

## **Policies and measures against early school leaving in the Republic of Bulgaria**

### *NATIONAL STUDY*

#### **1. Introduction**

This study under the project: Entrepreneurship Practice Firms Schools – Innovative education and training solution to early school leavers (Учебните предприятия в училище – иновативно образователно решение срещу ранното напускане на училище) presents the major policies, priorities and measures in the **Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers and the Action Plan for its implementation** adopted by the Council of Ministers. It was derived from the **good practices of SOU /Secondary General Education School/ Assen Zlatarov, town of Shabla**, in resolving the issue of keeping the school students within the educational system by providing opportunities for vocational education and education at an entrepreneurship training by practice firms /PF/. As part of the study the results were included from an anonymous **questionnaire**, distributed in the same school among students who have not taken part in training by practice firms.

Bulgaria was one of the first countries in the EU which, apart from recognizing the existence of the problem with early school leaving, has developed special policies for reducing the share of the early school leavers and plans to achieve reduction of this share to 11% as of the year 2020. In 2013 a **Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers (2013 – 2020) and an Action Plan, which is indelible part of it**, were adopted. The Action Plan includes measures for the prevention, intervention and compensating the problem with the early school leavers and every year it is updated and supplemented. An important milestone in the Strategy is the establishment of a **Coordination mechanism** for the implementation and control of the performance of the action plan since the problem is related to the operations of various ministries and other stakeholders.

Early school leaving in Bulgaria is related to various complex reasons, which are mainly of socio-economical nature. In the period of elementary education school truancy or its leaving to a great degree are related to family and community reasons. In the higher levels of education, apart from the abovementioned factors, the environment, in which the young people find themselves, the lack of well trained pedagogues to work with them, the absence of additional qualification for the teachers for coping with youngsters demotivated from participating in the educational process, also have an impact. Along with these factors serious influence exercise the poor marks at school as consequence of the not too proficient knowledge of the official language and the outdated educational programs that do not take into consideration to the necessary degree the abilities of the students to cope with the learning matter. The latter is valid not only for the Roma and Turkish minorities, but also for the children from families with low-income level and lower degree of education.

In the recent years the problems in Bulgaria with early leaving or truancy from school were decided with the support of various projects financed in the previous programme period mainly within the framework of the European Social Fund. During the next period the main intervention shall be within the new operational programme “Science and Education for Intelligent Growth”.

The Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers (ESL) - 2013-2020 shall continue to be operational also during the next programme period for achieving the target of "Strategic Framework of the National Development Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria "Bulgaria 2020" for increasing the standard of living by competitive education and training, creating environment for quality employment and social inclusion and ensuring accessible and quality health care. **National Development Programme "Bulgaria 2020"** encompasses the full range of activities of the state in the field of socio-economic development while at the same time it designates the role of the measure for achieving the national targets, the implementation of which is part of the National Reform Programme, the Convergence Programme and all applicable strategic and programme documents.

The Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers (2013-2020) is bound to policies and targets, integrated into key European documents and initiatives in the field of reducing the share of early school leavers: "Youth in Action", "Agenda for New Skills and Jobs " and „European platform against poverty and social exclusion".

The Strategy recognizes the necessity of policies and measures with broad coverage, geared towards securing successful transition between the different levels of education, flexible and successful opportunities for the early leavers to continue their training in order to acquire key competences, wide range of forms of education, recognition and validation of results from informal training and informative learning.

This Strategy is fully in line with the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union of 28 June 2011, on policies for reducing early school leaving (2011/C 191/01), as well as with strategic framework of the EU for cooperation in the field of education and training.

For the purposes of the strategy **„dropping out of school"** shall be signing out of school of a student under 18 years of age before completing the last upper secondary education class, unless the child was enrolled in another school.

**This strategy broadens and denotes the listed strategic and normative documents into three main sectors:**

- ❖ Prevention of early school leaving;
- ❖ Intervention against early school leaving ;
- ❖ Compensation of early school leaving.

## **2. Normative and strategic documents**

The **Constitution** of the Republic of Bulgaria sets forth the right of each Bulgarian citizen to education; it secures the compulsory education until the age of 16 and the gratuitous primary and lower secondary education in the municipal and state schools.

The **National Strategy for "Lifelong learning" (2014-2020)** sets the following as its priorities:

- establishment of a new educational approach and innovations in education and training;
- increasing the quality of education and training;
- ensuring educational environment that secures equal access to lifelong learning , active social inclusion and active public participation;

- fostering education and training geared towards the needs of the economy and the changes on the labor market.

**National strategy on youth (2010-2020)**, which envisions measures for individually supporting young people with their choice of profession and professional growth, as well as validating the results – European level tools for self-assessment of knowledge and skills Youthpass and Europass and a “Voluntary Service Certificate”.

### **3. Basic reasons for early school leaving**

The reasons for early school leaving may be classified into several main categories.

#### **A: Economic reasons**

Unemployment, low income, lowered standard of living and poverty place many children in conditions, which lead to increasing the risk of dropping out of school. As consequence of the financial and economic hardships many children are forced to help their families, which leads to interrupting their participation in the learning process. Large is the share of the families who work abroad, while the children are left behind to grandmas and granddads or other relatives who do not exercise control effectively or do not encourage the participation of the children in the educational system.

#### **B: Social reasons**

They are related to parent lack of concern, disagreements, conflicts, stress and crises in the family, the negative impact of the home environment, functional illiteracy or low level of education of the parents, broken families, children and students at risk of committing antisocial acts, students having hard to cope with conduct, or which disagrees with the law, domestic violence, disregarding the right of choice of the children, imposing severe punishments.

Considerable influence on early school leaving could have also the risky informal groups or circle of friends of the children and youth.

#### **B: Educational reasons**

They encompass a wide range of problems: difficulties in learning the taught content, weaknesses in the methodology of teaching and the organization of learning. The educational reasons are related also to the method of evaluation, teacher qualification, learning habits, negative mindsets of the participants in the educational process and lack of motivation, the quality of the textbooks. The large number of absences, the lack of adequately efficient system for control over the manner of their tracking and recording, the deteriorated discipline, violence and aggression at school, the low academic scores, are also processes happening inside the schools. The relations in the kindergarten and the school, the undeveloped career guidance and consulting, the unsuitable choice of a school and the unattractiveness of vocational education and training are also among the important educational reasons for early school leaving.

The potential of the teachers is not utilized fully effectively, of the pedagogical counselors and the school psychologists when providing mental and pedagogical support to prevent school leaving.

#### **F: Ethno-cultural reasons**

The ethno-cultural variety in today's Bulgarian educational system finds expression in the specific ethnic, religious and language aspects. The strongly effective internal rules of the group and the pressure of the ethnic-cultural traditions among vulnerable ethnic communities and groups presuppose the specific reasons for early school leaving: absence of cognitive motivation, low degree of eagerness for school, the parents lack motivation for their children to receive education, etc.

Studies and analyses show that the degree of enrollment in all levels of education with the Roma is much lower compared to all remaining minority groups. According to information from the census in 2011 out of the population of children in compulsory school age (from 7 to 15 years) the children of Roma origin not attending school are 23,2%, the children of Turkish origin - 11,9%, ethnic Bulgarians - 5,6% .

#### **D: Institutional reasons**

This category of reasons may include the inadequately coordinated approaches between the various offices and experts on the national, regional, local and school level for coping with early school leaving; the inadequately efficient control over the management and functioning of the policies on including, keeping and reintegration of the children and students in the educational system.

To make positive changes in this situation requires applying comprehensive measures and good coordination between the institutions from several different sectors at each level of governance - national, regional, local and at the school.

The main part of responsibilities for applying the national policy with respect to compulsory education is concentrated in the Ministry of Education and Science, the latter being a natural coordination center for the actions between the sectors for reducing early school leaving.

#### **E: Reasons related to the health status**

In the context of the policies for development of inclusive education the trend to integrate children with special educational needs in the general education schools continues. The risks for early school leaving are related to insufficient training of the kindergartens and schools to include these children. All the factors inherent to the facility amenities, educational environment, human and financial resources that do not correspond to the requirements for applying the principles of inclusive education are also part of this category.

A significant problem with respect to investigating the educational challenges for children with special educational needs is the deficit of exact data on the number of attendees and truants from school. Pursuant to data of the National Statistical Institute /NSI/ from the census of the population and housing conducted in 2011 the number of children in the age group 5 - 15 having a degree of disability is 7 4061. According to the Social Assistance Agency during the last decade annually on the average, in the age group of 0 to 16 years in Bulgaria, out of every 1000 children there were 3,5 newly registered children with disabilities.

### **4. Financial resources to reduce early school leaving**

Within the framework of the **National Programme "For more complete integration of students in compulsory school age "** (2007-2010) state funding was provided for: breakfast

and milk /tea for each student in I - IV class and the children in the pre-school preparatory groups and classes.

The National Programme **"Caring for every student"** provides teaching in Bulgarian language for children of the preparatory groups and for students in primary and lower secondary education encountering difficulties, thus preventing retardation before it has its impact on the educational results.

Under the National Programme **"Optimization of the school network"** funds were transferred to the municipalities, on the territory of which schools were closed, so that access may be provided the students to education in other schools. The activities are financed for the education of students at compulsory school age in the protected schools and the classes with less than the minimum number of students, transportation expenses for the travelling children, for the full-day organization of the school day and for meals in the cafeteria for students in I to VIII class in the focal schools. During the school 2010/2011 a full-day organization was introduced of the school day for the students in 1. class.

16,56% of the total budget of Operational Programme „Human Resources Development" (2007 -2013) is directed for providing significant support in reducing the share of early school leavers. In 2012 four more schemes were agreed for financing initiatives related to the possibilities for reintegration of the early school leavers in the educational system within the framework of the lifelong learning policies. In 2013 another scheme was agreed – **"Educational integration of children and pupils from ethnic minorities "**.

The **Project "Inclusive training"** provides enabling environment for equal access to education and opening up of the education system.

The **Projects „Creating a favorable multicultural environment for practical implementation of intercultural education and upbringing "**, **"Integration of the children and students from ethnic minorities in the education system"**, **"Reintegration into the educational system of dropout students"** and **„Educational integration of the children and students from ethnic minorities "** assist integration, reducing the number of early school leavers, and also the inclusion into the educational system of the children from ethnic minorities not included in the educational system .

The career guidance and consulting contribute to making an informed choice of educational and professional path by the family and the child, enhance being motivated to remain in school and acquire an educational degree.

During the extracurricular and out-of-school activities under the project **"School of self-affirmation and preparation for European horizons" USPEH (SUCCESS)** priority was given to including children showing signs of aggression, with absences, with imposed punishments.

Through the **Project "Adult Literacy"**, in the literacy courses (beginning stage) and in the courses for learning the teaching content for V, VI and VII class, persons of above 16 years of age were included.

**Projects like "Chance to work", "Increasing Employment Opportunities for Unemployed People through Quality Vocational Training ", "New Perspective"** are focused on professional guidance and motivational training of youth that have dropped out of school or were not included in the educational system, and also on apprenticeships.

## 5. Socio-economic resources and reducing the share of early school leavers

The national youth programme (2011-2015) finances a subprogramme for projects related to youth activities of NGOs for developing the networks of youth information – consultative centers. Direct target groups under the programme are young people aged 15 to 29, youth workshops and other experts. In 31 youth information-consulting centers the young people are guided to choose informal education, free consulting on their professional realization and personal development, for acquiring entrepreneurship skills, healthy lifestyle, being socially active, etc.

## 6. The physical environment and early school leaving

The regional policies for development and the kindergarten and school network ensure equal access to education of all children and students in compulsory pre-school and school age. The provision of accessible environment and suitable learning conditions, including through the protected and focal schools corresponds directly with the objectives of reducing the share of early school leavers. The special schools provide access to education for the children with special educational needs who cannot be educated through resource assistance in a general educational environment.

## 7. Other measures to prevent and reduce early school leaving

Various forms of education are implemented - independent, individual, evening, extramural. Programs are developed and implemented for acquiring key competences.

**The entrepreneurship education** is of key importance both with respect to developing one of the eight key competences and because of its direct relevance to improving the basic skills of the students. Almost 80% of the schools are already conducting training at the beginning stage, 80 schools educate the students in V to VII class, while during the school 2012/2013 in 36 schools the profile "Entrepreneurship and business" was implemented after VII class.

The schools are implementing measures for the prevention and overcoming the absences and the early leaving of the system like: preparing a strategy, action plan depending on the specific conditions and the individual case with every student; effective provision of consulting and the additional sessions with the children and students, informing the Social Assistance Directorate about the students with more than five unexcused absences within one month; promptly informing the parents about the absences and the success of the students and performing joint activities with the parents; prompting student self-governance and including the students in activities according to their interests; and other.

## 8. Analysis of the basic challenges faced by the policymakers for the period 2013 - 2020

### 8.1. Overview of main statistical indicators concerning the population 18 -24 years of age, who are not taking part in education and training and have not completed secondary education

The results from "Labor Force Survey", performed by Eurostat in 2012 show that the **share of early school leavers aged 18-24 years in Bulgaria is 12.5%** as compared to 12.8% for the



EU-27. During the last 5 years, with the exception of 2009, the share of early school leavers in Bulgaria is lower than the average European for the EU-27 where the rate, at which the share of the early school leavers declines in our country, is significantly greater than the average for EU.

Early school leaving affects disproportionately the development opportunities based on the qualified human resources in the various regions and types of populated areas. Huge imbalances exist in Bulgaria in the educational structure of the population by place of residence – while among the residents of the cities 71.6% have completed at least secondary education, in the villages this percent is 40.3%. The share of the population in the villages with low level of education or entirely without education continues to be high.

One of the groups with increased risk of early school leaving is the group of children who are not included into the pre-school education and preparation system. Failure to attend kindergarten increases the risk of the occurrence of learning difficulties at school, especially for children from vulnerable groups. These difficulties usually occur as early as during the beginning stage of education and may become the reason for early school leaving.

According to NSI the largest group among the school drop-outs is the group of students who have interrupted their education due to family reasons.

<b>Leavers by reasons and level of education</b>	<b>School years</b>			
	<b>2008/2009</b>	<b>2009/2010</b>	<b>2010/2011</b>	<b>2011/2012</b>
<b>Due to unwillingness</b>	<b>4536</b>	<b>3596</b>	<b>3473</b>	<b>3003</b>
<b>Family reasons</b>	<b>10259</b>	<b>9821</b>	<b>9123</b>	<b>8975</b>
<b>Went abroad</b>	<b>3769</b>	<b>4802</b>	<b>5052</b>	<b>5367</b>

Especially disturbing is the trend of more and more students leaving school due to relocating abroad. Their share for the period of school years 2008/2009 - 2011/2012 has increased by 49.40%. The available mechanisms for data exchange between Bulgaria and the countries, to which the main immigrant flow is directed, do not allow the tracking of what part of the students relocated abroad continue their education in the country of their new residence.

## 8.2. Participation in education and training of youth in the age group 18 - 24 години

Pursuant to data from Eurostat, Bulgaria is among the first countries in the European Union by the indicator young people in the age group 18 - 24 years who are not employed and not participating in education and/or training. In 2011 the non-studying and not employed in the age group were 16.7%, while in Bulgaria their share was higher by 11.2% percentage points – 27.9%<sup>2</sup>. A significant part of this youth - 38% did not complete any higher than elementary education. Solely in the group of early school leavers approximately 82% are unemployed, where half of them are not actively seeking work and do not wish to work. Nevertheless very few of them return to school to increase the level of their education.

### 8.3. Social and economic significance of early leaving of the education system

Even greater are the differences with respect to the opportunities to find work. In comparison with the people who have completed secondary education the chances of employment for the people with lower education are significantly slimmer.

The passing of poverty on from one generation to the next, related to low education status, is a significant negative social effect of early school leaving, which additionally exacerbates the problem with social exclusion. The possibility of dropping out of school of the children from families where the highest level of education of the head of the household is elementary or lower education, is twice as great than that for the children of families, in which the parents have a higher than elementary or lower than secondary education, and almost 12 times greater than the children of families, in which the head of the household has completed secondary education.

Early school leaving leads to increasing the risks of social exclusion, threatens the security and stability of society, and is prerequisite for deterioration of the quality of life of the current and the next generations. The health status and access to resources and services, which may secure a better standard and a lifetime in good health and prosperity, are directly dependent on the received higher level of education.

The enumerated consequences are indicative for the scope and degree of negative impact of early school leaving on the individual destinies of the directly affected, and on the prosperity of their families, on the opportunities for development of their communities, and on the entire socio-economic development of the country in the middle and long term, therefore the data on the share of early leavers of the education system in Bulgaria must not sooth us, but encourage the execution of an all-inclusive and integrated policy of prevention of this phenomenon, as well as overcoming it right on the spot where it is.

### 8.4. Management of the information about the early school leavers

Monitoring the transferred and dropped out students is performed by NSI and MoES – by the Center for Information Assurance of Education (by the ADMIN platform) and by the "Organization, Control and Inspection" Directorate. Since the school year 2012/2013 a web-based registry of the movement of children and students was introduced, which tracks down the number of children in the kindergartens and of the students in the general education and vocational schools, in the schools of art and culture, and in the special schools. For the children and students in this registry the processes of enrollment, transfer and leaving the educational system are recorded, while for the students also the transition to another form of education. data is entered at the schools and kindergartens and is recorded in the registry in real time. The Access to the registry is provided for the experts from MoES, RIE /Regional Inspectorates on Education/, municipal administrations, as well as the directors of schools and kindergartens. The creation and improvement of the registry is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of policies based on a unified and reliable information management system connected to early school leaving, while protecting personal data.



## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE AND OPERATIONAL GOALS OF THE STRATEGY

### STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE:

Providing equal access and support for development and integration into the system of pre-school education and preparation and in the school education of children and youth as prerequisite for equal social inclusion and complete personal fulfillment and participation in the development of the local communities and the country.

### OPERATIONAL GOALS:

1. Development, execution and monitoring of a comprehensive and integrated policy for increasing the scope of the educational system based on cross-sector cooperation upon clear division of responsibilities and interaction between the different levels of governance.
2. Identifying the risk factors for early school leaving with view of containing its consequences.
3. Encouraging the inclusion in education of risk groups and development of inclusive education.
4. Increasing the variety and efficiency of the mechanisms and stimuli for inclusion in education and training.
5. Building broad public trust and support for the policies of prevention and reducing early school leaving.

The following results are expected to be achieved upon fulfillment of the objectives of the Strategy:

- ❖ Developed cross-sector coordination mechanism on national, regional and municipal level, the policies, plans and measures of which are based on systematic monitoring, analysis, evaluation, regular reporting and transparency, out of which corrective actions follow, distribution of resources, directing investments according to the needs at the respective levels;
- ❖ Improved current mechanisms and procedures for management of the information with view of improving the Registry on the movement of children and students, allowing the tracking of each individual case of a child or student at risk of early school leaving;
- ❖ Increasing the scope in the kindergartens and schools by encouraging enrollment and regular attendance;
- ❖ Offered cross-sector services for educational and social support;
- ❖ Improved results from education and providing suitable educational support for the development of each child and student;
- ❖ Education and training synchronized with the requirements of the labour market.

## POLICIES AND KEY MEASURES FOR THE PREVENTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

The achievement of the strategic and operational objectives of the strategy takes place by: **Prevention**, which targets the prevention of the occurrence of prerequisites for early school leaving, as well as reducing the conditions which favor it. The policies and measures for prevention are focused starting from education and care in early childhood until the completion of secondary education.

**Intervention**, which focuses on the creation of conditions for reducing early school leaving while recognizing the specific threats at level the individual and following the principle of resolving the problems at the lowest level.

**Compensation**, which aims to assist the early school leavers to once again participate in education by offering them various and accessible forms of returning to the system of education and training and/or acquiring qualification.

### KEY MEASURES

#### 1. Policies of **prevention** of early school leaving

1.1. Providing a positive educational environment – school climate, atmosphere of relationships, management

The positive educational environment is related to clearly defining the rights, obligations and responsibilities of the participants in the educational process to ensure conditions of education favoring the development of the personality of each child and student, as well as improving the interaction between the educational institutions.

##### 1.1.1: Developing and performance of policies in the kindergarten and the school

The positive educational environment in each kindergarten and school is a key measure in the prevention of early school leaving where activities like the following are included to establish such environment: development and execution of own prevention program, improving the capacity of the pedagogical teams to identify the reasons for dropping out, developing and applying mechanisms for control, assessment and self-assessment of the performance of the director and the pedagogical experts with respect to reducing the absences, development of a system for reducing the absences of children and students, partnership with other stakeholders and experts in working with vulnerable families and communities, developing activities in support of each child and student, active interaction between parents, children and students, and pedagogical experts, developing inter-school initiatives and systematic exchange of good practices for the prevention of early school leaving, using student self-governance, etc. The development of the system for early warning in each kindergarten and school is especially important for preventing future problems. The prevention activities coming from the system are related to identifying the children and students threatened of early school leaving, as well as the underlying reasons for each particular case.

##### 1.1.2. Development of municipal policies

The development of municipal policies to limit the share of early school leavers is related to the coordination and management of the information flows on the range of the children and students subject to compulsory education, providing healthy and secure educational environment for the children and students, practicing efficient partnerships between the

interested institutions, applying the normatively set forth mechanisms for intervention with respect to the families who do not provide access to school for their children, enhancing the awareness of the families and communities with children at risk of early school leaving of the benefits of education.

#### 1.1.3. Developing national policies

The development of national policies should be focused on creating conditions and exercising control while performing the normative regulation, the development of mechanisms for monitoring the performance of the policies, related to reducing the share of early school leaving, promoting the financial and socio-economical results from reducing the share of early school leavers and analysis of the link between exclusion from education and social exclusion, health problems, crime, unemployment and other, applying a cross-sector approach and creating the conditions for promoting the good practices, creation and maintenance of a national system for tracking the children and students at risk of early school leaving and of the ones that never attended school.

#### 1.2. Increasing the quality of education as prerequisite for personality development of each child and student and preventing early school leaving

In this respect emphasis must be put on the following:

- Updating the teaching programs and developing textbooks and teaching aids with an emphasis on practical application;
- Assessment establishing results and providing feedback for maintaining and stimulating the incentive to learn, as well as monitoring the quality of educational process;
- Applying contemporary approaches to teaching in line with the individuality of the child and the student as partners in the educational process;
- Compulsory qualification of the pedagogical specialists focused on identifying and coping with the cases at risk of early school leaving;
- Appointing an assistant of the teacher and assistant mentor when necessary;
- Development and promotion of new forms of education;
- Formation of a mindset for lifelong learning starting in the earliest years of childhood.

#### 1.3. Providing access to education and increasing the quality of education for the children and students from vulnerable ethnic communities

For this purpose it is necessary to implement policies for overcoming the separation by ethnic origin of the children and students in groups and classes, guiding education towards working in a multicultural group and class, and at the same time increasing the intercultural competence of all participants in the education process. Where necessary additional teaching in Bulgarian language shall be provided and at the same time opportunity is given for education in the mother tongue.

#### 1.4. Access to quality education for children and students with special education needs

The cross-sector approach, the development and performance of policies on the national, regional and municipal level should ensure inclusive education for the children and students with special education needs by:

- Establishment and efficiently running of accessible centers providing adequate support for each child and student;
- Developing the capacity of the teachers from the general education schools and kindergartens to work with the children and students with special education needs, as well as of the experts working with children and students on applying a unified methodology for assessing their educational needs;
- Building pedagogical and specialized environment for each child and student to ensure inclusive education.

## 2. Policies for **intervention** for the early school leavers

### 2.1. Increasing the participation and commitment of the parents

The parents and the local community are participants in the process of education. They are a fundamental factor for helping the children and young people at risk of early school leaving and must be encouraged by:

- Promoting good practices and opportunities to participate in networks for including the parents and the local community in exercising measures for preventing early school leaving ;
- Increasing the responsibility of the parents and their engagement in cooperation with the teachers and the school governance with the aim of developing their children with focus on the parents from vulnerable groups to prompt the regular attendance of the kindergarten and the school;
- Including them in exercising civil control in the management of the educational institutions.

### 2.2. Firmly establishing individual and group tutoring

- Developing policies of non-violence and building a strong school community;
- Developing the individual and group tutoring for assisting children, students, parents and pedagogical experts with the aim of overcoming difficulties of educational, social and personal aspect;
- Providing efficient communication for the timely identification and resolving of occurred issues;
- Increasing the attractiveness of the class leadership and the role of the class teacher in individual consulting;
- Working on development of the class as a team;
- Holding consultations and timely interference upon conduct requiring interference;
- Building and applying the practice of "student tutors" to achieve functionality of a united school community based on team work, mutual support and solidarity;
- Engaging the student parliaments with activities for intervening in early school leaving.

### 2.3. Career guidance and consulting

- Building and applying a system for career guidance and consulting in the different age categories to motivate continuing the education and acquiring a qualification;
- Promoting the benefits of acquiring professional qualification as an opportunity for realization when there is risk of early school leaving.

#### 2.4. Developing models for acquiring professional qualification

- Tying the professions taught with the labour market and the trends in its development in the region;
- Developing teaching curricula for acquiring qualification in part of a profession according to the age of the students in compulsory school age;
- Partnership between the businesses and vocational education;
- Improving the quality of practical training and education in vocational education.

#### 2.5. Support for the development of children and students

- Appointing pedagogical counselors and/or psychologists and/or resource teachers in the kindergartens and the schools – upon such necessity;
- Creating teams working jointly with the parents, with the bodies dealing with child protection rights, and with the bodies working against antisocial conduct of the minors and underaged;
- Development of student self-governance through the student boards/ parliaments with the support of the school and the local self-governance bodies;
- Introducing contemporary approaches to coping with discipline in order to overcome the fragmentation in this respect and to achieve a consistent policy in the field of education.

#### 2.6. Applying systems for early warning

After identifying the children and students threatened of early school leaving and the underlying reasons, specific measures need to be applied for each threatened person, like:

- Working with his/ her family;
- Referring to a psychologist, pedagogical counselor, youth or social worker, recommendation for joining him/her in a semi-boardings group or a full-day organization of the school day, etc.;
- Additional sessions /consultations, recommending activities by interests;
- Motivation to continue education in the next level or for acquiring a professional qualification.

#### 2.7. Preparing sessions by interests

The sessions by interests have a proven effect as a tool to increase the satisfaction of children and students from the life in the kindergarten and school and reducing early school leaving. They give purpose to the free time of the students by performing a preferred activity, they integrate and motivate, including children and students with identified needs of specific support, children and students at risk of dropping out and/or showing signs of aggression and/or violence. These sessions increase the incentive for the students to participate in the educational process and contribute to the development of knowledge, skills and competencies.

#### 2.8. Assisting students at risk of early school leaving due to financial reasons

One of the main reasons for early school leaving is the lack of financial means of the family to secure the regular attendance and active participation of the children and students in the educational process. A targeted financial support may include:

- Partial or full payment of the fees of the kindergartens by the municipality for the children from low income families;

- Implementing school policies through developed rules for granting stipends to enhance the achievement of better learning results, assisting the access to education and preventing drop outs.

### 3. Policies to **compensate** the effect of early school leaving

#### 3.1. Creating suitable conditions for reintegrating the early school leavers into the educational system

- Returning of the early school leavers to the formal system of education and training by using various forms of education: distance, evening, extracurricular, correspondent;
- Participation of the early school leavers in literacy courses contributing to social integration and inclusion in the labour market;
- Promoting the possibilities to learn in clubs, libraries, education and cultural centers, youth information-consulting centers, regional and local centers;
- Creating opportunities of independent studying with the purpose of recognizing the results;
- Increasing the opportunities to learn at the job with focus on opening more jobs for internships and apprenticeships, and encouraging the local business to accept interns and apprentices;
- Providing sustainable mechanisms and means to guarantee the opportunity of inclusion of the persons in detention in education and training.

#### 3.2. Building a national system for validation of competences acquired through informal training and/ or informal learning.

- Normative regulation of the procedures for validating competences, as well as flexible paths for acquiring professional qualification;
- Building a system for recognition and validation of competences acquired in the process of informal education and/or independent learning.

## COORDINATION MECHANISM FOR IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

For the purposes of efficient implementation of the Strategy a Coordination Mechanism needs to be established, which to unite the efforts of MoES, MC/Ministry of Culture/, MAF/Ministry of Agriculture and Foodstuffs/, MJ /Ministry of Justice/, MLSP /Ministry of Labour and Social Policy/, MMC /Ministry of Youth and Sports/, MPP/Ministry of Regional Development/, MoI /Ministry of the Interior, other ministries, institutions, citizens and local governance. This mechanism should be based on improving the administration of information and overcoming the discrepancies between the different current information systems about the persons of compulsory pre-school and school age.

- The role of the municipalities in developing policies for education, health care and culture with view of the development of the economy and business in the regions;
- Participation of the NGO sector in the development and implementation of specific policies for education and in improving the material and technical availability in the facilities, social and psycho-pedagogical conditions related to the education system, including through the possibilities for public-private partnerships /PPPs/. The plan for implementing the Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early Leavers of the Education



System (2013–2020) for the period 2014-2015 was developed in performance of the Strategy. The first plan for implementation of the Strategy for the period 2014-2015 pays special attention to several items:

- Priority was given to developing measures related to prevention, as the best working when coping with the risk of early school leaving.
- The increased awareness activity is highlighted at all levels to promote the benefits of education, along with exchanging good and working practices among all interested parties.
- The beginning is set for developing a system for early warning, which to fully function within the operation of the Strategy. This system will provide ongoing and reliable information about the movement of students within the country and the ability to track their education and development. The reporting of the first two year plan shall take place until 30 October 2015. At the same time with the report the impact of the Plan will be assessed and steps shall be outlined for the performance of the Strategy.

**GOOD PRACTICES****Establishing a practice enterprise in the secondary general education school with vocational classes**

Secondary general education school "Assen Zlatarov" is the only secondary school on the territory of Shabla Municipality. It is a focal school. It serves for educating 330 students I - XII class, divided into 15 classes, where 10% of them are travelling from the nearby villages in the municipality - Gorun, Tyulenovo, Ezeretz, Krapetz, Vaklino, Durankulak, Chernomortzi, Smin.

The composition of the students is specific for the school - 40% are of Roma origin, 2% are Bulgarian Turks and the rest are ethnic Bulgarians. These are children of different stages of socialization and personality development.

Since 2008 the economic hardships, poverty, unemployment of the parents, the deteriorated standard of living have affected the population of the municipality and placed the children in a harsh living situation, mostly the ones of Roma origin.

The governance and the team of SGES „Assen Zlatarov” faced several problems concerning the retention and early leaving of students from the school. A concurrent problem for the entire country, but for small towns like ours it is vital, because the closing of one school brings with it other problems, mainly it leads to depopulation of the area.

The structural reform in Bulgarian education regarding the implementation of delegated budgets, unified expensing standards, and optimization of the school network, additionally exacerbated the problem of dropping out and exclusion of children in compulsory school age.

Since 2011 at SGES "Assen Zlatarov", town of Shabla, the whole-day schooling organization was renewed for the students of I class. Using personal funds the cafeteria and the kitchen were renovated in order to provide food for the students. The whole-day schooling form of education became even more necessary and required staged organization of the whole-day schooling for the students under and in the VIII class based on performing the national project «Improving the quality of education in the focal schools by introducing whole-day schooling organization », co-financed by the European Social Funds under Operational Program "Human Resource Development" between 2012 and 2015.

Our objective was using the measure undertaken to attract and retain the students in the school since we were faced by specific problems of the students from ethnic minorities. The most pressing of them are:

- ✓ Irregular attendance and dropping out of school;
- ✓ Frequent absences from the learning sessions;
- ✓ Difficulties with coping with the educational content;
- ✓ No help or involvement by the parents;
- ✓ Difficult financial situation;

- ✓ Conflicts in the family, problems between the parents (divorce, new partners of the parents, alcoholism, fights);
- ✓ Relocation, parent labour migration;
- ✓ Interrupting their education due to entering into marriage, having a child;
- ✓ Need to do work at home, care for relatives, close ones;

Many of the families are unemployed, others rely on temporary employment /seasonal agricultural work /, some on the monthly government aid for children. The parents cannot provide the children with school aids, clothes, shoes and items of immediate necessity. They live in extremely bad living conditions and are on the edge of survival. A major part of the parents are not educated and do not deem it necessary for their children to attend school. Thus the mindset of absence of importance of education is passed on from one generation to another and deeply filters through the community as a general notion. The concept of the parents that the child does not need education reflects on his/ her motivation. They project their outlook and beliefs on the child who gradually adopts their model and does not perceive the school as a value. The lack of interest of the parents with respect to the education of the children is a major problem since "the parents often fail to see any perspectives for their life, or the life of their children, to improve by higher level of education".

Realising the importance of the problem the team of SGES "Assen Zlatarov" – town of Shabla, performed a study on the reasons for the dropping out of students in compulsory school age from the school. It dedicated its efforts to removing the conditions for dropping out of students, which depended on the pedagogical team.

- ✓ The teachers at school have undertaken actions to fully include all children in compulsory school age , as well as the Roma, within the system of national education and to work with the drop-outs towards getting them back to school;
- ✓ The whole-day schooling with the students of I to VIII class, the compulsory teaching classes are combined with forms of self-study, sessions by interests and organized recreation, thus aiming to increase their motivation and overcoming the gaps in their knowledge
- ✓ Additionally to overcoming the gaps in the students' knowledge, work is done under national programme „Taking care of every student“, under the module „Providing additional teaching for the students of the primary and lower secondary stage of basic education to strengthen the achievements in the general education preparation;
- ✓ Providing free-of-cost textbooks and school aids for the children in I –VII grade;
- ✓ Providing free transport to school for the travelling students from the villages ;
- ✓ Providing breakfast and/ or a fruit, and/or milk/tea, including sour milk products for every student in I - IV class;
- ✓ Charity campaigns are organized in order to assist children in a difficult social situation;

- ✓ The school works in close cooperation both with the Municipal Administration, Shabla, and with the „Social Assistance“ and „Child Protection“ Departments.
- ✓ In order to be of help to illiterate parents or students who have left their studies at school early, since 2013 the school works under national programme „New Chance“. These people are given second opportunity to continue their education. All this leads to positive results.

The demographic factors cannot be overlooked as well – the low birth-rate, which leads to steady reduction in the number of students every year. The situation in this respect is very disquieting for the students of the higher secondary stage of education IX – XII class. Until 2008 the students studied in the profiles “Information Technologies”, “Entrepreneurship and Business”, “Tourism” and the vocational “Cook”, “Waiter/ress – bartender”, and the class groups of the classes were two each.

Since 2009 due to demographic and economic reasons gradually the number of classes has been reduced to one class for each grade of the upper secondary level with two professions. In the recent years vocational class groups were offered in line with the characteristic features of the region and the need of qualified labour force to fill out the available vacant job positions. The students from the small town are deprived of the opportunities provided by the big city and therefore it becomes even more difficult to motivate and retain the students so that they can continue their secondary education at SGES „Assen Zlatarov“. The quality of teaching does not differ from the rest of the country –as an evidenced we can point the high achievements of the students at Olympiads, tournaments, national and international competitions, owing to the professionalism of the team of teachers.

Since 2011 SGES “Assen Zlatarov” is registered in the Network of the Bulgarian Practice Firms, serviced by the Bulgarian Centre of Training Firms /BUCT/ and it successfully applies the method of practice enterprises in the “Project Performance” classes at XI grade and study practical training in XII class, where the idea is that the student will acquire maximum amount of practical skills and knowledge to help them be competitive on the labour market, and also in comparison with their peers from the big cities.

That was the way in 2011 the first practice firm “GriynRest” Ltd. was established by students from the XI class, who accepted the challenge to work in a team, all students were extremely motivated, they utilized their creative abilities, entrepreneurial thinking, and despite the lack of a mentor company on our territory they managed to develop a company strategy run through the prism of their imagination, its goal being to fill the market niche on out territory. Then the next challenge came - XV International Fair TF FEST 2012 “Young Entrepreneur” in the city of Plovdiv. They decided to participate as exhibitors, and also in the competitions. As a school which makes its first steps in such exhibitions the performance was at an acceptable level and the practice firm was bestowed three first places.

Thus by applying the method of the practice firm SGES "Assen Zlatarov" became a promotional message to those who were faced by the choice of profession in the IX class, by organizing "Days of the profession", "Day of open doors", where former and current students, employers and working people shared thoughts, responded to questions, presented their work at EPF over the years. The already graduated students motivated the ones coming after them and convinced them not to relinquish the chance given them. If they had the opportunity to participate in the work of the practice firms and give vent to their creative ideas, they advised them to be entrepreneurs and forget about fear.

This is how it came to the establishment of the second practice firm - "Biofuture", within three years. There the students worked with a lot of enthusiasm. Since the very beginning they had decided to join the XVII International Fair TF FEST 2014 "Young Entrepreneur" Plovdiv. Every one to assume responsibility for the problems of the practice enterprise was at the forefront. The participation in all possible competitions gave strength and confidence to the students in showing their best by contributing with ideas and a lot of work so that all that was required could receive the necessary visibility, experience, skills, and strategy. Thus PF "Biofuture" became an aggregate winner and received two more awards in 2014.

When asked "What did you learn from the practice firm and your participation in the Fair of PF" the students respond:

*Most of all it taught me to work efficiently in a team and to listen to the opinion and ideas of others. Working at PF enhances and stimulates creative thinking, which is the basis for receiving good results. It taught me to cope with stressful situations and not be afraid of failure. I acquired knowledge and skills, which will doubtlessly be of good use to me in my further career development.*

*The Fair is the culmination of EPF. There you have real opportunity to compare the qualities of your firm with the ones of the others. You definitely earn experience and you can see if you have omitted something in the process of establishment and development of the firm. Furthermore you meet a lot of new and different people to exchange experience and share ideas with.*

*Nikoleta Tasheva /PF "Biofuture"/*

*„I learned at PF not only how to acquire knowledge, but also apply it in practice even outside the process of studying, to resolve problems in innovative and original ways, to work in a team and take the initiative myself. PF teaches the responsibility and duty of how to embed creation in order to resolve a problem and get along with other people for the optimal best results. The fairs are the final step in the training, and the most important. When participating in such events each student may see the results of the training, understand the merits and practicability of what they do. To be*

*proactive in improving their skills and knowledge acquired until then and to understand how to efficiently use them in real life."*

*Daniela Tomova /PF „GriynRest“/*

In February 2015 a Day of the profession "Assistant in business services" was organized in SGES "Assen Zlatarov" by the students from X, XI, XII class. With the help of presentations, videos and placing of stands the older students demonstrated before the students from VII and VIII class, the teachers, parents and the public what they were studying, and the focus was on the work at the PF and the participation of the students in the PF exhibitions.