CALL FOR ACTION

Education equity now
Including all children in quality learning
Message from H.E. the Minister of National Education of the Republic of Turkey

The urgent challenge of including all children in quality education led to the UNICEF and UNESCO Institute of Statistics Global Initiative on Out-Of-School-Children. In this context, this Call for Action aims to accelerate efforts in Europe and Central Asia toward ensuring basic education for all by 2015.

It is vital that all children in Europe and Central Asia, including the most disadvantaged groups, should have access without exception to quality education. This Call to Action, which has been prepared at the regional level in order to accelerate the process of ensuring access to education and eliminating inequalities in education, will serve as a reference document for mobilizing political commitment at the highest level, and ensuring that effective policies and proven strategies are implemented on a wider scale in order to achieve this end.

How can discrimination be prevented? How can inclusive education be supported and a climate be created that will prevent children from quitting school at an early age? How can education policies which focus on equality be strengthened through the use of more advanced data, financing and information management systems? How can the barriers within families and communities be overcome? How can learning outcomes be improved through reforms directed towards quality in education? As the education systems of individual countries will not be able to find solutions to all these important issues by themselves, the collaboration of all relevant stakeholders across borders at the decision-making level will ensure education improvement in the region. We in Turkey encourage all decision-makers in the region, through good governance and cross-sectoral collaboration, to put this Call for Action into practice by focusing on:

• expanding access to early education services to ensure timely access to school for every child;
• improving access to quality education opportunities for every child, so that s/he is able to remain in the system and to continue onto the next stage of his or her education, and
• ensuring learning for every child, without exception.

NABI AVCI
Minister of National Education of the Republic of Turkey
Introduction

From 10–13 December 2013, representatives from 20 countries from Europe and Central Asia and partners from the region and beyond came together at a Regional Ministerial Education Conference – Including all Children in Quality Learning – in Istanbul, Turkey. The Conference launched this Call for Action to end the exclusion of children from education and to ensure that every child is included in quality learning.

The aims of the Conference were to:

1. Accelerate the political momentum around equity in access to and completion of basic education and upper secondary education in Europe and Central Asia, and reduce the number of children out of school – particularly young children and adolescents – by launching a Call for Action that will put in motion a regional initiative to include all children in quality learning;

2. Promote the importance of the quality and relevance of education as a way to improve learning outcomes, reduce equity gaps in learning and increase completion rates in basic and upper-secondary education in the region;

3. Promote an inter-sectoral approach to education inclusion, and in particular to the issue of out of school children;

4. Provide an opportunity and a forum to allow learners – particularly adolescents and youth – to get their voice heard, regarding the quality and relevance of the education they are offered.

The Call for Action was drafted in October 2013 through a collaborative process that involved 20 countries in the region, representatives of regional and international civil society organizations, UN organizations and young people from the region.

The hope is that this Conference and its Call for Action will bring together all countries in the region to work together to include all children in quality learning!
Education challenges in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia

All children and adolescents have the right to quality education. Yet, in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which is mostly home to middle income economies, 2.5 million children of primary and lower secondary school age and 1.6 million children of pre-primary school age are out of school, and thus out of learning.

At the secondary level, an estimated 12 million adolescents are not in school. Additionally, there are many more children, perhaps millions, from the most disadvantaged communities, who are excluded from national data collection procedures and thus are invisible in national indicators on education. For example, there are an estimated 5.1 million children with disabilities in the region, of whom 3.6 million are estimated to be out of school. Across all levels of education, there are millions more children that are enrolled and physically present in school, but that are silently excluded from learning.

The children out of school are easy to overlook when skimming national school enrolment data. Almost all countries in the region have primary school enrolment rates over 95% but these figures do not capture absenteeism and levels of achievement. The national picture also belies sub-national disparities that leave certain groups of children widely excluded from education with access to schools with sub-standard facilities, large class sizes, and under qualified teachers. Large equity gaps in education access and outcomes exist between groups of children, with some disadvantaged groups of children experiencing shockingly low rates of access and learning.

OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other international learning assessments show that there are serious equity gaps in learning in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. A regional analysis of the 2009 PISA results undertaken by UNICEF shows that, on average, 46% of 15 years-old students in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia do not reach the baseline level of achievement in reading, while in mathematics and science the rates are 51% and 46% – compared to 19%, 21% and 15% in countries from the same region that became member states of the EU in 2004.

2.5 million children of primary and lower secondary school age and 1.6 million children of pre-primary school age are out of school

The achievement gap between the highest achievers and the lowest achievers in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia ranges from 6 to 9 years of schooling. Most often children from disadvantaged groups have lower levels of achievement than their peers from majority groups. Children from the poorest quintile score on average almost one year behind their peers from the wealthiest quintile and children living in rural areas achieve about two years behind their urban peers.

Children fitting certain profiles are overrepresented in the out of school population. Adolescents and pre-primary school age children are more likely to be out of school than primary school-aged children, especially when pre-primary and upper secondary education are not compulsory. Children from ethnic

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1 All figures in this paragraph come from: UNICEF. Education Equity Now: A regional analysis of the situation of Out of School Children – To be published 2013.
and linguistic minority groups and children with disabilities are more likely than their peers to be out of school. In some countries gender stereotypes combined with age characteristics lead to boys being more excluded, and in others girls. Working children, children from migrant and undocumented families, children living in remote rural areas, children from the poorest social and economic backgrounds make up a significant part of the out of school population. Children that perform below academic standards in school, among which are often found repeaters, children enrolling late and children attending irregularly, are at a high risk of dropping out of school. Children combining more than one profile are the most at risk of being out of school. Children’s exclusion in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia is rooted in complex, diverse and interacting situations that must be addressed through comprehensive system reforms if equity in school participation and learning is to be realised.
Education challenges

Millions of children and adolescents out of school

- 1.6m children of pre-primary school age
- 2.5m children of primary and lower secondary school age
- 3.6m children with disabilities
- 12m adolescents

Millions of children and adolescents not learning

Half of 15-year-olds do not master basic skills in maths, reading and science

Millions of children and adolescents left behind

- 2 year learning gap
- 1 year learning gap
Global education promises

More than a decade ago the global community came together and committed themselves to achieving the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with renewed optimism about being able to work together to eradicate poverty. The MDG goals, and the Education for All (EFA) goals signed the same year, commit all countries to work collectively toward universal primary school education, and gender equity.

This left middle income countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia already at the finish line of the development goals in the year 2000 because their national education enrolment figures easily approached the MDG 2 benchmarks. However, despite the high national averages, there still is unfinished business in terms of access and learning. National averages distort realities at the district and local level. In Europe and Central Asia, countries must accelerate progress to closing equity gaps in education, so that no child is deprived of his or her right to quality education.

Europe and Central Asia has a critical role to play in contributing to the global momentum to close the existing equity gaps and lay the foundation for sustained access and quality improvement beyond 2015. The region can demonstrate to other regions that the most disadvantaged children can be reached through a variety of truly inclusive strategies. The good practices and lessons generated by Europe and Central Asia will be inspiring for lower income countries – which are tomorrow’s middle income countries – and the broader global community.

The Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda is co-led by UNESCO and UNICEF, with the support of the Governments of Senegal, Canada and Germany, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. A global multi-stakeholder meeting in Dakar in March 2013 emphasized that regardless of the structure the post-2015 agenda may take, education must claim an explicit goal focusing on equity, access and quality learning. Accordingly, ‘Equitable, Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All’ is proposed as an overarching education goal to realize the World We Want beyond 2015. The Dakar consultation further identified three priorities to promote a lifelong vision of education and learning:

1. Advance inclusion and equity;
2. Put quality and learning outcomes at the core of the agenda; and
3. Expand access beyond primary school.

This proposed goal and the accompanying priorities are of universal relevance and are both guided by the principles of human rights, equity, gender equality, sustainability, accountability and transparency. It is expected that this goal will enable all societies to develop the skills, knowledge and innovations needed to overcome current and future political, economic, technological, health and environmental challenges and to ensure that we remain on the path toward sustainable development.
The Call for Action

Governments and their partners throughout Europe and Central Asia are urged to put an end to the exclusion of children from schools and from learning and to ensure that every child is included in quality learning.

Education is a fundamental human right in itself as well as an enabling right, fostering the accomplishment of all other social, cultural, economic, civil and political rights. It is the bedrock of sustainable development, contributing to its social, economic and environmental dimensions, and underpins peace, security and equality. The interconnected benefits of investments in quality education are immeasurable – generating greater economic returns and growth for individuals and societies, creating a lasting impact on health and gender equality, and leading to safer, more resilient and stable societies. It plays a crucial role in shaping personal and collective identities, promoting social capital and cohesiveness, and in the formation of responsible citizenship, based on principles of respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity. It has the power to unleash human potential by nurturing the unique gifts that each and every child brings to the world.

Most governments embrace this vision, but public action has often been fragmented and inadequate. We must re-energize the regional community to deliver on the promises made to the children in our region in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and on the regional aspirations that every child, regardless of background or circumstance will have the right to a full cycle of quality education, from pre-primary to upper secondary education.

Today is a pivotal moment for collective action. The achievements of the past decade, in the region and beyond, have shown what it takes to succeed: political will at the highest levels, sound policies and enforcement procedures, and resources to scale up proven methods. But to achieve a breakthrough, an unprecedented mobilization of all traditional and new partners will be needed.

Governments and their partners throughout Europe and Central Asia are urged to accelerate their progress to achieve education equity now by ensuring that:

1. **Every child is in school** – Accelerate the political momentum around equity in access to, participation in and timely completion of a full basic education cycle (comprising one year of pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education) and upper secondary education.

2. **Every child is learning** – Promote the importance of the quality and relevance of education as a way to improve learning outcomes and reduce equity gaps in learning;

3. **Every child is learning early and enrolling on time** – Universalize access to quality early childhood education services and ensure that every child enrols in grade 1, having completed at least one year of pre-primary school, ideally at age 6;

4. **Every child is supported by effective and efficient governance** – Promote good governance within education systems including transparent and accountable arrangements. Greater efficiency accompanied by greater investment in education.

This Call for Action aims to spur a regional movement to include every child in quality learning. The time to act is now.
Every child in school

Every child learning

Every child learning early and enrolling on time

Every child supported by effective and efficient governance
1. Every child in school

Each and every child in the region has the right to quality education. Yet 2.5 million children in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia remain out of primary and lower secondary school. Many more drop out before completing the compulsory school cycle, enrol late or attend so infrequently that they achieve little within the classroom. Children that are already disadvantaged from society by wider patterns of social disadvantage and discrimination are most likely to be left out of basic education and learning in Europe and Central Asia. Poverty combined with inequalities relating to gender, age, ability, linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities, statelessness, refugee, internally displaced and migrant status, mobility and place of residence, child labour, social norms and cultural practices and conflict with the law leave children unable to access and complete basic education or excluded from learning processes. The structures and practices of education systems and schools are also often at the root of their exclusion.

Ensuring that every child is in school is a priority for the realization of child rights and to ensuring that education plays its appropriate role in poverty reduction and human development. Additionally, education inclusion promotes social cohesion, encourages respect for diversity and improves health.

Urgent action is needed to ensure the inclusion and timely completion of a full cycle of basic education for all children, including the most disadvantaged. Education systems must be equipped to identify children out of school, dropping out or at risk of dropping out and to handle diversity and respond to all children’s needs while respecting their identities.

Recommended principles

1. Develop, improve and enforce legislation and policies that are more inclusive of all children and that are non-discriminatory and responsive of children’s various needs, including children at risk of not enrolling, attending or completing a full cycle of basic education.

2. Strengthen social benefits and protection programmes to ensure that no child is excluded from education as a result of direct or opportunity costs for households.

3. Improve data collection and management systems to support the identification of children out of school and leaving education before completing a full cycle of basic education.

4. Develop child-seeking mechanisms for the referral and case management of children out of school or at risk of dropping out.

5. Support schools and teachers to adopt inclusive practices and develop drop-out prevention and response interventions.

6. Improve national and local cross-sector collaboration between ministries and vertical coordination between central, district and municipal levels.

7. Design and provide alternative and second chance education using innovative approaches and harnessing the potential of information and communication technology (ICT), including distance learning opportunities.

8. Consider increasing the length of compulsory education up to twelve years.

9. Support transitions to upper secondary education and school to work transitions through alternative vocational pathways.

10. Improve parental, family and community involvement in school, children’s learning and drop-out prevention and response interventions.
2. Every child learning

Education is ultimately judged by the learning outcomes that students take away from school. Learning outcomes determine the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviours that young people will carry into the labour market, society, politics and their families as well as their personal development and psychological and emotional well-being. To an important extent, learning outcomes can be measured in national and international surveys of student achievement. In Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, many students – more than half in some countries, according to PISA 2009 – leave school without mastering the basic skills and knowledge needed to engage productively in their countries’ workforce and society. Students from disadvantaged social groups achieve learning levels far below their wealthier peers, creating large equity gaps in schooling outcomes and the ability to navigate the labour market, and other areas of social and political participation.

Low student achievement results from a host of interacting factors at school and system levels. At school level, an ageing teacher corps with under-prepared teachers, outdated teaching-learning processes, over loaded and outdated curricula, lack of quality teaching and learning materials, low levels of instructional time and learning environments that are not conducive to learning are some of the factors that contribute to poor acquisition of cognitive and non-cognitive skills. At system level, the low status of the teaching profession, inefficient teacher recruitment, education and deployment systems, ad hoc curricula reform and a lack of appropriate learning assessment mechanisms all undermines school quality.

Schooling without learning detracts from the very purpose of education

Schooling without learning detracts from the very purpose of education and generates inefficiency. A lack of basic skills prevents young people from learning higher level analytical skills needed for the 21st century, including creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, application of knowledge and problem-solving. It also hampers employment, growth and productivity and leads to frustration among unemployed youth within the scope of international economic competition.

It is imperative that countries in Europe and Central Asia improve the quality of their education systems to ensure that all young people leave school with the knowledge and skills necessary for the 21st century and relevant to their lives.

Recommended principles

1. Promote a school culture that is conducive to learning, respectful of diversity and where attendance and participation matter.
2. Focus on the learning experience of students through flexible curricula, differentiated pedagogy and responsive teaching methods that address the unique needs and learning styles of diverse students.
3. Reform and increase the relevance of curricula by defining learning outcomes based on competencies and by developing teaching and learning standards that are in line with inclusive education principles.
4. Improve formative learning assessment systems and their regular use also as diagnostic tools so that students have multiple opportunities to develop an educational trajectory that suits them rather than focusing on high-stakes tests.
5. Improve pre- and in-service education training, including induction and mentoring, and professional development of all education staff: teachers, directors and auxiliary staff.
6. Expand the use of ICTs and introduce universal design to improve learning.
7. Empower parents to support and be actively involved in their children’s learning.
3. Every child learning early and enrolling on time

As a critical phase in the continuum of lifelong learning, quality early childhood education is one of the most powerful equalizers for school access and learning outcomes. A vast body of evidence demonstrates that early education can be provided in a variety of ways that are effective and cost-efficient. Early education services can give a significant headstart to children from poor and disadvantaged families. These services can also play a significant role in identifying and addressing individual children’s learning needs; later interventions are known to be both more costly and less effective. Early education is a right for all children and a global commitment spelled out in the Education for All goals. Yet across Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the majority of children in the 3–6 year age group do not benefit from early education programmes. There is a serious shortage of provision and services that do exist are concentrated in urban areas; children from poor and disadvantaged families, who would gain the most, are excluded from these services on account of cost, geographical location or other factors, such as disability. The quality of early education services is a matter of concern in the region and comprehensive and systematic monitoring information is unavailable.

The absence of early education services coupled with a lack of clear starting age policies means that many children, often the poorest and most disadvantaged, enrol late in primary school – sometimes not until the age of 8, or not at all. These children begin school already one or two academic years behind their wealthier peers, making it extremely difficult for them to catch up. Equity gaps that start in the early years, widen progressively throughout children’s school careers and beyond, thereby transmitting poverty and marginalization from one generation to the next. Early education and sound starting age policies can effectively narrow equity gaps right from the start.

Urgent action is needed to expand access to early childhood education, to monitor and improve the quality of services and to put in place policies that ensure that all children begin primary school at the age of 6.

**Recommended principles**

1. Universalize access to inclusive early childhood education, which should ideally start at age 3, especially for the most disadvantaged.
2. Prioritize one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education for all children.
3. Put in place policies that ensure that all children start primary school education on time, ideally at age 6.
4. Ensure a smooth transition to schooling, by building continuities in age-appropriate curricula and learning environments between early childhood development programmes, pre-primary education and the first two or three grades of primary school.
5. Promote the professionalization of early education teachers and staff through the development of qualification frameworks, pre- and in-service training opportunities and improved working conditions.
6. Involve and empower parents to be partners in the development and education of young children.
7. Establish or renew existing standards and monitor the coverage, quality and outcomes of inclusive early childhood education systems.
Good governance, accountability and oversight are the foundation of equitable education systems.

In Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the past twenty years have been a time of transition, with major political, administrative and structural changes and public finance reforms. Yet many challenges remain in establishing strong equity-enhancing and pro-poor education systems with clear oversight responsibilities at all levels. With huge inequalities between urban and rural local governments in terms of fund leverage opportunities and overall capacities, decentralisation sometimes has negative impacts on equity and further excludes groups of children traditionally marginalised from education. While civil society has been more active than before in school governance, oversight mechanisms involving, families and education beneficiaries, including young people, are not yet widely spread.

Despite a wide-spread free basic education agenda in the region, indirect education costs, ad-hoc funding requests for school events and maintenance, out of pocket payments and private tuition increase inequity and the economic burden of education on families. This constitutes a significant barrier to access for many children. Education financing reforms have taken place in most countries; however mechanisms to ensure that adequate funding targets students who need it most need to be improved and education systems’ financial efficiency further increased.

In order to reduce the numbers of out of school children and to reduce equity gaps in learning outcomes, urgent action is required to reform governance systems and financing mechanisms that address the needs of disadvantaged children. Investments in quality and inclusiveness can be offset by efficiency gains within existing budgets and can further generate savings.

### Recommended principles

1. Ensure that decentralization is supported by clear identification of responsibilities and adequate capacity, and that proper oversight mechanisms are established at all levels for a greater enforcement of national laws and policies pertaining to equity and inclusion. The state should remain the primary duty bearer for the realization of the right to education for all children.

2. Redirect the resources liberated from the demographic dividend to improve the quality and equity of education systems; and increase national education spending as percentage of GDP to a limit that allows sufficient investment in education quality and equity.

3. Allocate additional resources to students, schools and regions with the greatest needs and improve financial incentives.

4. Increase capacity of administrators, managers, school directors, parliamentarians, and elected members of municipality councils particularly at the lowest level of administration, through training, knowledge sharing and coordination mechanisms.

5. Improve overall financial management, anti-corruption measures and accountability through better use of information, transparency and participation of parents, communities, practitioners and the civil society.

6. Develop mechanisms to ensure that young people, especially from disadvantaged groups, are included in decision-making processes at all levels.

7. Improve teacher recruitment, deployment, retention, payment, motivation, status and working conditions.
Including all children in quality learning

- Equip students with relevant skills
- Introduce innovative approaches
- Assess students’ learning
- Engage young people as partners
- Professionalize early education teachers
- Invest in one year of pre-primary education for every child
- Ensure on-time primary school enrollment
- Invest in teacher quality
- Pre-primary school

- Primary and secondary school

- Equip students with relevant skills
- Introduce innovative approaches
- Assess students’ learning
- Engage young people as partners
- Professionalize early education teachers
- Invest in one year of pre-primary education for every child
- Ensure on-time primary school enrollment
- Invest in teacher quality

- Every child in school
- Every child learning
- Every child learning early and enrolling on time
Every child learning early and enrolling on time

NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL

SCHOOL DIRECTOR

ATTENDANCE DATA

DISTRICT STAFF TRAINING

CHILDREN AT THE CENTER OF LEARNING

Every child in primary and secondary school

Support schools to adopt inclusive practices

Reduce discrimination

Allocate more resources to schools with more needs

Support schools to adopt inclusive practices

Every child supported by effective and efficient governance
Conclusion

With millions of children and adolescents out of school or not participating in learning in Europe and Central Asia, poor learning outcomes and a significant skills gap in many countries, it is imperative that governments, the international community and the general public commit to improving access to quality education and learning for all children in the region. In Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, expanding access beyond primary education will require progressive universalization of pre-primary education and progressive universalization of secondary education.

We must ACT NOW. The timely completion of a full basic education cycle comprising pre-primary primary and lower secondary education is a goal that the region of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia has the know-how and the resources to achieve – but this is already long overdue. The cost of implementing this Call for Action could be covered by efficiency gains and cost savings. Furthermore, quality and inclusive education for all children brings about significant social and economic returns on investment.

We must at the same time THINK BIG. Tomorrow’s societies start in today’s schools. We must look toward the year 2030 and aspire to go beyond basic education. In the longer-term, we must aspire for every child to complete upper secondary education and pursue lifelong learning opportunities.

Tomorrow’s societies start in today’s schools. We must look toward the year 2030 and aspire to go beyond basic education

Further learning is imperative for all, but must be more varied. Many will complete upper secondary education to move on to higher education, while others may follow different learning pathways with an earlier entry in the world of work. But even the latter will need recurrent learning opportunities.

Together, we must start today, to bring about Education Equity Now!
CALL FOR ACTION

Find out more at:
www.education-equity.org