

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SAFE RETURN TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2020 - 2021 IN COUNTIES BACAU AND BRASOV



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This document was prepared under the technical assistance component of the project *Romania Grows with You - Early Education, Investment for the Future* for the purpose of supporting the early childhood education establishments (creches and kindergartens) to observe the SARS-CoV-2 prevention measures and prepare the start of the new 2020 - 2021 school year. The process, implemented in July - September 2020, involved two successive stages. The first consisted of monitoring visits in:

- 9 creches (of which 6 in the county town) and 84 pre-primary schools (kindergartens with or without juristic personality) in County Bacau
- 10 creches (of which 8 in the county town) and 18 kindergartens (of which in the county town) in County Brasov.

The scope of the second stage was the development of field evidence-based recommendations: how informed the management is, the reality in the field and the level of preparedness of each creche and kindergarten.

The document was written by healthcare practitioners, external consultants working together with the principals/coordinators of the kindergartens/pre-primary schools or creches implementing the project *Romania Grows with You - Early Education, Investment for the Future*. The project was initiated and is being coordinated by the project sponsor organisations, the Step by Step Centre in partnership with UNICEF in Romania.

The recommendations are addressed to the central authorities (Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Health) and to the local authorities responsible for the adequate provision of early childhood education.

We hope that these recommendations will contribute to the taking of informed decisions, beneficial for the nurseries and preschools, such as to ensure access to quality inclusive education to all children, from birth to the age of six.

1. PRIORITY ASPECTS FOR IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

1a. ENSURE ACCESS TO QUALITY PROVISION TO CHILDREN IN CRECHES - ANTE-PRE-SCHOOL LEVEL

542 children aged 0 to 3 are enrolled in the 9 creches of County Bacau included in the project *Romania Grows with You*. They are distributed in 9 creches, out of which 6 in the City of Bacau, in 31 groups. At the time of the evaluation, considering the requirement to keep 1.5 m between children and children and adults, the school year could have started face-to-face with 276 children, representing 51% of all those enrolled. After the rules were reassessed and distances decreased to 1 m by Order no. 5487/1494/2020, we believe that a recalculation is possible, allowing 414 children to attend school, **representing 76.5% of those enrolled**.

In County **Brasov**, the approved capacity of the 10 creches included in the project is of 875 places. Nursery children are allocated in 41 classrooms that are well maintained and suitably equipped with specific creche furniture. At the time of the visit, considering the requirement to

maintain 2 m distance between pieces of furniture and 1.5 m between children and children and adults, the school year could have started with only 534 children, representing 61% of those enrolled. After the rules were reassessed and distances decreased from 2 to 1.5 and, respectively, to 1 m by Order no. 5487/1494/2020, we believe that a recalculation is in order, allowing some **700** children to attend school, **representing 80% of those enrolled**.

1b. OUTFITTING OF OUTDOOR AREAS - ANTE-PRE-SCHOOL LEVEL

Seven out of the nine creches in County Bacau have no outdoors playing and learning areas. There are **only two** in the County, of which one pending development.

1c. ENSURE ACCESS TO QUALITY PROVISION TO CHILDREN IN CRECHES - PRE-SCHOOL LEVEL

There are 5313 children in preschool education in County Bacau, distributed in 247 groups. At the time of the evaluation, considering the requirement to keep 1.5 m between children and children and adults, the school year could have started with 3238 children, representing **60.95%** of all those enrolled.

After the rules were reassessed and distances decreased to 1 m by Order no. 5487/1494/2020, we believe that a recalculation is possible, allowing 4857 children to attend school, representing **91.41%** of those enrolled.

In County **Brasov**, the approved capacity of the 18 monitored kindergartens is of **3540** places. Nursery children are allocated in **133** classrooms that are well maintained and suitably appointed with specific kindergarten furniture. At the time of the evaluation, considering the requirement to maintain 2 m distance between pieces of furniture and 1.5 m between children and children and adults, the school year could have started with only 1950 children, representing 55 % of those enrolled. After the rules were reassessed and distances decreased from 2 to 1.5 and, respectively, to 1 m by Order no. 5487/1494/2020, we believe that a recalculation is in order, allowing some **2700** children to attend school, representing **76%** of those enrolled.

1d. OUTFITTING OF OUTDOOR AREAS - PRE-SCHOOL LEVEL

No outdoor playgrounds exist in 23% of the preschools of County Bacau. Where playgrounds exist (77% of preschools), they are merely plots of land, with no equipment. In 59% of the cases, the outdoors play equipment is insufficient. In some cases, the playgrounds are not fenced off for being located on public land and are not exclusively used by the children.

1e. AMENITIES

In 98% of the kindergartens in County Bacau **the toilets** are indoor; the maintenance varies from case to case. 2% of the kindergartens have outdoor toilets. 11% of the kindergartens do not comply with the rule that requires separate children/adult toilet facilities.

88% of the kindergartens in County Bacau are supplied with drinking water from the municipal system (with test reports, as per the relevant regulations) and 12% are supplied from wells. In this later case, however, the students and personnel drink water from dispensers or brought from home, given the risk of waterborne diseases.

1f. ACCESS TO LEARNING RESOURCES

77% of the kindergartens in County Bacau have sufficient wooden or plastic toys that can be suitably sanitised; 23% do not have enough wood or plastic toys.

1g. HUMAN RESOURCES

- None of the ante-pre-schools evaluated in County Bacau has back-up personnel for special situations.
- In special situations, only 15 out of the 84 creches and kindergartens could call in backup personnel from the County; whenever such personnel are available, they are retired educationalists.
- 13 nurses work in the 18 kindergartens of County Brasov.

2. POSITIVE ASPECTS THAT FACILITATE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SAFETY MEASURES

- All the creches in the two counties have hired medical staff.
- Plush, sponge or cloth toys were eliminated in all creches and replaced with wood or plastic ones that are safe and easily sanitised.
- All preschools have procurement plans, where the resources required for buying cleaning materials are identified. At the time of the review, all the reviewed kindergartens had procured sufficient stocks of the required specific SARS-CoV-2 protection materials (gloves, masks) and hands sanitiser dispensers (only for adults). Boxes marked BIOHAZARD for used gloves and masks were procured and fitted in each classroom such as to be easily accessed by children.
- In all the evaluated schools, teachers are keen to explain to the children in friendly terms how to behave and the rules to observe in these times (limiting close and lengthy contact, washing hands and its importance, limiting the sharing of toys, etc.).

3. CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Our proposals are based on our findings and the discussions with principals/coordinators of the visited schools. They cover:

3.1. HUMAN RESOURCES

- ***Expedite the implementation of the decision to recruit the necessary non-teaching personnel (janitors)***, as per the Law amending and supplementing law no. 55/2020 on

certain measures aimed at preventing and fighting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, PL-x no. 510/220

[http://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/docs/2020/cd510_20_\(1\).pdf](http://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/docs/2020/cd510_20_(1).pdf)

Rationale:

- insufficient non-teaching personnel (janitors), hired full or part-time, cleaning and disinfection of rooms and equipment cannot be done properly throughout the educational activities (Bacau);
 - given the size of the groups (there are more than 20 children per group in the kindergartens of Brasov City), extra janitorial personnel are required to ensure the children's health and safety in the pandemic and provide them with quality education.
 - many cleaning personnel left the system by retirement or resignation (25 employees of County Brasov creches had left at the time of the review).
- ***Expedite the implementation of the decision to recruit medical staff in early childhood education establishments***

Rationale:

- the epidemiologic screening cannot be carried out as per the procedure, since not all kindergartens have hired full time nurses; the epidemiologic screening can only be carried out by an adequately qualified person;

3.2. PHYSICAL RESOURCES

- ***Prepare procurement plans and identity the required resources for procuring printed self-adhesive film for windows and carpets of cushioning materials that are easily sanitised.***

! We recommend the expedite procurement of the materials for cleaning, disinfecting surfaces and personnel protection to prevent SARS-CoV-2 infections.

Rationale:

- when in classroom, small children play at tables and on large floor areas; eliminating carpets for hygiene reasons brings along the issue of cushioning children's fall downs (in particular the small ones) and of dampening the noise in the building blocks centres. We believe that it is necessary to replace the carpets on certain areas, in particular on play areas, with isoprene mats that can be sanitised, or to procure professional water or steam vacuum cleaners that ensure proper sanitation of classroom carpets.
- in all-day creches and kindergartens, eliminating sheers and curtains, including vertical blinds, generates a problem with children's afternoon nap, since windows are no longer shaded. In many cases, teachers believe that removing sheers and curtains creates bland, unfriendly spaces. A potential solution might be to buy coloured self-adhesive films that allow for the creation of child-friendly environments.

3.3. ENSURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MEASURES TO PREVENT SARS-COV-2 INFECTION AND TO GUARANTEE THE SAFE PROVISION OF SERVICES

- ***Connect preschools to public water supply and regularly monitor water quality.***
- ***Correct use of the equipment required by the regulations in force.***

Rationale:

According to the regulations in force, teaching and non-teaching personnel must permanently wear protection masks on school premises. This regulation drove a wedge among the personnel, many of whom believe that the mask prevents visual and emotional communication with children; the interviewees believe that this shortcoming can be dealt with by using plastic visors instead. Considering the above, we believe that **an awareness campaign on the proven role and efficiency of protective equipment** would be useful, to be implemented in the entire early and preschool education system.

- ***Revise the cleaning and sanitation personnel's working hours such as to ensure that these operations are carried out as per the applicable regulations.***

Rationale:

At the end of the daily routines with the children, the cleaning and disinfection of surfaces starts. These operations involve specific steps and durations as specified in procedures, in particular for disinfection, when disinfectants are allowed to stay on surfaces for a given time, according to the product instructions of use, and only then are such surfaces rinsed off and wiped dry. Given the importance of cleaning/disinfection and the large number of surfaces, furniture and toys that need such treatment, we estimate that the minimum time required is 2 hours. In this case, the day schedule may be revised in some schools.

3.4. OUTFITTING OUTDOOR AREAS OF CRECHES AND KINDERGARTENS

This is necessary for the use of the opportunities for holistic development of children in open air, in order to reduce the virus transmission risk, in the context of the pandemic. Outdoor playing and learning provide children with the opportunity to observe and experiment directly, to expand and strengthen the knowledge and skills they acquired in the activities proposed by the teacher. However, in the current circumstances, having open air activities and games is also an extra chance to remain healthy. The pandemic circumstances compel us to make the best use of alternative spaces and contexts to provide the children with various and yet safe learning settings. An organised open-air space may accommodate groups of children, whilst ensuring distancing, and host specific activities under each development area (language, communication and literacy, cognitive knowledge of the world, physical, social and emotional, learning skills and attitudes).

3.5. DELIVERING CONTINUING INFORMATION/TRAINING SESSIONS FOR ALL PERSONNEL CATEGORIES

- The Public Health Departments should deliver information/ training sessions the school management, teaching and non-teaching personnel, supporting them to understand and implement the applicable regulations.
- The need to have regular reflection and good practice sharing meetings with the teachers and other school personnel, approaching topics such as: techniques and strategies to reduce/limit contact between children in activities meant to stimulate small children, efficient and effective means to develop hygiene habits.
- We believe that the priority is to provide continuous training and support to the personnel during this school year on medical and teaching topics.

3.6. ORGANISING THE ACTIVITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

a. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARENTS

- ***Establishing procedures to facilitate the adaptation of children who come to creches or kindergartens for the first time.***

Rationale:

The child's adaptation in a new group and transition from family to creche or kindergarten is a process where the parents/family and the school need to work together and support each other through sharing information and decisional transparency.

Moreover, given the current rules (limited access of parents on preschool premises and more), it is desirable that the area in front of the entrance be set up in a child- and parent-friendly manner. At the same time, it is important that kindergartens and creches organise the space such as to avoid melees and keep a safe distance between people.

b. ASPECTS OF ORGANISING LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- ***Adapting and customising age-appropriate activities to the pandemic circumstances.***

Rationale:

The new rules on the operation of preschools, developed based on the specific pandemic legal requirements, also entail certain changes in the learning activities. Numerous legislative documents (minister orders) and implementation guides for different education levels were developed in this time period. We believe a real challenge is to maintain a balance and implement/ adapt the specific measures in nurseries and kindergartens, such

as to safeguard children's wellbeing and development and allow the educational process to continue (including in terms of knowledge, skills, habits and abilities).

Thus, children's day schedule should be organised around routines that safeguard their health and prevent SARS-CoV-2 infection, complying with the applicable rules and making up for the activities subject to limitation.

Annex 1

REGULATIONS IN FORCE KINDERGARTENS REOPENING SAFE FROM SARS-CoV-2 INFECTIONS

- Law no. 263/2007 on the establishment, organisation and operation of creches, as amended; Law no. 1/2011 of National Education, as amended.
- GD no. 1.252/2012 approving the Methodology for the organisation and operation of creches and other early ante-pre-school education establishments; Order no. 1955/1995 of the Minister of Health approving the Hygiene rules on children and youth education and training establishments, as amended; Law no. 55/2020 on certain measures for preventing and fighting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Law no. 136/2020 laying down certain public health measures in epidemiological and biological risk situations.
- GD no. 553/2020 extending the state of alert in Romania from 17 July 2020 and laying down the measures applicable for preventing and fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Order no. 3577/831/2020 on measures to prevent and fight contamination with the new SARS-CoV-2 and to ensure health safety continuation of workplace activities during the state of alert.
- Order no. 076/4518/3936/2020 laying down measures for the reopening of creches, kindergartens and after-schools to prevent SARS-CoV-2 infections.
- **Order no. 5487/1494/2020 approving the measures for the organisation of activities in schools such as to ensure epidemiological safety to prevent SARS-CoV-2 infections**

Annex 2

Project Romania Grows with You - Early Education, Investment for the Future

Consulting services to support kindergartens/creches in observing SARS-CoV2 prevention measures and preparing the 2020-2021 school year Survey

School _____ Community _____

Date _____

CAPACITY - NO. OF CHILDREN	YES	NO	COMMENTS/RECOMMENDATION
<p>What is the maximum capacity of the kindergarten/creche? <i>[Detail data on the children cohorts by age group. Detail the number and type of groups (half-day / full day)]</i></p>			
<p>Can all enrolled children be accommodated while ensuring 1.5 m distance during activities, that is 4.5 m² per child? <i>(If NOT, indicate the number of children that can be accommodated in the school observing the applicable rules)</i></p>			
PERSONNEL			
<p>How many teachers work in the kindergarten/creche? <i>(Detail the teachers' allocation to groups)</i></p>			
<p>How many support personnel work in the kindergarten/creche? (janitors, childcare workers) <i>(Detail the childcare workers allocation to groups)</i></p>			
<p>A procedure is to be implemented for checking the personnel's health state, covering:</p>			

- covid testing before the beginning of the school year - temperature taking when entering the school			
Does a list of back-up personnel exist for special situations?			
STRUCTURAL DETAILS			
Is the building dedicated only to kindergarten/creche activities?			
Is the courtyard divided such as to allow controlled access through only one gate?			
Are the spaces organised such as to allow circuits that prevent people crossing paths in certain activities?			
How many functions do classrooms have? <i>[Describe if the classrooms have a single function (teaching-learning) or double/triple function]</i>			
Is the building adequately maintained?			
Are the interior floors carpeted or covered with rugs? If YES , can they be removed?			
Is it possible to provide natural ventilation through the windows, considering that mechanical ventilation is banned?			
Are the windows protected with sheers, curtains or blinds that can accumulated dust? If YES , can they be removed?			
Is the water source verified and is a test report available, as per the applicable regulations?			
TOILETS			
Are the toilets inside or outside the building? <i>(Detail maintenance status and amenities)</i>			
Are there separate toilets for children and adults, as per the applicable regulations?			

Are there enough sinks, as per the applicable regulations, to avoid crowding at hands-washing time?			
Are there enough liquid soap dispensers fitted?			
Are there sanitiser dispensers fitted exclusively for the use of adults?			
Are there paper towels holders fitted, considering that fabric towels and air driers are not permitted?			
EATING AREA			
Is the lunchroom large enough to allow 1.5 m distancing between children and 2 m between tables?			
Are there enough tables and chairs?			
Is the food distributed in catering system?			
Are disposable plates and cutlery used?			
If traditional tableware is used, are there facilities where it can be washed and disinfected?			
When children bring food from home, is there a fridge where they can keep it from arrival until lunch time?			
Are the adults concerned with preventing children from swapping food?			
RESTING AREA			
Is there a napping area equipped with beds? <i>(Provide details on the types of beds in the school)</i>			
Are there enough beds for all the enrolled children?			
Is the napping area large enough to ensure 2 m distancing?			

PLAY AREAS			
Are the outdoor playgrounds fenced?			
Is there enough play equipment as to allow children to play while keeping the physical distance as required?			
Are there enough wood or plastic toys in the classrooms that can be washed with detergent and rinsed thoroughly?			
Have the plush or sponge toys that cannot be disinfected been eliminated?			
Is there enough space to provide 4.5 m ² per child?			
Are there measures taken to limit the children swapping toys?			
Is the personnel concerned with developing a procedure for communicating to parents the new school rules and routines?			
ENTERING THE SCHOOL			
Are the personnel considering the development of a procedure for children's access to school?			
Is there a designated space where street clothes and shoes can be stored during the school day, given that children have to change into indoor clothes?			
Will the fact that parents or caregivers are not permitted on the premises be communicated online and/or via an outdoor board?			
Will a procedure be developed describing how will each child's temperature be measured when arriving at school?			
Will a procedure be developed describing the actions to be taken when a child's temperature is above 37.3 ⁰ C?			
Does a plan exist for placing marks on the floor/pavement indicating the routes the children should follow?			

CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR			
Are the teachers keen to explain to the children in a child manner and without instilling fear how should they behave and what rules should they respect during this time period?			
Do the instructions for children include recommendations on limiting close and lengthy contact with one another?			
Do the instructions for children include recommendation on hands washing and the importance of doing this?			
Do the instructions for children include the ban on exchanging food and reducing swapping of toys between children?			
Do the instructions for children include information on keeping the 1.5 m distance?			
Considering the age-specifics of the children, are there plans to display suggestive visual materials on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - limiting close and lengthy contact between children; - reducing frequency of toy swapping; - ban on exchanging food; - how to wash hands; - observing the minimum 1.5 m distance? 			
PROTECTION MATERIALS			
Does a procurement plan exist and have the resources been identified for buying enough disposable gloves?			
Does a procurement plan exist and have the resources been identified for buying enough face masks?			
Does a procurement plan exist and have the resources been identified for buying enough dispensers of sanitiser substances for adults only?			

Does a procurement plan exist and have the resources been identified for buying enough lidded bins for collecting the gloves and masks used by adults?			
CLEANING MATERIALS DISINFECTANTS			
Does a procurement plan exist and have the resources been identified for regularly buying enough cleaning materials?			
Does the school envisage procuring the cleaning materials required for starting the 2020-2021 school year and have the resources required for this been identified?			
Does the school envisage procuring the cleaning disinfectants required for starting the 2020-2021 school year and have the resources required for this been identified?			
Does the school envisage procuring the hands disinfectants required for starting the 2020-2021 school year and have the resources required for this been identified?			
PERSONNEL TRAINING			
Is the school management aware of the <i>Joint Order laying down measures for the reopening of creches, kindergartens and after-schools to prevent SARS-CoV-2 infections, the Recommendations for carrying out activities with children in preschools during the 2020</i>			

summer holiday and other official recommendations in this area?			
Is the school considering developing a plan for training the teaching and support personnel on the specifics of activities during the COVID 19 pandemic?			
Will persons be designated with specific tasks for each activity?			
Will cleaning and disinfection measures be implemented according to the applicable regulations on the reopening of childcare and education establishments? Is the school considering outsourcing disinfection operations to a specialised company?			
Describe how in your opinion should your school open safely for children and adults in the school year 2020-2021.			