This is My A challenge
In the framework of the "A total approach to address students at risk of dropping out of school in Tirana, Korça, Berat and Durrës" project implemented by the Albanian Social Services Association in collaboration with MAFSR & ASCAP and supported by UNICEF Albania, #2019 Concept by: Livia Nano, Anila Salla, Anxhela Zeqiraj
This is how one teacher responded when asked: **What are you most proud of regarding the work that has been done for the student at risk of dropping out of school?**

*We are proud that Alban comes to school every day. Just seeing him laughing with his friends, playing with them, working and sometimes even surpassing them is enough. Now Alban has turned into a motivational role model for many other children in his position. We are proud of his academic progress, but of his psychological and social progress also.*
The project in figures

• 20 schools in the country, respectively in: Tirana (Androkli Kostallari, Ardian Klosi, Qazim Turdiu, Mihal Grameno, Kushtrim i Lirisë, Osman Myderizi) Korça (Naum Veqilharxhi, Ismail Qemali, Sotir Gura, Pandeli Cale, Asdreni); Berat (1 Maji, Thimi Tani, Shyqyri Lakra, Zihni Toska, Ajet Xhindole) and Durrës (Shkolla e Re, Qemal Mici, SHMB Kullë, Abedin Dino) have partaken in the piloting of more effective interventions to prevent and address the risk of dropping out of school.

• As regards the Early Warning System, the capacities of 300 teachers and other school actors to identify and address early students at risk of dropping out of school were increased.

• 200 teachers, school psychologists and principals have been trained to develop social and emotional expressions, aiming at increasing the resilience of vulnerable children at risk of dropping out of school.

• 168 teachers and school principals have been trained to build good relationships and involve parents in school.

• 200 teachers have been trained in the steps of mapping & implementing the action plan and small funds were allocated to 20 schools, in order to organize school-based activities to address children at risk of dropping out.
• 20 schools have been provided with 2 practice modules with workbooks and instruments to develop the students’ social and emotional expressions and strengthen parent-school relations.

• 200 teachers of other schools not included in the project have received information from their previously-trained colleagues (peer-training) on addressing the matter of students at risk of dropping out.

• During the year, 24 regional meetings have taken place, for the purpose of sharing personal experiences and challenges and discussing the lessons learned;

Painting made by the children in the “A. Kostallari” School
The following graph shows a reduction in the percentage of children identified as being at great or moderate risk of dropping out after the interventions in all 20 schools.

The interventions made during the 2018-2019 academic year have improved the situation of students at risk of dropping out of school in these three main areas:

1. Academic progress and performance
2. Behavior
3. School attendance
Reflections and lessons learned

Every child is unique! Every situation is unique!

Although there are no recipes that you can precisely follow in all cases and contexts, there are some good work patterns or lessons to be learned from directly working with children at risk of dropping out of school.

Based on the current experience from 20 schools, a change or transition is required in order for the intervention in schools to be effective at improving attendance and addressing children at risk of dropping out.
8 Reflections and lessons learned

From

1. From focusing only on the students that are at high risk of dropping out or those who don’t attend school at all.

TO

1. To focusing on all students - being vigilant about those who are at moderate and low risk of dropping out of school as well.
From

2. From a shallow or narrow understanding of the reasons for being at risk of dropping out of school such as:

TO

2. To a broader and deeper understanding of other reasons which can increase the odds for dropping out of school, such as:
Reflections and lessons learned

ECONOMIC AL

FAMILIES WITH SOCIAL ISSUES

CHILDREN WHO WORK PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

PARENTS THAT ARE NOT INTERESTED IN SCHOOL BEHAVIOUR AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES

CONFLICTS WITH THEIR PEERS

UNWELCOMING SCHOOL

BAD COMMUNICATION

BULLYING
From

3. From an approach focused only on the things that are wrong, problems, difficulties or deficits when talking about children at risk of dropping out.

TO

3 To an approach focused on the strengths. It is necessary for us to be able to identify talents, strengths, resources or the support students need just as well as we can identify the difficulties and problems they have.
Reflections and lessons learned

**From**

4. From just trying to address or handle the problem

**TO**

4. To making a serious effort to prevent the problem, as well as to help students grow and develop positively.
This is my challenge...

From

5. From perceiving the solution as mainly outside of the school - because the school itself is perceived to have little means and resources to address children at risk of dropping out.

TO

5 To school actors undertaking a more active role and more responsibilities in this regard.
Reflections and lessons learned

**From**

6. From working individually and isolated from one another

**TO**

6. To working at school as a team, where besides the teachers, students too are perceived as sources of help and contribution.
7. From a hopeless and surrendered stance due to parents not participating or engaging in the education of children at risk of dropping out of school. TO

7. To a decisive and active engagement to build good relationships with parents and to make them an active part of the school, even if this is difficult.

Thanks to an effective communication with parents, teachers can have a greater impact on students’ success. Having the parents by their side, teachers can manage all academic and behavioral problems in more efficiently;

“When the school, family and the community work together to support children, the chances of them succeeding and doing better in school, regularly attending school and above all liking school are higher.”
16 Reflections and lessons learned

**From**

8. From the perception that the work can only be done by professionals (e.g. the school’s psychologist, social workers) or by the teacher of the student in difficulty or at risk of dropping out.

**To**

8. To a joint engagement to create a school atmosphere where everyone feels responsibility to contribute even though the student might not be in his/her class.
9. From working only on an individual level with students at risk of dropping out.

9. To a three-level work where the student at risk of dropping out will benefit from universal interventions focused on the entire school; targeted interventions that are focused only on a group of students and also interventions on an individual level when necessary.
18 Reflections and lessons learned

From

10. From a short-term and fragmentary work for students at risk of dropping out or that do not attend school regularly.

To

10. To a better and long-term work organized in the six following steps of the Early Warning System.

The “All children in school” manual: Ensuring regular attendance and completion of basic education by every child:
designed by UNICEF and approved by the Ministry of Education in 2016.
20 Reflections and lessons learned

From

11. From efforts to provide a small variety of strategies/interventions to address students at risk of dropping out, such as:

- Financial help/material support for children and families;
- Referrals to social centers or the municipality.
- Individual psychological advice for students with problems.
- Food aid;
To an extension of the varieties of effective strategies and interventions such as:

- Activities that aim to build the social and emotional expressions of students, which the teachers will integrate during educational classes or extracurricular activities;
- Activities that foster a positive atmosphere in the school;
- Continuous meetings and workshops with parents, in order to involve them more in the school;
- Additional support for their classes and homework;
- Continuous meetings and workshops with parents, in order to involve them more in the school;
- Creating patronage groups-where children help children;
- Extracurricular activities, art clubs, sport clubs etc.;
- Providing students with a possibility to participate, contribute in the school and outside of it and to also become leaders;
- Documenting success cases, sharing them with other children-so that these may serve as role models to be followed and learn from;
- Communicating messages on the importance of attending school through different art forms (Painting, psychodrama, music etc.);
- Training teachers on the importance of social and emotional learning and the alternative forms of how they may include these elements in curricular and extracurricular activities;
- Training teachers on building good relationships and improving communication with parents;
- Training teachers on the importance of intervening on three levels and the implementation of the Early warning System for the risk of dropping out;
- Creating networks of teachers and organizing continuous meetings to share challenges and the ways they have overcome or addressed them;
- Cooperation and coordination of work with many other actors outside the school.
A SUCCESS STORY: NOW I GO TO SCHOOL HAPPILY

1.1 Family situation

Alban is a ten year old student who attends third grade. He comes from a Roma family with a low education level, but with other social problems as well, such as: unemployment, demographic movement, housing, health, societal acceptance and other problems that concern this community.

Even though he is an intelligent child, he did not want to attend school. This was due to many reasons, the most important being social rejection. He constantly went back home aggravated by his friends and teacher, often because of his incapability to face all the situations that would arise, so the next day he would just decide not to go to school. This would go on for several days and then he would return. Seeing that nothing changed, he would go on skipping days and whole weeks of school...

However, despite these difficult circumstances for an emotional child like him, his parents did not want him to drop out of school. On the contrary, they wanted Alban and his sister to get an education, no matter the costs. And that is what happened.

---

A success story from the Ardian Klosi school in Tirana. The child’s name used in this story is not his real one.
1.2 School performance:

At first, Alban was introduced at “Ardian Klosi” school as a new student coming from another school, without specifying the reasons of his departure. He was noted as being a shy child, suspicious of everything, even of his friends’ actions in and out of class. He felt as if he was different and not their equal. Not only was he hesitant to show his abilities in class or in different problem-solving situations, but he also refused to express his talent in drawing, singing or other activities organized by the school. However, due to his eagerness to be included, little by little he started gaining “territory” in class and, noticing that all the children started to support him, his situation changed.

Unlike before, he became more eager to go to school every day, spend time with his friends, work harder with the teacher, do his homework and participate in different extracurricular activities. Compared to a few months back, Alban's mornings were no different. Now it is him who wakes his parents up every morning to go to school. After these actions, his performance in both academic and the social matters improved greatly. In one of the parent-teacher meetings at school, his father said the following:

Not only had Alban become their morning alarm, but he also insisted that his parents participate in the activities he was a part of in school.
1.3 Behavior

When he first came to the school, Alban had behavioral issues, at times he would have emotional outbursts that he couldn’t always manage. His teacher, very patiently, tried to understand the reasons for this fluctuation in behavior and manage them, asking that from Alban and his classmates do the same. By reacting calmly to every problem that came his way, Alban began to understand that his classmates were just like him and that he was just like all of them.

Today, if we were to define Alban’s behavior with just two words, they would be “very good”. But this is not enough. Because, during the last few months in the “Ardian Klosi” school, Alban understood that the social environment, his relations with friends, are plays a very important role in connecting him even more to the school, so that he may wish to attend every day, and build a good and lasting companionship (why not) with the friends he has made at school.

1.4 Relationship with friends

In the beginning, his friends were strangers to him, as was Alban to them to an extent. Every time they tried to invite him to be part of the games or different class activities, he would but his interest and eagerness to be part of the game, painting, singing, basically every beautiful thing that was organized in class and outside of it were evident

Slowly, he started making friends and he realized that almost none them saw him as “the new” student in class, but as a friend that had always been there. Often, the teacher and the other children encouraged him to express himself and show his abilities. Very soon, his hesitation towards different situations vanished, until he began to feel equal, sometimes even good enough to triumph.
Today, Alban has started to realize that he may have his friends by his side for years and years, and he has a very good relationship with them. He plays and has fun with them, works with them, asks for their help anytime he needs it, and he does not hesitate to show that he is their equal in different "matches", sport activities etc. Alban has learned from his friends that good ambition is a feeling that encourages you to climb higher. But his classmates have also learned a lot from Alban, and they want him by their side every time there are different activities at school. He is a strong player that gives them courage and certainty of victory.

2. To what can his success be attributed to?

• Firstly, it can be attributed to Alban’s good will and insistence to continue attending school, despite the problems.
• To the dedicated work of his teacher - a very important factor that made Alban go to school happily every day.
• To his classmates, who welcomed and took him in, helped him and continue to do so every time he needs it.
• To his parents, who despite the difficulties and unfavorable conditions, encouraged Alban’s eagerness to go to school.
• To the other opportunities (participation in clubs) that the school provided him with to support him and prevent him from dropping out.
• To the collective and well-coordinated work of the school team, in the framework of the Early Warning System for the risk of dropping out of school.
3. The greatest challenges school actors encountered during their work were:

- Societal acceptance (mostly out of class).
- Communicating and working with other out-of-school actors.
- Progress in the educational process and the support for classes.
- Constant efforts to make the “I am different but equal” motto come true and be accepted.

4. Things that school actors have done well:

- Identifying his needs and wishes.
- The differentiated work of the teachers for academic achievements.
- Constant communication with the family, thus increasing their sensibility for school and its necessity.
- Inclusion in many sports, recreational, social and emotional activities.
- Encouraging students and the community to openly accept cases like Alban, in order to kindle their interest in education.
5. **What would they have done differently?**

- In other circumstances, the identification of the case could have been done sooner, so that the intervention to change the situation would have been at the right moment.

- Maximal utilization of all school spaces and facilities for the community. Assigning Alban as a leader in these activities, so that they stimulate and create a new “field” of operation in him, in order to help him gain confidence.

6. **Recommendations that teachers of other schools should keep in mind when they address a child at risk of dropping out.**

- Create as many communication bridges as possible with the family or legal guardians of the child at risk of dropping out of school.

- Work with your colleagues to exchange experiences and identify the needs of these children.

- Encourage these children's abilities in different fields as much as possible. Utilize their positive side and the child’s strengths to achieve success.
• Support the students and provide intervention in three levels: 1) Universal: for all students; 2) targeted: for a group of students; 3) individual. Also, they should become engaged in order to create the Early Warning team in their school, by making efforts to identify the needs and design individual plans to address the needs and issues of students at risk of dropping out.

• Have the phrase “This is my challenge” as their work motto. This is something that will certainly help them to see the case through to the end and later use it as a success story.