

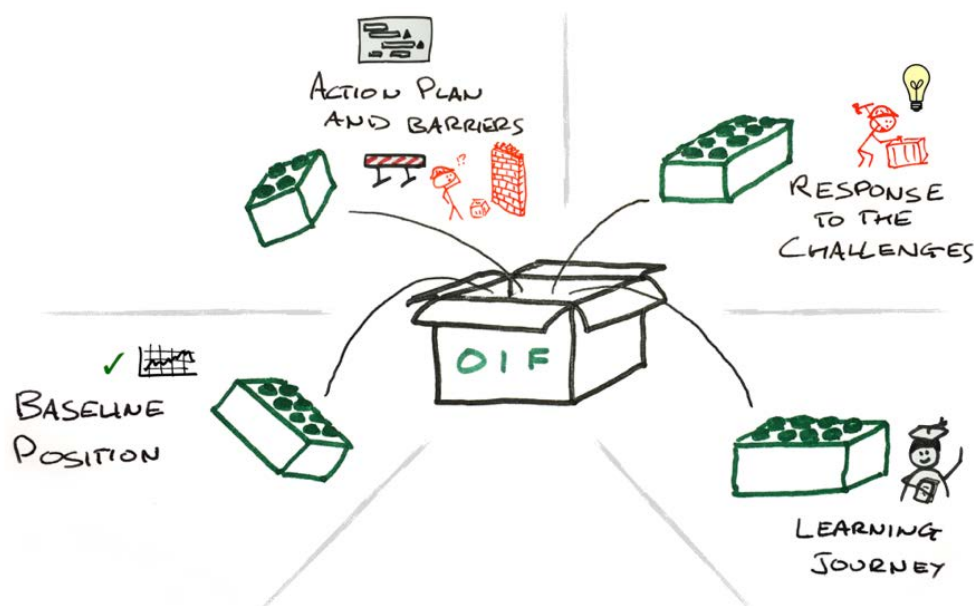
Sofia's Operational Implementation Framework within Stay Tuned

Introduction

Every school facing the risk of its students to leave the educational system should be immediately supported by the personal development support centres. Schools where leaving is not incidental should work with these centres in systematic and planned manner. The centres themselves should make the support of children at risk of school leaving or children whose school attendance is characterised as absenteeism its primary priority.

The municipal administration and the territorial divisions of the central education administration should undertake the respective measures – not only administrative and control, but also promotional and capacity building, in order to make the cooperation between schools and municipal and other structures working in the field of non-formal and informal education an established practice. This would probably require to review the existing or the development of new targeted local policy for prevention of leaving, including a supporting portfolio of guidelines, methodologies and reference protocols. The cooperation between the schools and the personal development support centres should result in deliberate effort of all partners mentioned above to keep every child at risk of leaving within the educational system by offering support through out-of-class activities and other forms of non-formal and informal educational practices.

This framework has been developed on the basis of the activities carried out within the Stay Tuned! Project in Bulgaria with aim to support the efforts of Sofia municipal administration to prevent early school leaving, including by encouraging the cooperation between educational institutions working with children in different age groups (pre-school and school age) and with organisations that support children development by means of out-of-school activities.



Baseline position

1. Short Review of Legal Documents at Governmental and Municipal Level that are Relevant to the Prevention of School Leaving

The main national legal documents that are relevant to the prevention of school leaving are the Pre-School and School Education Act (PSEA)¹, the Ordinance on Inclusive Education² and the Mechanism for joint work of the institutions for catching and inclusion of children and students at compulsory pre-school and school age in the education system (the Mechanism).³

PSEA has two provisions that directly address the work on prevention of school leaving, and another provision that legally defines the term “school leaving”. Such definition is contained in § 1 of the Additional Provisions, which stipulates that “leaving” means leaving a school before completing the last high-school grade without enrolling in another school. Policies for prevention of leaving⁴ are outlined as one of the “Objectives of the pre-school and school education” in the respective Section III of PSEA. Making the transition from the objectives of the Act to its operational implementation, article 283 (1) item 8 states that funds for “realisation of school programmes for preventing school leaving and for reducing the number of early school leavers” should be foreseen.

The Ordinance on Inclusive Education provides for ensuring general and additional support for personal development of children and students at nursery schools, schools and personal development centres, where general support is provided by teachers and other teaching specialists, and the additional support – depending on the plan for child or student support that defines the respective additional support actions and the required specialists for the provision of such support. The Ordinance explicitly states that the support for personal development of children and students shall be organised and ensured in accordance with the approved district and municipal strategies for support of personal development of children and students (article 5). Ensuring interest activities is defined as an important part of the general support, both in nursery schools and in schools. The municipality implements general programme for encouraging interest-related activities and performances of students in cooperation with schools, personal development support centres that organise interest activities, other municipalities, regional education departments and other institutions (article 21e). Depending on the individual needs of children and students, the nursery school, the school, the personal development support centre, and the regional inclusive education process support centre ensure specialists for additional personal development support, and these specialists work in a team for personal development support in the nursery school and the school nominated by order of the respective principal for the specific child or student (with special educational needs, at risk, with expressed talent, with chronic disease) for every academic year.

¹ Pre-School and School Education ACT, promulgated in SG no. 79 of 13.10.2015, effective from 1.08.2016, as amended and supplemented, SG no. 98 of 9.12.2016, effective from 1.01.2017, as amended, SG no. 105 of 30.12.2016, effective from 1.01.2017, SG no. 58 of 18.07.2017, effective from 18.07.2017.

² ORDINANCE on Inclusive Education, promulgated in SG no. 86 of 27.10.2017, effective from 27.10.2017; as amended and supplemented, SG no. 105 of 18.12.2018, effective from 18.12.2018, adopted by Council of Ministers’ Decree № 232 of 20.10.2017.

³ Adopted by Decree № 100 of the Council of Ministers of 8 June 2018 on the establishment and operation of Mechanism for joint work of institutions for catching and inclusion of children and students at compulsory pre-school and school age in the education system.

⁴ Article 5 (2).

The legal provisions for the measures aimed at prevention of leaving are contained in the above Mechanism. Actually the Mechanism has been applied since the academic year 2017-2018 and was adopted by Decision of the Council of Ministers.⁵ The text of the currently applicable regulation – the one of 2018, is too short: seven articles and one paragraph, however the word “municipality” and its derivatives are mentioned 20 (twenty!) times. Apparently, the legislator believes that **municipalities are the main agent for catching and inclusion of children and students at compulsory pre-school and school age in the education system.**

The main document of Sofia Municipality with regard to education, including with regard to prevention of school leaving, is Sofia Municipality Strategy for Education 2016 - 2023⁶. According to the Strategy, the issue of school leaving in the capital city – expressed in numbers, is half less than the average for the country (0,09 % in comparison for the average for the country - 0,2 %). The reasons for leaving stated at aggregate national level comprise “marginalisation, poverty or economic factors”, “loss of interest to learn” and it is further mentioned that “ethno-cultural specific features may only supplement any of the other factors”. The Strategy foresees measures mainly aimed at children at early age, such as “facilitating the access of vulnerable groups to nursery schools and schools and ensuring specific support at community level for direct interaction with marginalised communities”. The document underlines the need “to engage many institutions, good coordination of efforts and actions, as well as good “interaction between the nursery school, schools and community”, and implementation of “programmes and projects directed to interest activities and coordination of the measures of the educational and social system.” Furthermore, the Strategy explicitly states that “[with regard to] social services provided with the community on the territory of Sofia Municipality, as a priority we work on the prevention of school leaving of children and students”. The results expected from the realisation of the Strategy, in particular those aimed at school leaving, are as follows:

“Developed and implemented programmes and projects supporting the community role of nursery centres and schools for maximum inclusion and prevention of leaving.”

“Developed methodology for action at regional administration level aimed at catching all children and students in accordance with the specificity of the risk factors, in case of risk of non-catching or leaving.”

“Measures undertaken by the regional administrations with regard to the inclusion and prevention of leaving of students on their territory.”

The Strategy also addresses the issue of inclusive education in the context of “vulnerable children and young people and support for their families”.

Furthermore, Sofia Municipality has adopted Strategy for Personal Development of Children and Students 2017-2019,⁷ and such “programme document is aimed at establishing efficient model of

⁵ DECISION № 3 7 3 of 5 July 2017 on the establishment of MECHANISM for joint work of institutions for catching and inclusion of children and students at compulsory pre-school and school age in the education system.

⁶ Sofia Municipality STRATEGY for Education 2016 – 2023, SOFIA MUNICIPAL COUNCIL adopted by Decision № 220 under Minutes № 10 of 17.03.2016.

⁷ DECISION № 342 of Sofia Municipal Council of 22.06.2017 on the adoption of Strategy for Personal Development of Children and Students 2017-2019 and Action Plan for Support of Personal Development of Children and Students for 2017.

municipal policy for inclusive education". A list of Sofia Municipality's directorates that should participate in the implementation of the Strategy is provided in the *Mechanism for Implementation and Participation of Structures and Organisations* section of the document. Three strategic goals are defined: Provision of opportunities for equal access to education and support for children and students based on assessment of their individual needs and encouraging their development; Establishment of mechanism for interinstitutional cooperation for ensuring inclusive education; Information and communication strategy for ensuring personal development support.

The documents sets out Measures/ Activities, Monitoring indicators, Implementation mechanism/ financial and regulatory framework, Expected outcomes, however no quantitatively measurable indicators with regard to the decrease of the number of school leaving children and students in Sofia are defined.

The documents of Sofia Municipality show that 8 projects in total amount of BGN 22374,45 have been implemented in 2018 as "projects related to social and educational integration of children and students from different target groups. Prevention of school leaving"⁸. All these are "projects for implementation of the physical education and sports development programme".

2. Objectives, Planned activities, Stakeholders, target groups at risk:

2.1 Objectives

- Increasing the capacity of educational institutions (nursery schools and schools) and of administration for ensuring general support for prevention of early school leaving;
- Ensuring ongoing methodological support of the teaching staff on themes in the area of social integration and social inclusion;
- Encouraging and motivating municipal educational institutions to exchange good practices, achievements and to attain high results as a result of training;
- Improvement of the information provision with data for school leaving on the territory of Sofia Municipality.

2.2. Planned activities

1. Establishment of procedure for regular exchange of information between the Regional Department of Education and Sofia Municipality, in particular Education Directorate and Prevention, Integration, Sports and Tourism Directorate – improvement of the Mechanism for joint work of the institutions for catching and inclusion of children and students at compulsory pre-school and school age in the education system.
2. Development of mechanism for planned orientation of municipal organisations in the field of non-formal education to work with nursery schools and schools simultaneously, especially in regions where school leaving prerequisites exist (for example, higher levels of absenteeism).

⁸ REPORT FOR HOLDING A SESSION FOR PROGRAMME FUNDING IN 2018, ANNOUNCED BY DECISION № 40/08.02.2018 OF SOFIA MUNICIPAL COUNCIL, AND DECISION № 174/15.03.2018 OF SOFIA MUNICIPAL COUNCIL FOR APPROVAL OF PROJECTS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME FOR DEVELOPMENT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORTS

3. Focusing the work of municipal personal development support centres on the support of schools and nursery schools to use non-formal education methods while ensuring general support of children and students at risk of early leaving from education and training – inclusion in out-of-class and out-of-school forms.
4. Providing training resources for improving the capacity of those working in educational institutions to identify signs of risk of early leaving and to use non-formal education methods for prevention of early leaving – in coordination with Sofia-city Regional Department of Education.
5. Inclusion of the academic community in the improvement of the capacity of those working in educational institutions to use non-formal education methods for prevention of early leaving.
6. Providing resources for exchange of good practices for application of non-formal education methods aimed at mitigating the risk of leaving at the nursery school-school transition – participation of municipal educational institutions in the Non-Formal Education Days.
7. Support by Sofia Municipality for projects involving joint activities of nursery schools, schools, personal development support centres and NGOs for prevention of early leaving.
8. Recommendation of Sofia Municipality to municipal nursery schools and schools to organise thematic parent meetings aimed at supporting parents at the nursery school-school transition.

Stakeholders – teachers, teaching staff, management staff of Local support group:

1. Sofia Municipality directorates
2. Sofia-city Regional Department of Education
3. Municipal schools
4. Municipal nursery schools
5. Personal development support centres
6. NGOs, other.

Action Plan of Local support group

- 1 / Using the all-day organisation of the educational process for implementing training curricula and inclusion of children from groups exposed at high risk of leaving at the elementary stage in out-of-class and out-of-school forms;
- 2 / Development of training curricula and inclusion of children from groups exposed at high risk in additional educational forms – cooperation between schools and nursery schools;
- 3 / Improvement of the professional skills of school teams for problem identification, development of programmes for individual support, application of varied methods and strategies for motivation of children at risk of school leaving;
- 4 / Establishment of supporting environment – cooperation among schools, nursery schools, NGOs, Personal development support centres;
- 5 / Improvement of the qualification of teachers for using non-formal education methods for prevention of early school leaving.

Main target groups at risk – students and children:

- Children with different ethnic origin – mainly Roma children;
- Children from families with socioeconomic problems;
- Children with health problems – physical and mental disorders;
- Children without parents – from social institutions;
- Children – migrants and refugees.

Pilot Institutions and Actions, Implementation Plan and Barriers

Bulgaria's national target for inclusion in pre-school education is 90%. Even though the pre-school education has become compulsory also for the 5 year old children since 2016 with the enforcement of the new PSEA, the group net ratio of enrolment in nursery schools for 2017/2018 is 78,4%, in comparison to 79,4% for 2016/2017, which is a negative trend.⁹ At the same time, while more than 75% of all children at the age of 3 to 6 years countrywide go to nursery school, the great majority of children with fewer opportunities do not go to such educational institutions.

Analysed study data show that the optimal period for achieving best results at minimum expenses for overcoming inequalities, are the first years of their life where the personal development trajectory is not completely defined yet. Measures, such as providing parents with support for child raising and enrolling children in nursery schools, have potential for improvement of the early child development, “[...] and the results are better where programmes are of high quality and aimed at most vulnerable children”¹⁰.

Taking into account the importance of the role of pre-school education and upbringing for prevention of early leaving of education and training, especially with regard to children with SEN and children of Roma origin, 6 municipal educational institutions are included in the Bulgarian part of the project “Implementation of Actions for Prevention of Early School Leaving: Stay Tuned!” under URBACT III Programme, to pilot a model for prevention of leaving at the transition from pre-school to school education, by establishing a network among nursery schools, schools and personal development support centres and by using non-formal education methods for increasing the motivation to go to school. The 6 institutions are chosen by the experts of Sofia-city Regional Department of Education, in coordination with the team of Sofia Municipality, for the forthcoming project activities. As seen from the table below, these are nursery schools and schools with relatively high share of children and students from groups at risk – ethnic minorities, SEN, families with social difficulties, etc.

⁹ INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AT EARLY CHILD AGE. New ideas and instruments. Final summary report, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017

¹⁰ Encouraging children with fewer opportunities to go to nursery school. Experimental evidence from Bulgaria. IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT, June 2017. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/ World Bank

<i>School/ Nursery school</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Children from different ethnic origin</i>	<i>Children with SEN</i>	<i>Children at risk/ children from families with social difficulties</i>
<i>40th High School “Louis Pasteur” Academic year 2017/18</i>	<i>754</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>40th High School “Louis Pasteur” 2018/19</i>	<i>859</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>92nd Primary School “Dimitar Talev” Academic year 2017/18</i>	<i>448</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>92nd Primary School “Dimitar Talev” Academic year 2018/19</i>	<i>493</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>59th Nursery School “Elhitsa” Academic year 2017/18</i>	<i>246</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>59th Nursery School “Elhitsa” Academic year 2018/19</i>	<i>267</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>197th Nursery School “Kitna Gradina” Academic year 2017/18</i>	<i>124</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>197th Nursery School “Kitna Gradina” Academic year 2018/19</i>	<i>135</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>5</i>

The need to ensure general and additional support of children/ students at risk from leaving and their families comprises the need to use methods that result in increasing the motivation to go to nursery school and school, such as the use of out-of-class and out-of-school forms, plays a key role in this process. Therefore, the network for prevention of leaving at the nursery school-school transition also comprises two municipal personal development support centres – PDSC – Centre of Arts, Culture and Education “Sofia”, and PDSC – Sports School “Sofia”.

Leading lecturers of non-formal education from Sofia University are attracted for the improvement of the qualification of the employees at the 6 pilot institutions for using non-formal education methods in school and out-of-school activities. With their help and with the involvement of a leading inclusive education specialist, qualification improvement training is organised on using non-formal education methods for prevention of leaving. Summarised

feedback from training participants is completely positive as a result of the practical tasks, sharing personal examples, practical guidelines and cases, which they have acquired for managing problem behaviour and/or conflict situations with parents. Participants clearly express their willingness for more systematic and continuous qualification in this area and state the need of support for solving varied cases in practice by means of similar formats. The value of information and practice exchange among different types of municipal institutions – nursery schools, schools, personal development support centres, is especially highlighted. After the training, the 6 pilot institutions still communicate with the non-formal education lecturers from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, consult their initiatives with them and make use of opportunities to expand the network of partnerships they have. The 6 pilot institutions are provided with the opportunity to participate in the International Conference on Non-Formal Education where they can gain experience from world figures – specialists in this area, and during the Days of Non-Formal Education – to demonstrate their poster presentations for the practices of using non-formal education methods for prevention of early leaving from education and training. Pilot institutions expect to continue the partnership they have with academic institutions both in the area of supporting qualification and in the area of support for practical solution of cases and supervision.

The studied non-formal education methods are applied in the implementation of projects funded by Sofia Municipality under the Programme for Development of Physical Education and Sports, where the 6th pilot institutions work in network: lecturers from the personal development support centres train school teachers to work with non-formal education methods, and in their turn, they carry out joint actions with teachers from nursery schools, teams from the Centres organise activities in nursery schools and schools. As seen from the table below, more than 2500 children and students are involved in the joint actions.

Institution	Project	Objective	Activities	No of participants	No of participants from groups at risk	Partnerships
40 th High School “Louis Pasteur”	“35 Years Sports at School”	Increasing the motivation to go to school through inclusion in non-formal activities and improved nursery school – school connection	Sport activities and eco events, eco-carnival	859	74 (students from minority groups, migrants, with SEN, without parental care)	Sports School “Sofia”, National Sports Academy (NSA), 139 th Nursery School “Panorama”, 56 th

						High School
92 nd Primary School "Dimitar Talev"	"Together"	Increasing the motivation to go to school through inclusion in interest activities in the whole-day organisation of the school day	Interest activities – painting, music, sports; concert performed by the participants	370	63 (students from minority groups, with SEN)	PDSC – CACE "Sofia", PDSC – Sports School "Sofia"
197 th Nursery School "Kitna Gradina"	"Together we Can Do More"	Increasing the motivation to go to nursery school through inclusion of non-formal activities	Sport activities – role and motion games, relay games, mini volleyball	135	41 (children from minority groups)	PDSC – Sports School "Sofia", Non-Profit Association Parents
59 th Nursery School "Elhitsa"	"Swim, Jump and Dream – Fight to Win to the End"	Increasing the motivation to go to nursery school through inclusion of non-formal activities	Sport activities – swimming, relay games, rhythmic gymnastics, etc.	267	28 (children with SEN)	PDSC – Sports School "Sofia", NSA – specialists in adapted physical activity
PDSC Centre of Arts, Culture and Education (CACE) "Sofia"	"Pay it Forward"	Improving the qualification of workers in nursery schools and schools to use non-formal education methods for increasing the motivation for going to school	Workshops for mastering good practices	271	25 (children from minority groups)	40 th High School "Louis Pasteur", 92 nd Primary School "Dimitar Talev", 59 th Nursery School "Elhitsa",

						197 th Nursery School “Kitna Gradina”
PDSC Sports School “Sofia”	“Give Hand, Be Different in Sports with your Virtue!”	Integration of children with fewer opportunities through sport activities, interest activities in leisure time	Sport activities, competitions, meetings with famous athletes	390	26 (children from minority groups and without parental care)	Family Type Accomoda tion Centre for Children and Young People without Disabilities “Lyuben Karavelov”

Pilot schools and nursery schools demonstrate high interest of children and students to general support-related out-of-class/ additional activities. The following table presents data for the number of additional/ out-of-class forms

School/ Nursery school	Number of additional/ out-of-class forms
40 th High School “Louis Pasteur”	21
92 nd Primary School “Dimitar Talev”	13
59 th Nursery School “Elhitsa”	10
197 th Nursery School “Kitna Gradina”	7

If we review the topic for inclusion in additional/ out-of-class forms from the other side – from the side of institutions that provide such activities, we will see that the interest of schools and nursery schools to such opportunities is very high. The quality of offered activities and the fact that such activities are free of charge for the families are crucial for this interest. As the studies quoted in this report show, the access to free services to a great extent increases parents’ motivation to encourage their children to go to nursery school and school and decreases the risk of early leaving from education and training.

The table below describes the scope of activities of the pilot personal development support centres

Personal development support centre	Number of forms	Number of schools it works with	Number of nursery schools it works with	Number of children it works with
Centre of Arts, Culture and Education "Sofia"	43	79	7	2548
Sports School "Sofia"	9 types of sport	103	9	3599

As reported by the principals of nursery schools, the complex efforts of teaching teams and the inclusion of children in additional activities and the use of non-formal education methods result in sufficient willingness to go to school by all children, including those from vulnerable groups, at nursery school-school transition, and they successfully integrate in school. However, there is still no mechanism by means of which the principals of nursery schools could gain systematic feedback for the integration of their children at school – information is obtained on the basis of personal contacts with the school principals and the parents, especially the parents of children with SEN. Where there is direct connection between the nursery school teams and the schools in the vicinity, there is also direct exchange of information for the integration of children in the school system and the feedback from the school is very positive: children adapt quickly and successfully, and their academic progress is visible. Cases of children who have not been enrolled in the first grade after the completion of the preparatory group refer to their families going to other countries. These cases are identified thanks to the Mechanism for joint work of the institutions for catching and inclusion of children and students at compulsory pre-school and school age in the education system.

At this stage, data for absences in one of the two pilot schools involved in the project show weak trend to decrease of the number of absences in comparison to the data for the first school term of the current and the previous academic year. In the other school, an increase of the number of absences in comparison to the data for the first school term during the two subsequent years is seen. This is partially due to the increase of the number of students in the school, however, the average number of absences per student is slightly increased even after taking this factor into account.

<i>Year/ School</i>	<i>Total number of absences for the first school term</i>	<i>Total number of absences for the second school term</i>
<i>40th High School "Louis Pasteur" Academic year 2017/18</i>	22808,5	13493,5
<i>40th High School "Louis Pasteur"</i>	20669,5	

<i>Academic year 2018/19</i>		
<i>92nd Primary School "Dimitar Talev"</i> <i>Academic year 2017/18</i>	18147	13473
<i>92nd Primary School "Dimitar Talev"</i> <i>Academic year 2018/19</i>	20717	

At this stage, there are not enough data to make specific analysis of the reasons for the opposite trends in the number of absences in the pilot institutions and to draft unambiguous conclusions. According to school principals' observations, the inclusion of children and schools in different forms of out-of-class work and the use of non-formal education methods is among the factors counteracting the absenteeism and the risk of early leaving from schools, however the need of complex measures that encompass other aspects of the children and family support – socioeconomic, learning process-related additional support, measures for improvement of the family-school interaction, etc., is apparent.

This also defines the framework of the performed study on the current status of the problem with early leaving from education and training on the territory of the city of Sofia.

Identified problems/ barriers

- Inadequate communication among different institutions charged with the management of processes in education;
- Inadequate connection between administration and educational institutions;
- Inadequate order for collection, exchange and analysis of data and their use for development of policies;
- Inadequately developed system of preventive measures aimed at parents and families and focusing on inapplicable sanctions in case of low socioeconomic status of families and intensive migration demographic flow;
- Insufficient capacity and trainings for work with parents;
- Shortage of financial resources;
- Insufficient resources for development and maintenance of network for cooperation between 170 high schools in the city.

Response to the Implementation Challenges

The team from Sofia, Bulgaria have implemented a project to use sport and interests as a route into continuing education and to the future labour market. Capitalising on Sofia being named European Capital of Sport for 2018, the city initiated a Youth Referee Academy to build on personal development and cultivate leadership qualities in young people.

What was the starting point?

Sofia municipality has long been very active in the field of using physical education, sport and youth activities as a route into education and work. Their focus was on social phenomenon of Sport – using it as a lever for socialising, integration and early intervention with risk areas. Sofia was selected for the European Capital of Sport for 2018 and was a host for various world championships and other international sport competitions.

What were they working to implement?

With collaboration with National Federations, the national sport academy, the University for Sport, in 2018 Sofia Municipality started a special programme for Young Referees. This programme was highly relevant in the context of the European Capital of Sport and many important and relevant events in the city in 2018. The idea was to help students learn how national federations prepare for and deliver a major championship, understand the role of sport referees and how to apply their

From this opportunity, Sofia wished to use sport as a clear way to engage youngsters at risk of Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) and harness their interests to keep them engaged through sport and related activities. This was all set in the context of a broader set of activities within the city designed to reduce and prevent ELET.

sport skills to ensure fair and sportsmanlike games like. There is a big emphasis on leadership and how their jobs make a difference in local sport and major competitions alike. This programme linked very closely with other areas of the city's work that sought to bring communities together, with schools as the focus. This particular project brought a sports focus dimension to that existing work.

Key Policy Themes for Sofia:
Vocational Education & Training (VET)
Informal Learning & Schools as Communities

What were the challenges and barriers to implementation?

Many of the young people who are best helped by programmes like this are from high risk or disadvantaged groups. Consequently, they can be both difficult to engage in such programmes or require additional support to complete the programmes, even when they are more aligned to their needs and aspirations than other, more 'traditional' routes.

Parental engagement was also a challenge. Many parents of the more 'at risk' students are also difficult to engage with the programmes, and these further increases the chance of failure of the students. Dialogue between the different institutions in the city and at a local level was also a challenge. Collaboration was required in order for such a programme to success well.

Key Implementation Challenges for Sofia:
IC2 – Stakeholder Engagement

What was their delivery approach? How did they tackle the barriers?

The team's first step was to prepare the educational programme with National Federations and professors from the National sport academy and teachers from schools.

After that, meetings with parents were held to help build involvement of the students and their families, not least to ensure consent for participation

The training for students followed, both theoretical and along with team building skills; and practical courses, psychologists advise, and supervision of personnel.

An inspiring and engaging approach of setting up meetings and discussion with significant sports men and women (favourite national players, from Olympics games, sports journalists) also helped to motivate and provide inspiration. This was true for both students and their families.

Key Implementation Themes for Sofia:

#2 – Open Working and Stakeholder Involvement

#4 - Joint Delivery of Projects

What worked? (and what didn't..?!)

Having a defined personal development programme was also very important and helped students with additional needs in particular. The use of sport as a 'social' phenomenon was effective and enabled people to engage more effectively with new groups and their wider community. This has

become a core factor for the municipality for prevention, integration and socialisation.

The trainers involved in the programme were also successful in attending to the specific needs of the students, understanding their differences and diversities and using these to the students' advantage.

What did they learn? What did they change as a result?

What difference has it made? What do they plan to change in the future?

A key learning point was the definition of the city and schools as places where people live, work and play.

Bringing together communities around schools was effective in inspiring people and engaging youngsters and their families. Using sport as a mechanism to foster engagement in learning and seeing their interests as a route to possible careers was inspiring to their peers as well as the students.

In the first cycle, 18 students qualified as part of the programme. In the future, the team hope to help young referees move on to become students in the Sport Academy (University) and to involve sponsors of major local events as investors in the prevent of ELET.

Learning Journey

The following pages of the information describe the Focus Group Discussions held in two schools in Sofia. The topic for potential benefits of out-of-class activities with regard to the problem of early leaving is the main topic, however, the importance of inclusion of children in pre-school education is also clearly distinguished; other topics also come to the surface.

The common features of the two schools are that they are located in residential areas that are quite far from the city centre, and that they feel alone in their fight to keep students in school. Both schools have faced cases of emigration, however none of them believes it is a serious factor for early leaving. It is more indicative that the two focus groups started with questions from the respondents: “What will the result of this discussion be? How will it help the school?”

First of all, **the prime causes for leaving/ decreasing the number of children in the respective school and with the main problems with regard to the participation of students in the learning process** are presented. – In one of the schools (which will be hereinafter referred to as *School 1*) the school staff unanimously attributes the problem of early leaving from school to **the parents’ attitude**. Too **difficult and inapprehensible learning material** is also mentioned as a factor that often demotivates students and increases the risk of early leaving. However, the children are described as “trainees”, **as far as they regularly go to school**. As mentioned above, absenteeism is recognised as a major prime cause for leaving. To the opinion of the respondents, another identified problem, and namely that many of the children from the first to the fourth grade have **language difficulties**, do not understand the language in the textbooks due to their poor vocabulary, becomes deeper due to the new legal regulations according to which the children at the elementary level of primary education could not be kept back a year.¹¹ To their opinion, **financial reasons** are quite exaggerated, as “90% of children have money for kebab every day”, and some of them “receive 10-20 BGN pocket money per day.”

As an example of the irresponsible attitude of parents, the participants in the focus group quote explanations about children’s absences given by their parents by phone:

“We had a birthday and we couldn’t have enough sleep.”

And more:

“Well, how could I bring him to school, the mother sleeps, the child wakes her up, and she doesn’t want to wake up.”

In the other school (conditionally referred to as *School 2*) the decreasing number of students, to the opinion of the respondents, has totally different prime causes. **Parents**

¹¹ There is very critical and clearly expressed negative attitude by the teachers with regard to this provision: in general, their motives are as follows: *yes, it is true that children are not kept back a year, and this could, respectively, result in some of them not leaving at the elementary level, however the existing legal regulations just postpone and transfer the problem, with accumulation besides, to the high school stage. And sometimes such accumulation could not be overcome; and the price paid by all the rest – schoolmates and teachers, is unreasonably high.*

prefer schools in the city centre due to their better equipment and as a result of (not met) expectations for higher quality of education offered in the city centre. The issue of facilities is attributed to the delegated budgets that put bigger schools in more favourable position and decrease the chances for success of smaller schools. Furthermore, one of the participants recorded an improvement in the budget calculation formula. “Parents’ biases” for the learning process were described as “myths and legends” and refuted with the statements that *School 2* pays more attention to children and has more out-of-class activities, maintains closer contact with parents, and in general, the attitude is more personal than in big schools in the city centre where relationships are described as “protocol relations”.

“In small schools like ours, we know absolutely every child, with his problems – individual and family. We also work a lot with the children, with the parents, and with the families. We pay much more attention to children. Eventually, we create something like a small residential area community.” ...

“We communicate with every child. We communicate continuously. At least for me, and I think for my colleagues too, education does not just mean “Now, right down, 2+2 equals 4. Now we know that 2+2 equals 4.”

All this is refracted through the topic that is important for the respondents here: the overall decrease of the number of students in the school and the reasons for this.

Another serious problem shared by the participants in the focus groups refers to the high levels of ***absenteeism***, which affects the entire education process and in its nature is a prerequisite for leaving. In both schools, the level of absenteeism is high and school teams spend plenty of time and energy to fight against it.

The focus group participants are not firm about the systematic factors that influence the level of attendance, other than the *parents’ attitude* mentioned above, which is also a prerequisite for the early leaving and for redirection to other schools. To their opinion, the suspension of children allowances in case of accumulation of absences of children, as a method to influence parents, is a kind of step in the right direction. However, there are some respondents who think that the suspension of children allowances has only “*temporary effect*”, and others – that it has “*zero*” effect, as most of the parents have disability decision of Territorial Expert Medical Commission, many children, or other sources of income, and therefore they do not rely on allowances for one child only. In addition to the above mentioned parents’ attitude, other factors mentioned by the respondents that contribute to absenteeism, such as cold weather or fear of epidemics, are of rather sporadic nature.

The principal measures for prevention and reintegration of left children are now regulated in the above mentioned *Mechanism*¹². To the opinion of the respondents in one of the

¹² Refer to the section with review of the legal regulations.

schools, no significant decrease of the problem of early leaving is seen as a result of **the work under the Mechanism**. The steps that are undertaken when a child stops going to school are described as follows: 1) phone call; 2) visit at the home address several times “even without protocol”; 3) “then we are obliged to notify the social services”, but at the same time “we lose the connections with the parent”; 5) sending letters with return of service (“they are usual returned”); 6) “we write reports and start going to the institutions”; 7) “in that time we look for the child again because the class teacher is responsible”.

The attitude to the developed procedures is not quite positive.

“It happens to bring them in [...] We do not record statistical data [...] We proceed like this for years – 10-15 years.”

“We are doing this with the Mechanism, or without the Mechanism.”

However, a more careful perusal shows that this means that that the *Mechanism* itself has not brought significant changes, and on the other hand, respondents implicitly confirm that the measures foreseen in *the Mechanism* are those that have already been applied before being formally established in the *Mechanism* itself. The school also feels alone in the application of the *Mechanism* and recognises the municipal administration neither as a partner in the prevention of leaving, nor as an institution primarily responsible for every child and student who has left school earlier.

Despite the focus group participants from *School 2* expressed their support for the measures foreseen in the *Mechanism*, its application is considered rather infringing the interests of the school. A great number of children has been brought back under the *Mechanism* for the academic year 2017-2018 – a whole class figuratively said. They have been “sent by homes for accommodation of children without parental care” and from “the most marginalised groups”. As a result, the parents of other students have had their children stricken out from the school. Now the situation in the class these children have been enrolled is considered “out of control” and “lost” due to the degree of backwardness and the high levels of absenteeism. Irrespective of the efforts made by the members of the school team (including the measures mentioned above: calling parents by phone, visits at the home address, the assistance sought from other institutions), the percentage of secondary school leaving is yet high.

To the opinion of the respondents from the two schools, the biggest problem is that at this stage it leaves much to be desired with regard to the **work together with the social services**. The assistance of social services could hardly be an example of efficiency; the problem, and the responsibility for its solving, respectively, rather, if not entirely, lies in the school.

“They do not take any kind of responsibility.”

“We bring them in, they come for a week, then we wait again.”

“For 23 years I have not seen a social worker in the school [...] I feel they are afraid.”

“I have brought to the social services at least 10 protocols [during the last month], they have brought just one child of them back to school.”

The school's recommendation is categorically clear:

"To influence social care service and child protection: cross-sectoral teams do not work well."

A critical moment for early leaving from school is **the transition from nursery school to first grade**. Participants from *School 1*, where a great number of children with fewer opportunities study, share that **significant positive change is seen in this regard**. To the opinion of the school staff only 5% of children who are enrolled in the first grade at their school during the recent years have not been in pre-school group. The above mentioned problems, such as language difficulties many of the children from the first to the fourth grade have, not understanding the language in the textbooks due to the poor vocabulary and the very difficult and inapprehensible learning material, still exist, however each one of the teachers clearly confirms that they quickly identify the children who have been in preparatory group and who have been not, and that the first ones' preparedness for school education is undoubtedly better. Actually, teachers do not need to speak much on this topic: *pre-school education, especially for children who grow up in unprivileged socioeconomic environment, is an absolute must*: their experience has proved this during the recent years.

The attitude of teachers to the potential of out-of-class activities to contribute to the prevention of school leaving and the improvement of children's academic performance, **is unambiguously positive**. Out-of-class activities play important role for **the improvement of children's interest to the learning process**. What teachers share, with their own words, actually does not cast doubt on their evaluation for the out-of-class activities.

"They are really happy to participate in things that are out of the curriculum but are organised at school"...

It is for sure that out-of-class activities are a tool to cope with, or at least to limit, absenteeism:

"We make school more attractive. Being engaged with holidays, with projects, they have greater impetus to be here, it is more interesting for them"

It's not news for the teachers that "other activities" facilitate the decrease of absences and improve motivation and interest to learning.

"25% of children (in the elementary course) do not show interest to the learning process, however, all of them demonstrate interest to celebrations, sports and other activities" ...

"Non-formal education is better"

The experience shared by the participants in the focus groups shows that non-formal education may have valuable contribution to provoke children's interest in the learning process, which is especially valid for children at risk of leaving. The potential of out-of-class activities is also recognised as **a tool that mitigates the effects of social differentiation**. Being organised with the frames of the school curriculum, they could give all children the chance to go to excursions and to try different types of activities, which are currently offered by private business and are therefore accessible only for children whose parents can afford them.

“Great stratification: there are also children who go to trips abroad, and there are children who do not have water at home”, and as mentioned above, all children are willing to participate in out-of-class activities.

“Something that should be accessible: parents would not bring them to Sofia city centre to swim or to the theatre.”

Organised trips are extremely successful out-of-class activities mentioned by the two focus groups: in *School 1* - to (nota bene!) Sofia city centre: *“it was great that we made a trip round Sofia for the 3rd and 4th grade; in School 2 – to Vitosha Mountain. Children enjoy the trips with great enthusiasm, as they are always open to new experiences and getting familiar with the world. Despite their very limited scope in terms of geography, trips give the chance to expand children’s range of interests, and to the opinion of the participants in the School 1 focus group, some of those children have never left the residential area they live in. The own performances and concerts organised at School 1, which “everyone visits” have great success.*

Another important function of out-of-school activities is the **establishment of contact between parents and school**. The participants from *School 2* shared their positive experience from a trip with the participation of both children and parents, as well as the preparation of food together aimed at “uniting”. To the opinion of the respondents, such practices are necessary as the trust between the parents and the school is often prejudiced and children take advantage of this to shirk school. *School 1* faces serious difficulties to communicate with parents as they feel the school does not command respect.

“There problem is even that parents trust their children more than the teachers. I am responsible for the day-care study classes in the afternoon, and I have had the following experience: a parent comes and tells me: “Mister, why don’t you go to work? My child comes home at 2:30 and says that the teacher is not at work. He has gone.”

Any opportunities for interaction with them would contribute to increasing the level of trust of parents and establishing the authority of teachers, which in its turn would have positive influence with regard to the socialisation models. The final goal is to stimulate parents to bring their children to school, which would decrease the probability of leaving.

“The most important thing is to work and talk with children and parents. We are doing this continuously.”

With regard to **higher age groups**, where children are more autonomous if they are going to school or not, *out-of-class activities might have direct preventive effect*. Even if they do not have direct relation to the learning process, they provide favourable environment for development and socialisation. The experience of *School 2* is interesting where the children from the higher grades have tried alone to find a way to spend more time at school avoiding the family environment:

“In the 8th grade, for example, we have a problematic group of children who are not of Roma, but of Bulgarian origin, but with different family problems. We noticed that they constantly stay at school, they want to help. They help a lot. Physical work. To move something somewhere, things like this. And we asked them why they don’t go home. They told us that that it was not pleasant to stay at home. [...] And right here, next to us, we

prepared for them a room to go in. There is chess there, other varied games we managed to find.”

This is also an example for **the socialising functions of out-of-class activities** within the frames (including in the pure physical sense) of the educational institutions. These extremely beneficial initiatives, as described in the above quote, are currently emerging and are realised **spontaneously**, including during the standard learning process. A representative of the school team in *School 1* shared that during the class she has discussed “women’s issues” with the girls; in principle, it is expected that such topics are discussed in families. Both schools use time of the learning process to educate values, especially those related to the benefits of education.

Non-formal practices are applied rather **intuitively** and considering the statements made within the focus group, there are no clear concept and methodology for their use. We see the beginning of more comprehensive concept for non-formal methods based on some aspects of the school environment. For example, cardboard signs “*Success*” and “*Wealth*” are put on the staircase of one of the two schools directed to the inside of the school, and “*Failure*” and “*Poverty*” signs directed to the outside. Obviously, knowing the need and benefit of non-formal methods, the school team looks for active ways to communicate educational messages.

The opportunities prescribed or legally stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Science are considered a useful supplement, without being identified as an integrated part of an overall system for prevention of leaving. One of the schools offers day-care study classes for all grades where children prepare their homework, study lessons and play sport and table games. To the opinion of the participants in the focus group, children who visit the day-care study classes demonstrate higher level of engagement with the overall learning process, and are therefore less exposed to risk of **absenteeism** and leaving. The other school offers whole-day study for the first and the second grade. They share that children have interest to the day-care study classes and the only obstacle for having whole-day activities in the third and the fourth grade is the **lack of facilities**.

Respondents firmly state that the **whole-day care classes are an effective method to counteract the issue of absenteeism and early leaving**. Day-care study classes give children the chance to spend more time under the positive influence of the school environment, to acquire social skills and to deal with activities that facilitate their cognitive and personal development. Based on the same principle, the out-of-class activities provide students the opportunity to spend time in and to interact with healthy social environment.

“This is what we have figured out to be able to keep our most critical classes for the time being – the fifth and the sixth grade, to keep them as much as we can in school to avoid more mischiefs on the street.”

“The whole-day form of study helps. [...] Preparation, afternoon preparation helps a lot.”

Both schools are firm in **their positive evaluation of the “Stay Tuned” Project**, although one of the schools shares that, looking retrospectively, probably they have failed to get maximum benefit from the project. The other school just shared positive experience with their work within the “Stay Tuned” Project:

“It is necessary [to continue]... children came with interest and willingness. ...

Children’s interest and willingness to work increase. Teachers also work on the project with pleasure.”

Until now, the activities within the frames of the project have been mostly focused on supporting the educational process: activities that help to compensate the omissions in the learning process. However, the school staff expressed their willingness and intention to expand the possible future activities with varied out-of-class activities.

Maybe the big recognition of “Stay Tuned” came from another school where the FCD has actually not happened. In the process of reconstruction of respondents, the investigation team needed to contact different schools trying to arrange the FCDs. The principal of one of the schools which we knew in advance to have problems with keeping students explained as follows:

“Our school shows steady decrease of the number of students, and respectively, it is hard for us to keep teachers as well; the workload of all teachers is very big and therefore none of them is willing to participate in any kind of projects. We even refused to participate in “Stay Tuned”.”

The paradox in this particular case is that “Stay Tuned” is intended mostly for schools which have difficulties to face challenges such as early leaving of education and training and learning difficulties. It turns out to be that the school able to participate in the project to the greatest extent refuses to do so.

Completely understanding the potential of *out-of-class activities*, the respondents from the two schools where FCDs were held, consider them **currently insufficient**. They are rather a supplement, initiative of the schools themselves, an activity carried out spontaneously. **For the time being no institution or organisation whose work focuses on non-formal education has contacted these schools and has offered them specific help to overcome the problems with leaving, absenteeism and decreasing number of students**. It is true that the schools themselves are not very proactive in this respect. The extremely positive attitude to out-of-class activities in both schools has not resulted in development of approaches or structures for interaction with community centres, sport clubs and cultural institutions. It turns out to be that there is clear understanding that non-formal education methods offer working support for the prevention of leaving, however this potential is not sufficiently used, if used at all; engaging students in out-of-class activities is rather sporadic and depends on external and somehow accidental circumstances. And furthermore, external circumstances play decisive role for the discontinuation of non-formal and informal support with well-proven contribution to the educational process.

“They closed the community library.”...

“We definitely miss the community centre... currently, Roma dancing activities only are organised there.”

Then respondents share their extreme disappointment with the fact that the community centre they have had good cooperation with in the past, has been closed and the building is now let to the private business. Currently, there are no other organisations within the residential area with which the school could partner. Schools leave the impression of openness and passiveness simultaneously:

“Theatres, cultural clubs, other culture- and sport-related activities: We would like to have them in the school”

“To invite us to theatre. Sports, boxing”....

“Role models: to invite successful people”...

And they prefer believing that their not very ambitious approach is realistic:

“We are not aimed at results, our task [for the children up to the 4th grade] is to make them literate, to teach them to hygiene habits, what is class, what is break.”

The other focus group notes that there is willingness and intention to cooperate with the *Centre of Arts and Culture*, however they have not undertaken the required actions yet. Both schools expressed readiness to organise more out-of-class activities within the frames of the school itself and hope to have support from the institutions. What is the expectation towards the *Centre of Arts and Culture*?

“We expect many things. For example, they have teachers, groups for painting, dancing, music. For everything. Our children from the groups at risk have exactly such talents.”

The paradox of the situation is further supplemented by the clearly expressed understanding of representatives of non-formal education organisations participating in the same project with regard to the potential of their own organisations – realised both by them and by the schools, to prevent school leaving and to improve the academic performance of students. Such understanding was demonstrated during the conversations held within the context of this project, even though outside the frames of its study component: **the two personal development support centres participating in the project are aware of their preventive potential with regard to school leaving, absenteeism, or learning difficulties, but for the time being they do not have a specific programme to look for an active contact with schools where such problems exist.**

Synthesis

Improved capacity of workers in the educational institutions to use varied methods for work with children at risk of leaving - better information provision with data for school leaving on the territory of Sofia and procedures for regular information exchange between the Regional Department of Education and Sofia Municipality, in particular “Education” Directorate and Prevention, Integration, Sport and Tourism Directorate, are necessary.

Exchange of good practices, multiplication and sustainability - Where positive trends at the transition from pre-school to school education exist, they should be supported, and encouraged, including through planned orientation of municipal organisations in the field of non-formal education to work with nursery schools and school simultaneously, especially those where children in the nursery school continue their education in the respective school. The support of the nursery school – school transition is crucial especially in regions with data for prerequisites resulting in leaving (for example, higher levels of absenteeism).

Enhancing the formal–non-formal education connection. Data from the field study clearly show that the currently existing connections are sporadic and rather occasional, although their benefits are well-known both for formal education institutions and for municipal organisations dealing with non-formal education. At the same time, the pilot activities demonstrate that by means of planned and targeted efforts moderated by the municipal administration these connections become stronger and give results.

Existences of effective mechanism for policy management in the field of prevention of early leaving - obvious need to work in a network. Professionals who perform field work and fight for every child exposed to the risk of leaving to stay at school on daily basis make it very clear that they feel alone and unsupported, including with regard to the application of the Mechanism. It is sure that they miss the support of the social services and do not have clear concept for the opportunities for support by the municipal administration. The capacity of the academic community for improving the qualification of teaching specialists in areas related to prevention of leaving is still not used enough systematically. The respective structures of the administration engaged in prevention of school leaving need to put their role for field coordination and field support for the schools to the foreground, including by directing the interaction between formal education institutions and the non-formal education organisations.

Link between stages and forms of education - Improved motivation and increased capacity of municipal educational institutions and administration for prevention of early school leaving (developed system and indicators for analysis and identification of early leaving-related reasons and problems);

The correspondence of the data from the conducted field work with studies from other countries, including those quoted in this framework, is a clear indication that out-of-class activities are effective; however there is undoubted need to monitor and measure their effect systematically in the Bulgarian context, as well as to study the mechanisms of their impact. The recommendation is not only to provide out-of-class activities but to regularly adapt and build them up in order to facilitate the prevention of leaving in the conditions of dynamic social environment to the greatest possible extent.

