



SABER IN ACTION: BULGARIA

REFORMING EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR MORE INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH

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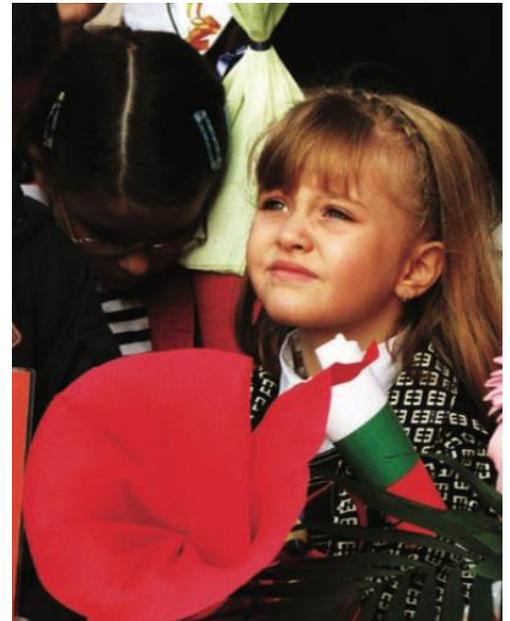
At a time of deepening economic difficulties in Bulgaria—including a doubling of unemployment—the government has recognized the need to re-think its approach to economic and social development by making education a central component of its policy reforms to stimulate more equitable long-term growth. The government has committed itself to narrowing the country's social disparities by targeting Bulgarians at risk for poverty, especially traditionally neglected minorities.

In this process, Bulgaria has become a pioneer in the use of the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) diagnostic tools to inform policy dialogue in four interrelated areas: early childhood development, teacher policies, school autonomy and accountability, and workforce development. With the help of data gathered through SABER, policymakers have been developing new laws and amendments and setting stronger programming benchmarks to better take advantage of the country's human and material resources.

Focus on early childhood development

Recognizing the importance of early childhood development (ECD), Bulgaria has a range of laws and regulations in place to promote early childhood services. SABER's analysis of ECD policies in Bulgaria helped the government inventory achievements of its existing system and identify critical gaps. The biggest concerns include coordination of program implementation in Bulgaria's decentralized service delivery system; improvement of data collection and quality assurance mechanisms; and expansion of access to ECD services, particularly for neglected minority groups. Bulgaria, the poorest European Union member state, is ranked 57th in the UNDP Human Development Index. Poverty is concentrated among the Turks and the Roma, comprising up to one half of the population.

Key SABER findings received a full airing at a national ECD conference held in Sofia in June 2014 attended by government ministers. Participants were urged to use SABER findings to establish a more comprehensive and integrated national policy and mechanisms for improved coordination and evaluation of existing ECD policies and programs. Participation was dynamic, with attending national and international media adding to the sense of expectancy and raising the bar for future ECD progress in Bulgaria.



Improving teacher policies and school autonomy and accountability

Past educational reform in Bulgaria focused on closing and merging schools to create spending efficiencies. An emphasis now is improving educational effectiveness by recruiting and training higher-quality teachers. The SABER analysis of Bulgaria's teacher policies found compensation for teaching staff was not conducive to attracting and retaining talented teachers. Findings from SABER provided a blueprint for the drafting of Bulgaria's *Strategy for the Development of the Pedagogic Staff* to enhance teacher professional development and expand e-learning for vocational training nationwide. The government



incorporated the strategy into its 2014 national development plan, identifying “education and life-long learning” as top budget priorities, with major new spending outlays on teacher retention programs.

Bulgaria’s sweeping decentralization and efficiency-focused reforms included the introduction of per-capita based financing and the delegation of financial and decision-making autonomy to school principals. SABER was also used to analyze Bulgaria’s school autonomy and accountability policies, identifying potential areas of focus including parental and community participation in school governance, and the use of assessment information for accountability and for pedagogical, personnel, and operational adjustments at the school level.

Developing a better-skilled workforce

Bulgaria’s educational reform initiatives are tied to building a more competitive workforce. SABER findings from analyzing workforce development (WfD) policies affirmed the government’s desire to narrow the gap between the supply and demand for work skills most likely to boost labor productivity. SABER found partnerships between Bulgarian employers and public training institutions were limited, despite private sector engagement, and the government had limited ability to monitor and evaluate vocational training outcomes.

Implementation of SABER involved interviews and a validation workshop to discuss findings with many stakeholders participating in a working group charged with creating amendments to Bulgaria’s law on technical and vocational education and training. e SABER recommendation to delay early tracking of students into vocational and academic tracks impacted education policy reform debates. SABER also supported a discussion on the pre-university education structure and the Bulgarian government’s consideration of using elements of the dual vocational system—linking vocational education with the labor market—to improve the relevance of vocational education and training.

Although Bulgaria has raised enrollment rates, there is a negative trend in student learning outcomes as measured by international assessments. In addition to improving teacher quality, the SABER analysis recognized a need for stronger curricula, expanded educational opportunities to under-served areas, and better evaluation of teachers and learning environments. A new law on pre-university education policies is expected to be drafted based on the reforms proposed during this ongoing stakeholder dialogue.

Bulgaria going forward

As a new EU member state, Bulgaria has set its sights on the development horizons of leading European nations while serving as an example to others struggling to reach the ranks of a middle- to upper-middle-income country. The SABER process allows for an evidence-based data approach to policy development. With improved inter-agency coordination and more careful monitoring, SABER’s assistance in Bulgaria promises to yield solid results.



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