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“Strengthening the governance model of pre-university education in Romania”

Diagnostic Report Summary

Romania is embarking upon a significant educational reform. The draft 2023 Pre-University Education Law and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan aim to improve the quality and equity of education, following the ambitious vision laid out in the “Educated Romania” report. Planned measures include developing school evaluation and support, increasing overall national funding for education, reviewing allocation mechanisms to support rural and disadvantaged schools, and strengthening the teaching career.

These changes offer an opportunity to address some of the most pressing challenges that the system is facing today. In Romania, many students do not acquire a minimum level of proficiency in reading, science, and mathematics. Enrollment rates are low and declining, and a growing number of youth leave school before completing secondary education. Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, particularly those from ethnic minorities and rural communities, are especially at risk for lower education outcomes.

This diagnostics report attempts to help build consensus on the necessary measures needed to implement reforms. It highlights critical questions that Romania will need to consider so that planned reforms translate into measurable improvements in quality, equity, and efficiency in education. The scope for the analysis in this report includes school education (primary and secondary education). At the request of Romanian authorities, the report focuses on the following changes: i) Reorganising responsibilities for school evaluation and support ii) Increasing financial and human resources for pre-university education and distributing them efficiently and equitably, and iii) Building a strong monitoring system for accountability and results.

Chapter 2: Reorganising responsibilities for school evaluation and support

Introduction

Educated Romania and its associated legislation aim to improve school accountability and support policies. Many of the planned reforms address current weaknesses of the evaluation system by consolidating the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP) as the main school evaluator and reconfiguring county directorates (former County School Inspectorates, CSIs) to provide support to schools. However, a number of factors may stand in the way of progress. This chapter raises some of the crucial questions that Romania will need to consider to ensure that ARACIP and county directorates drive improvements in schools and the education system.

Context and features

Until recently, schools have been subject to multiple forms of evaluation and inspection. In Romania, external evaluation from early years to tertiary non-university education is currently conducted by two different bodies: ARACIP and CSIs. ARACIP was created in 2005 as an autonomous institution to ensure schools meet minimum quality standards and support the development of quality assurance processes. CSIs are deconcentrated arms of the Ministry of Education at the county level with the responsibility for overseeing the quality of the education provision in their county.

This level of complexity is relatively unique in the EU and OECD as evaluation responsibilities are generally consolidated in one independent, national school evaluation body. The resultant duplication is inefficient and burdensome for schools. It also undermines wider reforms intended to change expectations for teaching and learning, both by communicating disparate standards for what is considered “good schooling” (the CSI and ARACIP evaluation frameworks are different) and through the continuance of the CSI compliance-based approach which runs counter to the commitment to greater school agency, leadership and autonomy.

Currently, CSIs and their affiliated teachers’ training houses are the main source of support for schools and teachers through advice, networking activities and continuous professional development. However, capacities to provide support are limited. This is mainly due to the tension inherent in fulfilling both inspection and support functions; the lack of training and information to deliver adequate support; and the limited resources provided for school improvement.

Planned changes in the reform

Change 1: Consolidating ARACIIP as the main external evaluator

- Establishing ARACIIP (formerly ARACIP) as the main national agency with school evaluation and inspection functions. ARACIIP will retain provisional authorisation, initial accreditation and recurrent evaluation. It will take on from CSIs the general inspections and thematic inspections, while CSIs will keep specialty inspections.
- Increasing ARACIIP human resources from 75 to 300 permanent staff.
- Opening new deconcentrated ARACIIP offices at the county level, with 200 staff based in county offices.

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single national agency can ensure professionalism, consistency, and independence. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – It eliminates some of the existing redundancies in inspection and evaluation. – It promotes the use of a single national set of quality standards for external and internal school evaluation. This is important to create a common language and a shared understanding among external evaluators and schools about the fundamental drivers of high-quality teaching and learning. – It can strengthen the integrity of evaluations. ARACIP evaluators have an objective distance from schools, as they cannot reside in the same county as the school being evaluated. ARACIIP also performs some quality control of school evaluation reports, as internal staff reviews and validates the reports prepared by external evaluators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new evaluation framework and methodology have some gaps: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The new framework is not yet fully aligned with the teacher standards developed through the PROF project, and does not assess schools’ instructional leadership – School actors do not receive sufficient support to conduct meaningful self-evaluations. • Evidence and analysis from ARACIP is not systematically used in the system, by the ministry in designing policy or by CSIs in their day-to-day work. • ARACIIP evaluations are not significantly driving school improvement efforts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Evaluators’ lack of qualifications and experience in the specific school level they evaluate. – Evaluators still tend to focus primarily on schools’ conformity with administrative procedures. – Evaluation reports do not consistently provide quality feedback on the areas schools need to improve, or

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ARACIP's new evaluation framework places a stronger focus on school improvement. It has many positive features: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – New standards focus on quality teaching and learning, going beyond questions of policy compliance, to generate – through classroom observation – information on how teachers are interacting with students. – There are some differentiated standards for different educational levels (e.g., early childhood; TVET) or educational types (e.g., special education). – There is a smaller set of quality standards, minimising the burden evaluations may place on school time. – They seek to bring low-performing schools up to basic standards. | <p>actionable guidance to do so. Conclusions in evaluation reports do not look explicitly at equity and inclusion, which are significant challenges in the system and priorities in the reform.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – There is a lack of clarity in ARACIP's follow up activities. • ARACIP's funding is unpredictable and has been insufficient over the years. Evaluation fees do not support equity across schools. Rigidities in the way the ARACIP can use its own resources makes it difficult to offer competitive salaries and attract qualified candidates. • ARACIP is not planning evaluations in a way that is effective and equitable. Evaluations follow a census-based approach aiming to cover all schools within a five-year period, which has been unfeasible over the years. They are conducted on an on-demand basis with no consistent criteria or evidence of need. • The reform does not clearly address the duplication between external evaluation and general inspections. This means that that schools are subject to two processes that, while different in emphasis and approach, serve the same function. |
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Change 2: Giving counties a more explicit support role

County School Inspectorates (CSIs) will be reorganised into County directorates for pre-university education (county directorates hereafter). They will no longer conduct inspections, except for teachers' specialty inspection, and will have a more explicit role in school support.

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reform allows counties to focus on their support role: By removing most of their inspection responsibilities, the reform allows for counties to channel their limited resources to help (rather than control) schools. • Counties' close proximity to schools means that they are well placed to strengthen schools as places of effective teaching and learning. They can support schools' self-evaluation and improvement planning after an ARACIP evaluation, work with schools in their community to reach national standards while understanding their distinct needs and constraints and help them apply for and manage project resources from international donors such as the EU. • The reform strengthens the internal and external 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counties' support role can be undermined by their continuing involvement in high-stakes teacher evaluations. • CSI's current organisation and staffing around control functions is not aligned with some of their new roles. While county directorates will have new administrative structures, they will operate with existing staff, who have been trained and worked as inspectors, often for several decades. Many of the functions that counties will have, notably on school monitoring and support, are not sufficiently staffed. The reform does not seem to be backed up by a plan or resources to retrain inspectors and start addressing the professional capacity gaps. • The reform does not sufficiently consider ways to leverage local capacities in a context where resources constraints are severe. Many counties lack the capacity to perform all of their planning and support functions. It will be

accountability of counties. County directorates will produce an annual report on the state of the education system for the Ministry of Education, reflecting the views of different actors at the county level. Coordinating reporting amongst the different actors that work with schools at the county level will be important because the overall improvement in outcomes of students and schools in Romania requires more concerted services.

difficult for Romania to improve the technical competencies of CSI staff without looking at how they are managed, shared and coordinated across the country.

- **There is no national strategy for school improvement.** To contribute meaningfully to the improvement of students' learning across all Romanian schools, school evaluation and follow-up support need to be part of a broader and coherent national effort to build schools' capacity to learn and improve. In Romania, there are initiatives to support school improvement, such as teachers' pedagogical circles, and schools "inter-assistance" networks. However, these initiatives are fragmented, and need further strengthening.

Considerations for implementation

(1) How can ARACIIP improve the design and conduct of school evaluations to provide schools with useful feedback on their strengths and on where and how they can improve?

What aspects of ARACIIP's school quality framework should be revisited to better guide evaluators and schools? Positively, the new evaluation framework, introduced in the 2021-2022 academic year, reoriented evaluations away from a focus on legal compliance towards instructional practices. There are some additional steps that Romania can consider to ensure the new framework provides better guidance to evaluators and schools. These include making sure that the school evaluation framework aligns with the new standards for teachers and principals and preparing bespoke manuals on how to apply standards in different types of schools and settings (e.g., early years, primary, secondary, TVET schools, small rural schools). Together, these measures can facilitate their adoption by evaluators and schools (for self-evaluation).

What changes are required to the recruitment and training of ARACIIP experts? School evaluations are effective depending on the quality of the evaluators and the feedback they provide. ARACIP does not have sufficient qualified staff, including permanent evaluators, who are essential for consistency across evaluations, and for providing on-the-job coaching for external evaluators. As the agency expands its teams, it will need to delineate the functions, expected competencies and paygrade. ARACIIP could initially focus on two distinct functions that other inspectorates in the EU have also established: school evaluators that lead independent school evaluations, and advisors that build the capacity of local authorities to support school self-evaluation and improvement processes. To guide its growth, ARACIIP could consider developing a plan to recruit experts and train them on the new methodology and standards. For this it is critical that the pace of expansion in staff numbers is in line with ARACIIP's capacity to provide them with training. Also, ARACIIP should be mindful of further developing processes to safeguard and oversee the quality and integrity of evaluations. For this, they might consider reducing the use of external experts, and ensuring all evaluations are led by a permanent evaluator from ARACIIP staff. The agency could also refine the process whereby ARACIIP permanent senior staff assure the quality of evaluation reports and processes.

(2) How can Romania leverage school evaluation to drive system-wide improvements?

What is needed to ensure county directorates coordinate with ARACIIP and use evaluation results? To ensure that ARACIIP's work is better connected to that of other actors in the system, Romania could define requirements on how intended users of school evaluations, notably county structures, should work

with ARACIIP and engage with quality standards and evaluation results. An option would be for Romania to establish formal partnership agreements between ARACIIP and county structures that define the specific areas where they need to work together, and requirements for county bodies to use ARACIIP evaluation reports. ARACIIP could create the role of “link evaluators” within each county. This would involve assigning a permanent evaluator, that is based locally and has dedicated time to liaise regularly with county actors and build up the knowledge on the issues and schools in their area. To encourage county directorates to take responsibility for school quality improvement, such agreements could also assign county directorates with a formal role in the evaluation follow-up process, and ensure they are trained by ARACIIP to effectively support school self-evaluation and improvement planning.

What resources could help schools use ARACIIP standards for self-evaluation and improvement planning? When properly conducted, external evaluation can help schools appropriate the standards and progressively gain the capacity to evaluate themselves and implement improvement actions. In Romania, conducting external evaluations to all schools within a five-year cycle has not been possible. Investing to develop schools’ capacity to conduct meaningful self-evaluations could be a more efficient use of limited resources. ARACIIP might consider working with counties to strengthen schools’ self-evaluation practices by providing them with a self-evaluation toolkit including handbooks that are specific for their school level or setting, data collection instruments (i.e., questionnaires, evaluative questions, or observation protocols); administrative data to benchmark their performance over time and compared to similar schools (through SIIR); exemplars of good practices; and targeted support to conduct self-evaluation and improvement planning when needed.

How can ARACIIP leverage school evaluations for systemic change? ARACIP school evaluation reports are made public. Instead of providing schools with a single summative score, reports answer five questions in narrative way, next to a judgement of quality. This is a very positive feature as it provides a more nuanced overview of what is working well in the school, and the areas where progress is needed. As reports are publicly accessible, schools are held accountable to improve. To further encourage schools to act on recommendations, ARACIIP could require that schools produce an action plan to address the specific challenges identified by evaluators. Schools could share the plan with the school’s administrative boards, parents and county directorates, and report to parents and county directorates on their implementation progress. ARACIIP could also work with county directorates to use evaluation reports and the efficiency index to design school improvement initiatives, such as networking and peer-learning across schools.

(3) How can ARACIIP’s resources be used more effectively, and its budget and funding model strengthened?

How can ARACIIP design a more equitable and efficient approach to evaluation? Experience shows that it has not been possible for ARACIP to evaluate all schools within a five-year cycle, and many disadvantaged schools have not yet benefitted from their first evaluation. Romania can consider a range of models that involve some form of selection and targeting of schools. An option would be a needs and risk-based approach to external evaluations targeting the lowest-performing schools. Another, potentially more suitable option, would be to adopt a differentiated approach, including more frequent evaluations and hands-on support to schools that need to improve the most (risk-based) as well as evaluations of a sample of better performing schools. This approach can be combined with a minimum frequency of evaluation for all schools (e.g., every school is evaluated at least once every ten years). It is also essential to explore ways to balance external evaluation with support for schools’ self-evaluation – because if many schools are not being externally evaluated, they will need to develop the capacity to self-evaluate and improve.

What further consolidation is needed in ARACIIP’s responsibilities? While the reform makes important strides to consolidate evaluation efforts, the duplication of regular evaluation and general inspection is not fully addressed. As the OECD has recommended previously, general inspections should

stop. There are two sets of questions that ARACIIP and the Ministry will need to discuss. The first one relates to the scope and process of external evaluation, to ensure that there are no important features that are lost by removing general inspections. The second question relates to the consequences for staff, in particular the need to retrain and in some instances relocate human resources.

How can ARACIIP optimise its presence at subnational levels? By building ARACIIP's subnational presence, Romania can strengthen local capacity and build evaluation expertise closer to county structures and schools. There are different options to optimise ARACIIP's presence at the subnational level, including: setting up offices at the regional level, or setting up offices at the county level while promoting consortia across counties. Consortia would allow for the pooling of limited resources and qualified experts among local offices.

What changes are needed to ARACIIP's funding model so that it can fulfil its functions? The current funding model, coming from school fees and ad hoc funding from the Ministry and international projects, has been insufficient and unpredictable. A more adequate solution, which is common across the EU, might involve ensuring that ARACIIP receives appropriate central funding from government without the need for fees. This would require reviewing the budgeting process to develop an integrated, multi-year budget that includes both core costs, permanent staff, capital costs and operational costs that are commensurate to ARACIIP's work and evaluation schedule; and that ties budget to planned increases in spending (see Chapter 3).

(4) How should county directorates be managed and organised so that they can support schools effectively?

How can Romania develop the two core functions that county directorates will have under the new reform: school support and monitoring? By refocusing county directorates' roles, the planned reforms aim to bring support closer to schools. County directorates are well placed to help schools access the resources, training, and guidance they need. Their geographic proximity to schools means that they can monitor key school performance indicators to identify any emerging issues and intervene rapidly to provide guidance on how to address them. Reorganising county directorates' administrative structures is a first step to concentrate capacity and resources behind what will become the core responsibilities of county directorates in the years ahead. Romania could consider establishing dedicated units for school support and school monitoring within each county directorate. The school support unit would review external evaluations, SIIIR data and other risk signals, broker support from other county bodies and national agencies, and directly work with ARACIIP and schools to help them strengthen their self-evaluation and improvement processes and apply and manage EU funding. The school monitoring unit would conduct quality checks on the data inputted by schools into SIIIR and produce relevant analyses.

What are steps needed to define the number and profile of county directorates' staff? To shift from a control to a supportive role, county staff will require new competencies and a change in mindsets. Some initial steps Romania can consider include defining the new roles and specific competencies expected for county directorate staff. In the short term it will be critical to deliver comprehensive training for former CSI staff who choose to re-integrate into the new county directorates. In the medium term, as existing staff moves on or retires, county directorates can organise merit-based job competitions involving transparent criteria to select candidates.

(5) What adjustments are needed to accountability and management structures to reflect and support the changed functions of county directorates?

How can the Ministry support counties' new functions? As county directorates transition away from their control, and into their support role, they will require guidance from the central ministry. Some of the actions the Ministry could undertake to support the work of county directorates include: helping county

directorates define a vision and school improvement goals for their territory connected to national education priorities; holding regular meetings with the county directorates' leadership team to discuss progress; facilitating pairing initiatives between county directorates with greater capacity and those that need more support; and providing relevant training opportunities for local actors.

How can county directorates work with other actors to improve the quality and equity of education?

The reform places a strong emphasis on counties' support role. However, there are several separate bodies responsible for school improvement at the national and county level. This might result in uncoordinated piecemeal initiatives. The roles of the county structures, ARACIIP, other national bodies, and schools themselves need to be coordinated and mutually reinforcing. By adopting a comprehensive national strategy for school improvement that assigns clear responsibilities to each body and links them to a commensurate budget Romania could strengthen the coherence in the design and implementation of school improvement policies and ensure adequate resourcing.

How can county directorates deliver their work in a more effective and efficient way? Romania has a fragmented governance structure, with a high number of small counties with limited scale and capacity. The current reforms do not pay enough attention to this issue. In the immediate future, there are a number of actions Romania could consider to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. An option is to promote inter-county co-operation, or consortia that allow counties to pool or share resources and expertise. Romania will also need to create coordination platforms to ensure that county directorates work closely with other county structures to ensure schools access the different resources, training and guidance they need.

Chapter 3: Increasing financial and human resources for pre-university education, and distributing them efficiently and equitably

Introduction

The draft legislative package aims to increase public funding for education, distribute financial and human resources more equitably across schools and students, and build a strong and attractive teaching profession, which is a cornerstone of quality teaching and learning. However, planned reforms fall short in addressing some of the long-standing structural constraints in the system. To make the most of increased public funding, Romanian authorities will need to consider different options to develop a more strategic approach to budgeting, explore the scope to improve efficiency in the system, define objective criteria and standardised protocols to identify special educational needs (SEN) and disadvantaged students, and coordinate support actions across the system. This chapter addresses critical questions that Romania will need to consider to make the most of increased public spending.

Context and features

Public spending on education is very low by international comparison. It represented 3.7% of GDP in 2021, the lowest level among all countries in the European Union (4.8% EU average) and Central and Eastern European countries (5% in average). Spending levels were particularly low for pre-university education, representing 0.8% of GDP, compared to an average of 1.7% in the EU.

The current funding system perpetuates inequalities across counties and schools. Schools are financed primarily through the basic per-capita national budgetary allocation but can also receive complementary and additional funding from the Ministry, local councils and county councils. Even if recent adjustments in the funding formula have given more resources to rural schools, funding inequalities prevail. The central Ministry does not compensate schools in disadvantaged counties, where local budgets are

insufficient to complement their basic funding, creating disparities between the total funds received by schools in disadvantaged areas relative to those in more advantaged ones. This is further compounded by the way local authorities distribute funds across schools, as they do not follow transparent criteria or evidence of need.

Demographic changes have challenged the efficiency and quality of the school network. Despite efforts to rationalise the school network in the past, data suggests possible inefficiencies remain. For instance, the number of teachers in upper secondary education has remained relatively stable in spite of declining enrolment rates. It is estimated that 35% of Romanian schools have less than 300 students, the minimum number of students prescribed by the law, and more than 60% of schools are underutilised. Reorganising the network might not only help improve efficiency, but also raise educational quality. National data suggests that students enrolled in small schools with less than 300 students scored below those in larger schools in the national Grade 8 assessment in 2022 (an average score of 5.9 in small schools compared to 6.8 in larger schools).

There are incentives to attract teachers to isolated and rural areas, but they have not been effective. Schools in rural and remote areas face a shortage of qualified teachers. Romania provides a number of incentives to attract teachers to these hard-to-staff schools. These include a top-up of up to 20% to their basic salary, an extension of the contract duration for teachers employed on a fixed-term contract, and reduced teaching hours for secondary school teachers. However, policies have not been sufficient to address the range of issues that teachers face in these contexts. Rural schools typically are typically associated with more difficult working conditions and higher transportation costs due to longer commuting distances. They tend to have more limited access to educational resources, including teaching materials, technology, and professional development opportunities.

Planned changes in the reform

Change 1: Increasing public spending for education

Romania plans to progressively increase national public expenditure in education to 15% of total government expenditure by 2027.

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher levels of spending are needed to deliver an adequate educational provision: An increase in government expenditure would enable Romania to progressively reach per-student spending levels that are sufficient to provide education of basic quality and more in line with EU and CEE averages. • Increased spending would allow investment in the professional capabilities, teaching resources, and data systems needed to deliver reform objectives, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A strong cadre of ARACIIP evaluators and resources and support for school self-evaluation and improvement planning. - The professional development, one-to-one mentorship, and curriculum materials for teachers. - A strong cadre of professionals within the Ministry, and sustained resourcing to develop a robust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no specific guidance on how to allocate additional funding: While planned reforms provide some general orientation about the sectors and areas most in need of support, they have not developed the type of operational and expenditure plans that would be needed to translate general aims into interventions that deliver results. • Budgeting is not aligned with long-term strategic goals. It is conducted within an annual timeframe, with the fundamental aim of covering costs incurred by the current system and avoiding deficits. It relies primarily on historical costs rather than forecasts or projections of future resource needs linked to the Ministry's strategic goals. • Past efforts to rationalise the school network have so far fallen short. Measures to rationalise the school network through clustering, have not sufficiently addressed quality and resourcing gaps between schools with legal status and their subordinated satellite schools. In addition,

<p>EMIS.</p> <p>Romania has piloted a methodology for spending reviews in the education sector, which can provide guidance on how to assess the value-for-money of public spending in education.</p>	<p>county actors do not have sufficient data or incentives to adjust their educational offer to the declining number of students. Without a study on the school network capacity and demand, and national guidelines, reorganisation efforts may fail to rationalise the network and enhance the quality of education.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The system is highly bureaucratic: Redundant or unnecessary administrative procedures at different levels of the system absorb resources and detract policymakers and educators' attention away from their core tasks.
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Change 2: Targeting additional funds to disadvantaged students and schools

Romania plans to reallocate public spending to provide more support to disadvantaged schools and students with:

- Changes in the funding formula that increase the standard funding per student for schools that enter a consortium involving urban and rural schools, as well as for schools serving students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and with special educational needs (SEN).
- New targeted programmes such as grants for schools with high rates of early school leaving, and specialised professional support for students with SEN provided by County Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance.
- New grants for teachers and students, including a lump-sum monetary bonus for teachers who work in rural and disadvantaged schools, and a revised scholarship scheme for students based on merit and need.

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Challenges</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned changes can help address educational inequities by directing additional resources to students who face greater disadvantages or barriers to learning. This is a positive step in a system where disadvantaged schools have typically faced significant resource constraints. • The draft law sets clear objectives on how to integrate students with SEN and provides additional resources for schools to accommodate them, when possible, in a regular classroom setting. Integration can allow SEN students to interact and learn from peers and reduce their marginalisation and stigmatisation. • The creation of the National Centre for Inclusive Education can enable more comprehensive and coordinated programmes to support students from vulnerable groups. • The Ministry plans to collect and analyse data to perform periodical reviews of the funding formula using administrative data on school funding and dedicated surveys on school funding and needs. A greater use of administrative data, together with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no clear prioritisation of the population of students and schools that need additional resources and integrated support. The draft law provides a very broad definition for students with SEN, that overlaps to some extent with that provided for disadvantaged students. Since the inclusion of SEN and disadvantaged students can require significant resources, it will be important to clearly delineate priority target groups. • Changes in the funding formula and teacher bonuses might not suffice to attract more qualified teachers to hard-to-staff schools. There are other factors that matter for teachers' satisfaction and willingness to stay in a school that go beyond compensation, such as opportunities to grow intellectually, develop as professionals, and supportive work environments. • Financial schemes for teachers and students are not well-designed to support quality and equity. New scholarships place a strong focus on merit and academic excellence rather than financial need. Similarly, teachers' merit pay does not rely on objective measures of quality teaching.

dedicated surveys on school funding can help ensure the funding formula is fit-for-purpose and directs adequate levels of funding to schools.

Considerations for implementation

This section raises questions that Romanian authorities will need to consider for increased funding to contribute to greater quality, equity and efficiency.

(1) How can Romania develop a more strategic approach to budgeting so that increased investments support long-term goals?

How can the budgeting process better support the delivery of reform objectives? The planned reforms set broad direction as to the areas that should benefit from increased funding. However, the Ministry's approach to budgeting, with an annual timeframe and based on historical costs, remains an important challenge. Strategic budgeting processes allow countries to plan their spending and allocate resources in a way that aligns with the implementation of long-term priorities. Internationally, there are well-established features of strategic budgeting that Romania could consider, which include: adopting a comprehensive medium-term budgeting framework; developing staffing benchmarks; and conducting budgeting analyses, such as simulations, ex-ante cost-benefit analyses, and spending reviews to evaluate the financial implications of different policy scenarios.

What are the steps to strengthen the Ministry's capacity for strategic planning and budgeting?

There are different measures Romania can consider to help build central capacity and bolster strategic planning and budgeting for education policy. For instance, in the short term, Romania could recruit experienced leaders and expert consultants to develop more rigorous budgeting practices, forecasting models and provide mentoring and guidance to existing staff. In the longer term, it would be important to consider a government-wide reform and professionalisation of the public sector to strengthen and standardise core government capacities for budgeting and strategic planning. The Ministry of Education could support this process by redefining the roles and competencies in areas specific to education, starting with the teaching career.

(2) How to make a more efficient use of public spending in education?

What scope is there to improve the efficiency of the school network? As Romania plans to review its funding formula and redefine rules on the size of schools and classrooms, it will be critical to understand how these measures can best support greater network efficiency, quality, and equity across the country. Some of the key decisions that will need to be made include defining the role of the central Ministry in overseeing and guiding counties' reorganisation efforts, the most appropriate strategies to reorganise schools (e.g. clusters, consortia, consolidation) and the regulations and incentives that can steer the development of the network in line with policy priorities.

What data is needed to improve the efficiency of the school network? To answer the questions above, authorities will need accurate and comprehensive data on the present capacity of the school network as well as reliable projections of future demand. Typically, evaluations of the school network include estimating the current capacity of each major stage of education at the municipal and county level; forecasting demand (in the next 1-5 or 6-10 years) for each major stage of education in each municipality and county; and identifying opportunities and costs of different scenarios.

How can Romania reduce the costly bureaucratic burden on the school system? The existing layers of bureaucracy at different levels of the system absorb resources and detract policymakers and educators'

attention away from their core tasks. A rigorous, independent evaluation of administrative operations in schools and county structures could help quantify the burden of existing procedures and offer recommendations for efficiency improvements. An evaluation of this type in Romania could include an assessment of existing processes, identification of capacity gaps, and offer recommendations for the reallocation of resources to support new staffing arrangements.

(3) What further measures are needed to better resource disadvantaged students and schools?

What actions would help ensure additional funding is reaching students in need? To reduce some of the deepest disparities in the system, Romania will need to concentrate limited resources on the populations and schools that face the greatest needs. To do so, Romania will need to establish clear definitions and protocols to identify target groups, and ensure monitoring and evaluation pay adequate attention to understand how resources are allocated across counties and schools.

What additional measures can address the barriers to attract teachers to work in disadvantaged schools? Existing monetary schemes have not been sufficient to encourage teachers to work in these challenging contexts, suggesting that complementary measures might be needed. Proposed amendments to the draft law already raise the possibility to provide additional support for teachers who decide to work in disadvantaged schools (e.g., to cover for housing expenses, including charges and transportation). These measures would be an important complement to the one-off monetary bonus already planned in the law. In addition, Romania could consider providing career development opportunities to recognise and motivate teachers who work in hard-to-staff schools, and offer targeted professional development activities to help teachers acquire the knowledge and skills needed to address the diverse needs of their students. Expanding training in multi-grade teaching, or instructional approaches to work with SEN students will be important in light of a growing number of multigrade classrooms, and plans to integrate SEN students in mainstream education.

What targeted support is needed to enhance learning in disadvantaged schools? Improving learning and achievement in disadvantaged schools requires alignment with other social policies and specialised services that help students stay and succeed in their education. Planned reforms aim to provide underserved schools with integrated support services from the County Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance, targeted resources outside the main allocation mechanisms from the NRRP, and individual financial aid for disadvantaged students and their families from the Ministry. They are delivered by different bodies and not guided by a common definition of the specific categories of students and schools that need support. When planning the comprehensive package of sustained support for students and schools, Romania will need to consider revising its student scholarship scheme which is accentuating rather than reducing inequalities; establishing stronger connections between county actors that deliver targeted support; and identifying a subset of schools where targeted funds can make the most substantial difference.

Chapter 4: Building a strong monitoring system for accountability and results

Introduction

As part of its draft law, Romania aims to establish an integrated Education Monitoring and Information System (EMIS), the *Sistemul Integrat de Management al Școlărității*, or SIMS building on its current EMIS, SIIIR. At the same time, the Ministry of Education has developed a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework for the reforms that outlines roles for monitoring, evaluation and reporting. These changes lay the foundations for a greater use of data in policymaking and greater focus on reform delivery and accountability. However, there are important gaps that can limit the effectiveness of SIMS and the M&E

framework. This chapter presents a set of questions that policy makers should consider to fully implement SIMS, improve monitoring data on student learning outcomes and use evidence to inform future policymaking and enhance accountability.

Context and features

SIIR represents an improvement in the quality of education data. Romania launched its current EMIS, *Sistemul Informatic Integrat al Învățământului din România*, or SIIR in with the aim of helping the Ministry, county school inspectorates (CSIs) and schools to better plan, monitor and manage the education system. The SIIR represented an improvement in the quality of education data because it consolidated key education data into a single platform and introduced advanced features enabling actors to analyse data in ways that are more useful to their work.

However, a lack of dedicated staff within the Ministry and a limited budget have made it difficult to develop and improve SIIR over time. The platform has been mainly sustained by external sources, leading to underfunding and interruptions in its development when external funding expires. Given the lack of national investment in SIIR, there is almost no staff in the Ministry that knows how to extract and analyse data, that can swiftly adapt data to new user needs and legislation and that are able ensure its smooth functioning.

Despite efforts to establish SIIR as the main education data hub, integration with other data/systems remains a challenge. Several education databases continue to run in parallel to SIIR and do not link to the EMIS nor follow the common definitions set out in the National System of Education Indicators (SNIE). This creates a lack of consistency that can lead to inaccurate reporting and even conflicting results. Also, while Romania has been working on increasing the quality of data on dropout and early school leaving, there are still important data gaps in other areas such student learning outcomes.

System monitoring and evaluation responsibilities in the education sector are divided between the Ministry and specialised agencies such as the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP) and the National Centre for Policies and Evaluation in Education (NCPEE). In the last four years, Romania has made several changes to the organisation and roles of its evaluation agencies, which at times has led to duplication of work. These constant reorganisations, coupled with a lack of adequate funding, have caused entities to face chronic staff shortages, undermining their capacity to perform core work tasks.

There is a limited culture of evaluation and accountability in Romania's education system. Despite collecting large amounts of primary data on the education system, Romania does not adequately invest in ways to analyse and report education data so that it is useful to different stakeholders. The use of evidence to drive system improvements is constrained by the limited culture of evaluation and accountability in the education system. For instance, the annual State of Education report, one of the key monitoring and evaluation resources, has several shortcomings, including a narrow understanding of system performance, a lack of attention to equity challenges, a format that is not accessible to a broader audience, and limited dissemination efforts.

Planned changes in the reform

Change 1. Building an integrated Educational Management Information System

- Establishing SIMS (former SIIR) to fully integrate different data courses into a single EMIS platform. Its implementation falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

- Creating a new Executive Unit for Support, Maintenance and Technical Assistance for Digitisation (UESMATD) to provide IT support and strengthen the capacity of actors to use the SIMS platform.

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SIMS has the potential to significantly improve Romania's EMIS, by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Guaranteeing the interoperability of data. – Simplifying data collection and access, reducing the schools' reporting burden. – Improving overall data quality and access, by setting common indicator definitions and referencing the same data source for different purposes among other efforts. • Romania is working to align its EMIS with national education goals, by including new modules addressing challenges such as school segregation or building the capacity of county directorates to collect more disaggregated data about student characteristics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is not yet a common understanding of which databases will be integrated in SIMS. There is limited awareness of this initiative among stakeholders and no plans that explicitly set out which existing databases will be connected to SIMS platform. • Planned reforms do not give sufficient attention to data gaps on learning outcomes as there are no plans to review how national assessments can be standardised to provide reliable system-wide data. • Romania has secured substantial external funding for SIMS, primarily from the EU, but the lack of strategic planning risks jeopardising the platform's long-term sustainability. At present, there are no clear plans to ensure adequate investments to staff, maintain and further develop the platform.

Change 2. Defining a monitoring and evaluation strategy for the reform

- Developing the *Unitary Framework for the Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Educated Romania 2022-2030 Project* (hereafter “the Unitary Framework”) and several supporting documents that outline the methodology, allocate responsibilities, and provide templates for monitoring and evaluation activities.
- Creating the Directorate General for the Implementation of the Educated Romania Project (DGIPRE).

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The methodology for monitoring and evaluation activities is clearly described distinguishing between coordination, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities. • Reporting plans and the introduction of mandatory parliamentary oversight have the potential to increase transparency and accountability for improving the pre-university education system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Unified Framework does not sufficiently articulate the responsibilities of central actors nor their capacity to conduct monitoring and evaluation activities. The Unified Framework also states that other parts of the Ministry should support DGIPRE to implement and monitor Educated Romania. However, it does not sufficiently articulate the M&E roles of existing entities within and outside the Ministry (i.e., the Public Policy Unit, ARACIP, IES and NCCE) • Strategic indicators have been identified, but prioritisation of key issues remains unclear. Positively, the strategy includes a mix of types of indicators, from inputs (e.g., funding as a share of public expenditure), to outputs (e.g. the number of teachers trained in applying the new curriculum), to outcomes (e.g. percentage of 15-year-olds scoring below Level 2 in PISA). While these indicators are aligned with the different priority areas under the Educated Romania Project, the large quantity of

indicators may lead to confusion and prevent stakeholders from focusing on priority goals.

Considerations for implementation

This section outlines questions that policymakers could consider as they build an integrated EMIS and develop a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to measure progress and outcomes of the reform.

1) *How can Romania ensure SIMS provides quality data that is relevant for policymaking and accessible to different users?*

What changes are needed to the existing EMIS architecture to fully implement the new SIMS platform? The new SIMS platform aims to address several challenges that have hindered the SIIIR platform's ability to serve as an integrated EMIS system. If Romania is to fully implement this reform, the government will need to make changes to the existing education data infrastructure, including: a system design guided by national education goals to help prioritise the most important data modules; the identification and integration of databases operating in parallel to SIIIR; and developing tools to improve data quality and consistency. While the planned functions of the SIMS platform can help improve the consistency and timeliness of Romania's education data, improving staff capacity to collect, report and use data, and performing data checks or audits to verify and validate the data – are all critical measures needed to further improve the quality of the data in the SIMS platform.

How can Romania improve the accessibility and usability of education data? To date, the functionality of the SIIIR platform has been underdeveloped largely because of a lack of funds for staffing and reporting costs. This not only makes it difficult for stakeholders to access and use the data to inform their work but motivates some actors to conduct their own data collections, creating process inefficiencies and increasing the likelihood of data errors. In taking decisions about the SIMS platform's functional capabilities Romania should consider the needs of the different users. At the national level they could provide a dashboard or module on key performance indicators for the Educated Romania project as well as developing or creating modules related to strategic education priorities (e.g., school segregation or early school leaving). At the county level (ARACIIP and county directorates), SIMS could build on school-level data to provide visual benchmarks on key indicators and provide with functions that allow users to analyse and present data in different ways to take decisions on which schools to prioritise for external evaluations. At a school level, presenting data from the SIMS platform in a more user-friendly way (e.g., summary of school performance and custom reports) could help schools to monitor their own progress over time and make contextualised comparisons with other schools. Such information can in turn support school self-evaluation. Lastly, building a public web-portal would allow a wider range of users (e.g., parents, students and community members) to make comparisons based upon chosen criteria, generate charts and figures and export data for further analysis. To develop these functionalities, the Ministry will need well-prepared EMIS staff, including for the management of data privacy and accessibility issues.

How can Romania establish SIMS as the central resource for the collection and use of education data? The Ministry plans to establish a new unit, the UESMATD, to manage SIMS. However, it is unclear how its internal structure will be (if there is a team dedicated to SIMS) and its relation with other bodies in the Ministry. For the platform to serve as a valuable tool for system monitoring and evaluation the managing unit will require staff with digital and quantitative expertise and staff with experience in using evidence to inform and deliver education policy. To avoid having duplicate and parallel data collections, the unit responsible for SIMS should have the mandate and capacity to stop parallel, separate data collections and integrate all existing databases into SIMS.

What can Romania do to help ensure the long-term sustainability of SIMS? A well-functioning EMIS requires adequate investment to maintain and further develop the platform. While Romania has secured EU funding for the next three years, the Ministry will need to develop a strategic multi-year plan that includes a dedicated budget for managing the SIMS platform (Chapter 3). Planning for the long-term sustainability should consider covering different aspects of the EMIS including physical infrastructure, the platform architecture and ensuring the staff have the range of skills profiles needed to populate and manage the EMIS.

2) How can Romania improve data on student learning outcomes?

What main questions will Romania need to address when introducing a standardised assessment of student learning? Compared to nearly all OECD and EU countries, Romania stands out for its lack of standardised national assessment data at the pre-university level. Since improving the quality of teaching and learning and promoting equity in education are among Educated Romania's key objectives, addressing the lack of standardised assessment data will be critical to future monitoring and evaluation efforts. As a first step, Romania should determine the primary purpose of its national assessment, as this will guide most of the subsequent decisions about the instrument's design and use. This definition would guide the decision of having a census-based or a sample-based assessment. Other decisions would imply establishing what grade(s) and subject(s) should be covered and identifying what additional student background information (e.g., on students' socioeconomic, linguistic, or ethnic background). Similarly, Romania should reflect on how to report resulting data in a way that supports system monitoring and evaluation (e.g., performance differences according student background) could help policymakers and the public to better identify and understand potential performance gaps faced by different groups of students and schools.

What governance, capacity and resource implications are associated with a standardised assessment of student learning? The draft law includes the reestablishment of the National Center for Curriculum and Evaluation (NCCE) with more staff and functions. Key challenges will need to be addressed, including the NCCE's lack of flexibility and predictability in hiring staff, as well as technology gaps. For instance, by offering more attractive contracts to recruit and retain experienced staff; building partnerships with non-government actors; working closely with the Educated Romania team; and implementing a medium-term funding plan for the new national assessment system.

3) How can Romania strengthen the monitoring and evaluation framework to support the delivery of reforms?

What are the main gaps in the monitoring and evaluation framework? The Ministry needs a strong monitoring and evaluation framework to inform the planning and delivery of Educated Romania reforms. For this Romania needs greater clarity on the key reform goals and performance indicators as well as on the main policy interventions that will be implemented in the upcoming years. With this purpose the country could consider selecting the most important objectives in the system (linked to Educated Romania goals) as national key performance indicators. Also, to operationalise Educated Romania, the Ministry will need to develop systemic policy interventions. These should not be based on individual projects but connect the work of actors from across all parts of the system within coordinated interventions that are based on a clear intervention logic and tested and refined through regular monitoring and evaluation.

How can reporting practices be adjusted to better support improvement and accountability across the education system? At present, inputs from other education bodies such as IES and ARACIP are not considered in the monitoring and evaluation reporting plans. Romania could adjust reporting practices to improve accountability by, for example, reviewing the State of Education report and the data reported on school quality. To ensure the State of Education report has greater outreach and impact, Romania could consider drawing on national sources about system quality, highlighting key national priorities and making

the format more engaging. As for school reporting, the Ministry could draw on thematic inspections to understand how schools are translating priority reform objectives into their day-to-day work, include a template for public reporting on how schools evaluate their performance in relation to national standards, and complement the data produced and reported through the SIMS platform and national standardised testing to communicate how schools and teachers are working towards priority objectives in the reform.

What institutions and capacities should be developed as a priority? Staffing and budget plans to carry out the new monitoring and evaluation framework are not explicit. To support key monitoring and evaluation functions, Romania might consider strengthening the capacity within the Ministry, taking stock of existing competencies in other parts of the Ministry, and by identifying and recruiting staff to perform statistical and broader policy analysis that can monitor reform delivery and conduct regular evaluations. The country should also consider optimising the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) as an independent evaluation body by focusing its activities on those set out in its four-year plan. The changes to budgeting discussed in Chapter 3 should help the Ministry progressively channel part of the planning increase in public funds for education to these functions.