

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



Case study

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 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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