Implementing inclusive education projects in Bulgaria: Lessons from an evaluation of *Bright Start* and *Success for You*

Overview

This document presents a summary of the OECD's interim evaluation of two inclusive education projects in Bulgaria: *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, particularly 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.

The projects are implemented under Programme "Education'' 2021-2027 (PE), financed by the European Social Fund Plus and national budget. The interim evaluation aims to support the Executive Agency Programme "Education", the Ministry of Education and Science and project teams to better deliver 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 and schools. The OECD evaluations follow a realist approach, reporting on what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how. Findings are organised according to six criteria (see below); as an interim evaluation, there is a strong focus on effectiveness, considered in terms of outcomes as opposed to long-term impact.

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 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 total budgets for *Bright Start* and *Success for You*, respectively. Under *Success for You*, the recommended training topics are narrow in scope, focusing mainly on needs identification and less on developing inclusive pedagogies. While national programmes can complement project-specific training, this requires teachers and specialists to correctly identify their needs and successfully seek out relevant training.

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*, *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. Both projects are prompting behavioural changes in kindergartens and schools, including improved diagnosis of learner needs and the implementation of structured, small-group supports. However, practical guidance on inclusive pedagogies is limited, and methodological support (i.e. hands-on technical guidance on how to deliver quality interventions) is not part of the formal responsibilities of project teams. This means that, while activities are implemented procedurally, some are not sufficiently understood in terms of educational intent or effective practice. This is particularly evident for general support under *Success for You* and, under both projects, for intensive work with parents and support for gifted learners or those whose first language is not Bulgarian.

Efficiency: In both *Bright Start* and *Success for You, c*ommunication 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 scale, scope, and format 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 the next 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.
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.

Further information

This summary is based on findings published in OECD (2026), *Implementing inclusive education projects in Bulgaria: Lessons from an evaluation of Bright Start and Success for You.* The full report is available via the QR code below and at https://doi.org/10.1787/030e0717-en.

The report is an output of the OECD's evaluation support under the 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, the Executive Agency "Programme Education" and the OECD. Under this agreement, the OECD will conduct a series of interim and final evaluations of initiatives in five key thematic areas: 1) inclusive education, 2) integration of marginalised communities, 3) digitalisation and competency-based education, 4) vocational education and training, and 5) higher education.

For more information about either the report or the OECD's support to Bulgaria, please contact christa.rawkins@oecd.org or zhasmin.avetisyan@oecd.org.

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