

Budapest, 29 March 2019

**Roma Education Fund's recommendations on the National program
"Support to municipalities for implementation of activities for
educational desegregation" in Bulgaria**

The Roma Education Fund (REF) welcomes the initiatives and efforts of the Ministry of Education in the field of education of Roma students in Bulgaria especially the most recent national program "*Support to municipalities for implementation of activities for educational desegregation*". Indeed, there is need for urgent action from the side of the Ministry of Education to deeply engage in desegregation of Roma students in school institutions. As official data indicate around 26% of Roma children receive education in segregated circumstances while misdiagnosis of Roma children is still an ongoing discriminatory practice.¹ REF recognizes the program "*Support to municipalities for implementation of activities for educational desegregation*" as a great opportunity to bring equal and quality education of Roma in mainstream settings through supporting municipalities and designing program elements for specific needs of Roma.

Inclusive education contributes to social mobility to both Roma and non-Roma and brings together the interest of parents, school officials and other respective stakeholders. Education is also a key for social, economic and political integration of Roma that contributes to the development of the entire society.

In order to further strengthen our already existing cooperation with the Ministry while taking into account REF's knowledge and expertise to the issue of combating segregation, hereby, REF provides recommendations to the Ministry on the National program. The recommendation package is based on REF's desegregation model that have proven its impact in several European countries.

¹ FRA, Second European Union Minorities and Discriminatory Service, Roma Selected Findings, 2016; European Commission, Education and Training Monitor Bulgaria 2016; REF Country Assessment- Advancing the Education of Roma in Bulgaria, 2015

Recommendations:

1. Access/enrolment to non-segregated schools/classes

- Enrolling Roma children in as many schools as possible outside the Roma neighborhoods. It is greatly important to stop further reproduction of segregation or segregated schools by enrolling most of the Roma students into the same school.
- Covering the transportation of students from the Roma neighborhood to the schools and back by the Ministry.

2. Educational component

- Appointing mentors, one for each host schools. The roles of the mentor are; to build relationship between the parents and schools; to manage the day-to-day relationship between the school, the project management and the parents.
- Providing opportunities for further qualification of teachers at the host schools, with particular emphasis on inclusive and intercultural education.
- Organizing extracurricular activities by teachers in host schools or by specially trained pedagogues² for students lagging behind. This also includes providing additional academic support for children during the summer and holiday months.
- Providing pedagogical guidance to the project by specially recruited educators who, either individually or in consultation with other project participants and host school leaders, determine the enrollment strategy, the need for additional pedagogical work, forms of out-of-school work, or oversee the work of mentors.
- Tracking the children's GPA rate, attendance/participation rate, absenteeism rate, dropout rate, graduation rate, transition rate. Clarify cultural, social-economic and educational obstacles and identify solution in cooperation with local stakeholders.

² Teachers who are trained for sharing relevant knowledge on inclusive education models

3. Parental involvement and family support

- Organizing parental forums; to prepare Roma and non-Roma parents for the process; to change the current negative perception of integration; to make sure respective parents better understand the benefit of integration for both Roma and ethnic Bulgarians; to bridge the interest of parents and school representatives; to prevent anti-Roma sentiments that Roma students might face; to develop the community in general and facilitate public debates.
- Assisting Roma parents to participate in schools' parents board meetings and periodic organization of parent meetings of project participants.
- Providing financial support for Roma families in need both for school materials/equipment as well as for meals.

4. Social component and visibility

- Implementing a recruitment campaign of the project to popularize integration and joint efforts for the benefit of the entire society and raise awareness on the issue.
- Conducting extra-class events - celebrations, excursions, camps, cultural events etc. with a clear multicultural character with attraction of children and parents - Roma and ethnic Bulgarians.
- Having a general approach of motivating students, highlighting the main competences of theirs and potential goals.

5. External support

- Ensuring political and public support of the project by the leading actors in education, both among the Roma community/NGOs and the political forces in the settlement and the city.
- Providing support to local educational and municipal authorities as well as to NGOs and the media.

6. Monitoring and evaluation component

- Creating monitoring and evaluation plan
- Establishing track records and reporting system
- Employ constant field monitoring during the project implementation

The above points are the basis of the desegregation model of the Roma Education Fund that is being offered as expert recommendations for the Ministry. It is also pivotal to highlight that the transportation of students itself will not bring effective change in the education system neither will it solve segregation as such in a long term. Both Roma and non-Roma parents, students and school teachers need to be prepared for the process. Moreover, specific needs of students need to be addressed both in academic and financial senses.

The recommendations largely contribute to the successful integration of Roma students into mainstream school institutions. Thus, based on international experience, REF calls the attention of the Ministry to take into consideration these specifics before the implementation of the national desegregation program.

In addition to that, REF stands ready to provide its expert support to the Ministry to further strengthen the national desegregation program. Furthermore, REF is ready to support development of integration strategies and policies aimed at combatting segregation of Roma students in Bulgaria in partnership and close collaboration with the Ministry.

REF is looking forward to continuing the communication regarding the national desegregation program either via email or in person discussions.

Should you have any further inquiries, please contact:

Roland Ferkovics, Policy and Advocacy Officer
Roma Education Fund Headquarters, Budapest
E-mail: rferkovics@romaeducationfund.org

Ognyan Isaev, REF Country Facilitator for Bulgaria
E-mail: oisaev@romaeducationfund.org