Educational support

The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia as the highest legal act in the state, in Art.44[1] stipulates that everyone has the right to education. Education is available for everyone, on equal terms. The state is striving to provide education for everyone equally, regardless of sex, race, color of skin, national and social background, political and religious belief, property and social status.

The legislation in the Republic of North Macedonia sets good ground for improving the social inclusion through education. Numerous processes have been started which are supposed to build strategies and establish mechanism for using the educational system in this direction.

The new Law on Primary Education (Закон за основното образование [1]) which was adopted in July 2019 foreseen children with disability to be enrolled in regular education. Currently (October 2019), special working group is working on the concept of inclusive education. The concept should be a guideline for all stages of the implementation of inclusive education in the country and should address any ambiguities that will be discussed. The Law on Primary Education stipulates that students with special needs should be included in mainstream education and that by the 2022-2023 school year, special schools will no longer enroll students. For that purpose, from November 2018 to July 2019, team from the Bureau for Development of Education conducted special trainings for primary school teachers for better inclusion of children with disabilities in primary school.

The National Strategy on Alleviation of Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Macedonia 2010-2020 [2] is a document which reflects the intention of the country for balancing the degree of inclusion and welfare in all social levels. One of the 14 areas included in the Strategy is education. In that manner, the Strategy stressed following strategic goal: provide overall scope of pupils in elementary education, provide overall scope of students in secondary education, raise literacy level of the population, raise educational level of the population to enable education for vulnerable groups and the education system to adapt to the needs of the labor market, to strengthen the market potentials for
The following results should be achieved in order to accomplish this objective:

1. All students of relevant age are enrolled in elementary school and finish elementary school;
2. Curricula and textbooks are adjusted to the needs of the children with specific needs;
3. The work of the teachers with children with specific needs;
4. All students enter secondary school immediately after finishing elementary school and finish secondary school;
5. Reduced percent of illiterate population and increase real literacy by training students to read and write with comprehension;
6. Increased percent of finished secondary school children who enter university and acquire a university degree;
7. Provided conditions for relating secondary education and adult education to the labor market.
8. Provided rights for all ethnic communities in an integrated educational system in order to support the development of a coherent society.

In order to achieve the objectives, the Strategy envisages a wide range of measures, such as: In addition to the principle of zoning, the schools should be stimulated to receive students from socially vulnerable families living close to the school, but belong to a different zone; Stimulate regular class attendance by: non-violence in school campaign, student and parent advisory, free textbooks, free transportation, financial assistance for disabled persons (transport for the student and the accompanying person); Teacher training; Employment of psychologists, pedagogues and defectologists; Social assistance for vulnerable categories; Improvement of the infrastructure (repair of the toilets, reconstruction, procurement of teaching aids, access ramps for disabled children); Studying the language of the communities; Include children with developmental impediments in the special classes and schools only when this would serve the best interest of the child (only if it is absolutely necessary for the child’s overall development); Adapt the computer software to the children with disabilities in all the schools where this is necessary, and other measures.

The Strategy also provides some special measures for Roma youth as vulnerable category, such as: awarding monetary assistance to socially vulnerable families if they fulfill certain criteria with respect to the education of their children (conditional cash transfers), provision of additional financial and staffing benefits for the schools with a significant number of Roma children, increase the enrollment quotas and provision of scholarships for Roma to study teaching faculties, in particular faculties that prepare primary school teachers, reduced criteria for enrollment of Roma children in the public secondary schools, provision of scholarships for Roma students, provision of mentoring and tutoring for all students/scholarship recipients, as well as other students from the Roma ethnicity in the school they attend, and other measures.

Education Strategy for 2018-2022 and Action Plan [3] were developed with financial and technical support of the European Union through a wide consultation and participatory process which was implemented by means of a large number of meetings, discussions, debates and conferences at different stages of the Strategy development. This first draft (Сеопфатна стратегија за образованието за 2016-2020 и Акциски план- прв нацрт [4]) of the Strategy was produced in June 2016 and disseminated among the key stakeholders including national authorities, public institutions, social partners, educational institutions, development partners, experts and other players in the field of education. Based on their recommendations, the Strategy was reviewed, further improved and the final version was presented in the late 2017. The Education Strategy stressed out that children with special educational needs are not sufficiently included in regular primary education. Their inclusion in regular schools is not properly regulated and appropriate mechanisms have not been introduced. In addition, there are prejudices toward these children among parents, teachers and students. Teachers also do not possess enough competences to work with this category of learners.
The inclusion policies of the Ministry – to cover pupils with special educational needs in the regular educational process – are based on:

• preparation of individual subject programmes;
• forming an inclusive team in secondary schools;
• equipping the expert services with pedagogists, psychologists and special educators;
• using assistive technological devices and building access ramps to the school buildings.

Pursuant a Government decision in 2015, MES via the Directorate for Development and Promotion of Education in the Languages of the Ethnic Communities started awarding scholarships for Roma students. The goal of this measure is to stimulate the Roma to enroll at universities that produce teaching staff. This measure is in line with the Action Plan for Education 2014-2020 which is part of the National Strategy on Roma Inclusion in the Republic of Macedonia (Стратегија за Ромите во Република Македонија 2014-2020).

The Strategy also notes that focus is on people (pupils) with special education needs when it comes to improving inclusion, which as a topic is featured in almost all pillars. In the Strategy, according to special education needs, the needs are implied of persons who independently and without educational interventions and support by educational factors can’t achieve learning standards anticipated for their age. A characteristic for persons with special education needs is the need to provide them with additional assistance in education in order to achieve the learning standards.

When it comes to inclusion of students with physical disabilities, the Action Plan of the Strategy envisages adapting the buildings of the Universities (faculties) for inclusion of students with physical disabilities. Responsible institutions for implementation of this measure according to the Action Plan are the Ministry of Education and Science and Universities, and it should be realized by the end of 2020.

The Law on Secondary Education (Закон за средното образование) includes a number of provisions regarding education for children with special needs. Provisions include: the existence of special curricula, formation of inclusive teams (consisting of pedagogue or schools’ psychologist, teacher, parent or guardian of the student for developing individual education plans) and arranging, free of charge, everyday transport to school and back, as well as, for breaks and weekends (for students residing in dormitories). The age limit for enrollment in first year of secondary education, for students with special needs is extended to 25 years of age (for regular students it is 17).

The National Youth Strategy 2016-2025, in the section: Social integration of disadvantaged groups through education and by developing working and learning conditions, under objective 9: to achieve significant inclusion and integration in the education system of children and youth with special needs, foresees the following measures:

- Train existing teaching staff and professional departments and hiring additional staff where necessary;
- Cross-institutional cooperation and coordination and cooperation with CSOs;
- Analyzing the current situation concerning the availability and application of assistive technologies;
- Needs analysis;
- Cooperation between institutions and CSOs in the implementation of projects;
- Staff training in the use of assistive technologies.

Objective 12, of the Strategy: to improve the availability of non-formal education for specific groups of children and youth, foresees the following measures regarding non-formal education:
Establishing cooperation between CSOs and institutions;
Needs analysis;
Developing and implementing programmes;
Opening education centers;
Hiring appropriate staff

As already mentioned above, Roma population is one of the groups targeted with policies for social inclusion. Therefore there are a number of policies for social inclusion for Roma students through education and training included in official documents regarding Roma people.

Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in collaboration with the National Coordinator of the Decade and Strategy of Roma have developed - Strategy for the Roma in Republic of Macedonia 2014-2020 [8]. This Strategy focuses on several areas and the purpose of this Strategy is to improve the standard and quality of life of the Roma population in North Macedonia. The education as an important segment and as a condition to achieve the objective of this strategy occupies a significant place in the same document.

Roma population is particularly affected by poverty and social exclusion influenced by a range of factors, and beside unemployment, discrimination and other issues, one of the main factor is lack or law level of education. In order to increase the rate of Roma students at Universities, the Government introduced quotas for enrollment of Roma students in higher educational institutions. This practice functions for years as an affirmative measure for easier access of the Roma students in the institutions of university education. During the academic year of 2011, for the first time the subject Romani language and culture was introduced as an elective subject at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje.

In 2017, the Minister without Portfolio in charge of the implementation of the Strategy for improving the situation of the Roma in the Republic of North Macedonia, together with the Minister of Education and Science and the founder of the Department and professor of Romany at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, discussed the initiative for introducing the Bachelor Degree Roma language, and studies for Roma teachers as a new department of the Pedagogical and Philology faculty. The initiative was launched by the Minister without Portfolio and it was positively assessed by the Minister of Education and Science, but to date it has not received its implementation. [8]

The specific strategic objectives and expected results in the area of education outlined in the Strategy for the Roma in the Republic of Macedonia are:
- To increase the transition from primary education to secondary education, to improve the performance and to significantly reduce the withdrawal of Roma students by 2020.
- To increase the number of Roma university graduates by 2020.
- To increase the number of Roma students enrolled at pedagogical faculties and other faculties that produce teaching staff.
- Completion of primary and secondary education by Roma adults that because of various reasons did not finish in time, in order to gain the opportunity for subsistence, personal development and other needs.
- Decreased number of Roma pupils enrolled in schools for children with special needs by 20% by 2020 year.

The new Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination (Закон за спречување и защита од дискриминација) includes education in every provision regarding grounds for discrimination.

The Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Man (Закон за еднакви можности на жените и мажите) also includes the area of education in provisions regarding the establishment of equal opportunities for women and men regulated by the Law and application of the Law (Article 3, (3) Discrimination, harassment and sexual harassment on the grounds of gender shall be prohibited in the public and private sector in the spheres of employment and labor, education, science and sports, social security, including the social protection, pension and disability insurance, health insurance).

The Administration for Development of Education of the Languages of the Communities in collaboration with the NGO National Roma Centrum from Kumanovo and other departments in the Ministry of Education and Science, in 2010 developed a Handbook for Protection and Prevention from Discrimination in the Educational System Republic of Macedonia (Прирачник за заштита и спречување на дискриминацијата во воспитно-ообразовниот систем во Република Македонија). In general, the overall objective of this manual is to achieve cooperation and coordination between all institutions and individuals involved in the educational system in order to provide equal conditions and opportunities for quality education for all children regardless of religious, ethnic or any other basis and to establish a monitoring system that will allow uninterrupted and quality education for all children, through the cooperation and involvement of all stakeholders.

The National Youth Strategy 2016-2025, in the section: Social integration of disadvantaged groups through education and by developing working and learning conditions, under objective 10: to improve the support of children and youth who are neglected in terms of education and upbringing, foresees the following measures:

- Analyzing the current situation;
- Developing and implementing a programme for socially excluded children and youth;
- Monitoring and evaluating the programme for socially excluded children and youth;
- Analyzing the current situation of children and youth whose age does not correspond with the patterns of the existing education system;
- Establishing inter-institutional cooperation;
- Developing and implementing a programme for so-called ‘phantom’ children;
- Monitoring and evaluating the programme for ‘phantom’ children.