Chapter 5

System evaluation in Romania: Using information for system improvement

This chapter looks at how Romania uses information about the education system to monitor its performance and inform policy making. While it does have many of the components of system evaluation in place, it lacks a coherent national strategy to draw on this information effectively. This chapter suggests that the “Educated Romania” initiative could help to address this by creating a national education strategy underpinned by indicators to monitor progress. The absence of standardised data on student outcomes and the contextual information that might shape learning weakens system evaluation in Romania; the Grade 4 national assessment could be revised to address these gaps. Finally, educational improvement hinges on feedback; making information more accessible at the local and school levels will help them to make better use of data to lead improvement.
Introduction

Romania has many of the constituent parts of system-monitoring and evaluation in place. It collects information on student learning outcomes through national and international assessments, it is improving the breadth and reliability of its statistical tools to capture educational data, it collects information about the learning environment in schools, and government bodies and non-governmental agencies produce insightful policy research and analysis. What Romania lacks, however, is a coherent and continued approach to evaluation that draws on this information in a consistent way to inform national education policies and practices in schools. This reduces its capacity to provide fair and accurate accountability information to the public on how the education system is working, and to inform policy making for educational improvements, which are the two main goals of system evaluation (OECD, 2013).

Improving system evaluation could catalyse progress in education in Romania. Setting a long-term strategic vision for the sector built on a broad-based national consensus, with clear, measurable goals, would be an important first step, and would help to orient policy reforms and prioritise investments. The current discussion around a new education law and the “Educated Romania” initiative to develop an education strategy offer the opportunity to develop this vision into action. Underpinning national education goals with a rigorous monitoring framework and regular reporting would strengthen public accountability and encourage more systematic use of data to inform policy making.

A strong monitoring framework would also propel Romania into addressing key data gaps. Better information about the contextual factors that influence student learning and the use of financial resources will be critical to addressing systemic challenges of high dropout rates and relatively low student achievement. Better information – and greater capacity to use it – would also mean that central government is better equipped to steer reform, while counties and schools would be better able to understand their current strengths, and put in place appropriate strategies for improvement.

Context and main features of system evaluation in Romania

The national vision for education

The 2011 Education Law sets out the overall objective of education in Romania. This is to develop individuals’ competencies in the form of multifunctional and transferable knowledge; skills, abilities and aptitudes for personal accomplishment; social and economic integration; and respect for human rights. According to the law, the education system is governed by a set of principles that include fairness, quality, relevance, efficiency and public responsibility.

Implementation of the Education Law has been mixed. While some parts of the law were supported by implementation plans, changes in policy direction and political leadership led to discontinuity and the plans were only partially realised. Implementation of other parts of the law has been significantly delayed; for example, individualised learning plans for students to accompany the new national assessments in Grades 2 and 6 are still not in place nationwide. In other cases still, subsequent amendments to the law have reversed its original intent. The Education Law aimed to support decentralisation, for example devolving responsibility for teacher hiring to schools, but this was later amended and remains the responsibility of the County School Inspectorates (CSIs).
Romania has recently developed sector-based education strategies, which are linked to the achievement of its European Union (EU) 2020 targets and were the condition for receiving EU structural funds (Box 5.1). In general, the sector strategies are well aligned with the objectives and principles of the 2011 law and provide a clear plan to address the prominent challenges of Romania’s education system. For example, the strategy on reducing early school leaving includes the development of an early warning system to detect children at risk, and professional development for teachers working with vulnerable groups. It also aims to strengthen the government’s capacity to implement, monitor and evaluate early school leaving. While the strategies have given impetus to reform, their external financing and accountability may limit national ownership and sustainability.

Box 5.1. Romania and the Europe 2020 strategy

Europe 2020 is the European Union’s jobs and growth strategy for 2010-20. It aims to create the conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth across the EU, with national targets in five key sectors including education.

Romania has developed its own national targets for Europe 2020. Those that are specifically related to education include the reduction of early leavers from education and training to less than 11.3% by 2020 and at least 26.7% of 30-34 year-olds completing tertiary level education by 2020. These targets have informed the development of five national strategies:

- National Strategy to Reduce Early School Leaving 2015-2020
- National Strategy for Tertiary Education in Romania, 2015-2020
- National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training, 2016-2020
- National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2014-2020
- National Strategy for Infrastructure Investments in Education Institutions (under development).

The national strategies are supported by an extensive national and European-level monitoring system. As part of a standard EU-wide process, Romania produces an annual National Reform Programme which sets out the actions that it will put in place to support its EU 2020 targets. The European Commission monitors Romania’s progress towards its EU 2020 targets, and based on this progress and the national report, issues country specific recommendations.


Responsibilities for system evaluation

The Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research (MNESR) has overall responsibility for system evaluation in Romania (Figure 5.1). It exercises this role primarily through its Public Policy Department, which is charged with monitoring the education system, supporting the development and analysis of policies, and supporting strategic management in the MNESR. The department publishes the State of Education report, an annual report on the education system in Romania. It is also responsible for co-ordinating and reporting on the five national strategies. At the time of the OECD Review Team’s visit in July 2016, the Public Policy Department had nine staff, a mixture of civil servants and contractual staff with expertise in European affairs and public management.
The MNESR also contains the Monitoring and School Inspection Directorate, which conducts direct school evaluations, and the unit for Information Technology in Education, which is responsible for the Integrated Information System for Education System in Romania (SIIIR), collecting school-level education data.

Specialised agencies that operate at arms length from the ministry also provide data and evaluation of the education system. These include the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES), the National Center for Assessment and Examinations (NCAE) and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP). For local analysis, the ministry can draw on the annual reports of its 42 County School Inspectorates (CSIs).

Beyond the ministry, the independent National Institute of Statistics (NIS) plays a prominent role in the collection and management of education data. The NIS is responsible for all data reporting to Eurostat as well as for monitoring Romania’s progress towards its Europe 2020 goals.

The distribution of roles and responsibilities for evaluation across these different bodies is not always clear. In some cases this means that useful analysis is not used as fully as it could be. For example, the annual CSI reports on school quality in their counties or ARACIP’s research reports on education quality nationally do not contribute systematically to system evaluation.

Figure 5.1. System evaluation in Romania

**Tools for system evaluation**

System evaluation is the use of multiple tools to develop an overall view of educational performance. It provides the public with information on how the education system is performing, for accountability, and policy makers with insights to inform policy decisions. Important tools for system evaluation include:

- indicator frameworks mapping out the collection of key monitoring information
- national and international assessments, and longitudinal analysis to monitor student outcomes
- qualitative information and analysis about the education system
- the evaluation of specific programmes and policies (OECD, 2013).
Romania has developed a number of these instruments in recent decades. It collects student performance data at multiple times while a student is at school, and the NIS provides national education indicators and SIIIR collect education data. The IES provides policy analysis and evaluation, while qualitative school evaluations are provided by CSIs and, since 2005, by ARACIP.

System-level indicators

The NIS is the primary provider of national administrative data on education in Romania. Accession to the EU has supported improvements in Romania’s statistical tools, and the NIS now collects data according to most of the key indicators collected internationally, as established by the UNESCO-OECD-EUROSTAT collection of educational data. Participation in the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey (EU-SILC) complements administrative data by providing information on education outcomes and enables longitudinal studies to be conducted.

The national education indicators managed by the NIS are now complemented by data provided by SIIIR. Established in 2013, SIIIR reflects an important improvement in the quality and reliability of MNESR’s own data. It collects data on the school network, school infrastructure, individual students and is developing a component for data on individual teachers (e.g. their qualifications, professional experience and continuous professional development). The NIS and MNESR have worked together closely to develop SIIIR and to avoid duplicating data collection from schools. As the MNESR increases its capacity, it is expected in the future to be the only organisation responsible for data collection at the school and county level.

Importantly, SIIIR now collects individual student-level data for the first time in Romania. It uses a unique student identifier (ID) which in the future should make it possible to connect student assessment and examination results from the NCAE with individual student data in SIIIR. This would provide data for enhanced analysis of student outcomes. However, at present no information on students’ socio-economic background is collected through SIIIR or student assessments. Over time, SIIIR will also offer the possibility to conduct longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis of student outcomes.

Student assessments

Romania’s 2011 Education Law introduced a new annual national assessment for system-monitoring in Grade 4, the last year of primary education. Romania had previously conducted sample-based assessments for system-monitoring in Grade 4 at roughly three-year intervals between 1995 and 2008.

While the Grade 4 assessment is set out in the law as a system-monitoring, sample-based assessment it has not been implemented in this way. The assessment is marked at the school level, which means that the marking process lacks the standardisation necessary to ensure consistently reliable data to monitor student learning in one year across different schools or counties, or over time. In 2015 it was also administered to the full student cohort. This decision was based on the objective of collecting individual student results for each grade when a national assessment or examination occurs. Following the assessment, students and parents receive a two page report indicating the questions that were answered correctly, partially correctly and incorrectly on one page and a short text on their strong points and areas for improvement on the second page. The NCAE produces a national report analysing student responses by question.
Unlike earlier versions, the current assessment is not accompanied by a questionnaire to collect contextual data. While the national report provides results broken down by county and urban-rural areas for each item, there is no overall breakdown or analysis for the whole assessment by such factors, and it does not analyse other key background factors such as gender or socio-economic group.

Internationally, Romania has participated in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since 2006 (and also in 2000). It also participated in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement’s Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) until 2011, when participation ended due to lack of funding. Such assessments provide Romania with international benchmarks and trend data to compare their students’ performance over time. International assessments are accompanied by student, parent and school questionnaires, providing extensive contextual information that is not collected via national surveys. Little use is currently made of international assessment results for system-monitoring purposes, although the IES conducted an analysis of how students answered individual questions in TIMSS and PIRLS to provide teachers with insights on common student errors. These insights were also used by the IES in its co-ordination of the new curriculum’s development.

Feedback from parents, teachers and students

Romania does not run national surveys of parents, teachers and students but surveys form part of school self-evaluations. Romania asks its students for written feedback more frequently than most OECD countries. In PISA 2015, 93% of Romanian students were in schools whose principals reported that their students had been requested to provide written feedback on lessons, teachers or resources, compared to an average of 69% of students across OECD countries (OECD, 2016). However while this information is available at the school level it does not seem to be linked to critical self-reflection (see Chapter 4). Neither is it linked to national reporting on stakeholders’ perceptions of the education system.

Since 2013, the NCAE has been responsible for surveying Romania’s teachers as part of the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). TALIS asks teachers and school leaders about their roles including appraisal and feedback, development and support, teaching practices and the classroom environment, school leadership, and self-efficacy and job satisfaction.

School performance efficiency index

ARACIP has been developing an “efficiency index” of school performance since 2009 (Box 5.2). This index is a contextualised attainment model that measures a school’s actual results with the school’s “expected” or “predicted” results based on its characteristics, and its student and teaching body. The index identifies schools that are achieving better results than would be expected given their background. The index is not used by the MNESR in any systematic way although the President recently awarded the Order of “Merit for Education” Knight to the top-ranking rural school in the efficiency index.
Box 5.2. ARACIP’s efficiency index

In 2009, ARACIP began developing a contextualised attainment model to take account of the factors that may have a strong influence on students’ learning outcomes. The data are collected directly from the schools by ARACIP, and since 2014 the collection has taken place exclusively online. The index was first piloted in 2011 in 1 023 schools across all levels - kindergartens, primary, gymnasium and high school. The methodology was further revised and the index was applied to another 1 300 schools in 2014. In 2016 a ministerial decision confirmed the intention to extend the index to the remaining schools that have not yet been included in the pilot index.

The index is calculated at the school level and currently incorporates input indicators for:

- **Family background**: for example, the percentage of children from families with low income, parents’ education in number of years and the average commute time between home and school.
- **Education environment**: for example, if the school is located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area, the number of school shifts and the average number of pupils per class.
- **Infrastructure**: for example, the availability of basic utilities such as water and electricity, and the availability of classroom furniture such as desks.
- **Equipment and teaching aids**: for example, the number of books in the school library, the number of computers, and the number of computers with Internet connection per 100 pupils.
- **Information communication technology (ICT)**: the level of ICT use in the school.
- **Human resources**: for example, the percentage of qualified teachers, new teachers, and the average teacher-pupil ratio.

Expected and actual results are measured through the following indicators:

- **Participation**: the average number of absences per pupil, the percentage of students dropping out and the percentage of students repeating a grade.
- **Results**: the distribution of average classroom assessment marks at the end of the school year, the average results in the Grade 8 and baccalaureate national examinations, and average results in the competence certification exam for vocational schools.

When a school receives its quality certificate following an ARACIP evaluation it also receives its performance against the efficiency index criteria and its overall ‘index of efficiency’. Where this value is higher than 1, it indicates that a school is achieving better results than other schools functioning in similar conditions and with similar resources.


**Qualitative reviews**

Romania collects a wealth of information about what happens in classrooms and school quality through its external school inspections. The CSIs conduct evaluations of the schools within their county, with each school being evaluated approximately every four or five years and ARACIP performs recurrent evaluations of all schools nationally on a five-year cycle. The Monitoring and School Inspection Directorate within the MNESR has inspected a sample of schools annually since 2011, (and also prior to the mid-2000s). The CSI and MNESR school evaluations evaluate the same areas whereas the ARACIP criteria differ in some areas. Broadly, all look at issues of institutional
capacity, educational efficiency and quality management but there are some key areas that are not covered by either framework, such as the outcomes of students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds (see Chapter 4).

Each CSI produces an annual report that includes a summary of the individual inspectorate’s top priorities and general conclusions from the inspections it has conducted that year. The Monitoring and School Inspection Directorate’s school inspections result in individual school-level reports and recommendations for decision makers in MNESR (see Chapter 4).

ARACIP produces two kinds of report. Its annual activity reports make recommendations on how it can improve its own functioning and efficacy and how schools can improve their quality, and also sometimes makes recommendations to the MNESR and the CSIs. It also produces general reports looking at the quality of education nationally. In recent years, European Social Funds have enabled further reports: in 2013 ARACIP reported on the development of the concept of quality in Romania’s schools, and in 2015 a thematic report was produced on quality in rural schools based on ARACIP’s findings from its internal and external school evaluations (ARACIP, 2013, 2015). The main audience for ARACIP’s reports are the MNESR, CSIs and schools, and the reports make specific system-level observations and recommendations to each of these organisations.

**Policy evaluations**

The IES is the primary source of analysis and policy evaluations on education in Romania, for both the ministry and the public. It analyses NIS indicators for the State of Education report, and is an important source of analytical capacity in Romania’s education system. It analyses the feasibility of new policies, for example the challenges and opportunities of moving to a school-based curriculum. The IES has also provided in-depth analysis on key challenges facing Romania’s education system, such as out-of-school children, developed in cooperation with the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (UNICEF, 2012). It also looks at the impact of policies, such as the integration of the Preparatory Grade into compulsory education, and it will evaluate the implementation of the new curriculum whose development it is leading. However neither the IES nor the MNESR systematically conduct post-implementation policy evaluations. As a member of the European Network of Education Councils, it has the opportunity to discuss and learn from other European councils that advise their governments on education.

**Policy issues**

Institutionally, Romania’s education system has made great strides in recent decades. It has established an examinations and assessment centre, the NCAE; an independent institution for quality assurance in schools, ARACIP; and is improving its data quality to meet international standards. However critical challenges remain. The system’s actors and resources have not been consistently directed towards the achievement of clear national education goals, leading to constant policy changes and undermining accountability. This has also meant that existing resources have not been used as effectively as they might be to monitor the education system and identify improvements.

Raising educational outcomes for students from all backgrounds will require consistent efforts over the medium to long term. The current consideration to develop a
new law for education and the “Educated Romania” initiative create an opportunity to develop an inclusive national vision. It is crucial that this is complemented by transparent, reliable progress reporting and expanded data collection. Improved public reporting will help to strengthen public accountability, creating clear incentives for actors across the system to work together to achieve tangible progress against national goals. The overall limit in school resources and inequities in resource distribution make improving the transparency and availability of information on school resources important. This information will enable more effective targeting of resources to disadvantaged schools for improved equity, and also strengthen accountability of resource use.

Romania can also do more to exploit the information that it has. Making better use of data will help to focus evaluation and assessment more towards improvement. County and school-level leaders can be and are powerful agents of local change, but they need better support and more accessible data so that they can identify appropriate improvements to support better student outcomes.

Policy Issue 5.1: Strengthening strategic planning

Romania’s 2011 Education Law set high-level national goals for education, but these have not been accompanied by an implementation plan or a monitoring framework to put them into practice. Romania now has national strategies linked to the achievement of its EU 2020 targets and key challenges in Romania, such as the National Strategy to Reduce Early School Leaving (Box 5.1). However the externality of these strategies and their fragmentation means that they cannot replace a comprehensive national vision and strategy for Romania’s education system. At the same time constant political change in Romania, with on average, a new minister approximately every nine months since 1989, has led to frequent policy changes. Without strong strategic planning to ensure continuity, it has so far proved difficult to establish a consistent approach to tackling the persistent challenges of access, quality and equity.

Strategic planning refers to the setting of short-, medium- and long-term objectives, and creating a plan with actions to achieve them (OECD, 2014b). In OECD countries, strategic public management involves: setting a vision, strategy and clear goals which provide meaningful performance expectations; regular monitoring, analysis and reporting of results; and acting on results and holding government organisations and individual managers accountable for their performance (OECD, 2014a).

Developing a national strategy for education

Romania is currently considering a new national law on education. At the same time, the President has launched a three-year “Educated Romania” initiative, to identify a long-term vision and strategy for education. Given the mixed implementation of the 2011 law and the relative weakness of strategic planning in Romania, these initiatives are to be welcomed. In particular, conducting a public consultation to develop national objectives and a long-term strategy to achieve those objectives is an essential first step to coherent and consistent reform.

Successful policy implementation requires that all stakeholders assume ownership of the policy and perceive it to be legitimate, both in the short and long term (Burns et al., 2016). This means that it will important to ensure that any new education law is developed inclusively. Romania’s own recent history underscores the importance of collective ownership. In 2007 all the political parties came together to sign the
Pact for Education which outlined eight objectives for the education system. These were reflected in the subsequent 2011 Education Law. However, many fundamental parts of the 2011 Education Law are still in the process of being implemented, or have been reversed by amendments.

One explanation for this is that neither the pact, nor the law itself, were underpinned by genuine consensus among the political parties themselves, and that few beyond central government were part of the discussion. The OECD Review Team heard suggestions during interviews that there was not enough time for consultation, discussion and development, with the law being rushed through. The repeated amendments also suggest that the Romanian system was not ready, either philosophically or practically, to implement the measures set out in the 2011 law.

**Building collective ownership and legitimacy**

Developing a strategy that will be more successfully implemented than the 2011 Education Law requires a genuinely open public consultation. If actors understand and value a strategy’s goals they will be more inclined to assume responsibility for its implementation (Burns et al., 2016). This creates challenges on two levels. First, it implies engaging all education actors: school leaders, teachers, students, parents, academics and non-governmental organisations. This will help to ensure that the strategy is informed by the different and varied contexts in which students learn across the country. The approach taken by “Educated Romania” to organise themed events throughout the country seems a good step towards creating an open discussion informed by the educational realities of each county.

Second, it will be important to build the strategy’s legitimacy among political parties and society. This is essential to ensure consistent implementation and avoid the strategy being amended and re-amended as the 2011 law was. It will be important to provide evidence to support a clear rationale for the directions set out in the strategy, to create an objective discussion that goes beyond political affiliations. It will also be important to highlight education’s contribution to national development objectives, such as improving competitiveness, growth and social and economic convergence with the rest of the EU. Romania could also consider using non-politically aligned experts to oversee the national debate and national strategy development, to encourage objectivity and strengthen the link to national development.

**Setting long-term goals to ensure continuity**

The first step in translating the new strategy and law into a practical implementation plan is to set out a few clear goals critical for national development, like improving education access, equity and quality. These goals will provide clear objectives to report against to help ensure continuity over the medium to long term. This would help to address the current challenge of discontinuity linked to political change by ensuring the overall focus of the education system remains unchanged despite government changes. Using simple goals with measurable, time-specific targets (see below) is essential to help ensure that each government’s commitment to these goals is not only rhetorical but measured in terms of impact.

A long-term approach is important in the field of education since reform can take years to take hold and yield results. Many countries establish new strategies over 10-15 year periods, with periodic reviews and space for appropriate adjustments to ensure they continue to be relevant. Given the experience of the 2011 law, and the frequent
changes in education leadership that have been common in Romania, establishing an agreed adequate timeframe will be critical. One country that has taken a very comprehensive approach to setting national goals and integrating them into system evaluation is Australia (Box 5.3).

Box 5.3. Australia's Melbourne Declaration

The Melbourne Declaration was agreed by all the Australian territories’ education ministers in 2008. It provides two goals, one based on quality and equity, and another setting out the kind of young Australians the schooling system should nurture: successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

These goals provide a framework for national education for 2009-18. They also provide the basis of measuring performance nationally, as they were translated into national performance measures in the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia. This includes the National Assessment Program that covers national and international assessments to measure student achievement. The performance measures are reported against annually in the National Report on Schooling in Australia.


Aligning evaluation and assessment with the new vision

Once national objectives have been decided, other policies for evaluation and assessment should be reviewed to ensure that they are all working to achieve the same goals. The different parts of an evaluation and assessment system – student assessment, teacher appraisal, school evaluation and system evaluation – will have the most positive impact when they are aligned and focus coherently on improving student learning (OECD, 2013).

The 2005 Quality Law and the 2011 Education Law provide elements of an evaluation and assessment framework, but the policies and practices that they have created do not always consistently support their own goals. For example, the Education Law provides for individualised student learning and feedback as a central part of student assessment but it does not set out a role for formative assessment which is an integral part of student feedback and engaging students in their own learning (see Chapter 2).

The development of a new national strategy creates the opportunity to address this by recognising the role of evaluation and assessment in improving student learning and clarifying the purposes of its different parts to avoid inconsistencies. This would support a shift in evaluation and assessment from reporting and compliance towards using results and information to identify and plan improvements. Using standards – for student learning through performance standards, and teaching and school standards – will help to ensure that evaluation and assessment coherently supports quality teaching and improved student learning (see Figure 0.2 in the Assessment and Recommendations).

In Romania, this would mean that student assessment should therefore recognise not only the role of central assessments and examinations but also leave space for teacher-based assessment and the development of teachers’ assessment literacy. Teacher appraisal and school self-evaluation should focus on encouraging teachers and schools to engage in critical self-reflection to identify development needs. Finally, system evaluation needs to
draw on the full range of available information and use this as the basis for policy changes and adjustments where appropriate.

**Transparent monitoring and progress reporting against national goals**

It will be important for Romania to establish transparent mechanisms for progress monitoring for two reasons. First, progress monitoring is essential for strategic planning. It translates high-level national goals into time-specific, measureable targets. Regularly collecting information on implementation against these targets provides feedback that the government can use for continuous adaptations rather than waiting until the evaluation stage at the end (Burns et al., 2016). Second, regularly and publicly reporting progress supports accountability by creating the means to hold the government accountable for progress achieved, or not achieved. To ensure that reporting leads to broad public engagement, it will be important to ensure that it is accessible and easily understandable for the average member of the public. For example, although the State of Education report currently analyses key educational challenges in Romania such as early school leavers, it has not been published to a regular and predictable schedule (see below), which undermines the public’s ability to be able to draw on it, and its ability to provide a regular, anticipated contribution to the public debate on education.

**Developing indicators for progress monitoring and reporting**

The national goals set out in the strategy should be accompanied by measurable, time-specific targets and indicators for transparent monitoring and progress reporting. Experts should be involved in the development of the indicators to ensure that they are realistic and methodologically sound. Developing an indicator framework that maps out the targets and appropriate indicators would help Romania identify where further indicator development or data collection is required, such as key individual data on student background and teachers, which are currently underdeveloped in SIIIR. The framework should draw on both quantitative and qualitative sources. It should also exploit valuable information which is currently underused for system-monitoring, such as CSI and ARACIP reports on county and national school quality.

**Making the State of Education report an authoritative source of information on system performance**

The State of Education report is the principal reporting tool for the education sector. However it does not seem to inform decision making (World Bank, 2010). This reflects lack of capacity within the ministry to use the information (see Policy Issue 5.3) but also the fact that the report does not provide an authoritative perspective on national education. It is based on a limited set of inputs that include NIS’ national education indicators, and results from the Grade 8 and Grade 12 baccalaureate national examinations. However it does not systematically draw on the findings from the national assessment for system-monitoring in Grade 4. The report now includes some data, such as the number of inspections conducted over the year by CSIs, ARACIP, and the ministry’s Monitoring and School Inspection Directorate, which is positive. However it could go further by discussing the conclusions of the school evaluation bodies, such as the overall factors that might be hindering school improvement, findings from the ARACIP reports on school quality and the ARACIP efficiency index. Including this kind of information on learning outcomes, and the learning environment would increase the report’s value as an accountability tool and resource for policy makers and the public by highlighting key challenges that schools face in improving learning outcomes.
There are efforts to improve integration of some of this information into MNESR reporting. A World Bank-sponsored project aims to harmonise the format of the CSI reports with the national State of Education report, and include more CSI data in the latter. This would help the report to provide a more balanced perspective on education in different regions. To reinforce school evaluation the report could provide an overview on school quality, by drawing on CSI and ARACIP information that is seldom used at the moment (see Chapter 4).

One important source of information about an education system is the views of stakeholders. Romania does conduct student and parent surveys as part of the school self-evaluation process. Student attitudes to learning are also collected as part of PISA. However, this information is currently not used to monitor the system. Romania could consider how this information could be reported more systematically in the State of Education report, since it could provide important insights into the learning environment, which would be especially useful in Romania given its high levels of student dropout. In other countries it is an integral part of annual reporting on the education system. For example, Norway’s annual education system report, the Education Mirror, uses its national Pupil Survey and PISA data to monitor information about student-teacher relationships, student motivation, the levels of home support that students receive and student well-being (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014).

A clear and predictable reporting schedule is important for the transparency and perceived reliability of results. According to the MNESR, the State of Education report should be published and presented to the parliament at the beginning of the year by the MNESR. However, in recent years it has not been published because it did not receive approval from the incoming education minister. Inconsistencies in the reporting schedule undermine transparency and accountability.

**Enhancing the transparency and accessibility of reporting**

System-level evaluation results in Romania are spread across different websites and agency reports. If a member of the public wants to see how Romania is progressing in reducing early school leaving they have to consult the State of Education report on the ministry’s website. But if they want to see how primary students performed in the system-monitoring evaluation in Grade 4 they have to consult the NCAE’s report on its website.

If the public are to be able to monitor the government’s progress against national education goals the accessibility of system-level data should be improved by concentrating system results on a single website. For now, this could simply mean ensuring that the State of Education report is published to a regular, predetermined schedule prominently on the ministry’s website. Access to other system-monitoring information could be facilitated by posting direct links to NCAE reports, and ARACIP’s annual reports and efficiency index from the same place.

In the future, Romania might develop a more sophisticated single-window, user-friendly website where the public can access, navigate and manipulate system-level results (Box 5.4). Such efforts would also help to improve the openness and accessibility of system-level information for other external audiences, such as researchers and civil society. In particular, Romania should make efforts to ensure that system level data, such as national assessment results, are fully available and accessible for third party analysis. The analysis produced by external actors could provide new insights and help to promote the role of data and evidence in the public debate on education.
Policy Issue 5.2: Aligning system-monitoring to educational priorities

Romania has made significant improvements to system-monitoring in recent years. EU accession has driven improvements in the reliability and quality of data to meet international standards and student-level data are now collected nationally. However, changes in policy direction and the absence of a coherent approach for system-monitoring and improvement means that these very important tools are not used as effectively as they might be for monitoring national educational priorities. This includes the current Grade 4 assessment which could become a powerful tool for system-monitoring if it were standardised and combined with background questionnaires. While the breadth and quality of data collection has improved significantly, further expanding coverage to include student background, school resources, processes and context, will make it possible to analyse how student background and learning environment are shaping student outcomes in Romania. Finally, more transparent monitoring of resources will help to provide the basis for better allocation of funds linked to need, helping to improve equity.

Making better use of the Grade 4 national assessment for system-monitoring

In 2015, Romania conducted a new Grade 4 national assessment. According to the 2011 Law the assessment should be sample-based and used to assess the primary education system. In reality however, the design and the format of the Grade 4 assessment is the same as those in Grades 2 and 6. This means that marking is not standardised, as being marked by teachers undermines its ability to provide reliable information that can serve as the basis for system-monitoring.

Such information is very important for an education system. It provides feedback on how students are learning and enables governments to monitor changes in student learning across years. It is especially important when governments are implementing policy changes, as Romania is with its new curriculum, to provide information on how those changes are being implemented in classrooms and their impact on student learning. The IES, in co-operation with the ministry and NCAE, is planning to assess students’ competencies at the end of primary in 2017, to monitor implementation of the new curriculum. While this should provide helpful insights it remains a pilot exercise for the moment, and will not collect the background information for equity monitoring that a
system-monitoring assessment can. Given the disparities in student outcomes in Romania and the current lack of national monitoring on how contextual factors are affecting students’ learning outcomes, it remains important that there is a standardised system monitoring tool. For Romania to develop a powerful system-monitoring assessment, it will need to improve the reliability of its Grade 4 assessment through standardisation, ensure the continuous development and quality of the assessment’s items, and report against national expectations of student learning.

**Standardisation**

National assessments for system evaluation like the Grade 4 assessment provide information on how students are learning across the country. They can also highlight differences in learning by region or among different groups of students. It is therefore essential that they are reliable, to ensure accurate information on student learning. Countries ensure reliability by standardising what students are tested on, and how their responses are marked.

In Romania, the content of the Grade 4 assessment is standardised. All Grade 4 students take the same test which is established centrally by the NCAE. However, marking is not standardised. Marking follows the same procedures for all the national assessments, which were designed to encourage school ownership of the process and results. The NCAE provides standard guidelines but tests are marked within each school and the school provides their results to the NCAE through an electronic platform. There is no external marking or moderation. This is appropriate for a diagnostic assessment where the data are intended for classroom use to support adjustments in individual learning, but it is not appropriate where the data are intended to support inferences on the performance of the education system. A national system-monitoring assessment would provide key information to monitor learning outcomes and equity in Romania but if the Grade 4 assessment is to be used as such, then its marking procedures will need to be more rigorously standardised.

**Reverting to a sample-based test**

Romania might also reconsider its decision to extend the Grade 4 assessment to the full cohort. Sample-based tests are often considered to be preferable for system-monitoring since they are less costly to run and help to avoid any association of high stakes, and yet have the potential to assess learning outcomes with depth and breadth across the curriculum (OECD, 2013). These are especially important considerations in Romania. In a system where there is already significant external high-stakes testing, another assessment for the whole cohort risks having high stakes attached to it too. Furthermore, the NCAE already runs a large number of external tests with limited resources. Reducing the scale of the Grade 4 assessment to a sample-based test would free up some of its capacity so that it can focus on ensuring the quality and reliability of the assessment, and developing background questionnaires (see below).

To enable analysis of the factors shaping students’ educational outcomes, the sample should be designed so that it is possible to compare schools in different counties, across urban and rural settings, and students from different backgrounds including ethnicity, mother tongue language and socio-economic group.
CHAPTER 5. SYSTEM EVALUATION IN ROMANIA: USING INFORMATION FOR SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

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Reporting against national standards

Currently, the results of the Grade 4 assessment are reported nationally, giving the share of students who responded correctly to individual questions, with each item linked to learning objectives. This information is important for understanding student performance across the curriculum and should continue to be provided. However, this does not provide policy makers and the public with the primary information needed from a system monitoring assessment, which is how well students are mastering what the country wants them to know overall. Reporting the Grade 4 results by the share of students meeting national learning standards would help to achieve this (see Chapter 2).

For example, this would mean reporting the share of students who can communicate in the Romanian language according to the national expectations for Grade 4 students, linked to the outcomes that are specified for the end of each education cycle in the curriculum framework. This would provide a simple message that could be easily interpreted by education actors, policy makers and the public so that they can understand the level of student learning in a given year, and track changes over time. This would also help national goal setting (see Policy Issue 5.1). The new national education strategy might include a goal to improve student learning outcomes, with a numerical target for the share of students who should have reached a “satisfactory” level in reading and writing, and mathematics by the end of primary education.

Australia uses national standards to communicate results on its national student assessment. The results for its National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy are reported against national minimum standards for each area that is tested. A national report indicates the percentage of students at, above and below national minimum standards, with performance broken down by gender, indigenous status, language background, geography, parental education and occupation (Santiago et al., 2011).

Ensuring the consistent quality of assessment items

The assessment items used in the Grade 4 assessment seem to be well designed to assess students’ competencies. The assessment covers two core subjects – Romanian language and mathematics - with each assessment linked to learning objectives from the curriculum. For example, in the case of communication in the Romanian language, learning objectives for comprehension and written expression are assessed, and these are further broken down into more detailed objectives. This seems to provide a good framework to link the assessment with the key competencies set out in the new curriculum.

The assessment currently uses a combination of multiple choice, closed format short answers and some open-ended writing tasks. This is in line with the types of items most commonly used in OECD and EU countries for national assessments (OECD, 2013). The questions require students to interpret and apply information from different contexts. In the future, Romania might consider further developing the assessment items by including questions that require students to draw on a range of competencies.

So that Romania’s national assessment is able to continually develop and improve in line with international practice it will be important that the NCAE has technical capacity for modern test design. It should also have the opportunity to learn from the types of questions used in international student surveys such as PISA, which assesses students’ application of knowledge and skills to interpret and solve real life problems (see Chapter 2).
Moving towards a matrix model of assessment in the medium term

Once the Grade 4 national assessment is well established, Romania could consider introducing a sample-based national assessment for system-monitoring in lower secondary education in the medium term. This would provide information on student learning outcomes at multiple stages in the education system and for comparing student progress across grades. The lower secondary assessment could use a matrix model that tests different subjects in different years. This would make it possible to test a broad range of the curriculum (reflecting the increasing breadth of student learning in secondary education), while helping to avoid the assessment becoming associated with high stakes.

However, Romania should not simply introduce another assessment on top of the existing national assessments and examinations, which are already extensive. It would need to be developed in the context of an overall review of national testing and the structure of secondary education. In particular, the format of the national assessments in Grades 2 and 6 might be revised to become more teacher-led to provide greater space and support for teachers to develop their assessment literacy (see Chapter 2).

Improving the availability and use of contextual student data

Romania collects comparatively little contextual information. Such information is invaluable for better understanding the factors shaping student outcomes, such as low levels of learning, and early school leaving. It would also help to provide better understanding of the learning and teaching environment overall.

Including a background questionnaire with the Grade 4 assessment

The analysis of the Grade 4 national assessment results is currently limited to descriptive statistics that break down student performance by county and urban-rural areas. Romania could follow the practice of many OECD countries and use questionnaires as a part of its national assessment to obtain information about student background and attitudes. This could be used to help monitor the progress of particular groups of students who tend to perform below the national average, such as ethnic minorities, and to better understand the background factors that are associated with low educational performance and lack of motivation.

The questionnaire might collect information on students such as gender, socio-economic background, parents’ level of education, profession, family support, area of residence and distance from school. It could also cover classroom instructional processes, such as the disciplinary climate, and information about the school context such as school resources, human resources and community size. Non-cognitive factors that deal with aspects related to attitudes to learning, such as truancy, engagement and motivation could also be included. The impact of such factors on student learning could be analysed annually in the national report on the assessment’s results and the main conclusions presented in the annual State of Education Report (see Policy Issue 5.1).

Connecting information on student outcomes and background in SIIIR

The development of SIIIR also provides opportunities to expand the availability of contextual data, but this will require it to be better targeted at those factors that influence student and school performance. So far, the information it collects on school infrastructure is the most developed and includes very detailed data on material resources. The information it holds on students is much more limited. For students, it includes their
IDs (which is common to the NCAE), and personal details such as their name, gender, nationality, mother tongue and the classes that they attend. In 2016 it included their results, if applicable, from the Grade 8 and Grade 12 baccalaureate mock examinations for the first time. The teacher component is equally limited for the moment. It includes a unique ID for each teacher, and their personal details such as their name, gender, date of birth and email address.

SIIIR plans to expand the information it collects on students and teachers. It should prioritise ensuring the systematic collection of central examination results, and then expanding the collection of student background information, such as implementing plans to collect data on the distance that a student travels to school and the average income per family member.

**Developing ARACIP’s efficiency index to monitor school performance**

The MNESR should consider ending its current ranking of high based on Grade 8 examination results since this is not an accurate indicator of school performance and encourages a perception of educational achievement that is focused solely on exam results (*Admitere*, 2016) (see Chapter 4). Instead, Romania should make greater use of ARACIP’s contextualised attainment model of school performance (Box 5.2). This “efficiency index” provides much greater accuracy in measuring school performance as it helps separate out the contribution of an individual school to student outcomes from contextual factors that are beyond the control of teachers and the school (OECD, 2008). The MNESR should make more effective, systematic use of the ARACIP efficiency index by including its findings in the State of Education report and encouraging its use at county and school level as a means to better understand school performance.

**Improving the transparency of school funding to enable funds to be better targeted to meet school needs**

It is not only the overall underfunding of Romania’s education system that is hindering educational improvement, but also disparities in resource allocation. Romania spends significantly less on students in rural areas and from disadvantaged socio-economic groups than on those in urban areas and from more advantaged socio-economic groups (see Chapter 1). Research on the new per capita funding formula has found that nearly half of the schools sampled in a disadvantaged area reported that their funding was insufficient to cover their needs (Fartusnic et al., 2014). The need for local government and families to compensate for a shortfall in national resources appears to compound, rather than alleviate, inequalities in funding. Improving the quality and equity of Romania’s education system will require ensuring that schools in disadvantaged areas have sufficient resources to address the distinct needs of children from poorer and marginalised families.

**Improving resource planning and use through more transparent data**

This will require better data on school resources, to inform more effective funding and school support policies. System-monitoring and evaluation should help to direct resources to support national priorities and goals, and evaluate whether they are being effectively and efficiently used. However it is unable to fully fulfil this function in Romania due to a lack of transparent financial data, especially at the local level. Romania’s schools are funded centrally by a standard per student cost model, but there is also redistribution at county level if central funds are insufficient to cover teacher salaries in a school. This may result in
funds being taken away from schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, where the teaching costs are lower due to having less experienced teachers, and being given to schools with more experienced teachers and therefore higher teaching costs (Fartusnic et al., 2014). Schools may also receive additional funding from local authorities and parental contributions, which are not publicly recorded. This means that the MNESR lacks accurate information on schools’ budgets.

Improving the reporting of local budgets to the central level would help the MNESR to track school resources and how they are being used. This is essential information that provides the basis for distributing resources more equitably to raise educational outcomes. It will also provide the basis for evaluating how effectively resources are being used to achieve national goals and understand the relationship between resourcing and learning outcomes across different schools and groups of students. Improving the tracking of resources would help to enhance integrity by making it possible to assess how far funds are being invested as intended.

**Distributing resources more equitably**

Better data could help to improve the funding formula and might inform the design of additional compensation programmes. While the new per capita funding formula has improved the equity of resource allocation, it remains relatively simple and offers relatively limited compensation for characteristics of the student population which may affect their needs, such as economic disadvantage. Revising the formula to take greater account of the profile of a school’s student body may help to create a more equitable distribution of resources.

Some OECD countries use special support programmes or “compensatory programmes” to direct additional resources to schools facing particular socio-economic disadvantage. These programmes may target areas or schools with a high share of students from a disadvantaged background (see Chapter 4 and Box 2.5 in Chapter 2). However the success of such programmes depends on local and school capacity to be able use resources effectively to support school development (OECD, forthcoming).

**Policy Issue 5.3: Improving use of results**

Romania’s evaluation and assessment system generates vast amounts of information from students, teachers and schools through testing, inspections and evaluations, but it makes limited use of it. The use of results is an essential part of system evaluation, since it provides feedback to better understand current performance and help to identify where and how improvements might be made. Making better use of results at all levels in Romania, within schools, counties and central government, will help to develop a more comprehensive understanding of current performance in the education system, and identify where improvements can be made.

**Making more effective use of results for decision making in central government**

It was indicated to the OECD Review Team more than once during its interviews that the use of data and evidence in decision making was rare in Romania. This finding is echoed by others. The World Bank found that the MNESR’s use of information and analysis was too limited, and that it was not realising the potential of the evidence available as a key resource for policy making (World Bank, 2010).
Establishing a standard procedure for the use of evidence

A priority for improving the use of results will be to ensure that available data and evidence are used in a framework for progress monitoring, and in key system reporting tools such as the State of Education report (see Policy Issue 5.1). However, ensuring that information is regularly reported will not always ensure that it is used for decision making. This might be encouraged by creating a standard procedure for key policy-making decisions. Such a procedure could use a standard template with a mandatory section to present the relevant available evidence for a particular policy, and to acknowledge any data or knowledge gaps.

Developing capacity in the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research

Improving the use of data and evidence in decision making requires strengthening central capacity in the MNESR. The ministry’s Public Policy Department is supposed to support the development and analysis of public policies and the strategic management of the MNESR. However, with only nine staff members, its capacity is taken up by the coordination and monitoring of the five national strategies developed in support of Romania’s EU 2020 targets.

Encouragingly, one of the measures in the National Strategy to Reduce Early School Leaving is the creation of a “research group within MNESR to study educational reforms (including technology) and challenges specific to Romania” (MNESR, 2015). Other countries such as the Netherlands and New Zealand have created similar bodies in the past. The purpose of such bodies has been to collect, compile and analyse evidence, and make it available across their respective ministries of education so that it forms part of policy making (OECD, 2013). Given the currently limited use of data and evidence in policy making in Romania, the creation of such a research group would seem to be a welcome step.

Optimising the Institute of Educational Sciences as an analytical resource

At central government level, the IES could be a critical resource for evaluation, but it is currently underexploited in this area. Its position outside the MNESR, with technical autonomy from the education authorities, provides it with some distance from political decision making, enabling rigorous data analysis for policy and programme evaluation. While the IES does provide some research and policy, its capacity is constrained by limited resources and the need to respond to ad hoc ministry requests.

The IES’s ability to provide insightful research and policy evaluations would be helped by reinforcing its independence and capacity. This could be achieved by ensuring its work is focused on the activities set out in its four-year activity plan that is agreed with the ministry, and ensuring a multi-year budget that matches the plan. At the moment it is frequently pulled away from its own research activities to address requests from the ministry. Additional activities outside its plan should be limited to an absolute minimum and be fully co-ordinated across the ministry. The new research body in the MNESR discussed above could instead provide technical research capacity to meet the ministry’s needs.
Clarifying the governance of the evaluation and assessment system

Other changes to the roles of institutions recommended in this report will further support the development of more strategic, evidence-driven government. Strengthening the independence of the NCAE and its technical expertise in the development and analysis of student assessments and examinations would give the ministry more reliable data on student learning outcomes for systematic use in policy making (see Chapter 2). Establishing ARACIP as the primary school inspection body would provide the ministry with an authoritative account of school performance against a single set of national standards. Redefining the roles of CSIs would provide more consistent and real-time information on schools, helping to identify problems early, while supporting their continuous improvement. The ministry’s Monitoring and School Inspection Directorate would become an arm of policy oversight, helping it to track how national policies are being implemented and make sure reforms take effect (see Chapter 4).

Improving county-level use of results to support local improvement

Given the direct relationship that CSIs have with schools, teachers and the local community, they are potentially important leaders for local improvement. However CSIs need accessible, relevant information, and technical support to help them use it, to be able to fulfil this role. Use of results by local actors is important if they are to develop locally relevant goals and objectives linked to county-wide visions of improvement which support national targets.

Setting expectations for CSIs

There are currently no strong mechanisms for reporting or monitoring CSI activities, which leads to weak local accountability. The 2011 Education Law indicates that CSIs should produce an annual report regarding education in their county but there is no specification on how the report should integrate national objectives or the role of data and evidence. In the Czech Republic, each region is expected to evaluate its own education system, which is reflected in an annual report. These reports should look not only at regional education performance, but also evaluate how the objectives set out in the long-term plan for the individual region are being fulfilled (Santiago et al., 2012). Setting a clear requirement that CSIs develop county-specific objectives in support of national objectives, accompanied by regular progress reporting, would help to enhance local strategic planning and accountability in Romania.

Supporting CSIs to make better use of system evaluation results

CSIs’ use of student results data is currently limited to raw examination and assessment results. However, being able to monitor the overall learning outcomes of different groups of students across different schools is important for their work. ARACIP’s efficiency index provides this kind of information and CSIs should be encouraged by the ministry to make greater use of it to monitor school performance.

Other countries have developed information management systems to make relevant school and student performance information available to schools and other education agents to encourage its use in self-evaluation and improvement (Box 5.5). Romania might consider how its current information management tools, including SIIIR, could make information on learning outcomes and learning environments easily accessible for CSIs, with the aim of enabling them to develop a clear understanding of the statistical profile of the schools that they are working with. For example, CSIs should be able to identify two
schools within their county with a similar share of students from a disadvantaged socio-economic group or whose mother tongue is not Romanian, and compare the learning outcomes of students across these schools. This would help CSIs to develop a more nuanced understanding of the schools in their county in order to target their support where it is most needed. It will be important that measures are taken to guard against such data being used for school ranking, such as not making the information in such systems publicly available.

**Box 5.5. SMART Australia**

New South Wales in Australia has developed the School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit (SMART). SMART provides information from national assessments and examinations, and from school-based assessment activities, to provide education agents with a wide range of diagnostic information on individual students. It allows users to identify strengths in student performance and areas for improvement. It is also possible to conduct analysis of educational outcomes and processes at different levels, from individual students to groups of students, cohorts, schools and the system as a whole.


**Improving dissemination of results data to CSIs**

Improving how results are disseminated from the central to local levels would also help CSIs to interpret and make greater use of results data to support improvements. CSIs and the MNESR already attend an annual meeting at the beginning of the school year in Romania, which is helpful. The MNESR presents the national assessments and examinations, including how they are developed, and the national and local results, with the expectation that this information is cascaded down to schools and teachers. However, it was reported to the OECD Review Team during its interviews that this may not always happen effectively. It is important that the MNESR explores why this is the case, and perhaps consider moving to a less centralised process through more regional events and involving more local, operational actors. A reoriented Monitoring and School Inspection Directorate focused on overseeing policy implementation would be well placed to lead this work.

**Helping schools to make better use of system results for improvement**

Through data reporting, assessments, exams and school inspections, schools in Romania provide a huge amount of data to the system, but they receive very little information back. Unsurprisingly in this context, it was reported to the OECD Review Team during its interviews that schools see little value in these data, neither understanding why the information is being requested nor the value that it can add to their work. Data on student learning outcomes, student background, and student progress over time can provide valuable insights on school performance and identify areas for improvement. Better use of results in schools would be supported by ensuring that results are made available and accessible, and taking measures, including training, to develop capacity at the school level to act upon this information.
Chapter 5. System Evaluation in Romania: Using Information for System Improvement

Providing more accessible information on student learning outcomes for schools

Romania produces national reports following assessments and examinations. This means that schools have access to their own data and the aggregated national results. But a school’s understanding of its performance would be helped by having more detailed information on their performance in relation to national learning expectations. For example, a school should be able to see the share of its students who have satisfactorily mastered key competencies compared with national averages, and be able to look at results according to students’ socio-economic information, and to compare the school’s results with those of other schools with similar or different statistical profiles. This would help schools to develop a more nuanced understanding of how their learning environments and teaching are shaping student learning. This information could feed into the school’s reflection on its own performance, help it to set goals and plans for improvement, and to monitor progress as part of its self-evaluation.

Schools could be supported by a data management system where they can analyse their own data and identify schools with similar statistical profiles. Romania is planning to develop an application that will enable schools to download and manipulate their own data. It might draw on the experience of other countries as it does so (Box 5.6). An individualised school report could also be useful. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, schools that take the national assessment receive a detailed feedback report on student performance in relation to national averages (OECD, 2013).

Box 5.6. Supporting schools to use and analyse their data

A number of countries have developed information management systems to help education actors, including schools, to use data on learning outcomes and the learning environment more systematically to support improvement. Australia’s has developed SMART (see Box 5.5) and Norway has developed its School Portal (Skoleporten). The School Portal is an online information tool that presents education monitoring information such as learning outcomes, learning environments, resources and basic school data. Part of the site is accessible to the general public, while another part is password protected, where schools and school owners can access more detailed information and benchmark themselves against national averages. Such tools could prove useful in Romania, to help teachers and schools draw greater benefit from educational data to develop a more comprehensive picture of learning outcomes for individual students, classes and schools as a whole.


Other countries produce individualised analyses of national assessment or examinations for different audiences, and support their use through dissemination events. In Slovenia, system-level results are packaged into different formats and analyses depending on the audience. For example, mathematics teachers may receive a specific report if the system-level results highlight issues of particular relevance for the improvement of mathematics teaching. The publication of results is accompanied by teacher training seminars and other dissemination activities to promote the wider use of assessment results. While Romania did provide this kind of analysis for TIMSS and PIRLS it was a one-off exercise and was performed on an international test. It would be useful for Romania to undertake this kind of work regularly for a national test based on its own curriculum.
Supporting school capacity to use results

It is important that any new data tools are accompanied by appropriate training and guidance, so that schools have the analytical capacity to use them. In the United States, “data coaches” have provided some schools with technical expertise in the use of data, enabling schools to create easy-to-read data dashboards that make information more accessible to teachers (OECD, 2013).

CSIs have a key role to play in supporting better use of results within schools. In Australia, some provinces have created “data” posts – consultancy positions in performance analysis and reporting to support regions in using data to inform improvement (Santiago et al., 2011). As the CSIs move away from a control function and towards a more supportive function (see Chapter 4), consideration should be given as to how they can develop technical expertise to support schools in making better use of system data to support improvements. One option might be to create similar dedicated data roles within CSIs, and include this as part of the profile for CSI staff appointments in the future.

Conclusions and recommendations

Improving system evaluation in Romania will benefit the whole education system. Developing a more strategic approach to national planning will provide a more consistent approach to tackling persistent challenges around access, equity and quality. Revising the Grade 4 national assessment to make it a more powerful system-monitoring tool will help to better understand student learning and what is affecting it. Finally, making results more accessible and supporting capacity to use the results will help education actors at the central, local and school levels identify and lead improvements in the teaching and learning environment.

Recommendations

5.1. Strengthen strategic planning

5.1.1. Develop a long-term national strategy for education. The current discussion around a new education law and the Presidential initiative “Educated Romania”, which launched a national debate on education, create an opportunity to forge a long-term vision and strategy for education. It will be important for Romania to develop collective ownership of the new strategy, to create national support to prevent the policy reversals the 2011 law suffered. Linking the strategy and new law to wider national development objectives and engaging independent experts in the strategy’s development could help to build political consensus. Setting a limited number of goals over the medium term would support monitoring and accountability, and provide evidence on key priorities to inform policy making.

5.1.2. Ensure the transparency and accessibility of progress reporting. Romania needs to develop measurable, time-specific indicators for monitoring progress towards the national strategy’s goals so that the government can be held accountable for results and has the information it needs to design effective policies and allocate resources. Indicators should be carefully developed, with the involvement of statistical and educational experts to ensure that they are methodologically sound and, where they are focused on learning, that they reflect the breadth of student learning to avoid the use of a narrow measure focused solely on academic achievement.
Developing the State of Education report so that it draws on a broader range of system-monitoring information will help it to become a more authoritative source of information on the education system’s performance, and better inform decision making.

5.1.3. Clarify the role of evaluation and assessment in supporting national learning. Romania’s evaluation and assessment system has many positive practices that support student learning, but these tend to be nascent and are undermined by the weight of national examinations and evaluation for compliance. Setting out clearly in the national strategy how evaluation and assessment can support Romania’s learning goals would help to provide greater coherence to its positive practices and ensure all aspects of the system are working together to support improvements in teaching and learning.

5.2. Align system-monitoring to educational priorities

5.2.1. Standardise the Grade 4 national assessment and introduce background questionnaires to create a system-monitoring tool. Romania currently lacks its own system-monitoring assessment which means that it does not have the means to reliably measure learning outcomes against national expectations or to judge the impact of policy changes on teaching and learning. Romania should standardise the marking procedures for the Grade 4 assessment so that it provides reliable system-wide data on students’ learning outcomes. Introducing a background questionnaire as part of the Grade 4 assessment will help Romania to better understand the impact of contextual factors on student learning. Finally, Romania should consider moving to a sample-based assessment to help avoid any stakes becoming attached to the assessment, in a high-stakes national examination culture. Sample-based assessments also make it possible to cover a broader range of subject domains, knowledge areas and competencies.

5.2.2. Expand the data that is collected on student outcomes and background in the Integrated Information System for Education System in Romania (SIIIR). Alongside the new background questionnaires for Grade 4, this would also provide the basis for a better understanding of how contextual factors are shaping student learning and more effective policy responses.

5.2.3. Improve information on school resource allocation and use. This is important to enhance the effectiveness of resourcing policies, and in particular to develop policies to reduce the wide disparities in funding available to schools (for example through a review of the per capita funding formula and introduction of additional targeted programmes for disadvantaged schools). Romania also needs better data on school resources to support further decentralisation and greater overall investment in education, both of which this review considers will be important to improvements in outcomes.

5.3. Improve the use of results at central, county and school level

5.3.1. Invest in central government capacity for analysis of the education system. Expand the number of staff and analytical capacity in the Ministry’s Public Policy Department and proceed with the creation of a research group in the ministry, as set out in the National Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving. This will enhance central government’s analytical capacity to use the information produced by the evaluation and assessment system for system evaluation. Ensure that the IES has sufficient independence and resources to deliver its research programme so that it can devote itself to providing research and policy evaluations that provide evidence for policy making.
5.3.2. Improve the use of system-level information at county level to support improvement and accountability. Set the expectation that CSIs will adopt county-specific targets linked to national targets, with regular progress reporting to central government. Develop information management systems for CSIs so that they can better understand the statistical profile (e.g. school resources, student profile, teacher profile and learning environment) of the schools within their county and how this is affecting students’ learning outcomes so that CSIs can target their support to schools most in need.

5.3.3. Provide schools with more accessible information to support school self-evaluation and improvement planning. Provide schools with information on their statistical profile and students’ learning outcomes, so that they can analyse their own data and understand how the teaching and learning environment at their school is shaping students’ learning outcomes in comparison with other schools.
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