

# Executive summary

Over the past five years, Bulgaria has undertaken several reforms to improve the quality of its education system and provide equal opportunities for all students. The country has introduced a new curriculum, policies to develop the teaching profession and attract new teachers, a new school funding model, a dual vocational education and training (VET) system and a compulsory pre-primary year, among others. To ensure that these reforms lead to large-scale improvements in student learning, Bulgaria will need to continue aligning its policies to ensure that they are coherent and provide additional support to help education actors adapt their practice. Policy makers will also need to target resources more effectively, to ensure they flow to the areas where they are most needed, namely the most vulnerable students, the most sought-after teachers and to supporting the lowest-performing schools.

Evaluation and assessment policies provide a lever for systemwide improvement. A sound evaluation and assessment framework will establish standards and expectations for different actors in an education system, allow them to periodically review performance and help identify where adjustments may be needed. This review examines Bulgaria's evaluation and assessment instruments to identify gaps in its policy framework that may hinder improvements to student learning. The review provides recommendations designed to help Bulgaria build on its reforms and prioritise its future investments. In particular, this review advises Bulgaria to strengthen communication between different system actors, to continue targeting areas where resources are most needed and, over the medium term, to undertake a systematic review of the design and use of its national assessment framework.

## **Making student assessment an integral part of student learning**

Bulgaria introduced a new student assessment framework in 2016, which covers modern student assessment practices such as qualitative grading and diagnostic assessments in classrooms. A specialised agency, the Center for Assessment in Pre-school and School Education (hereafter the Center for Assessment) is responsible for centrally designed test items and administering nationwide assessments and examinations. Recently, the centre has been working to strengthen the State Matriculation examination's validity, reliability and integrity, which is now highly trusted as a metric for deciding admission into higher education. However, teachers and schools lack guidance and support to put new student assessment methods into practice and classroom-based assessment continues to be primarily summative. Concurrently, features of selection into and out of upper secondary education may distort both student learning and progression, and determine student pathways from a relatively early age. Bulgaria will need to ensure that student assessment is progressively used to guide student-centred teaching and learning, and that it is aligned with competency-based approaches. The country should build a common understanding of student assessment as central to learning, develop the capacity of teachers to use formative assessment and improve the validity and fairness of selection into and out of upper secondary education.

## **Ensuring that investment in the teaching profession is strategic and leads to improvements in quality**

Bulgaria has significantly invested in its teaching profession over recent years and it has introduced a range of policies to develop the teaching profession and attract new teachers. It has introduced, for instance, new teacher standards, a teacher career structure linked to professional development and core content for initial teacher education programmes. The country also has an established framework for teacher appraisal, which it is currently revising. However, reforms in teacher policy need to be better linked, for instance by connecting appraisal processes and basing them on the new teacher standards, ensuring they are more geared towards helping teachers improve their practice. In addition, there is a need to improve the quality and relevance of initial teacher education, particularly in the context of an ageing cohort of teachers. Bulgaria should work to ensure that appraisal processes are more objective and consistent, and that teachers receive regular feedback to help improve their practice. In addition, it could meet the demand for new teachers and support their development through data-driven planning and updated initial teacher education curricula, as well as induction support. Finally, the country could ensure that teachers have access to quality in-service learning opportunities through supporting peer learning initiatives in school and on line, and through strengthening quality assurance and signposting in the provision of professional qualifications.

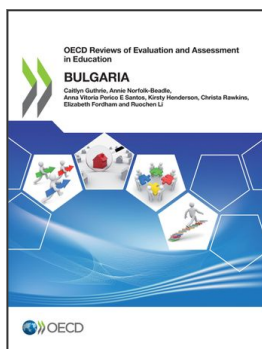
## **Establishing a common understanding of school quality and helping schools to lead their own development**

Over the past five years, Bulgaria has established a new school evaluation system, with a central school inspectorate, the National Inspectorate of Education (hereafter the Inspectorate). It has introduced new school quality standards and the Inspectorate has decided to focus its efforts on low-performing schools. The country has plans to issue a new ordinance to regulate school self-evaluations and has introduced new measures to professionalise and develop school leaders. However, there is still no shared understanding of school quality among different actors in the education system and there is a lack of clarity around the new roles of the REDs with regard to the Inspectorate. Both the REDs and the Inspectorate lack resources, which may hinder their ability to carry out their tasks effectively. At the same time, self-evaluation is not compulsory and school leaders do not receive training either on conducting evaluations or on planning for school improvement. Bulgaria should ensure that its new school evaluation framework helps schools take charge of their own development and work towards national education goals as soon as possible. To achieve this, Bulgaria should work to build a common understanding of school quality, for instance through showcasing schools that have made good progress in meeting quality standards. It should also make sure that external school evaluations support school improvement, especially in at-risk schools, for instance by building RED capacity to fulfil their new, more formative mandate. Finally, the country should make regular school self-evaluation mandatory and build schools' capacity for development – for example by providing schools with a self-evaluation manual and data to benchmark with other schools that have similar features and by strengthening the principal's instructional leadership.

## **Building a system-level monitoring framework that can advance national education goals**

Bulgaria has established clear long-term education goals, which provide an objective reference to guide evaluations at the system level. It also regularly participates in international assessments and runs an annual national assessment, which both provide learning outcomes data to monitor and evaluate performance against these goals. The Ministry has made a considerable investment to modernise its Education Management Information System (EMIS), which should significantly improve both the quality of

education data and reduce the burden to compile it. Bulgaria carries out research on major systemic issues and the modernised EMIS should provide new opportunities to carry out a more in-depth and regular analysis. At the same time, the National External Assessment (NEA) cannot currently produce quality data for system monitoring, due to issues around its design and implementation. Implementation planning could be improved and made more evidence-based, to ensure that high-level goals translate into concrete actions, and the country does not currently provide regular, comprehensive reports on system performance to key education actors and the wider public. In the short term, Bulgaria should continue to address any remaining gaps in the implementation of its new EMIS and consider reporting on system performance regularly and comprehensively to key stakeholder groups and the public. Over the medium term, Bulgaria should review the design and use of its NEA to reinforce its monitoring and formative potential.



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