



Context

In recent years, the Republic of North Macedonia has made progress in expanding access to education and strengthening institutional capacity. Yet, despite these improvements, the progress on the most important measure of education system quality – student learning outcomes – remains limited. Data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that learning outcomes in North Macedonia are lower than international and regional averages and show no sign of improvement. In 2015, half of the country’s 15-year-olds did not demonstrate basic proficiency in all three core subjects in which they were assessed – mathematics, reading and science (OECD, 2016). The World Bank Human capital index reveals that in 12 years of schooling, our students receive an equivalent of 8 years in learning.

Challenges

A 2018 review of the country’s education system, conducted by OECD and UNICEF identified a number of reasons for the negative trends in learning outcomes – the following are some of the most significant ones:

- **Initial teacher education does not equip new teachers with minimum teaching competencies.** Selection criteria of candidates for future teachers who have good academic knowledge and skills for quality teaching are very low.
- **Teachers don’t get enough opportunities for continuing professional development** compared to their peers in the region, and schools get very little financial support to organize in-service training for their staff.
- **By the age of 14, students in primary education receive nearly 900 hours less instruction** than the OECD average. Short learning time in schools limits the breadth and depth of study and the scope to pursue additional support classes.
- **Classroom assessments are not based on established, national learning standards,** and therefore do not convey reliable and meaningful information on student achievement.
- **Only 28% of children with disabilities attend primary education.** The medical categorization of the children remains to be the way for the child to go forward through the education system, both in conditions of special schools and special

classes in regular schools, which is not a single education system at all.

- **The use of research and evaluation in policy-making is weak** and there is a lack of a national assessment strategy for

monitoring student learning outcomes. Decision-making is not always evidence based, risking that political considerations are prioritized above what is most important for teaching and learning.

Policy Recommendations

The Government and the Ministry of Education and Science are initiating a comprehensive reform of the country's education system with the aim to tackle these bottlenecks and improve student learning outcomes. UNICEF is supporting the reform and is calling for all involved parties to make sure that the following policy recommendations are appropriately considered and addressed in the new law.

Introduce a merit-based career advancement system and increase the opportunities for professional development for teachers. Implementing the merit-based career path will help motivate teachers to develop new competencies and take on new roles and responsibilities. This will serve not only to identify and reward the most effective teachers, but also to leverage their expertise to improve the quality of teaching across the education system. The country needs to increase the investment in professional development, within and outside school, so that teachers can access learning opportunities to become expert teachers as they progress in their career. It is also important that schools adopt a structured system for peer support and learning as an additional area for their improvement.

Increase, the number of school hours that students get in primary education. The amount of instruction time available to students is an important factor in their learning process. Existing evidence suggests that the quality of instruction and the time available for learning can have a positive effect on student achievement. The government should reconsider its decision to further reduce the learning time. Instead, schools should be encouraged to make more effective use of the allocated instruction time, giving students the opportunity to engage in more hands-on activities.

Develop National Learning standards for primary education before revising old or introducing new curricula. National learning standards will help teachers make judgements on assessment that is more consistent and meaningful. Stronger understanding of national expectations will enable teachers to confidently and accurately monitor student learning. Alongside greater support and encouragement for formative assessment, this will help teachers to identify and address learning gaps early on.

Strive towards full inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream education system in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The proposed changes in the Law on primary education envisions that special schools transform into resource centers and provide support to regular primary schools in the process of accommodating and including students with disabilities.

Set up a research and analysis unit and clearly define its purpose. Education policy making should draw on national information about how the system is currently operating, and international research about what factors contribute to effective teaching and learning. Establishing an analysis unit within the Ministry of Education and Science will improve and centralize data access, analysis, evaluating the effectiveness of education policy, measuring progress towards strategic goals and promote the use of evidence to inform policy making.