Early Warning System in schools in Kazakhstan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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This report has been prepared by Dr Natallia Yakavets, senior research associate, University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education) with the assistance of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Kazakhstan.

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Dropping out of school usually implies the inability of children to continue in school for various reasons. By identifying the students most at-risk of dropping out, there is a better chance of not only reaching them early, but also delivering the most appropriate support and interventions to ensure they stay in school.

The current project started in February 2018 with an inception phase. The main goal of the inception phase was to collect evidence and identify the gaps in the existing system of dropout prevention and suggest recommendations for addressing such gaps. Insights from the inception report helped the team from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education to develop a Theory of Change on the Early Warning System (EWS).

**The Early Warning System is a mechanism for identifying children and young people in difficult circumstances who need support, regardless of whether or not they drop out.**

*With limited resources, priority should be given to children who are most at risk and most in need of support.*

**Assessment aims and scope.**

This executive summary presents results of the final phase of study that aimed to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of an Early Warning System model for preventing, identifying and responding to dropout in schools in Kazakhstan. The assessment exercise is exploring what risk factors have been identified and what is the best practice in relation to the EWS model delivery and what are the bottlenecks that impede the implementation of the model.

Since September 2018, an EWS has been piloting in four schools (Group B and G1 in Table 1), and four additional schools joined the project later in 2019. The seven schools are located in three urban locations – big cities and in one rural location – a village school. For simplicity, information about the participating organisations and coding is summarised in Table 1.
Table 1. Responses by Years of Participation in the Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third 2020 – 2021 only</td>
<td>School -C-location-iii-r</td>
<td>School -D-location-ii-u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten -A-location-i-u</td>
<td>Kindergarten -B- location-ii-u</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dropped out from project

Valid responses:
(N=324) 184 (56.8%) 44 (13.6%) 96 (29.6%)

Assessment methodology and approach.

The current assessment followed the ethical principles of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). During the Third Phase of the assessment exercise (March-May 2021), data were collected through the following methods: 1) via a Qualtrics online questionnaire (available in English, Kazakh and Russian); and 2) by documenting the piloting process – e.g., collecting self-assessment tools from all pilot organisations.

Selected findings

The pilot organisations reported certain progress achieved by the schools in supporting children at risk. Some promising practices have been observed as well as some areas where additional support and improvement are required.

Increasing awareness of the factors contributing to children becoming at risk of school dropout and awareness of school teachers/staff and parents about an EWS model with attention paid to addressing the needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and/or children with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD).

Increased presence and timely support by school based EWS team.

- Overall, data from self-assessment forms as well as from the online survey show that EWS teams were created in pilot schools. Most participants reported that an EWS Team had been created in their schools. The percentage of agreement varied from 78.3% among the participants in Group A to 84.4% among Group C. However, compared with the results of the mid-term report, less participants in this year’s survey were aware of the roles and responsibilities of the EWS team.
- In addition to the EWS teams, pilot schools reported examples of internal structural mechanisms that were established to support students and seems to widely implement inclusive practices.
- The pilot schools achieved most of the good practice indicators in terms of supporting students at-risk. Creating an inclusive culture and environment has been prioritised by all schools. Participants in schools stated that they are trying to provide an inclusive education policy that is accessible and that all members of the school community know and follow. Data from self-assessment tools show that a comprehensive program for the development of inclusive practices for medium- and long-term planning has been developed in some schools.
- The participating schools had access to different tools to help their staff understand the EWS model. Out of these tools, the most commonly identified as useful were the attending sessions organised by the EWS team, identified in almost half the total responses (48.4%). This seemed to be especially the case among Group C participants (63%). In contrast, among participants of Group B, the mostly commonly identified tool was attendance to online sessions (55.9%).
Increased awareness about EWS indicators (factors that impact on school dropout) and its thresholds.

- Overall, the data show widespread awareness of signs, risk factors and potential dropout across all eight schools. The participants reported that the risk factors associated with dropout most commonly identified by the EWS team were poor attendance and poor academic achievement. However, over 10% of the participants across the groups reported not knowing which risk factors had been identified.

- EWS is a database system including information from families, schools in monitoring students’ attendance, behaviour, academic performance and taking practical actions to provide support for at-risk students to help them to remain in a school via school-based response measures (individual support [development] plan; peer/teacher mentoring; family conferencing techniques). EWS uses readily available and easily accessible information at the school level (such as school/class social passports; daily attendance tracking forms; e-journal Kundelik; an Outof7 programme) to identify students at-risk of dropping out.

Improved monitoring, school attendance and behaviour policy.

- Like previous phases of the assessment, the EWS teams in G1 schools reported clear policies and protocols in place and used risk assessment indicators for the identification of students’ needs against the ‘A-B-C’ criteria (i.e., attendance-behaviour-course performance), and planned interventions accordingly. Overall, such practices seemed to help build a better understanding of students’ situations among teachers.

- Survey data showed that, compared to Group A, a slightly smaller percentage of participants from Group B identified the daily tracking from the e-journal, and the paper-based records. However, slightly more participants from Group B (35.3%) reported using the behaviour tracking form than participants from Group A (19.9%). Compared to Groups A and B, less participants from Group C identified the daily attendance form and home visits. However, participants in Group C identified the at-risk tracking form more often than any other group (49.4%), data discussed by the EWS (51.3%), and case management (30.9%).

Number of children receiving support in pilot organisations.

Table 2 provides some information about children with SEND, children in home schooling and children ‘at-risk’ as identified by EWS teams in schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G1 &amp; G2 schools</th>
<th>1 quarter 2020</th>
<th>2 quarter 2020</th>
<th>3 quarter 2021</th>
<th>4 quarter 2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children with SEN studying in inclusive classes (no data for NISs; and data from School-C-location-ii included children in Grade-0)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeschooled children</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children ‘at-risk’ identified by the EWS teams at internal control</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeschooled children</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data for 3 schools only**
Schools reported having the individual plan (individual development plan) of working with students at risk. Such a plan includes the basic indicators, mapped by the EWS team: i) systematic control of absenteeism data; ii) systematic control of students’ achievement records (includes peer support of those students who demonstrate low academic achievement and mentorship); iii) systematic measures of controlling and improving the students’ behaviour and progress at school; iv) continuous work with parents.

The self-reported data from all pilot schools show that Individual Development Plans (IDPs) used not only to support children in school but also for those being home-schooled. Moreover, multidisciplinary professionals are involved in the support system.

The most commonly identified additional support noted by the teachers in Phase 3 was information/training on teaching children with SEND (n = 32, 32%). This finding was influenced mainly by the respondents of Group C, who had taken part in the 2020 intervention only, 36.9%, compared to only 22.9% of the participants of Group B. Among the latter group, the most commonly identified support needed for working with SEND children was a different format of textbooks, chosen by almost half of the teachers in the group (42.9%). These findings might be seen as possible evidence of two different stages among the participants. First, among participants in Group C (2020 intervention only), there seems to be greater awareness of the need to receive specialised training to provide children with SEND the teaching and care they need. In contrast, this need seems to be less felt by Group B (2019 and 2020 interventions), who seemed to have a better understanding of the resources needed to work with SEND teachers and were able to identify more decisively a specific tool (textbooks).

Results from the questionnaire shows that the most commonly provided interventions for children with SEND during the 2020/2021 academic year was differentiated pedagogy. However, for Group B the most commonly identified intervention was guidance and counselling (46.3%). Homework clubs, on the contrary, were the least common intervention available. Compared to Group A, slightly more participants of Group B identified the availability of a teaching assistant (A = 8.2%; B = 26.8%), while more participants from Group A (49.7%) than from Group B (36.6%) identified additional classes and small groups. Similarly, compared to groups A and B, the participants from Group C identified slightly more often differentiated pedagogy (57.1%), and mentoring schemes (16.7%).

When asked to identify the interventions provided for children with SEBD, overall, the participants identified more commonly the use of guidance and counselling (39.9%) and messages or calls to parents (38.8%).

The participants were asked to identify interventions used in the school to engage all students (including those with SEND and SEBD) in active learning. Across all groups, marking and feedback was the intervention most identified.
Reinforcement of the whole-school development approach to inclusive education with integrated EWS model for intervention and prevention of school dropout, especially for children with SEND and/or SEBD to include identifying strategies for the inclusion of all children.

- Across all groups, home/class teachers were the most commonly identified staff member responsible for collecting data about the children. Although social pedagogues were also identified by more than 70% of the participants of groups A and B, this professional was identified by only 30.3% of those in Group C.

- The most commonly identified strategy across all groups was the implementation of attendance policies and programmes, identified on average, in almost half of the valid responses.

Teachers’ knowledge and skills in providing supportive learning / retention, and family conferencing.

- The evidence from the online questionnaire shows that the participants viewed most of the various aspects of supportive learning as important (all means above 3.10). The most commonly identified techniques were treating the students as individuals and displaying flexibility and responsiveness to the students’ individual needs, both identified consistently by more than 50% of the participants of each group.

- Participants were asked to indicate if they agreed with the statement that students with special educational needs and disabilities who had been included in school saw improvements in various areas. Overall, the level of agreement with the statements seemed similar across all the groups.

- The proportion of participants who reported that the practice of peer support was present in their school decreased slightly from 91.3% (n = 147) among participants from Group A, to 85.4% (n = 35) in Group B, and 87.2% (n = 75) in Group C. The practice of mentor support seemed to be less available, especially according to members of Group C.

- Across the three groups, the most commonly identified objective of family conferencing was involving the parents (70.0%), especially among Group C participants (77.6%).
Communication within the school, as well as between the school, with parents and organisations.

- The two data collection tools most commonly identified to track children at risk of dropping out across the groups were social passports (65.3%) and daily attendance records (63.4%).

- Participants from schools reported an increase in communication with the parents by calling and messaging the students’ parents to identify the reasons of absence, increased communication with the parents for the case management as well as the increased number of visits to the families of the students at-risk. Furthermore, cooperation was assessed as effective in almost 60% of the valid responses.

Timely response and delivery of services.

- All pilot schools reported that they support not only the children who have been identified as ‘at-risk’, but also provide psychological support for all students in their organisations.

- Overall, most participants across the groups agreed that their school had procedures regarding the use of support plans to work with children with SEND (75.5%), and to a lesser extent, with children with SEBD (64.1%), and those registered for home schooling (68.7%).

- Consultations by specialists, and preventive work were, overall, the two most commonly identified forms of support available. Compared to Group A (15.9%), a slightly higher percentage of participants from Group B (31.6%) identified the existence of supplementary or out of school programmes. However, the percentage of participants from Group B who identified preventive work (39.5%) was slightly lower than that of participants in Group A (54.5%).

Participants stated that pilot schools are working with a range of organisations such as methodological centres, PMPC, Police, local medical centres, and region and/or city education departments; a local university and other local schools; some organisations and foundations, and the Association of Parents of children with disabilities.

- Overall, the participants reported that the children were supported “quite well” before the introduction of the EWS (all means above 2.50), and after the introduction of the model (all means above 2.70). In general, the means did not vary significantly across groups (all p > .05). Thus, there seemed to be no important changes in the perception of how the children were supported before or after the introduction of the EWS.

- The participants were asked their level of agreement with two statements about the EWS: “The EWS is beneficial for all children,” and “Your school needs the EWS.” Most of the participants reported that they “agree” with the statements. Comparisons of the means by group revealed no statistically significant variation (p > .05).

- Most participants reported that they believed that the EWS model was the best use of resources (91.5% of agreement across groups). However, among participants of Group B, there seemed to be an increase in the perception that the EWS model might not be the best use of resources. As before, due to the important proportion of missing data in this question, these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

- Participants who reported that an EWS had been created were asked to evaluate how well the initiative worked in their school. Overall, the participants had a positive view of the EWS. More than 60% of the participants assess the performance of the EWS model as “above average,” especially the participants of Group C. These results were consistent across groups, as the means did not vary significantly by group (p > .05). However, due to the important proportion of missing data (more than 32% in all groups), these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

- Participants provided 39 open-ended comments about how schools can improve the EWS to make it more sustainable. There were suggestions to continue working with the EWS, following the ‘Inclusive policy’, and ‘Involve all teachers to create an additional program for children at risk’ and more teamwork. Participants also commented that it is necessary to provide ‘concrete solutions to existing problems’; search for ‘effective methods’ and aim at for collaboration of between the entire school community and students (“Бирлескен жан жакты жұмыс қажет” – ‘We need to work together’).
There was a view that ‘it may be necessary to create a team directly only for [EWS] purpose, not loaded with other work’. Besides, there was a worry that too much reporting is not beneficial. Overall, there were ‘thank you’ notes with one comment that ‘the work in the project was very interesting, it made [people] look differently at many problems of children and parents’ (survey-participant-165).
3.1. There is a need to raise awareness among the entire school staff about the purpose of the EWS, the team and its roles and responsibilities. It is necessary to provide school wide events, capacity building and inclusive education activities to increase the commitment and engagement of everyone (teachers, students, parents).

3.2. To sustain the EWS practice, training sessions and ongoing support for school practitioners should be provided. Training topics could be diverse and related to EWS and inclusive education practices: such as how to improve school climate; supporting socio-emotional skills of students, provide parental support and education, increase reliance on inclusive teaching practices; and case management.

3.3. There should be opportunities to increase dialogue, collaboration, sharing experience at the regional level between schools, stakeholders, and services to support children at risk by implementing the EWS.

3.4. The development and sustainability of an Early Warning System requires committed, effective leadership and engagement of the school staff. It is important to consider the needs and capacity of each school and local context that has a direct impact on the students, teachers, and families.

3.5. The evidence from piloting the EWS across different types of schools in four locations has shown that on-going support and training provided by the UNICEF office in Kazakhstan together with local experts and collaborators (e.g. NEA, NU GSE and NIS), are crucial for the success of piloting the EWS and could be an important collaborative approach for scaling up the EWS work further.

1.1. Organisational and structural changes in practice need to be communicated and explained across the schools, parents and students, especially any changes that affect the practice of teachers or specialists in the organisations.

1.2. There should be a strong commitment to an early warning system from the senior leadership team and teachers. Joint planning, collaborative work and clarity about the responsibilities and distribution of tasks across the core members of the EWS team need to be prioritised to reduce the burden of a heavy workload on some people.

1.3. The purpose of using the self-assessment tool needs to be clarified for the EWS team and teachers. The self-assessment tools should be seen as a collaborative data collection approach to improve the capacity of a school in planning and in the collection, analysis and use of the [school level] data in decision-making and prioritising interventions.

2.1. The Early Warning System should involve an (on-going) assessment and identification of early signs of students’ behaviours that subsequently lead to dropout but also consider predictors through the lens of what causes a student to dropout. An EWS must contain indicators that accurately identify those ‘at risk’ or ‘off track’ early enough to intervene. The assessment will need constant revision and adaptation over time. To have intervention and student need coincide, practitioners must identify the link between the student-level behaviour and the intent behind that behaviour. Thus, an EWS should be seen as a meaningful prediction and intervention strategy.

2.2. Understanding why students are disengaged from school systems should help to utilize multiple approaches by EWS teams. The evidence from the current and previous reports suggest that no single strategy alone works to increase student engagement and retention, although some strategies and interventions are more important than others. The EWS teams should be aware that it might be possible that students’ needs are not being addressed by the intervention because it is not effective, or the students are not adequately participating to benefit from the interventions, or additional needs may have appeared.

2.3. An important strategy is the on-going monitoring of interventions to address any problems quickly. There is also a high possibility that the EWS teams may need to identify new interventions that are not currently available to meet the needs of these students. The EWS teams should be able to examine and discuss the effectiveness of interventions, to reflect on why it did not work, to build up the team’s understanding of which interventions are best at addressing specific needs and enable the EWS teams to improve the practice of matching students to interventions.

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