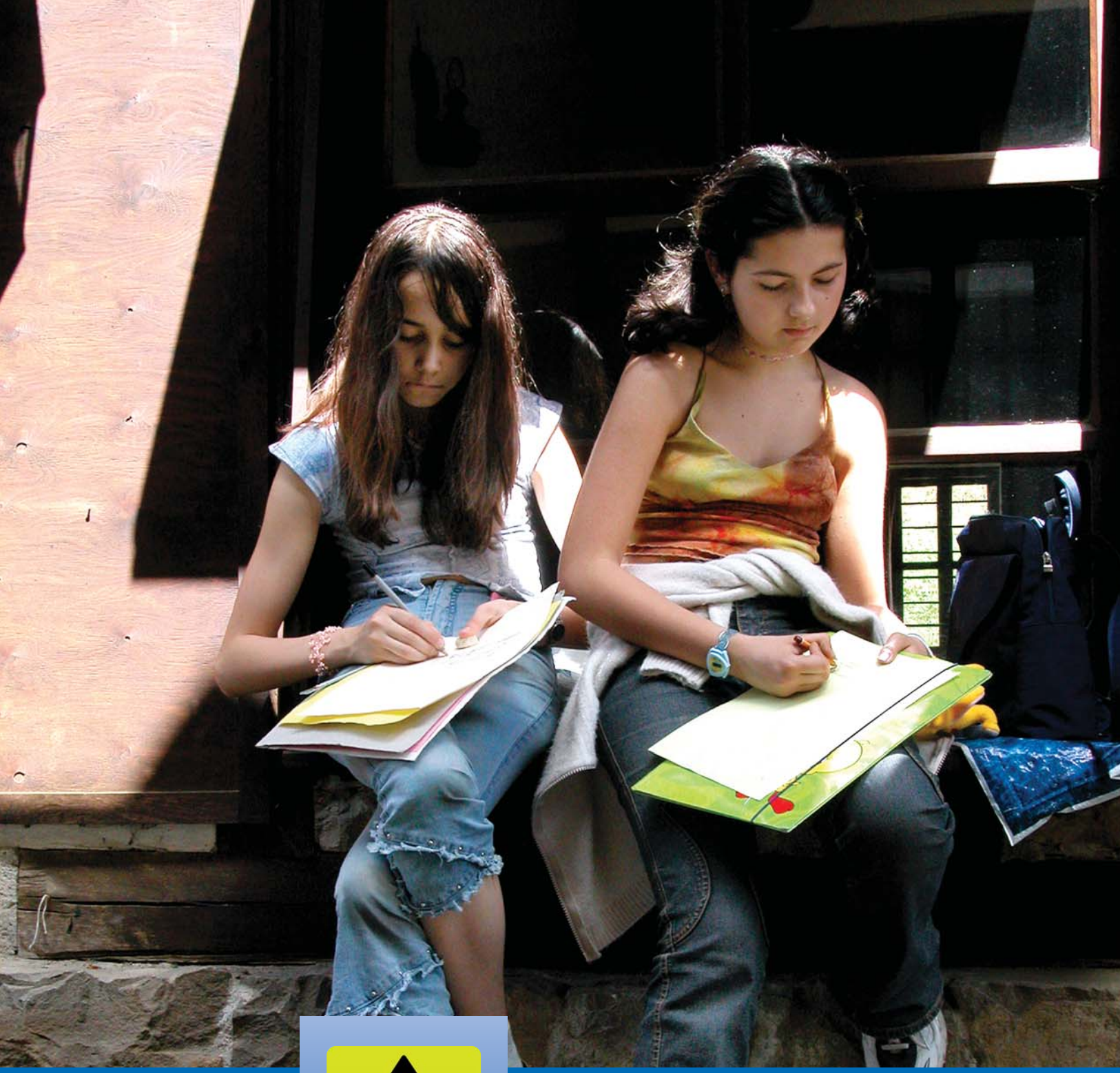

goal 2

Improve Education

1. DESCRIPTION

Bulgaria modified the global millennium goal in education, „Achieving primary education for all", to „Improving primary and secondary education" because the real issue for the country is not simply access to education, but access to quality education. That goal was defined in the Lisbon strategy and was discussed at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000.[34] The forum envisaged ensuring primary education of good quality for children of inequitable social standing and ethnic minorities, halving illiteracy, and guaranteeing equal educational opportunities for boys and girls by 2015. Access to education is also seen as providing opportunities for all to achieve measurable and valid educational outcomes and to meet their personal educational needs throughout their lives. An additional question raised by the World Economic Forum is what education do we need in the new global economy? Are elementary literacy and subject knowledge sufficient?

This report looks at the quality of education. Equal access to educational grades is not equal, if it fails to provide education of good quality and chances for professional fulfillment. Therefore the discussion will center on access to quality education – the theme that brought together all stakeholders and political powers in Bulgaria.

2. STATUS AND TRENDS

2.1. The general situation

Table 2.1 presents Bulgaria's achievements against the indicators for Goal 2, „Improve primary and secondary education".[35] The data indicate that enrollment rates are still comparatively high, especially at the two initial stages making up primary education in Bulgaria (97.8% for elementary school and 83.7% for junior high school). The proportion of elementary school graduates is also quite high and is close to the desired goal by 2015 at 94.7%. The challenge comes with the higher educational grades, particularly for students failing to complete compulsory educational level. Junior high schools report the greatest number of dropouts.

An extensive survey of dropout reasons in Bulgaria[36] shows that the parents of dropout children, the children

Table 2.1: Indicators for Goal 2 - Improve primary and secondary education

	2002	2006	2007	2015
1. Net enrollment rate in the initial stage of primary education[37]	99.8	98.5	97.8	100.0
2. Net completion rate in the initial stage of primary education[38]	93.3	93.0	94.7	100.0
3. Net enrollment rate in the junior high stage of primary education	83.9	85.1	83.7	97.0
4. Net completion rate in the junior high stage of primary education[39]	85.0	88.6	86.5	95.0
5. Net dropout rate in the junior high stage of primary education	3.2	4.2	-	2.0
6. Net enrollment rate in secondary education	74.9	78.0	78.3	86.0
7. Net completion rate in secondary education[40]	51.3	74.0	76.3	90.0
8. Net dropout rate in secondary education[41]	3.0	2.7	-	1.0
**The number of graduates in 2002 was smaller as a result of the extended overall length of education by one year.*				

Source: National Statistical Institute[42]

[34] The Dakar Framework for Action: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf>

[35] The educational system in Bulgaria is structured in three tiers. The first tier is primary education comprising two stages: elementary (grades 1 through 4) and junior high (grades 5 through 8). The second tier is secondary education (grades 9 through 13), and the third tier is higher education. Compulsory education is required until 16 years and in reality covers the first educational tier (primary education).

[36] Reasons for children dropping out of school in Bulgaria. Analysis of the results of a sociological survey. 2007, Sofia: East-West. The survey was conducted by a team at the Ministry of Education and Science (Dr. Andrey Nonchev et al.) and was financed by UNICEF. Discussion of dropout reasons in this report is based on the analyses in the survey.

[37] Enrollment rates are calculated as a correlation between school goers in three age groups (7-10; 11-14; 15-19 year olds) and total populations in the respective age groups (as of 31 December of the current year).

[38] Proportion of children enrolled in grade 5 compared to the number of first graders 4 years ago.

[39] Number of primary school graduates divided by total population aged 15 (the most typical graduation age).

[40] Number of secondary school graduates divided by total population aged 19 (the most typical graduation age).

[41] The ratio between dropouts and students enrolled in secondary school.

[42] The indicators used by the information systems of the Ministry of Education and Science (ADMIN) and the NSI have not yet been unified.

Table 2.2: Dropout students

School year	Number of enrolled students in the beginning of the school year (grades 1 through 13)	Dropouts
2004–2005	963,051	19,193 (2%)
2006–2007	917,067	19,639 (2.14%)

Source: Ministry of Education and Science, Coordination and Control of Secondary Education Directorate

themselves, teachers and social workers assess differently the factors leading to dropout. Parents, social workers and teachers pointed out poverty as the chief factor. Teachers believed that disinterested parents also play a significant role for dropout. Children stated educational difficulties, too. Having in mind that dropout children are mostly from the Roma minority, efforts should concentrate on ensuring better adaptation of Roma children to the school environment. That will require dedicating greater attention and resources to preschool education.

A key reason for Roma girl dropouts between grades 5 and 8 was claimed to be early marriages and the fear of being stolen. A new group of children has appeared whose parents work abroad. Left under the supervision of elderly grandparents or distant relatives, they also drop out of school. According to the survey results, that was a concern primarily for social workers. In addition to dropouts, special notice should be given to the no small number of children who are completely beyond the reach of the educational system, mostly in Roma neighborhoods and in homes without any address registration.

Table 2.3: Dropout students by educational grades for the school year 2006/2007

Educational grade	Number of dropouts	Share in total number of dropouts
Grades 1–4	5,361	27%
Grades 5–8	8,733	45%
Grades 9–13	5,545	28%

Source: Ministry of Education and Science, Coordination and Control of Secondary Education Directorate

Table 2.4: Main reasons for dropout for the school year 2006/2007

Reason	Share in all dropouts
Social and family reasons	63,3%
Absences	35,1%
Low grades	1,6%

Source: Ministry of Education and Science, Coordination and Control of Secondary Education Directorate

Table 2.5: Public resources for education, 2004

	Public spending on education, % of GDP	Public spending on education (except higher education), % of GDP	Public spending on education, % of total government spending	Public spending on education (except higher education), % of total government spending	Spending on public schools per student, % of per capita GDP	Share of wages in total public spending on education
BULGARIA	4.6	3.0	11.6	7.6	19.2	77.1
EU-27	5.1	3.5	10.8	7.4	23.7	84.2
EU-12 („New Europe“)	5.0	3.4	12.6	8.5	21.5	79.6
Estonia	5.1	3.8	14.9	11.2	22.2	n.a.
Cyprus	6.7	4.9	15.6	11.4	32.1	99.9
Latvia	5.1	3.7	14.2	10.4	22.3	83.0
Lithuania	5.2	3.5	15.6	10.4	22.3	83.8
Malta	5.0	3.0	10.9	6.6	17.8	89.6
Poland	5.4	3.7	12.7	8.7	n.a.	70.4
Romania	3.3	1.9	10.1	5.9	13.7	75.6
Slovakia	4.2	2.7	11.1	7.1	16.4	63.6
Slovenia	6.0	4.1	12.8	8.9	28.5	84.8
Hungary	5.4	3.5	11.1	7.1	22.9	81.5
Czech Republic	4.4	3.0	10.1	6.8	19.2	66.5

Source: Eurostat

Where is Bulgaria in terms of public spending for education and the effectiveness of the educational system compared to the new EU member states?

Tables 2.5 and 2.6 indicate that although Bulgaria's spending on education as a percentage of GDP is close to the average for the new EU members, it is one of the lowest appropriations in „New Europe". The situation is aggravated by the fact that Bulgaria's GDP is lower than the EU average, which further deteriorates the physical infrastructure for education and undermines the social prestige of Bulgarian teachers. That has direct repercussions on the quality of education.

The second table shows that the students per teacher ratio across school education in the „New Europe" countries varies from 9.4 to 15.2, while in Bulgaria it is a little above the average compared to the surveyed countries. That indicator can be interpreted twofold – it is good in terms of education quality, but in a situation of scarce financial resources it indicates there are possibilities for improving the system's efficiency, especially in secondary education, where the students per teacher ratio in Bulgaria is one of the lowest in „New Europe".

That has to do with the major issue of the yet unreformed educational system in Bulgaria and its efficiency. A school network that has not been streamlined (too many schools serving fewer and fewer children); a lacking independent system to evaluate the quality of education; and an ineffective teacher qualification and career development system, all have a direct bearing on the quality of education.

Table 2.6: Students per teacher ratio in the "New Europe" countries

	School education total	Elementary education	Primary education	Secondary education
Bulgaria	13.2	16.3	12.6	11.9
Czech Republic	14.4	17.5	13.5	12.8
Estonia	...	...	...	...
Cyprus	14.1	17.9	11.9	11.5
Latvia	11.7	12.2	11.2	12.1
Lithuania	9.4	11.3	8.8	:
Hungary	11	10.6	10.4	12.2
Malta	10.6	12.1	8.4	17.4
Poland	12.3	11.7	12.7	12.9
Romania	14.9	17.4	12.4	16
Slovenia	13.5	15	11.1	14.5
Slovakia	15.2	18.9	14.1	14.3
EC12 average	12.8	14.6	11.6	13.6

Source: Eurostat

Box 2.1

MATRICULATION EXAMS 2008

In 1998 the Public Education Act introduced mandatory matriculation exams as a condition for earning secondary education degree. Until 2008 the exams were postponed four times due to various reasons. The first matriculation exam took place in June 2008 and covered all outgoing students graduating grade 12.

Out of 79,334 last-year students, 72,951 took an examination in Bulgarian Language and Literature (BLL). Overall, 8% of all graduates did not take the exam: 4% did not file an examination request, 3% were not admitted due to failing school grades, and 1% did not turn up on the examination date.

Last-year students must take 2 mandatory exams: the BLL and a second examination with an optional choice between 8 subjects that are part of the general secondary school curriculum. Certain universities and specialties recognize the grades from the final exams as an admission test. Secondary school graduates who have not passed their matriculation exams are not allowed to continue their education in universities and don't get a diploma of secondary education.

The BLL universal examination results revealed several things:

A) A lower average attainment score, falling from 4.60 in 2007 to 4.41 in 2008.

B) Substantial attainment differences between different types of schools:

Type of school	*Number of students*	*Average score*
Special profile schools	12,858	5.30
Art schools	1,038	4.81
General education schools	24,254	4.49
Vocational schools	33,911	4.03

C) Districts have smaller average score differences than different types of schools. The table below gives the average score of six districts (the 3 districts at the top of the chart and the 3 lowest rankings):

District	*Average BLL score*
Sofia – capital	**4.67**
Yambol	**4.56**
Varna	**4.52**
Kyustendil	**4.21**
Razgrad	**4.09**
Targovishte	**4.06**

D) There are no distinct population-based differences by type and size of localities. The same place may have schools with high and low average scores. A case in point are 3 schools in the town of Gotse Delchev, where 2 vocational schools have an average score of 3.33 and 4.31 respectively, while the school of mathematics reports an average score of 5.14. The top performer in the town of Vidin was the foreign language school „Yordan Radichkov" (5.27) and the poorest score came from the vocational technical school „Vasil Levski" (3.26).

E) The best and worst performers are almost 3 score points apart. An interesting detail is that the 2 top schools are only 0.001 score point apart, although one is a public school and the other is a paid private school.

Locality	*Type of school*	*Name*	*Average BLL score*
Sofia	general school	American College in Sofia	**5.80**
Sofia	general school	73 General Education School	**5.79**
Plovdiv	general school	Plovdiv Language School	**5.76**
Kuklen, Plovdiv district	vocational school	Vocational Agricultural School	**2.97**
Benkovksi, Kurdzhali district	vocational school	Nikola Vaptzarov School	**2.96**
Sofia	vocational school	Vocational School for Lifting, Building and Transportation Equipment	**2.89**

F) Roughly 35% of students did not make the creative writing assignment due to 2 possible reasons – either they were unable to argue an opinion about a given text, or they did not wish to pursue a higher educational degree and did not strive to get the maximum matriculation score.

That corroborates the existence of great differentiation between schools. Special measures need to be developed with respect to vocational schools since 42% of students who took the exams were vocational school graduates. More in-depth analyses are required by specific districts and localities to identify the reasons for their success or underachievement. Reasons should be examined in greater depth and measures should be undertaken with respect to the 8% of last-year students who did not take final matriculation exams.

The results from the matriculation exams will support educational policy both at the Ministry of Education and at the local level.

Source: *Ministry of Education and Science, Center for Control and Assessment of the Quality of Education*

3. DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL DISPARITIES

3.1. Ethnic and regional disparities

First and foremost is the issue of including Roma children in mainstream education. The highest numbers of children outside the educational system and the highest percentage of dropouts belong to the Roma ethnic minority.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are still segregated schools and preschool forms, where Roma children account for more than 50% of all students. According to a recent survey, in 2005 there were 524 such schools and kindergartens (predominantly schools) out of 5,085 educational institutions covered. Segregation itself is a major issue, but no less important is that these schools give education of poor quality.

Certain data[43] indicate a growing inclusion of Roma

[43] Changes in the birth rate among Roma people in this age group also point in that direction. The average number of children in young Roma couples has dropped from 2.64 in 2001 to 1.33 in 2007 due to diminishing incidence of births at a very late or very early age. Nevertheless, the average number of children in Roma families is twice higher compared to ethnic Bulgarians (1.33 and 0.52, respectively). See the *Family Models and Migration* studies, UNFPA / Ministry of Labor and Social Policy / Agency for Socio-Economic Analyses / Center for Comparative Studies, 2007.

Table 2.7: Share of enrolled children in 2005

Educational level	Population neighboring Roma households	Roma children
Elementary and primary education (7-15 years old)	99%	77%
Secondary education (16-19 years old)	81%	12%

Source: UNDP

minority members in mainstream education over the past couple of years. In 2007, 75.2% of Roma people aged 15–35 had primary education and only 6.4% had no formal schooling. In comparison, uneducated Roma (not having completed primary school or without any formal training) accounted for 37.1% in 2001, when 42.9% had primary education. Possibly, albeit slowly, we are witnessing a process of convergence between the life models of Roma and ethnic Bulgarians, especially among young people under 35 years.

Secondly, there are still significant disparities in terms of school attendance and quality of education for children living in the cities and in rural regions. The issue is particularly valid for children from high-mountain villages, who study in mixed classes where first to fourth graders learn together. When they study in central schools serving several settlements, children cannot attend regularly in winter due to poor infrastructure.

Another issue is that Bulgaria is becoming a desired destination for foreign settlers, but little thought is given to integrating their children in mainstream education. The problem is particularly acute for the children of refugees.

Vocational education is another problematic area because it is separated from the needs of the labor market and is rarely tied with specific job prospects and placements.

One piece of good news in this challenging context is that the studies of the quality of education do not report gender inequalities in Bulgaria, where girls even demonstrate better educational achievements.

3.2. Disparities in the quality of education

The report will discuss data from three international studies on the quality of education: PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA.

- PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy) for 2001 and 2006. The survey covers students aged 9–10 at the end of elementary education (grade 4).
- TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) is an assessment of 15-year-old students in mathematics and natural sciences conducted in a 4-year cycle. To date three TIMSS cycles have been completed in 1995, 1999 and 2003. The latest assessment took place in 2007.
- PISA (Program for International Students Assessment) looks at the achievements of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics and natural sciences. Assessments were carried out in 2000, 2003 and 2006, and the next phase is scheduled for 2009. Bulgaria took part in the first assessment exercise in 2003 with a focus on reading and in the program in 2006 which focused on mathematics and natural sciences.

PIRLS and TIMSS are conducted by the International Association for Assessment and Measurement in Education. PISA is carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and participation in the program is seen as a commitment for OECD member states.

Who are the top runners and where is Bulgaria?

PIRLS

The 2006 survey covered 49 countries. The top three performers were Russia, Hong Kong (now Hong Kong – China) and Singapore.

Bulgaria

The PIRLS–2001 data showed high literacy levels in elementary school and Bulgaria ranked 4th out of 35 countries. It retained the same level in 2006 with a score of 547 points, the same as in 2001. The average

score was 500 points and the highest score (Russia) was 565 points.

TIMSS

The 2003 assessment covered 46 countries. The top rankings in mathematics achievements belonged to Singapore with 605 points, Korea, Hong Kong (now Hong Kong – China), Taiwan (now Chinese Taipei) and Japan. At the end of the ranking were Saudi Arabia, Ghana and South Africa.

Bulgaria

1995 – 9th place in mathematics and 5th place in natural sciences

1999 – 17th place in mathematics and 16th place in natural sciences

2003 – 26th place in mathematics and 25th place in natural sciences

Bulgaria had a mathematics score of 527 points in 1995, 511 points in 1999, and 476 points in 2003. In 2003 it was still one point above the average score, but had registered **a 51 point drop in mathematics and a 66 point drop in natural sciences between 1995 and 2003. No other country has slipped so far down.**

Achievements are measured according to a four-level scale: very high, high, low and very low. Data indicate that only a small part of Bulgarian eighth graders showed very high achievements. Most Bulgarian students ranked in the lowest bracket.

The school principals covered by the survey pointed out two chief reasons for the dramatic drop in quality: excessive absences and extremely poor school facilities. Only 3% of students go to schools where appropriately equipped natural science labs are not an issue. No other country reports such indicators.

PISA 2006

The 2006 assessment covered 57 countries. The best achievements in natural sciences came from students from Finland (average score of 563 points) followed by Hong Kong – China (542 points), Canada (534 points), Chinese Taipei and Estonia. Azerbaijan, Qatar and Kyrgyzstan closed the list.

The best achievements in mathematics were again from Finland followed by Korea, Hong Kong – China, Azerbaijan and Canada. Brazil, Qatar and Kyrgyzstan ranked last.

Bulgaria

Among the 57 countries that took part in PISA 2006[44], Bulgaria ranked 46th in mathematics and 42nd in natural sciences with an average score of 434 points. According to that indicator, it stood in the same group with Chile, Serbia, Uruguay, Turkey, Jordan, Thailand and Romania.

Girls had an average score of 426 points, by 17 points higher than the average score of boys at 443 points.

Students from special profile high schools in Bulgaria scored an average of 531 points, by 31 points higher than the average score in OECD countries (500 points). Their standing at the top of the general ranking in natural sciences is comparable with the best achievements in PISA 2006.

Students from general secondary schools had lower average scores than their peers from vocational schools (respectively 414 and 420 points).

The average score of students from general secondary schools, vocational high schools and vocational schools in Bulgaria was much lower than the average achievement of students from special profile high schools.

[44] Information about PISA scores and ranking was provided by the Center for Control and Assessment of the Quality of Education.

Conclusions:

Bulgaria still has very good elementary education, but the quality of junior high education is deteriorating compared with 10 years ago.

A logical question is what is causing the difference between the two stages of primary education in Bulgaria (elementary and junior high)?

Elementary schooling is provided mainly by one teacher who knows the children, probably dedicates greater responsibility and attention to the class, and keeps up some systematic training. Free textbooks are provided. Perhaps there is greater attention from the family because the child is small and there is greater family control.

Junior high school is the start of dropouts, there are more absences and the more complex subjects require better physical facilities, which the schools are lacking. Such explanations are not sufficient, however, and a more serious analysis is required.

The most serious and alarming finding is the huge difference between elite schools like the special profile high schools, and other schools. They were more than 100 points apart in PISA 2006, but TIMSS data also indicate drastic disparities in student achievements. Formally, all these children have completed the same grade of primary education. In reality, their knowledge is incomparable. Formally, all Bulgarian children have equal access to primary and secondary education. In reality, there is no such thing like „Bulgarian children" in general. There are different groups with different chances in the labor market, different opportunities for participation in the global economy, and different prospects of finding prestigious, qualified and well-paid jobs. Many Bulgarian students have already been excluded from the global running. And a very small part has vast chances to be among the winners.

That is the situation with mainstream education. If we add children excluded from the educational system altogether, dropouts, segregated Roma schools, and children with special educational needs outside the mainstream establishments, a rather unpleasant trend is shaping up for having secluded elite schools giving good education, and all other schools, where acquiring the next educational degree is a challenge.

If this trend continues, it will engender acute differentiation in Bulgarian society. PISA 2006 data indicate that the students' achievements directly depend on the social status of their parents – educational and financial. The educational system cannot bridge social divides and after grade 4 it effectively fails to provide equal access to quality education in terms of equal access to the higher educational grades. That is the clearest indicator of a crisis in mainstream education and the „success" of „alternative" education disguised behind the mainstream educational system in the form of private lessons. Admission in special profile high schools comes after an intensive course of private lessons. Enrollment in an elite school is a challenge intellectually as well as financially.

Data from international comparative studies show that high quality of education exists where it is a government priority and where there are no major disparities between different types of schools. This is not the case in Bulgaria. Therefore, the educational system really needs urgent reform. Education needs to become a priority, if Bulgaria wants to have good positions in the global competition called the global economy.

4. GOAL ACHIEVEMENT POLICIES

The crisis in mainstream education has been recognized and educational issues have received special attention over the past couple of years. Several strategic documents were adopted on educational development and prevention of dropouts.

1. In 2004 the 39th National Assembly passed a National Program for Better Coverage of Students in Mandatory School Age. Under that program, free textbooks are provided for grades 1 through 4, all children get snacks and warm milk in school, and school buses take students to central schools serving several localities. The good quality of elementary education is probably due to that program. A study of the Open

Society Institute in 2006, however, found that provision of free textbooks was regarded as the most positive impact, while giving buns and milk was approved only by the poorest families.[45] Since the most massive dropouts take place in junior high school (grades 5–8), efforts should concentrate at that educational level. The government intends to provide free textbooks for the junior high curriculum as well. A National Plan for Prevention and Reduction of Dropouts (2007–2010) was drafted in 2007 and is pending ratification by the Council of Ministers.

2. A National Program for Development of School Education and Preschool Education and Training (2006–2015) was adopted with a primary focus on the welfare and personal development of students. The program aims to achieve two main goals: to provide equal access to education to all children and to ensure a high quality of education. It is a comprehensive strategic document and systematically outlines the necessary elements for achieving the two goals formulated in the program, which will ultimately reform Bulgarian education.

Two further documents were adopted in order to provide equal access to education to all children: a National Plan for Integrating Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Chronic Deceases in the Public Educational System, and a Strategy for Educational Inclusion of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities.

To improve the quality of education, a National Strategy was approved for Introducing Information and Communication Technology in Bulgarian Schools. School computers were installed on a large scale, a national educational portal was created and electronic textbooks were introduced, using predominantly interactive methods. A National Strategy for Ongoing Vocational Education (2005–2010) was also approved.

3. The Family Benefits for Children Act (passed in 2002) was amended to provide for student assistance as well as target benefits, for example, a one-time benefit for first graders. The social policy combines sanctions and stimuli – benefits are provided, but they are cut off, if the child does not attend school. The idea is to link the money with the student. A further amendment in 2005 delegated rights to the Social Assistance Directorates to substitute the monthly monetary benefits for children with social investments, mostly to support the child's education, if the parents do not use the money for the intended purpose.

All these documents indicate there is good will for improving the quality of education in Bulgaria, but many more concrete steps will be required for the actual achievement of that goal both in terms of regulations and resources.

Box 2.2:

COMPARABLE INDICATORS FOR MEASURING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The European Report on Quality of School Education mentions 16 indicators divided in four areas, as follows:[46]

- **Achievements** – mathematics, reading, science, information and communication technology, foreign languages, learning skills, civic education;
- **Student progress** – dropouts, secondary education graduates, university admittance;
- **School education monitoring** – school education assessment and management;
- **Resources and structures** – education and training of teachers, children covered in preschool education, number of students per computer, educational expenditure per student.

Source: *The report team.*

According to a recently published study of the World Bank, the restructuring of Bulgarian education should continue along the following lines:

- Encouraging competitiveness between schools (so that demand from parents should create more incentives for individual schools);
- Introducing a knowledge assessment system, which will allow identification of good quality schools

[45] www.osi.bg.
[46] The report was published in 2000. For more information: European Report on Quality of School Education: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/indic/rapinen.pdf>

and teachers;
- Ensuring greater independence of schools (which was partially achieved by the introduction of delegated budgets).

Educational development, like incomes, is threatened by disparities – disparities between the poor and the rich, between children from villages and from the cities, between Bulgarian, Roma and Turkish children, between healthy children and chil-

Box 2.3:

IN FOCUS:
INTEGRATING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Abbreviations

CPAT – Complex Pedagogical Assessment Team
PEA – Public Education Act
REI – Regional Educational Inspectorate
SEN – Special Educational Needs
MCC – Medical Consultation Commission
RIPEA – Rules for Implementation of the Public Education Act
RC – Resource Center

After three years of integrated education of children and students with special educational needs, the system still hasn't placed the children first. According to government data, by July 2007 one in four schools in Bulgaria provided mainstream education to children with special educational needs and almost one in five children with such needs known to the institutions was educated in the mainstream system. While 1,593 children with SEN were integrated in 2006, in 2007[47] their number was already 4,380 and a growth of 175% was reported to the European Commission. Beyond statistics, however, the functioning of the mainstream education system meets with serious difficulties. Two cases from the National School Network „European Lessons" illustrate that.

Successful integration

The place is a large municipal secondary school with 1,453 students. A physically disabled student (who moves about in a wheelchair because his legs are paralyzed) joined the mainstream school 3 years ago. He was admitted in the third grade, leaving behind one-on-one education at home. The boy was received really well by the other children in class. In time the teachers noticed that his presence even caused greater solidarity between children. His educational achievements oscillated between very good and excellent. In grade 4 the progress of the boy's disease required a more sophisticated wheelchair, which the family could not afford and which was not readily available in the Bulgarian market. His classmates launched a fund-raising campaign (for 6 months). The school management helped them to get in touch with the Danish manufacturer and to negotiate a 50% discount. After further maneuvering through the Bulgarian customs and tax authorities, the new wheelchair was finally delivered.

Unsuccessful integration

The place is a medium-sized municipal secondary school with 654 students. A girl with a congenital decease (mental retardation) joined the school 2 years ago. She was admitted in grade 5 after completing the elementary level in an auxiliary school in a neighboring municipality. At first the new student was accepted very well by her classmates. More efforts were required (until the end of the first term) to explain the situation to their parents, until they were assured that the presence of a child with intellectual difficulties will not undermine the educational achievements of the entire class and will not put at risk the other children. The girl's performance during her first year at school verged on „good" and was comparable with the results of 20% of the class. She received additional support – two hours of additional work every week provided by a resource teacher, but that was not enough. In the second term of grade 6 her performance deteriorated to „average" and she started having frequent behavior changes (outbursts of hyperactivity and periods of total apathy). At the same time the girl's physical development dramatically began to outpace her intellectual skills. That created unexpected problems not in her class but during the breaks, when she became an „interesting" object for teenagers from the upper grades. After consultations of the school psychologist with these children, the number of incidents (mocking and verbal abuse) decreased. The girl was becoming more and more isolated. The recommendation of the school integrated education team was to move towards one-on-one education. Meanwhile the closest auxiliary school had closed and the girl's re-entry in day school education was no longer possible. These cases are to a great extent typical and indicate several sets of problems facing the system of integrated education:

1. The regulatory and program framework

- The system fails to take into account the enormous variety of special needs that differently affect the educational abilities of children. Regulation No 6/2002, the Public Education Act and the Rules for Implementation of the Public Education Act indiscriminately define

[47] Report of the Government of European integration, 2005-2007.

children with physical disabilities, mentally retarded children and children with visual and hearing disabilities as „children with special educational needs".

- Persisting oversights in regulations make the no easy task of teachers in general education schools all the more difficult. For example, repeating grade 1 is prohibited under the Public Education Act but is allowed in certain circumstances under and Rules for PEA Implementation.

2. Management issues

- Teachers, parents and resource teachers alike, that is, all adults who directly work with a child with special educational needs, complain of three things: a) shortage of information; b) unrealistically high expectations from the other participants in the process; and c) an overly bureaucratic system where the time for administration and paperwork exceeds the time for work with the child.
- Different institutions have competences to make decisions about the integrated education of a child with special educational needs. Their roles are not sufficiently and clearly defined in the relevant regulations and, with few exceptions, it is quite difficult to determine who is responsible for what concerning the child.
- The institutions and bodies responsible for integrated education – the Complex Pedagogical Assessment Teams (at the regional level), the Integrated Education Teams (in the schools) and the Resource Centers, have too many responsibilities, which are impossible to meet with the available resources.
- The management system of integrated education excludes the municipalities from the consultation process. At the same time the municipalities fund 85% of schools and virtually all kindergartens.
- There isn't good coordination of processes aiming to streamline the network of special educational institutions for children with SEN and the introduction of integrated education in mainstream schools. A blatant example was the creation of Resource Centers from scratch and the parallel closing of auxiliary schools in the same 28 cities (district centers). In most of them the restructuring of auxiliary schools into resource centers would have saved money and time.

3. Resource issues

- There are no assessments and analyses of the educational abilities of various groups of children with special educational needs, or information on their distribution across the country. That restricts the capacity of schools and municipalities to plan their actions for integration of these children.
- The teachers in general education schools have no readily accessible information and consultations about different groups and conditions of children with special educational needs. Paradoxically, the specialists in general educational institutions who spend most time working with such children, are least prepared for that.
- There are 28 Resource Centers employing 635 specialists. By July 2007 one resource teacher was responsible for seven integrated students. That is not sufficient for providing good quality support to the currently integrated students with special educational needs. Resource support for integration of children with SEN living in remote and small settlements is virtually impossible.
- The standard requirements for resource teacher openings in general education schools are ineffective, especially for children with intellectual difficulties. The requirement is to have five integrated children with SEN or a group of at least five students with SEN from different schools. Resource support is 2 hours of one-to-one work a week for each integrated student.

Source: Paideia NGO

dren with special educational needs. Differentiation in the quality of education can be healthy for the competition between some select schools in Sofia. The gap between elite educational establishments and small town schools, however, is too big to create beneficial competition. If the eight Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved, development should benefit the entire Bulgarian society and not only a limited elite.

Bulgaria's eight Millennium Development Goals are largely intertwined with one another. In the strongly competitive environment of the European Union, high incomes are unthinkable without competitive, good quality education. Although the indicators under the educational targets are comparable to the EU levels, the report notes that the quality of education is declining and urgent reforms are needed to support the adjustment of the educational system in an economy that must be innovative and competitive within the EU single market.