GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

2025

REGIONAL EDITION

Central and Eastern Europe,
the Caucasus and Central Asia

Lead for inclusion

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Sustainable Development Goals

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Network of Education Policy Centers

Global Education Monitoring Report

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the Caucasus and Central Asia

Lead for inclusion

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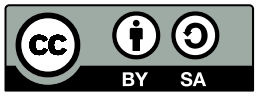

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The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action specifies that the mandate of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is to be 'the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on SDG 4 and on education in the other SDGs' with the responsibility to 'report on the implementation of national and international strategies to help hold all relevant partners to account for their commitments as part of the overall SDG follow-up and review'. It is prepared by an independent team hosted by UNESCO.

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* team is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in this book and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO nor of its funders and do not commit the Organization. Overall responsibility for the views and opinions expressed in the report is taken by its Director.

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SHORT SUMMARY

Inclusive schools need inclusive school leaders

Schools in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have made efforts to prevent discrimination in admissions and teaching. Yet social tensions can challenge efforts to promote an inclusive school ethos, leading to students feeling isolated and excluded, and to more cases of bullying and discrimination. School leaders who promote inclusive practices can significantly improve the sense of belonging for children from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities or those who do not speak the language of instruction at home, whether they belong to a minority ethnic group or have recently immigrated.

This regional edition accompanies the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* and shows that inclusive schools are guided by leaders who champion inclusion. Such leaders possess strong values, set high standards and lead by example. They have the necessary pedagogical and managerial expertise to translate their vision into reality. These leaders can drive change, often navigating resistance from colleagues and communities.

Leaders' understanding and attitudes towards inclusion vary significantly, as evidenced by surveys in seven countries in this vast region. This is often linked to practical concerns such as heavy workloads, inadequate training, insufficient specialized staff and a lack of necessary resources. For example, over 60% of school leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Estonia believe that inclusion is more effective in theory than in practice.

The success of inclusive practices hinges on a supportive context, including social and cultural norms, effective governance systems, a robust legislation and policy framework, and adequate preparation. Many school leaders start their roles without any pre-service or induction training at all. And a scant one third of training programmes focus on collaboration, the foundation of inclusive practice. Sharing responsibilities with teachers, support staff, parents and communities is an essential step towards embedding inclusion throughout schools.

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Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed

Foreword

This report focuses on gaining deeper insights into the inclusivity of education systems in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. It accompanies the 2024/25 *Global Education Monitoring Report on leadership and education* and is the first of four regional editions unpacking educational leadership in diverse contexts.

'Lead for Inclusion' emphasizes the critical role of school leaders in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where all students can thrive. It embraces education as a cornerstone of societal development – a promise that can only be fulfilled when every child, regardless of background, ability, or circumstance, feels accepted, valued, safe, and therefore empowered to learn.

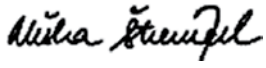
Discussions about inclusive education often overlook school leadership. This report shows why that must change. When school leaders demonstrate inclusive behaviours and cultivate a school ethos that values diversity and respect, they influence the behaviour and attitudes of students and staff, creating a more equitable learning environment.

Through their decisions and priorities, school leaders ensure that policies, resources, and teaching practices align with the principles of inclusion. They empower teachers with the training and support required to meet learners' needs, engage families as partners, and advocate for the systemic changes dismantling barriers to the right to education. Effective school leaders can inspire a contagious approach, by recognizing every learner's unique strength and creating opportunities for all to succeed.

The countries featured in this report have undergone significant political transformations and implemented several reforms on education over the last three decades. School leaders have played a vital role in this journey. In many cases, their vision, resilience, and dedication have made inclusive education not just an aspiration but a lived reality.

Together, let us continue to advocate for systemic changes that support every school leader in placing inclusivity at the heart of education, ensuring every child's right to learn and succeed.

Stefania Gianini, Stefania Giannini
Assistant-Director of Education, UNESCO



Dr Urška Štremfel
President of the NEPC Governing Board

About the Network of Education Policy Centers

The Network of Education Policy Centers is an international non-governmental membership organization that gathers members from 20 countries in Eastern and south-eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Founded in 2006, its members are public and civil society organizations dealing with education at various levels, from education research and policy analysis to teacher training and school-based activities. NEPC empowers the education ecosystem to support transition and transformation in the NEPC region towards earth-centric and inclusive education through policy, practice, research and international partnerships. The mission of the Network is to promote flexible, participatory, evidence-based, transparent education policies reflecting the values of inclusion, participation, and collective wellbeing. The geographic complexity in which it operates enhances a qualitative comparative approach as well as the attitude to explore new topics and trends in education.

Network of Education Policy Centers

Executive Director: Lana Jurko

Sanja Brajković, Igor Hrustić, Iva Perković and Katarina Velan

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This regional edition built on extensive primary data and information collected from school leaders and national and local policymakers for creating the country case studies. The GEM Report team and NEPC are grateful for all those who contributed to collecting, reviewing and analysing the information and all those who shared their perspectives.

The report was edited by Andy Quan. We also wish to acknowledge and express our gratitude to the individuals and organizations who worked hard to support the production, design, printing and translation of this regional edition within and outside UNESCO.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Unless indicated otherwise, the case studies are the source of all examples from the focus countries.

Albania
Rozeta Hoxhallari

Bosnia and Herzegovina
proMENTE social research (Lamija Spahić and Sidik Lepić)

Estonia
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The background paper, *A review of challenges and opportunities in inclusive leadership in Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia,* by Jasna Kovačević, summarized the evidence.

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KEY MESSAGES

In Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, new inclusion challenges in education related to language, ethnicity and political upheaval have been added to the existing ones.

- A long process of deinstitutionalizing children is underway. The proportion of Moldovan students with a disability in special schools fell from 77% in 2005/06 to 5% in 2023/24.
- Across the region, 8% of 15-year-old students – rising to one in three in Estonia – speak a different language than the language of instruction. They are at risk of feeling a lower sense of belonging in school and facing a higher chance of being bullied.
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, only half of school-age Roma children attend the first grade of primary school.
- In 2024, 25% of Polish classrooms had at least one Ukrainian migrant or refugee student.

Inclusive schools need inclusive school leaders:

- Who articulate a vision based on inclusive values and attitudes and communicate it to others.
- Who encourage individualized education plans, flexible curricula, and assessments adapted to specific learners' needs.
- Who follow a collaborative approach to promote inclusion.
- Who target teachers' development to their schools' unique needs.

School leaders need to be trusted with autonomy and empowered to promote inclusion.

- School leaders with financial autonomy can allocate funds to support those with the greatest needs. In Albania, school leaders lack the autonomy to determine the school budget.
- The 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reported that fewer than half of the principals in the region had significant responsibility for selecting learning materials (44%) or determining course content (40%).
- School principals' decision-making powers over pedagogy and resource management have gradually decreased in Kyrgyzstan.

Inclusion should be a part of school leader recruitment.

- Nearly 90% of countries in the region use open selection competitive recruitment process, yet selection criteria do not focus on inclusion knowledge, values and attitudes.
- Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia have measures to improve minority representation in leadership positions.

School principals need better preparation to promote inclusion.

- 65% of countries mandate pre-service training for school principals, but the topic of inclusion is neglected. The compulsory preparatory training programme of Albania is an exception.
- Inclusion-related content is mostly covered in principals' in-service training. School principals in Slovenia have to complete a compulsory module on inclusive education.
- Inclusion is often easier in theory than practice due to lack of time, training, specialized staff and resources. Among principals in Albania and Kyrgyzstan surveyed for this report, 9 in 10 argued that the shortage of qualified teachers challenged the implementation of inclusion.

Leadership for inclusion thrives on collaboration.

- *With teachers*: Only 46% of school leader professional standards in the region require principals to promote teacher cooperation.
- *With support staff and services*: In Estonia and the Republic of Moldova, school leaders rely on external services for needs-based assessment and specialist learner support.
- *With parents and communities*: 77% of countries in the region have standards requiring school principals to relay information to parents and guardians.

Inclusive education, historically associated with efforts to ensure education for students with disability (Hunt et al., 2024), has emerged as a paradigm of modern educational policy and practice. It aims at providing equitable learning opportunities for every student, regardless of their background, ability or identity. Inclusive education views diversity as a resource that enriches learning experiences and strengthens, rather than encumbers, school communities (UNESCO, 2020).

At the heart of this endeavour is leadership – leadership that is committed to creating school cultures where all learners feel valued, respected and empowered, and where curricula and pedagogies reflect diversity. School leaders are defined broadly to include not only principals, directors or head teachers but also other teaching or non-teaching staff who are assigned formal or informal responsibility for selected tasks. They can play a key role in promoting a school ethos which supports teachers, other school professionals, students, parents and communities, encouraging their collaboration and active engagement in school life (Childhood Education International, 2021; OECD, 2023a). School leaders can 'accommodate the differing requirements and identities of individual students' (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, p. 3) for the inclusion of all learners in education.

It is a prerequisite that school leaders embrace the values at the heart of inclusive education. But the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2024a) also identified four core education leadership dimensions to achieve any education outcome: setting clear expectations, prioritizing learning, fostering collaboration and developing the capacity of people (Leithwood, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2020). Acquiring these competencies calls for professionalizing school leader careers through well-defined and transparent selection and recruitment processes, accessible and continuous professional development opportunities, and robust assessment and appraisal systems.

Even more than for other education objectives (**Box 1**), leadership for inclusion requires the development of collaborative, supportive and reflective environments in which educators, families and communities work together to ensure that each student's potential is recognized and nurtured. Leadership can transform the principles of inclusion into everyday reality for every learner through intentional efforts to dismantle barriers to learning (Hunt et al., 2024).

BOX 1.

The regional editions of the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report*

The 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* focuses on education leadership at the school, system and political levels, and documents the impact of leadership on measurable learning outcomes. However, it is important to also document the impact of leadership on other important education outcomes. This is the objective of the regional editions of the 2024/5 cycle. This edition on Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia focuses on school leadership and inclusion, while forthcoming editions will look at the exercise of distributed leadership in Latin America to promote democracy and support to education leaders to promote digital transformation in East Asia.

This edition is the result of a partnership between the GEM Report and the Network of Education Policy Centers (NEPC). It builds on eight case studies from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, the Republic of Moldova and Slovenia. The focus countries were selected to ensure geographical representation of different subregions. The case studies were informed by desk research, a survey administered to a non-representative sample of between 3% and 5% of school leaders in seven out of eight countries, interviews and focus group discussions.

This regional edition highlights evidence on school leader standards, working conditions, selection processes and training programmes, drawing on 27 countries in the region, collected for the PEER website as part of the preparation of the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report*. It reports governance aspects, characteristics, attitudes and capacities of school leaders to promote inclusive education. Finally, it focuses on practices across four dimensions of leadership that serve as the foundation for system-wide policies.

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia were Socialist states until 1990 and inherited several common characteristics, one of which was a medical model of disability that led to segregation in education (Norwich, 2014). Since then, they have made significant progress (Council of Europe, 2018), undertaking structural reforms based on 'inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination' (European Commission, 2024). But countries in the region have also had to tackle new inclusion challenges related to ethnicity, language and conflict, which emerged during their political transitions.

Credit: © UNICEF/UN041406/Pirozzi*

Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia face inclusion challenges

REFLECTING ON MY ROLE

Credit: © UNESCO Gem Report/Rooftop

Irena Ivanović,
School Principal at High School Čazma, Croatia

Another Monday, another attempt to set the tone for the week. As I brushed my teeth this morning, I gave myself the usual pep talk: This is the week I inspire teachers to be extraordinary educators and students to be unstoppable learners. By 10 a.m., reality had already crashed the party.

As a Croatian principal, the law says I'm the leader and manager of the school responsible for teaching, learning, legal matters, finances, and seemingly everything in between. Of course, this is made extra interesting by the fact that principals here don't have deputies or vice-principals to lean on. It's just me.

My to-do list started the day with exactly one tick. The unexpected tasks list, however, seems to have no limit. I made myself another coffee and mentally handed those tasks off to a mythical team that doesn't exist, fully aware that trying to do everything myself guarantees I'll get nowhere fast.

When I first became a principal, I quickly realized how much of the role had nothing to do with the teaching I was trained for. The sheer breadth of responsibilities was overwhelming. That's why I decided to enroll in a postgraduate program specifically designed for school principals. It's been a lifesaver, teaching me how to navigate this vast world of administration, management, and leadership.

It's not easy, but every Monday brings a new chance to try again. Here's hoping this week makes a difference, even if just a small one.

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have made similar efforts to prevent schools from discriminating against any learners in admission or teaching (UNESCO, 2021). Some countries have prioritized the inclusion of learners with disability. Between 2005 and 2022, the number of children and youth with disability in special schools decreased by 30% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and by 11% in Poland (TransMONEE, 2022). In the Republic of Moldova, the number of students with disability in special institutions dropped from 77% in 2005/06 (UNESCO, 2021) to 5% in 2023/24 (Republic of Moldova National Statistical Office, 2024). In other countries, disability remains a major barrier for access to schools. Despite a commitment to inclusion, children and adolescents with disability in Kyrgyzstan are still mostly placed in special education and correction classes. Programmes, materials and textbooks have not been updated to support the transition. Teachers are not trained on how to adapt individual programmes and adjust teaching and learning materials as well as methodology (UNICEF, 2021).

Fighting education exclusion on the grounds of ethnicity and language is crucial (UNESCO, 2021). On average, 8% of 15-year-old students in Albania, Estonia, Georgia, Poland, the Republic of Moldova and Slovenia speak a different language at home than the language of instruction, ranging from 3% in Poland to almost 30% in Estonia. Roma children have lower education outcomes. In Albania, about one in two Roma children have dropped out of school. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, only half of school-age Roma children attend the first grade of primary education (UNICEF, 2018). It is also more likely that they will have some functional difficulty (UNICEF, 2023a).

A sense of belonging to the school is vital for children at greater risk of exclusion. Social diversity helps children interact with peers from different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds and strengthens social cohesion. Yet schools are sometimes a place where differing perspectives on society clash. In all countries except for Kazakhstan, Latvia and the Republic of Moldova, according to the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in which 21 countries and territories of the region took part, 15-year-olds who spoke a different language at home had a lower sense of belonging (e.g. struggling to make friends and feeling isolated) and were more likely to experience bullying at school than those who spoke the language of instruction (**Figure 1**).

FIGURE 1.

Students from linguistic minorities feel less included in school

Differences in (a) sense of belonging and (b) exposure to bullying between students who speak a different language at home than the language of instruction, selected countries, 2022

Notes:

1. The sense of belonging index is based on responses to the following questions: 'I feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at school', 'I make friends easily at school', 'I feel like I belong at school', 'I feel awkward and out of place in my school', 'Other students seem to like me' and 'I feel lonely at school'.
2. The bullying index is based on responses to the following statements: 'Other students left me out of things on purpose', 'Other students made fun of me', 'I was threatened by other students', 'I got hit or pushed around by other students', 'Other students spread nasty rumours about me', 'I was in a physical fight on school property', 'I stayed home from school because I felt unsafe' and 'I gave money to someone at school because they threatened me'. The value of zero represents the average for OECD countries.
3. The differences are statistically significant in all cases, except for bullying in Estonia and a sense of belonging in Slovenia.

Source: GEM Report analysis based on the 2022 PISA data.

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School leaders are key to building an inclusive school ethos

An inclusive school ethos is one where diversity is valued and where the school community supports the needs of all students. Such an ethos is the result of factors operating at various levels. The overarching **social and cultural context**, notably how minorities and, especially, vulnerable populations are treated, has a decisive influence on schools' ethos. Several countries in the region have experienced heightened social tensions, even conflict, in the course of their political transitions. Inter-ethnic and inter-state tensions have escalated to conflicts in many countries. European Social Survey data in 2002 and 2014 show that Eastern European countries consistently show more negative perceptions towards immigration, than, for example, Nordic countries. Hungary, Poland and Slovenia also reported polarized views towards immigration within their borders (European Social Survey, 2016).

Governance systems, which often reflect cultural norms, influence principals' roles, practices and effectiveness. Their decision-making power contributes to the extent to which they can exercise their leadership functions. Principals with autonomy are more likely to adapt financial and human resources to school needs and create inclusive environments (Hunt et al., 2024).

Education legislation and policy that prioritizes inclusion is also fundamental for the development of an inclusive school ethos, especially when it is part of a conscious attempt to influence sceptical social attitudes. A sound legal and policy framework is a prerequisite for the achievement of inclusive education. Most countries in the region have made considerable progress in this area in the past 35 years (**Box 2**), which shows some degree of political commitment. In some countries, this shift was part of their European Union accession process; in other countries, it has been motivated by international commitments, such as the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

REFLECTING ON MY ROLE

Credit: © Pavel Cerbusca

Pavel Cerbusca,

Principal of the Republican Theoretical High School "Aristotle," Chișinău, Republic of Moldova

As a high school principal, I've come to understand that my true responsibility is to shape our school into a place where every student can thrive and realize their potential. My role isn't confined to administration it's about creating an inclusive, equitable environment that nurtures the growth and individuality of each student.

Every day, I strive to support teachers in designing a differentiated learning process that meets the unique needs of our diverse student body. Whether they come from rural or urban areas, every student deserves an education that acknowledges their interests, talents, and learning pace. Our mission is to cultivate multiple intelligences, embrace diversity, and foster the development of individual strengths.

Collaboration is at the heart of quality education. I place great importance on strengthening the relationships between the school, families, and the community. Open dialogue with students, teachers, and parents and the involvement of community members in our initiatives is essential for making real progress.

What keeps me motivated are the little things a thoughtful conversation, a curriculum adjustment, or an innovative idea. These details, though small, form the foundation for meaningful change. Each one is a step toward ensuring that every child has access to a better, brighter education.

BOX 2.

Entrenched practices of education exclusion have been shed in the past 35 years

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have been advancing a rights-based approach to inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021). For example, all but Tajikistan have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognizes that 'the committed leadership of educational institutions is essential to introduce and embed the culture, policies and practices to achieve inclusive education at all levels' (United Nations, 2006).

A review of country laws and policies published in the PEER country profiles on inclusion in 2020 shows that, of 27 countries and territories in the region, 15 referred to the rights of multiple groups, 7 to disability and special educational needs and 6 to linguistic minorities in their general education laws. All had a definition of special educational needs in various laws or policy documents; of those, 19 linked the definition primarily with disability and 12 included a variety of other potential disadvantages, although this tended to mainly be 'giftedness'. In total, 23 had a definition of inclusion in various law and policy documents; of those, 20 focused on marginalized groups beyond learners with special educational needs or disabilities.

All eight focus countries in this regional edition have a definition of inclusive education, and seven refer to 'all' students in their definition. In Albania, the definition of inclusive education primarily refers to students with disability and special educational needs, although marginalized groups, such as the Roma and Egyptians, are specifically referenced in various legal and policy documents.

Analysis of country case studies conducted for this report shows that only four of the eight focus countries (Albania, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Slovenia) refer to multiple marginalized groups in their legal and policy frameworks. The other countries do not specifically refer to groups vulnerable to exclusion beyond students with disability and special educational needs (**Table 1**).

In the Republic of Moldova, the Education Code updated in 2023 and the Inclusive Education Development Programme for 2024–2027 cover multiple marginalized groups in their definition of inclusive education, based on economic status, residence, ethnicity, language, gender, age, disability, political or religious beliefs, health status and criminal record. In contrast, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan and Poland, inclusive education is still associated solely with special educational needs and disability (Kovačević, 2025).

TABLE 1.
Country recognition of marginalized groups in inclusive education laws and policies, 2024

	Albania	Bosnia/Herzeg.	Estonia	Georgia	Kyrgyzstan	Poland	Rep. Moldova	Slovenia
Multiple marginalized groups referenced in legal and policy documents	X			X			X	X
Only students with disability and special educational needs recognized as vulnerable to exclusion		X	X		X	X		

Note: 'Multiple marginalized groups' means that at least three different vulnerable groups are referenced in laws, policies or strategies.
Source: GEM Report team analysis based on country case studies.

Beyond social and political factors, individual **values and attitudes** of school staff and community members can drive an inclusive school ethos. Personality traits, behaviours, styles, motivations and beliefs of school leaders matter. They can set standards of excellence and an example for others to follow. At the same time, it is arguable whether it is personalities or effective teams that ultimately drive inclusion. While the highly quoted findings that 'there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader' (Leithwood et al., 2004) is appealing, it might be misleading to credit individuals with single-handedly transforming schools. A positive education outcome is usually the work of several people who are intrinsically motivated.

Moreover, for an effective school ethos, it is not just motivation that is needed but also **knowledge and**

expertise – pedagogical and managerial – to help build appropriate institutional environments and organizational structures. Many of the competencies needed can be identified in the pool of potential leaders through appropriate recruitment and selection procedures or developed among existing leaders through externally organized training programmes and internally developed professional learning communities. Creating an atmosphere of trust that empowers each person to feel capable of achieving individual and collective objectives can make a big difference.

In all these areas under the control of school actors, principals, teachers and other school staff serving as school leaders can contribute to an improved school climate and student achievement. They can guide education to be responsive to individual needs and promote acceptance of all learners (Esposito et al., 2019). Along with their personal values, principals' daily activities can help create inclusive environments for all students (Sider et al., 2017). They can formulate an inclusive vision (including a resourced plan, school policies to support it, and a monitoring mechanism to evaluate progress), promote targeted pedagogies and positive relationships, collaborate and share responsibilities (with teachers, support staff, parents and communities) and develop, motivate and empower staff.

For example, in linguistically diverse schools, leaders can promote inclusive practices for students who speak a language other than the official language of instruction (**Box 3**). The inclusion of refugee students is another challenge and school leaders in receiving countries often try to ensure the inclusion of students who have experienced trauma and learning disruption (**Box 4**).

This regional edition focuses on how decision makers can design policies to ensure that each school will have leaders who are prepared to competently address and resolve education inclusion challenges. This shifts the attention away from exceptional individuals to systematic processes: how to encourage and nurture diverse groups of people with good leadership potential to pursue such careers, how to organize the recruitment of people who will not act alone but with and for their community; and how to prepare, develop and appraise them.

BOX 3.

School leaders create inclusive environments by promoting linguistic diversity

Speaking a minority language can cause a student to be excluded from a broadly monolingual educational system. Ethnic and cultural tensions have politicized the right to education in a home language in many countries in the region. Several countries have established separate schools for linguistic minorities, in an attempt to include students in the education system but at the potential cost of reinforcing segregation or self-segregation and diminishing prospects for social cohesion and inclusion (UNESCO, 2021). In Kyrgyzstan, instruction is provided in multiple languages (Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik and Uzbek) but students are taught separately in each.

In principle, students feel truly included when they are 'valued, respected, represented and made visible in the school and classroom' in their diversity (UNESCO, 2024b, p. 6). School leaders can embrace and value linguistic diversity and inclusion through teaching representations, means of engagement and opportunities for expression (Loreman et al., 2014). In the Republic of Moldova, schools are encouraged to promote extracurricular activities to familiarize the school community with linguistic diversity, such as camps, contests, workshops and symposia, as part of the National Programme for Learning Romanian by National Minorities. While Italian and Hungarian communities living in Slovenia can receive education in their own languages, Roma students cannot. School leaders can promote their inclusion through Roma assistants and targeted support initiatives. An amendment to the Basic School Act mandates schools to develop a stimulating and safe learning environment, based on the principles of equal opportunities and diversity of student needs (Eurydice, 2024).

However, it can be hard to implement such practices. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, teaching strategies and materials must meet minority needs, but implementation depends on staff preparation and material availability. In 2000, Estonia piloted a programme to promote Russian and Estonian languages and cultures in schools, using Russian as the medium of instruction. The practice was abandoned primarily because teachers and leaders were insufficiently prepared (Mehisto and Asser, 2007). The National Audit Office of the Estonia's Ministry of Education and Research audited 90 schools and surveyed more than 6,500 school staff and over 40,000 basic school graduates from 2005/06 to 2019/20 to assess their language proficiency (Simson, 2023). The study concluded that teachers and students were not adequately proficient in Estonian and that graduates risked being disadvantaged in accessing higher education and entering the labour market. Following the adoption of an amendment to the basic school and gymnasium laws in December 2022, all Estonian schools have been required to transition to the use of Estonian as the sole language of instruction between 2024 and 2030 (Popova, 2023). This transition challenges the right of the Russian-speaking community to receive education in their language.

Continued on the next page

BOX 3. *Continued*

Analysis of data from 21 countries and territories of the region that participated in the 2022 PISA shows the incidence of multiple inclusive practices in schools with high concentrations of speakers of languages other than the official language of instruction. In seven countries and territories, it is more likely that linguistically diverse schools use inclusive teaching practices. Bulgaria, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Poland and Slovenia combine multiple approaches, providing additional support to disadvantaged students and teaching principles how to be more inclusive (**Table 2**).

TABLE 2.
Correlation between principals' self-reported leadership practices for inclusive education and share of students who speak a different language at home, 2022

	Help recognized similarities between students with different backgrounds	Encourage conflict resolution between students with different backgrounds	Encourage students' expression of diversity	Teach how to respond to discrimination	Teach how to be inclusive towards others	Provide additional support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds
Azerbaijan (Baku)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Albania	0	0	-	-	0	0
Bulgaria	+	+	+	+	+	+
Croatia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Czechia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Estonia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Georgia	0	+	0	+	+	+
Hungary	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kazakhstan	0	0	0	0	+	+
Latvia	+	+	0	0	0	0
Lithuania	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rep. Moldova	0	0	+	0	0	0
Montenegro	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Macedonia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Poland	+	0	+	0	+	+
Romania	0	0	0	-	-	-
Serbia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slovakia	0	0	+	0	0	+
Slovenia	+	+	+	+	+	+
Ukraine	0	0	+	0	0	0
Uzbekistan	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: 0 = No significant correlation between linguistic diversity in school and listed pedagogical practice.
(–) = Negative significant correlation. (+) = Positive significant correlation.
Source: GEM Report team analysis based on 2022 PISA data.

BOX 4.

School leaders in Poland have adopted practices to include Ukrainian refugees

As of April 2024, 134,000 school-age Ukrainian refugees, as well as 50,000 Ukrainian migrant children who had arrived in Poland before the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, were enrolled in Polish schools. They are present in 25% of Polish classrooms (Chrostowska, 2024). The wave of Ukrainian refugees has posed major challenges to receiving schools in Poland. School leaders and teachers have had to rapidly adjust classroom sizes, resources and staffing. They have adopted multiple strategies to address refugees' barriers to education and learning.

Language is one of the main barriers why school leaders look for support, such as intensive language preparation classes or hiring additional teachers to support newcomers in regular schools to learn Polish (Herbst and Sitek, 2023; Tędziagolska et al., 2022). Laws have allowed hiring Ukrainian teachers without full formal qualifications (Stolarski, 2024). Teacher assistants who can support refugees and fill teacher shortages can be hired without certified knowledge of Polish (Herbst and Sitek, 2023; Nazaruk et al., 2024).

School leaders have been flexible and adaptive. Some schools reported lowering their emphasis on grading (Tędziagolska et al., 2022). As Polish teachers lack previous experience of working with foreign students (Nazaruk et al., 2024), some leaders have turned schools into hubs of community support for Ukrainian families. Principals work closely with local governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and volunteers to provide food, housing and counselling services, especially for students who have experienced trauma (Tędziagolska et al., 2024). Partnerships between schools and communities create collaborative opportunities for student to meet their needs and families to find support (Cytlak and Jarmužek, 2023). To improve integration, school leaders organize activities, for example during Migrant Day or Children's Day, which create opportunities for students to meet peers and express their identity, strengthening school cohesion (Nazaruk et al., 2024).

Problems have arisen also from unclear regulations, organizational difficulties and different perceptions about the aims of preparatory classes (Tędziagolska et al., 2024). Many teachers and principals report facing difficulties in coping with stereotypes (Cytlak and Jarmužek, 2023). Moreover, due to the increasing workload, principals report an increase in sick leave among teachers who suffer burnout (Tędziagolska et al., 2024).

More than half of all Polish teachers had no previous experience in working with foreign students (Nazaruk et al., 2024). The Ministry of Education has partnered with UNICEF, universities and NGOs to provide 'accessibility in education' training for teachers and school administrators (ReferNet Poland, 2024). UNICEF also launched the Learning Passport, an e-learning platform, specifically targeting teachers to support the inclusive education of refugees. Teachers can access resources and trainings on cross-cultural communication and dealing with students' trauma (UNICEF, 2023b; 2024). Local and regional organizations assist school leaders, educators and pedagogical assistants with pedagogical toolkits, guidelines and training. Support is provided through communication and psychological assistance and intercultural and diversity workshops (Bochkar, 2024; Kanoria and Shetty, 2024).

In parallel, Ukraine's Ministry of Education made efforts to expand its distance learning tools based on digital platforms launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the All-Ukrainian Online School and Optima School, enabling some students to continue accessing the Ukrainian curriculum online (Optima School, 2022; Stolarski, 2024). However, since September 2024, the law mandates that all Ukrainian refugees must attend Polish schools (Notes from Poland, 2024).

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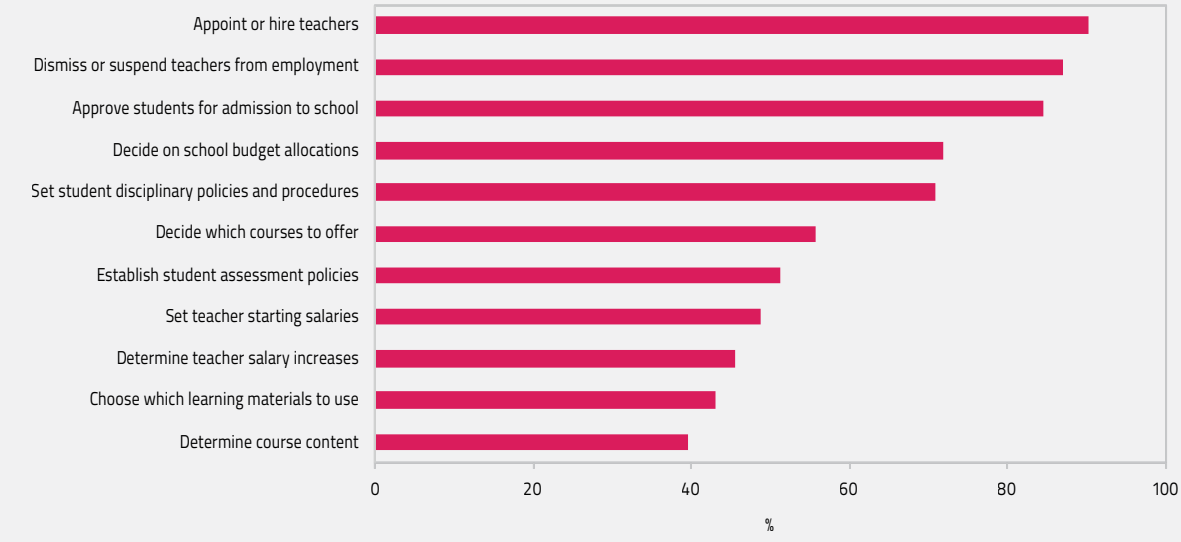
Principals with autonomy are better placed to lead on inclusion

Countries that participated in the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reported differences in levels of school and principal autonomy. Principals on average held significant decision-making authority in hiring and appointing staff (90%), dismissing and suspending staff (87%) and budget allocation (72%). Principals in the region decide on final student admission (84%), which plays a key role in ensuring inclusive access for some groups of students. However, only half of the principals can establish and adapt student assessment policies (**Figure 2**).

FIGURE 2.

Principals have limited decision-making power on learning aspects in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia

Percentage of lower secondary school principals reporting significant responsibility, by decision type, selected middle- and high-income countries, 2018



Source: OECD (2020).

School leaders with *financial autonomy* can allocate funds to support those with the greatest needs (UNESCO, 2021). In Albania, school leaders lack the autonomy to determine school budgets and adjust the school plans and operations accordingly. The system also lacks mechanisms for allocating resources based on disparities among students (Maghnouj et al., 2020). For example, 84% of respondents in the survey conducted for this report identified limited financial resources as a key barrier to successfully implementing inclusion. School leaders also reported lacking substantial autonomy in teacher selection (Albanian-American Development Foundation, 2019).

In Slovenia, services not covered by the national budget (above-standard programmes for basic schools) can be covered by municipalities (Eurydice, 2023). The implementation and purpose of those funds vary across municipalities. Some municipalities grant schools greater autonomy, while others impose stricter guidelines. In certain cases, municipalities may mandate that funds be allocated for specific purposes. For example, in the Ljubljana municipality, schools receive financial resources to support specific personnel needs. Allocations are determined based on the number of classes in each school. Schools have the autonomy to hire additional teachers, support and auxiliary staff. This model provides principals with the flexibility to employ staff based on the school and students' diverse needs and can contribute to creating inclusive environments. It empowers schools to address challenges, implement innovative solutions and tailor staffing aligned with their specific context.

The ability to select *teaching staff* is critical for establishing an inclusive school culture and building adequate school capacity (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). School leaders also need to be accountable to governments and communities for the use of these resources. Estonian schools and school leaders enjoy a great degree of autonomy in decision making. Almost all principals reported deciding on the appointment and dismissal of teachers (OECD, 2020) and their professional development. Yet only

1% of the national budget for teacher salaries allocated to schools is dedicated to professional development (Maghnouj et al., 2020).

Less than half of principals in the region reported having significant responsibility for selecting learning materials (44%) or determining course content (40%), which are key *pedagogical aspects* for inclusive teaching and learning. The harmonization of schools in Kyrgyzstan has also led to the standardization of curricula and textbooks, limiting school leaders' autonomy in adapting them. Decision-making powers over pedagogical aspects and resource management has gradually decreased, as reported by school leaders.

In Slovenia, less than 10% of principals are involved in decisions on course content (OECD, 2020). Head teachers are those who decide on teaching and learning, such as course selection and customization to address diverse learning needs. By contrast, principals retain significant authority over hiring and dismissing teachers, budget allocations and establishing student disciplinary policies (Japelj Pavešić et al., 2018).

REFLECTING ON MY ROLE

Credit: © Vera Balan

Vera Balan,
"Petre Ştefănucă" Theoretical High School, Ialoveni, Republic of Moldova

Today, I had a meaningful conversation with the mother of an 8th-grade student with severe disabilities. We reflected on her son's journey, his achievements, the challenges he faces, and the collective effort it takes to ensure he receives a quality education.

One thing that stood out to me is how deeply parents like her engage in their child's education. They are true advocates, working closely with schools to craft individualized plans, secure resources, and uphold their children's rights. The emotional support they provide is equally invaluable, fostering resilience and self-confidence in their kids.

We discussed her son's inclusion in our high school's regular music, technology, and physical education classes. Among them is how much this inclusive environment supports his social and academic growth. At the same time, we acknowledged the hurdles, particularly the marginalization he sometimes faces from peers, which can harm his self-esteem.

Her concern about the lack of services in our town and her son graduating 9th grade at the age of 16 resonated with me. It's a stark reminder of the gaps in our system. While I assured her that this issue is being addressed at both the local and national levels, I know we cannot wait passively. Writing projects, seeking external funding, and advocating for solutions must become a priority.

We concluded with an understanding that the inclusion process is a shared responsibility. Parents play a critical role, but schools must step up, ensuring quality education while addressing social challenges like marginalization. I've resolved to discuss actionable strategies with my teaching staff and to actively pursue solutions for post-school integration services.

This conversation reminded me why I do what I do because every student, regardless of their challenges, deserves opportunities to succeed.

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Positive individual attitudes towards inclusion are not shared by all

Motivated and committed school leaders can open the way for inclusive learning environments. Personal vision and a commitment to improving education were key drivers for surveyed school leaders in focus countries. School leaders in Albania, Estonia and Slovenia expressed an aim to transform education practices and implement their vision for inclusive education of good quality. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Moldova, school leaders' values and ambition shape their aspirations. They feel responsible toward their communities and want to serve as role models.

School leaders' attitudes are crucial for inclusive education practices (Biesta et al., 2015; Van Mieghem et al., 2022). Those who embrace a growth mindset and believe abilities and intelligence can be developed with effort and are not fixed traits (Claro et al., 2016) are better equipped to create an equitable environment and address learners' diverse needs (Adams et al., 2023; Muenks et al., 2024). Positive views on inclusive education strongly predict commitment to inclusive practices (Kielblock, 2018), while negative views can have an adverse impact on the education outcomes and social inclusion of students with disability and other disadvantages (Idol, 2006). Surveys carried out as part of the country case studies for this report suggest that school leaders' understanding of inclusive education varies, even among this non-representative sample of respondents (**Table 3**).

TABLE 3.

School leaders' understanding of and attitudes towards inclusion in education

	Understanding of inclusion		Attitudes towards inclusion	
	Focus	Key challenges	Support	Key reservations
Albania	Equality, collaboration, supportive climate	Limited awareness of broader dimensions	Positive, supportive of adapted curriculum and assessments	Concerns about infrastructure and feasibility
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Equality, tailored teaching, focus om special educational needs	Insufficient teacher training, curriculum adjustments	Acceptance in theory, scepticism about practice	Scepticism about effectiveness, SEN-centred focus
Estonia	Access for all, systemic challenges	Teacher workload, behavioural integration challenges	Directors are optimistic; heads of studies less optimistic	Practical barriers like resources, teacher time
Georgia	Access, equity, transformative leadership	Leadership vision	Strongly positive, confident in benefits	Leadership capacity
Kyrgyzstan	SEN focus	Polarized views, lack of broad inclusivity	Polarized with mixed support for general classrooms	Polarization on broad inclusion, teacher resources
Rep. Moldova	Diversity, equality, universal access	Resource constraints, time demands	Generally supportive, uncertainty about practical application	Logistical constraints, time-intensive teaching
Slovenia	Supportive climate, collaboration, individualization	Resource limitations, curriculum adaptation	Positive but tempered by concerns	Resource shortages, time-intensive teaching

Source: Analysis of country surveys conducted in seven focus countries.

In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republic of Moldova, school leaders focused on the inclusion of all learners. By contrast, a narrower interpretation of inclusion limited to students with special educational needs was prevalent in Kyrgyzstan. In Estonia and Slovenia, school leaders have mixed views on inclusive education: while they adopt a broader definition of inclusion, they also question its feasibility. In Estonia, inclusive education is generally understood as equitable access to quality education for all, regardless of socioeconomic status, nationality, gender, location or special needs (Estonia Government, 2024) and as a learning approach primarily (80%) taking place in mainstream classrooms (Räis et al., 2016). However, Estonian school leaders' mixed views are partly due to the lack of a formal national definition, which makes them seek European frameworks for guidance.

School leaders have varying attitudes towards inclusive education and its outcomes. In Albania, 90% of school leaders agreed that inclusive schools enhance academic progress for all and 96% supported curriculum adaptation for effective learning. In the Republic of Moldova, 91% of school leaders supported academic progress and 93% supported curriculum adaptation. But in Kyrgyzstan, only 41% of school leaders believed that inclusive education boosts students' self-esteem. In Estonia, 74% of school directors considered that inclusive education promotes independence but only 47% of heads of studies did. Directors' leadership roles shape their attitudes, giving them a broader perspective. School leaders in Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Moldova emphasized differentiated teaching and co-teaching strategies, considering it crucial for diverse student needs.

Practical implementation of inclusion in schools is a challenge. Among school leaders, 68% of those in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 60% of those in Estonia believed inclusion is more effective in theory than in practice. Teacher workload, lack of training and specialized staff, and limited resource allocation are some of the practical challenges mentioned. Almost 90% of school principals surveyed for this report in Albania and Kyrgyzstan argued that the shortage of specialist personnel challenges the full implementation of inclusive education.

In the Republic of Moldova, where 46% of school principals had doubts about the practical feasibility of inclusion, 75% also reported that inclusive teaching is a significant strain on teachers' time, a sentiment echoed by 85% of those in Estonia, where school leaders are concerned about the lack of support specialists, such as special educators and speech therapists (Räis et al., 2016). Inclusive education advisors stress that mainstream schools cannot support students with special needs due to teachers' limited knowledge and skills in managing inclusive classrooms. Although several in-service training programmes exist, school leaders felt they were rarely designed according to school leaders' different roles (Kivirand et al., 2021).

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Enabling policies and legislation matter for school leadership

The professionalization of school leaders' careers is a critical, if underappreciated, factor for the principles of inclusive education to be understood, appreciated and acted upon. As argued in the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report*, the presence of well-defined standards, transparent and equitable selection processes, adequate preparation and in-service training, and robust appraisal mechanisms are essential building blocks for the professionalization of school leaders.

School leadership standards help communicate national priorities and are used to guide selection, preparation, training and assessment of school principals (UNESCO, 2024a). They guide school leaders in promoting inclusive education by aligning school objectives with national goals (Kovačević, 2025). Among countries with available information in the region, 48% have adopted stand-alone professional leadership standards or competency frameworks. But only some explicitly address inclusion (**Table 4**). In some countries, laws appear to link school leadership with inclusive education only in reference to special needs and disability. In Slovenia, inclusion for all is not mandated, with the 2011 Placement of Children with Special Needs Act only mandating the inclusion of children with disability. School leaders therefore play a crucial role in promoting inclusion that is outlined in law, through upholding values of equal opportunity, tolerance and respect for diversity.

TABLE 4.

School leader standards that mention inclusion objectives, selected countries

Albania	The Professional Standards for School Leaders (2019) promote leadership for inclusive education through the values and principles of inclusiveness, equity, collaboration, lifelong learning and continuous development, aiming towards all students' well-being and success.
Armenia	Decision No. 76 (2022) on professional capabilities stipulated that school directors must 'provide equal learning conditions for all students' and 'create a healthy moral-psychological atmosphere of mutual respect and support'.
Croatia	The Qualification Standards for School Principals (2020) state that principals are responsible for developing new educational programmes that respect the needs of different groups of students, ensuring conditions for a safe environment, developing a climate of cooperation and trust, and implementing activities aimed at reducing stress in the educational process.
Georgia	The Public School Director's Standard (2022) requires school leaders to create a 'safe, inclusive, and goal-oriented school environment' based on the principles of shared leadership.
Estonia	The Educational Leader Competency Model (2023) states that masterful educational leaders and system changers use the methods of inclusive leadership and coaching in their work and implement the principles of inclusive and collaborative learning.
Serbia	The Regulation on Standards of Competence of Directors of Education and Training Institutions (2013) stipulated that directors are expected to ensure that: there is 'an inclusive approach in the educational process': international conventions and human rights treaties are respected; students are protected from violence, abuse and discrimination; there is a climate that accepts and appreciates diversity and promotes tolerance; the needs of all students (e.g. talented and gifted, with disability, from vulnerable social groups) are understood; and individual education plans are developed for students with disability.
Rep. Moldova	The Professional Competence Standards for Managerial Staff (2016) prioritize intercultural dialogue, tolerance, non-discrimination and social inclusion.
Russian Fed.	The Professional Standards for Heads of Educational Institutions (2021) require the principal to nurture students' talents and abilities; consider the educational needs, abilities and ethno-cultural situation of children; and ensure the availability of educational programmes for children with disability.
Ukraine	The Professional Standard of the Head of the General Secondary Education Institution (2021) states that the head of the school is responsible for ensuring a safe, healthy and inclusive educational environment.

Source: PEER country profiles and country case studies from Albania, Estonia, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.

PRINCIPALS' RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION PRACTICES DO NOT PLACE ENOUGH EMPHASIS ON INCLUSION

Principal recruitment and selection should match candidates to the education system's overall objectives and to schools' specific needs (UNESCO, 2024a). Regardless of whether the system is centralized or not, the essential element is objective, fair, inclusive, transparent and clearly defined criteria (Grissom et al., 2015; Palmer and Mullooly, 2015). Such criteria enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the principal's role and help build trust and respect within the school community. But the probability that the leader will instil an inclusive school ethos will be higher if these criteria also include knowledge and commitment to inclusion (Kovačević, 2025; UNESCO, 2024a).

All countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia except for Belarus use open competitive recruitment for principals. Albania's recruitment process started changing in 2019 to reduce political influence and increase transparency. An Evaluation Committee is established with school board members, teachers and parents, alongside local self-government and local education office representatives. Kyrgyzstan implemented radical reforms in principal recruitment in 2022, with a legally enshrined competition process and universal qualifications for candidates. Principals in Poland are chosen by a committee including representatives from the school, pedagogical supervisors, teachers, parents and trade unions. In 2024, Slovenia amended the process to limit the political influence on the principals' appointment. The Minister's approval takes place after the school board completes the selection process. Overall, policy differences between countries mean that the profiles of appointed school principals also vary (**Box 5**).

BOX 5.

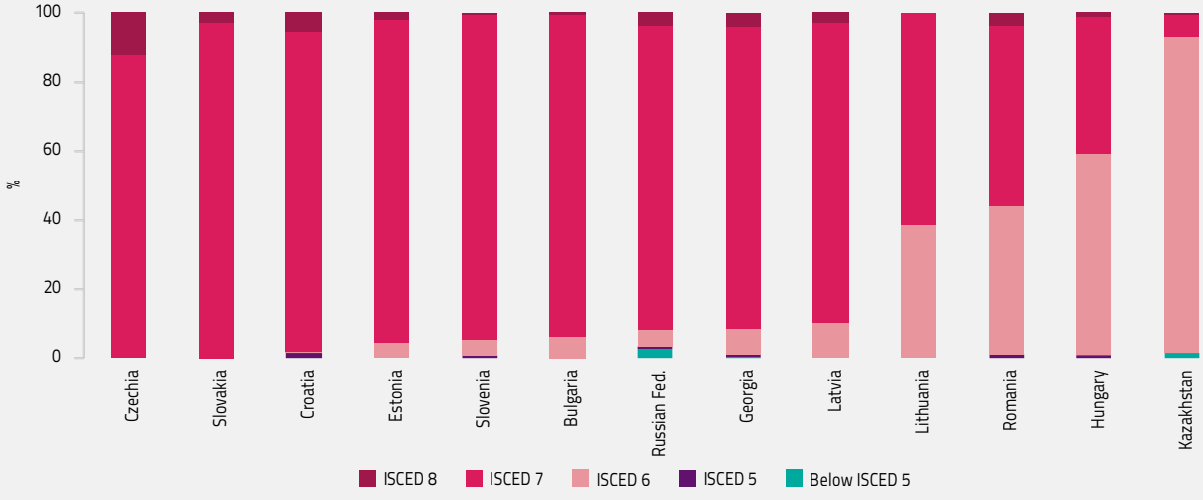
School principals' profiles and roles vary

Factors such as education, experience, age, gender and ethnicity can impact principals' work, motivation and relationships with the school community, and have a role to play in shaping an inclusive learning environment. Data from the 2018 TALIS, complemented by evidence from the case studies, describe lower secondary school principals' background characteristics in 13 countries in the region. For example, most principals – and all in Czechia and Slovakia – had at least a master's degree, which may well be a necessary academic qualification to prepare them for the complex tasks required to lead inclusive schools. Yet about half of principals in Hungary, Lithuania and Romania – and hardly any in Kazakhstan – had a post-graduate qualification (**Figure 3**).

FIGURE 3.

A postgraduate academic qualification is standard for principals in most countries

Lower secondary school principals by academic qualification, selected countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, 2018



Notes: ISCED = International Standard Classification of Education. The four featured levels are short-cycle tertiary (5), bachelor's (6); master's (7) and doctorate (8).

Source: 2018 TALIS data.

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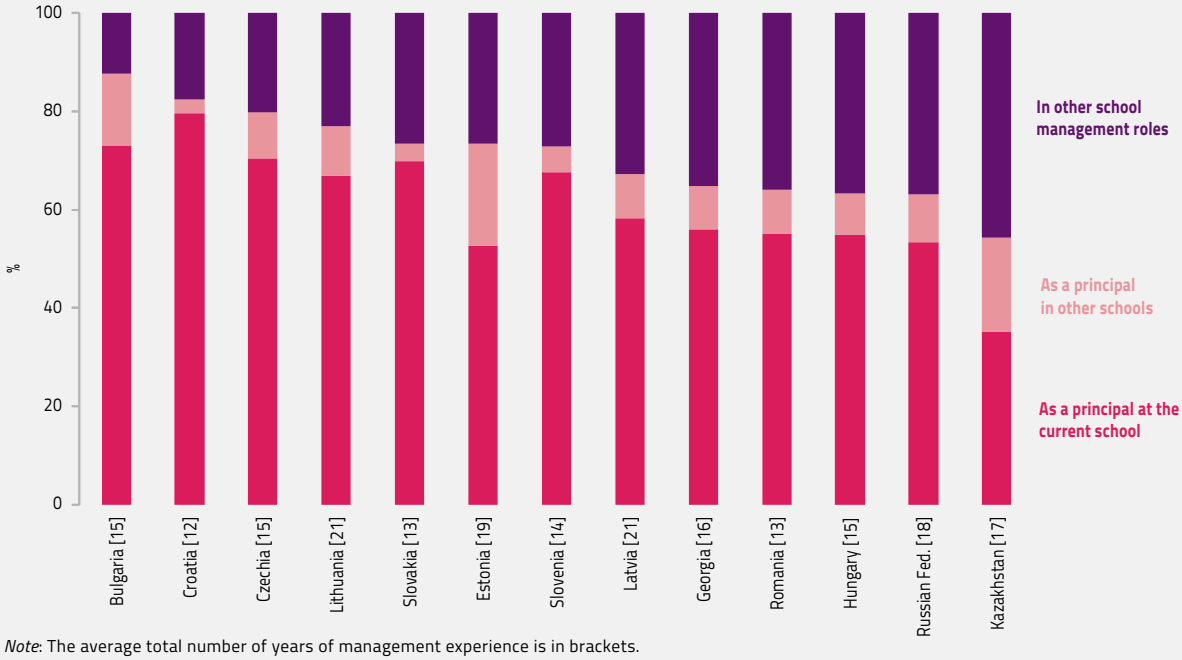
BOX 5. *Continued*

Lower secondary school principals in participating countries had management experience of an average of 16 years, of which 9.7 years was in their current school, 1.7 in another school and 4.7 in another school management role. The longest experience was recorded in Latvia and Lithuania (21 years) and the shortest in Croatia (12 years), whose principals were also those who had earned most of their experience in their current school (80%). In contrast, principals in Estonia had the lowest share of experience acquired in the same school (53%) and the highest acquired in another school (21%). Finally, there were differences in the share of experience acquired in another school management position, from a low of 12% in Bulgaria to a high of 46% in Kazakhstan (**Figure 4**). In Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Moldova, half of principals have been in their position for less than four years, which may suggest ongoing attempts to bring less experienced people into school leadership positions, but also raises concerns about institutional continuity and expertise.

FIGURE 4.

Average principals' tenure in the same school is 10 years or more

Lower secondary school principals by management experience and tenure, selected countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, 2018



Note: The average total number of years of management experience is in brackets.
Source: 2018 TALIS data.

Roles also vary somewhat. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Moldova, principals focus more on administrative responsibilities and less on teaching roles. But principals in Georgia spent more than 20% of their time on teaching and learning tasks (UNESCO, 2024a). Estonian schools apply a distributed form of leadership. School principals are responsible for the administrative management of the school, including budget and infrastructure, and recruiting heads of studies. Head of studies oversee teaching and learning, student assessment and teaching activities (Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, 2021).

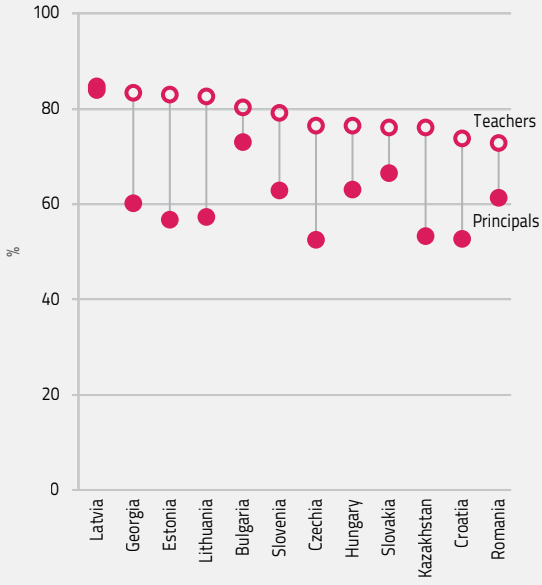
The distribution of teaching and leadership duties also varies within countries. Principals in disadvantaged schools in Georgia have more experience than those in non-disadvantaged schools (Teig et al., 2024). School leaders in rural areas handle both teaching and leadership roles more often than in urban areas, for example in Albania and Kyrgyzstan.

Another difference is in the extent to which education systems select women for school principal positions. It is argued that women are more likely than men to promote collaboration, professional growth and accountability for student learning, improving education outcomes and inclusivity (OECD, 2020). In all countries, more than half of principal positions are occupied by women – except in Bosnia and Herzegovina where there are more male (61%) than female principals. Still, except for Latvia, women are more likely to be teachers than principals, with more extreme disparities observed in Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Lithuania, indicating cultural and systemic factors that prevent gender equality in leadership (**Figure 5**).

Continued on the next page

BOX 5. *Continued*

FIGURE 5.
Women are much less likely to be principals than teachers
Share of women among all lower secondary school principals and teachers, selected countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, 2018



Source: 2018 TALIS data.

The case studies indicate that countries may have formal assessments of candidates' knowledge about inclusive education, but they may not be used. In Georgia, the selection process is based on the Public School Director's Standard, which includes inclusive education principles. Yet only attitudes towards inclusive education are evaluated in examinations and interviews, not specific knowledge. In the Republic of Moldova, formal assessment of professional and managerial knowledge on inclusive education occurs during the selection process but is limited to required knowledge on disability and special educational needs. In Kyrgyzstan, only principals of special schools are required to have relevant education qualifications and experience in the education of students with disability, while the selection process for general schools only includes some disability-related questions in the test. Slovenia has a structured appointment process but lacks clear criteria for assessing knowledge of inclusive education. However, it should be noted that while countries such as Albania and Slovenia do not formally assess knowledge on inclusion during selection processes, mandatory training programmes for school leaders address inclusive education.

Another dimension of inclusion-related criteria in the selection process is the extent to which school leaders promote diversity (Hunt et al., 2024). When the cadre of school principals reflects the background characteristics of the population, it can signal an education system commitment to inclusion. It can also provide students from a minority community with role models and have a positive impact on their education outcomes, behaviour, motivation and sense of belonging (Lee and Mao, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In the Republic of Moldova, school leaders interviewed for this report said that their diverse backgrounds help them better understand learners' emotional and psychological needs. However, only Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia have adopted measures to address the under-representation of ethnic minority groups in school principal positions.

SCHOOL PRINCIPALS NEED MORE PREPARATION TO PROMOTE INCLUSION

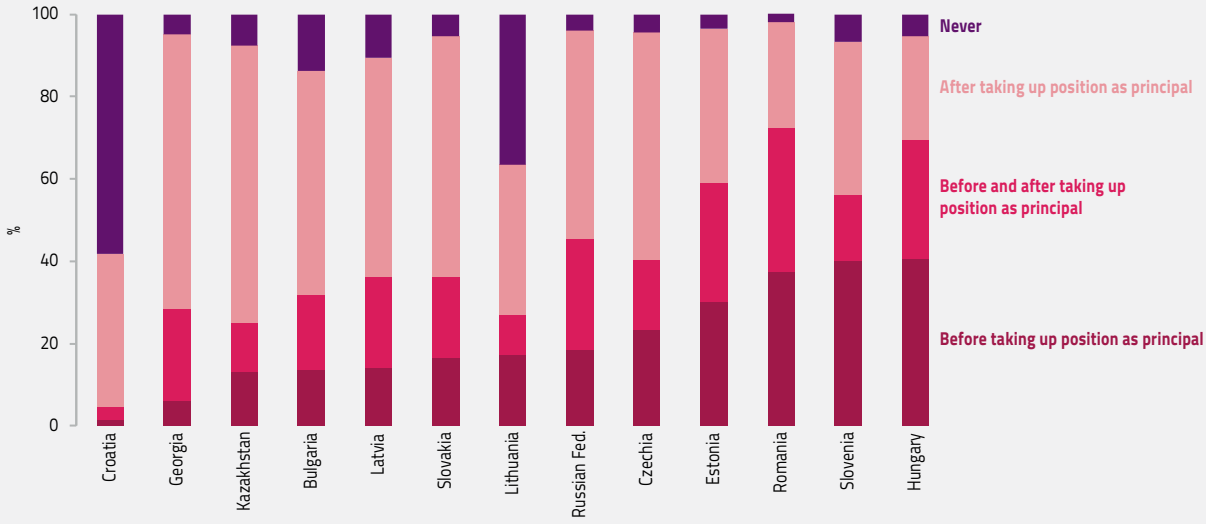
For school principles to promote inclusion, they need more preparation, in general, and not just specifically on inclusion. Yet despite growing calls to prepare principals before they enter their positions, only 65% have such provisions for pre-service training and just 19% for induction. Pre-service training is not mandatory in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia and Kyrgyzstan. In Slovenia, the Mentoring for Newly Appointed Head Teachers programme offers systematic support and assistance to novice head teachers, facilitating their collaboration with experienced mentors, providing practical guidance and fostering effective engagement in leadership processes. The programme includes five one-day meetings, intermediate activities and ongoing individual collaboration between mentors and novice head teachers (Erčulj, 2007; National School for Leadership in Education, 2025).

The 2018 TALIS survey shows that the majority of lower secondary school principals in the region receive training after they take on their position. In Georgia and Kazakhstan, 67% of principals only take courses in school administration after starting their roles, showing a reactive rather than proactive approach to leadership development. In Croatia and Lithuania, at least 4 in 10 principals reported never having received such training (**Figure 6**).

FIGURE 6.

Few principals have completed a course in school administration

Percentage of lower secondary school principals who have done a programme or course in school administration or principal training, by timing, selected education systems in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, 2018



Source: 2018 TALIS data.

In contrast, countries continue to prioritize in-service training: all but two countries in the region – Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation – make general provisions for in-service training of school principals in their laws and policies. Estonia's Ministry of Education and Research, which plans to amend the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, mandates a certification mechanism for school leaders detailing in-service training needs, in alignment with the Educational Leader Competency Model and Educational Leader Career Model.

In terms of training content, analysis of 28 principal preparation and professional development programmes from 17 countries in the region based on the PEER profiles suggests that core dimensions emphasized by leadership for inclusion experts (Hunt et al., 2024; Kovač, 2022) were only covered to a limited extent. A focus on 'transformational' (setting expectations) (39%) and 'instructional' (learning) (39%) leadership were the two most common areas covered, followed by fostering collaboration (36%) and staff development (25%). Only 21% of the programmes covered all four dimensions of leadership.

Principals need specialized knowledge and understanding of inclusion to address diverse needs and promote equitable learning environments, although the roles they might play vary by context (Adams et al., 2023).

For example, in Estonia, school principals focus on managerial tasks while they delegate specialized tasks about learning quality to heads of studies, which reflects a decentralized and resource-rich model. In Albania, a more direct, community-focused leadership style is dominant that compensates for the lack of resources.

Yet coverage of inclusion-related topics in pre- and in-service training is limited. In four of the eight focus countries, teachers may first acquire knowledge on inclusive education through their initial teacher training, although subjects are often limited or elective. In Albania's initial teacher education programme, inclusion is mandatory although it only covers issues related to students with special needs in mainstream education. In Slovenia, some initial teacher education programmes cover inclusive education through elective subjects, such as intercultural education, methodologies for teaching mixed-level classes, and teaching students with learning difficulties.

Among lower secondary school teachers in 13 countries in the region who took part in the 2018 TALIS, 16% expressed a need for more training to teach in a multicultural or multilingual setting, and 24% to teach learners with special needs (OECD, 2019).

All countries cover inclusive education in professional development for school principals (**Table 5**) (Kovačević, 2025). But the European Policy Network on School Leadership highlights that equity considerations are 'relatively neglected' in school leadership training programmes (OECD, 2023a), as these often focus on administrative and compliance requirements (UNESCO, 2020). One exception is Albania, where in line with the school leadership standards revised in 2019, the nine-month Compulsory Preparatory Training Programme for school leaders focuses on instructional leadership. Its content is regularly reviewed to meet national educational goals. The training modules cover the core leadership dimensions, such as setting the vision and leading transformational change; focusing on learning and data-based pedagogical leadership grounded in principles of equity and inclusion; fostering collaboration; and developing people.

Existing content tends to be neither mandatory nor specific to inclusive education in seven of the eight countries analysed. In Croatia, principals have access to professional development programmes but these tend to focus on administration and management, lacking coverage of inclusion, multiculturalism, fairness and justice issues (Kovač, 2022). The Republic of Moldova has three universities and three colleges whose programmes include content on inclusive education, but these are not mandatory for school leaders, while there are no current plans to address inclusion in pre-service training of school principals. Yet, to support inclusion, principals need communication, interpersonal, problem-solving, pedagogical and legal skills (Hunt et al., 2024).

TABLE 5.

Inclusive education content in school principals' training according to laws and policies, selected countries, 2024

	Pre-service training		In-service training	
	Provision for training made in law/policy	Inclusion-related content	Provision for training made in law/policy	Inclusion-related content
Albania	X	X	X	X
Bosnia/Herzeg.			X	Republic of Srpska
Estonia			X	X
Georgia	X		X	X
Kyrgyzstan			X	X
Poland	X		X	
Rep. Moldova	X		X	
Slovenia	X		X	X

Source: PEER country profiles and country case studies. Both mandatory and non-mandatory training programmes were considered.

In Albania, school leaders must do at least three days of training a year. Courses related to inclusion focus on collaborative leadership for inclusive education, inclusive school culture and inclusive school-based policy development. In Estonia, the Basic and Upper Secondary Schools Act states that in-service training of directors and head teachers is organized with a subsidy from the state education budget to municipalities (Estonia Government, 2010). However, school leaders are not currently required to participate in any in-service training. The Inclusive School project, launched by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2015, offers continuous professional learning to school leaders to enhance their response to diverse needs and promote individual development and creativity (OECD, 2023a) but it its impact is limited when participation is not mandatory (Kovačević, 2025). The Education and Youth Board offers informal in-service support through a mentoring network which connects school leaders with experienced peers for practical advice and guidance. School leaders also benefit from network coaching on change management and innovation provided by the Ministry of Education.

Georgia's National Centre for Teacher Professional Development implemented a programme in 2016–19 for school principals to support inclusive, participatory and

student-centred environments as instructional leaders. The Inclusive Education Promotion Programme also covers school leaders. In Kyrgyzstan, an inclusive education module is available through the professional development system. However, none of the country's school leaders interviewed reported participating in such training.

Slovenia's one-year headship licence programme is open to new principals who must complete it within a year of their appointment. It aligns with the legally mandated tasks of school and preschool principals and inclusion is one of its central themes. The compulsory module, Inclusive School, addresses the definition of inclusion and inclusive leadership, emphasizing leadership in environments with diverse student populations, including those with special needs and students from low socioeconomic and migrant backgrounds. The National School of Leadership also offers advanced programmes helping school leaders implement inclusive education practices.

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Leaders promote inclusive education through various practices

School leaders, whether guided by social context, policy frameworks, their values or their expertise, follow a variety of inclusive practices (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). This section reviews a range of examples from the focus countries in which school leaders, as a result of effective selection practices or preparation and training policies, as well as out of their own values and convictions, have guided or implemented school practices that promote an inclusive ethos and support the case for inclusive education, such as formulating an inclusive vision, promoting targeted pedagogies, fostering collaboration and prioritizing teacher development.

LEADERS NEED A VISION AND A PLAN TO DEVELOP AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

Setting a strategic direction is a core function of inclusive school leadership. It involves identifying and articulating a shared vision of inclusive education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021). In Estonia, school leaders view their role as setting strategic goals and ensuring alignment with inclusion priorities. Policymakers in Georgia interviewed for this report agreed that an inclusive education approach should not be separate from the school's vision; otherwise, it may contribute to segregation.

School principals should be prepared to communicate an inclusive school ethos. The strength of the ethos relies on how clearly school values are expressed. This involves developing a mission statement that articulates the school's collective intent to value and accommodate student diversity and respect for all school community members, and formulating an action plan, which outlines school goals and strategies (UNESCO, 2021). In Slovenia, school leaders who are effective in promoting inclusive education have articulated, communicated and implemented their vision, motivating all stakeholders. Involving the whole school community in creating the vision helps promote a shared goal at all levels.

Lack of knowledge or confidence in formulating the development plan may hinder the process. Half of Georgia's principals agree that school leaders should have the readiness and vision to support inclusive school environments but many lack the necessary skills and knowledge about inclusive education. Likewise, 36% of Kyrgyz and 29% of Moldovan school leaders who took part in country surveys implement school development plans but lack confidence in formulating plans that promote an inclusive culture.

A plan is more credible and easier to communicate when backed by a monitoring framework that informs school stakeholders whether progress is being made and where adjustments are needed. The Index for Inclusion is a tool developed by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education to support inclusive school development. It can help identify learning barriers and examine solutions to enhance learners' participation (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). An urban school in Albania has successfully implemented its inclusive vision based on participatory planning and decision-making using the Index for Inclusion (**Box 6**). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Index of Inclusion was sometimes used for the joint formulation of school development plans and inclusive policies, although 37% of school leaders surveyed for this report reported not feeling confident in using this tool for participative assessment of school culture. In the Sarajevo Canton, some primary and secondary school leaders and teams consisting of teachers, psychologists and speech therapists organize monthly meetings, with the school leader being responsible for the implementation of the government's Rulebook on Inclusive Education.

BOX 6.

An Albanian school used the Index for Inclusion to develop an inclusive environment

In Albania, despite progress on inclusive education, challenges remain. School principals have many responsibilities, especially concerning children with disability. For example, they rely on information collected by teachers in the school's neighbourhood and consult with a school assessment commission on the presence of children with disability. Training is needed.

An inclusive education project for children with special educational needs carried out between 2014 and 2017 by Save the Children in cooperation with MEDPAK, an NGO, involved 28 schools. It was guided by the Index for Inclusion. Principals were trained to use the index as part of self-evaluations in order to create inclusive policies for mid-term school plans approved by the regional education directorates or offices and to monitor the relevant activities through performance indicators.

In one urban school, the principal and the school development team, composed of teachers, students, parents and community members, committed to empower all school stakeholders to participate in the formulation of the school's vision, mission and values. A thorough analysis, identifying priorities and jointly designing the strategic School Development Plan and Annual Action Plan, was guided by the Index for Inclusion. The process, as outlined in the Professional Standards for School Leaders, involved diverse stakeholders and fostered a sense of ownership and joint commitment towards creating an inclusive school culture.

School stakeholders actively participated in implementing planned activities such as anti-bullying, open school days, and psychosocial and arts activities. Positive changes were observed in school culture, parental support, teacher commitment, community relationships, and student well-being and achievement.

Source: Save the Children (2017).

SCHOOL LEADERS CAN FOSTER INCLUSION THROUGH TARGETED PEDAGOGIES

School leaders must be flexible, adaptable and proactive in creating a safe and equitable environment for a diverse student population (OECD, 2023a). Some countries are examining the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a method of curriculum design that aims to provide all individuals with equal opportunities to learn (UNESCO, 2020). Lithuania's Ministry of Education has prepared guidelines for incorporating UDL as part of the Millennium School Programme. School leaders are asked to serve as initiators, supporters, team leaders, learning guides and attitude shapers. They help teachers anticipate possible barriers and make the necessary adaptations for everyone to learn together (Lithuania Ministry of Education, Science, and Sports and European Social Fund Agency, 2023).

School leaders can promote accessibility by adjusting cognitive aspects (e.g. scaling educational materials according to the difficulty level), perpetual aspects (e.g. appropriate font sizes and graphics), linguistic aspects (e.g. simplified texts) and diagnostic aspects (e.g. improved diagnoses or needs assessments). They can also encourage the use of project-based learning methods to help boost the self-efficacy and active participation of students with diverse needs (ReferNet Poland, 2024). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, among surveyed school leaders, 85% believed that tailoring the curriculum and 91% that adapting teaching methods and materials were effective inclusive practices to meet individual student needs.

Individualized education plans are a common inclusive practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Slovenia (Kovac-Cerovic et al., 2016; Ograjšek et al., 2022; Toth, 2007). They outline the support and services required for students with special needs to thrive in school. Based on these plans, teachers can adapt lesson plans and the curriculum to meet individual students' needs and ensure equal learning opportunities (Kovac-Cerovic et al., 2016). In Estonia, 70% of principals reported frequently using differentiated teaching and individualized education plans to address diverse learning needs.

Principals can adjust school policies or practices such as grading systems or disciplinary approaches. Student assessment adaptations may include extra time, a dictionary for minority languages, or a quiet space. Almost all principals in Bosnia and Herzegovina (87%) and the Republic of Moldova (96%) recommended the use of these adaptations, although fewer reported often using differentiated teaching and assessment practices in schools.

Finally, school principals can lead on intercultural practices (**Box 7**). In order to ensure the successful integration of migrants into the Slovenian education system, it has become a statutory practice in some schools to implement intercultural activities that foster understanding and respect among students from diverse backgrounds, as well as provide language support for non-native speakers.

BOX 7.

Music education is used as an inclusive pedagogical tool for Roma youth in the Balkans

Music education can be a powerful tool for fostering inclusion, engaging students with different backgrounds, promoting their sense of belonging and enhancing personal well-being (Crawford, 2020; Sobel, 2023). Brakja Ramiz-Hamid is one of the largest primary schools in Skopje, North Macedonia, the leadership of the principal and music teacher demonstrated the pedagogical potential of music for the inclusion of Roma youth. The Roma, who constitute the majority of the over 2,000 students, have faced multiple and persistent barriers, such as poverty, discrimination and limited access to quality extracurricular opportunities. Motivated by a vision to providing young people with more opportunities, school leaders founded the Roma Rock School in 2017, an association for multi-ethnic music education.

Under the leadership of its founder Alvin Salimovski and co-founder Nevrus Bajram, and with the support of experienced musicians, the school, which offers free music education to Roma youth, has become a vital space for empowerment and inclusion. Students are taught music theory and learn to play instruments, as well as have the opportunity to write, record, produce and perform their own original music. This experience allows students to develop a sense of ownership of their work, fostering confidence and a feeling of inclusion within the school and society.

Beyond its curriculum, the Roma Rock School serves as a platform for cultural and social exchange. As part of the Creative Europe Music Connects project and led by the NGO Musicians Without Borders and the Fontys Rockacademie, part of a Dutch vocational university, the school has partnered with the Mitrovica Rock School, operating in the ethnically divided town of Mitrovica in Kosovo. The two schools organize concerts, summer programmes and training, where students from diverse ethnic backgrounds share their passion for music. This initiative helps build mutual understanding and strengthen a sense of belonging.

Note: Reference to Kosovo should be understood in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244.
Sources: Bašić (2022); Mitrovica Rock School (2024); rfi (2023); Roma Rock School (2022).

SCHOOL LEADERS CAN FOSTER INCLUSION THROUGH COLLABORATION

Encouraging collaboration is crucial for building inclusive school cultures and practices (Lambrecht et al., 2022). Yet only 46% of school leader professional standards in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia require principals to promote teacher cooperation. Collaboration is needed with teachers, support staff and services, as well as with students, parents and the community.

... with teachers

According to the 2022 PISA, 38% of lower secondary school students in Albania, Estonia, Georgia, Poland, the Republic of Moldova and Slovenia attended a school whose principals promoted teacher collaboration at least monthly. In contrast, almost one in five attended schools where this practice was uncommon (OECD, 2023b). Building a collaborative structure through discussions and exchange of materials and practices can improve pedagogical processes (Eisenschmidt et al., 2024).

Half of school leaders in the region consider collaborative teaching as inclusive, but the practice is likely to have not been formally established. In Albania, teachers form subject teams, based on their specialization, to engage in activities, such as discussing assessments and observing classrooms, but this form of collaboration is not fully supported by the education system (Maghnouj et al., 2020). Teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina report cooperation in teaching by grade or subject, such as developing assessment criteria and teaching practices, but this is spontaneously organized by them rather than by the school (Guthrie et al., 2022).

Features of the education system may pose limitations. In Georgia, one in three teachers rarely discussed students' learning development with colleagues. But the reason may be that there are many small rural schools, which limit collaboration opportunities (Li et al., 2019). One in four students attend schools with less than 250 students (OECD, 2022).

Collaborative teaching, especially between general and special education teachers, can be transformative, leading from a simple knowledge transfer to inclusive learning (Hedegaard-Soerensen et al., 2018). Special education teachers may assist in planning, teaching and designing assessments (OECD, 2023a). In 2017, Poland's Ministry of Education established working teams of mainstream and special school leaders – principals, teachers and

specialists – to collaborate on creating an inclusive education model for learners with special educational needs. Extended to include representatives of NGOs, practitioners and researchers, these teams have played a significant role in informing a psychosocial model of education for all learners.

A whole-school approach based on collaborative effort and coordinated actions on pedagogies and school culture helps promote students' socioemotional development and overall school well-being (Goldberg et al., 2018). School leaders in a school in Ljubljana interviewed for this report use a whole-school approach to achieve inclusive education. The school has welcomed students with low socioeconomic and refugee background. Professionals discuss learning plans and lead targeted initiatives during team meetings, including intercultural activities, language support and community engagement.

... with support staff and services

In the transition to inclusive education, school leaders need to ensure appropriate learning support. In-school support staff facilitate information sharing and support school leaders to plan and implement inclusive education practices (Asamoah et al., 2021). School leader collaboration with support services outside the school is also crucial for accurate school placement and support (**Box 8**).

BOX 8.

Social services support school leaders' efforts to address learners' needs

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have progressively deinstitutionalized special schools and introduced a system of needs assessment and school placement based on collaboration. The inclusion of children with disability is a significant outcome of collaboration between educational, social and medical services (Trofin et al., 2019).

School leaders often rely on external services to address support staff shortages. In Estonia, Pathfinder Centres, piloted in 2008 and expanded in 2014, are regional counselling centres that provide need assessments and specialist services to students and young people with special learning needs, including speech therapy, psychological and career counselling, and social assistance (NCEE, 2024). In small rural schools, where additional assistance is needed, school leaders apply for support from Pathfinder Centres and consult an expert advisory panel to appropriately address learners' needs (Eisenschmidt et al., 2023).

Since 2011, teachers and principals in the Republic of Moldova have been receiving methodological support and targeted training (through workshops, working groups and case-based sessions) from the Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Service, which implements the Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education in every region and municipality. A team of 8 to 10 specialists, including speech therapists, psychologists and support teachers, assesses children's educational needs to help school leaders include them in classrooms (Trofin et al., 2019).

Methods and approaches towards inclusive education may not always align. In Kyrgyzstan, social educators are mandated to identify children at risk of exclusion. However, school leaders interviewed for this report said that their instructional and methodological approaches do not always favour inclusive placement in mainstream schools. School principals and teachers can challenge the decision and then admit children with disability into mainstream schools (UNICEF, 2021).

Learning support staff help with student placement (Fasting and Breilid, 2024) and the identification of strategies to create inclusive learning environments. In Albania, the identification of children with functional difficulties that impact learning is done by schools and the psychosocial service in regional education directorates and offices, in collaboration with local agencies and health and social services. Principals establish and appoint members of the school commission for children with disability, while the regional education directorates and offices recommend individualized education plans. School commissions design the plans with primary, subject and supportive teachers and the school psychosocial team. School principals then approve the individualized plans (Save the Children, 2017).

Estonia has established a three-tiered support system for students with special educational needs based on the provision of targeted support which varies according to students' needs from general to special. General support consists of individual tutoring, study support lessons and individualized specialist services. Students with 'lasting study difficulties' are entitled to enhanced support, including individual study programmes in general education classrooms. Special support is reserved for students with

severe disability. It consists of disability-specific learning, supportive technologies, and social and health-care specialists in general education or special classrooms.

In the Republic of Moldova, support teachers are key figures for the implementation of inclusive activities and practices, as per the ministerial guidelines and methods. In collaboration with school leaders and teachers, they coordinate support initiatives. They also collaborate with the Committee for Children in Difficulty, that brings together health centres and social assistance mechanisms to support schools on specific inclusion issues. In Poland, learning accessibility advisors support school leaders to develop the inclusiveness of school environments to meet the needs of learners, such as those with a migrant background.

As mandated by the European Union accession process, Bosnia and Herzegovina signed the 2019 Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration and committed to raising the completion rates of Roma youth to 90% in primary and 50% in secondary education (Lukenda, 2023; Regional Cooperation Council, 2019). To support this effort, Roma mediators work with Swiss Caritas and other NGOs in selected cities to guide children and families and to promote intercultural communication among students of different backgrounds (European Union and Council of Europe, 2020).

The availability of non-teaching support staff, including instructional specialists, psychologists and nurses, varies greatly in the region. There is one support staff member for every 352 students in Albania and for every 134 students in Estonia (OECD, 2022). Three quarters of school leaders interviewed for this report reported that a shortage of non-teaching support staff was a challenge to inclusion. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the federal, cantonal and district (Brčko) level, schools can request support staff based on the recommendation of the professional team or an assessment of student needs. In practice, however, availability depends on resources. School leaders in Georgia primarily attributed the shortage of support staff to financial constraints.

In September 2022, Poland set a ratio of specialists per number of students and mandated the hiring of specialist teachers, psychologists and the new profile of special educators, in mainstream kindergartens and schools. The target is to reach a minimum of 51,000 support staff by 2025. However, as of 2024, there is a lack of intercultural assistants and psychologists: only one for every 785 students. There are 450 municipalities with no one in this role (Tędziagolska et al., 2024).

... with students, parents and communities

The active engagement of students, parents and communities helps improve student attendance, adaptation and well-being (Kefallinou et al., 2020). When families are supportive, students report a stronger sense of belonging at school and higher levels of life satisfaction (OECD, 2019). Analysis of the PEER country profiles shows that 77% of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have adopted standards requiring school principals to give parents and guardians information on school matters and student performance.

In Albania, school leaders prioritize collaboration, active student participation, community engagement and relational aspects of leadership. The introduction of a Parents' Day in a school helped improve parental involvement and awareness. Students discuss the day's activities, which engages them to celebrate the supportive role of families. Information is shared about school decision-making processes, school programmes and objectives, and students' talents. The practice has improved relationships between teachers, parents and students and increased students' motivation. In Slovenia, school leaders focus on collaboration, involving parents and external professionals, to cultivate an inclusive school culture and foster a shared vision.

Principals and teachers can invite parents to school to encourage their involvement (Yulianti et al., 2022). Meetings with principals and teachers is a common practice of parental engagement (Heinrichs, 2018). In Georgia, school leaders find it important to create a space for families to provide feedback and express concerns as a way of not only engaging them but also identifying the community's needs.

Principals can support parent and community organizations by providing resources and involving them in school decisions. In Estonia, each school has a board of trustees, a body that brings together the principal, teachers, parents, students and graduates. Among other activities to promote quality, the board develops the school's learning plan, approves and amends the school's statutes and curriculum, and makes recommendations on admission conditions and procedures – all of which have implications on inclusiveness. In Georgia, parents of children with disability must be involved in decision making regarding the best school model and the formulation of individual education plans (Tchintcharauli and Javakhishvili, 2017).

Parents on school management teams, as associations or individuals, can be key advocates for inclusion. In Slovenia, representatives of parents sit in school councils and

contribute to decisions on teacher appointments and dismissals. Parents' councils have an advisory role on the learning programme. Since 2008, parents have the right to form local, regional and national associations. Parents' associations have actively contributed to the inclusion of children with special needs through dedicated projects, workshops, educational and other support activities (Schmidt et al., 2020).

The extent to which collaboration with families and communities improves inclusive education varies by context. In nearly all focus countries, school leaders interviewed for this report face the challenge of resistance from families of children with special educational needs to inclusion in mainstream schools. In Poland, school leaders highlighted the lack of an external support system, for example in the form of mediation, to help solve potential conflictual situations and resistance from families.

To address such challenges, school leaders in some countries have promoted parental awareness of inclusive education. In the Republic of Moldova, for example, parents' school academies have been established as a collaborative space to discuss inclusive conduct for children with special needs and create a supportive community to facilitate the implementation of inclusive practices.

LEADERSHIP CAN SUPPORT TEACHERS' DEVELOPMENT TO PROMOTE INCLUSION

A core dimension of school leaders' activity concerns the professional and career development of their staff. School leaders who engage in developing people enhance teachers' and staff's capacities, motivation and commitment, thus improving teaching and learning (Berkovich and Eyal, 2017; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). Analysis of the PEER country profiles suggests that 85% of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia mandate principals to support staff professional development.

Principals who enjoy a high level of autonomy can match their development of teachers with the need to promote an inclusive environment. School leaders in Estonia have a high degree of autonomy in decisions related to teacher professional development (Tirri et al., 2021). They can assess teachers using models developed by school leader associations and customize them according to their schools' characteristics (Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). In Slovenia, principals have autonomy in decisions over teacher appraisal and career promotions. They may recommend additional training and customized courses.

Teacher professional development can be promoted in various forms, including through professional learning communities and knowledge networks (**Box 9**) (Admiraal et al., 2021). Principals surveyed at least in five countries for this report expressed confidence in facilitating professional learning communities, which can help develop inclusive cultures and practices (Walton et al., 2022). In Estonia, professional learning communities can increase trust and open communication among teachers, although more could be done for teachers to feel empowered to organize regular meetings for collective learning (Oppi and Eisenschmidt, 2022).

BOX 9.

In a Croatian school, empowered teachers could support Roma students

The full inclusion of Roma students depends on teachers' attitudes and competencies (Mirazchiyski et al., 2022; Symeou and Karagiorgi, 2018). In Mala Subotica, Croatia, the primary school Tomaš Goričanec has prioritized the inclusion of Roma, who form a large part of its roughly 500 student population. For most Roma students, Croatian is not the main language spoken at home. As a result, many Roma children begin primary school with limited proficiency in the official language of instruction. Moreover, most Roma families reside in segregated communities, and many Roma students attend segregated branch schools. Although Croatian law guarantees the right of national minorities to be educated in their mother tongue, systemic barriers have posed significant challenges to Roma children's educational outcomes. Barriers include a lack of teachers' awareness of and competencies in addressing the specific needs of Roma students.

Continued on the next page

BOX 9. *Continued*

To address these issues, the school leadership developed a comprehensive strategy for integrating Roma children in education. The school joined the Roma Early Years Network Croatia (REYN-C) study, which aimed at addressing social and educational barriers affecting its Roma students. School leaders promoted the participation of teaching staff in REYN-C as a form of professional development focusing on understanding the root of inequality. School leaders also facilitated teacher participation in the Teaching Second Language Learners programme to equip educators with methods to adapt teaching practices to support language acquisition and overall learning development.

Furthermore, the school supported the development of a handbook tailored to teaching Croatian as a second or foreign language. The resource, developed by two teachers, has been shared with other schools to support Roma students. Finally, school leaders promoted cultural awareness among teachers through participation in a Bajash Romanian language course. This initiative empowered educators to build positive relationships with Roma children and their families, fostering respect for their language and culture within a plurilingual educational environment.

Sources: OS T.G. Mala Subotica (2019); Romani Early Years Network (2024).

School-to-school networks to share expertise is another way to develop a learning community (Jackson and Temperley, 2006), increase motivation and build positive relationships (Education Development Trust and VVOB, 2017). In Slovenia, the National School for Leadership in Education promotes several initiatives to encourage peer-to-peer learning. The Network Learning Schools and Kindergartens allow leaders to share experiences and best practices, including on inclusive education, and seek peer support (National School for Leadership in Education, 2025). The Illusion of Equality – Addressing Diversity for Inclusive Educational Institutions initiative is a three-year collaboration for school leaders to enhance their knowledge of inclusion implementation.

School leaders can help staff implement inclusive education practices through coaching and mentoring programmes, which help novice staff, while also allowing expertise to be shared and insights to be gained (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). In Slovenia, school leaders reported that they serve as mentors and facilitators. They help teachers understand and implement inclusive practices through guidance and resources.

Principals can empower teachers through constructive supervision and structured assessment, linked to feedback and coaching (Grissom et al., 2021). In Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, 70% of countries assign teacher evaluation and assessment to principals. In Poland, school leaders conduct teacher appraisals in consultation with the parents' council. Their results inform the development of annual pedagogical supervision plans, which include the identification of professional development needs and support (Poland Ministry of Education, 2022).

School leaders can encourage self-evaluation that promotes reflection on the effectiveness of teaching strategies (OECD, 2023a). Estonia has implemented teacher self-assessments and competency assessments that are based on a 360° comprehensive feedback method. Other people, including peers, students and their parents, contribute feedback on the teacher's work (Estonia Education and Youth Board, 2024). Adopted in 2018, the Moldovan professional competence standards for managerial staff, which also cover intercultural skills, non-discrimination and social inclusion, serve as a resource for self-assessment and the identification of professional development priorities.

Conclusion

As part of their political transition in the past 35 years, countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia have taken various steps to reform their education systems and adopt an inclusive paradigm, notably to include children with disability. However, fresh challenges to inclusion in schools, related to language and ethnicity, are challenging education systems, which have to find new ways to support the needs of all students and value their diversity.

The extent to which schools adopt an inclusive ethos is the result of many factors: the overarching social and cultural context (and the way minorities and vulnerable populations are treated); enabling conditions that allow principals to adapt resources and make decisions related to teaching and learning; education legislation and policy that prioritizes inclusion, often in the face of sceptical social attitudes; individual values and attitudes of school staff and community members that can set inclusive examples for others to follow; and individual knowledge and expertise to help build appropriate institutional environments and organizational structures.

School leaders, defined broadly to include not only principals but also other teaching or non-teaching staff who are assigned formal or informal responsibility for selected tasks, can play a decisive role in promoting an inclusive school ethos, at least in areas under the control of school actors. They can do so by formulating an inclusive vision (including a resourced plan, school policies to support it, and a monitoring mechanism to evaluate progress), promoting targeted pedagogies and positive relationships, collaborating and sharing responsibilities with teachers, support staff, parents and communities, and developing, motivating and empowering staff. This has happened often despite reluctance and resistance to inclusion, both by peers and communities.

Decision makers can build on such examples to design system-wide policies that will ensure each school has leaders who are prepared and well supported to address and resolve education inclusion challenges. The solution cannot be exceptional individuals but system-level processes that attract diverse groups of people with good potential to pursue leadership careers, who are prepared and willing to not act alone but with and for their community. Four recommendations stand out for establishing enabling conditions for inclusive school leadership.

School leaders need to be trusted and empowered to promote inclusion.

The extent to which school leaders and management teams have the authority to take decisions remains limited in the region. In a context of strict hierarchy and school reliance on central interventions, the school community absolves itself of the responsibility to take decisions and, therefore, its capacity to respond to the needs of its members weakens. Education systems need to empower school principals with sufficient autonomy to manage school affairs and promote an inclusive ethos, which requires agility and responsiveness.

School leaders need to be recruited with inclusion in mind.

Many of the competencies needed for inclusive schools can be identified in pools of potential leaders through appropriate recruitment and selection procedures. But while the region has broadly embraced open recruitment, which is a precondition for meritocratic appointments, there is insufficient focus on candidates' abilities to promote inclusion in schools. Education systems need to ensure that school leader professional standards explicitly refer to inclusion and that selection processes assess candidates' preparedness to also focus on this objective.

School leaders need better preparation to promote inclusion.

While countries cover inclusive education in professional development for school principals, the focus tends to be on administrative compliance. Content tends to be neither mandatory nor specific enough. Education systems need to develop the capacity of existing leaders through externally organized training programmes and internally developed professional learning communities, especially as new challenges emerge.

Leadership for inclusion thrives on collaboration.

Only about one third of training programmes for principals focus on collaboration. Yet collaboration is the foundation of inclusive practice. Sharing decision-making authority with peers, forming teams with complementary skills, engaging with and responding to the community, and involving students in the schools' daily life are all components of democratic school management that open the door for respect to diversity – of opinions, contributions, needs and perspectives. Education systems need to emphasize collaboration in principal standards and appraisals.

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GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

REGIONAL EDITION

Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia

Lead for inclusion

Building on the theme of the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* on leadership in education, this regional edition is the result of a partnership with the Network of Education Policy Centers. It provides comparative analysis on leadership for inclusion, drawing on profiles of 27 countries in the region, collected for the GEM Report's PEER website, and eight in-depth country studies from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, Poland and Slovenia.

This edition highlights evidence on how school leader standards, selection processes and training programmes can contribute to inclusion. It reports on aspects of governance, as well as school leaders' characteristics, attitudes and capacities, that promote inclusive education. Finally, it focuses on practices across four dimensions of leadership that serve as the foundation for system-wide policies that encourage inclusion: setting expectations, prioritizing learning, fostering collaboration and developing people.

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