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Inclusive education:

Compendium of country case studies in Europe and Central Asia

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CONTENTS

Journeys to inclusion: Comparing education reforms in Georgia, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia

A quiet revolution in Eastern Europe's classrooms

In recent years, classrooms across Georgia, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia have been transforming in ways that were hard to imagine a generation ago. Consider a few scenes: In Georgia, a boy with Down syndrome walks into his neighbourhood school each morning, warmly greeted by teachers trained to support his needs. In Montenegro, a visually impaired child listens to a digital audio-visual textbook, keeping pace with her classmates in reading and history and they are all benefiting. In a Romanian town, a Roma girl and a Romanian classmate study side by side, solving math problems together where once they might have been separated. In Serbia, a teacher's staff room buzzes as educators share strategies on how to help every student in a diverse classroom succeed. Just a decade or two ago, many of these children would have been taught in separate institutions – or left out of school entirely. Now they are learning and thriving alongside their peers.

These changes did not happen overnight. Each country faced its own pressures and catalysts that set inclusive education reforms in motion. They each had to overcome obstacles, ranging from entrenched attitudes to limited resources – and form a unique coalition of stakeholders to sustain progress. This narrative explores the journeys of Georgia, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia as they worked to make education more inclusive. We will examine what triggered reforms in each nation, who drove them forward, what made each process unique, and how their outcomes differ.

Along the way, countries highlight key insights – the levers of change and the innovations that proved especially effective – and share the lessons learned. These stories convey a sense of optimism and possibility, demonstrating that, with commitment, creativity and collaboration, education systems can evolve to embrace every child. At the same time, these are real-world reforms full of practical lessons about how to turn inclusive ideals into reality in schools every day.

Each country is introduced with a brief overview of its unique journey, followed by a reflection of the countries' approaches and the lessons that can be learned from their experiences. The full case studies then provide a detailed account of each country's journey. By exploring their stories, we gain a richer understanding of how inclusive education can be achieved in different contexts, whether that be a post-Soviet nation overhauling a legacy system, a small country pioneering new technologies, an EU member state tackling segregation or a Balkan state pursuing comprehensive policy change. Their experiences offer other countries inspiring advice: no matter their starting point, inclusive education is achievable – and benefits everyone.

Georgia – Transforming a legacy: From special schools to community schools

Inclusive education in Georgia emerged through a combination of grassroots activism and international partnerships, set against the backdrop of post-Soviet transformation. Following independence in the early 1990s, Georgia inherited a segregated education system, where children with disabilities typically attended separate special schools or institutions, often distant from their communities or were excluded from any form of education. By the early 2000s, societal shifts and parental advocacy began challenging this model, prompting initial pilot projects to demonstrate that children with disabilities could successfully learn in mainstream classrooms.

Parent groups and NGOs played a crucial pioneering role in these early initiatives. Around 2005–2006, with backing from the Government of Norway and UNICEF, small inclusive education projects began expanding into national programmes. Norway's sustained support throughout the following decade provided critical expertise, training, and funding, helping inclusive education gain momentum and institutional backing.

In 2006, the Ministry of Education and Science appointed dedicated individuals to lead inclusive education efforts which paved the way to the institutionalization of inclusive education. In 2011, the Vocational and Inclusive Education Development Division was established, a decisive step marking inclusive education as a national priority. The government introduced training programmes for teachers, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and actively engaged communities through awareness campaigns to overcome stigma and promote the benefits of inclusive classrooms.

Significant legal milestones followed in 2010, affirming every child's right to mainstream education and obligating the state to provide necessary support. Georgia gradually assumed financial responsibility from external donors, funding support teachers, specialists, and inclusive materials. In 2016, the process of gradual transformation of special schools into resource centres started, providing expert support, adapted resources, and specialised services to regular schools nationwide, thus retaining valuable expertise within the new inclusive framework.

By the mid-2010s, inclusion extended beyond primary and secondary education, reaching into early childhood and vocational settings. Georgia also started adapting vocational education and training and higher education environments, albeit facing challenges in infrastructure and accessibility.

Georgia's success lies in its blend of bottom-up advocacy, sustained international partnership, and committed governmental policy, effectively tackling deep-rooted societal stigmas. Today, inclusive classrooms have become widespread, significantly improving educational outcomes and social integration for thousands of children with disabilities. Teachers report enhanced pedagogical skills, while all children benefit from greater empathy and collaboration fostered by inclusive environments. Georgia's journey exemplifies how collaborative efforts can lead to comprehensive educational transformation.

Montenegro – A small nation with big innovations in inclusion

Montenegro may be among Europe's smaller nations, but its inclusive education reforms have achieved significant impact through innovative approaches and strong partnerships. Following independence in 2006, Montenegro prioritised modernising its education system in line with European standards and child rights principles. Driven by international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and aspirations for EU membership, inclusive education rapidly became a national priority. Importantly, there was genuine internal commitment among policymakers and educators to transition from segregated education towards inclusive mainstream schooling for all children.

A pivotal reform was transforming special schools into resource centres around 2012–2013. The Ministry of Education, supported by UNICEF, restructured these institutions into hubs providing teacher training, assistive technology, and specialised services across the country. This meant that even remote schools could access essential resources and expertise for inclusion. The Resource Centre in Podgorica exemplified this shift, supporting schools with materials, training, and assistive technology.

Montenegro's approach notably emphasised technological innovation, particularly through the introduction of DAISY digital textbooks in 2013. These accessible audiobooks synchronise text and audio, benefiting students with visual impairments or learning disabilities. Montenegro became the first country globally to integrate DAISY books into its national curriculum systematically. Collaboration between the Ministry of Education, Resource Centres, UNICEF, and even local actors ensured high-quality implementation. Teachers reported improved engagement among all students due to the multisensory nature of these materials.

In parallel, practical support measures reinforced these reforms. Assistive technology labs within resource centres developed tailored teaching aids, such as tactile materials for visually impaired students and communication tools for children with autism. Comprehensive teacher training programmes across the country ensured educators felt supported in adopting inclusive practices. Early childhood intervention programmes were also introduced, shifting the support model from segregation towards family-centred, rights-based services. This helped young children with developmental delays to integrate smoothly into mainstream preschool and primary education.

Montenegro's inclusive education reforms were initiated by parents who continue to advocate for better inclusion and support. These were sustained by internal leadership, EU aspirations, intensive advocacy campaigns and targeted external support from partners like UNICEF. While smaller in scale, the reforms faced challenges including teacher scepticism and the need for accessible infrastructure improvements, which were addressed through continuous professional development and incremental investments.

Today, inclusive education is firmly embedded in Montenegro's education system. Virtually all school-age children with disabilities attend regular schools, supported by resource centres, technology, and inclusive teaching methods. Moreover, the inclusive ethos now extends to supporting all vulnerable students, highlighting Montenegro's innovative and collaborative approach as a compelling model for larger countries.

Romania – From segregation to inclusion for *all* children

Romania's journey towards inclusive education has been driven by a determination to end segregation and ensure quality schooling for every child, particularly the most marginalised. In the early 2000s, stark inequalities plagued the Romanian education system. Children from poor rural areas, Roma communities, or those with disabilities often received inferior education–if they attended school at all. High dropout rates among disadvantaged groups and significant achievement gaps between urban and rural students highlighted these disparities. As Romania prepared to join the European Union in 2007, international commitments and aspirations for a more equitable society provided strong impetus for reform. In 2008, all major political parties signed a "Pact for Education," agreeing no child should be left behind, setting the stage for systemic change.

Initial reforms targeted the most blatant form of injustice–school segregation. In 2007, Romania officially banned ethnic segregation, addressing widespread practices such as isolating Roma children into separate classes or schools. While aligning with EU human rights standards, enforcing this policy proved difficult. Early efforts demonstrated that legal bans alone were insufficient; lasting inclusion required deeper changes in school culture, teacher training, and resource allocation.

By the mid-2010s, Romania reignited its inclusive education initiatives with a more comprehensive approach. Reformers, supported by UNICEF and EU partners, carefully assessed persistent segregation of Roma children in education and decided to review the approach to school desegregation. A robust policy in 2016 clearly defined segregation at various levels and established a National Commission on School Desegregation to monitor and support schools effectively.

Romania expanded the scope of inclusive education beyond desegregation, adopting the philosophy of "education for all children, in all schools." Policies now address multiple intersecting disadvantages under one inclusive framework, acknowledging, for instance, that a Roma pupil with disabilities from a poor village faces compounded barriers. Efforts included directing additional support and funding to disadvantaged schools, particularly those in rural and Roma communities.

Stakeholder collaboration has been crucial. The Ministry of Education and Research, supported by international organisations like UNICEF, introduced inclusive educational models, teacher training programmes, and community-based approaches, demonstrating practical and scalable solutions.

Despite significant progress, Romania's journey has faced ongoing challenges, including resistance from some school communities, fluctuating political priorities, and limited funding. Nevertheless, visible achievements include increased enrolment of Roma children in mainstream schools, widespread teacher training in inclusive practices, and a profound shift in educational discourse towards equity and inclusion. Romania's experience offers important insights into achieving sustainable educational reform through coordinated policy, cross-sector cooperation, and persistent advocacy.

Serbia – A comprehensive Journey to “Education for all”

Serbia’s journey towards inclusive education has spanned over 15 years, driven by persistent efforts to transform a fragmented system into one that genuinely serves all children. In the early 2000s, Serbia faced significant educational inequalities, notably impacting children with disabilities, Roma students, and those from impoverished or rural backgrounds. Traditionally, medical commissions labelled many children as unable to attend mainstream schools, leading to segregation in special schools or exclusion altogether. By 2005, growing advocacy highlighted the urgent need for reform.

A turning point came in 2006 when Serbia participated in the international PISA assessment, revealing widespread educational shortcomings. This shifted policy conversations from focusing on individual deficits to addressing systemic issues, placing inclusive education at the core of educational reform.

In 2009, Serbia introduced comprehensive legislative reforms with the Law on the Foundations of the Education System, explicitly promoting inclusive education and eliminating the practice of segregating students by disability. The new policy created interdisciplinary municipal assessment and support teams, school-based Inclusive Education Teams and support teams, and regional resource centres providing expert support to mainstream schools. Schools received additional funding for supporting students with special needs, partially funded initially by international donors like the World Bank. Since 2015, UNICEF has supported the Ministry of Education in strengthening institutional capacities and modernizing teacher training through collaboration with experienced educators and academics. Since 2021 with the support of EU, the reform has focused on the transformation of special schools into resource centers, including integration of assistive technologies into education.

Serbia’s reform approach also emphasised shifting attitudes and enhancing teaching skills through extensive training and awareness campaigns, facilitated by collaboration with UNICEF and other partners. Educators learned inclusive teaching methodologies, such as creating Individual Education Plans and managing diverse classrooms effectively. Additionally, Serbia promoted “horizontal learning,” encouraging teachers to share successful inclusive practices, fostering professional community and mutual support.

A distinctive aspect of Serbia’s reforms was their broad, equity-driven perspective, explicitly linking disability inclusion with efforts to support Roma students, rural children, and other marginalised groups. Initiatives included Roma teaching assistants, expanded rural preschool access, and improved data tracking to inform evidence-based policies.

While challenges such as funding constraints and resistance from educators initially impeded progress, sustained advocacy, international partnerships, and compelling evidence of success helped maintain momentum. Today, inclusive practices are widespread, significantly reducing exclusion. Special schools often now function as resource centres, mainstream classrooms have grown more inclusive, and teachers report increased collaboration and professional growth. Serbia’s experience highlights how comprehensive policies, collaborative practices, and a commitment to equity can foster transformative educational outcomes.

Comparing the paths: Common threads and key differences

Each of these four countries charted its own course toward inclusive education, moulded by its context and challenges. Yet, their stories intersect in many ways. It's illuminating to compare the levers of change they employed, the pressures they responded to, and the distinct strategies that emerged:

Triggers for Reform: All four countries were influenced by a combination of moral imperative and practical crisis. In Romania and Serbia, international alignment (EU accession goals and human rights commitments) provided strong impetus, coupled with stark evidence (such as Romania's internal studies on inequality and Serbia's PISA results) that education reform was necessary. In Georgia, the trigger was more grassroots, with parent advocacy exposing the injustices of the old system, reinforced by a government and donor partnership willing to modernise. Montenegro, in its post-independence zeal, was driven by a desire to set an example and meet global standards from the outset, demonstrating to the world that a small nation can champion the rights of the vulnerable. In all cases, a sense of 'we can't continue like this' – whether due to moral conviction or global pressure – set the reforms in motion.

Key Stakeholders and Champions: In each country, a coalition of stakeholders came together to design and implement the reforms. While government ministries of education were clearly pivotal, they rarely acted alone. In Romania and Serbia, for example, the ministries collaborated closely with international organisations such as UNICEF, Swiss Development Cooperation, World Bank and the European Commission, who provided funding and a human rights framework. Georgia had a unique champion in the form of the Government of Norway, whose consistent support over the years was akin to having a dedicated mentor. Meanwhile, Montenegro benefited from UNICEF's on-site guidance and the enthusiasm of local experts, such as the directors of resource centres, who became national advocates. Civil society and NGOs were influential everywhere. In Romania and Serbia, Roma rights groups kept up momentum and held authorities accountable, while in Georgia, parent and disability organisations did the same. In Montenegro and Serbia, inclusive education experts played a similar role. Furthermore, in Serbia, there was a National Network for Inclusive Education of inclusive teachers and experts. A key takeaway is that reform requires champions at all levels, from high-level political figures who authorise bold policies to grassroots implementers who bring the vision to life in classrooms and partners who provide technical expertise and resources.

Distinct Approaches and Innovations: While the ultimate goal – inclusive, quality education for all – was shared, the pathways differed:

- **Georgia's** approach was **targeted and incremental**. Initially focusing on children with disabilities, it built the necessary infrastructure (laws, training and services) for this group before gradually expanding inclusion to other areas such as early education and vocational training. This approach enabled a greater depth of focus, for example in the form of highly specialised training and resources for disability inclusion, and built confidence for broader inclusion later on.
- **Montenegro's** strategy was **innovative and technology-friendly**. With assistive technology at the forefornt, it tackled the very practical aspect of giving students tools to succeed in regular classes. Montenegro used its small size to quickly pilot nationwide solutions, such as making an entire curriculum accessible through audio textbooks. This demonstrates how a "niche" innovation (accessible format materials) can have a significant impact.
- **Romania** adopted a **broad, equity-centred approach**. Its reforms linked inclusion to desegregation and improvements in overall quality, addressing systemic issues such as disparities between urban and rural schools. Romania's efforts addressed multiple vulnerabilities (ethnicity, disability and poverty) simultaneously. This made the reform complex, but also comprehensive.
- **Serbia's** approach was **systemic and holistic**. It essentially rewrote the rules of education to prioritise inclusion. Serbia didn't shy away

from overhauling bureaucracy, finance, teacher education and community engagement all at once to promote inclusion. This made the reform a long process, but one with deep roots. It also uniquely framed inclusion as a means of improving overall educational outcomes, thereby uniting the agendas of special needs education and general education reform.

Complexity of Reforms: Serbia and Romania were perhaps faced with the most complex reforms due to the size and scope of their task. They had to coordinate changes across thousands of schools and address multiple forms of exclusion simultaneously. This required robust data systems, continuous policy refinement and management of various pilot projects under a unified vision. In contrast, Georgia and Montenegro had a more limited scope, focusing primarily on disability inclusion. However, Georgia's efforts were complicated by the need to undo a rigid Soviet legacy with limited resources, while Montenegro had to introduce entirely new concepts, such as digital textbooks, from scratch. A common theme is that they all encountered complex social challenges in the form of entrenched attitudes and beliefs, which are often more difficult to change than laws. Ensuring that reforms reached every corner of society also presented a challenge. For example, this meant training every teacher in Serbia and ensuring that every rural school in Montenegro was connected to the resource centre network. Each country found ways to manage these complexities, often by phasing in changes (piloting and evaluating them before expanding them), and they did not do so alone – they enlisted the help of NGOs, universities, international donors and local communities.

Main Targets and Outcomes: The immediate targets of reform varied. Romania aimed to end the segregation of students based on ethnicity or disability, with the goal of physically mixing student populations and equalising resources. Meanwhile, Georgia sought to dismantle its special school system and integrate children into mainstream education, general and vocational with the necessary support. Meanwhile, Montenegro aimed to improve access to the curriculum and support services, ensuring that children could genuinely participate and learn once they were in mainstream schools. Serbia targeted the structure and mindset of the education system as a whole, effectively trying to eliminate the "special vs. regular" dichotomy and ensure that all schools could serve all children. As a result, the outcomes also differed. Romania measures its success in terms of reduced segregation and improved equity metrics, such as policies that prevent any school from isolating certain groups and increased enrolment rates of vulnerable children. Georgia measures progress by the number of children with disabilities in neighbourhood schools, which has grown dramatically year on year, and by the shrinking number of children in institutions. Montenegro's outcomes are often described in terms of capacity and tools: for example, dozens of accessible textbooks have been produced; hundreds of teachers have been trained in assistive technology; and virtually all schools have been connected to a resource centre. Serbia's outcomes include the integration of policy and practice: every school now has a functional inclusion team; no children are officially excluded from education; and inclusive education is part of standards of teacher's competencies and standard teacher in-service training. Initial education is still lagging behind and needs further enhancement. There has also been a tangible drop in segregation (fewer special classes, and more Roma students and students with disabilities in mainstream education), as well as improved performance for previously underperforming groups.

Despite their differences, all four countries recognise that inclusive education is an ongoing process. Even when celebrating milestones, they continue to refine and expand their efforts. Romania is developing new monitoring tools and addressing subtle forms of segregation that remain. Now that access has improved, Georgia is focusing on enhancing the quality of inclusive education. For example, they are ensuring that students with disabilities are not only present in class, but are also actively learning and making progress, particularly those with more complex needs. Montenegro is extending its inclusive practices to secondary schools and constantly updating its assistive technology and methodologies as technology evolves. Serbia is focusing on sustaining funding and quality to ensure that the initial enthusiasm translates into permanently higher achievement and opportunity for all groups, while addressing any remaining gaps, such as those affecting Roma children.

Lessons learned and advice for other countries

The stories of Georgia, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia offer a wealth of lessons for any country aspiring to make its education system more inclusive. While each nation's context is unique, the **principles of successful reform** show striking similarities. Here are some key takeaways and motivating insights drawn from their experiences:

High-Level Commitment Paired with Grassroots Action: Inclusive education reform is most effective when there is political will and community support. High-level policies, such as Serbia's 2009 law and Romania's anti-segregation orders, provide a framework and open doors. However, it is the teachers, parents and local leaders who implement that vision. Every country has found that engaging with stakeholders at all levels – through consultations, public awareness campaigns and by empowering local champions – creates a groundswell that sustains the reforms. Inclusion is not just an official decree; it's a movement. Build that movement by uniting everyone, from ministers to mothers, behind the cause of ensuring that every child has the right to learn alongside their peers. Despite their differences, all four countries have one thing in common: inclusive education is a journey with no final endpoint. Even as they celebrate milestones, they continue to refine and expand their efforts. Romania is developing new monitoring tools and tackling subtle forms of segregation that remain. Georgia is improving the quality of inclusive education now that access has improved, ensuring that students with disabilities not only attend class, but also learn and progress – especially those with more complex needs. Montenegro is extending its inclusive practices to secondary schools and universities constantly updating its assistive technology and methodologies as technology evolves. Serbia is focusing on sustaining funding and quality, ensuring that the initial enthusiasm translates into permanently higher achievement and opportunity for all groups, and addressing any gaps, such as those affecting Roma children (although these have improved, they still require continued attention).

Legislation is a Foundation, Not a Finish Line: Although all four countries introduced new laws or regulations to support inclusive education, they discovered that implementation is the real challenge. Clear laws and policies are essential as they remove ambiguity and legitimise change. However, once a law has been passed, the focus must turn to the practicalities: Are schools given guidelines on how to implement them? Is there funding for any new responsibilities, such as accessible materials or extra staff? Is someone monitoring progress? Romania's experience highlights the importance of detailed definitions and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that segregation does not occur. Serbia's experience highlights the importance of embedding requirements, such as school inclusion teams, into regular school standards to ensure buy-in from all stakeholders. Advice: Use legislation to set standards and assign responsibilities, and provide relentless follow-up in the form of training, funding and oversight to turn words into reality.

Invest in People – Teachers and Beyond: A recurring theme is that the success of inclusive education depends on teachers. Unsurprisingly, every country has devoted significant resources to teacher training and support. The lesson is to go beyond one-off workshops and make training continuous and collaborative. Serbia's peer learning model and Montenegro's hands-on coaching from resource centres are excellent examples of this. Teachers need ongoing mentorship as well as initial training, particularly when they encounter new situations. Also, recognise and celebrate teachers who innovate in inclusive classrooms, as they can inspire others. Apart from teachers, investment in other human resources is also crucial: principals who champion inclusion, special educators and therapists who can support mainstream classrooms, and community workers or assistants (such as pedagogical assistants

for Roma students in Serbia or teacher assistants in Georgia) who bridge the gap between school and family. Building a multidisciplinary support network around schools ensures that teachers are not alone and that children's varied needs are met holistically.

Change Mindsets with Awareness and Success Stories: Deeply held social attitudes about disability, ethnicity or difference do not change overnight. However, they do change, and these countries demonstrate this. Public awareness campaigns, inclusive education initiatives and celebrating small victories have all contributed to shifting mindsets. Georgia tackled stigma head-on by showing positive images of children with disabilities learning and playing with their peers, involving respected community figures in promoting inclusion and encouraging parents to speak out about their hopes for their children. Montenegro's success stories about children using technology to learn helped convince sceptics that inclusion is practical and beneficial, not just idealistic. Serbia and Romania demonstrated that mixed classrooms foster tolerance and better prepare all children for life in a diverse society. The takeaway message is to make inclusion visible. Share positive stories in the media, invite the community into schools for events and allow children to act as ambassadors. When people see children learning and laughing together, it is difficult to argue against inclusion.

Adapt and Innovate – One Size Does Not Fit All: Each country adapted its strategies according to its own circumstances, sometimes having to change direction when something wasn't working. Romania, for instance, learned from its initial mistakes and, in 2016, adapted its approach to be more data-driven and cross-sectoral. Innovation was key: Montenegro found a technological solution to an educational barrier, while Georgia modified the role of special schools to serve a new purpose and Serbia experimented with new capacity building approaches. The lesson is to be creative and flexible. If a direct approach meets resistance, find an indirect route, such as using resource centres or pilot programmes to gradually ease people into change. Embrace technology and partnerships that can accelerate progress, such as digital textbooks and e-learning for teacher training. It is important to monitor and evaluate progress continuously (all four countries improved their data systems over time), so you know what is and isn't working and can make adjustments as necessary. Innovation isn't just about high-tech tools; it's about problem-solving and persistence.

Secure Sustainable Support (Financial and Institutional): Reforms often begin with external funding or a surge of political attention. For them to last, however, they must be woven into the country's normal budgets and institutions. Georgia's story highlights the gradual transfer of funding responsibilities from donors to the state, which is a crucial step towards sustainability. Serbia integrated inclusive education roles into the official job descriptions of school staff and officials so that it became part of everyone's work rather than an ad hoc project. Montenegro has ensured that its resource centres are government-funded fixtures of the education landscape. The advice here is to plan for the long term from the outset. Advocate for budget lines for inclusion and demonstrate cost-effectiveness (for example, the cost per student of their inclusive programmes was quite reasonable compared to the long-term cost of exclusion). Include inclusion in teacher accreditation standards, school inspection criteria and education ministry departments so that it does not depend on a few passionate individuals or time-limited projects. In short, make inclusion the norm that carries on by default.

Community and Cross-Sector Partnerships: Inclusive education does not happen in isolation – issues outside of school, such as health, nutrition and social welfare, can greatly affect a child's ability to learn. Romania's cross-sector approach, which links schools with health and social workers in poor communities, offers a model of holistic support. When a child is identified as being hungry or malnourished, or as lacking birth registration, the solution may require social services or healthcare before they can fully benefit from schooling. Likewise,

engaging local government and community organisations increases the reach of the reform. In Serbia and Romania, local NGOs and municipalities have contributed by running after-school learning centres, mentorship programmes and transport services to help vulnerable children get to school. The lesson is to cast a wide net of partnership. Involve health ministries, social protection agencies, local councils, parents' associations and even the children themselves in shaping solutions. A community that understands and supports inclusion will reinforce what happens in the classroom and ensure that children are supported outside of school.

Celebrate Progress, But Keep Pushing Forward: Finally, a key takeaway from these cases is the importance of celebrating victories, such as the first cohort of students with disabilities graduating alongside their peers, schools transitioning from segregated classes to inclusive practices, and policies that eliminate discriminatory practices. This momentum can then be harnessed to drive further change. Success breeds success. Montenegro's pride in being a world pioneer in this area gave it the confidence to continue innovating. Georgia's initial pilot successes formed a coalition of willing participants that was then scaled up nationally. In all countries, the sight of happier children and families was the driving force that kept educators and officials going through tough times. However, they also recognise that there is always more work to be done to truly achieve Education for All. The journey continues, and each new challenge is met with the experience gained from past efforts.

The following country studies are not only stories of policy changes, but even more importantly of human changes. The overarching lesson is one of hope and determination: Inclusive education reform is challenging, but eminently possible. No matter the starting point, every country can find a path towards inclusion by harnessing the right levers of change, be they policy, people or partnerships. When they do so, the rewards are great: not only do previously excluded children gain knowledge and opportunities, but all children learn the values of empathy, diversity and cooperation. By creating schools that welcome all, countries are nurturing future generations who will build more inclusive societies. This is a legacy worth striving for, and it grows richer as each country shares its experiences and inspiration with others.

Georgia: Journey towards inclusion in partnership with Norway

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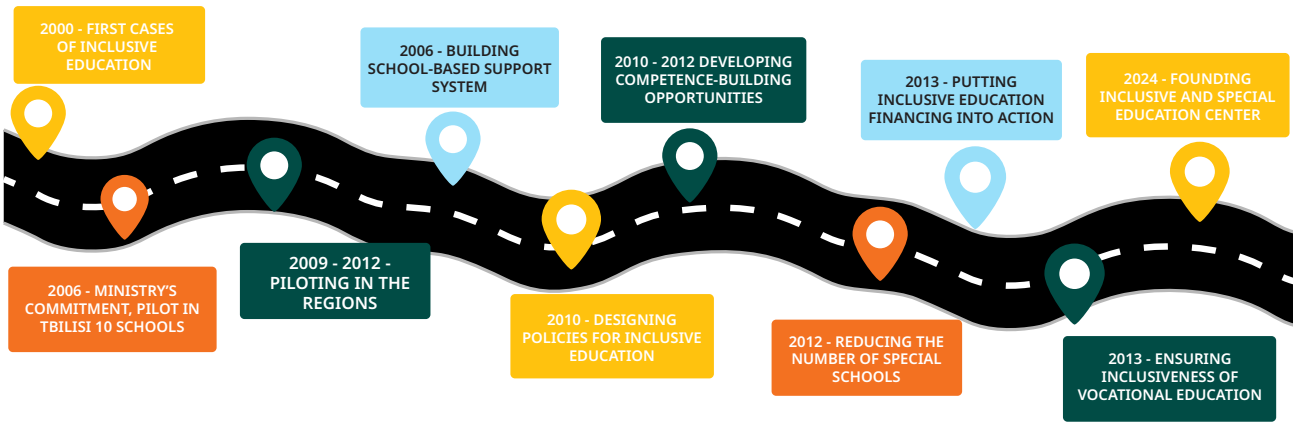
Georgia's journey shows the power of perseverance and partnership. A key insight from Georgia is that sustained international support combined with local activism can fast-track reform. Over nearly two decades, a partnership with Norway and the dedication of Georgian parents proved that even a deeply entrenched system can transform. The conversion of special schools into resource centers stands out as an innovative strategy – it respected the past while moving into the future. For other countries, Georgia offers this inspiring lesson: start small if you must but start. Each success, even in one school, can ripple outward and win over hearts, minds, and eventually, national policy.

Over the years, Georgia has built a robust support system to ensure children with disabilities and special educational needs can thrive in mainstream classrooms. Georgia's approach stands out for its comprehensive teacher training programmes, school support services and the new pilot Inclusive and Special Education Centres that provides consultation and guidance to schools. Close partnerships with international experts – such as a flagship initiative with Norway and UNICEF – have helped the country establish Child Rights Knowledge Hubs at universities and enact forward-looking legislation. Today, inclusive education is woven into Georgia's national education strategy, reflecting a commitment to leave no child behind. The country's vision is strategic and envisages all levels of education, from preschool inclusion to smooth transitions into vocational and higher education.

Home to 3.7 million people, Georgia is a multicultural, upper-middle-income country with a GDP per capita of roughly USD 8,210. In 2023 the government devoted about 3.1 percent of GDP to education and just 0.5 percent to disability programmes–of which only 0.12 percent directly supported children with disabilities. Cultural, religious, and social norms have long set low expectations for children with disabilities, prompting families, professionals, and institutions to view them as passive care recipients rather than independent individuals, which in turn fosters strong–often maternal–dependence and social isolation driven by negative public attitudes and limited awareness of inclusion. These same beliefs shaped the education system for decades, channeling students with disabilities into separate special schools and making their presence in mainstream classrooms a rarity, so that even today–despite generally improving attitudes–significant stigma, especially toward children with intellectual disabilities, persists[1]. In the early 2000s, determined parents in Tbilisi successfully challenged school-enrolment denial for their children with disabilities, securing the creation of a dedicated class in a public school.

Figure 1: ***Georgia's path towards inclusive education***



[1] UNICEF Georgia (2016). Analytical Report. Study on Stigmatization of Children with Disabilities.

According to EMIS data for the school year 2024/2025, 14,080 learners with special educational needs and disabilities are now enrolled in 1,524 public schools–about 1.9–2 percent of all students–underscoring both Georgia's rapid progress and the remaining gap to full inclusion. Several interlocking factors explain Georgia's swift transition from a small pilot in ten Tbilisi schools to a nationwide inclusive-education system: unwavering political commitment galvanized by early 2000s parent advocacy; rapid legal codification that made inclusion a statutory right; long-term partnership with Norway, which provided stable technical know-how and funding; UNICEF's continuous capacity-building and attitude-change efforts, including the #SeeEveryColor campaign; and a ring-fenced financing formula introduced in 2013 that allocates additional resources for every student with special educational needs. These elements created a legal, financial, professional and cultural ecosystem in which inclusiveness is now treated as standard practice rather than an experimental add-on.

Laying the legal and institutional foundations for inclusive education

In the early 2000s, when parents began to demand their children's right to education, Georgia was at a crucial stage in its development and modernisation. Ongoing reforms in many directions extended to the Georgian education system. Exposure to international best practice significantly raised the awareness of the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science and Youth about inclusive education and motivated them to take responsibility and initiate the systematic implementation of inclusive education. The launch of large-scale international projects required the Ministry to form a specialised team with expertise in inclusive education and programme management. This initiative laid the foundation for the Ministry's Inclusive Education Team, which was expanded in 2009 and soon formally established as the Inclusive Education Development Division.

The Georgian education system took a proactive approach by establishing sustainable support mechanisms, primarily through a strong legislative framework, including the National Curriculum which catalysed the replication of these changes across the country. The success of pilot projects in 10 schools led to a significant increase in the enrolment and identification of students with special educational needs beyond the target schools, both in Tbilisi and in the regions. This has created a demand for the Ministry to extend its interventions - such as student assessments, SEN status determination, teacher training and consultations - to additional schools. While expanding the implementation of inclusive education in schools and coordinating this process, the Ministry team also focused on developing sustainable building blocks for inclusive education.

In 2008, the Ministry developed its first Inclusive Education Development Strategic Plan for 2009-2011. The plan details a comprehensive approach to reforming inclusive education by establishing regulations, guidelines, and funding mechanisms, and setting minimum standards for school infrastructure and accessibility. It includes the development of procedures and protocols for identifying and assessing the needs of students with special educational needs (SEN), utilizing assessment tools and teams, and establishing protocols for creating and implementing individual education plans and evaluating SEN students' academic performance. Additionally, the plan aims to increase the competence of teachers and special educators through enriched initial teacher training programs and professional development. It also seeks to expand educational opportunities for SEN children at the preschool level and to develop vocational training opportunities in schools and colleges. Since then, the Ministry has revised the strategic document twice to reflect progress and address emerging challenges. The most recent strategic plan 2022-2030 Unified National Strategy of Education and Science of Georgia was launched in 2022, prioritizing the improvement of the quality of education and its inclusiveness through the use of innovative teaching approaches.

Naturally, all parties involved in the development of inclusive education agreed that establishing a strong legal basis was essential for moving from pilot processes to sustainable and systematic implementation, especially since Georgia already had anti-discrimination legislation, adhered to international conventions and had a constitution that guaranteed the right to education for all. In addition, Georgia's modernisation efforts since the early 2000s included the updating of many pieces of legislation, or developing new legislation, including the Law on General Education and the National Curriculum. As a result, by 2006, the law already recognised the term 'inclusive education' but considered the provision of inclusive education to be a voluntary initiative of educational institutions rather than a mandatory obligation. In 2010, important amendments were made to the General Education Law. These amendments allowed students with special educational needs who had never been enrolled in school to be enrolled in age-appropriate classes. They also required the development of individual education plans based on the national curriculum and promoted the use of sign language for deaf students. In addition, key terms such as 'inclusive education' and 'pupils with special educational needs' were redefined in the law. The concept was broadened to include the equal participation of all students in the educational process, including gifted children, ethnic minorities, students with different abilities and needs, and those from socially vulnerable groups, thus going beyond the initial focus on students with disabilities. The recognition that not all students with disabilities face learning difficulties, while some students without disabilities do, also led to the introduction of the concept of students with special educational needs (SEN) in 2008, which was officially defined by law in 2010. According to this definition, SEN status is granted to students who have educational needs due to sensory, cognitive, behavioural, emotional or physical difficulties, as well as to those with learning disabilities.

Today, the law makes the provision of inclusive education an obligation rather than a discretion for schools, requires the allocation of additional state funding to schools for inclusive education and the provision of support services for pupils. The adoption of a regulatory document specific to inclusive education in 2018 - Rules for the introduction, development and monitoring of inclusive education and the identification of students with special educational needs - provided a clear path for the implementation of inclusive education. In addition, the introduction of accessibility standards among the requirements for the authorisation of educational institutions ensured (to some extent) the improvement of the infrastructure of preschools, schools, vocational schools and universities built during the Soviet era.

As inclusive education expanded, there was a need to delegate some responsibilities from the Ministry to its subordinate agencies and to strengthen these agencies with staff with the necessary expertise. As a result, from 2010, inclusive education components were divided among the National Curriculum and Assessment Center the National Centre for Teacher Professional Development and the Agency for Educational and Scientific Infrastructure Development. This delegation of responsibilities marked a fundamental step in the systemic development of inclusive education.

Figure 2: ***Subordinate agencies within the Ministry supporting inclusive education, 2024***

Today, all agencies under the Ministry support inclusive education. The National Centre for Teacher Professional Development leads capacity building for educators across all levels and is responsible for training sign language interpreters and mobility and orientation specialists. The Agency for Educational and Scientific Infrastructure ensures physical accessibility and provides Braille and audio textbooks and assistive technologies. The National Centre for Education Quality Enhancement oversees compliance with inclusive education standards during accreditation. Education Management Information System collects and maintains data on SEN students and support personnel, informing school funding allocations. The National Assessment and Examination Centre evaluates teacher qualifications in inclusive education, which affect their remuneration. The Professional Skills Agency enhances vocational education inclusiveness and coordinates support services for SEN learners. Finally, the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions (Mandaturi Office) established the Inclusive and Special Education Support Center in 2024 to support the implementation of inclusive education processes.

Once inclusive schooling gained traction in Georgia's primary and secondary system, reform energy has moved *downward* to preschool, where early pilot projects (launched by parents in 2009) and the 2016 Law on Early and Preschool Education–developed with UNICEF–set national standards that require every kindergarten to admit children with special needs, run a school-readiness programme, and employ qualified staff; enrolment of young children with disabilities has since risen, four universities now teach inclusive-early-years modules, and many kindergartens have begun hiring special-needs educators, psychologists and speech therapists. Yet implementation remains uneven because of the lack of a comprehensive

approach to early inclusive education, while the Ministry is responsible for educational standards and curricula, the implementation is the responsibility of the municipality: inspections still prioritise hygiene over pedagogy, data on disability are patchy, specialist services (especially for hearing and vision) are scarce, budgets and trained staff are limited, and families often delay enrolment for fear of stigma–leaving inclusive practice strong in some kindergartens and minimal in others; closing these gaps through consistent monitoring, stable funding for support staff and materials, and better transition planning into primary school is the next priority.

Further up the system, vocational education has become a relative bright spot: reforms launched in 2013 with Norwegian support now see roughly 270 learners with special needs enter VET each year, aided by flexible admissions, targeted funding for VET schools and on-campus support services–though career guidance and employer incentives still lag. In higher education, enrolment of students with disabilities in the last five years has climbed to about 400 per year thanks to exam accommodation, mandatory (if minimal) accessibility standards and automatic state scholarships, but universities implement support unevenly and often rely on students to request their own adjustments; developing campus-wide disability services and strengthening links to the labour market remain key challenges.

Capacity building and support for inclusive schools

Teachers' widespread attitudes were shaped by several factors embedded in the Soviet education system: Traditionally, higher education programmes did not equip teachers with the skills needed to teach SEN students, and the rare inclusion of SEN students in schools made it difficult to develop alternative perspectives to defectologists (in the Soviet era, this qualification was generally obtained through well-developed undergraduate training programmes for teachers assigned to students with SEN, which focused primarily on 'treating' the dysfunction, often within a specialised or therapeutic setting). Although they had already been renamed special education teachers (by law), their competences differed significantly from those required of special education teachers.

Acknowledging the need for significant investment in capacity building, it was decided that the Teachers' Professional Development Centre, would lead this effort. The Centre recruited staff with expertise in inclusive education who develop a comprehensive training cycle for both general and special education teachers. A particularly noteworthy initiative was the intensive 120-hour in-service training programme for special education teachers. The training covered key topics such as understanding inclusive education, developmental milestones and disorders, assessment and evaluation of students, writing individual education plans, universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, behaviour management, classroom management, etc. At the same time, the Centre set up a team of 10 consultants, responsible for coaching teachers and special education teachers after their training, focusing on the planning and implementation of educational processes for SEN students. Soon schools were requesting help almost exclusively for challenging-behaviour cases, signalling that teachers felt least prepared in this area; the consultants quickly became known as "behaviour specialists," and behaviour-management expertise was henceforth treated as the top hiring criterion for new staff.

in 2012 the Ministry began to develop and strengthen university programmes to train future teachers and special educators, ensuring a steady flow of well-prepared professionals into the field. In 2013, with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, Ilia State University established a master's programme in special education. Later, with the support of international donors, two state universities - Tbilisi Ivane Javakhishvili State University and Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University - developed special teacher training and certification programmes (one year), with their first intake in 2024. Another important milestone is the integration of courses/topics on inclusive education (covering topics such as curriculum modification, differentiated instruction, universal design for learning and classroom management) into the teacher training programmes at five state universities. UNICEF played a key role in this initiative.

The establishment of internal support systems within schools involved expanding and diversifying the school staff by hiring specialists with more experience in teaching students with special needs (mostly defectologists, renamed special teachers) or redirecting the duties of existing school psychologists to support inclusive education. As the inclusive education programme expanded, special teachers and psychologists, initially introduced in pilot schools, became increasingly common in schools with SEN pupils. In addition, many regular teachers expressed interest in moving into the role of special educators, enhancing their skills through the 120-hour special educator training programme.

To assist teachers in writing IEPs, the Ministry developed several manuals and training programmes implemented through the National Centre for Teacher Professional Development. However, it soon became clear that teachers were struggling to adapt the National Curriculum for SEN pupils with severe and profound disabilities; it was also difficult for teachers to plan the training programme for those who had dropped out of school for various reasons and needed to meet the key requirements of the curriculum in an accelerated manner; and it was also evident that the National Curriculum could not fully cover the subjects that were additionally required for pupils with visual and hearing impairments. In response, the Ministry decided to develop an extended curriculum for students with visual and hearing impairments, including subjects such as Georgian sign language and orientation and mobility training, an alternative curriculum focusing on the development of functional skills for students with severe intellectual disabilities (this curriculum was developed entirely on the basis of the National Curriculum, with an emphasis on the transformation and use of skills in everyday activities) as well as a catch-up and accelerated curriculum for students re-entering the education system (with UNICEF support and funding by the Bulgarian Government).

To reduce existing misconceptions, negative attitudes and stigma towards children with disabilities, and to change cultural and social norms, UNICEF implemented a national communication campaign called #seeeverycolor.

The #SeeEveryColor campaign, aimed at addressing stigmas against children with disabilities in Georgia, was officially launched on February 23, 2017. with the support of the European Union and USAID. This campaign significantly increased knowledge (reaching 94%) and reduced negative perceptions and attitudes towards children and adolescents with disabilities by 13%.

Transforming special schools into resource schools

The closure and repurposing of Georgia's special-school network marked a watershed in the country's education and child-protection reforms, but its success has so far been only partial and leaves a complex set of challenges to resolve. Before 2010 the Ministry ran twelve special schools - eleven of them residential - serving roughly 850 pupils, many of whom had been placed there not because of disability alone but because their families lived in poverty or wanted Georgian-language schooling unavailable locally. Conditions were poor: pupils were separated from home communities, buildings were in poor conditions, and pedagogy was still rooted in Soviet-era "defectology," which sought to correct impairment rather than foster inclusive learning or independent living. The 2010–2012 deinstitutionalisation drive with focus on special schools, coordinated with UNICEF and associated with the wider child-welfare reform, carried out individual assessments of every pupil, shuttered five of the schools outright and transferred most children either back to their biological families, to foster care or to nearby mainstream schools that had just begun practising inclusion. A new gate-keeping procedure–managed by regional psycho-educational assessment teams–was introduced to ensure that no child could henceforth be enrolled in a special school without a multidisciplinary review of educational and social needs, effectively ending the former "open-door" admissions policy.

These measures reduced the number of boarding institutions to seven "resource schools" and cut enrolment to 417 pupils by 2024, demonstrating clear progress toward meeting UN CRPD obligations and freeing many children from institutional life. At the same time, the reform

exposed difficult trade-offs. Teachers feared job losses, principals worried about shrinking budgets, and some parents–especially those of children with severe or multiple disabilities–questioned whether mainstream schools could provide adequate support. Although most receiving schools were backed by the new Regional Multidisciplinary Teams (MDTs), they often lacked specialist staff and accessible infrastructure, so several pupils moved again, into integrated classes established in 2014 (currently twelve classes–eleven for autism, one for hearing impairment–serving about one hundred learners) or into home-based tuition. The resource schools themselves, while renamed, were left with the same per-capita funding formula as ordinary schools even though they now served only high-need students, making it difficult to finance low student-to-teacher ratios or modernise facilities. As a result, schools for students with hearing impairments still await Frequency Modulation (FM) and acoustic upgrades, and blind-student programmes need additional Braillers, tactile graphics and Georgian-language screen-reader software.

Recognising that expertise built up over decades should not be lost, the Ministry amended the General Education Law in 2016 to redefine special schools as resource schools and, in 2023, gave them a formal mandate to deliver outreach and training to neighbouring mainstream schools. With UNICEF's support and Norway Government funding, administrators, special teachers and therapists from those schools have since been retrained to provide consultative services on sign-language use, orientation-and-mobility skills, curriculum adaptation and assistive-technology deployment. Early results show promise: mainstream teachers value on-site coaching, and a small lending scheme now circulates specialised devices regionally. Yet funding is still insufficient for full regional coverage, and many resource-school staff need continued mentoring from the Inclusive and Special Education Support Center to shift fully from a custodial to an advisory role.

Georgia's special-school reform therefore stands as a significant, though incomplete, achievement: it broke a long tradition of segregation, aligned education policy with the broader deinstitutionalisation agenda, and pushed inclusive practices into the mainstream system far faster than would otherwise have happened. But the transition also revealed how fragile inclusion remains when resources, training and parental confidence lag behind legal change. Completing the journey will require sustained capital investment to modernise the seven remaining resource schools, a funding formula that reflects the higher costs of intensive support, tighter links between resource-school outreach teams and the Inclusive and Special Education Support Centre, and stronger monitoring to ensure that integrated classes and home tuition remain exceptional, not default, pathways. Only through that continued effort can Georgia turn a partial success into a fully realised rights-based model in which every child–regardless of disability severity–has meaningful, well-supported access to learning in the least restrictive environment.

System-building through long-term collaboration with Norway

As mentioned earlier, Georgia's journey toward system-wide inclusion began in the early 2000s, when a group of parents in Tbilisi persuaded the Ministry to pilot inclusive classes in ten motivated public schools–demonstrating that children with disabilities could succeed alongside their peers. Norway joined in 2006, refining the model, underwriting teacher-training cycles and helping formalise regional MDTs. With this local–international partnership in place, the Ministry quickly embedded inclusive principles in the legislation and expanded them nationwide. Rapid legislative action followed: amendments to the Law on General Education embedded the right to inclusive education, while Norway continued to underwrite teacher-training cycles, itinerant resource teachers and MDTs. As inclusion took root in general education, attention shifted to other levels. The 2016 Law on Early and Preschool Education, drafted with UNICEF's support, obliged every municipal kindergarten to admit children with disabilities, run a school-readiness programme and hire specialist staff; enrolment has risen, but quality remains uneven because municipal budgets, data systems and trained personnel differ widely. In vocational education, a

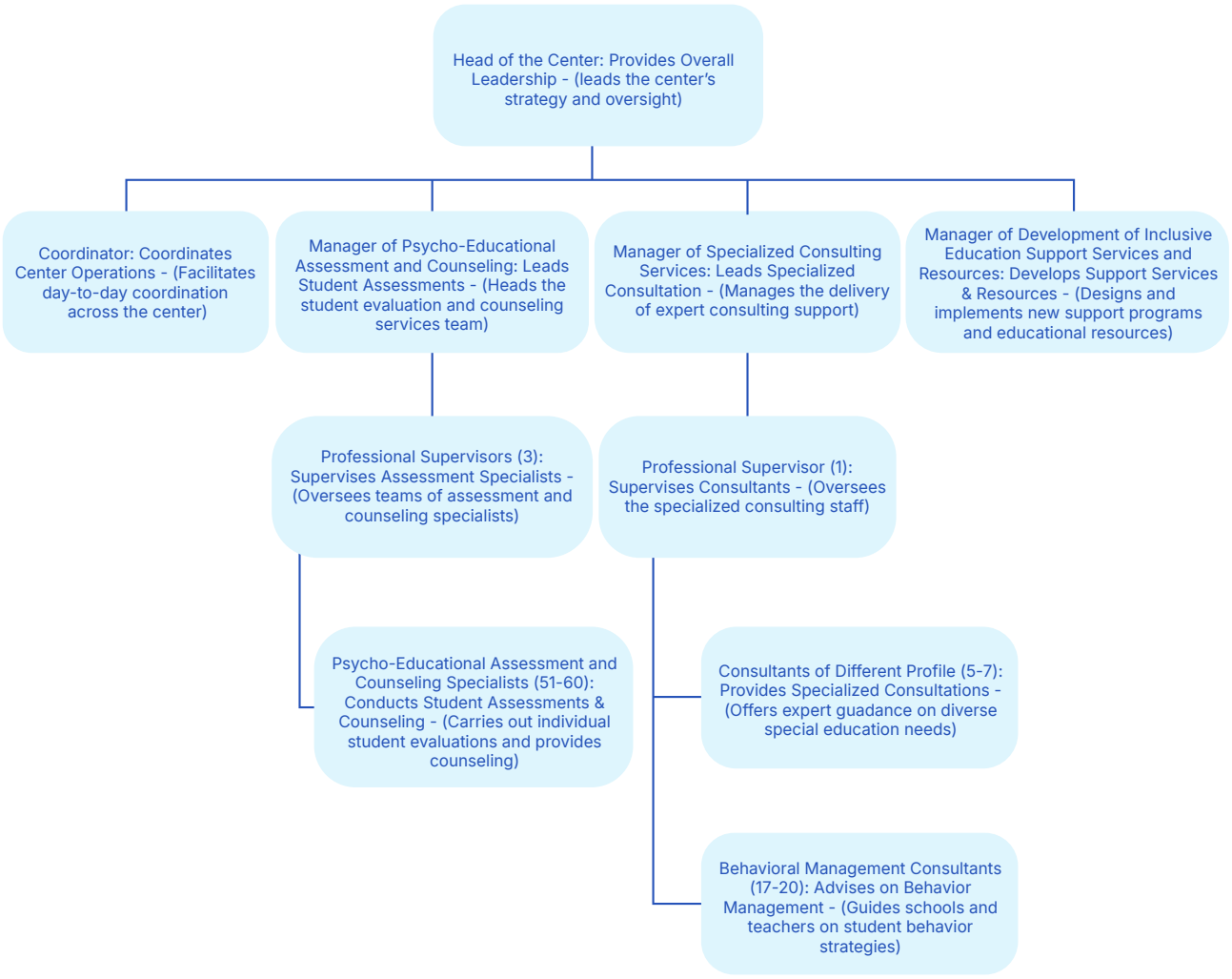
2013 reform–again backed by Norway–introduced flexible admissions and targeted grants, allowing about 270 learners with special needs to enter each intake, though career guidance and employer demand still lag. Higher-education inclusion has likewise advanced: automatic study grants and entrance-exam accommodations now bring roughly 80 students with disabilities into universities annually, yet campus support is inconsistent and often triggered only when students self-advocate.

By 2019 the Ministry recognized that it could no longer manage policy, training and direct school support from one department. Seeking to modernise how schools are supported, Georgia's Ministry of Education renewed its partnership with Norway and looked to Norway's STATPED agency as an example of a single, coordinated structure for inclusive-education services. With the Norwegian Ministry of Education and UNICEF, it launched the three-year Leave No Child Out initiative (2021-23). The project began by analysing every layer of Georgia's inclusive-education landscape–governance arrangements, inter-agency coordination, staffing patterns, school needs and the strengths and gaps in the seven remaining resource schools–while Norwegian experts provided technical advice.

A renewed tripartite partnership - Ministry, Norway and UNICEF - launched the three-year Leave No Child Out programme (2021-23) to map fragmentation and design an integrated support system. The assessment showed that frontline help for schools was fragmented across several sub-agencies, resulting in patchy coverage and duplication of effort. Reviewers recommended gathering all external support functions under one roof, and the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions -already responsible for school safety, psychologists and social workers - was judged the best host. MDTs, integrated-class supervisors and behaviour consultants were therefore moved into the Office. Throughout 2022-23 Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions' structure and mandate was amended, a new staffing table approved and two intensive development tracks introduced: a 44-hour leadership programme (mission design, change management, user participation) and a 70-hour counsellor programme (universal design, AAC, hearing- and vision-support strategies, behaviour management). Budgets previously funding MDTs and TPDC-housed behaviour specialists were consolidated. Additional speech-and-language therapists, psychologists and special educators were recruited, and draft legislation clarified lines of authority and funding streams.

These reforms culminated in the 2024 launch of Georgia's Inclusive and Special Education Support System, now housed within the Office. Through this state-funded structure, teams deliver psycho-educational assessments, specialized consultations, on-site coaching for teachers and system-wide data monitoring - providing schools with an integrated, nationally coordinated source of expertise that mirrors, in Georgian form, the design principles that proved effective in Norway. The Support Centre's mandate now includes several key areas: to provide psycho-educational assessment and counselling at both individual and systemic (school) levels based on referrals; to provide specialised counselling services for students with hearing, visual, communication and behavioural disorders; to develop services and resources to support inclusive education; to develop existing professional resources/ competencies in the system; to contribute to the development and dissemination of knowledge in inclusive and special education; to generate and analyse statistics, monitor progress and prepare reports. The Centre operates with a four-tier organisational structure. The table below outlines the structure of the Support Centre for Inclusive and Special Education and the number of staff employed by the Centre.

The centre has a director and employs coordinators and managers who are responsible for supervising and promoting different directions, such as general and specialised psycho-educational assessment, counselling and resource development. In addition, the Centre has operational teams (of 60 professionals) for psycho-educational assessment and counselling (formerly known as multidisciplinary teams), organised both regionally and by specialisation. These professionals work directly with children and schools and are managed by professional supervisors who ensure their effective operation. The Centre actively works with resource schools to support their transformation into inclusive



educational support services. In partnership with the Centre, teachers and specialists from resource schools advise other schools and develop their expertise in areas such as hearing, vision and multiple disabilities.

In order to ensure that the Centre operates effectively, legislative changes were first enacted and the Centre's operating rules and regulations were established. In addition, job descriptions and work protocols for the staff were developed and agreed upon for the efficient management of the Centre's services. The Inclusive and Special Education Support Center is currently in an active development phase. UNICEF continues to support the Center by developing documents and protocols, and by organising workshops for its staff to ensure its effective functioning under its new mandate.

Funding

The Ministry's key decision in 2013 to provide additional funding to schools for inclusive education was seen as an important turning point in strengthening the school-based support system. The amount of funding received by educational institutions depends on the number of students with special educational needs enrolled or identified by the educational institution, e.g. in the case of 1 to 5 SEN students, the educational institution receives 2840 euros per year. In the case of 6 to 10 SEN pupils, the amount is 5680 euros, and this amount increases according to the number of pupils. The minimum funding for a school in 2024 is 2,840 euros per year for 1 to 5 pupils, and the maximum is 28,465 euros per year for 46 to 50 pupils. These funds will be used to pay for additional specialists employed by the school

to support the provision of inclusive education (specialist teachers, personal assistants for SEN pupils), teaching resources, assistive technology and transport. The school can decide how to use this amount according to the needs of the student. In the initial phase of the introduction of inclusive education, the Ministry took an important decision and refused to introduce the practice of additional remuneration for those teachers who teach SEN pupils in mainstream classes. The Ministry of Education has gradually increased funding for inclusive education in schools.

In recent years (since 2017), the Ministry, with the support of NGOs, has started to develop a support service/programme for transitions within schools and from school to the next level of education. This initiative is based on evidence of the specific vulnerability of individuals with special educational needs during transitions, which highlights the need for comprehensive support during the adaptation phase in a new educational setting. Guidance documents have been developed, and several pilot initiatives have been implemented to support transition activities. One such project, supported by UNICEF and the Government of Norway in 2022, was Strengthening Inclusive Education in 10 Public Schools through Innovative Approaches. The Centre for Supporting Inclusive and Special Education was identified as responsible for the systemic implementation of transition support practices.

Nowadays, support specialists working in schools are expected to work as multidisciplinary teams, supporting teachers and pupils throughout the learning process and ensuring a prompt response to pupils' identified needs. The composition of support teams in schools varies according to the specific needs of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities. As schools began to include students with significant intellectual, behavioural and physical disabilities, the Ministry took a crucial step by formally authorising the position of personal assistant for SEN students in 2021. This policy move was significant in ensuring the safety and independence of students with high support needs within the school environment. The National Centre for Teacher Professional Development also created a training programme for assistants, further strengthening their role. The Ministry is also committed to sustaining the funded components after project completion and has fully met this commitment by providing funding for the Support Center, multidisciplinary teams, teacher training, support resources and school accessibility.

While significant progress has been made in developing these programmes, further systemic implementation and refinement is needed. This includes developing the Georgian Sign Language curriculum and improving Georgian language teaching methodology for both linguistic minorities and deaf students, as the literacy rate of deaf people remains significantly lower than that of their peers and there are currently no deaf students in higher education.

Addressing remaining challenges

Georgia's inclusive-education reforms have laid a solid legal and institutional foundation, yet several gaps still keep many children from learning–and thriving–alongside their peers. One pressing issue is the rapid proliferation of day-care centres run by the social-protection sector. These centres, valued by families for transport, meals and therapies, often operate during school hours and, lacking a clear mandate for education, inadvertently draw children away from classrooms. Without national guidelines that define their role as complementary–not alternative–to schooling, day-care schedules continue to clash with the school day, leaving children with disabilities academically behind and socially isolated. Clear standards that coordinate individual education plans, therapy timetables and transport across schools and day-care providers are therefore essential.

Reliable, early data are another missing link. Fewer than two percent of Georgia's pupils are formally identified as having special educational needs, largely because no SEN status is assigned in preschool and the education ministry has limited information before Grade 1. Introducing

systematic screening and a preschool SEN registry tied to the Education Management Information System would allow authorities to plan budgets, staff and transitions more effectively while helping schools track attendance rather than mere enrolment. Regular monitoring could reveal when pupils skip lessons to attend rehabilitation sessions or stay home because transport is unavailable- problems that remain hidden when only registration figures are reported.

Funding and accessibility also demand attention. Although new buildings meet basic access standards, half of public schools and most kindergartens still lack ramps, lifts or adapted toilets, while resource schools operate on mainstream per-capita budgets that do not cover low student–staff ratios or specialised equipment such as FM systems or Braille embossers. Revising school-funding formulas to reflect severity of need–and earmarking capital grants for retrofitting–would let mainstream and resource schools purchase assistive devices, renovate infrastructure and pay competitive salaries that stem turnover among aides and specialist teachers.

The creation of the Inclusive and Special Education Support Centre has unified external services, yet its regional teams are still calibrating caseloads and protocols. Schools require faster on-site coaching, especially when confronting challenging behaviour, so that pupils can remain in class for a full timetable instead of being sent home early. Municipalities, for their part, need standard job profiles and career ladders, as well as adequate training and pay for personal assistants to stabilise the workforce and build expertise over time.

Smooth transitions are equally critical. Preschool children move into first grade, school-leavers enter vocational colleges, and trainees graduate into the labour market, but only pilot guidelines support these handovers. Each transition should be planned jointly by families, schools, the Support Centre and, where relevant, day-care staff, yet coordination across ministries remains ad hoc. In vocational education, flexible admissions and targeted grants now attract about 270 learners with special needs per intake, but employer awareness and incentives lag, limiting graduates' job prospects. University enrolment of students with disabilities has reached roughly 80 a year thanks to exam accommodations and state scholarships, but campuses still deliver support inconsistently and often only when students request it, underscoring the need for a minimum national standard for higher-education accessibility.

Changing attitudes remains a cross-cutting task. The #SeeEveryColor campaign demonstrated how strategic messaging can reshape public perceptions; a follow-up initiative co-branded by the education, health and social-protection ministries could promote the idea that therapies and schooling complement each other and that inclusive classrooms, not segregated services, should be the norm. Establishing a permanent inter-ministerial committee to track joint indicators - enrolment, attendance, therapy hours, day-care use - and report quarterly to Parliament would help officials identify bottlenecks and respond in real time.

Georgia's next phase is therefore less about new legislation and more about implementation and expansion: capacitating resource centers, expansion of inclusive education to preschool and higher education levels, clarifying the supportive - not substitutive - role of day-care centres, aligning funding with actual needs, embedding robust data loops from preschool onward, and ensuring that every child spends the bulk of the day in an accessible, well-supported learning environment. Only then will the country's impressive legal framework translate into the everyday reality of inclusive, high-quality education for all.

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Inclusive education in Montenegro: From special schools to inclusive practices

Montenegro's inclusive education reform is distinguished by a bold social awareness campaign and firm policy commitments. In the early 2010s, the country's "It's About Ability" campaign helped transform public attitudes: within three years, support for children with disabilities learning alongside peers rose dramatically to 80%. This shift in mindset paved the way for strong government action. Through successive national strategies and legal reforms, Montenegro equipped schools and teachers to welcome diverse learners, setting up resource centres and training programmes to support students with special needs. The country is also expanding early support services – from day-care centres to improved early disability detection – to reach families who need help. By coupling community engagement with robust policy, Montenegro has created an education system where inclusion is the norm – showing how a small nation can achieve big changes in attitudes and opportunities.

By pioneering digital accessible textbooks, created an important lever for change. The DAISY initiative is a shining example of innovation: it harnessed technology to remove barriers, and it did so by uniting people from many fields around a common goal. The success was so profound that when the COVID-19 pandemic struck years later, Montenegro's investment in digital learning tools paid off widely – those audio textbooks became invaluable for remote education, benefiting all students during school closures.

Changing policies and changing minds

Montenegro's journey toward inclusive education exemplifies the broader shift seen across Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the past two decades. Like many countries in the region, Montenegro historically educated children with disabilities in segregated "special" schools or institutions. In the early 2000s, only a handful of children with special needs were included in regular schools. Two policy shifts altered that landscape decisively. First, ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the pressures of EU accession talks demanded legislation that guaranteed every child the right to learn alongside peers - prompting amendments to the General Law on Education and adoption of the Law on Education of Children with Special Educational Needs. Second, a sequence of Inclusive Education Strategies (2008-2013, 2014-2018, 2019-2025) set measurable targets for accessibility, quality and teacher capacity, anchoring inclusion in national planning rather than short-term projects. Third, companion strategies on digitalisation of the education system (2022-2027) and early-childhood development (2021-2025), which included assistive technology and family-centred early care into mainstream planning.

Public attitudes evolved in tandem. UNICEF's *It's About Ability* campaign (2010-2013) used children's stories, TV spots and community debates to challenge stigma; by 2015 the share of citizens who considered it *acceptable* for a child with disabilities to sit in the same class as their own rose from 35 per cent to 78 per cent, while acceptance of close friendships climbed from 22 per cent to 60 per cent. With social support growing, policymakers could move from rhetoric to structural change.

During 2012–2013, Montenegro's special schools underwent significant transformation and reform. The Ministry of Education redesignated three special schools as Resource Centres – transforming into national hubs mandated to *support* inclusion instead of *substituting* for it. This paradigm shift – moving from a "special school" mentality to a resource-and-support model – required overcoming initial resistance from educators who feared for their jobs or doubted inclusion's feasibility. Through pilot projects and outreach, mindsets gradually changed. Resource Centre staff began to see their role not as segregated caregivers but as partners in each child's education, working together with families and regular teachers. As one educator noted, inclusion demanded *"seeing the child first, rather than their impairment"* – a fundamental shift in philosophy

that Montenegro embraced. The inclusive education reform thus reflects a broader change in societal values, affirming that diversity enriches the educational experience and all children have the right to learn together.

The three Centres each assumed an explicit thematic mandate while sharing a common outreach mission. Resource Centre "Dr Peruta Ivanović", Kotor became the hub for hearing and speech, offering sign-language tuition, audiology services and communication technology; Resource Centre "1. Jun", Podgorica took the lead on intellectual disability and autism, delivering functional-academics and behaviour-support programmes; and Resource Centre "Podgorica" focused on physical and visual impairments, hosting the national tactile/Braille and DAISY-textbook studios. Since 2018, all three operate assistive-technology classrooms, run mobile multidisciplinary teams and coach mainstream teachers - turning former "special" staff into partners who travel to children rather than transferring children to segregated sites .

This resource-centre architecture has proved central for Montenegro. It secures specialist services without reviving segregation, aligns with EU standards on inclusive schooling, and offers a scalable template for neighbouring states that face similar demographic and fiscal constraints. The pages that follow trace how this model underpins three core pillars -accessible learning materials, assistive-technology networks and early-childhood intervention - and where further consolidation is needed to complete Montenegro's inclusive-education journey. They offer itinerant outreach, teacher coaching, production of accessible materials (e.g., Braille and DAISY books) and, where necessary, short-term intensive programmes for children. Their staff reinforced their expertise through regional peer learning, most notably a study visit to Serbia's inclusive flagship "Milan Petrović" school, which inspired Montenegro's own Assistive-Technology Labs and training packages for mainstream teachers.

Montenegro's Resource Centres work in tandem with the social-protection sector, having signed agreements with every municipal social-work centre to house families during early-intervention visits and to formalise referral and payment pathways, positioning inclusion as a joint welfare–education mandate. Building on that platform, the Ministry of Education–supported by UNICEF–has embedded day-care expertise into kindergartens and primary schools in 11 municipalities, so therapeutic services and classroom learning reinforce one another instead of running in parallel . This creates a multi-tier network in which Resource Centres, day-care services, schools, social-welfare units and health professionals co-design Individualised Plans, ensuring every child receives seamlessly coordinated specialist support in their natural settings. Specialists flag developmental risks; municipal referral commissions coordinate assessment; and Centres deploy *mobile teams* to homes, preschools and primary classrooms. These arrangements have begun to erase the old boundary between "special" and "regular" provision, embedding specialist know-how inside the general system rather than at its margins.

The resource-centre architecture delivers three strategic pay-offs. First, it secures specialist support nationwide without recreating segregation. Second, it fulfils EU and CRPD obligations by ensuring that expertise follows the child. Third, it offers a scalable template for neighbours facing similar demographic and fiscal constraints. The sections that follow trace how this systemic pivot underpins Montenegro's flagship pillars–accessible learning materials, assistive-technology networks and family-centred early intervention–and where consolidation is still needed to complete the country's inclusive-education journey.

Resource centres' roles - starting in early intervention

Inclusive education in Montenegro does not begin when a child enters primary school – it starts much earlier, through proactive early childhood intervention (ECI) services that reach children in their first years of life. Early intervention is a critical part of the inclusive education ecosystem, ensuring that developmental delays or disabilities are addressed as early as possible so that children can transition smoothly into preschool and school alongside their peers. Montenegro's approach to ECI has been to extend the inclusive philosophy into the domain of early childhood, transforming

what used to be "special" early education services into inclusive, family-centered support. In essence, the journey has moved *"from the traditional concept of the special school to the homes of the youngest children,"* showing how the once isolated "special" professionals are now becoming partners to parents in the child's natural environment. This shift illustrates the systemic approach Montenegro has adopted: building an inclusive continuum that spans from infancy through the entire education system.

Before the reforms, services for young children with disabilities in Montenegro were limited and mostly institution-based. If a child was born with a disability or developmental difficulty, the main options were sporadic therapies (often in medical settings) or enrollment in a special preschool or daycare, separate from mainstream children. Special schools traditionally focused on school-age children and had little outreach to kids below school age. This began to change with the inclusive education reforms. The Law on Education of Children with Special Needs and the Law on Social and Child Protection were updated to establish early intervention programs as a right and a mandated service. Importantly, the redefinition of special schools into Resource Centres included the expectation that they would provide early childhood services in addition to school-age education. In practice, each Resource Centre developed early intervention programs targeting the age group and disabilities of children they specialize in.

Resource Centre "Podgorica" (formerly the Institute for Education and Rehabilitation of Disabled Children and Youth) was a pioneer in this effort. It underwent a profound paradigm shift in the early 2010s, even changing its name to signal a new orientation toward inclusion. As staff opened up to new ways of working, the Centre started an early intervention program in the 2013/2014 school year, focusing on infants and toddlers with physical, motor, or visual impairments. The program provides individualized therapy and stimulation for children, delivered by a multidisciplinary team that includes somatopedists (physical development specialists), tiflologists (visual impairment specialists), speech therapists, psychologists, and physiotherapists. Sessions are tailored to each child's needs and often involve parents directly in the interventions (parents might be guided on exercises to do with their child, for example). The Resource Centre Podgorica's early intervention services might take place at the Centre and – increasingly – through home visits, where specialists coach families on helping their child's development in everyday routines.

At the Resource Centre "1. Jun" in Podgorica, which serves children with intellectual disabilities and autism, early intervention efforts have included training and outreach to local preschools. Specialists from "1. Jun" work with very young children on the autism spectrum, using play-based therapy and behavioral techniques to improve social and communication skills. They also invite kindergarten teachers to their Centre for workshops on strategies for including children with autism in regular preschool classes. This collaboration has two benefits: the children receive early specialized support, and the preschool staff become more confident and skilled in working with those children in an inclusive setting. Similarly, the Resource Centre for Hearing and Speech "Dr. Peruta Ivanović" in Kotor opened its doors to infants and toddlers with hearing impairments. In Kotor's program, a notable practice is that parents participate alongside their children in early intervention sessions. By having parents present, the therapists ensure that families learn how to communicate effectively with their deaf or hard-of-hearing child (for example, by using sign language or visual communication methods). This Centre also helps prepare children for inclusive preschool or school by organizing visits to mainstream institutions – essentially easing the transition by familiarizing the child (and the school) with each other. Such visits help reduce anxiety and build bridges between special and mainstream settings, making inclusion a more natural next step.

A cornerstone of Montenegro's early intervention model is the adoption of the Family-Oriented Early Intervention (FOEI) approach. FOEI emphasizes empowering families to support their child's development, rather than having the "experts" do everything in a clinic. In 2013, Montenegro invested in building capacity for FOEI by training Resource Centre staff extensively. Teams from RC Podgorica underwent a series of four training modules (conducted in April, May, and June 2017) that covered setting functional developmental

goals, conducting home visits, coaching parents, developing Individual Family Support Plans, and using standardized tools like the "International Guide for Monitoring Child Development".
The training was very hands-on, involving self-assessment and reflection to help professionals shift their mindset from a therapy-Centred model to a family-Centred model. Following this, in 2021 RC Podgorica launched a pilot FOEI service. Although the RC was not included in the piloting process they adopted this approach and as of the latest report, six families and their children are actively involved in FOEI services at RC Podgorica. In FOEI, a specialist (or a small team) visits the family regularly at home, works with the child in their natural environment (like during playtime or daily routines), and guides the parents on techniques to stimulate development through everyday activities. This approach has been shown internationally to improve developmental outcomes and family well-being, and Montenegrin families have similarly responded very positively. One preschool teacher who participated in joint workshops with Resource Centre specialists remarked: *"It was a great success because we learned about the specifics of the children who come to them for treatment, but we also learned how to design and implement some activities ourselves. More importantly, we got to know each other and made contacts, and now we can go directly to them for advice and instructions. I think it would be good to continue working together… combining their expertise and our creative skills… so that together we can design materials that further support these children's development."* This testimonial underscores the power of collaboration between special educators and mainstream preschool teachers – the Resource Centres are no longer isolated but rather are working in tandem with regular early childhood services.

Assistive technology and communication support

For many children with disabilities, simply having a textbook is not enough – they may also require specialized tools or technologies to participate fully in learning and communication. Recognizing this, Montenegro has made assistive technology (AT) and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools a central pillar of its inclusive education strategy. The right to communicate and participate in the classroom is seen as fundamental; no child should be unable to engage in learning due to the lack of a needed device or support. As stated in Montenegro's current Inclusive Education Strategy, beyond ensuring physical accessibility of schools, it is *"necessary to ensure that every child's developmental and educational needs are met with the help of accessible equipment and adapted teaching material and methods,"* including assistive technology. This policy commitment has translated into concrete initiatives to develop, procure, and utilize a range of assistive devices and communication aids in schools. Moreover, the transformation of special schools into Resource Centres enabled a system where expertise in assistive technology is shared across the whole school system – the Resource Centres act as assistive technology hubs supporting regular schools nationwide.

One of the first major steps was establishing Assistive Technology Labs at each Resource Centre. As mentioned earlier, by 2018 all three Resource Centres had dedicated AT classrooms, each tailored to the primary needs of the student population it serves. For example, the Resource Centre for Hearing and Speech in Kotor set up a Communications AT Lab focusing on speech-generating devices and hearing-assistive technology for children with hearing or communication impairments. The Resource Centre "1. Jun" in Podgorica, which serves children with intellectual disabilities and autism, created a Developmental–Didactic AT Lab, emphasizing cognitive and learning aids, sensory toys, and software for children on the autism spectrum. Meanwhile, the Resource Centre for Children and Youth in Podgorica (which specializes in visual and physical disabilities) established a Sensory-Motor AT Lab, equipped with devices like screen readers, magnifiers, tactile and Braille devices, as well as mobility and physiotherapy tools. These labs were not intended just for the students enrolled at the Resource Centres; critically, they function as demonstration and training sites for educators from mainstream schools. Resource Centre experts use the labs to train classroom teachers, learning support assistants, and parents on how to use assistive devices and adapt teaching materials for children with disabilities. In this way, the benefits of the specialized equipment extend to many schools and students across the country.

Montenegro's push to develop AT capacity was bolstered by learning from international and regional best practices. In 2017, representatives from all three Resource Centres and the Bureau for Education went on a study visit to Novi Sad, Serbia, organized by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF. They visited the Primary and Secondary School "Milan Petrović," which is well-known in the region for its advanced assistive technology programs and production of low-cost didactic aids. The visit exposed Montenegrin educators to a working model of how a former special school can operate as a resource hub for AT. Inspired by this, the Montenegrin team returned with new skills to create customized didactic and teaching materials and to train staff in regular schools on using these resources effectively. Shortly after, the Resource Centres began producing their own assistive teaching aids – including some *home-grown innovations* using affordable materials and even 3D printing technology. For example, teams designed tactile and 3D-printed models to teach Braille or geometry, and simple communication boards with symbols for non-verbal children. These locally made didactic materials were combined into "assistive packages" and distributed to regular primary schools. In 2022, sets of 3D-printed teaching aids and other adaptive materials were delivered to primary schools with inclusive classrooms, to ensure all children (not just those at resource Centres) could benefit from them. The idea is that assistive technology should be available at the child's school, as much as possible, rather than requiring the child to always come to a special Centre. By decentralizing the tools, Montenegro increased the reach of assistive supports across the whole education system.

Another key component has been extensive capacity building for teachers and professionals on assistive technology and AAC. The Ministry of Education, with UNICEF's support, organized a series of training programs and workshops for educators at all levels. These trainings introduced participants to various types of AT–covering supports for intellectual disabilities, physical impairments, visual and hearing impairments, and autism–and how to implement them in classrooms. In total, several hundred educators have been trained. Notably, one large general training on assistive technology had 240 participants, reflecting the strong interest among Montenegrin teachers to learn about new tools. Specialized sessions were also held, for instance on using assistive communication for children with autism (with 53 participants) and on integrating AT into Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) and transition plans in secondary schools (130 participants). The largest training session, with 240 attendees, focused on the characteristics of children with developmental disabilities and how to adapt/develop assistive technology materials to support their learning. This emphasis on tailoring materials to each child underscores Montenegro's commitment to truly individualized support.
One example of the new AAC tools is Cboard, a symbol- and text-to-speech app adopted in 2019. After nationwide training sessions, it is now used in a growing number of preschools and primary schools, illustrating how educators integrate digital aids to support non-verbal communication. The focus remains on thoughtful selection and classroom integration of such tools so they translate into real learning gains rather than stand-alone gadgets.

The impact of these assistive technology initiatives is increasingly visible. Through the program "Towards Practical Student and Teacher Competencies of Inclusive Education" (supported by UNICEF), a needs analysis was done to guide AT investments in schools. Forty schools were selected for intensive training and coaching on inclusive tech use, involving not just teachers but also principals, IT coordinators, and support staff. These schools received basic assistive equipment packages and ongoing mentorship. As a result, by the end of the program, AAC materials had been developed for approximately 520 students with communication or learning difficulties across those schools. These materials helped students to better master academic subjects, improve literacy and numeracy skills, and even manage their emotions and behaviour through visual supports. Such outcomes illustrate a significant step forward in creating inclusive classrooms. Instead of a few specialized institutions concentrating all supports, many regular schools in Montenegro now have the knowledge and tools to accommodate students with a range of disabilities.

Overall, Montenegro's experience shows that investing in assistive technology and teacher

training goes hand-in-hand. The country built an infrastructure (Resource Centre labs, devices in schools) *and* human capacity (trained teachers, support teams) simultaneously. This systemic approach is depicted conceptually in Montenegro's *"Inclusive-Assistive Response Scheme"* (Figure 1), which links resources horizontally (across different types of support and settings) and vertically (from policy level to classroom practice). By ensuring policy, practice, and technology are aligned, Montenegro has laid a strong foundation for assistive technology to continuously evolve. As new tools emerge (for example, future innovations with 3D printing or software driven by artificial intelligence), the education system is prepared to evaluate and integrate them in the service of inclusion. The collaborative networks established – between Resource Centres, mainstream schools, ministries, and international partners – will be critical in sustaining momentum. Montenegro's progress in this area also contributes to the regional knowledge base; other countries in the Western Balkans have observed Montenegro's AT programs and expressed interest in adopting similar models of resource hub networking and teacher capacity development. In short, assistive technology and AAC in Montenegro are not treated as add-on extras, but as integral components of quality education for all. This reflects a deep understanding that accessibility and inclusion are two sides of the same coin in education.

Accessible textbooks: Introducing DAISY audio books

One of Montenegro's most notable innovations in inclusive education is the development of DAISY textbooks – audio-visual digital textbooks designed for students who have difficulty using standard print. DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) format books provide synchronized audio narration with highlighted text, offering a richer, multi-sensory learning experience for readers with visual impairments, dyslexia, or other learning difficulties. The introduction of DAISY textbooks has greatly improved accessibility in education by respecting the rights and needs of students with print disabilities. Montenegro is the first country in the world to systematically integrate DAISY audio textbooks into its national inclusive education system, making them a standard part of teaching materials across all primary schools. While similar assistive materials exist elsewhere, Montenegro's approach stands out for its comprehensiveness and scale, achieved through a strong partnership between policymakers, education authorities, and practitioners. This collaborative effort ensured that audio textbooks moved from a novelty to a mainstream resource available free of charge to any student who needs them.

Work on DAISY textbooks began in May 2013, spearheaded by the Resource Centre for Children and Youth in Podgorica. An initial working group meeting convened stakeholders from the Ministry of Education, UNICEF Montenegro, the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids, the Institute of Education, and the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Cetinje. By pooling their expertise, this group planned how to adapt Montenegro's printed primary school textbooks into the DAISY format. They decided to start with literary readers (language arts textbooks) for grades 4 through 9, based on expert recommendations. The reasoning was that younger visually impaired students should first master Braille literacy, after which audio textbooks would provide significant educational benefits. In line with this plan, the team set out to record the readings for these textbooks. Professors and students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts volunteered their time and talent to narrate the texts in a clear and engaging manner, lending professional-quality voice acting to the books. The recording, editing, and production processes were carried out on a completely voluntary basis, showcasing a remarkable collaboration between educators and artists in support of children with disabilities. By June 2015, the final audio reader (for 9th grade) was completed, marking the successful recording of six grade-level readers in total. An event was held at the Montenegrin National Theatre to promote the first recorded DAISY textbook, celebrating this milestone in front of educators, students, and the broader public.

The DAISY materials were then piloted in real classrooms. Starting in 2015, a pilot program introduced DAISY audio readers in 20 primary schools to test their usage and impact. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Teachers reported that the audio-visual format helped *all* students improve their reading engagement

and comprehension, not only those with visual impairments or dyslexia. By 2019, DAISY textbooks had been rolled out to half of all primary schools in Montenegro, and usage continued to grow. A total of 10 textbooks (six literature readers and four history textbooks) for various grades have been produced in DAISY format to date. Hundreds of teachers were trained in how to use these resources: by 2019, 356 teachers of language and history subjects had received training on incorporating DAISY audio textbooks into their teaching. These trainings included guidance from dyslexia experts and methodology workshops on teaching with audio-visual content, ensuring that teachers could effectively integrate the new format into lesson plans.

Importantly, DAISY textbooks were made freely available for download to maximize their reach. The Resource Centre "Podgorica" established a studio and online repository where all recorded textbooks can be accessed at no cost, and the national Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids also hosts the DAISY files on its website. This open access strategy meant that any student, parent, or teacher could obtain the audio textbooks, democratizing access to educational content. Over time, DAISY books have become a vital component of Montenegro's broader digital education efforts. Their value was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools closed and learning moved online – students used DAISY audio textbooks at home, benefiting from their multi-sensory format to continue learning remotely. The existence of these accessible digital materials significantly supported continuity of learning for children with disabilities during lockdowns.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the DAISY initiative, an evaluation was carried out and a strategic plan was developed. In 2015, UNICEF Montenegro commissioned an evaluation titled *"Use of Textbooks in DAISY Format – Training of Primary School Teachers for the Use of Audio Textbooks."* Based on this evaluation's recommendations, an Action Plan was created to institutionalize DAISY production and training.

One key step, taken in early 2016, was handing over the coordination of new DAISY recordings to the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids in Podgorica. This move integrated DAISY into the mandate of the official textbook publisher, thereby embedding accessible textbook production into the regular education system. Throughout 2016 and 2017, the Institute, with UNICEF's support, oversaw the recording of the remaining history textbooks for grades 6–9. These history texts posed unique challenges (e.g. describing complex historical maps and timelines in audio form), which were solved by consulting subject experts to prepare clear verbal descriptions. The high level of dedication to quality ensured the audio textbooks were truly educationally equivalent to printed books. The Action Plan also outlined responsibilities for each partner and secured commitments for ongoing activities and funding. A persistent challenge identified was the need for continuous teacher training, since some teachers were initially reluctant or unsure how to integrate technology into their teaching. To address this, the plan called for expanding training to more teachers and sharing success stories to encourage uptake.

After nearly a decade, the DAISY textbook initiative in Montenegro can be deemed a resounding success. It has shown how digital innovation can foster inclusion, benefiting not only the originally targeted group (e.g. students with visual impairment) but a broader range of learners. Montenegro's systematic approach – supported by policy, driven by multi-sector partnerships, and sustained by embedding in the education system – provides a model that other countries are now interested in. Indeed, Montenegrin representatives have presented their experience with DAISY at international conferences (such as the "New Technologies in Education" conference in Belgrade in 2016) to share lessons learned. By making curriculum content accessible in multiple formats, Montenegro is upholding the principle of education for all in a very tangible way. The DAISY experience also paved the way for further digitization of education materials in the country's ongoing education reform.

Challenges that remain

Montenegro's reform trajectory now stretches over fifteen years, yet a cluster of systemic obstacles still complicates the day-to-day reality of inclusive practice. The first revolves around governance and policy continuity. Even though inclusion is embedded in three successive national strategies and in amended framework laws, political changes can affect implementation, divert earmarked funds or revive debates. Advocates therefore find themselves revisiting the "why" of inclusion whenever a change in government happens. A proposed solution is to fuse the freshly adopted Early-Childhood Development Strategy (2023–2027) with the Inclusive Education Strategy (2019–2025) into a single cross-sector programme accompanied by a multi-year financing decree; doing so would make the cradle-to-career pathway legally indivisible and less vulnerable to political churn.

Even with explicit laws, inter-sector co-ordination remains uneven. Health centres routinely identify developmental risks and issue medical certificates, but if referral paperwork is delayed or terminology differs from education forms, children can enter preschool without the Individual Developmental–Educational Plan that unlocks classroom adaptations. The Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation has brokered memoranda tying social-work centres, day-care services, kindergartens and the three national Resource Centres into a referral loop that includes temporary accommodation for rural families. Yet these agreements still rely on ad-hoc goodwill and project funds; without a standing body that convenes budget holders from all three sectors each quarter, service gaps and overlap persist–particularly at moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 shutdown, when remote therapies had to be improvised without clear inter-agency protocols.

A third constraint is the workforce gap. Nationally there are fewer than forty registered speech–language pathologists and an even smaller cadre of augmentative-communication or assistive-technology coaches. Most are clustered in Podgorica, leaving northern municipalities dependent on itinerant teams who can visit perhaps once a month. Universities are revising curricula to include inclusive-education modules and the Resource Centres have begun micro-credential courses for classroom teachers, but graduates still emerge without sufficient practicum in AT, family-oriented early intervention or multisensory literacy methods. Compounding the shortfall are civil-service staffing norms that allocate positions by enrolment ratios rather than by needs indices, making it hard to hire an itinerant psychologist or part-time Braille instructor even when municipal budgets can cover the salary.

The fourth challenge concerns infrastructure, materials and digitalisation. Montenegro's DAISY textbook initiative is lauded internationally, yet fewer than a quarter of primary-level titles have been converted, and the existing mp3 files sit on two separate portals that do not track usage or push automatic updates. AT cabinets installed during the 2018–2020 roll-out are showing wear: switches need replacement, tablets require new operating-system licences and low-tech symbol boards have missing pieces. Meanwhile, the 2022–2027 Digitalisation Strategy mandates virtual-learning platforms and AI-driven diagnostics, but classroom teachers and parents say guidance on safe, purposeful use is still sparse; many feel compelled to "figure it out on the fly", which heightens the risk of devices becoming showcase items rather than embedded learning tools.

Geography and money form the fifth knot: Resource-Centre mobile teams now cover eleven municipalities, but outreach services remain thin in several northern and coastal municipalities, and families from remote villages still shoulder travel and lodging costs when a child needs intensive physiotherapy or Braille training in Podgorica. Donor projects have bridged gaps, but core state budgets do not yet carry a dedicated line for updating DAISY titles, replenishing AT kits or scaling coaching teams. Unless those expenses shift from project to programme financing, hard-won innovations could stagnate when external funding cycles close.

Finally, quality-assurance mechanisms are in place, but they operate largely in silos. Evidence still comes from project-specific studies, revealing uneven standards between schools, and data are stored in incompatible health, education and social-work files that cannot be merged to track each child's progress. The priority now is to agree on a small set of shared indicators, align reporting calendars and embed joint multi-sector reviews in everyday practice–so that outcomes are monitored consistently and improvements can be steered with real-time feedback. Without harmonised indicators and a feedback loop, policymakers cannot easily see which supports generate the strongest gains, nor can they redirect resources swiftly when gaps emerge.

Overcoming these intertwined challenges will require steady political stewardship that transcends election cycles, enforceable inter-agency protocols with pooled budgets, a strategic plan to grow and fairly deploy the specialist workforce, designated funds for renewing inclusive technologies, and a robust data backbone that follows each child from the first home visit through graduation. Taking those steps would convert Montenegro's inclusive vision–already sketched in laws and strategies–into an every-day reality for children and families in every classroom and community.

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Quality inclusive education in Romania: A case study of systemic reform

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Over the past decade, Romania's journey towards inclusive education has demonstrated how evidence-based pilot programmes and strategic partnerships can drive systemic change. Romania's experience illustrates how inclusive education flourishes when communities, families, and institutions collaborate. A crucial lesson from Romania is that carefully designed local initiatives, such as UNICEF's Quality Inclusive Education (QIE) programme, can drive broader systemic change. The QIE model provided practical tools and training for teachers, significantly improving teaching methods, enhancing parental engagement, and reducing dropout rates among disadvantaged students. From early childhood programmes to accommodating refugee and Roma children, Romania's reforms are closing long-standing gaps in access to education.

Equally innovative was Romania's Minimum Package of Services (MPS), an integrated approach combining education, health, and social care to support at-risk children and families in vulnerable communities. Complementing QIE, the Minimum Package of Services (MPS) ensures integrated access to education, healthcare, and social protection. Implemented by teams comprising social workers, community nurses, and school counsellors, MPS addresses challenges like poverty, early school leaving, and health issues at the community level. These initiatives demonstrated the effectiveness of holistic support: improved school attendance, better academic outcomes, and strengthened community ties. Romania's example underscores the importance of starting with focused, community-based actions; each local success gradually influencing national policies and fostering inclusive education for every child. These initiatives have been scaled up with support from UNICEF and the EU, demonstrating that grassroots participation and cross-sector collaboration are pivotal in creating inclusive educational environments.

Policy environment and key drivers for inclusive education

In 2007, a Presidential Commission led by Minister Mircea Miclea conducted a critical analysis of education, identifying four major problems undermining competitiveness: inefficiency, lack of relevance, lack of equity, and poor quality. These findings galvanised political consensus around a National Pact for Education (2008) that affirmed equal opportunities as a national priority. All political parties agreed that every child–regardless of ethnicity, disability, residence or family income–must have equal access to quality education. The Pact embraced a principle of solidarity, committing extra support where gaps and discrimination existed. This high-level agreement signalled a systemic shift toward equity.

However, translating consensus into concrete policy proved difficult. A new Education Law enacted in 2011 aimed at sweeping reforms, but partisan divisions meant many provisions were delayed or watered down. Frequent government and ministerial changes disrupted implementation at the school level. Chronic underinvestment in education–among the lowest in the EU–further constrained reform efforts. Still, the 2011 law and subsequent strategies kept equity on the agenda, influenced by European commitments and presidential initiatives. Notably, the "Educated Romania" project launched under the Presidency in 2016 culminated in a 2021 report outlining a long-term vision for inclusive, competency-based education. This provided a strategic roadmap that fed into the development of new education laws in 2023.

External drivers also shaped Romania's inclusive education agenda. As an EU member, Romania aligned with European objectives for "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" (Europe 2020) and adhered to targets on reducing early school leaving and improving educational outcomes. EU reports highlighted persistent rural-urban disparities and Roma exclusion, pressuring Romania to act. International organisations were important partners as well. UNICEF and the World Bank in particular, had supported education reform since the 1990s, advocating child-centred approaches and providing technical assistance. OECD reviews and EU monitoring reports provided evidence and recommendations, for example on strengthening teacher training and evaluation

systems. These combined influences created an impetus for change, even when domestic politics slowed progress. By the mid-2010s, there was broad recognition among stakeholders that ensuring equity and inclusion in education was not just a social imperative but also vital for Romania's economic development and EU convergence.

Barriers to quality and inclusiveness of education

Despite policy intentions, Romania faced entrenched barriers that perpetuated inequities in education. One fundamental challenge was the teaching workforce. Many teachers entered service with insufficient training in pedagogy, inclusive education, and child development. Pre-service teacher education programs had low entry standards and minimal practical training in managing diverse classrooms. In-service professional development opportunities were likewise scarce, especially in rural areas and on topics like adapting curriculum for learners at risk. Rigid rules prevented modernisation of training delivery (fully online courses could not be accredited), limiting access for teachers in remote communities. Consequently, a large proportion of teachers lacked the skills and support to address varied student needs. Rural schools were particularly affected by teacher shortages and high turnover–qualified teachers were hard to attract and retain in disadvantaged areas. Often, to fulfil required teaching hours, rural teachers had to cover subjects outside their specialization, a practice that inevitably undermined instructional quality (European Commission, 2023). Low pay and difficult working conditions made teaching posts in poor communities undesirable, fuelling a cycle of under-qualification, demotivation and burnout.

These capacity gaps were compounded by resource inequalities. The financing system relied on a per-student formula that did not account for socio-economic disadvantage, starving high-need schools of supplemental funds. Poor communities had little ability to raise extra-budgetary resources. The result was stark disparities in infrastructure and materials: many rural schools lacked laboratories, libraries, heating, or even running water. Limited access to technology and learning resources contributed to wide learning gaps–national assessments and international tests like PISA consistently showed rural students performing far below their urban peers. By 2018, only one in four rural youth completed upper secondary education, and functional illiteracy affected an estimated 40% of 15-year-olds, with important equity gaps. Such outcomes pointed to systemic neglect of marginalised groups.

As part of the child-led storytelling and feedback mechanisms, **Nicoleta** - a student whose family faced financial hardship and she lacked support and did not prioritize education, shared her experience in 2021: "*Before the programme, I didn't think I could finish high school. Now I want to become a nurse and help others like I was helped*."

Another critical barrier was the weak institutional capacity at the school level. For years, school principals were appointed through patronage rather than merit, and few had training in educational leadership. Many head teachers did not systematically use data to identify at-risk students or plan interventions. Whole-school strategies for inclusion were underdeveloped; for example, *early warning systems* to track attendance or early drop-out existed only in isolated cases. Collaboration among teachers was limited, and sharing of good practices between schools was almost non-existent. Schools also struggled to engage the families and communities of vulnerable children. There was a lack of trust and communication between educators and marginalised parents (many of whom had low education levels or faced discrimination, e.g. Roma families). Consequently, home–school partnerships that could support at-risk learners were weak.

Long-standing patterns of segregation and discrimination presented further obstacles. In some localities, Roma children or those with disabilities were still taught in segregated classes or schools or faced bullying and low expectations in mainstream schools. Such practices, rooted in social stigma, led to alienation and higher dropout rates among these groups. Studies documented alarming levels of prejudice, making inclusion all the more challenging without broader attitudinal change. In summary, by the mid-2010s Romania's education system was trapped in a vicious cycle: children who most needed support were concentrated in disadvantaged areas, under-resourced schools staffed by underprepared

teachers, yielding poor outcomes that reinforced perceptions that these children could not succeed. Breaking this cycle required multi-faceted reforms attacking each barrier concurrently–from teacher training and funding formulas to school management and community engagement.

UNICEF's strategic interventions and innovative models

Confronted with these complex challenges, UNICEF Romania, in partnership with the government and civil society, launched targeted interventions to demonstrate how inclusive education could work in practice. A flagship effort was the Quality Inclusive Education (QIE) National Intervention Programme, a pilot model designed as a foundation for a "friendly and inclusive school" for all students and teachers. Implemented between 2015 and 2019, QIE was a comprehensive initiative addressing the full ecosystem around the child – from classroom pedagogy to community services. It was carried out in Bacău county across 51 pilot schools (urban and rural), directly reaching over 70,000 students and 1,400 teachers and staff. QIE explicitly focused on children *most at risk of dropping out*, aiming to keep them in school and improve their learning outcomes through holistic support. This model continued during 2020 – 2023 with the focus on one of the most critical junctures in a child's educational journey: the transition from lower to upper secondary school.

A key innovation of QIE was its integrated approach. Developed jointly by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF, the model brought together teachers, school principals, counsellors, health and social workers, local authorities, parents and students as partners in inclusion. Interventions were implemented not only at school level, but also at the family and community levels, recognising that barriers to education often lie beyond the classroom. The programme's design was modular and adaptable, each school community identified its specific needs and could tailor activities accordingly, whether introducing remedial learning, counselling for parents, or extracurricular programs to engage children. While *universal* in offering quality improvements for all students, QIE prioritised those most vulnerable, ensuring they received additional tutoring, mentoring, or material support as needed.

Crucially, the QIE model was embedded within a broader multisectoral framework. It became a practical application of UNICEF's "Minimum Package of Services" (MPS) model, which Romania was piloting to deliver integrated services to vulnerable children. Under MPS, professionals from education, health and child protection work in unison at community level to identify at-risk children and ensure they receive a coordinated package of support (such as school counselling, healthcare, nutrition, and social assistance). QIE operationalised this concept in schools: teachers, school counsellors, Roma mediators, nurses and social workers were encouraged to collaborate in case-management teams. Common work procedures and joint training sessions were established, and a county-level multi-disciplinary team provided oversight. This cross-sector convergence was formalised through a 2017 Joint Ministerial Order enabling education, health, and social services to share data and co-ordinate interventions for children in need. By embedding QIE within the MPS methodology, Romania created a sustainable framework for tackling the non-academic causes of exclusion (like poverty or poor health) alongside in-school improvements. This was an innovative aspect of Romania's approach–recognising that inclusive education requires integrated solutions beyond the education sector alone.

Another distinctive feature of QIE was its basis in prior experimentation and evidence. The initiative drew on the lessons of earlier pilots, particularly the *Priority Education Areas* programme of the 2000s (which channelled extra resources to deprived rural schools) and a School Attendance Campaign (2010–2014) that UNICEF had supported to combat absenteeism. These experiences had built local know-how and political will to address out-of-school children. QIE was conceived as the next step: taking proven strategies (such as community-based outreach, teacher coaching, and after-school programs) and combining them into a coherent model that could be evaluated and scaled. UNICEF and the Institute of Education Sciences applied an *action-research* approach in QIE, constantly collecting data on what worked and feeding that into policy dialogue. The partnership brought together a wide range of expertise–from curriculum design and teacher training to Roma inclusion and parental education–leveraging the

strengths of each partner institution. Importantly, the Ministry of Education and its county agencies co-led the project, ensuring government ownership from the outset. Governance structures included a national steering committee and county coordination teams, which fostered accountability and alignment with national priorities.

Data and monitoring were at the heart of the QIE model. The project developed a robust mechanism for collecting and analysing data at school level, including a custom online platform (www.qie.ro) where schools uploaded indicators on attendance, learning outcomes, and implemented activities. School staff were trained in data collection and usage, enabling them to identify students at-risk students more systematically and track the impact of interventions. This evidence guided mid-course adjustments to the project and provided ammunition for advocating policy change. For instance, QIE data showing improvements in target schools helped persuade decision-makers to adopt similar measures nationally. The culture of continuous learning extended to the project team itself: partners met regularly to review progress, share findings, and plan refinements. UNICEF facilitated these forums for reflection, which built trust and ensured that all stakeholders – from ministry officials to local NGOs – had input in problem-solving.

At the school level, QIE funded an array of activities tailored to each community's needs. These typically fell into five intervention areas: (1) improving teaching and learning (through teacher training on inclusive methods, provision of teaching materials, and introduction of child-centred pedagogies); (2) strengthening school management and leadership (training principals in strategic planning, use of data, and resource mobilization); (3) enhancing parent and community involvement (workshops for parents on parenting skills, community events to raise awareness of education, and involving local authorities in supporting schools); (4) providing student-focused services (remedial education, counselling, mentoring for at-risk students, school mediators working with Roma families); and (5) upgrading school environments (small grants for schools to improve infrastructure, create friendly learning spaces, or acquire equipment). By addressing multiple dimensions simultaneously, QIE sought to transform schools into inclusive environments where every child is valued and supported.

Romania's approach also included a forward-looking emphasis on innovation in education delivery. The QIE partnership recognised that new technologies and approaches (such as digital learning tools and assistive devices for students with disabilities) could greatly enhance inclusion if used effectively. During the project, some pilot schools experimented with ICT-based learning and online teacher communities, although broader uptake was limited by infrastructure. Still, this early exposure to innovation laid the groundwork for later initiatives, for example, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Ministry was able to publish many open educational resources developed under QIE on a national e-learning platform.

Romania's inclusive education journey is unique in how these various elements: pilot experimentation, cross-sector integration, data-driven management, and innovative pedagogies converged in one programme. UNICEF's role was essential at each stage: convening partners, providing technical expertise in areas like teacher training curricula and child rights, securing funding (from both UNICEF core resources and donors), and ensuring that evidence from the ground was communicated to policymakers. UNICEF also helped maintain a focus on equity throughout, reminding stakeholders that the ultimate measure of success was whether the *most marginalised* children were benefiting. By the end of the pilot in 2019, QIE had become a proof of concept for inclusive education reform in Romania–one that would significantly shape subsequent national policies.

A phased and participatory approach to implementation

Careful sequencing was required to translate the QIE model into practice. The intervention was implemented over four academic years (2015–2019), with each subsequent phase building on the previous one, and adjustments were made throughout. In the first year (2015–2016), activities were launched simultaneously across all five intervention areas in the pilot schools, essentially stress-testing the model. Schools began implementing teacher training, student clubs, parent meetings, support services and

infrastructure improvements. An initial analysis of local contexts and needs had been conducted to inform this rollout, ensuring that the interventions were relevant to each school community. Year 1 focused on building trust and establishing routines, introducing new teaching methods, setting up data tracking systems, and engaging parents and local authorities.

The second year (2016–17) was devoted to refining the model. Feedback and data from the first year were reviewed extensively. Through joint workshops, the partners identified the activities that had the greatest impact or presented the most challenges and then streamlined the intervention package. For instance, if certain training modules were deemed too theoretical, they were made more practical, and additional mentoring was provided to schools that struggled with data entry. This iterative refinement process ensured that the model remained realistic and user-friendly for schools. By the end of the second year, the roles and collaboration mechanisms of the various stakeholders (teachers, principals, local social workers, etc.) had become clearer, and the pilot schools had developed greater confidence in managing the new practices independently.

In the third year (2017–18), QIE introduced new improvements and conducted formative research. Additional components were added in response to emerging needs, such as digital skills training for teachers and student peer mentoring programmes, to further enhance inclusiveness. At the same time, the Institute of Education Sciences conducted research to evaluate interim outcomes, including classroom observations to assess changes in teaching methods, surveys to measure student engagement, and case studies of successful practices. This formative evaluation helped to identify effective strategies and areas for improvement while there was still time to make changes. It also deepened the understanding of why certain schools were improving, highlighting the importance of active school leadership and the presence of a strong community facilitator, for instance.

In the fourth year (2018–19), the focus shifted towards documenting outcomes and formulating policy recommendations. As the pilot came to an end, a thorough external evaluation was commissioned to accurately measure its impact, which will be discussed in the next section. These findings were then used to generate concrete proposals for scaling up. The project team analysed the 'transfer conditions', i.e. the requirements for expanding QIE nationally, including financing, human resources, and regulatory changes. They also identified which QIE elements could be integrated into existing government programmes. Stakeholder workshops were held to present the results to policymakers at county and central government levels. The aim of this final phase was to ensure that the pilot transitioned from being an experimental project to becoming a permanent policy.

Throughout these phases, participatory management was paramount. The consortium of partners (the Ministry, UNICEF, NGOs, research institutes and county authorities) met regularly, often at the mid- and end-of-year points, to review progress. All partners were encouraged to present updates and openly discuss any implementation issues. A culture of collaborative problem-solving emerged; for instance, if teacher absenteeism from training was observed, the partners would brainstorm solutions such as offering credits or scheduling sessions more flexibly. These meetings were also important for adjusting the sequencing of activities each year based on learning. This adaptive management approach prevented potential failures and kept the project on track towards achieving its objectives.

At the local level, county teams of experts, including school inspectors, teacher trainers and NGO field staff, played a crucial intermediary role. They visited schools, providing on-the-spot mentorship to teachers and principals, while also fostering networks among the pilot schools. Their presence ensured that the intervention remained sensitive to local contexts and that information flowed between the schools and the national project coordination team. The county teams also helped to make the changes more permanent by linking schools with existing county services (for example, referring families to county health programmes or child protection units as needed).

By the end of the four-year cycle, the QIE pilot had achieved its direct targets in the schools of Bacău County and produced a scalable model ready for implementation. The structured phasing enabled experimentation, learning and consolidation, providing a valuable lesson for any systemic reform. Rather than attempting a one-off nationwide reform, Romania tested and refined its approach in a controlled setting. This increased the credibility of the model in the eyes of decision-makers and provided a detailed roadmap for national implementation.

Achievements in equity, inclusion, and systemic change

The QIE initiative produced both measurable improvements and meaningful change in the pilot communities, showing that targeted interventions can make schools more inclusive. According to the final evaluation, more than half of the 51 pilot schools reduced their dropout rates by at least 5% within a few years, with several managing to re-enrol students who had previously left school. Overall, the number of students who remained in education until the end of the year increased, and absenteeism in QIE schools decreased by around 10% compared to the baseline figure. These hard indicators were complemented by qualitative improvements. School staff reported a significant shift in awareness and attitudes: by the end of the project, virtually all pilot schools had introduced procedures to identify 'at-risk pupils' early on and monitor their participation. Teachers and principals became more proactive in addressing early warning signs such as frequent absences or declining grades. Many schools formed inclusive education teams to plan support for vulnerable children and began revising their School Development Plans to prioritise equity goals. In short, a culture of 'inclusive schools' began to take root in places where dropping out might previously have been seen as inevitable.

Teacher capacity showed a significant improvement, which is a critical factor for inclusion. Over 90% of the teachers surveyed in the pilot scheme said that the in-service training programmes had improved their understanding of the curriculum and their pedagogical skills in relation to diverse classrooms. Teachers reported adopting more active learning techniques and differentiated instruction to engage struggling learners. Classroom observations confirmed an increase in student-centred practices and a decline in punitive or exclusionary discipline. Many teachers also developed skills in supporting students' socio-emotional development. In participating schools, children were taught social skills and conflict resolution, which contributed to a more positive climate. Around 20% of students interviewed (especially those from vulnerable groups) said they felt safer and more welcome at school than before the project began. Furthermore, the self-esteem of at-risk children increased – most vulnerable pupils who received tutoring, counselling or other support displayed greater confidence and motivation, as evidenced by teacher assessments and student feedback. These changes suggest that QIE not only kept children in school but also improved the quality of their engagement and learning.

Other areas of impact included school leadership and community partnership. The principals of the pilot schools became more active instructional leaders and facilitators of collaboration. They held regular meetings with teachers to discuss student progress, which was rare before. Head teachers increasingly reached out to parents and community leaders, organising school–community events and leveraging local authorities to support educational initiatives. By the end of the project, the pilot communities had developed models of intersectoral cooperation. For example, in several municipalities, the mayor's office, social services and schools formed joint working groups to prevent early school leaving. These local coalitions were able to mobilise resources, such as transport for students and meal programmes, and respond in an integrated way when a student was at risk. Parents became more involved, too – parent committees in pilot schools reported greater participation and better parent–teacher communication. This was partly thanks to parenting education sessions that improved parents' skills and confidence in supporting their children's learning. Overall, the pilot fostered a 'whole community' approach to inclusion, aligning the efforts of students, their peers, their families and local authorities with those of educators.

At the system level, QIE made a set of evidence-based policy proposals for scaling up which were taken up by the government and other stakeholders. Key recommendations included:

Student Identification and Data Systems: Establish a standardised system for early identification of students at risk of dropping out, linked with training school staff in data analysis and intervention planning. The Ministry has since begun developing an Education Management Information System that integrates risk indicators, as advocated by the pilot.

Early Education Expansion: Prioritise early childhood education in the national education strategy, making at least the pre-primary year compulsory and developing financing mechanisms for ages 0–3. Reflecting this, Romania has since legislated the gradual introduction of compulsory preschool and created a per capita funding formula for crèches and kindergartens, aligning with UNICEF's advocacy that early education is key to later inclusion.

Targeted School Grants: Implement a grant funding programme for schools with high numbers of vulnerable pupils, to finance locally designed inclusion activities (after-school programmes, mentoring, etc.). This recommendation directly informed a national scheme launched in 2022 – the National Programme for Reducing School Dropout (PNRAS), financed through Romania's Recovery and Resilience Facility, which provides grants to hundreds of at-risk lower secondary schools.

Capacity Building: Ensure that all stakeholders, teachers, principals and parents alike are ready and able to actively address disadvantage and marginalisation. Romania has since integrated parental education in EU-funded projects for marginalised schools, revised national in-service training for school principals and teachers, and increased capacities of schools to implement a competency-based curriculum.

School Counsellors and Mediators: Expand the cadre of school counsellors and Roma school mediators and strengthen their capacity through dedicated training. QIE highlighted their critical role as bridge figures supporting at-risk students; consequently, the Ministry of Education boosted the hiring of counsellors and institutionalised the mediator role at county level.

Open Educational Resources for Inclusion: Invest in developing and disseminating learning resources tailored to disadvantaged students (for example, remedial literacy materials or bilingual resources for minority students). During COVID-19, many such resources created under QIE were published on the national digital platform for wider use (www.digital.educred.ro).

These measures demonstrate how QIE served as a testing ground for reform ideas that subsequently became government policy. The long-term impact of the QIE is most evident in the policies promoted by the new Education Law for Pre-University Education (Law 198/2023), which includes a dedicated chapter on equity. This chapter mandates additional support for schools with high concentrations of vulnerable students, such as supplementary teaching posts or funding. It also calls for the establishment of a National Centre for Inclusive Education to coordinate inclusive policies and practices nationwide. The Act earmarks extra funds for rural schools and raises per capita allocations for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream classes. It also launches targeted literacy programmes and teacher training for primary and lower secondary levels. Drawing on the QIE, it includes robust anti-segregation measures. UNICEF played an active role in all stages of the consultation process for drafting the new law, providing specific technical support on issues of inclusion, equity, and early education.

QIE also raised awareness of the importance of inclusive early education and care services, in-service teacher training on curriculum adaptations, parental counselling, and regional peer-learning workshops. School leaders especially valued micro-grants and leadership courses, which improved their fundraising and project management skills. Evidence from QIE also informed broader policies, including the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 'An Equitable Romania 2022–2027', and the National Strategy on Children's Rights 2023–2027.

Achieving sustainability and addressing challenges

Romania has taken deliberate steps to ensure that the momentum generated by QIE for inclusive education is sustained and expanded in the long term. One crucial aspect of this is institutional capacity. The external evaluation confirmed that the QIE project has strengthened institutional and community capacity to support the most vulnerable learners. Schools now place a far greater emphasis on inclusive teaching and targeted support for at-risk and low-achieving pupils, as well as activities that prevent absenteeism and early school leaving. Interventions focusing on early childhood and the Roma community continue to be supported by school mediators, teacher training in non-discrimination and Roma culture, and public campaigns that celebrate diversity and counter stereotyping.

Key support measures are expected to be implemented in 2024–25 under the 2023 Pre-University Education Act (No. 198). By mid-2024, Romania will have launched a national system to monitor, prevent and address school segregation. This will be followed in August by incentives to attract and retain teachers in priority areas, and in September by an integrated plan to reduce early school leaving. Child well-being and anti-bullying initiatives, which are already supported by an EU Technical Support Instrument, remain a key priority for the ministry. In October, a new framework for personalised services for pupils with special educational needs will be introduced. During this period, the government will also revise per-pupil funding, pilot education vouchers for support services and establish updated quality standards for initial and in-service teacher training, as well as broader quality assurance.

Maintaining QIE's comprehensive approach requires additional human and financial resources, so the programme should be scaled up in the most disadvantaged schools and counties first. Parliament recognised the success of the model by passing Law 231/2020, which incorporates the Minimum Package of Services into the Social Assistance Law. The ministries of education, labour and health – working alongside the finance, EU funds and development portfolios, as well as UNICEF – are now drafting funding rules, implementation guidelines, county-level service structures, and a national online system to manage the scheme. The 2023 Pre-University Education Act (No. 198) establishes a unified framework that responds to learners' needs through competence-based curricula, differentiated teaching, remedial programmes, incentives for rural teachers, priority investment areas, and anti-segregation measures. The effective rollout of this framework hinges on the preparation of roughly 200 pre-university and 95 higher education ministerial orders, a process in which UNICEF will contribute QIE experience and recent equity research. Romania aims to halve functional illiteracy to 20 per cent by 2030 by using school grant schemes under the National Programme for Combating School Dropout (funded via the Recovery and Resilience Facility since 2022) to reduce absenteeism and early leaving. A new learner profile, launched in November 2023, sets out literacy, STEM, digital and sustainability competencies – aligned with the OECD Learning Compass – across all education levels. Achieving these outcomes will require teachers to be ready, and UNICEF's QIE experience and related training programmes can help prepare them to deliver the competencies embedded in the profile.

The external evaluation confirmed that QIE has strengthened the institutional and community capacity to support vulnerable children. This has been achieved by refocusing schools on inclusive, quality education; providing targeted services for at-risk and underachieving pupils; and implementing measures to reduce absenteeism and early school leaving. Initiatives for early childhood and the Roma community will continue, alongside programmes that certify school mediators, integrate the Roma language and culture through teacher training and new textbooks, and run diversity and anti-discrimination campaigns that promote positive role models and self-esteem. Regular

national and county-level meetings with partners proved invaluable for planning actions and refining annual plans. Regular consultations with UNICEF kept partners engaged in monitoring and review, while county experts linked schools with local stakeholders and national briefings aligned the programme with emerging policies, thereby boosting its overall impact.

Despite the progress made, Romania's inclusive education journey continues to face challenges. The QIE external final evaluation revealed that ambitious targets relating to absenteeism and dropout rates were hindered by external factors, including family financial circumstances (and often migration experiences), low parental educational expectations, and various health issues affecting children, including mental health problems. The QIE project also highlighted the need for greater support for pupils at risk in non-academic areas and for more integrated services for these children and their parents. Many schools lacked the expertise to engage parents, build social capital, or collaborate across sectors. Few experts from sectors such as social protection, healthcare and local employment were involved in addressing issues such as dropout and absenteeism, or in supporting at-risk students. There was also a notable lack of experience in ongoing data sharing and developing inter-institutional reference systems to ensure the effectiveness of interventions for children and youth at risk.

Successful scale-up requires long-term, expert facilitation to build trust and commitment in pilot schools. It is also not possible to have a dedicated scale-up process without documenting the transfer conditions in detail and ensuring that all of these conditions are met. A significant challenge was the high staff turnover in pilot schools throughout the project's duration. The departure of trained and experienced school staff from pilot schools disrupted the continuity of the multi-year intervention. Additionally, the accredited training programmes organised as part of the project required strict participation and active engagement from teachers. However, some teachers lacked the motivation to invest the necessary time and effort, resulting in their failure to complete the courses. Furthermore, paying greater attention to developing teachers' digital skills – such as using educational platforms and open resources – would have strengthened the capacity-building efforts. The closure of schools due to the pandemic forced a rapid shift to online learning, but Romania lacked a national e-learning platform, which created wide disparities in provision and deepened learning gaps, especially for disadvantaged pupils. Many remote schools struggled to launch online classes and the QIE follow-up was interrupted. While some teachers were familiar with asynchronous online work, most lacked the skills required for live teaching and the effective use of open digital resources. These issues are now being addressed through UNICEF's post-pandemic initiatives, such as TRUST-ED.

The evaluation confirmed that poverty and other socio-economic pressures continue to hinder children's attendance and learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of integrated social and economic support provided at a local level. Initiatives such as QIE and the Minimum Package of Services demonstrate the value of partnerships between schools and municipalities, with counsellors and mediators working alongside social workers being crucial to keeping vulnerable pupils engaged and happy at school. Low motivation among learners is another hurdle: early joint action by parents and teachers, reinforced by positive role models and reduced exam pressure, is essential to counteract the household chores and testing anxiety that deter many children from learning.

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School desegregation in Romania: A systemic journey toward inclusive education

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Romania learned that outlawing segregation was only the first step; true inclusion came from changing hearts, minds, and school support systems. One key insight from Romania is that high-level commitment must be matched by on-the-ground support – laws opened the school doors to every child, but training teachers, funding poor schools, and involving communities kept those doors open and welcoming. Romania's story shows that even after setbacks, a country can reboot and strengthen its reforms, moving ever closer to the ideal that every child, of every background, learns together in a quality school.

This case study describes the country's systemic journey, highlighting the interconnected building blocks of inclusive education, including legislative reforms, institutional innovations, data-driven monitoring, and stakeholder advocacy. Romania's approach features several unique innovations, such as codified definitions and sanctions against segregation, an integrated Education Management Information System (EMIS) for monitoring purposes which in Romanian is Integrated Information System of Education in Romania (SIIIR), and methodologies to identify intersectional vulnerabilities. These innovations together form a robust model for inclusive education. By analysing the key drivers of change in Romania, including legislative action, stakeholder engagement and advocacy, this study distils actionable lessons for other countries pursuing inclusive education and desegregation in their own contexts

Evolution of the legal and policy framework

A strong legal foundation has been central to Romania's efforts to desegregate its schools. This journey began with Ministerial Order No. 1540/2007, which prohibited the segregation of Roma children in schools for the first time. Although Order 1540/2007 was groundbreaking in intent, it had notable gaps: it provided only a general definition of school segregation without operational details; it lacked standardised monitoring or enforcement procedures; and it did not assign clear responsibilities or sanctions for non-compliance. Without concrete indicators and oversight mechanisms, this early policy had little practical impact on reducing segregation.

Recognising these shortcomings, Romania substantially revised its approach in 2016. Order No. 6134/2016 expanded protections to include all ethnic minorities and introduced four additional prohibited criteria for segregation: disability or special educational needs (SEN), socio-economic disadvantage, low academic performance and area of residence (urban or rural). Order 6134/2016 notably provided nine specific definitions of school segregation, capturing the various forms it can take, such as between different schools, between buildings within the same school, between classes, and even within classrooms (e.g. segregating students to the back rows of seats). For the first time, it set out explicit obligations for stakeholders at school, county and national levels, and violations could trigger sanctions. This created a far more actionable legal framework, aligning Romania's policy with EU non-discrimination standards and the principles of the Race Equality Directive (2000/43/EC), which treats segregation as a severe form of discrimination.

Romania's commitment to desegregation was further strengthened by integrating these norms into primary legislation. The Pre-University Education Law No. 198/2023 enshrined the prohibition of school segregation in national law, representing a significant advancement beyond ministerial orders. Chapter VII of this law, entitled 'Inclusive Quality Education for All', guarantees non-discrimination in education and explicitly forbids the segregation of students on the grounds of ethnicity, disability/special educational needs (SEN), socio-economic status, disadvantaged background, residence or academic achievement. By defining segregation as the physical separation of students from protected groups such that their representation in a class or school far exceeds their proportion in the general population, Romania has set a clear legal standard by which schools can be held accountable. Incorporating these

provisions into an Education Law not only elevated their authority but also signalled the government's enduring commitment to upholding inclusive education as a core value of the system.

Most recently, Romania has consolidated and strengthened its policy framework through Ministerial Order No. 7701/2024, which entered into effect in January 2025. This comprehensive order consolidates previous regulations into a unified methodology for monitoring, preventing and combatting school segregation. Essentially, Order 7701/2024 incorporates the substantive protections of Order 6134/2016 and the technical monitoring procedures of Order 5633/2019 (described below) into a single, coherent policy instrument. By codifying all aspects – from definitions and data collection to intervention protocols – within one order, the Ministry of Education aimed to eliminate ambiguity and ensure consistency in application. The entry into force of the new order led to the repeal of the earlier orders (6134/2016 and 5633/2019), thereby streamlining the regulatory landscape. Thus, the evolution of Romania's legal framework illustrates a building-block process: initial principles set in 2007 were expanded in 2016, given legislative backing in 2023 and finally operationalised in 2024 as a comprehensive system. This trajectory highlights the importance of continuously refining policies to address gaps, adapt to broader inclusion goals and integrate lessons learned over time.

Institutional mechanisms and monitoring systems

Alongside legal reforms, Romania developed an institutional infrastructure and monitoring system to implement and enforce desegregation. A key innovation was the establishment of a National Commission for School Desegregation, which was first proposed in the 2007 policy and formally established in 2016. Under Order 6134/2016, the Ministry of Education set up the Commission to coordinate desegregation efforts across the country. The Commission collaborates closely with relevant ministry departments, such as the Directorate for Education in Minority Languages, to ensure that policy directives result in changes at the school level. Its responsibilities include developing strategies and norms, overseeing the implementation of desegregation action plans, and providing technical guidance to county and local education authorities. By formalising a dedicated body, Romania has ensured that there is a sustained focal point within the government to promote inclusive education, which is an important safeguard given the frequent turnover in political leadership.

At county level, School Inspectorates (CSIs) have been assigned specific responsibilities for monitoring and preventing segregation within their jurisdictions. Similarly, at school level, existing committees (initially those focusing on violence, corruption and discrimination) have been tasked with monitoring and reporting instances of segregation within their schools. This multi-tiered structure creates accountability at each level of the education system. However, the effectiveness of these bodies depends on clear roles and active engagement. Romania's initial attempt in 2007 to establish a permanent working group on desegregation was unsuccessful, as the group was never actually formed. Building on this experience, subsequent policies have explicitly mandated the above-mentioned commissions and linked them to specific duties and timelines.

One of the most distinctive elements of Romania's approach is its data-driven monitoring methodology. In 2019, the Ministry of Education adopted Order No. 5633/2019 with the technical support of UNICEF, which approved the 'Methodology on School Segregation Monitoring in Pre-University Education'. This methodology introduced 103 quantitative and qualitative indicators to diagnose segregation across various criteria and forms. These indicators included the ethnic composition of classes, the distribution of vulnerable students across parallel classes or school buildings, and even seating arrangements within classrooms. Compared to the 20 basic indicators proposed in 2007, the 2019 set was far more comprehensive and evidence-based. It enabled officials to capture subtle patterns of segregation that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Importantly, this monitoring was intended to be a regular, periodic process (to be conducted annually), thereby ensuring continuous vigilance. Research has shown that, without ongoing monitoring, initial desegregation gains can be eroded by 're-segregation' trends. Romania's strategy explicitly acknowledges this

risk and aims to continually diagnose and address segregation trends as they emerge.

In order to implement the monitoring methodology on a large scale, Romania expanded its national Integrated Education Management Information System (SIIIR) using technology. The 2019 Order mandated the use of SIIIR for collecting and reporting all segregation-related indicators. During the 2022–23 school year, the methodology was field-tested in a pilot involving 176 schools of various levels. With the support of UNICEF and EU experts, the Education Ministry developed a segregation monitoring module within SIIIR to automate data aggregation and analysis. By 2023, this SIIIR module was operational, enabling every school to input the necessary data and identify potential cases of segregation using built-in algorithms. This IT integration significantly eased the burden on schools and inspectors by utilising existing administrative data – a crucial factor for sustainability. Investment in such infrastructure was necessary, as collecting data on ~100 indicators for all schools would be a formidable task without automation. The Ministry's decision to upgrade SIIIR for segregation monitoring during the pandemic proved prescient. In the 2024/2025 school year, the national exercise for monitoring school segregation was conducted for the first time. As part of this exercise, all schools in Romania reported data through the specially prepared module within the Integrated Information System of Education in Romania (SIIIR). By the end of 2026, the reported data will be processed and included in the national report on school segregation, identifying the schools where the phenomenon of segregation is present and where school desegregation efforts will be undertaken. .

Another noteworthy policy tool is the requirement for students to be randomly distributed into classes at the beginning of each educational cycle. Introduced as part of the 2019 monitoring methodology and later reaffirmed in Order No. 3945/2024, this procedure prevents school leaders and teachers from grouping students informally by ability, ethnicity or social background. By assigning children to classes through a random or algorithmic process, Romania is seeking to eliminate a common cause of internal segregation. Though seemingly technical, this measure addresses the subtle practice whereby better-resourced parents or biased educators might cluster privileged children together, relegating disadvantaged students to separate classes. In the 2024/2025 school year, the Ministry made random allocation mandatory for all schools with multiple parallel classes in a year group. According to official reports, this step is intended to 'ensure compliance with the principle of school desegregation' by pre-empting the formation of segregated classes from the outset. These proactive measures, implemented before any monitoring data has been analysed, demonstrate Romania's commitment to preventing segregation rather than merely reacting to it.

Stakeholder engagement and advocacy as drivers of change

Romania's desegregation journey has been driven not only by top-down policy, but also by the sustained advocacy and engagement of key stakeholders. From an early stage, civil society organisations and international partners played a key role in raising awareness of school segregation. Since the mid-2000s, Roma rights NGOs and disability advocacy groups have exposed instances of segregated schooling and pressed the government for action. In 2007, a coalition of NGOs supported by UNICEF and the OSCE successfully lobbied for the first anti-segregation order, emphasising Romania's legal obligations to provide equal education opportunities. This alliance between domestic NGOs and global organisations exemplifies how external pressure and local voices can converge to spark reform.

The European Commission has also played a key role in driving change by enforcing anti-discrimination directives. In the late 2000s and 2010s, the Commission examined member states' progress on Roma inclusion, warning that school segregation could violate the Race Equality Directive. The threat of infringement proceedings – legal action by the EU against a member state for breaching EU law – loomed over countries with high levels of Roma segregation. Romanian policymakers were acutely aware that failing to address segregation might trigger EU sanctions, as had happened in other states. This external pressure provided additional impetus and a sense of urgency to strengthen national policy. Indeed,

officials have cited the threat of infringement proceedings as a 'powerful motivating factor' that helped to advance the desegregation agenda.

Throughout the desegregation drive, UNICEF has acted as Romania's strategic ally. First, it joined the NGO advocacy that secured the 2007 anti-segregation order. Then, it formalised a cooperation protocol with the Ministry of Education for the period 2017–2022. UNICEF's specialists have co-drafted important regulations (Orders 6134/2016, 5633/2019 and 7701/2024), devised a monitoring framework comprising 100 indicators and helped establish the National Commission for School Desegregation. Alongside this policy work, UNICEF undertook large-scale capacity building: by early 2020, every county inspectorate and thousands of school leaders had been trained to collect, interpret, and act on segregation data. UNICEF also funded and co-designed the SIIIR segregation-monitoring module and an online helpdesk, providing schools with user-friendly dashboards and real-time technical support. In the community, UNICEF developed the 2011 School Mediator's Guide for Roma Communities, trained Roma mediators and continues to bring together NGOs, parents, students and academics to draft the forthcoming National Strategy for School Desegregation. Crucially, by briefing ten successive education ministers between 2016 and 2023 and supplying comparative evidence, UNICEF's consistent presence has preserved reform momentum during political turnover, illustrating how external partners can reinforce national capacity rather than supplant it.

Within Romania, certain institutional stakeholders have taken on crucial roles. One such body is the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD), an autonomous agency that adjudicates discrimination complaints. Individual cases of school segregation, especially those involving Roma students, have been brought to the CNCD by NGOs and parents over the years. The CNCD has the authority to investigate and issue rulings or fines in confirmed cases of discrimination. However, prior to recent reforms, the CNCD's impact on desegregation was limited by a lack of clear definitions and evidence – many schools could deny intent to segregate and data was scarce. The new legal framework and monitoring system promise to bolster the CNCD's effectiveness by providing objective evidence (in the form of SIIIR data and defined indicators) to substantiate complaints. Going forward, if a school is identified in national data as being segregated, this information could inform CNCD investigations, strengthening enforcement. Thus, Romania's strategy envisages a synergy between administrative monitoring and quasi-judicial enforcement: systemic data can trigger accountability through anti-discrimination law.

The pace of implementation has been significantly influenced by political leadership – or at times the lack thereof. There has generally been an official stance against segregation, with multiple Ministers of Education in recent years voicing support for inclusive education. Nevertheless, Romania had ten different Education Ministers between 2016 and 2023, which posed challenges in terms of continuity. Each change in leadership risked derailing ongoing initiatives, as new ministers had to be convinced of the importance of desegregation and brought up to speed on technical processes. During these transitions, UNICEF played a crucial role in maintaining momentum – the UNICEF team in Romania repeatedly briefed incoming ministry officials, provided evidence on why tackling segregation is essential, and advocated sticking to the reform roadmap. Without this external champion of consistency, the policy might have stagnated amid shifting political winds. While high-level political will was present in principle, it needed to be translated into sustained administrative action, which could only be achieved through persistent advocacy and support.

Ultimately, it is the stakeholders on the ground – school administrators, teachers, parents and local authorities – who make or break desegregation efforts. Romania's experience has shown that legal mandates alone are insufficient without buy-in from these stakeholders. Some school principals and teachers initially resisted desegregation measures, such as random class assignment or transporting students from marginalised neighbourhoods, often due to misconceptions or convenience. Better-off parents, perceiving differences in school quality, sometimes oppose measures that would mix their children with students from disadvantaged groups, fearing that this might compromise academic standards.

Meanwhile, disadvantaged parents may lack the resources or confidence to demand better educational inclusion for their children. To address these attitudes, raising awareness and providing training have been key. UNICEF and the Ministry have engaged in public information campaigns about the benefits of inclusive education, emphasising that diversity in classrooms improves the social skills and cohesion of all students, not just vulnerable groups. There is also an ongoing effort to improve quality across all schools (through equity funding, infrastructure upgrades and teacher incentives in schools in areas of need) so that parents feel less inclined to 'vote with their feet' and send their children to a few elite schools. Romania recognises that, as long as stark quality gaps exist between schools or classes, social pressure for segregation will persist. Thus, desegregation must go hand in hand with levelling up educational quality system-wide.

Local government officials, such as mayors and municipal councils, oversee school infrastructure and can influence school zoning and resourcing. Their support for desegregation varies. While some have championed inclusive policies, others perpetuate segregating practices quietly (for instance, by maintaining 'Roma annexes' in separate buildings or not investing equally in all neighbourhood schools). The question of local political will remains unanswered in Romania. In order to secure local alignment, the National Commission and Ministry have included local authorities in consultations and disseminated data highlighting segregation issues in their constituencies. It is hoped that objective evidence and community pressure will encourage mayors to view desegregation as a positive and necessary goal rather than a political risk.

Addressing intersectional vulnerabilities in education

A notable feature of Romania's approach is its recognition of intersectional vulnerabilities – the idea that certain children experience multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage that can exacerbate their risk of exclusion. School segregation in Romania does not occur solely along ethnic lines; in practice, many segregated settings concentrate children who are poor, Roma, from rural areas, and/or have special educational needs all at once. For example, a Roma child from a low-income family in a remote village may face a much higher risk of being in a segregated class than a Roma child from a better-off family in town. Understanding these layered vulnerabilities was crucial for designing effective interventions.

Historically, Romanian policies had compartmentalised vulnerable groups (Roma, disabled, poor, etc.) without considering their overlap. The 2016 Order marked a turning point by explicitly covering multiple criteria and thus implicitly acknowledging that a single child might fall under more than one category. Building on this, recent reforms have tried to operationalise intersectionality in concrete terms. The monitoring indicators developed with UNICEF assistance include combinations of factors – for instance, they track not only how many Roma students are in a class, but also how many of those Roma students are from low-education families or live in poverty. By doing so, the data system can flag "hotspots" where disadvantage is concentrated to a degree that certain classes or schools become segregated by multiple factors at once.

Romania's new legal framework even leaves room to expand protected criteria as needed. The 2023 Education Law lists the main grounds (ethnicity, disability, etc.) but allows that additional characteristics can be added if evidence emerges of segregation on those bases. This flexibility is forward-looking; for instance, if gender-based segregation or other forms were observed, policies could adapt accordingly. Already, policymakers are noting new vulnerabilities that merit attention, such as children of underage mothers or refugee children (the example given is Ukrainian refugee students in Romania). These children may not have been traditionally considered in "at-risk" definitions but clearly face educational marginalization. The desegregation monitoring now incorporates such status markers, reflecting an evolving understanding of who might be left behind.

Data from recent studies underscored the need for an intersectional lens. The 2022 Population and Housing Census in Romania, along with the European Commission's Education and Training Monitor 2023 highlighted that Roma children in Romania often simultaneously experience deep poverty and residential segregation, compounding

their educational segregation. Nationally, statistics have been alarming: as of 2022, approximately 51% of Roma pupils attend schools where all or most of their peers are also Roma – a steep increase from 26% in 2015. This trend indicates growing isolation of Roma communities in certain schools, which often correlates with high poverty rates and lower resource schools. Indeed, a 2008 UNICEF-supported survey found that in two-thirds of surveyed schools, Roma students were segregated in some form; in one-third of the schools, Roma comprised the majority of students, while in another third they were separated into Roma-only classes. Such schools tended to have worse facilities and less qualified staff, demonstrating the overlap of ethnic segregation with quality deficits. Romania's commitment to inclusive quality education recognises that simply mixing students is not enough – the schools they attend must be equipped and staffed to meet all learners' needs. Thus, desegregation efforts are coupled with broader inclusive education reforms (curriculum adaptation, teacher training in diversity, etc.) to ensure that vulnerable children not only learn alongside others but truly belong and succeed.

One concrete methodological advancement is the development of a segregation intensity scoring system. The latest monitoring framework doesn't just identify whether segregation exists; it also measures its degree. For example, a school where 100% of children in certain classes are vulnerable (and 0% in other classes) would score as highly segregated, whereas a school where distribution is somewhat uneven would score lower. This allows for prioritising interventions at sites of acute segregation. The scoring takes into account multiple criteria – effectively, a child who ticks several vulnerability boxes contributes more to the intensity score if concentrated with similar peers. Such a tool is fairly innovative internationally and gives Romania an edge in targeting resources (e.g. extra teacher aides, grants, or inspections) to the most segregated environments first.

Addressing intersecting vulnerabilities also required better data collection at enrolment. It was observed that the standard student enrolment form did not capture all the information needed to monitor segregation (for instance, whether a child is from a single-parent family or has a parent working abroad). Efforts are underway to enrich administrative data and ensure that, with appropriate privacy safeguards, schools report key socio-economic and demographic variables into SIIIR. This way, the *moment a child enters the education system*, their various needs and potential disadvantages can be recorded (confidentially) and later used in aggregate to detect patterns of segregation. While issues like personal data protection and reluctance of families to self-identify (especially for ethnicity, due to lingering stigma) present challenges, Romania is working to balance data needs with privacy and trust. Roma organizations have been encouraged to assist in sensitively improving ethnic self-identification rates so that the data reflects reality. Ultimately, acknowledging students' intersectional identities is key to designing inclusive practices that reach those who most need support.

Innovations and unique aspects of Romania's approach

Romania's desegregation architecture stands out due to the way in which six innovations come together to form a coherent, mutually reinforcing system – one that goes far beyond the incremental or piecemeal approaches commonly found elsewhere in Europe.

Firstly, it begins with exceptional legal precision. While many countries rely on broad anti-discrimination clauses, Romania's regulations spell out segregation at four levels – school, building, class and even the last rows of benches – and prohibit it based on five criteria: ethnicity, disability/special educational needs (SEN), socio-economic status, residence and prior academic performance. By conceding no grey areas, this typology prevents administrators from claiming that pupils placed in a separate wing or parallel class are technically 'in the same school'. This clear language also underpins enforceability: inspectors and the National Council for Combating Discrimination can cite specific clauses rather than arguing abstract principles, making it more likely that sanctions will be enforced and remedial action will follow.

Second, legal clarity is combined with real-time, data-driven oversight. Segregation indicators –

over one hundred quantitative and qualitative items – are embedded in Romania's Education Management Information System (SIIIR). As schools already submit enrolment, attendance and achievement data via the SIIIR system, incorporating desegregation metrics has transformed monitoring from a special project into routine administrative work. Each autumn, school directors enter class composition data and the system applies pre-set thresholds to flag any building or classroom whose share of vulnerable students far exceeds local population benchmarks. County inspectorates and the National Commission then access automated dashboards that pinpoint where interventions are required. There are two key benefits: policy decisions are based on evidence rather than anecdote, and the practice is institutionalised, so it is unlikely to disappear when donor funding ends or political attention shifts elsewhere.

Thirdly, Romania moves beyond the binary question of whether segregation exists by scoring its intensity. The monitoring algorithm calculates how concentrated vulnerable pupils are within each unit, producing a normed index ranging from minimal to acute segregation. This nuance is important because it directs scarce resources, such as teacher assistants, mobile counsellors and infrastructure grants, to the most severe hotspots first. Equally importantly, it tracks incremental progress. A school whose index shifts from 'severe' to 'moderate' can demonstrate improvement long before achieving perfect parity, which sustains local motivation and provides ministry officials with credible success stories.

Fourthly, the framework does not rely on ex-post correction alone; it incorporates prevention. A nationwide ministerial order now requires schools with multiple parallel classes to allocate pupils by random draw (or an equivalent algorithmic process) at key intake points. By eliminating teacher or parent discretion in class composition, Romania cuts off the common pathway by which well-connected families cluster their children into 'strong' tracks, leaving poorer or Roma pupils in 'weaker' ones. The rule is administratively straightforward – schools publish the randomisation procedure in advance and videotape the draw – but politically bold, signalling that the ministry will abandon customary practices if they perpetuate inequity. Early evidence from pilot counties shows that random allocation, when paired with supportive teacher development, yields more balanced classrooms without reducing overall achievement.

Fifth, these technical instruments form part of a robust governance framework. The National Commission for School Desegregation and Inclusion (NCSDI) links ministry departments, county inspectorates and school-level committees via clear reporting lines and annual work plans. Rather than creating a stand-alone project unit vulnerable to budget cuts, the ministry has embedded equity duties into existing structures. Inspectorates must now include segregation metrics in their routine quality reviews and every school's anti-violence or ethics committee must log desegregation data each term. This 'mainstreamed' accountability sends a powerful cultural message: dismantling segregation is part of every education official's day job and not the remit of a special task force. In practice, the NCSDI serves as both a coordinating hub and an institutional memory, which is crucial in a political environment that has seen ten education ministers in seven years.

Finally, Romania ensures the system is future-proofed with adaptability and strategic vision. The 2023 Education Law explicitly permits the addition of new protected criteria as and when evidence emerges – an important safeguard in a rapidly changing society which is now hosting large numbers of refugee pupils and recognising new at-risk groups, such as children of underage mothers. Alongside this legal flexibility, the ministry – again with UNICEF support – is drafting a 2025–2035 National Strategy for School Desegregation. This strategy will combine legal enforcement, data analytics, teacher training, infrastructure investment and community outreach into a single roadmap complete with costings, milestones and evaluation cycles. Few countries have attempted such a granular, equity-specific action plan. If it is fully implemented, it could become a template for integrating multiple strands of inclusive education policy on a national scale.

Lessons learned and actionable insights for other countries

Romania's experience highlights ten interconnected lessons for any country seeking to dismantle segregation.

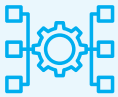
Firstly, a clear legal ban must be adopted that defines all forms of segregation and covers all grounds of protection, while assigning sanctions. Clarity in the law is essential for enforcement. Romania's multi-tier definitions spell out segregation at school, building, class and seating-row levels, while prohibiting discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, disability, poverty, residence or achievement. This level of precision leaves no loopholes and empowers watchdogs to impose sanctions the moment segregation is detected.

Secondly, monitoring should be institutionalised by incorporating a comprehensive set of segregation indicators into the Education Management Information System (SIIIR). Automatic annual reports now highlight disparities that were previously hidden, ensuring that policy is evidence-based.

Thirdly, it is important to recognise that desegregation will fail if families still perceive stark differences in school quality. Romania combines its equity initiatives with targeted investment in better infrastructure, teacher incentives, and learning materials so that every neighbourhood school becomes a viable option, thereby reducing the 'flight' dynamic that fuels segregation.

Fourthly, ensure stakeholder buy-in. Pupils' and parents' national councils, teacher unions and municipal leaders were involved in consultations, public awareness campaigns and diversity training. This transformed inclusion from a top-down directive into a collaborative effort.

Fifthly, develop new technical capacity. UNICEF and other partners provided expertise in designing indicators, coding the SIIIR module, and training inspectors and teachers – a level of support that will also be required by most countries when shifting from abstract commitments to daily practice.



Sixthly, create structures that can withstand political change. For example, Romania's National Commission for School Desegregation was backed by cross-party endorsement and EU human rights obligations, enabling it to maintain reforms through ten education ministers in seven years.

Seventhly, adopt low-cost preventative measures, such as Romania's mandatory random allocation of pupils to classes, to prevent segregation before it can take root.

Eighth, apply an intersectional lens. By mapping the overlaps between ethnicity, poverty, disability and rural isolation, the authorities can allocate scholarships, transport, teaching assistants and counselling services to pupils facing the greatest number of barriers.

Ninth, embed change within a long-term strategy that includes milestones, budgets and annual reviews as part of the broader education sector plan. Romania's forthcoming National Strategy for School Desegregation will embed reforms within a multi-year timetable.

Finally, safeguard data privacy and community trust. While ethnicity and income data are important, they must be collected under strict confidentiality. Meanwhile, Roma leaders should explain to families how accurate self-identification leads to better services. Taken together, these ten strategies will transform isolated policies into a self-reinforcing ecosystem.

This will demonstrate that clear laws, rigorous data, sustained resources and persistent engagement can dismantle deeply rooted segregation and enable every child to learn in a diverse and equitable environment.

The Romanian case study shows that inclusive educational reform is a complex undertaking requiring legal action, administrative systems, human resources and community attitudes to be aligned. Romania has created an interlocking ecosystem in which each component reinforces the others to support inclusion by pairing laws with enforcement bodies, integrating data systems with training programmes and linking advocacy to policy change. Other countries should assess their own contexts across these dimensions, adapt lessons accordingly and begin with targeted pilot schemes, such as a regional monitoring system or random class allocation, to build momentum for wider implementation. Although challenges remain – such as sustaining political and public support, eradicating subtle segregation, and improving quality in all schools – Romania's progress is evident. This is marked by a robust legal ban, nationwide monitoring, and a growing appreciation of inclusion. It shows that deeply rooted segregation can be dismantled through a holistic, data-driven, and rights-based approach. Ultimately, Romania's experience provides practical guidance and hope, demonstrating that meaningful progress towards equitable and diverse learning environments is possible with vision, collaboration, and perseverance.

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Serbia's inclusive education reform: A Journey of systemic and sustainable change

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Serbia proved that deep systemic reform is possible – even terminology like "uneducable" was scrapped as the country embraced a culture of support for every learner. A key insight from Serbia is the importance of embedding inclusion into the fabric of the education system, rather than treating it as a separate program. Serbia didn't create a parallel inclusive system; it transformed the mainstream system itself. The lesson for others is clear: lasting change comes when inclusion is woven into all policies, teacher development, and school processes. Serbia's long-term approach also shows that patience and persistence pay off. Over 15 years, the country kept adjusting and improving its strategies – and today serves as a regional example that with the right mix of legislation, training, and community engagement, no child needs to be left out of learning.

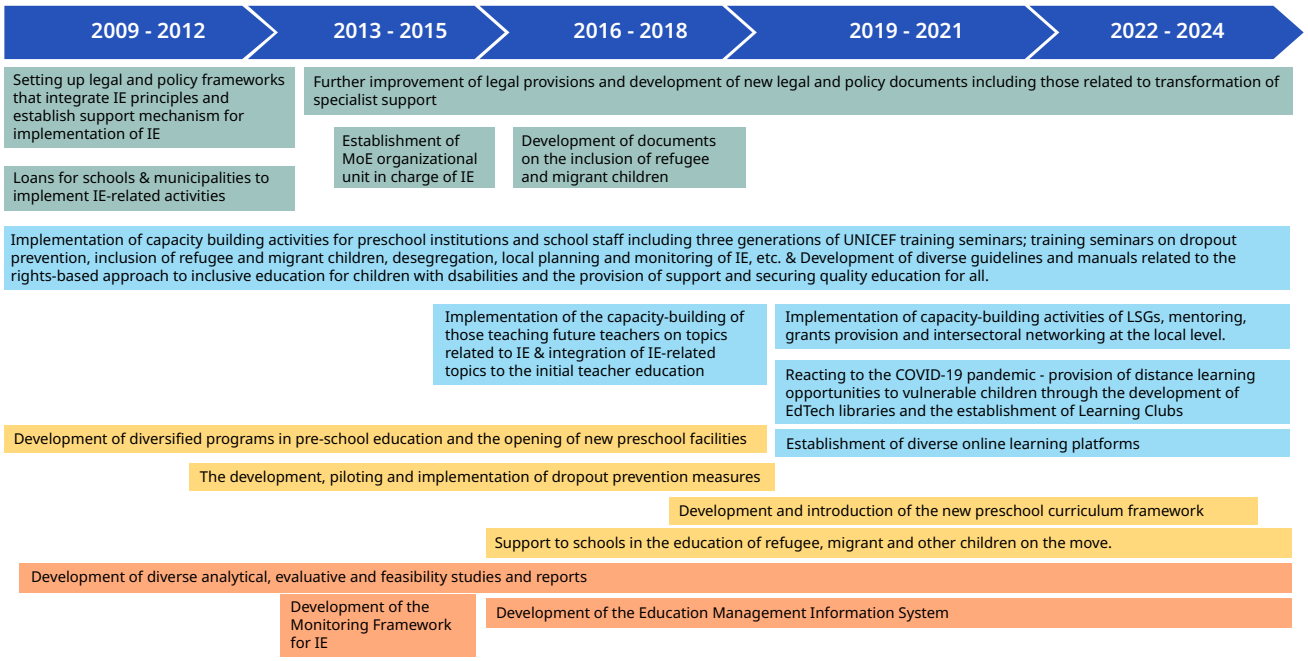
Serbia's journey towards inclusive education began with groundbreaking legislation in 2009, which guaranteed every child's right to learn in mainstream schools. Since then, the country has woven inclusion into the fabric of its education system. Thousands of children from vulnerable groups – including children with disabilities, Roma children, and those from low-income families – are now learning alongside their peers, supported by individualised education plans and trained staff. Teachers nationwide have been trained in inclusive methods, and hundreds of pedagogical assistants now support children with additional needs in classrooms. The number of students in segregated special schools has steadily declined as classroom support improves and attitudes shift. Serbia's model emphasises support at all levels: schools have inclusive education teams and inter-sectoral support services, while national strategies and EU-backed investments strengthen teacher training and resources. This dedication to inclusion represents not just a policy, but a change in culture – moving from isolation towards a sense of belonging for every child.

Drivers for inclusive education reform

Since the early 2000s, Serbia's education policy has increasingly emphasised equity and quality, aligning with national development goals and international commitments (e.g. the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child and of Persons with Disabilities). Yet Serbia faced serious challenges in educational inclusion. Access to pre-primary education was very limited – facilities were scarce and unevenly distributed, so the children most in need (those from disadvantaged backgrounds, children with disabilities, Roma children) were often left behind. Enrolment practices for children with disabilities were also deeply problematic: local "categorization commissions" in health centers evaluated whether a child could *fit* the standard school environment. If deemed unable to adapt, a child was diverted to a special school or even labelled "uneducable," left at home or in an institution. A rigid notion of the "typical child" disproportionately affected vulnerable groups (children with disabilities, Roma, children in extreme poverty or remote areas). Many who might have thrived in mainstream schools were instead segregated or excluded entirely. This exclusionary approach led to severe inequities: children needlessly separated from families, overrepresentation of vulnerable children in special schools/classes, high dropout rates among Roma and other marginalised groups, and many children with disabilities not attending school at all.

Evidence of the system's shortcomings became more evident through the 2000s. Serbia's participation in PISA 2006 showed that the country continued to face serious challenges in terms of learning outcomes. Teacher training and professional development had been neglected for decades, leaving many educators ill-prepared to support diverse learners. Policymaking was seldom based on data or research. Yet amid these challenges, a consensus was emerging that improving equity would improve quality. Education leaders came to see inclusion not just as a social obligation but as a strategy to raise overall performance. Ensuring that *all* children -regardless of socio-economic status, disability, or ethnicity - could attend quality schools was viewed as foundational for a more open and just society, and essential to improving educational outcomes nationwide.

By 2009, Serbia was ready to fundamentally reform its approach to inclusive education (IE). The reform launched that year was comprehensive and system wide. It aimed to mainstream inclusive education in law and policy, strengthen institutions and actors at all levels to implement and monitor inclusion, increase equity and reduce segregation in schooling, and promote evidence-based decision-making. Importantly, while some measures targeted specific vulnerable groups (such as Roma inclusion programs), the ultimate vision was an education system where *every* child learns alongside their peers in regular schools, reaching their full potential in a supportive, non-segregated environment. Serbia's journey toward inclusion has been systemic, systematic, and focused on long-term sustainability – offering valuable lessons for other countries seeking to do the same. Serbia's reform can be viewed as four interconnected strategic priorities: (1) establishing an inclusive policy and institutional framework; (2) empowering teachers and other stakeholders through capacity-building; (3) instituting inclusive practices and support mechanisms at the school and community level; and (4) improving data use and monitoring to guide decisions. The following sections describe each of these, highlighting how the reform was pursued holistically and for the long run.



Establishing an inclusive policy framework

A critical moment came with the adoption of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (LoFES) in 2009, which enshrined inclusive education principles into Serbia's legal framework. This law declared that everyone has the right to education and explicitly defined inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing their participation in mainstream schools and eliminating segregation and exclusion. LoFES 2009 became the backbone of the reform: it laid out principles and standards for pre-primary, primary, and secondary education, and set conditions for delivering education at all levels. Crucially, it instituted new mechanisms and supports to put inclusion into practice. For example, the law abolished the old "categorization" of children by disability, ending the routine tracking of certain children into special schools. It introduced rights to additional educational support for students with disabilities or learning difficulties, and required the creation of supportive structures at national, local, and school levels. Every school now had to form an Inclusive Education Team to plan for inclusion; Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were introduced to tailor instruction to students' needs; and the role of pedagogical assistants was created to help children (especially Roma or those with disabilities) participate in class. The law also encouraged a shift to a "curriculum for all," promoting differentiated

teaching and formative assessment so that learning outcomes could be achieved by every child through adapted approaches, rather than expecting children to conform to an inflexible curriculum.

In the years immediately following 2009, Serbia reinforced this legal foundation with by-laws and regulations to ensure the reforms took root. Between 2010 and 2012, new regulations streamlined school enrolment (making it easier for children with disabilities and other needs to enrol in mainstream schools) and defined specific additional support measures for any student who might require them. Notably, Intersectoral Committees (ISCs) were established in every municipality as interdisciplinary teams (education, health, and social welfare professionals) to assess children's needs for additional support and coordinate services. This was a step toward a holistic, multi-sector approach: rather than leaving schools on their own to handle special needs, ISCs would bring in health and social services alongside education. Additional by-laws introduced detailed procedures for developing and implementing IEPs and created roles such as pedagogical assistants (including Roma pedagogical assistants to bridge language and cultural gaps) to provide in-class support. Other supportive measures included introducing Resource Centres to assist mainstream schools, providing free textbooks and adapted materials for children with disabilities, and instituting affirmative action in secondary school admissions (e.g. reserved places and scholarships for Roma students and students with disabilities).

These early reforms were accelerated by international support – in particular, a World Bank education loan (2009–2012) that provided substantial resources to kick-start implementation of the new inclusive education policies. The World Bank funding enabled a nationwide rollout of key activities: training for teachers and school principals in inclusive practices; grants to roughly one-third of schools (across almost all municipalities) to initiate local inclusive education projects; municipal grants specifically to support inclusion of Roma children; development of policy documents (guidelines, rulebooks) and some reforms to financing for inclusion; and creation of national support mechanisms such as advisory bodies and professional networks for inclusive education. This infusion of resources in the early 2010s helped Serbia move quickly from legislation to action, ensuring the ideals of the 2009 law translated into changes in classrooms and communities.

Serbia also aligned other laws and sectoral policies with the new inclusive approach. Legislation in areas like financial support to families, health care, and social protection was amended to introduce measures facilitating inclusion (such as benefits and services for children with disabilities and their families), so that education reforms would not be undermined by conflicting policies. The Strategy for Education Development 2030 explicitly integrated inclusive education goals, reinforcing that improving quality and increasing coverage at all levels must include a focus on vulnerable groups and equitable access. In essence, within a few years inclusion went from a piloted concept to a guiding principle embedded across Serbia's education system and its broader social policy framework.

Another crucial step was creating a dedicated institutional home for inclusive education within the Ministry of Education. In 2015, the Ministry – with UNICEF's support – established a Group for Social Inclusion (later upgraded to the Department for Human and Minority Rights in Education) to coordinate, develop, and oversee inclusive education policy implementation and later renamed into Sector for Prevention and Protection of Violence and Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups with more employees to support this agenda. This permanent unit was charged with mainstreaming inclusive practices throughout the education sector, rather than relying on ad-hoc projects or NGOs. The unit leads initiatives on anti-discrimination, violence prevention in schools, and dropout prevention, in addition to core inclusion programs. Its creation reflects the systemic approach Serbia adopted – recognising that inclusion touches many aspects of education governance and thus requires a central coordinating body. (It also highlights UNICEF's role as a constant partner in the reform, from helping draft policies to building institutional capacity.) By establishing the legal and institutional framework and securing a coordinating hub in government, Serbia laid the groundwork for a sustainable reform that would survive beyond

individual projects or political cycles. Within a few years, inclusive education was embedded in laws, integrated into national budgets and data systems, and linked with related efforts like anti-discrimination campaigns – rather than being an isolated add-on initiative.

Building systemic capacity: Teachers and stakeholders

Transforming laws and policies was only a first step; the success of inclusive education hinged on the capacity and mindset of those implementing it on the ground. Thus, a massive effort was made to equip teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders with the skills and attitudes needed for inclusion. Beginning in 2009, Serbia launched intensive nationwide teacher training programs to improve classroom practices and help educators embrace inclusive principles. The initial wave of training (circa 2009–2013), led by the Ministry with support from UNICEF and other partners, aimed to initiate a mindset shift among educators. Many veteran teachers had never received formal training on inclusive pedagogy, so early sessions raised awareness about student diversity, challenged negative stereotypes (e.g. about children with disabilities or Roma children), and promoted the idea that every child can learn given the right support. At the same time, these trainings provided very practical strategies: how to differentiate instruction for students of varying ability, manage a classroom with diverse learners, and design and use IEPs. Tens of thousands of teachers across all regions participated – by the mid-2010s, virtually every school had staff exposed to core concepts of inclusion.

After that foundational phase, Serbia continued investing in educators' skills through two more "generations" of capacity-building. Between roughly 2013 and 2019, trainings became more specialised, enhancing pedagogical techniques such as individualised instruction, classroom management in an inclusive setting, formative assessment, and specific approaches for working with children with particular needs (for example, strategies for teaching students with autism or ADHD). UNICEF played a critical role in designing and rolling out many of these programs, often in partnership with local experts. From 2019 onward, a third wave of training introduced more innovative, peer-learning-based approaches. For instance, the SHARE project (supported by UNICEF) paired high-performing inclusive schools with struggling schools, fostering mentorship and horizontal learning. Communities of practice were established so that teachers could regularly meet (in person or online) to exchange experiences and solutions related to inclusion. This acknowledged that improving inclusive education is an ongoing learning process – educators benefit from continuous support and the ability to learn from each other, rather than one-off workshops. In sum, Serbia moved from basic awareness training to advanced skills training to cultivating professional learning networks, keeping teachers in a "learning loop" so that inclusion remained an active focus beyond a single workshop.

The scale of Serbia's teacher capacity-building is impressive. Between 2011 and 2023, over 45,000 educators and specialists received some form of in-service training on inclusive education. Moreover, Serbia recognised that teacher preparation needed to start *before* teachers ever entered the classroom. From around 2016, reforms were introduced in initial teacher education at universities to incorporate inclusive education into curricula. University professors of pedagogy were invited to join the in-service training efforts, working alongside master teachers as co-trainers, thus updating professors' own knowledge of modern inclusive practices. Some universities even launched centers of excellence in inclusive education (for example, at the Faculties of Philosophy in Belgrade and Niš) to focus on research and training in inclusive pedagogy. These steps help ensure that new graduates enter the profession with a foundation in supporting diverse learners, gradually reducing the need for remedial in-service training. In short, Serbia linked pre-service and in-service training into a continuum, an approach that other countries could follow to ensure that next generations of teachers are better prepared for inclusion.

Beyond teachers, other education stakeholders had their capacities strengthened as well. School principals were trained to become *instructional leaders* for inclusion – learning how to create an inclusive school culture, support their teachers, and allocate resources for support measures. Professional support staff like school psychologists and pedagogues received training to help

classroom teachers implement IEPs and new methodologies. A Network for Inclusive Education (Network for IE) was created in 2010 as a peer support network of about 120 experienced practitioners and experts. Over time, this evolved into a formal cadre of advisors – external associates as an inclusive-education experts available to schools – a systemic, sustainable resource that the Ministry can deploy when a school is struggling with a complex case. For example, if a school is having difficulty including a student with complex needs, an advisor-external associate from the respective school administration can visit, advise staff, and help solve problems. This ensures that expertise developed over years of reform is retained and shared nationally, creating an institutional memory for inclusion.

At the local community level, municipalities were supported to fulfil their roles in inclusive education. Local government officials and members of the intersectoral committees underwent training and mentoring (often facilitated by UNICEF and other partners) on how to monitor inclusion at the local level, develop Local Action Plans for Children, and coordinate across sectors (education, social welfare, health) to support families. UNICEF supported dozens of municipalities in drafting Local Action Plans that set inclusion objectives and concrete activities. These plans became forums for aligning local stakeholders–schools, health centers, social services, parent groups–and for budgeting local resources toward inclusive initiatives (for example, funding an assistant teacher or transportation for students with disabilities). Municipalities have also been encouraged to form local inclusive education networks to sustain peer support among schools and ensure knowledge and resources are shared within and between communities. Few municipalities have formal bodies for inclusive education that now have budgeted plans and support implementation of measures.

Another aspect of capacity is the availability of guidance and tools. In partnership with different partners and with UNICEF's support, Serbia developed a wealth of handbooks and manuals on inclusive education, grounded in rights-based and evidence-based practices. These practical guides (e.g. on how to develop and use IEPs, how to do differentiated instruction, how to prevent dropouts, how to assess the need for additional learning support) were distributed to schools and intersectoral committees to help them implement new approaches. In this way, knowledge wasn't only transferred via training but also captured in print and online resources that educators could continually reference. This added to the reform's sustainability – even as personnel change over time, the resources remain to guide new staff.

Finally, Serbia's teaching workforce is now required and incentivised to pursue continuous professional development, including in inclusive education. Under LoFES and subsequent regulations, teachers must complete a certain number of training hours (credits) every five years, and inclusion has been designated as a national priority area for accredited professional development programs. Many Ministry-approved training courses on inclusion count toward teachers' required hours. This policy keeps inclusion on the agenda for every teacher seeking career advancement. For instance, the official catalogue of accredited training programs for 2022–2026 lists 85 courses under the priority "application of an inclusive and democratic approach in education," covering topics from identifying students' needs to adapting teaching methods and working with parents. In summary, Serbia systematically built human capacity for inclusion at every level of the education system – national, local, school, and classroom – making inclusive education increasingly the norm in teaching practice and school management rather than the exception. This comprehensive capacity-building (much of it supported by UNICEF and other international partners) has been a cornerstone of the reform's impact and sustainability.

School-level mechanisms and inclusive practices

Real change is ultimately measured in schools and classrooms. Alongside policy and training, Serbia introduced numerous mechanisms at the school (and pre-school) level to drive inclusive practices and directly support students. One of the earliest and most influential changes (stemming from the 2009 law) was the requirement that every school establish a School Inclusion Team. Typically composed of teachers, the school psychologist or pedagogue, and a school leader,

these teams coordinate the school's efforts on inclusive education. Their tasks include identifying students who might need additional help, initiating the development of IEPs for those students, organising teacher peer-support sessions, and liaising with parents and external support services. By institutionalising such teams, Serbia ensured that inclusion was not left to individual teacher initiative – it became a shared responsibility within each school's management structure. Having a formal inclusion team created a designated group to champion and monitor inclusive practices. This mechanism, which UNICEF advisors had recommended during the drafting of LoFES 2009, proved effective in promoting a whole-school approach to inclusion rather than isolated efforts.

Another key focus at the school level has been preventing dropouts, which is integral to inclusion given that students from vulnerable groups historically had much higher dropout rates. Serbia developed an early warning system to flag students at risk of dropping out (using indicators like attendance and grades) and issued guidelines for schools on how to intervene. Schools began implementing measures such as remedial classes and tutoring for struggling students, mentorship programs where teachers or peers provide extra help, and stronger engagement with families to address absenteeism. Training and ongoing mentoring for school staff on dropout prevention was provided. Based on positive results from pilot projects in select schools (which saw dropout rates fall), many of these measures were incorporated into official policy. By the late 2010s, the Ministry had integrated an early warning and intervention system for at-risk students into national regulations, turning what started as a project-based innovation into a standard practice across all schools. In short, pilot efforts to reduce dropouts were scaled up through policy so that every school now systematically works to keep vulnerable students engaged.

Serbia's inclusive reform also had to respond to new challenges that emerged, such as the influx of refugee and migrant children during the 2015–2016 European migrant crisis. Previously, the education system had little experience with foreign or non-Serbian-speaking students. In line with its inclusive ethos, Serbia moved quickly to include refugee and migrant children in schools. The Ministry of Education, with UNICEF and EU support, set up a Learning Support Programme specifically for these children, focusing on Serbian language acquisition and basic skills (including digital literacy) to help them integrate. Provisional guidelines were issued to ensure immediate, unconditional enrolment of children on the move into primary schools, and to facilitate their enrolment into secondary education as well. In the following years, more permanent policies were developed: for instance, Serbia is preparing regulations to guarantee that refugee and asylum-seeking children can promptly access schooling just like any citizen child. A "National Welcoming Programme" was created for children on the move, and special Serbian-as-a-foreign-language courses were introduced to help them catch up academically. These efforts have been cited as a good practice in emergency inclusion – an education system already sensitised to inclusion (thanks to years of prior training) was able to accommodate a sudden wave of non-native students with relatively little friction, through strong cooperation between the Ministry, UNICEF, and the national refugee agency. By the late 2010s, Serbia had demonstrated that inclusive education principles could extend to *all* children in its territory, including refugees and migrants, even under crisis conditions.

Early childhood education (ECE) was another front for inclusive practices. Historically, pre-school (kindergarten) in Serbia had very low coverage, especially for marginalised groups, and some pre-schools even ran "developmental groups" – essentially segregated classes for children with disabilities. UNICEF advocated expanding ECE access as a way to foster inclusion from the very start of a child's educational journey. Pilot projects demonstrated ways to reach more vulnerable young children – for example, mobile kindergartens and community-based pre-schools for Roma settlements – and these successes informed policy. A new Preschool Curriculum Framework (PCF) was developed and implemented nationwide from 2018, embedding inclusive education principles and modern, child-centered pedagogy in pre-schools. The PCF encourages mixed-ability play and learning, valuing diversity as an asset in the classroom. However, remnants of the old system persisted: some children with disabilities were still being placed in entirely

separate pre-school groups, missing out on interacting with peers. To address this, Serbia's National Education Council proposed policy amendments to abolish "developmental groups" and instead utilise special educators as support staff within mainstream pre-schools (rather than running parallel segregated classes). If adopted, this policy would fully integrate pre-schoolers with disabilities into regular groups, with special educators acting as itinerant experts to assist teachers and children, rather than isolating the children. The clear trend in early education is toward inclusivity, ensuring that the foundations laid in kindergarten carry through to primary school.

Children with disabilities remain a central focus of inclusive education, and Serbia has enacted specific measures to support them in mainstream settings. As mentioned, LoFES 2009 banned the old practice of categorising/excluding these children, but the practical question was how to support their needs in regular schools. In 2010, Serbia adopted a Rulebook on Additional Educational, Health and Social Support for Children and Students (replaced by the actual one, adopted i 2018), a by-law formalising the process for identifying a child's need for support (educational or otherwise) and allocating resources or services to meet those needs. This ensures a legal right to accommodations such as individual classroom aides, assistive technology, or therapy, so a child with a disability can participate fully in school. In 2021, a Rulebook on Resource Centres was introduced, paving the way for an important new concept: transforming special education schools into resource centers that support mainstream schools. Rather than operating as separate institutions where children with disabilities are sent away, resource centers provide expert services to students and teachers in regular schools. In fact, Serbia began this transformation on a pilot basis as early as 2012, but the 2021 rulebook institutionalised it. Now, special schools are gradually being reimagined as hubs of expertise and support – lending out specialists (itinerant special educators, speech therapists, etc.) or equipment to mainstream schools, and even operating "assistive technology libraries". This approach aims to retain the valuable expertise of special educators while avoiding the segregation of children.

On the subject of assistive technology (AT) – tools like communication devices, specialised software, or adapted learning materials – UNICEF has been a key partner in expanding their provision. In recent years, UNICEF supported Serbia in developing a system to provide assistive technology to any child who needs it. This included creating assessment procedures, guidelines for matching devices to a child's needs, training on how to use AT, and a management system to track devices. UNICEF also donated a substantial amount of equipment, jump-starting an AT lending scheme whereby resource centers house collections of devices that can be loaned out to students in mainstream schools. In 2024, a web-based platform and online AT catalogue was developed as part of the National Education Portal to further streamline access to these technologies and connect educators, families, and service providers. The emphasis on AT reflects an understanding that technology can greatly enhance inclusion – for example, a tablet with a speech-generating app can allow a nonverbal child to participate in class, or a screen-reader can help a student with visual impairment access the curriculum. Serbia's goal is to ensure such solutions are not confined to a few pilot sites but integrated system wide.

Across these various initiatives, an important theme is intersectoral cooperation. Inclusive education doesn't happen in a vacuum – it overlaps with social welfare, healthcare, and community services. Serbia's establishment of local Intersectoral Committees (ISCs) was a novel attempt to institutionalise cross-sector collaboration for each child needing support. In practice, the ISCs bring together professionals from different sectors to develop a comprehensive support plan for a child (covering education, health, therapy, social sector/financial assistance, etc.), embodying the "social model" of disability (addressing environmental barriers and lack of supports rather than viewing the child's impairment as the problem). Aligning other sectors with this approach has been challenging, though. While the education sector moved decisively toward inclusion, the health and social protection systems in Serbia were slower to abandon the old "medical model" perspective. Disability policy reforms in health and welfare lagged behind those in education, meaning that at times ISCs struggled – for example, if a medical representative

on the committee still saw institutionalization as an acceptable solution, or if social services lacked resources to follow through on recommendations. This misalignment is an area requiring further work: harmonising definitions of disability, expectations of inclusion, and funding across sectors is essential for a truly holistic inclusion system. Still, the ISC mechanism was a bold step and remains a cornerstone of Serbia's approach, ensuring that children needing support are at least *visible* in the system and have a chance at receiving coordinated assistance.

In summary, at the level of schools and communities, Serbia's reform introduced concrete structures (school inclusion teams, municipal committees), practices (IEPs, early warning systems for dropouts, an inclusive preschool curriculum), and targeted programs (for Roma children, for refugees, for children with disabilities) that collectively create an ecosystem supportive of inclusion. Many of these began as donor-supported pilots or responses to urgent needs, but over time they have been woven into the fabric of the education system. The continuous thread has been UNICEF's support – whether in conceptualising programs, funding initial phases, or providing technical expertise to turn pilot successes into national policy. By the late 2010s, Serbia had many of the building blocks of an inclusive system in place, from the classroom to the national ministry, all interacting in a systematic way to support every child.

Data-driven decision making and monitoring

From the outset, Serbia understood that lasting reform requires not only action but also reflection – gathering data, evaluating progress, and adjusting accordingly. Improving data collection and monitoring was therefore a vital part of the inclusive education reforms. At the system level, efforts proceeded along several tracks. First, around 2015 Serbia developed a comprehensive Inclusive Education Monitoring Framework (with UNICEF's assistance). This framework set out indicators and standards to assess how well schools, local authorities, and the country as a whole were implementing inclusive education in line with national goals and international standards. It covered areas such as enrolment rates of vulnerable groups, availability of support services, teacher training levels, and the inclusiveness of school climates. The monitoring framework gave the Ministry and partners a clearer picture of where progress was being made and where gaps remained. In 2023, the framework was refined – for example, adding more indicators to capture local-level implementation – reflecting the recognition that local data (municipal and school-level) is needed to truly track inclusion on the ground.

Secondly, Serbia undertook a series of evaluative studies and research to guide policy. A rapid assessment of the new inclusive education measures was conducted soon after the 2009–2010 reforms to get early feedback. In 2015, a cross-sectoral analysis examined education through a poverty/equity lens, highlighting disparities. UNICEF supported a formative evaluation of inclusive practices (2009–2014) that was completed in 2016, to examine what was working and what needed adjustment. Notably, in 2015–2016 an evaluation looked specifically at the quality of education in special schools and special classes. The findings were eye-opening: students in segregated settings were often receiving an inferior education, and many could be included in mainstream schools with proper support. This evidence strengthened the case for accelerating the transformation of special schools into resource centers (as discussed earlier). In other words, data was used to overcome inertia and push the system further toward inclusion. Additionally, studies were conducted on financing models – for instance, exploring public-private partnerships to expand preschool access, and analysing funding modalities for early childhood education – as part of the broader push to expand equitable access to quality early education. All these research efforts provided an evidence base to inform policy tweaks and resource allocation.

Another critical data initiative was the overhaul of the Education Management Information System (EMIS). Serbia introduced unique student identification numbers, allowing the tracking of individual students' progress through the system and disaggregation of data by background characteristics. With a more robust EMIS, it became possible to identify, for example, how many children with disabilities are enrolled

in regular schools or compare attendance and achievement patterns of Roma students versus others. Such data is invaluable for pinpointing remaining inequities and designing targeted interventions. By analysing EMIS data, policymakers could see trends like "hotspots" of dropout, the impact of inclusive measures on learning outcomes, or where additional support staff might be needed. EMIS also helps ensure no child falls through the cracks unnoticed – since each child has an ID, those who drop out or never enrol can be more easily identified and reached (in theory). Many of the EMIS improvements, supported by UNICEF and the EU, contributed to fostering a culture of evidence-based policymaking in education.

Serbia's commitment to data is also evident in its regular national reports on inclusive education. These reports (covering periods like 2015–2018, 2019–2021 and 2022-2024) provide periodic reviews of the state of inclusive education. They include statistics on key inclusion indicators, qualitative findings from school inspections, and updates on implementing legislation. For instance, Serbia's external school evaluation system – which evaluates each school on a rotating cycle – now explicitly checks for inclusive practices (such as whether the school has an effective inclusion team, whether teachers differentiate instruction, etc.). The results feed into the national reports. By institutionalising such monitoring and reporting, Serbia ensures that inclusive education remains a visible priority, and that successes and shortcomings are transparent. Notably, one of these reporting initiatives began as a UNICEF/EU-supported project but has since become a regular government practice.

All this data and monitoring has yielded concrete evidence of progress and has guided adjustments. For example, data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) – large household surveys supported by UNICEF – captured changes in education indicators over time. Comparing MICS data from the mid-2000s to 2019 shows significant improvements. Early childhood education attendance (ages 3–5) rose dramatically: from roughly 50% of children attending pre-school in 2014 to about 61% in 2019. (This is around double the rate from the early 2000s – a remarkable jump, though still leaving room for further growth.)

The increase was especially pronounced in rural areas: pre-school attendance in rural communities climbed from ~27% in 2014 to 46% by 2019. MICS data also showed a narrowing gap in primary education. In 2005, only 74% of Roma children were attending primary school, versus over 98% of children in the general population – a huge disparity. By 2019, primary school attendance was almost universal across the board: about 99.6% for the general population and 93% for children in Roma settlements. Likewise, primary school attendance among the poorest households climbed to virtually the national average by 2019. These statistics illustrate that Serbia's reforms in access – abolishing exclusionary practices and proactively including marginalised children – have succeeded in bringing nearly all children into primary education.

The data on secondary education, while still showing disparities, also indicate progress. Secondary school attendance among Roma youth was extremely low in the mid-2000s (around 10% in 2005); by 2019 it had nearly tripled to about 28%. Though this is still far below the national secondary attendance (roughly 94% in 2019 for the general population), the trajectory is upward. In fact, net secondary attendance for Roma girls doubled from 15% in 2014 to 27% in 2019 – still only one-third of the national average but clearly improving. Other vulnerable groups also advanced: for the poorest quintile of households, secondary school attendance rose from ~64% in 2005 to 81% in 2019. These gains can be attributed to measures like affirmative action (e.g. scholarship and mentorship programs for Roma high-schoolers), better preparation and support during primary school, and local initiatives encouraging continuation to upper secondary. Completion rates reflect similar patterns: nearly 97% of children overall complete primary school, but only ~64% of Roma children do – indicating the challenge that remains. For secondary education, about 87% of general population youth graduate, whereas roughly 61% of Roma youth do. Serbia's data systems thus highlight both substantial progress in inclusion *and* persistent gaps requiring attention. The transparent, evidence-based approach – supported by robust information systems and research (often in partnership with organisations like UNICEF, OECD, and the Open Society Foundations) – has helped maintain momentum

for the reform by celebrating achievements while candidly identifying remaining challenges.

It's worth noting that Serbia's inclusive mindset and investments in EdTech proved valuable during crises as well. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 and schooling shifted to remote learning, marginalised students everywhere were at risk of being left behind. In Serbia, the existence of an inclusion mindset helped shape the response. With UNICEF and EU support, Serbia rapidly expanded digital learning platforms (like an online national learning platform and educational TV programming) to reach all students. Importantly, efforts were made to ensure these remote learning solutions were accessible (providing devices or printed materials to those who needed them, creating content for students with disabilities, etc.). The crisis reinforced the need for flexibility and innovation in reaching every child – lessons that Serbia is now integrating into its ongoing inclusive education approach.

Remaining challenges and gaps

Despite over a decade of reforms and clear progress, Serbia's journey to full inclusion is not complete. Building an inclusive education system is a long-term endeavour, and several challenges persist – some systemic (needing further policy or structural changes) and others more practical or attitudinal (needing mindset shifts or resources on the ground).

Financial and resource constraints pose a serious challenge. Inclusive education, done right, requires investment – hiring support staff, training teachers, modifying buildings for accessibility, procuring assistive devices, etc. Yet Serbia's public expenditure on education has been under pressure, with tight government budgets in recent years. Declining or stagnant education spending can undermine the implementation of inclusive policies. Poorer municipalities struggle to allocate local funds for inclusive education needs. For instance, laws might declare that a child is entitled to a pedagogical assistant or transportation to school, but if funding isn't available at local level, those supports may not materialise in practice. International donors (World Bank, EU, UNICEF and others) provided crucial funding during the reform's first decade, but donor priorities can shift. Serbia faces the risk of a funding gap as some external projects end. If government does not fully take over financing of certain services (like pedagogical assistants or continuous teacher training), those services could stall. In short, achieving a sustainable financing model for inclusion – one that mitigates regional inequities and secures adequate resources long-term – is a pressing task. In 2024, UNICEF supported a Feasibility Study for financing of inclusive education offering three models to improve efficiency, as well as introduction of earmarked transfers to local self-government and flexible grants to schools. The Ministry of Education will need to work with the Ministry of Finance on potential reforms, to ensure that funds flow where they are needed most.

Another deeply rooted challenge is persistent inequities in outcomes for marginalised groups. As the data showed, access to education has greatly improved, but the *quality* of outcomes (learning and progression) for groups like Roma children, children with disabilities, or those in extreme poverty still lags behind. For example, Roma students still have disproportionately high dropout rates before the end of secondary education. Many factors outside school contribute to this – poverty requiring children to work, early marriage among some Roma girls, or feelings of alienation at school – and schools alone cannot solve all of them. Likewise, children with disabilities might now be formally enrolled in mainstream schools, but some receive only token inclusion – they may be physically present yet spend much of the day separated from peers or without meaningful learning. There is also concern about what happens *after* schooling. Students with disabilities who finish high school often find no clear pathways to vocational training or employment, leaving them dependent on the welfare system. The education system can't resolve employment issues alone, but it can do more to prepare students for transitions and advocate for inclusive post-secondary opportunities. More broadly, linking education with employment and community life – especially for the most disadvantaged – remains a gap. Serbia still lacks robust second-chance education programs or strong school-to-work transition supports for youth who don't go to university (such as many Roma youth or youth with disabilities). Without such pathways, the gains of inclusive schooling risk evaporating after graduation.

Educational quality and learning outcomes remain an overarching challenge. While inclusion has advanced equity in access, Serbia is still grappling with raising overall student achievement and reducing disparities between schools. PISA results, although slightly improved in recent years, indicate that on average Serbia performs below the OECD mean, with a large variance between high-performing and low-performing schools. Many low-performing schools are those with concentrations of disadvantaged students. This suggests that inclusive education's promise – to improve quality for all – is not yet fully realised, perhaps due to uneven implementation quality. Some teachers, despite attending trainings, still lack a deep understanding of inclusive pedagogy; they might *differentiate lessons on paper* to meet requirements, but not truly adapt instruction effectively in practice. Teachers often cite lack of time, large class sizes, or insufficient specialist support as barriers to implementing what they learned. There is anecdotal evidence and some surveys indicating that classroom practices haven't transformed as deeply as hoped. In other words, there is a difference between formal compliance (having an IEP, having an inclusion team, etc.) and actual change in teaching and learning processes. This points to the need for ongoing support, mentoring, and accountability to ensure that inclusive pedagogy moves from theory into genuine, school-wide practice.

Related to this is the challenge of attitudes and cultural change. Serbia's reforms have definitely shifted mindsets overall – surveys show greater acceptance among educators and the public that children with disabilities belong in regular schools, for instance, compared to 15 years ago. But attitudes do not change overnight. There are still segments of society (and some educators) who are sceptical about full inclusion. Some teachers and parents quietly question if inclusive education "lowers standards" or if certain children might be better off in special settings. Resistance can also be institutional: parts of the special education profession understandably felt threatened by the changes. Serbia did make efforts (e.g. via resource centers) to give special educators a continued, valuable role, but not all felt assured. The reform could have benefitted from an even stronger communications campaign early on to build a shared understanding (this point is discussed further in Lessons Learned). In any case, continuous advocacy and sensitization are needed to solidify inclusion as a non-negotiable value throughout society.

At the local governance level, challenges persist in clarifying roles and building capacity. Education in Serbia is primarily a national responsibility, but municipalities have certain duties related to support to inclusive education (school facilities maintenance, co-funding of assistants, transportation, etc.). Many local authorities, especially poorer ones, find it difficult to fulfil these responsibilities for inclusion due to limited budgets or expertise. Some municipalities still do not have active local inclusion plans or committees, despite the national mandate. This uneven local capacity means the experience of inclusion can differ from one community to another. Strengthening municipal-level commitment and capacity – through funding incentives, training for local officials, and perhaps clearer legal obligations – is an area for improvement.

Finally, there have been some policy ambiguities and backtracks that signal caution. Notably, Serbia's laws still technically allow special classes in some form. After 2009, there was a period when all special classes were banned to push full inclusion, but later regulations re-introduced the option of special classes for certain cases. This inconsistency sent mixed messages and likely reflects a degree of pushback or caution within the system. Opponents of inclusion pointed to the reintroduction of special classes as evidence the policy "was not working." The continued existence of any segregated streams indicates that achieving *full* inclusion is still a work in progress. Ultimately, reaching the end goal would mean those special classes are rendered unnecessary – but that requires the system to build enough capacity and confidence to support every child in a mainstream setting. Until then, the policy ambivalence could slow momentum. The lesson here (again elaborated later) is that a country moving toward inclusion should define early on what will happen to its special education sector and stick clearly to that plan, to avoid confusion and resistance down the line.

Lessons from Serbia's experience and recommendations for other countries

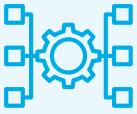
Serbia's decade-plus journey toward inclusive education offers valuable insights for other countries. This chapter distils key lessons learned from Serbia's reform experience–each paired with a concrete recommendation.

1. Strong Legal Foundations and Policy Commitment. A solid legal and policy framework is the cornerstone of inclusive education reform. Serbia's transformation began with the 2009 Law on the Foundations of the Education System, which enshrined the right of all children to participate in mainstream schooling and mandated additional support for those with special needs. This law signalled a shift from a "medical model" (viewing disabilities as a defect to be treated) to a "social model" focused on removing barriers and providing accommodations in regular schools. Backed by high-level political commitment, Serbia's legislative reforms established inclusion as a national priority and aligned subsequent strategies (e.g. the Education Development Strategy 2030) with this vision.

Recommendation: Countries should begin inclusion reforms by establishing a comprehensive legal mandate for inclusive education. Enact or update education laws to guarantee every child's right to attend regular schools without discrimination, paired with policies that operationalise this right (such as regulations on school accessibility, individualised support, and anti-discrimination measures). High-level policy commitment must accompany legislation – inclusion should be embedded in national education strategies and action plans, ensuring all institutions share a clear vision. A strong legal foundation not only provides legitimacy and direction for reform but also holds systems accountable to deliver inclusion.

2. Building Teacher Capacity for Inclusion. Teacher preparation and support determine the effectiveness of inclusive education in the classroom. Serbia learned that passing laws is not enough if teachers lack the skills and confidence to teach diverse learners. Early in the reform, many Serbian teachers had limited training in special needs education, leading to inconsistencies in practice. In response, Serbia introduced pre-service and in-service training programs on inclusive techniques and created school-based expert teams to help teachers adapt curricula and instruction. Over time, thousands of teachers in Serbia received training on individual education plans, differentiated instruction, and managing classroom diversity. Even so, the national report found that teacher capacity indicators remained among the weakest links in school inclusivity, underscoring that continuous professional development is essential.

Recommendation: Invest in comprehensive teacher training and ongoing support as a top priority for inclusive education reforms. This includes revising teacher education curricula to cover inclusive pedagogies and universal design for learning and providing regular in-service training on adapting teaching methods to diverse needs. Training should be practical and continuous, with coaching, mentorship, or peer learning networks so teachers can exchange experiences and refine their skills over time. Countries should also establish school-based support teams or resource centers (drawing on special educators, psychologists, or experienced teachers) to assist classroom teachers in problem-solving and implementing individualised strategies.



3. Support Structures and Services for Inclusive Education: Dedicated support structures are crucial to translate inclusive education policy into practice. Serbia's experience shows that schools need additional human and material resources to meet diverse student needs. Over the reform period, Serbia put in place several support mechanisms: introducing pedagogical assistants for Roma children and children with dsabilities, and personal companions for children with disabilities, forming inclusive education teams within schools, and establishing intersectoral

committees at the local level to coordinate education, health, and social services. Serbia also grappled with defining and professionalising these support roles – for instance, clarifying the tasks of pedagogical assistants vs. personal companions – and ensuring consistent funding for such positions. Another lesson from Serbia is the value of intersectoral collaboration: local committees involving educators, social welfare and health professionals were created to assess children's needs and recommend support (such as therapy, assistive devices, or social services), fostering a holistic approach to inclusion.

Recommendation: Establish robust support services and coordination mechanisms to underpin inclusive education. Other countries should create formal roles for support personnel – such as classroom assistants, special educators, or therapists – and integrate them into the education system (through defined job descriptions, training, and stable financing). It is advisable to institutionalise these roles (e.g. by adding an official cadre of inclusion support assistants) so that schools can reliably employ trained staff to support teachers and students. Furthermore, develop cross-sector referral and support networks: set up local or regional committees that bring together schools, health, and social services to assess and address complex student needs. Governments should allocate specific budget lines for inclusive education supports – covering assistive technologies, accessible materials, and specialised services – so that recommendations (such as providing a personal aide or mobility aids for a student) can be implemented in a timely manner.

4. Evolving the Role of Special Schools. The transition to inclusion requires rethinking the role of special schools and other segregated institutions. Serbia's reform illustrates that special schools can evolve from isolated settings into resources for the inclusive system. Rather than abruptly closing all special schools, Serbia encouraged a gradual transformation. Special schools continue to exist for cases of severe or complex disabilities (often if parents opt for that placement), but their expertise is increasingly made available to support mainstream schools. This approach leverages the strengths of special schools (small student-teacher ratios, specialised methods) to benefit a broader range of children. Serbia's lesson is that inclusive education is not achieved simply by moving children physically into regular classrooms, but by infusing the mainstream with the expertise and supports that were traditionally found only in special settings.

Recommendation: Repurpose and integrate special school expertise into the mainstream education system. Other countries should chart a careful course whereby special schools and their staff become partners in inclusion. This can involve converting special schools into resource centers or hubs for teacher training, diagnostic services, and material development to aid nearby inclusive schools. Special educators can be deployed as traveling consultants or co-teachers in mainstream classrooms. Policies should also facilitate dual placements or part-time attendance arrangements, where students spend most time in regular classes but can receive specific instruction or therapy at special institutions as needed (this aligns with providing a continuum of support). Importantly, any ongoing role for special schools must be aligned with the ultimate goal of inclusion – for instance, using them only for short-term intensive support or for students whose needs truly cannot be met in a regular class despite accommodations.

5. Engaging Parents and Communities. Public perception and understanding of inclusive education significantly influence reform success. Serbia discovered that engaging parents and the wider community is essential to overcome resistance and sustain inclusion. Early on, some Serbian parents and educators were uncertain about inclusive education or feared that bringing children with disabilities or from Roma communities into mainstream schools might slow down learning for others. To address this, Serbia undertook awareness campaigns and local outreach. The Ministry, with UNICEF and NGOs, organised school-level information sessions and disseminated easy-to-understand materials to explain what inclusive education entails and how it benefits all children. These efforts were aimed at dispelling myths and highlighting positive outcomes (such as improved social skills, reduced

prejudice, and academic gains for all students in diverse classrooms). Over the years, attitudes in Serbia began to shift as success stories of inclusive schools were publicised. Another aspect of engagement was involving parents of vulnerable children in decision-making – for instance, Serbian schools formed parent councils that included representatives of children with disabilities or from minority groups. By giving such parents a voice, schools built trust and better understood student needs.

Recommendation: Prioritise communication, advocacy, and stakeholder involvement alongside technical reforms. Other countries should launch public awareness campaigns about inclusive education's benefits, targeting common concerns with evidence and examples. This might include workshops for parents at school level, media campaigns showcasing inclusive education success stories, and peer learning between families (for example, parent support groups where families of children with and without disabilities share experiences). Education authorities should provide clear, accessible information on how inclusion works in practice – explaining new services (like assistants or individualised plans) so parents understand that supports are in place. Additionally, involve parents and communities in the reform process: include parent representatives (especially from vulnerable groups) in school boards or councils, consult community leaders when developing inclusion policies, and partner with disabled persons' organisations and advocacy groups to champion the cause.

6. Personalised Instruction and Flexible Curriculum. One-size-fits-all education does not work in an inclusive setting – individualised approaches are key. Serbia's reform underscored the importance of tailoring education to each student's needs. The 2009 law required schools to develop Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students who need additional support, detailing necessary curriculum adaptations, teaching methods, and learning aids. In practice, this meant adjusting lesson content, allowing alternative assessment methods, or setting personalised learning goals for students with disabilities or those lagging behind. Serbia also introduced the concept of *modular instruction* – rather than excusing a student from an entire subject due to difficulties, schools could modify the subject material or focus on essential components, so the child remains engaged in learning.

Recommendation: Adopt child-centered teaching with flexible curricula and assessment in all schools pursuing inclusion. Other countries should mandate and facilitate the use of individual education plans (or similar personalised learning plans) for students who require them. Teachers should have access to tools and training to differentiate instruction – for instance, providing multi-sensory learning materials, adjusting the difficulty level of assignments, or giving additional time for tasks. Curricular guidelines should allow *flexibility*: set core learning outcomes but permit modifications or alternative pathways for students who learn differently. Assessment methods should also be flexible (e.g. oral exams, project work, or portfolio assessment for students who cannot take standard written tests).

7. Equity Focus: Reaching All Marginalised Groups. An inclusive education system must proactively reach all vulnerable groups of children, not only those with disabilities. Serbia's reform experience shows that inclusion should be viewed broadly as education for any child at risk of exclusion. Alongside children with developmental disabilities, Serbia identified Roma children and those from low socio-economic backgrounds as groups facing persistent barriers in education. Over the past decade, measures such as affirmative action in enrolment, provision of free preschool for low-income families, Roma teaching assistants, and community liaison programs were used to boost the inclusion of Roma and poor children. Another equity aspect Serbia faced was geographical disparities – some regions or municipalities lagged in implementing inclusive education due to uneven distribution of resources and pilot projects. The reform showed that without deliberate efforts to cover all areas (urban and rural, developed and less-developed regions), certain communities would have fewer inclusive programs or trained staff, leaving vulnerable children in those localities behind.

Recommendation: Apply an equity lens to inclusive education reforms, targeting interventions to marginalised groups and under-served areas. Countries should start by using data to identify which children are most frequently excluded or segregated – for example, children with severe disabilities, ethnic or linguistic minorities, girls in certain regions, nomadic or migrant children, or the very poor. Design inclusion strategies that address the specific barriers these groups face. This might mean hiring bilingual teaching assistants for minority-language children, offering scholarships or free meals and transport for children in poverty, running anti-discrimination training for educators, or collaborating with community mediators to build trust with minority communities. Set enrolment and retention targets for each vulnerable group to ensure progress is monitored and gaps close over time. In addition, ensure that inclusion programs have national reach: allocate additional resources and support to regions or districts that have fallen behind in implementing inclusive practices.

8. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement. Serbia's journey highlights that inclusive education reform is an ongoing process that requires regular monitoring and adaptation. After more than a decade of efforts, Serbia has made notable gains – for example, rising numbers of children with disabilities attending mainstream schools, fewer students in special schools, and more children from vulnerable groups in early education. Yet, the reform is not "finished"; gaps persist in quality and equity, and new challenges continue to emerge. Recognising this, Serbia established mechanisms to evaluate progress and inform policy adjustments. Serbia also invested in data systems: for instance, developing a national education information system that tracks students with additional support needs, and requiring schools to self-evaluate their inclusive practices annually. A key lesson here is that policymakers must be willing to learn and course-correct.

Recommendation: Implement strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks to drive continuous improvement in inclusive education. Countries should build a data-driven approach: establish indicators for inclusion (e.g. enrolment rates of children with disabilities, attendance and completion rates for vulnerable groups, school accessibility measures, teacher training coverage, etc.) and collect data regularly at school and system levels. Develop or enhance education management information systems to include disaggregated data on children with special educational needs and other at-risk groups. In parallel, conduct periodic evaluations – both internal (school self-assessments) and external (independent reviews or inspections) – to gauge the quality of inclusion in classrooms and identify bottlenecks. It is advisable to publish findings (as Serbia did with its National Report) to maintain transparency and accountability. Crucially, ensure that there are feedback loops: use the evidence gathered to update teacher training content, reallocate resources, or adjust policies. Institutionalise learning and adaptation by setting up working groups or advisory boards on inclusive education that periodically review progress and recommend course corrections. Finally, share and celebrate successes and innovations identified through monitoring – this keeps stakeholders motivated and spreads effective practices.

Serbia's inclusive education reform teaches us that committed action, coupled with flexibility and persistence, can yield transformative results in schooling equity. Each country will need to tailor reforms to its context, but the overarching insight remains universal: inclusive education is a continuous journey of system-wide learning and adaptation, one that ultimately benefits not only marginalised children but every learner and society as a whole.

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