

Strengthening efforts for digital and inclusive education: Insights from the “Equal Access to School Education in Times of Crisis” project (2021-2023)

Overview

This document summarises key findings and recommendations from the OECD’s evaluation of Bulgaria’s “Equal Access to School Education in Times of Crisis” project implemented from February 2021 to December 2023 through REACT-EU funds.

This final evaluation included an extensive review of national and international evidence, online and in-person interviews with policymakers and school-level actors, school visits and non-representative surveys of principals, teachers, students and Regional Education Departments. It was designed around seven evaluation criteria reflecting EU and OECD frameworks. These are: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, impact, efficiency, EU added value and sustainability.

This summary is intended for policy-implementing directorates within Bulgaria’s Ministry of Education and Science, Regional Education Departments and the Executive Agency Programme Education. It provides practical recommendations to help improve future activities that aim to strengthen digital and inclusive education.

The “Equal Access to School Education in Times of Crisis” project improved the equality of access to digital devices within Bulgaria’s schools and helped build basic digital skills among teachers, students and educational mediators. Through this, the project addressed clear needs in the Bulgarian education system and reduced the risk that future moves to distance learning would widen educational disparities, especially among vulnerable groups, such as Roma communities. These are notable achievements, particularly for a limited one-off project taking place in the context of an international health crisis.

However, there is limited evidence that the project led to a significant increase in innovative digital teaching and learning, or in parental and caregiver engagement in students’ remote learning. The project’s ability to create impact was hindered by a lack of attention to the broader digital education ecosystem in Bulgaria. For example, schools and families could have benefitted from quality guidance, training and collaboration around pedagogy and assessment in digital environments and a clearer system-level vision about what effective and engaging distance learning involves.

Building on these key findings, the evaluation offers some recommendations for Bulgaria to consider when designing and implementing future projects for digital and inclusive

education, proposing some related actions for policymakers.

1. Recognise that basic access is only the first step towards digital equity

Evidence collected during the evaluation indicates that equitable access to devices was a valid concern at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforcing findings from international and national data. The project successfully addressed this challenge, closing gaps in access to digital devices: 99% of Bulgarian schools received devices via the project, based on their own identification of students' access needs. However, equal access does not translate into equal opportunity to achieve quality educational outcomes. For example, there were also reported inequities in parents' capacity to support their children with remote learning. For certain groups of students, the work of educational mediators was perceived as having been more effective for remote learning than the distribution of devices but limited additional support for mediators meant schools could not engage harder-to-reach students. Future efforts will need to look beyond access, addressing broader digital inequities.

What does this mean in practice?

- Design and implement activities that support students from disadvantaged or vulnerable groups to engage effectively with digital devices for learning. This could involve:
 - Developing structured supports for disadvantaged students in digital learning settings, including through investing in key human resources such as education mediators.
 - Supporting parents to develop their own digital skills to ensure they can support their children to learn in digital environments.
 - Enhancing teachers' capacity to develop strategies for differentiated instruction in digital environments.

2. Ensure efforts to strengthen teachers' and students' advanced digital skills alongside the more basic ones

At the start of the pandemic, there were important gaps in teachers' and students' digital skills. For example, many students surveyed for this evaluation reported being unable to use key learning platforms prior to school closures and/or reported the same for their teachers. The trainings provided to teachers and students therefore addressed relevant priorities in the Bulgarian context and exceeded participation targets for students. However, remote teaching and learning demands a broad range of skills that goes beyond basic digital proficiency and platform navigation. It would have been highly relevant to support the development of more advanced digital competencies, such as digital

production, collaboration and problem-solving as opposed to limiting the focus to less transformative capabilities like managing video conferencing platforms.

What does this mean in practice?

- Move beyond training for basic, technical skills to pro-actively developing advanced digital competencies aligned with existing national and international competence frameworks.
- Embed opportunities for teacher development that go beyond one-off training formats. This includes:
 - Fostering greater collaboration among teachers on topics such as digital pedagogies and digital assessment practices.
 - Developing high-quality methodological guidance on teaching and learning in digital environments.

3. Strengthen measures to involve parents in remote learning, going beyond efforts to enhance digital skills

As a major potential barrier to educational equity during the pandemic, improving parental involvement in children's remote learning was an important priority in Bulgaria at the start of the project. For example, the share of students who did not speak Bulgarian at home reporting that their parents could not help them with technical issues for digital learning was double that of students who spoke Bulgarian at home. The project delivered training to around 35 000 parents and educational mediators, around 78% of its target. However, evidence collected for this evaluation and broader research indicate that digital skills are unlikely to have been the primary barrier to parental engagement. Factors such as parental time, life context, trust in the school and sense of shared responsibility with teachers and principals are critical. While the project could not be expected to address every barrier to parental involvement, activities and objectives could have been strengthened by developing more integrated support structures to engage parents as active partners in their children's distance education

What does this mean in practice?

- Expand the role of educational mediators to improve parental engagement among target groups through increasing the number of mediators and providing additional resources for them to support family engagement.
- Develop structured parent support programmes with curriculum-aligned guidance.
- Strengthen partnerships between schools and communities to build trust and collaboration in digital education.

4. Employ a systems-based approach to digital education policy, even in times of crisis

Nearly all surveyed schools (90%) reported feeling better equipped to respond to future

disruptions to in-person learning, and evidence collected for the evaluation indicates that the provision of devices and training improved the system's preparedness for future crises. However, this may only endure for as long as the devices remain functional, and the skills are not outdated. Schools expressed concerns over the replacement of ageing devices and continuity of acquired skills, indicating a lack of related funding and continuous professional development. The project did not include significant mechanisms to ensure the long-term sustainability of the training or the renewal of hardware, not to mention strategies to further develop skills over time.

What does this mean in practice?

- Incorporate a systems-based approach to project design, ensuring that crisis response measures align with long-term digital education goals. This could include:
 - Conducting an early needs-assessment at the design stage to swiftly identify and address gaps across the digital ecosystem including areas such as governance, guidance and regulation; infrastructure; pedagogical approaches, curricula and assessment; and human resources.

5. Strengthen monitoring as a learning tool, not just a compliance mechanism

The monitoring and evaluation processes for the project were primarily compliance-focused, tracking metrics such as the number of devices distributed and people trained, but collecting, compiling, and communicating limited data beyond this. For instance, no evidence was collected on aspects such as the impact of training on learning outcomes, digital teaching practices or parental engagement, nor the regional distribution of activities. Many participants commented on the administrative burden of compliance checks and some suggested that monitoring data could be better used to improve decision-making. Interviewees also mentioned that inconsistent data collection methods over time make comparisons difficult. Future projects could focus on embedding monitoring as a strategic learning tool.

What does this mean in practice?

- Develop a clear theory of change to guide data collection and measure impact.
- Track how devices are used in practice to inform future resource allocation.
- Conduct pre- and post- training evaluations to assess digital skills development and inform iterative improvements.
- Reduce administrative complexity whilst strengthening the collection of relevant monitoring data.

Information about the project



This summary is based on findings published in OECD (2025), *Bulgaria's Equal Access to School Education in Times of Crisis Project: Final Evaluation*. The full report is available via the QR code below or at <https://doi.org/10.1787/4ba2d868-en> and <https://sf.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=3823>.

The report is an output of the OECD's agreement to support the Evaluation Plan of Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027. Under this agreement, the OECD will conduct a series of interim and final evaluations of initiatives in five key thematic areas: 1) inclusive education, 2) integration of marginalised communities, 3) digitalisation and competency-based education, 4) vocational education and training, and 5) higher education.

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