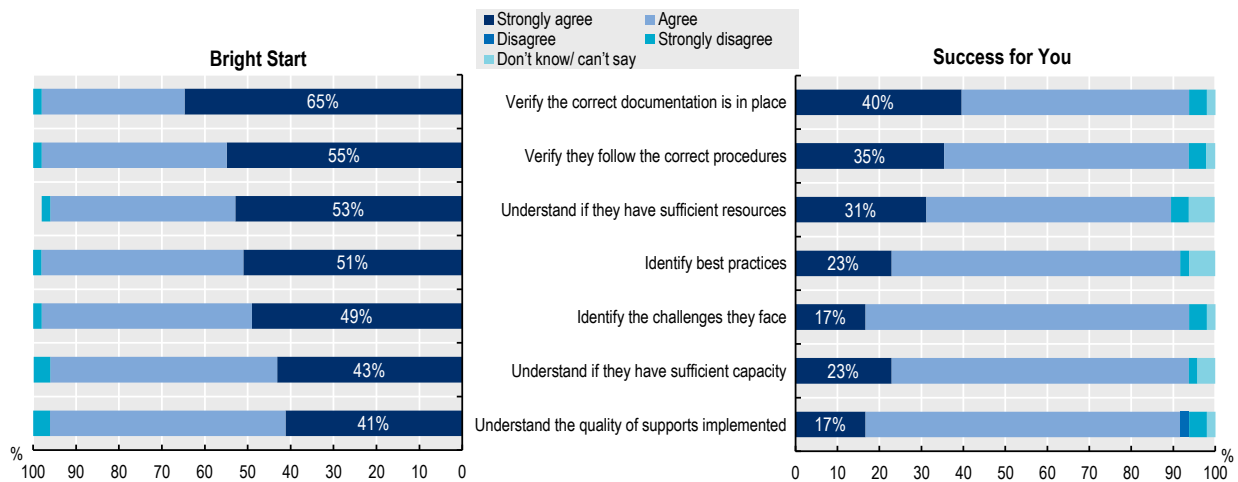
activities with project guidance, and one refers to follow-up visits. A single visit can combine multiple purposes. Regional staff shared that, in practice, there is no set approach for targeting the visits, and decisions are often made based on practical considerations. Moreover, there is no consistent rationale in terms of who conducts what type of visit, aligning expertise.

- As with several other aspects of implementation, **time constraints for regional project staff** also inhibit the scope of kindergarten and school visits. Among those working on *Bright Start*, 77% reported visiting kindergartens at least once a month; 58% of those working on *Success for You* reported the same. However, in open responses, several respondents identified that they wish for more time or opportunities to conduct visits (OECD, 2025^[1]).

"[I wish] to have the time to visit sites more frequently and focus on improving the effectiveness of the activities, rather than most of my time being spent on monitoring the documentation." – Regional project team

Figure 5.5. For regional project teams, kindergarten and school visits fulfil a lot of different purposes but inspection-oriented ones dominate over quality

Share of regional project staff agreeing with different purposes of kindergarten or school visits



Note: Survey items are ranked in descending order based on the share of *Bright Start* respondents agreeing with the statements.

Source: OECD (2025^[1]), *Interim evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You: Survey for regional project teams*, unpublished.

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6 Implications for current and future programming

Drawing on the findings presented in preceding chapters, this final chapter presents some key implications for those implementing *Bright Start* and *Success for You* at national, district and institutional levels. First, the chapter summarises main findings by evaluation criteria. Next, it identifies some promising practices that emerge from the evaluation and that can provide a basis on which project implementation can build in the future. Finally, it outlines five recommendations that can help project management and coordination teams enhance implementation going forward. These are accompanied by possible actions for both the current programming period and the next.

Main conclusions

Relevance: The design and implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You* align closely with international principles for inclusive education, adopting a universal, early-start approach and engaging teachers and specialist professionals, parents and students in inclusive practices. However, the provision of support to learners decreases considerably as they enter upper secondary education, a period when international and national evidence indicates they may be particularly vulnerable to drop out. Moreover, efforts to build professional capacity for inclusion in kindergartens (i.e. pre-primary education settings which, in Bulgaria, includes kindergartens and pre-schools) and schools – a key barrier to inclusion in Bulgaria – do not explicitly include leaders for whom there is consensus among stakeholders and in research of their critical role. Furthermore, the training offered to teachers and specialists under Activity 1 is limited in scale under both projects, but particularly *Success for You* where the scope of recommended training topics as established in project guidance is narrow, focusing principally on needs identification. Training available under national programmes can complement and supplement the specific trainings offered under the project, but this requires teachers and specialists to accurately identify and seek out training that meets their needs for activity implementation.

Coherence: The projects demonstrate strong internal and external coherence, aligning with national and European strategic priorities for inclusive education and making substantial resources available to all kindergartens and schools to directly support and engage learners. They complement each other and additional initiatives for inclusion and integration implemented under Programme “Education” 2021-2027, offering a continuum of integrated general and additional support throughout compulsory education. They also help extend the effects of predecessor projects from previous programming periods, principally by supporting the continued dissemination and application of needs-identification resources developed under projects such as *Active inclusion in the pre-school system*, *Support for Success*, and *Support for Inclusive Education*.

European Union (EU) added value: The projects provide greater breadth and scale than is currently available through national programmes although there are some overlaps in the content of interventions. They integrate multiple actions within a single project, facilitating – in theory at least - more holistic and

strategic thinking in kindergartens and schools around the varied supports that make up inclusive education. They also operate with significantly larger budgets than national programmes are capable of; this creates scope for impact that would not be achievable without EU funding and, according to several interviewees from kindergartens and schools, provides much-needed additional resources on top of national funding allocation and programmes.

Effectiveness: Project teams at national and regional level are very effective in ensuring that activities are implemented in line with project guidance and EU requirements, in part thanks to a good level of experience among them with implementing similar projects. This has also facilitated a relatively fast uptake of activities for learners, many of which have nearly reached or already exceeded their final output targets for 2028 or 2029. According to interviewees and final beneficiaries (i.e. students and parents), both projects are prompting behaviour changes in participating kindergartens and schools, establishing strong conditions for learner-centred interventions under both general and additional support. This includes a focus on diagnosing learner needs, tracking progress and implementing support in small-group settings.

However, there is much less focus in general on the inclusive pedagogies required to deliver high quality interventions for learners. Methodological support (i.e. technical support provided to kindergartens and schools to help them implement quality education interventions) is not included in the responsibilities of project teams at any level, despite there being a logical basis for it within regional teams. Although it is typical in EU-funded projects in Bulgaria to focus the work of project teams on reporting and control, given that these aspects now function efficiently and at scale for these projects, there is scope to integrate specific responsibilities for methodological support. Although there is a defined role for other public institutions at regional and national level to provide this type of support to kindergartens and schools, there is little evidence of this happening. Civil society organisations, which have relevant expertise in areas such as engaging parents and supporting learners whose first language is not Bulgarian have not been integrated into implementation design. This means that activities are not always being implemented in ways that maximise educational outcomes. This is particularly evident for general support under *Success for You*, often used for examination preparation, despite being conceptualised more broadly as strengthening foundational skills and redressing learning gaps. It is also evident in the delivery of newer activities such as parental engagement and support for gifted learners or those whose first language is not Bulgarian, where there is less clarity among implementing teams about what quality interventions look like and how it can be achieved.

Efficiency: Communication between project teams is clear, timely and responsive, and simplification measures – particularly the introduction of the simplified cost option and dedicated project information systems - have reduced some administrative load for participating kindergartens and schools. However, reporting and control processes remain demanding and are the focus of work related to the projects at every level of project management and coordination, risking inefficiencies. While reporting and control are important, this can inhibit the educational effectiveness of project implementation as resources are channelled to compliance-oriented processes. Moreover, there is some evidence that the intensity of related tasks can also deter or reduce the scale of participation among kindergartens and schools. Financial allocation mechanisms are well designed to ensure resources reach high-need institutions and learners - among those kindergartens and schools willing to participate, at least. Efforts to target project resources currently only cover those that apply to participate and neither recruitment efforts nor implementation supports are sufficiently targeted to engage other institutions that could benefit.

Sustainability: The projects are making a strong contribution to inclusive education long-term by raising awareness of inclusive practices across national and regional administrations and kindergarten and school communities. However, interviewees from kindergartens and schools raised concerns that the appointment of in-house specialist professionals to support inclusive education and their growing role, is not financially sustainable beyond the term of the projects. The evaluation team identified some emerging collaboration initiatives at national, district and institutional levels, which have potential to spread greater understanding

of inclusive education and good practices across the system. However, these tend not to be formalised leaving them vulnerable to losing momentum once project implementation ends.

Monitoring processes have improved under the current programming period, with more data collected and used to support implementation. However, these efforts remain largely compliance-oriented; there are currently several missed opportunities for more systematic learning that supports the institutionalisation of inclusive education, including through the work of the expert group in the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) for example, the analysis and dissemination of insights from project microdata and the approach to kindergarten and school monitoring visits.

Promising practices

The evaluation identifies several promising practices in project management, coordination and implementation at different levels of the system. Bulgaria can build on these to further enhance implementation going forward.

Across levels

- **Project management and coordination has strong foundations.** Key processes, such as communication, reporting and verification run smoothly, although the latter can be time-consuming. This means that project teams can ensure project implementation in kindergartens and schools aligns with guidance and requirements. It also means that the structures are in place for any changes or developments in that guidance to also be implemented efficiently.
- **The projects promote the use of quality resources for learner-centred interventions.** *Bright Start* and *Success for You* are helping to extend the uptake of quality, validated tools developed under previous projects, both for diagnosing learner needs and for supporting children in kindergartens whose first language is not Bulgarian. The provision of related training for teachers and specialist professionals is helping to ensure that these tools are well-understood by those using them and that their use spreads further across the system.

At national level

- **National project teams convene experts from across the MES.** The cross-directorate nature of the national project teams and the MES' expert group is helping to spread awareness of inclusive education and its importance across the organisation. It also means these teams benefit from varied expertise, aligning with the multifaceted nature of inclusive education.
- **There is regular interaction between national and regional project teams.** Under *Bright Start* specifically, the national project team holds a monthly meeting (online or in-person) with regional project teams. This provides timely opportunities to exchange key information and solve shared problems as they emerge. The regularity of the meetings can also help foster collaboration between regional teams. The national project team for *Success for You* also holds periodic meetings with regional teams although these are not formally scheduled monthly.

At district level

- **Some regional project staff have strong expertise in implementing inclusive education.** Within some districts, there are individual project coordinators or experts with a high-level of experience working on issues related to inclusive education both in kindergartens or schools and

from within regional or national administration. They typically view their role as being more methodologically oriented although they do not have formal responsibility for this.

- **Some regional project teams are promoting a focus on effectiveness and institutional learning.** Some regional teams have introduced initiatives to support kindergartens and schools to reflect on the effectiveness of project implementation in their setting. This includes approaches focused on collecting and analysing data on outcomes for learners as well as organising regular meetings to share good practices.

At institutional level

- **There has been large-scale participation in both projects among kindergartens and schools in the first years of implementation.** This highlights their strong relevance to key challenges to inclusive education in the Bulgarian context, and their coherence with strategic priorities and the policy landscape.
- **Some teachers and specialist professionals are designing innovative interventions to support learners and parents.** The evaluation team identified examples of interesting or novel approaches to general supports, parental engagement and activities of interest. This included multi-grade groups to encourage peer learning, involving parents in the design of activities and asking students to identify their own literacy needs to inform the content of support sessions.
- **Some kindergartens and schools collaborate with each other to enhance inclusive education.** Whether through online support groups and communities, meetings organised by regional project teams, informal exchanges with colleagues or self-initiated visits to other kindergartens or schools, some institutional staff are seeking out ways to interact with colleagues, to enhance the implementation of the projects and inclusive education more broadly.

Lessons and recommendations

This section outlines key recommendations to strengthen the implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, enhancing educational and wellbeing outcomes for learners. Most of the related action steps can be addressed in the current programming period but some should be considered for the next. The section also includes international examples from OECD Member Countries to help illustrate different approaches to the areas of action highlighted in the recommendations. Recommendations focus on five key areas: 1) professional capacity, 2) activity guidance, 3) methodological support, 4) monitoring and evaluation, 5) increasing participation.

Recommendation 1. Enhance measures to strengthen professional capacity for inclusive education, including among kindergarten and school leaders, by expanding the scope, format and quality of training

Professional capacity in kindergartens and schools is a key barrier to inclusive education in Bulgaria. Although the projects are increasing the number of specialist professionals in kindergartens and schools, it is also necessary for existing staff – teachers and leadership teams – to develop relevant expertise. The training currently on offer under the projects to both specialists and teachers is of limited scope and scale – particularly under *Success for You* – although it may be supplemented by training offered under national programmes. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the format of training under Activity 1 may not be sufficiently practice-oriented to deliver pedagogical change. Crucially, there are currently no explicit efforts within project design or implementation to build inclusive capacity among institutional leaders or project coordinators, despite very strong international evidence of their pivotal role in shaping inclusive

learning environments. Addressing these gaps is essential not only for achieving the intended outcomes of the projects, but also for embedding and sustaining inclusive practices across the system.

Possible action steps to further strengthen professional capacity

- **Improving the relevance and quality of the training offered to teachers and specialist professionals under Activity 1.** This will require expanding the scope of the training offered under *Success for You*, moving beyond needs identification. A greater focus on inclusive pedagogies as well as tailored instructional approaches for supporting learners whose first language is not Bulgarian and gifted learners, and for collaborating with parents would be particularly relevant (see Recommendation 2). As done for *Bright Start*, the national project team could also survey teachers and specialists to better understand their training needs and interests. To enhance quality, stronger monitoring of training outcomes, as outlined in Recommendation 4, could encourage providers to pay more attention to delivering high-quality learning opportunities.

For the next programming period, investing in kindergarten- or school-embedded professional development that promotes collaboration between staff, such as professional learning communities and peer observation, could help strengthen the link between training and practice. International examples provide insights into how this can be organised (see Box 6.1) while other projects implemented under Programme “Education” which are adopting such approaches also present an important learning opportunity. Knowing that professional development is most effective when it is sustained over time, these changes will likely require greater resource allocation under the project budget. Finally, it could also be beneficial to consider the way in which initial teacher education builds capacity for inclusive education, ensuring it is well-aligned with the implementation model proposed under the projects.

Box 6.1. Enhancing professional capacity for inclusion via collaborative, school-based activities

International evidence shows that improving professional capacity for inclusion requires sustained investment in quality, practice-oriented learning. While one-off trainings and workshops can be a useful starting point for thinking about inclusive practice, teachers and other professionals need regular opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills to their daily work and in collaboration with colleagues.

School-based collaborative professional learning in Alberta (Canada)

The Alberta Teachers’ Association has shifted from traditional, one-off training sessions to school-based professional learning which must be embedded in personal and institutional professional learning plans. Professional learning is increasingly delivered in formats which emphasise team-based development, coaching, and community partnerships. Activities include action research, in which teachers investigate their own teaching practices, test new approaches, and share findings with peers; classroom visits in other schools, supported by substitute teacher arrangements; and collaborative curriculum development. The work is supported by thematic specialist councils, including one for inclusive education and one for Indigenous education. They support teachers to tailor professional learning activities to these topics and organise regional communities of practice in their thematic area.

Extended school-based training and coaching for early years teachers in England (United Kingdom)

In England, the *Reception Jigsaw* professional development programme supports teachers to embed strong principles of early years mathematics teaching. It involves five in-person workshops (outside instruction hours) and five in-person coaching visits over an academic year. All ten sessions are school-based, and the coaching is tailored to the school’s needs. In an evaluation funded by the Department

for Education, children in the target grade in 138 participating schools made, on average, the equivalent of one month of additional progress in maths compared to children in other schools during the year of participation, and a further additional month during the following academic year. Evaluators expressed high confidence that this difference was due to the training, not other factors.

Collaborative learning for specialist professionals working with marginalised communities in Ireland

Ireland's *Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)* scheme targets educational disadvantage by building sustained partnerships between schools, families, and community services. HSCL Coordinators – qualified teachers released from teaching duties for up to five years – work full-time on family engagement. The scheme has a two-tier cluster structure for peer learning among coordinators:

- 1) *Family Clusters* are small, local groups of HSCL Coordinators working with overlapping family groups. They meet weekly or fortnightly to share insights, plan joint interventions, and organise common parent courses, allowing coordinators to respond more effectively to local needs.
- 2) *Local Clusters* bring together HSCL Coordinators from a wider geographic area. Meeting up to seven times per year, they provide a space to exchange good practices, align with regional initiatives, and liaise with voluntary and statutory services.

In both cases, the meetings are formally structured, with rotating chair and secretary roles, and are a required component of implementation planning.

Source: Brussino (2021^[1]), Alberta Teachers' Association (2025^[2]), *The professional association of teachers in Alberta*, <https://teachers.ab.ca/> (accessed on 27 October 2025); Education Endowment Foundation (n.d.^[3]), *Reception Jigsaw professional development programme*, website of the Education Endowment Foundation <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/promising-programmes/reception-jigsaw> (accessed on 27 October 2025); OECD (2024^[4]), *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Reviews of National Policies for Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3433784c-en>.

- **Introducing structured collaboration and training opportunities to build inclusive capacity among kindergarten and school leadership teams.** As a first, immediate step, regional project teams, with the support of their national counterparts, should formalise and expand some of the ad-hoc collaboration already taking place between leaders and/or project coordinators in different institutions. This might include organising structured learning visits and regular cross-institutional meetings or establishing online spaces for leaders to exchange challenges and good practice. Leaders could also be included as a target group for training under Activity 1.

For the next programming period, the formal training offered under the projects should include a well-structured training offer for institutional leaders and project coordinators wanting to develop inclusive capacity. This could cover topics such as developing a vision and action plan for inclusion, supporting school-based collaborative professional development for inclusive education and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of supports for learners (see Recommendation 4). Following the suggested actions for the training on offer to teachers and specialists, different formats should be considered including coaching, mentoring and networking; international experiences offer related insights (see Box 6.2).

Box 6.2. International initiatives to enhance leadership capacity for inclusive education

In several OECD Member countries, education systems are supporting targeted groups of school leaders to enhance their leadership capacity for raising learning outcomes, particularly among more disadvantaged students. Collaboration, whether that be between peers or with external experts (based in the administration or in academia or civil society), is a common component of several approaches.

- In **Northern Ireland**, school leaders in disadvantaged schools formed a professional learning community to address common inclusion challenges. Leaders meet regularly, organise peer learning visits, and form sub-groups to tackle priority issues. This collaborative model has been linked to improvements in student outcomes and stronger leadership capacity.
- To support schools with low performing students, **Chile's** Education Quality Agency provides video coaching to school management teams. Experts conduct three video calls with schools: 1) an initial needs diagnosis with regards to curriculum management, student assessment and teacher professional development; 2) co-development of relevant actions or tools to address identified needs; 3) progress review and reflection on ways to improve. The remote delivery of support, which began during the COVID-19 pandemic, has helped the Agency to provide coaching at scale, reaching nearly 1 000 schools in just two years.
- In **Sweden**, the *Collaboration for School Improvement* programme connects school leaders and boards with the National Agency for Education and universities to co-develop school improvement plans. Leaders receive structured guidance from researchers, ensuring that strategies are evidence-based and inclusive. The programme promotes shared accountability and builds institutional capacity in schools with low student achievement.

Source: OECD (2024^[4]), *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Reviews of National Policies for Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3433784c-en>; OECD (2024^[5]), "Policy dialogues in focus for Brazil: International insights for strengthening resilience and responsiveness in lower secondary education", *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, No. 108, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e99f8322-en>.

Recommendation 2. Improve activity guidance by better defining relevant practical approaches to parental engagement, supporting gifted learners and those whose first language is not Bulgarian, and general support in schools.

Kindergartens and schools follow project guidance to implement structured interventions that identify learner needs and track progress. However, guidance on the content of interventions – specifically the pedagogical approaches teachers and specialist professionals can adopt in response to identified needs – is much less detailed. This leads to a lack of clarity across national, regional and institutional teams as to what quality educational interventions under the project might entail. For newer activities such as intensive work with parents, additional support for gifted learners and general support for those whose first language is not Bulgarian, the limited guidance can also discourage uptake as kindergartens and schools lack clarity on what such interventions could include. Meanwhile, there is a common misinterpretation of the guidance for general support under *Success for You*: many schools are focusing on examination preparation while the aim stated in project documentation relates to addressing gaps in basic skills more broadly.

National project teams can strengthen activity guidance by drawing on expertise from across the system, including teachers and specialists in participating kindergartens and schools, and experts working in other relevant public institutions or civil society. In this way, enhanced activity guidance can offer practical direction without being overly prescriptive; it can also facilitate the provision of methodological support (see Recommendation 3).

Possible action steps to improve activity guidance

- **Identifying and sharing good practices from kindergartens and schools.** Project teams can achieve this through kindergarten and school visits, also helping to make these more learning-oriented (see Recommendation 4). It can also be a focus of the regular meetings with kindergartens and schools at district level and with regional project teams at national level. Regional project teams can coordinate the selection of good practices, which activity coordinators could then collate into a compendium. Where possible, kindergartens, schools and regional project teams should be encouraged to nominate good practices that show evidence of positive outcomes.
- **Engaging with other professionals working on inclusive education** to draw on their expertise in key areas. The focus of this engagement should be on identifying practical approaches: civil society organisations and the national and regional centers that support the implementation of inclusive education are well-placed to offer this expertise; researchers who have conducted action- or practice-based research could also be eligible. Activity coordinators within the national project teams can convene these professionals and collate and synthesise their insights. Along with the territorial teams, they can also play a role in disseminating the knowledge across participating institutions.
- **Developing practical guidance and methodologies for delivering high-quality interventions.** International examples of work with parents offer helpful insights into how more practical guidance and stronger conceptualisation of interventions for different target groups can support kindergartens and schools to implement more effective or impactful activities (see Box 6.3). In Bulgaria, this could helpfully be done around parental engagement but also for other key target groups such as learners whose first language is not Bulgarian. As well as drawing on the steps outlined in the previous two bullet points, preparation may include involving a group of kindergartens and schools who have recognised expertise or experience in related areas to develop, trial and revise different methodologies.

Box 6.3. Improving parental engagement through clear guidance and structured processes

Building strong connections between kindergartens, schools and families is key for inclusion. International experience shows that national administrations can support teachers and other staff to enhance engagement by providing them with clearly structured frameworks and practical approaches.

Scotland (United Kingdom): Legal and strategic approach to parental engagement

Scotland has embedded parental engagement in law through the *Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006*, which requires local authorities to develop strategies for engaging parents, by providing training, guidance, and targeted support – especially for vulnerable families. National and local policies are built around a clear framework with four pillars:

- Parental Involvement: Parents help shape school life through councils or volunteering.
- Parental Engagement: Families and educators work together to support learning and progress.
- Family Learning: Parents and children learn together, often with community partners.
- Learning at Home: Parents support learning via reading, conversation, or help with homework.

This four-pillar approach is built into national plans, giving schools and local authorities a clear, flexible framework upon which they can design and implement relevant interventions. Local authorities support schools, leading efforts to reduce barriers to school-parent cooperation, especially for families with

complex needs. This includes working with civil society organisations and public-service providers to offer more comprehensive support.

France: Structured interventions to support parental engagement in schooling

The Parents' Briefcase initiative was first introduced by one of **France's** regional education authorities in 2008. It originally aimed to improve communication between parents and schools as students enter secondary education. The initiative targeted schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities. It offered parents the opportunity to participate in three meetings led by the school leader, explaining how they can become more involved in their children's education. An online platform provided advice to school leaders and teachers to strengthen parental engagement. A randomised evaluation of 183 classes in 34 schools found that the initiative was associated with a reduction in absenteeism and behavioural problems, as well as improved academic performance. These effects persisted 18 months after participation. The initiative was then extended to all levels of education, with a particular focus on the transition years. It is currently being re-designed.

Source: Education Scotland (2022^[6]), *Strategic Framework for: Parental Involvement, Parental Engagement, Family Learning and Learning at Home*, <https://education.gov.scot/media/4w3lkhd/strategic-framework-for-pi-pe-fl-lah-august-2024.pdf> (accessed on 21 July 2025); OECD (2024^[7]), "The Parents' Briefcase - France [La mallette des parents – France]", *OECD Youth Policy Toolkit*, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/fr/publications/reports/2024/11/oecd-youth-policy-toolkit_7ae28a3d/parents-briefcase-france_8085e54e/86118c17-fr.pdf (accessed on 05 December 2025).

Recommendation 3. In future programming periods, create the conditions for project teams and other public institutions to provide methodological support by establishing clear responsibilities, expertise and time for such work

The evaluation finds that integrating methodological support into the responsibilities of project teams could enhance the educational effectiveness of the projects. Currently, and as is typical under EU-funded projects in Bulgaria - none of the existing roles within the core project teams at national, regional and institutional level have formal responsibility for methodological support. The Regional Centres for Inclusive Education and other public institutions, which are identified as possible providers of methodological support in project guidelines are currently underutilised. This inhibits the ability of kindergarten and school teams to implement activities effectively. In the future, regional project teams are well placed to provide methodological support; some do so informally already but others lack expertise in inclusive education and time to engage in work beyond reporting and verification. Creating the right conditions for all regional teams to deliver stronger methodological support in the future and proactively involving activity coordinators from the national project team and other public institutions is essential.

Possible action steps for creating the conditions for methodological support

- **Expanding regional teams in key districts.** There is strong evidence that certain regional teams, particularly for *Bright Start*, could benefit from an additional staff member and that, more broadly, allowing for more differentiation in team sizes depending on the number of kindergartens and schools and level of need in a district could support efficiency. The national project team could usefully conduct analysis of project and administrative data to determine which districts have high need for the projects but below-average participation. Analysis should also take staff profiles into consideration, appointing an additional staff member with inclusive education expertise to regional teams that currently lack it, for example.
- **For the next programming period, project guidance should clearly integrate both methodological and administrative support into project management and coordination**

structures. This includes exploring a stronger role for national and regional institutions involved in the implementation of inclusive education, and for civil society organisations with relevant expertise. Developing a clear structure for methodological support that helps differentiate tasks by level of support required could help more efficiently direct resources to where they can have most impact (see Box 6.4).

- *For the next programming period, developing clear responsibilities for methodological support and guidance on the type of activities it can involve.* As well as assigning new responsibilities, there will need to be some streamlining of tasks to ensure time for additional methodological work and to efficiently delineate roles. For example, on regional project teams, one person could be oriented towards methodological support and another towards project management tasks such as application, reporting and control, depending on experience and expertise. Similarly, within national teams, some or all activity coordinators can be released from tasks related to reporting and control as other team members undertake similar work. Possible responsibilities include:
 - **For activity coordinators in national project teams,** methodological support can involve coordinating national working groups on different aspects of inclusive education, developing compendia of good practice, participating in national meetings with regional teams to share insights into effective approaches and preparing guidance on implementing learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation efforts in kindergartens and schools (see Recommendation 4).
 - **For regional project teams,** methodological support can involve organising regular structured meetings for different kindergarten or school representatives and on different aspects of inclusive education, facilitating school-to-school visits, sharing good practices, supporting kindergartens and schools to implement learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation and any other more intense, tailored support to higher-need institutions (see Recommendation 5).
 - **For other public institutions,** methodological support can involve participation in the national working groups suggested above; review of or contribution to activity guidance and compendia of good practice; participation in national and regional meetings of project teams to share expertise; and coaching of specialist professionals, teachers or leaders identified as facing particularly challenging contexts.
- *For the next programming period, providing opportunities for regional project teams to develop capacity for methodological support.* The training offer under Activity 1 could be extended to cover regional project staff, providing them with training that strengthens their expertise in inclusive education. Moreover, territorial teams based in the MES could usefully identify the regional project staff already providing effective methodological support and support them to share their expertise with colleagues through master classes at national level, or by pairing them with staff from other regional teams that could benefit from peer support.

Box 6.4. Developing clear structure for providing varied methodological support in Chile

Chile's *Learning by Living Together* (2022) policy seeks to develop positive and inclusive school environments across the school network. Recognising that schools implementing the policy do so in very different contexts and with varying starting points and objectives, the accompanying implementation strategy establishes a three-tiered structure for methodological support:

- 1) Universal in nature, **technical training assistance** targets all key stakeholders at the regional, municipal, and institutional levels. It seeks to strengthen professional and institutional capacity through ongoing training, critical reflection, self-evaluation and improvement planning based on

the Multilevel Total School Model. As part of this, regional teams host seminars and conventions at least twice a year, which serve as a venue for training, exchanging of experiences, promoting best practices, and increasing alignment among those with decision-making responsibilities.

- 2) **Network technical support** reaches about 10-20% of municipalities or schools and aims to strengthen the community networks that link different stakeholders responsible for implementing inclusive education in the area. In doing so it aims to establish a local system where education and community stakeholders share a common framework for action. Activities include regular meetings that take various forms: technical working sessions, learning communities, territorial dialogues, exchanges between schools, training programmes, or joint planning workshops. The aim is to overcome institutional fragmentation and promote more coordinated and transparent decision-making at local level.
- 3) **Intensive technical assistance** is a tailored support strategy reaching around 5-10% of municipalities or schools. Recipients are selected based on their level of need, their level of commitment, and/or the potential for systemic learning. The assistance takes place over a sustained period with regular school-based technical support, including meetings with school teams and other key stakeholders such as specialist professionals and community liaison coordinators. This work involves reviewing ongoing initiatives, identifying structural barriers to progress, analysing available data, and co-designing relevant strategies. Advisors play a facilitating role as opposed to an evaluative or decision-making role – they offer methodologies, analytical frameworks, and critical feedback while valuing the practical knowledge of the school community.

Source: OECD (2024^[5]), “Policy dialogues in focus for Brazil: International insights for strengthening resilience and responsiveness in lower secondary education”, *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, No. 108, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e99f8322-en>; Salud Mental Escolar (2025^[8]), *Learning by living together [A convivir se aprende]*, <https://saludmentalescolar.cl/a-convivir-se-aprende-2/> [accessed on 18 October 2025].

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

Despite efforts to enhance data collection, monitoring processes continue to be compliance-oriented and, while a lot of data is being collected, it is not currently being used to enhance the delivery of quality inclusive education. As project implementation progresses, it is essential that the considerable resources put into monitoring and evaluation lead to the type of institutional learning that can support both project effectiveness and sustainability. Those working on the project at every level of implementation should be involved in this; it will be important to support kindergarten and school teams to monitor their own implementation efforts too.

Possible action steps for strengthening monitoring and evaluation

- **Clearly defining the mandate of the expert group**, providing them with a well-defined role in learning-oriented project monitoring. The responsibilities and tasks of the MES’ expert group require much clearer definition, and it will be important to do this quickly to ensure that members remain fully engaged. The MES should define a small number of key objectives that play to the group’s expertise while recognising their limited resources. A relevant objective could be to oversee the implementation of selected recommendations or action steps presented in this report.

- **Improving and increasing learning-oriented kindergarten and school visits.** Kindergarten and school visits should be a more constructive experience for institutional teams, helping them to adjust implementation to improve effectiveness and efficiency. They could also help generate insights into good practices to be shared across the system (see Recommendation 2). The national project teams could helpfully revise the forms used for the “Activity monitoring” visit to include the identification of good practices, constructive feedback and agreed action steps for institutional teams. They should also make “Activity monitoring” a compulsory part of all visits and provide clearer expectations on frequency and how to prioritise kindergartens and schools. It will also be important to clearly communicate the learning-oriented purpose of these visits to kindergartens, schools and regional project teams. Finally, they should establish short qualitative reference standards that can help structure feedback to kindergartens and schools.

For the next programming period, the Executive Agency and the MES could more effectively streamline visits. For example, the different types of visits could be usefully assigned to different staff within project teams: national reporting staff could conduct compliance visits while activity monitoring can be limited to regional project staff with inclusive education expertise. Moreover, visits themselves could be streamlined by identifying compliance-oriented checks that can be carried out remotely via the project information system.

- **Enhancing data collection on work with teachers, specialists and parents.** Currently, Bulgaria is not collecting information on the outcomes of training for teachers and specialists, nor on intensive work with parents. This represents an important gap in the monitoring framework. The Executive Agency and the MES should introduce additional monitoring indicators that fill these gaps. For example, for measuring the outcomes of Activity 1, the MES and Executive Agency could explore different approaches to collecting data on changes in teacher knowledge, practice or behaviour.

For the next programming period, it will be important to fully define the project logic model (i.e., inputs, desired outcomes and impact) before establishing the monitoring and evaluation framework. This will help ensure the framework is comprehensive (see OECD (forthcoming^[9])).

- **Supporting kindergartens and schools to better understand outcomes and how to improve implementation.** As part of methodological support, national and regional project teams can help kindergartens and schools to better understand the quality of the interventions they implement. As well as building capacity for this through the stronger guidance and support outlined above (see Recommendations 2 and 3), establishing a formal expectation and structured process for regular evaluation can also be helpful (see Box 6.5). This should not require unnecessary duplication of reporting or control activities. Rather, it should encourage kindergarten and school teams to engage with project data, speak to final beneficiaries and reflect together on implementation at institutional level.

Box 6.5. Monitoring and evaluating interventions for disadvantaged students in England

In England (United Kingdom), the Pupil Premium provides schools serving disadvantaged students with additional funding to help close the achievement gap. Recipient schools are expected to follow a five-step implementation approach which embeds monitoring and evaluation at multiple points:

- 1) **Diagnosing students’ needs.** Schools are encouraged to draw on a range of data to identify the academic and non-academic challenges facing disadvantaged students in their context. This can include data from internal and external assessments, discussions with teachers and support staff, and engagement with students and families.

- 2) **Using evidence to inform interventions:** Schools must base implementation on reliable evidence of what works for disadvantaged students. To support this, the Department for Education (DfE) has developed a menu of approaches across three areas – high-quality teaching, targeted academic support, and wider strategies. Guidance is based on insights from academic literature, action research in schools and school evaluation reports.
- 3) **Developing an effective strategy:** Schools are expected to engage different stakeholders in developing a Pupil Premium Strategy which aligns with other school improvement documents. It should be developed for a three-year timeframe but is reviewed and revised each year.
- 4) **Delivering and monitoring the strategy:** School leaders must identify the data and resources they will need to monitor the impact of each activity they implement. They are then expected to monitor progress with a view to improving both implementation and student outcomes, and share their data, insights and findings across the school community. To support this, the DfE encourages leaders to build in sufficient time and opportunities for staff to reflect on implementation data and feedback, and to identify and address challenges.
- 5) **Evaluating the strategy:** Schools are required to evaluate their efforts annually to improve implementation. To do so, schools must determine monitoring and evaluation measures at the planning stage to ensure that decisions are taken with clear outcomes in mind.

To hold schools accountable, they must report annually on their use of the Pupil Premium, publishing a statement on their website using a template provided by the DfE. The primary audience is parents, the school board and other key stakeholders in the school community. Part A outlines the strategy, including intended outcomes and success criteria as well as the evidence base for selected approaches. Part B explains what outcomes were achieved by the disadvantaged students in the previous academic year, using internal and external assessment data as well as school data and observations on issues such as attendance, behaviour and wellbeing. Schools must state whether they are on target to achieve their outcomes and provide an analysis of what aspects are or are not working well.

Alongside school-level monitoring and evaluation, use of the Pupil Premium is formally integrated into external school evaluation. Ofsted, England's education inspectorate, must monitor the attainment and progress of disadvantaged students and how schools are addressing their needs. If an inspection identifies issues, then a more thorough "Pupil premium review" is conducted to help schools improve.

Source: Department for Education (2025^[10]), Using pupil premium: guidance for school leaders (March 2025), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68e661e3dadf7616351e4f5b/Using_pupil_premium_guidance.pdf (accessed on 18 October 2025).

Recommendation 5. Develop targeted efforts to increase project participation and enhance implementation among high-need kindergartens and schools, starting with key districts before expanding nationally

Around a third of kindergartens and schools across Bulgaria are not participating in the projects but evidence suggests they could benefit. At the same time, efforts to increase participation are relatively limited and adopt a universal approach that assumes that knowledge of the projects is the only barrier to uptake. To increase participation in the coming years, particularly among high-need and hard-to-reach institutions, a more targeted approach to recruitment and support is necessary. The MES could pilot related actions first in a small number of key districts, selected according to both need and capacity within the regional project team. The teams participating in the pilot can then help scale good practices more widely across the system as more districts adopt targeted approaches.

Possible action steps for targeted recruitment and support

- **Identifying high-need non-participants and the barriers to their participation.** The national project team should undertake a first analysis of administrative and project data to identify non-participating kindergartens and schools with a high concentration of vulnerable learners, low academic performance and/or high dropout rates. Regional project teams can then approach these institutions to determine the barriers to their participation and how they could support them to overcome them.
- **Developing tailored approaches to overcoming participation barriers.** The territorial teams in the MES and the regional project teams should then work together to address the specific needs of different non-participants. For example, this might include providing additional support to prepare the initial project application, supporting institutional staff to visit and exchange with participating institutions, or identifying experienced project coordinators from other kindergartens or schools to provide peer support to those in new recruits.
- *For the next programming period*, the Executive Agency and the MES could explore **adopting a more progressive approach to project recruitment and support from the outset**. This may involve, for example, identifying and targeting some high-need kindergartens and schools to participate in the project setting related participation quotas. Project implementation design could then also provide new and high-need participants with additional support and/or resources. Other countries are applying progressive approaches to European funded projects, offer related insights (see Box 6.6).

Box 6.6. Strengthening efforts to embed inclusive education in high-need schools in Portugal

The fourth iteration of Portugal's Educational Territories of Priority Intervention Programme (TEIP4, 2023-2029) is an inclusive education project targeting schools in areas with greater social vulnerability. It aims to ensure the inclusion and educational success of all students, improving their learning, and reducing dropout. It is funded by the European Social Fund Plus.

While TEIP3 was notable for its focus on improving development planning and the logic of intervention at school level, the fourth iteration focuses on targeting resources more efficiently with a view to supporting schools in greatest need.

TEIP has expanded its reach among Portugal's schools in each of the four iterations of the project. In TEIP4, 165 school clusters¹ are participating, an increase from 146 in the previous programming period. Targets for the number of participating schools for each of Portugal's five mainland regions were defined prior to the project's launch. While Portugal decided to maintain the participation of schools from TEIP3 to support them to consolidate progress, new schools joining the project for TEIP4 had to qualify based on their index of social vulnerability. This is calculated via administrative data for three indicators: a) student beneficiaries of the school social action scheme; b) students whose mothers have not attained upper secondary education; and c) migrants.

In addition to continuing to expand its reach among school clusters in greatest need, TEIP4 has adopted an implementation strategy characterised by positive discrimination. Under the project, schools receive differentiated resources and supports, according to their level of need. Firstly, intensive support is provided to schools joining the project for the first time, ensuring greater accessibility to guidance and assistance. Secondly, participating schools are organised into two groups:

- **Group 1: TEIP schools in development** – those with the highest index of social vulnerability representing around 40% of participating schools in each region. They receive resources for

more additional instructional time (four hours per week) as well as more frequent site visits from methodological support teams (four times per academic year).

- **Group 2: TEIP schools in transition** – those that were part of TEIP3 and do not meet the requirements to be included in Group 1. They receive resources for two additional hours of instruction per week. Around 60% of participating schools in each region are part of this group.

Schools remain in their respective group for three academic years, after which the Ministry of Education undertakes an assessment of the need to maintain the school in TEIP4 and/or its respective group, based on an analysis of the results obtained.

1. The average school cluster consists of five to six schools typically within the same municipality and crossing different education levels. Source: Government of Portugal (2023^[11]), *Diary of the Republic, 2nd Series – Education: Order No. 7798/2023*, No.146, pp. 65, 28 July 2023, <https://files.diariodarepublica.pt/2s/2023/07/146000000/0006500069.pdf> (accessed on 18 October 2025); Ministry of Education (2024^[12]), *Annual report: TEIP4*, https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EPIPSE/relatorio_teip_2023_2024.pdf (accessed on 18 October 2025).

Table 6.1. Overview of key recommendations and their evidence base

Recommendations	Main findings	Rationale	See more
Enhance measures to strengthen professional capacity for inclusive education, including among kindergarten and school leaders, by expanding the scope, format and quality of training.	The projects see strengthening the knowledge and skills of teachers and specialists as key, but limited funding and narrow focus reduce the relevance of planned activities.	Interviewees from national, regional and institutional project teams, and previous analyses identify professional capacity as a major barrier to inclusive education in Bulgaria. Both projects offer related training for teachers and specialist professionals. However, funding is modest, and, under <i>Success for You</i> in particular, the scope of available training as defined in project guidance is narrowly focused on identifying learners' needs. Although this is supporting the sustainability of tools developed under previous projects, it does not comprehensively address professional capacity needs. This, plus the broader challenge of quality assurance for professional development in Bulgaria, may limit the impact of training on practice.	Chapter 3: Finding 2.2 Chapter 4: Finding 4.2
	The projects do not explicitly include capacity-building initiatives for kindergarten and school leaders despite their importance.	International evidence highlights the crucial role of kindergarten and school leaders in setting a shared vision for inclusive education and embedding it over time. Interviews and site visits confirmed that engaged leaders are a decisive factor in effective project implementation, yet leaders do not currently receive capacity building under the projects and their responsibilities focus on administrative tasks.	Chapter 3: Finding 2.4 Chapter 5, Finding 2.1
Improve activity guidance by better defining relevant practical approaches to parental engagement, supporting gifted learners and those whose first language is not Bulgarian, and general support in schools.	Newer activities – such as parental engagement, and support for gifted learners or those whose first language is not Bulgarian - are not always sufficiently understood by those implementing them.	Interviews reveal that kindergarten and school staff value the diagnostic tools available to them via the projects. However, particularly under <i>Success for You</i> , there is less support regarding how they can respond to learners' varied needs. Across both projects, related guidance is also limited. This is particularly challenging for newer activities (i.e., intensive work with parents, additional support for gifted learners and general support for those whose first language is not Bulgarian), for which the existing knowledge, expertise and experience in kindergartens, schools and administrations is low.	Chapter 4, Findings 4.2 & 7
	There is a risk that general support under <i>Success for You</i> is primarily used for examination preparation as opposed to catching and addressing foundational learning gaps, as originally intended.	The key target groups for general support under <i>Success for You</i> are learners at risk of dropout and those who have systemic difficulties mastering educational content. However, project data and site visits show that, in practice, schools are using general support as a form of intensive preparation for students with upcoming national examinations or assessments. While this is well-intentioned it contributes to a broader distortion of teaching in Bulgaria by a high-stakes assessment culture.	Chapter 3, Finding 1.2 Chapter 4, Finding 6
In the future programming period, create the conditions for national activity coordinators, regional project teams and other public institutions to provide methodological support by establishing clear responsibilities, expertise and time for such work.	Project implementation design does not assign responsibility for methodological support to project teams at any level; this gap can inhibit the educational effectiveness of activities.	National and regional project teams effectively ensure that activities are implemented in line with guidance, in part due to relevant expertise coordinating EU-funded projects. However, as is typical under EU-funded projects in Bulgaria, project design does not formally integrate methodological support into the responsibilities of project teams. Nevertheless, interviewees identify a need for it and some regional project staff informally adopt a methodological role, but provision is uneven and inhibited by time and skill constraints, largely thanks to the fact that this is not part of their formal responsibilities. Meanwhile, reporting and control constitute a large amount of project time, reducing focus on educational outcomes.	Chapter 4, Findings 1 & 2 Chapter 5, Finding 2.1
Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes to facilitate more learning across the system.	The Executive Agency and the Ministry of Education and Science have improved the collection of output and outcome data, but this is not yet being used systematically to	While there are clear improvements in the scope of data collection for both projects, its use for inclusive practice and institutional learning remains limited. Firstly, there are some weaknesses in the indicators collected and coverage of key outcomes. Secondly, project teams report a lack of time and unclear responsibilities for engaging with project data.	Chapter 5, Finding 6

	enhance inclusive practice.	Finally, kindergarten and school visits are compliance-oriented, making them a major missed opportunity for learning. These gaps are important as regular learning-oriented evaluation can enhance effectiveness and sustainability.	
Develop targeted efforts to increase project participation and enhance implementation among high-need kindergartens and schools starting with key districts before expanding nationally.	Efforts to target financial resources and increase participation cannot currently ensure all institutions and learners who should benefit from the project do so.	Project funding is targeted to less developed regions and allocated through a needs-based application process, which stakeholders view as fair and constructive. However, these measures only reach those that apply to participate while recruitment efforts favour a universal approach that does not sufficiently target those that may benefit most. Interviews indicate multiple potential barriers to participation, requiring more tailored approaches to recruitment and implementation.	Chapter 5, Finding 3

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Annex A. Project Data

Table A.1. Progress in key performance indicators for *Bright Start* and *Success for You*

	Bright Start			Success for You		
	Regions in transition	Less developed regions	Total	Regions in transition	Less developed regions	Total
Participating children under 18						
Target 2024	1 243	6 214	7 457	6 419	32 092	38 511
Final target	6 214	31 069	37 283	16 047	80 232	96 279
Actual 2025	6 729	27 251	33 980	25 403	121 493	146 896
Share of final target reached by April 2025	108%	88%	91%	158%	151%	152%
Participants from marginalised groups, including Roma						
Target 2024	621	3 107	3 728	3 209	16 047	19 256
Final target	3 107	15 534	18 641	8 023	40 117	48 140
Actual 2025	679	9 189	9 868	8 046	68 230	76 276
Share of final target reached by April 2025	22%	59%	53%	100%	170%	158%
Children with special education needs, at risk, chronic diseases and outstanding talent receiving support for personal development						
Target 2024	152	758	910	569	2 846	3 415
Final target	758	3 791	4 549	1 423	7 116	8 539
Actual 2025	613	2 502	3 115	2 802	7 077	9 879
Share of final target reached by April 2025	81%	66%	68%	197%	99%	116%
Participating parents						
Target 2024	1 243	6 214	7 457	6 419	32 092	38 511
Final target	6 214	31 069	37 283	16 047	80 232	96 279
Actual 2025	N/R	N/R	12 342*	735	7 603	8 338
Share of final target reached by October 2025 (<i>Bright Start</i>) and April 2025 (<i>Success for You</i>)	N/R	N/R	33%	5%	9%	9%
Children from vulnerable groups receiving support						
Target 2024	1 091	5 456	6 547	5 849	29 247	35 096
Target 2027	5 456	27 278	32 734	14 623	73 117	87 740
Actual 2025	2 052	13 317	15 369	11 596	73 379	84 975
Share of final target reached by April 2025	38%	49%	47%	79%	100%	97%
Pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff who have acquired or upgrade skills to work with children with learning difficulties						
Target 2024	119	597	716	278	1 389	1 667
Final target	596	2 981	3 577	747	3 782	4 529
Actual 2025	N/R	N/R	701*	41	52	93
Share of final target reached by October 2025 (<i>Bright Start</i>) and April 2025 (<i>Success for You</i>)	N/R	N/R	20%	5%	1%	2%

N/R – Not Reported

*Based on information reported to the OECD in October 2025.

Note: Final targets for *Bright Start* are set for 31 December 2028; for *Success for You*, final targets are set for 31 December 2027.

Source: EAPE (2025^[1]), *Bright Start: Technical report No. 3 – April 2025*; (2025^[2]), *Success for You: Technical report No. 5 – April 2025*

Annex B. OECD Survey for Regional Project teams 2025

In April 2025, the OECD administered an online survey to the project coordinators and experts for *Bright Start* and *Success for You* based in Bulgaria's 28 Regional Education Departments (REDs). The survey was administered via LimeSurvey and sent to 118 people who had three weeks to respond; the OECD received 99 responses, a response rate of 84%.

The OECD's *Survey for Regional Project Teams* mixed fixed and open response questions to explore perspectives on project implementation within districts, kindergartens and schools. Headline data to fixed response questions is summarised in the tables below. The data is presented as the number of responses. The total number of responses for *Bright Start* is 51 for each question; for *Success for You*, the total number of responses is 48 for each question.

Table A B.1. How did you take on and prepare for your role in the implementation of *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You*? (Question 6)

	I was assigned the role	I applied for the role	I participated in a competitive recruitment process (e.g. submitted an application, participated in an interview)	I participated in training and/or information sessions related to managing and implementing Bright Start and/or Success for You	I participated in training and/or information sessions related to managing and implementing projects funded by the European Commission	I participated in training and/or information sessions related to inclusive education	I read the project documentation	I read about previous inclusive education projects and reform efforts	Other
Bright Start									
Yes	33	36	16	35	25	25	44	38	11
No	18	15	35	16	26	26	7	13	40
Success for You									
Yes	33	33	11	36	31	24	45	37	8
No	15	15	37	12	17	24	3	11	40

Table A B.2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Question 8)

	The aims and objectives of inclusive education in Bulgaria's education system are clear	The aims and objectives of <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i> are clear	The roles and responsibilities of kindergartens/schools in the implementation of <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i> are clear	The roles and responsibilities of staff in the Ministry's project organisation and management team in the implementation of <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i> are clear	The roles and responsibilities of my RED in the implementation of <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i> are clear
Bright Start					
Strongly agree	13	27	21	28	29
Agree	30	22	27	19	20
Disagree	3	0	1	0	0
Strongly disagree	2	2	2	2	2
Don't know/can't say	3	0	0	2	0
Success for You					
Strongly agree	15	24	17	21	28
Agree	27	20	28	22	17
Disagree	1	0	0	0	0
Strongly disagree	3	3	3	2	3
Don't know/can't say	2	1	0	3	0

Table A B.3. In an average working week, approximately what share of your working time is spent on tasks related to the implementation of *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You*? (Question 10)

	Less than 20% (i.e. less than 1 working day)	Around 20-40% (i.e. 1-2 working days)	Around 50% (i.e. 2.5 working days)	Around 60-80% (i.e. 3-4 working days)	More than 80% (i.e. more than 4 working days)
Bright Start					
	1	36	9	3	2
Success for You					
	1	31	9	4	3

Table A B.4. In general, approximately what share of the total time spent on *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You* do you spend on the following tasks? (Question 11)

	Communicating with kindergartens/schools	Communicating with staff in the Ministry's project organisation and management team	Communicating or collaborating with other professionals working on inclusive education within your district	Communicating or collaborating with colleagues in other REDs working on Bright Start and/or Success for You	Conducting kindergarten/school visits	Promoting the activities of <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i> , including to recruit new kindergartens/schools	Reviewing project documentation for compliance	Analysing documents submitted by kindergartens/schools and other available data or information	Other
Bright Start									
A very small share (i.e. less than 10%)	0	3	9	8	7	6	4	3	8
A small share (i.e. 10-20%)	0	9	18	9	6	9	1	7	3
A moderate share (i.e. 20-30%)	11	26	15	24	25	20	17	16	1
A large share (i.e. 30-50%)	18	6	6	7	8	7	16	14	1
A very large share (i.e. more than 50%)	21	7	3	3	5	7	13	11	1
Not applicable (this is not part of my work)	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	37
Success for You									
A very small share (i.e. less than 10%)	1	15	11	11	7	12	0	1	9
A small share (i.e. 10-20%)	1	9	13	17	10	9	1	3	0
A moderate share (i.e. 20-30%)	13	15	14	14	23	17	7	4	1

A large share (i.e. 30-50%)	18	4	5	4	7	7	19	21	0
A very large share (i.e. more than 50%)	15	4	3	1	1	2	21	18	0
Not applicable (this is not part of my work)	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	38

Table A B.5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the regional-level support provided to kindergartens/schools for the implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You?* (Question 12)

	My RED has a sufficient number of staff to fulfil its role in the implementation of the projects	My RED has staff with sufficient knowledge, skills and expertise to fulfil its role in the implementation of the projects	My RED has sufficient financial resources to fulfil its role in the implementation of the projects	My RED receives sufficient information and guidance from the Ministry to fulfil its role in the implementation of the projects	My RED has sufficient autonomy and flexibility to respond to the different needs of the kindergartens/schools in my district when implementing the projects	My RED supports staff to undertake relevant professional development to fulfil their role in the implementation of the projects	I have sufficient time to fulfil my role in the implementation of the projects	I have sufficient knowledge and skills to fulfil my role in the implementation of the projects	I receive sufficient information and guidance to fulfil my role in the implementation of the projects	I have sufficient autonomy to respond to the different needs of kindergartens/schools in my district when implementing the projects	I can take part in professional development that will help me fulfil my role in the implementation of the projects
Bright Start											
Strongly agree	15	26	17	30	21	24	9	21	27	19	16
Agree	30	24	23	19	26	25	36	27	21	29	27
Disagree	4	0	1	1	1	0	5	0	1	1	4
Strongly disagree	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Don't know/ can't say	1	0	9	0	2	1	0	2	1	1	3
Success for you											
Strongly agree	12	25	9	21	14	20	9	28	16	13	10
Agree	24	23	27	25	30	26	26	20	29	32	30
Disagree	10	0	3	1	3	1	13	0	3	3	7
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Don't know/ can't say	2	0	9	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
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Table A B.6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about communicating with different people involved in the implementation of *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You*? (Question 13)

	I know who to contact in the Ministry's project organisation and management team and how best to contact them	I receive timely responses from those I contact in the Ministry's project organisation and management team	I receive helpful responses from those I contact in the Ministry's project organisation and management team	I know who to contact in kindergartens/schools and how best to contact them	I receive timely responses from those I contact in kindergartens/schools	I know who to contact in other organisations in my district involved in inclusive education and how best to contact them	I know who to contact in other REDs about implementation of the projects and how to contact them	The digital platform for the implementation of <i>Bright Start/Success for You</i> facilitates my communication with kindergartens/schools	The digital platform for the implementation of <i>Bright Start/Success for You</i> facilitates my communication with the Ministry's project organisation and management team
Bright Start									
Strongly agree	33	30	31	36	29	30	24	19	19
Agree	18	18	18	15	22	19	27	26	26
Disagree	0	2	1	0	0	2	0	3	2
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Don't know/can't say	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	3
Success for You									
Strongly agree	22	19	22	28	16	19	16	12	10
Agree	23	25	24	20	29	25	30	31	30
Disagree	2	4	2	0	3	1	2	4	5
Strongly disagree	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know/can't say	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	3

Table A B.7. In your experience, how often do the following types of collaboration happen as part of the implementation of *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You* in your district? (Question 14)

	Staff within a school collaborate with each other to enhance the implementation of the projects and address shared challenges	Kindergartens/schools collaborate with each other to enhance the implementation of the projects and address shared challenges	Staff in the project team in my RED collaborate with each other to enhance the implementation of the projects and address shared challenges	The project team in my RED collaborates with other colleagues working in the RED to enhance the implementation of the projects and address shared challenges	The project team in my RED collaborates with colleagues working in other relevant organisations within the district to enhance the implementation of the projects and address shared challenges	The project team in my RED collaborates with civil society organisations working in the district to enhance the implementation of the projects	The project team in my RED collaborates with project teams in other districts to enhance the implementation of the projects and address shared challenges	The project team in my RED collaborates effectively and sufficiently with the Ministry's project organisation and management team to enhance the implementation of the projects and address shared challenges	The project team in my RED attends online or in-person meetings with project teams in other REDs to share best practices or common challenges	The project team in my RED organises online or in-person meetings with staff involved in the projects in kindergartens/schools to share best practices or common challenges
Bright Start										
Never	0	0	0	1	1	9	0	0	6	0
Very rarely (1 to 2 times per school year)	0	1	0	2	5	14	10	1	7	5
Rarely (1 to 3 times per school term/semester)	3	2	1	3	7	13	7	4	11	13
Sometimes (1 to 3 times a month)	9	19	3	22	28	6	25	22	14	25
Often (once a week or more)	23	23	47	22	9	3	7	23	12	8
Don't know/can't say	16	6	0	1	1	6	2	1	1	0
Success for You										
Never	0	0	0	0	1	10	2	0	11	4
Very rarely (1 to 2 times per	0	0	0	6	6	11	13	3	8	12

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school year)										
Rarely (1 to 3 times per school term/ semester)	2	5	0	6	14	10	7	5	11	12
Sometimes (1 to 3 times a month)	9	16	2	14	11	4	17	24	10	14
Often (once a week or more)	25	20	46	22	13	6	7	16	6	6
Don't know/ can't say	12	7	0	0	3	7	2	0	2	0

Table A B.8. Approximately how often do you conduct kindergarten/school visits? (Question 15)

	Very often (i.e. more than once a month)	Often (once a month)	Sometimes (once a quarter)	Rarely (less than 4 times a year)	Never
Bright Start					
	19	20	8	3	1
Success for You					
	16	12	9	11	0

Table A B.9. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about conducting kindergarten or school visits in your district as part of the implementation of *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You*? (Question 16)

	Visits help me verify whether kindergartens/schools are following the correct procedures when implementing the projects	Visits help me verify whether kindergartens/schools have all the correct documentation in place when implementing the projects	Visits help me understand whether kindergartens/schools have sufficient resources to implement the projects	Visits help me understand whether staff working in kindergartens/schools have sufficient capacity to implement the projects	Visits help me understand the quality of the supports kindergartens/schools are providing to students under the projects	Visits help me identify the challenges kindergartens/schools face when implementing the projects	Visits help me identify best practices among kindergartens/schools implementing the projects	Visits help kindergartens/schools understand how to improve implementation of the projects	Visits help kindergartens/schools understand how to improve supports for vulnerable students	Visits help kindergartens/schools understand what support they can access to improve the implementation of the projects
Bright Start										
Strongly agree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Agree	22	17	22	27	28	25	24	23	22	25
Disagree	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Strongly disagree	28	33	27	22	21	25	26	27	25	24
Don't know/can't say	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	3	2
Success for You										
Strongly agree	17	19	15	11	8	8	11	14	12	12
Agree	28	26	28	34	36	37	33	31	33	31
Disagree	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Strongly disagree	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	1
Don't know/can't say	1	1	3	2	1	1	3	2	2	3

Table A B.10. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about monitoring and reporting for the implementation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*? (Question 17)

	Kindergartens/ schools find monitoring and reporting for the project straightforward	Kindergartens/ schools do not find monitoring and reporting for the project time consuming	Kindergartens/ schools find monitoring and reporting for the project helpful for identifying ways to improve implementation	I find monitoring and reporting for the project straightforward	I do not find monitoring and reporting for the project time consuming	I find monitoring and reporting for the project helpful for identifying ways to improve implementation	My RED uses project data and documentation to support the development of related education policies and strategies	The Ministry's project organisation and management team shares insights from monitoring and reporting data that can help improve implementation at regional level	The Ministry shares insights from monitoring and reporting data that can help improve implementation at school level	I have sufficient time to analyse project data and documentation to enhance my work	I have sufficient knowledge, skills and expertise to analyse project data and documentation to enhance my work
Bright Start											
Strongly agree	7	7	10	9	7	13	7	17	12	3	16
Agree	34	27	38	37	36	37	29	32	35	37	30
Disagree	6	14	1	3	6	0	3	0	1	7	0
Strongly disagree	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Don't know/ can't say	2	3	2	2	2	1	11	2	3	4	5
Success for You											
Strongly agree	3	1	4	4	3	5	6	10	10	4	15
Agree	27	23	33	32	21	41	32	34	29	26	33
Disagree	9	13	4	9	20	1	1	2	4	18	0
Strongly disagree	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know/ can't say	8	8	7	3	3	1	9	2	5	0	0

Table A B.11. Based on your experiences related to kindergartens/schools in your district, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the support students are receiving under *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You*? (Question 19)

	Students' needs are accurately assessed before they receive support under the projects	Students' progress is monitored while they receive support under the projects	Students who have special educational needs receive support matched to their needs	Students who have exceptional talents receive support matched to their needs	Students whose first language is not Bulgarian receive support matched to their needs	Students who perform below their expected level in school in any or several subjects receive support matched to their needs	Students who are at risk of dropping out of school receive support matched to their needs	In schools participating in Bright Start and/or Success for You, all or nearly all (i.e. >90%, approximately) of the students who need support receive it	In this district, all or nearly all (i.e. >90%, approximately) of the kindergartens /schools that have vulnerable students participate in <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i>
Bright Start									
Strongly agree	7	8	8	0	3	6	6	9	9
Agree	36	40	36	14	14	32	30	34	27
Disagree	4	1	3	1	0	2	4	2	10
Strongly disagree	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know can't say	3	2	4	36	34	11	11	6	5
Success for You									
Strongly agree	9	9	10	4	3	3	3	5	7
Agree	33	37	33	12	13	41	40	28	32
Disagree	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	9	6
Strongly disagree	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know can't say	3	1	2	31	31	2	4	6	3

Table A B.12. Based on your experiences of kindergartens/schools in your district, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the different people involved in the school-level activities implemented under *Bright Start* and/or *Success for You*? (Question 20)

	Teachers have the capacity (i.e. knowledge,	Teachers are able to access and receive	Non-pedagogical staff have the capacity (i.e.	Non-pedagogical staff are able to access	Kindergarten or school leaders /project	Kindergarten or school leaders/ project	Kindergarten or school leaders/ project	Parents of children who receive support	Kindergarten/ schools effectively engage with	Kindergarten/ schools have sufficient financial	Kindergarten/ schools have sufficient human	Kindergarten/ schools have sufficient material
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	skills and expertise) to provide high quality supports to vulnerable students	quality training related to <i>Bright Start, Success for You</i> and/or inclusive education that is matched to their needs	knowledge, skills and expertise) to provide high quality supports to vulnerable students	and receive quality training related to <i>Bright Start, Success for You</i> and/or inclusive education that is matched to their needs	coordinators have the capacity (i.e. knowledge, skills and expertise) to lead the provision high quality supports to vulnerable students	coordinators have the capacity (i.e. knowledge, skills and expertise) to comply with processes and procedures required under the project	coordinators are able to access and receive quality training related to <i>Bright Start, Success for You</i> and/or inclusive education that is matched to their needs	under <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i> understand the aims of the project and the type of supports their children receive	parents whose children receive support under <i>Bright Start</i> and/or <i>Success for You</i>	resources to provide high quality supports to vulnerable students	resources to provide high quality supports to vulnerable students	resources (e.g. adapted infrastructure, pedagogical materials etc.) to provide high quality supports to vulnerable students
Bright Start												
Strongly agree	8	8	4	9	9	10	9	3	5	6	3	4
Agree	34	31	34	29	37	39	35	44	44	32	32	36
Disagree	6	7	6	6	4	2	3	2	1	4	12	6
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know/ can't say	3	5	7	7	1	0	4	2	1	9	4	5
Success for You												
Strongly agree	3	3	4	3	7	6	4	3	3	4	0	3
Agree	41	34	32	32	39	39	38	30	40	37	37	37
Disagree	4	6	7	5	2	2	4	1	2	1	8	5
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know/ can't say	0	5	5	8	0	1	2	14	3	6	3	3

Annex C. List of project documents consulted

Table A C.1. *Bright Start and Success for You* project documents consulted in the evaluation process

Project	Document Title	Original Document Title	Date	Source
Bright Start	Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.003 "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education"	Условия за кандидатстване по процедура чрез директно предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ BG05SFPR001-1.003 „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в предучилищното образование“	2024	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Sample Application Form with Project Proposal (Annex IV)	Образец на Формуляр за кандидатстване с проектно предложение (Приложение IV)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Instructions of the MA of the Education Program 2021-2027 for the Specific Beneficiary Ministry of Education and Science regarding the requirements for the formation of the teams for organization and management of projects (Annex V)	Указания на УО на Програма „Образование“ 2021-2027 за Конкретния бенефициент Министерство на образованието и науката относно изискванията за сформирани на екипите за организация и управление на проекти (Приложение V)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Instructions of the MA for filling in an electronic application form under the procedure (Annex VI)	Указания на УО за попълване на електронен формуляр за кандидатстване по процедурата (Приложение VI)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Methodology and criteria for evaluation of a project proposal under the direct grant procedure "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education" (Annex VII)	Методология и критерии за оценка на проектно предложение по процедура за директно предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в предучилищното образование“ (Приложение VII)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Table of Budget Codes-Indicators UMIS WMP (Annex VIII)	Таблица за бюджет-кодове-индикатори ИСУН ПУО (Приложение VIII)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Table of unit costs and lump sums under procedure BG05SFPR001-1.003 "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education" and Programme "Education" 2021-2027 and accompanying documents (Annex IX)	Таблица на единичните разходи и еднократните суми по процедура BG05SFPR001-1.003 „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в предучилищното образование“ и Програма „Образование“ 2021-2027 и придружаващи документи (Приложение IX ТЕРЕС ПУО);	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Template of an administrative contract for the provision of grants under the Programme "Education" (Annex X)	Образец на административен договор за предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ по Програма „Образование“ (Приложение X)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	General terms and conditions for granting financial assistance under priorities 1, 2 and 3 of the Education Program (Annex XI)	Общи условия при предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ по приоритети 1,2 и 3 от Програма „Образование“ (Приложение XI);	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"

Success for You	Conditions for reimbursement of expenses under the procedure "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education" (Annex XVI)	Условия за възстановяване на разходите по процедура „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в предучилищното образование“ (Приложение XVI)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Project implementation monitoring questionnaire (Annex XXI)	Въпросник за мониторинг на изпълнението на проекта (Приложение XXI)	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Guidelines: Project implementation monitoring questionnaire BG05SFPR001-1.003 "General and additional support for personal development in preschool education"	Указания: Въпросник за мониторинг на изпълнението на проект BG05SFPR001-1.003 „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в предучилищното образование“	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Justification for the methodology and selection criteria for the operation "General and Additional Support for Personal Development in Preschool Education"	Обосновка към методология и критерии за подбор на операция „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в предучилищното образование“	2023	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Information on selected operations of strategic importance "Bright Start"	Информация за избрани операции от стратегическо значение „Силен Старт“	2023	Ministry of Education and Science
	Project proposal (developed by the Ministry of Education and Science)	Проектно предложение (разработено от Министерството на образованието и науката)	2023	Ministry of Education and Science
	Contract No. BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001-C02, Financial Report No. 3	Договор № BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001-C02, Финансов отчет № 3	2025	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Contract No. BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001-C02, Technical Report No. 3	Договор № BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001-C02, Технически доклад № 3	2025	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Project microdata for Bright Start	Микроданни по проекта „Силен Старт“	2025	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Guidelines for the Implementation of the Activities of Project BG05SFPR001-1.003 "Bright Start"	Указания за изпълнение на дейностите по проект BG05SFPR001-1.003 „Силен Старт“	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
	Application conditions: Direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-1.001 "General and additional support for personal development in school education"	Условия за кандидатстване по процедура чрез директно предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ BG05SFPR001-1.001 „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в училищното образование“	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Sample Application Form with Project Proposal (Appendix VI)	Образец на Формуляр за кандидатстване с проектно предложение (Приложение VI)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Guidelines of the MA of the Education Program 2021-2027 for the specific beneficiary Ministry of Education and Science on the requirements for the formation of project organization and management teams (Appendix VII)	Насоки на УО на Програма „Образование“ 2021–2027 за конкретния бенефициент – Министерство на образованието и науката относно изискванията за формиране на екипи за организация и управление на проекта (Приложение VII)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	MA instructions for filling in an electronic application form under the procedure (Annex VIII)	Инструкции на УО за попълване на електронен формуляр за кандидатстване по процедурата (Приложение VIII)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Methodology and criteria for evaluation of a project proposal under the direct grant procedure "General and additional support for personal development in school education" (Appendix IX)	Методология и критерии за оценка на проектно предложение по процедура за директно предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в училищното образование“ (Приложение IX)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
	Table of unit costs and lump sums under procedure BG05SFPR001-1.001 "General and additional support for personal development in school education"	Таблица на единните разходи и еднократните суми по процедура BG05SFPR001-1.001 „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в училищното образование“	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"

education" and Programme "Education" 2021-2027 and supporting documents (Annex X)	развитие в училищното образование" и Програма „Образование“ 2021–2027 и придружаващи документи (Приложение X)		
Template of an administrative contract for the provision of grants under the Programme "Education" (Annex XI)	Образец на административен договор за предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ по Програма „Образование“ (Приложение XI)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
General terms and conditions for granting grants under priorities 1, 2 and 3 of the Education Programme (Annex XII)	Общи условия за предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ по приоритети 1, 2 и 3 на Програма „Образование“ (Приложение XII)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Conditions for reimbursement under the procedure "General and additional support for personal development in school education" (Annex XV)	Условия за възстановяване на средства по процедура „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в училищното образование“ (Приложение XV)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Project implementation monitoring questionnaire (Annex XVII)	Въпросник за мониторинг на изпълнението на проекта (Приложение XVII)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Guidelines: Project implementation monitoring questionnaire BG05SFPR001-1.001 "General and additional support for personal development in school education"	Указания: Въпросник за мониторинг на изпълнението на проект BG05SFPR001-1.001 „Обща и допълнителна подкрепа за личностно развитие в училищното образование“	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Information on selected operations of strategic importance "Success for You"	Информация за избрани операции от стратегическо значение „Успех за теб“	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Project proposal (developed by the Ministry of Education and Science)	Проектно предложение (разработено от Министерството на образованието и науката)	2022	Ministry of Education and Science
Contract No. BG05SFPR001-1.001-0001-C02, Financial Report No. 5	Договор № BG05SFPR001-1.001-0001-C02, Финансов отчет № 5	2025	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Contract No. BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001-C02, Technical Report No. 5	Договор № BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001-C02, Технически отчет № 5	2025	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Guidelines for the Implementation of the Activities of Project BG05SFPR001-1.001 Success for you – Version 2	Насоки за изпълнение на дейностите по проект BG05SFPR001-1.001 „Успех за теб“ – Версия 2	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
Site Inspection Card	Инспекционна карта	2023	Ministry of Education and Science
Project microdata for Success for You	Микроданни по проекта „Успех за теб“	2024	Ministry of Education and Science

Source: Author's own based on data provided from the Executive Agency "Programme Education"

Annex D. List of project output, outcome and impact indicators

Table A D.1. Indicators collected through the monitoring questionnaire for assessing progress of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*

Project	Indicator	Sub-indicator	Type
Bright Start	Total number of children from vulnerable groups supported in project activities	Number of children with SEN supported	Output
		Number of children whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian supported	
		Number of children at risk of dropping out supported	
		Number of other children from vulnerable groups supported	
	Educational outcomes of children from vulnerable groups (start vs end of school year)	Number of children from vulnerable groups who achieved all expected learning outcomes across all educational areas (100%)	Intermediate outcome
		Number of children from vulnerable groups who largely achieved expected learning outcomes across all educational areas (80%)	
		Number of children from vulnerable groups who partially achieved expected learning outcomes across all educational areas (65%)	
		Number of children from vulnerable groups who did not achieve expected learning outcomes across all educational areas (50%)	
	Educational outcomes of children from vulnerable groups in Bulgarian language and literature activities (start vs end of school year)	Number of children from vulnerable groups who achieved all expected learning outcomes in Bulgarian language and literature (100%)	Intermediate outcome
		Number of children from vulnerable groups who largely achieved expected learning outcomes in Bulgarian language and literature (80%)	
		Number of children from vulnerable groups who partially achieved expected learning outcomes in Bulgarian language and literature (65%)	
		Number of children from vulnerable groups who did not achieve expected learning outcomes in Bulgarian language and literature (50%)	
	Educational outcomes of children with special education needs (SEN) (start vs end of school year)	Number of children with SEN included in the project who fully met learning requirements (100%)	Intermediate outcome
		Number of children with SEN included in the project who met most requirements but still required additional support (70%)	
		Number of children with SEN included in the project who encountered significant difficulties and required additional support (40%)	
	Reduction in unjustified absences among children from vulnerable groups	Number of children supported by the project who reduced unjustified absences	Intermediate Outcome
		Share (%) of children supported who reduced unjustified absences vs baseline	
	Continuation or completion of pre-school education among children from vulnerable groups	Number of children from vulnerable groups included in the project	Output
		Number of children who continued in the next pre-school education group or completed pre-school education	Outcome
		Share (%) of children who continued or completed pre-school education vs total included in project	
Success for You	Average GPA for all students (baseline and follow-up)	Average GPA after Grade 4 (Bulgarian Language and Literature)	Outcome
		Average GPA after Grade 4 (Mathematics)	
		Average GPA after Grade 7 (Bulgarian Language and Literature)	
		Average GPA after Grade 7 (Mathematics)	
		Average GPA after Grade 10 (Bulgarian Language and Literature)	
		Average GPA after Grade 10 (Mathematics)	

Average GPA for vulnerable groups (baseline)	Average GPA after Grade 4 (Bulgarian Language and Literature) – vulnerable groups	Outcome
	Average GPA after Grade 4 (Mathematics) – vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 7 (Bulgarian Language and Literature) – vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 7 (Mathematics) – vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 10 (Bulgarian Language and Literature) – vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 10 (Mathematics) – vulnerable groups	
Average GPA for vulnerable groups supported by the project (follow-up)	Average GPA after Grade 4 (Bulgarian Language and Literature) – supported vulnerable groups	Intermediate outcome
	Average GPA after Grade 4 (Mathematics) – supported vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 7 (Bulgarian Language and Literature) – supported vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 7 (Mathematics) – supported vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 10 (Bulgarian Language and Literature) – supported vulnerable groups	
	Average GPA after Grade 10 (Mathematics) – supported vulnerable groups	
Overall GPA (system-level performance for Grades 5-12)		Outcome
Overall GPA of vulnerable students (system-level performance for Grades 5-12)		Outcome
Reduction in absences among project participants	Number of students with absences in 2021/2022 (base year: all students in reporting school(s))	Outcome (baseline)
	Number of students participating in project activities (2023/2024) who reduced their absences (Project participants only)	Intermediate outcome
	Share (%) of project participants who reduced absences out of total students with absences in 2021/2022 (Project participants vs baseline cohort)	Intermediate outcome
Progression/completion rate among project participants	Count of students in Grades 1–11 who were enrolled in project-supported activities during the 2023/24 school year	Output
	Count of project-included students who either (a) advanced to the next grade level at end of 2023/24, or (b) completed grade XII (for those in terminal grade)	Intermediate outcome
	Percentage of project-included students who advanced to the next grade or completed Grade 12 at end of 2023/24	Outcome
Number of students were re-enrolled into the formal education system (by grade)	Grade-specific counts (Grade I–XII) for 2022/23 and 2023/24 school year	Output
Number of students retained in the education system (by grade)	Grade-specific counts (Grade I–XII) for 2022/23 and 2023/24 school year	Intermediate outcome
Total number of schools in district receiving support in 2023/24		Output
Number of supported schools located in settlements <10,000 inhabitants		Output
Share of schools supported in district (%)		Intermediate outcome
Share of schools supported in small settlements (%)		Intermediate outcome

Note: Output indicators capture the immediate products or services delivered by the project—they reflect what the project *does* rather than what it *changes*. In contrast, outcome indicators measure the effects of these activities on the target population, focusing on changes in behaviour, skills, or status that occur as a result of project interventions. Outcomes can be categorized by their time horizon: intermediate outcomes represent short-term changes, such as improved learning results or reduced absenteeism, while final outcomes reflect longer-term achievements, such as successful completion of pre-school education or graduation from secondary school.

Source: Executive Agency “Programme Education” (2023^[3]), *Project implementation monitoring questionnaire (Annex XXI)*, unpublished; Executive Agency “Programme Education” (2022^[4]), *Project implementation monitoring questionnaire (Annex XVII)*, unpublished.

References

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EAPE (2023), *Project implementation monitoring questionnaire (Annex XXI)*, unpublished. [3]

EAPE (2022), *Project implementation monitoring questionnaire (Annex XVII)*, unpublished. [4]