

REPORT TO MINISTER OF EDUCATION

Fiecare copil în grădiniță

FIRST YEAR RESULTS
AUGUST 2010 – JUNE 2011

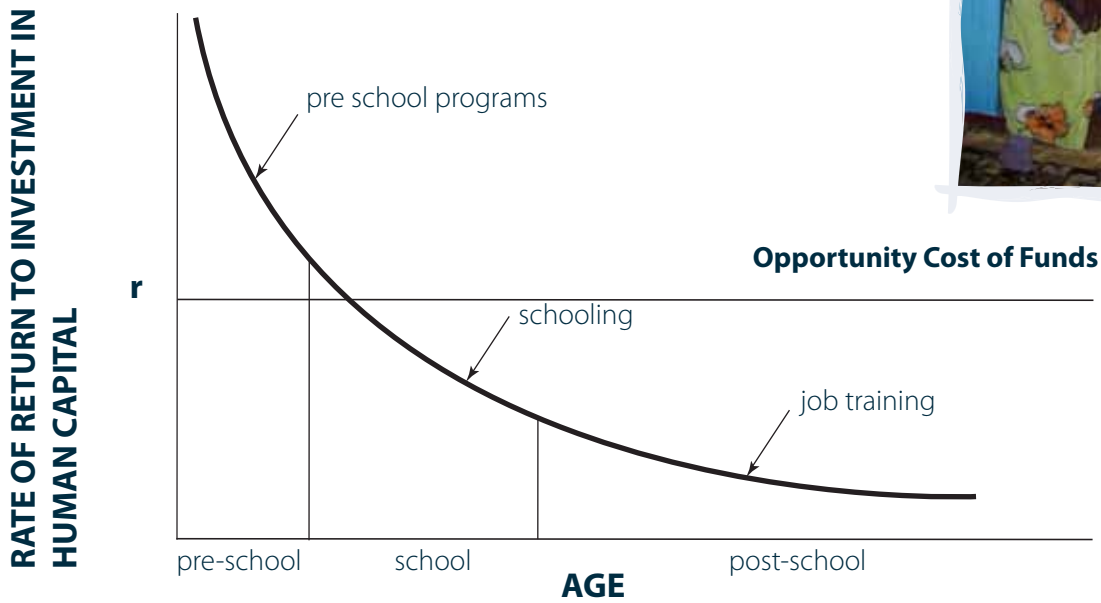
THE EDUCATION GAP ‘TIPPING POINT’

ALINA SEGHEDI, MARIA GHEORGHIU, LESLIE HAWKE
JULY 2011

ASOCIAȚIA OVIDIU ROM
www.ovid.ro



Return on Investment Over Time



Rates of return to investment in human capital as function of age when the investment was initiated. The data were derived from a life cycle model of dynamic human capital accumulation with multiple periods and credit constraints. Investments were initially set to be equal across all ages. 'r' represents the cost of the funds. Data are from Cunha et al (2005).

Source: Knudsen, et al.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. 2010-2011 RESULTS Outcomes, Impact, Challenges, and Lessons 5

A. Children	7
B. Parents	9
C. Teachers	12
D. Local Teams	14

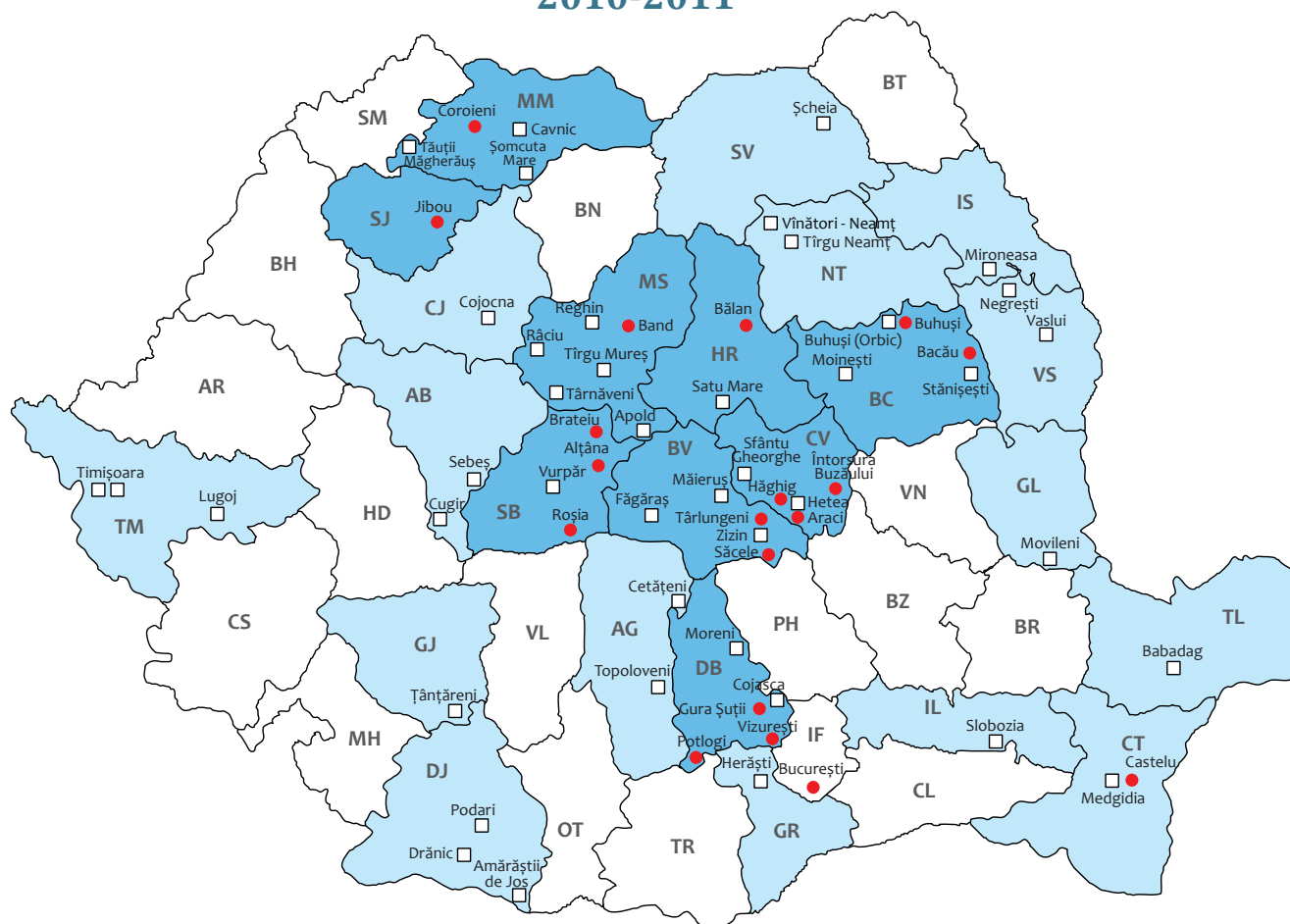
II. NEXT STEPS

A. Community Selection	19
B. Ongoing Local Costs	20
C. The Urgent Need for Action and Continuity	21

III. APPENDICES

A. Evidence of the Lasting Effect of Early Education: a Bibliography	24
B. 2011-2012 Schedule	25
C. Target group and Locations	26
D. Legal & Strategic Context	26

Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță 2010-2011



- Comunități FCG 2010-2011
- Comunități aplicante 2011

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The following organizations and individuals have each donated over € 175,000 over a seven-year period to Ovidiu Rom's efforts to get every child in kindergarten and school:



Ethan & Ryan Hawke
Mark Nelson & Dana Johnson
and
the Alex fund

More recent **Major Investors** in *Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță*:



We also gratefully acknowledge the counsel and support of

Daniel Petru Funeriu
Oana Iulia Badea
Liliana Preoteasa
of the Romanian Ministry of Education

AND THE DEDICATION OF
THE MEN AND WOMEN IN THE FRONTLINE
WHO, OFTEN WITHOUT RECOGNITION,
GO THE EXTRA MILE EVERY WORKING DAY.



Foto: Aga Luczakowska

“Children whose minds are not stimulated by appropriate interaction with adults and their environment pay for these early deficits throughout their lives—and so does society.

Such children are far more likely than their more fortunate peers to do poorly in school, to drop out early, to be functionally illiterate and only marginally employable in today’s world. These children affect labor productivity and national economic prosperity.

“Yet none of this need happen... Early childhood programs enhance school readiness, foster beneficial social behavior, lessen social welfare costs, and promote community development.

“Programs that remedy critical early childhood deficiencies are fundamental—not only to the success of each child in life, but also to the success of society as a whole.”

Armeane Choksi,
The World Bank 1996

Romania has hosted a legion of early education projects targeted to disadvantaged and/or Roma children over the past two decades. Yet none have made even a small dent in the school dropout, delinquency, employment or higher education attainment rates of young adults who have grown up in poverty.

Why?

***Either the statements above are false,
or we are doing something wrong.***

OVIDIU ROM'S BASIC TENETS

- 1 The future of Romania depends on raising the educational attainment of its poor.
- 2 Most disadvantaged children cannot succeed in school without early education.
- 3 Parent incentives are crucial to change habits & induce children's daily attendance.
- 4 Short-term projects are a waste of everybody's money.
Only sustained interventions make a difference in life outcomes.

I. 2010-2011 RESULTS

CORE ELEMENTS OF *FIECARE COPIL ÎN GRĂDINIȚĂ:*

- 1 **Leadership & strategic thinking by local authorities** and a proactive Local Action Group;
- 2 **Door-to-door recruitment of children** at risk for dropping out of school;
- 3 **Teacher training** in modern methods and strategies for working with disadvantaged children;
- 4 **Parent engagement through incentives** for daily preschool attendance of 3-6 year olds.

After a decade of educating impoverished children¹, Ovidiu Rom's founders concluded that their focus on primary school actually resulted in little long-term gain for disadvantaged children who had started school late. "Second Chance" programs (for reintegrating children who had already dropped out) were sadly ineffective in producing high school graduates or qualified workers. But the children who started early, between 3 and 5, had much better results in the school system, both behaviorally and academically².

Ovidiu Rom (herein "OvR") found that it was not difficult to get impoverished parents, even traditional Roma, to register their children for *grădiniță*³, but it was very difficult to get the children to attend on a daily basis. With a small UNDP grant in 2007, OvR first tested *tichete sociale* (herein "food coupons") as an incentive to parents to send their children to school every day. It worked.

In July 2010, Ovidiu Rom and the Ministry of Education invited Romanian mayors to apply for assistance in getting every poor 3-6 year old into preschool. OvR allocated approximately €150 for each child whose family qualified for social benefits or met other poverty criteria. These funds covered monthly food coupons to the families whose children had perfect attendance and €15 per child for educational resources. OvR also provided training to the teachers and the local implementation team, program oversight and consultation.

Over 100 communities applied. With input from the Ministry of Education, OvR selected 13 (See Appendix C), expanding its methodology from six to 19 communities in September 2010. A total of 1300 children living in severe poverty were included. Daily attendance was recorded by teachers. The local coordinators distributed monthly food coupons to parents of children with 'perfect' attendance at the end of each month. Procedures were monitored by OvR's 3-member field staff under the leadership of executive director Maria Gheorghiu.

¹Ovidiu Rom's criteria are economic-, not ethnic, based. The poverty rate for Roma is four times higher than the national poverty rate, so many beneficiaries of OvR programs are Roma or of Roma descent.

²A large body of international research shows that early intellectual deprivation results in major learning disabilities. In other words, the environment in which children live for their first five years affects their ability to function successfully for the rest of their lives. (See Appendix A.)

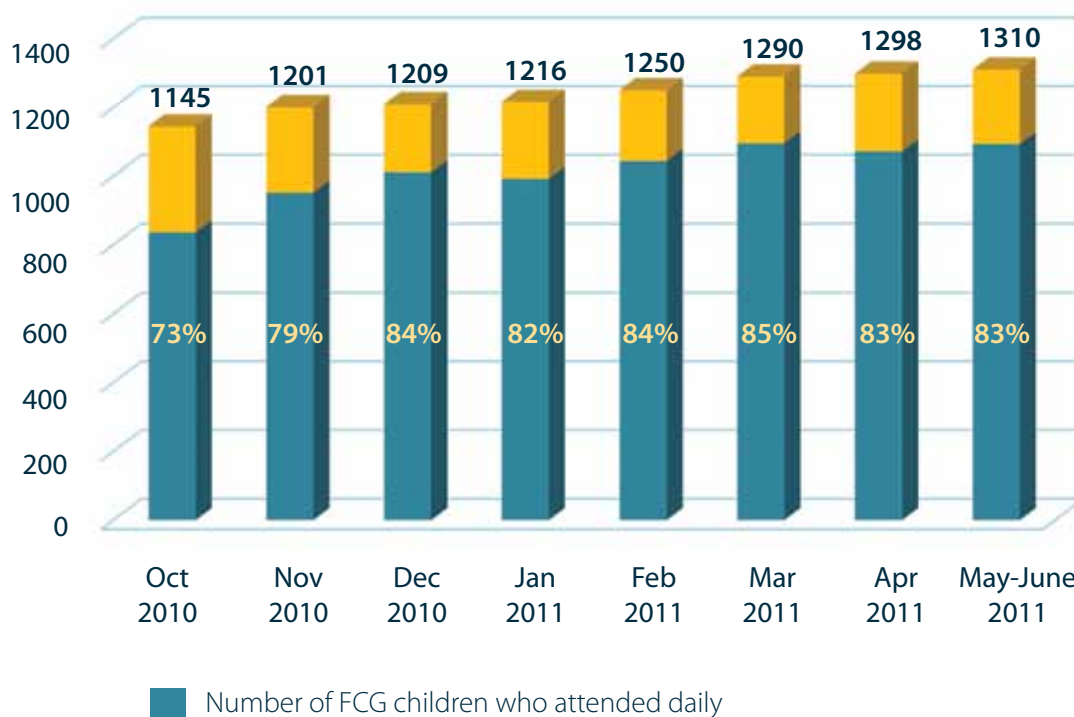
³Romania's inclusive term for preschool and kindergarten.

Local community requirements:	Ovidiu Rom contributions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● At least 50 impoverished children – not registered or not attending <i>grădiniță</i> regularly ● Local action group willing to manage implementation ● Desire of school director and local administration to have every poor child age 3-6 attending <i>grădiniță</i> ● A trained school mediator ● Willingness to recruit children door-to-door & provide necessary apparel ● Teachers willing to invest extra hours in training and program related activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● €120 per child per year for monthly food coupons ● €15 per child per year for classroom materials ● Assistance in finding alternative solutions (teacher aides, afternoon groups, lobbying for additional teachers) ● Ongoing consultation and monthly visits ● Assistance in obtaining private sector contributions ● 12-15 teacher training sessions ● Extensive teacher's manual ● Student workbooks for all <i>grădiniță</i> students

OUTCOME, IMPACT, CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

Even if they are officially registered, many poor children do not attend preschool often enough to reap any benefit from it. Poor parents themselves have little or no education and are easily intimidated by the system, the authorities, and the “hidden costs” of education⁴. The result of a child’s delayed introduction to the education system is usually poor school integration and early school abandonment – because these children never catch up academically or fit in socially with their peers. In contrast, a positive early experience can change the trajectory of a child’s academic career.

**Attendance of children in *Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță*
October 2010 - June 2011**



⁴ Hidden costs include appropriate clothing and shoes as well as a variety of educational materials. In many places parents are expected to furnish these items, but coming up with the cash to buy them can be a mighty obstacle for a destitute mother with several children. It is easier for such parents to postpone introducing their children to education until the last possible moment, frequently as late as age 8, and sometimes as late as 9.

A. OUTCOME: MAJOR INCREASE IN GRĂDINIȚĂ ATTENDANCE

“We registered the highest attendance rate in the past 10 years.”

Cristina Linte, school director & coordinator, Alțina, Sibiu

“Before, these kids attended a maximum of two months a year. This year we have had excellent attendance, even on the coldest days.”

Doina Gheorghe, teacher & coordinator, Gura Șuții, Dâmbovița

“Last school year we registered 89 children. This year—152, of which 115 qualify for the program. 110 [95%] have only a few absences for illness; even the attendance of children who are not in the program increased.”

Szilard Dullo, school director & coordinator, Araci, Covasna

“In the 10 months of monitoring, 87% of the children had 100% attendance; we don’t have exact data but we believe that no child registered such perfect attendance last year.”

Radu Bratu, school vice-director & coordinator, Roșia, Sibiu

“Last school year 60 children were enrolled, out of which 15 [25%] attended regularly. This year the attendance rate increased to over 75%.”

Radu Uglea, teacher & coordinator, Coroieni, Maramureș

In the 17 communities that implemented *Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță* in 2010:

- Official preschool enrollment increased from 1990 children in 2009 to 2370 children in 2010. 1310 of these children were living in poverty and included in the project⁵.
- Daily grădiniță attendance increased from an “official” 66% in 2009-2010 to 84% in 2010-2011.

In all locations children’s attendance was the highest in recent years. In October 2010, 67% (817 qualifying children) were reported to have 100% daily attendance⁶. In May 2011, the number had risen to 83% (1087 children). Many local coordinators noted that this is by far the highest kindergarten attendance EVER. Two communities observed that attendance of their primary school students also increased.

81% (1011 out of 1310) of impoverished children enrolled in grădiniță in 19 communities achieved unprecedented daily attendance records.

⁵ Officially, the 2010 school year attendance rate increased by 20% over the previous year, but according to the teachers, the difference was actually much greater. The consensus among school staff is that attendance increased by at least 40%.

⁶ Children’s attendance was recorded daily by the teachers. Each week one local team member randomly checked the attendance and the local coordinator sent Ovidiu Rom an SMS text message with children’s attendance that day. Ovidiu Rom visited each kindergarten at least once a month and checked the project file.

A. IMPACT: INCREASE IN CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGE

"There's been a gradual positive change in the children. They now express themselves more clearly, count correctly from 1 to 10, and recognize certain letters and colors."

Anamaria Bârlea, local coordinator, Hăghig, Covasna

"The project integrates children into the school system from an earlier age so teachers have time to modify certain negative behaviors they bring from home and the children adjust much more easily to group work."

Teacher, Gura Șuții, Dâmbovița

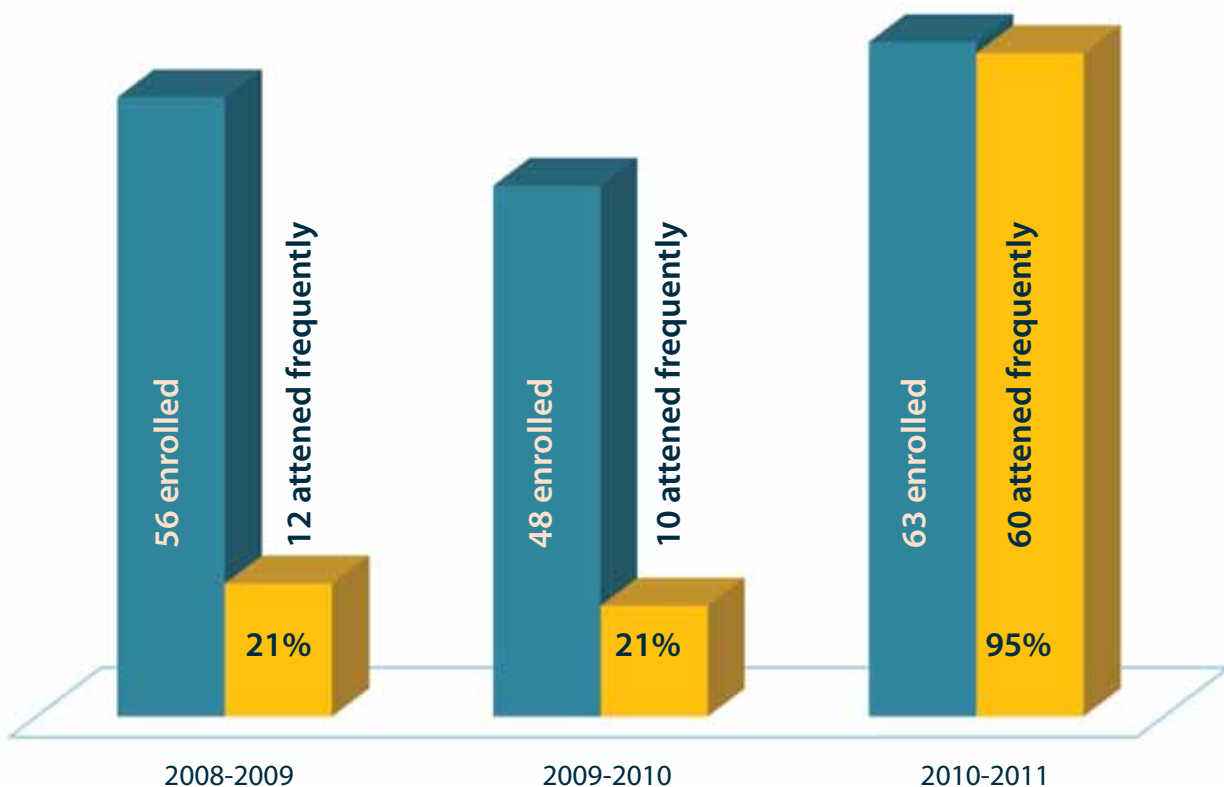
"The results are visible, especially for the ones who'll start first grade in the fall. They speak Romanian, they make the intellectual effort, they finalize what they started, and appreciate cleanliness."

Suzana Barbur, preschool principal, Jibou, Sălaj

A. LESSON: "WHATEVER IT TAKES"

- Initial recruitment drives should be organized by the school mediator and social worker, since these are the two people who know the families the best and are in a position to decide who legitimately qualifies. But the more team members that participate in the recruitment drive, the better—for both team development and outcomes.
- Repeated door-to-door visits are necessary to ensure that ALL children are identified and registered.
- Local team must be flexible so that children without birth certificates and those identified late can still register and participate. The list of children is revised every month to keep information up-to-date.

Evolution of children with frequent attendance compared to total number of children enrolled in preschool, per school year Coroieni, Maramureș



B. OUTCOME: IMPROVED FAMILIES' ECONOMIC SITUATION & INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

"130 children would not have come to kindergarten if their parents had not received the food coupons."

Alina Panaite & Anita Ciobanu, social workers, Sacele, Braşov

"I noticed that some children who had never brought snacks before, began bringing sandwiches after they got food coupons"

Doina Gheorghe, local coordinator, Gura Şuţii, Dâmboviţa

- **Food coupons worth 115,000 Euros** were provided to **1200 impoverished families** whose children attended grădiniţă every day.
- **960 children received clothes and shoes** from local councils. (Where this was not possible, the local community took responsibility for obtaining sponsorships.)
- **1000+ parents participated in children's education** by bringing them to kindergarten every day and taking part in monthly "open door day" with their children in which they learned how to do educational activities at home.
- **300 parents** participated in classes as **"teacher assistants"** (one day per month, by rotation).
- **250 parents and their 2-3 year olds** participated in **weekly 2-hour classes** ("Sotron Zero"), learning about the education process, and registering their children for next year's **grădiniţă** class.

Most of the qualifying families exist on Law 416 welfare benefits and their children's state benefits.

School requires clothing, shoes, and materials (not to mention the sometimes optional, sometimes not so optional „fondul clasei” (a widespread practice whereby parents are asked for money for school supplies, special notebooks, furniture and classroom improvements. Fees are not mandatory, but parents who can't afford them often would rather not send their children than deal with the awkwardness of not being able to comply).

See how food coupons motivate parents in Comuna Roşia to bring their children to grădiniţă every day on ProTV News, February 2011: <http://www.ovid.ro/5297/ovidiu-rom-has-done-wonders-in-rosia-sibiu/>

B. IMPACT: IMPROVEMENT IN POOR PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION & TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD POOR PARENTS

"In the beginning 80% of the parents were uncooperative. Their attitude has really improved; they are much more open now towards the activities in the kindergarten."

Cristina Linte, school principal & local coordinator, Alţina, Sibiu

"The parents became more responsible. The project had a positive effect all the way around."

Anamaria Bârlea, City Hall worker & local coordinator, Hăghig, Covasna

"Parents have really changed their attitude." Suzana Barbur, grădiniţă principal, Jibou, Sălaj

"The higher you fly, the further you see. These parents have begun to fly."

Radu Uglea, teacher & local coordinator, Coroieni, Maramureş

"The parents became more involved, there were not as many conflicts, they came to understand the importance of daily attendance. The relationship between the school and the community has definitely improved." Ioana Manolache, teacher & local coordinator, Târlungeni, Braşov

"We succeeded in changing the mentality of some parents who said in the beginning, 'My child does just fine at home'. They are now proud that their children know the names of colors."

Erika Rendes, social worker & local coordinator, Band, Mureş County

OvR's methodology encourages parents to take part in class activities, by rotation, once a month, as "teacher assistant" in order to familiarize them with the educational activities taking place. This is a new practice for both parents and teachers, but in time both get used to it. Parents learn how to make themselves useful in the classroom, while better understanding the efforts teachers make to educate their children – and that *grădinița* is not just about playing, but is actually for learning. Many parents who can't read and write prefer to do administrative activities at first (such as sharpening pencils or distributing snacks) – with proper guidance by teachers, in time they participate in educational activities as well.

Monthly "open door days" help parents understand how and what children learn at this age. This activity gives them the opportunity to play with their children and interact with the teachers in a relaxed setting.

'Sotron Zero' is an optional FCG module that 13 communities adopted in the spring of 2011. It allows parents to participate with their children, some as young as 2, in a 2-hour class once a week. There is no monetary incentive for attendance, but with the encouragement of mediators or social workers, many mothers, some grandmothers, and a few fathers, do start to bring their toddlers once a week. This results in a striking improvement in parents' attitudes about their children's readiness for organized group activities and helps the little ones prepare for daily *grădiniță* next year.

B. CHALLENGE: ESTABLISHING THE RULES

"The most difficult thing is to explain to poor parents that they don't qualify for the project because their house is not run down enough."

Doina Gheorghe, teacher & coordinator, Gura Șuții, Dâmbovița

To qualify for the FCG program, three criteria must be met: 1) maximum 150 lei per month income per family member, 2) substandard housing conditions, and 3) low education level of parents. There is often the initial perception that this is a "Gypsy project". It is important to correct this misperception for the sake of good community relations by stressing and demonstrating that the decisions are financially-based.

In some communities there are many young families with no other income than their children's allowance, but because they live with their parents who acquired a decent house during Communism, they are not eligible for food coupons. In other communities children whose parents work abroad live with grandparents whose living conditions are better than what would normally qualify them for the project. This is a sensitive distinction that we encourage the local coordinators to carefully consider in order to make the most appropriate, locally consistent decisions.

To qualify for the monthly food coupons, children are required to attend every day with the following exceptions:

1. Medical absence verified by a medical certificate (*scutire medicală*) or if not feasible, a note signed by the parent,
2. One "personal day" per month if accompanied by a parent's note (*cerere de învoire*).

In principle, daily attendance-taking is a simple, straightforward task, but it requires organization, consistency, and frequent "judgment calls". *Grădinița* is not mandatory and keeping meticulous attendance records is not a hallmark of Romanian *grădiniță* procedures. It is easier and more advantageous⁷ to teachers to make generous "guesstimates" on a weekly or even monthly basis.

In the beginning many poor parents feel that if their children are registered and come fairly often, that should be close enough to "every day" to qualify for food coupons. Initially, it is hard for parents to accept that if their child misses more than one day for discretionary reasons (e.g., parents have to leave the village for work and take their children along) or

⁷Attendance records are often used to prove that there are enough children in the class to justify the teachers' salaries; the more students recorded in class, the more *corn si lapte* snack for the children.

consistently shows up toward the end of the class period, the family won't qualify for that whole month.

An added wrinkle was that as of January 2011, family doctors were not required to see more than 20 emergency cases per day. Above this number, people must either pay or make an appointment for a later date. This sometimes makes it difficult to obtain a medical certificate especially if the medic comes to their village only once or twice a week⁸. Parent-written notes in lieu of a doctor's certificate are accepted, but when the parent is illiterate, the note must be written by the teacher, making additional work. Teachers often base their decisions on trust – or worse, on personal bias.

Coordinators don't always have time to compare the attendance records for every child with medical certificates or parent notes, and they may choose not to question teachers' records for fear of offending them. Spot-checks were made by both OvR staff and local team members throughout the school year. Still, the final attendance audit revealed a variety of errors, e.g., food coupons given despite more than one excused absence and lack of documentation for excused absences. This undoubtedly resulted in a slight inflation in attendance reports, but much less than if such checks were not in place.

B. LESSONS: COMMUNICATION & OVERSIGHT

“The key element in this project is communication.”

Alexandra Marian, teacher, Brateiu, Sibiu

“The most important lesson we learned is that “trust is good, controls are better”.

Radu Bratu, school vice-principal & local coordinator, Rosia, Sibiu

Communicating the objective selection criteria (making it clear that they are economic, not ethnic) to the community at large is essential to avoid conflicts between parents who receive food coupons and those who do not, and to establish general goodwill. In the beginning local teams must carefully review the selection criteria in light of their community's composition and sometimes customize it to the particular situation; once agreed upon, the criteria must be consistently interpreted.

It takes about two months for parents to fully understand and accept the coupon conditions. Tensions can be avoided through repeating the conditions to parents in the first weeks, interpreting the regulations consistently, and warning those who are not in compliance. It can't hurt to have authority figures (mayor, principal or police) on hand the first time the coupons are distributed.

While some teacher flexibility is called for, the point is to get the children in class often enough so there are no gaps in their learning – and to habituate parents to making school attendance a family priority. Exceptions lead to complications. With clear rules, fair and consistent enforcement, some personal counselling, and material rewards for compliance, parents DO “get with the system”. Mediators can be very helpful in communicating the importance of daily attendance. As one parent admitted, “Sometimes I need to be reminded.” When the teacher and mediator have good cooperation, both absences and disputes go down significantly.

Important steps to encourage accurate record-keeping and make the process less onerous:

- In **training**, emphasize the importance and **discuss methods for taking attendance**;
- Enforce requirement that **attendance sheets be posted on the class wall**;
- **Include family doctors** in the Local Action Group;
- Frequently remind teachers of the **reasons** for accurate record keeping;
- Closely **monitor attendance sheets**, involving both local team members and OvR staff;
- Require teachers to take a **photo** of the class at 9:30 each morning⁹. This also addresses the problem of habitual tardiness and can provide “class photos” to be used as presents for parents.

⁸ Most reported absences (80%) were due to illness—from the usual winter childhood ailments to conditions such as hepatitis that are related to inadequate hygiene and substandard living conditions. Other causes: family problems, parent sickness, parents being abroad, parents leaving town for work. Absences for lack of clothes were only 7% (e.g., the child's one set of “kindergarten clothes” was washed but not dry by next day). No one gave “lack of money” as a reason for absences.

⁹ This fall OvR, with the support of Orange, will test this procedure by providing coordinators with cameras to supplement attendance records and increase both accuracy of record keeping and on-time attendance of children.

C. OUTCOME: TEACHERS PROVIDED WITH ESSENTIAL TOOLS

- 330 teachers participated in OvR's in-service training (90 from *Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță* program).
- 290 teachers organized 2011 summer programs for 3000 children in 80 schools.
- 7 new teachers were approved by the School Inspectorates to accommodate an increased number of children.
- 5 teaching assistants were hired by OvR to help teachers deal with an increased number of children.
- 90 teachers were given €15 per child for classroom educational materials.

C. IMPACT: CHILDREN BENEFITED FROM BETTER PREPARED TEACHERS & BETTER EQUIPPED CLASSROOMS

"Activities in the classroom are more diverse, thanks to the new resources."

Cristina Linte, school principal & local coordinator, Alțina, Sibiu

"This project changed my view of the future. We worked harder, but it was stimulating."

Cosmina Marin, teacher, Întorsura Buzăului, Covasna

"We didn't have any more problems with school supplies and the teachers didn't have to use money from their own pockets to arrange the classrooms."

Szilard Dullo, school principal & local coordinator, Araci, Covasna

"...the children love coming, they don't do it because their parents make them."

Ioana Mihalache, teacher & local coordinator, Tărlungeni, Brașov

Preschool teachers are a young child's first contact with the education system, and for many poor children, their first contact with the world beyond their own street. These teachers are key to making children feel welcome, safe, and eager to learn. This is a special challenge in rural areas where many teachers are not qualified, their remuneration is tiny, and the probability of their staying in that school unlikely (as many are *suplinitori* – i.e. they fill the position temporarily). Working with children who have not been talked to or played with very much, and never read to, is a special challenge.

The 2011 "One School for All"¹⁰ research report notes that many schools serving these children "are doomed to a vicious circle of 'quality deficit accumulation' due to inadequate material resources combined with a preponderance of substitute teachers with low appraisal scores".

Ovidiu Rom's training and ongoing oversight help *grădiniță* teachers become more effective and engaged in their work. The training is especially critical for inexperienced teachers. (In many isolated villages teachers have no pedagogical training at all). OvR's modest resource grants of 60 lei per child (per year) allow teachers to purchase dearly needed educational resources and are greatly appreciated.

OvR conducted a series of teacher trainings in all the communities, facilitated by Maria Gheorghiu and Betsy Grob, an early education teacher trainer from the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in New York¹¹. Topics covered specific methods of working with young children in summer schools (and during the school year), making children feel welcome in class, and working with large numbers of children at once. See Pro TV news of teacher training held in Coroieni, Marmureș, May 2011: <http://www.ovid.ro/en/6660/domnul-trandafir-la-%C8%9BBara-27-mai-2011>.

¹⁰ Duminica & Ivasiuc, "One School for All", UNICEF, 2011, p. 174

¹¹ Betsy Grob first worked with Romanian teachers in a 1998 Step-by-Step training. She has been back many times to train teachers.

C. CHALLENGE: INCREASED WORKLOAD

“It’s a challenge to get teachers involved – at first they only see the disadvantages: more children, heavier workload. In addition to the moral satisfaction of having contributed to the long term future of individual children and the community, some form of material incentive for teachers would be very welcome.”

Radu Bratu, vice-principal & local coordinator, Rosia, Sibiu

“It was the hardest year of my 37 years in the education system, as part of the time I should have spent working with children I spent talking to Roma parents, filling in attendance charts, and training the teaching assistant.”

Suzana Barbur, grădiniță director, Jibou, Sălaj

It is not unusual for this program to double the number of children attending on a daily basis. Although teachers may be working the same number of hours, their work is more difficult because they have a higher number of poorly prepared children in their classes every day. The children are not used to paying attention or staying put for long. They may come dirty, the younger ones may cry and disturb the whole group. Allowing children to register during the course of the semester also adds to the teacher’s workload. Consequently, teachers tend to consider the project “volunteer work” – and some resent not being paid extra for working with the children identified through the project.

C. LESSON: TRAINING, RECOGNITION & MODEST REWARDS

The following measures would greatly improve teacher retention and motivation, and consequently, outcomes. Ovidiu Rom is committed to helping find solutions to obtain:

- Smaller classes or trained teachers’ aides,
- Special recognition from the School Inspectorate and Ministry of Education,
- Performance bonuses for exemplary participation in the project.



Foto: Aga Luczakowska

D. OUTCOME: COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCED SUCCESSFUL INTER-AGENCY TEAMWORK

- 150 community members (mayors, school directors, local council members, social workers, and mediators) were directly involved in implementation;
- General and *grădiniță* school inspectors from six counties found concrete solutions to teacher and school mediator shortages.

D. IMPACT: LOCAL EARLY EDUCATION STRATEGY STRENGTHENED

“The City Hall is now focused on kindergarten, thanks to the mayor’s meeting with other Covasna mayors involved in the project.”

Szilard Dullo, school principal, Araci, Covasna

“The whole team, even the mayor and school director, got involved in recruiting children door to door. They got more proactive in solving concrete problems faced by parents.”

Doina Gheorghe, teacher & local coordinator, Gura Șuții, Dâmbovița

“I had to visit 60 families to make sure the children were eligible. It was hard, but in the end it was a great exercise.

I would recommend all principals do this.”

Radu Bratu, vice-principal & local coordinator, Roșia, Sibiu

“I more closely followed the kindergarten activities.

It didn’t require more time, just more commitment.”

Mihaela Popoiu, principal, Tărlungeni, Brașov

“The teachers and school mediator were open from the beginning, but it took awhile to get some of the others moving.

Now the Local Council members are happy with the results and want to continue.”

Cristina Linte, school principal, Alțina, Sibiu

“This project should become national policy”.

Silvia Bumbac, school principal & local coordinator, Întorsura Buzăului, Covasna

This program involves something of a small scale revolution – it changes the way parents relate to education, the way teachers relate to impoverished and/or Roma children, the way public employees work together in addressing a common problem, and the way individuals see their role as agents of change in their communities.

As more children are brought to kindergarten, the program generates the need for more teachers and more classrooms. In some communities, there is also a need to hire more school mediators, a school social worker or a school nurse. This should be easier in 2012, when schools initiate per-student funding. (See Appendix D)

Most general school inspectors or preschool inspectors participated in the Local Action Group meetings. The support of the School Inspectorates of Covasna, Sibiu, Maramureș, and Harghita was outstanding. The Covasna Inspectorate invited OvR to apply in partnership to expand the project to seven communities through EU structural funds.

Over the year local public administrations became much more involved in finding concrete solutions to the problems identified through the project. Thus, seven new teaching positions were approved and paid by School Inspectorates; City Halls and school management found solutions for new spaces for preschool groups; and Local Councils

declared the project a “project of local public interest” and took responsibility for ensuring that all children had the proper clothes and shoes.

Statistically, the best results were obtained where the coordinator was the school principal or the mayor was a vocal advocate. It is demotivating for the implementing team (teachers, social worker, school mediator) if they feel their extra effort is not recognized and appreciated by their superiors. Out of the 13 new communities, one did not reapply for a second year: Săcele, which had the weakest support from its City Hall.

The need to harmonize local, county and national early education strategies and actions came up repeatedly in Local Action Group meetings. Another widely discussed issue was the need to formulate a concrete plan and timeframe for making preschool available to all children.

This is one area in which comunas and small towns have a distinct advantage over cities - because it is easier to cross administrative and departmental boundaries and use collective knowledge to develop solutions to complex issues like poverty.

D. CHALLENGE: THE PROBLEMS OF SUCCESS

TEACHER SHORTAGES & SPACE CONSTRAINTS

“Lack of space is a handy excuse, but it’s not an insurmountable problem if the authorities genuinely want to find a place for the children.” School director

Many kindergartens are not large enough to accommodate the additional children brought by the project – but when the local authorities want to find solutions they are amazingly adept at finding them. Some kindergartens resolved the problem by forming afternoon groups. In some communities, the Local Council is seeing to the renovation of other spaces. EVERY community found a solution, and no child was turned away. In every case where the School Inspectorate was petitioned for an additional teacher, the teacher was granted.

Even though this program sometimes doubled the number of children in *grădiniță*, every community found a way to adjust. See the Pro TV news from April 2011, regarding the solution found by Araci school principal, Szilard Dullo: <http://www.ovid.ro/6179/more-children-from-disadvantaged-families-have-the-chance-to-go-to-kindergarten-april-15-2011/>

“WHITE FLIGHT”

More children in kindergarten puts a strain on resources; consequently local support may ebb and flow. City Hall’s backing is essential because their social workers play a key role in verifying children’s eligibility and distributing the monthly food coupons.

In communities where it is an option, such as Castelu, Constanța, better off parents often send their children to other more economically or ethnically segregated *grădinițe*. This is a fact of human nature and a problem with public education systems the world over. Public awareness efforts that promote the importance of early education for all children may help lessen this objection on the part of middle class parents. In any case, local leaders’ attitudes set the tone.

AFTER GRĂDINIȚĂ

“Andreea is the first person in our family ever to go to kindergarten.”

Elvis Pădureț, Parent, Sector 5, Bucharest

The question often comes up, “But what will happen when they are ready for first grade and don’t get food coupons anymore?”

The national program that provides school materials, inadequate as it is, helps somewhat to defray entry costs. The *corn și lapte* daily snack program is another attendance draw.

And as of 2011, *alocația socială complementară* (supplementary child allowance) offered by the state is conditional on children's school attendance.

Most important is that a major element of ***Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță*** is convincing poor uneducated parents of the importance of education and making them aware of their own children's capacity for learning. Parents develop new attitudes, new habits, new hopes for their children and new pride in their children's accomplishments. With a higher percentage of "ghetto" children attending school, peer pressure begins to have a positive effect. There is, unquestionably, significant "status" associated with school attendance among poor children themselves. Children who don't go to school are ashamed and envious – ***until they enter school totally unprepared and wind up feeling ostracized and stupid.*** Our job is to make sure they feel welcome and succeed.

Ovidiu Rom and its local partners will continue to monitor the school attendance of FCG children who will enter first grade this fall.

D. IMPACT: INCREASED LOCAL TEAMWORK

"We learned to work as a team. All the members are now motivated because they saw a change. The relationship between the school and the community has definitely improved."

Ioana Mihalache, teacher & FCG local coordinator, Târlungeni, Brașov

"You have to want to make a change – as a community, as a mayor, as a school principal, as a teacher. For the dream to become reality, it takes at least two people who think and act in the same way. Next year we will become more united as a team, and more motivated as individuals to do something for the good of the children."

Alexandra Marian, teacher & local coordinator, Brateiu, Sibiu

"Only now do I really understand how hard the teachers are working every day for the children."

Maria Petcu, social worker, Potlogi, Dâmbovița

"Believe it or not, we don't have as much trouble with the people up here since this project started."

Policewoman, Coroieni, Maramures

"Working together effectively requires working differently, to higher standards."

Graham Allen UK MP

This project is based on a simple idea. But satisfactory execution requires a team effort—for everyone in the team to understand the basic principles behind it and to execute their designated role. After training, practice is required to change old work habits—even when people are motivated. When team members are not clear on this or that procedure, Ovidiu Rom's implementation manual offers a guide and if that is not sufficient, OvR offers consultation.

It is essential for local team members to relate to ***Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță*** as "our program" not the "Ovidiu Rom project". OvR provides the methodology, most of the direct expenses, and ongoing consultation. But the people who make it work are the local teams. That is why the coordinator's role is so important – the coordinator must motivate the others and ensure that everyone does their part. Otherwise, out of the desire to make the project work, the coordinator will wind up doing most tasks alone – which makes the project unsustainable in the long term.

The "results-oriented" nature of the project is appreciated, especially by mayors. They appreciate both the goal and the methodology, which brings results from the very first month. They also appreciate the timely manner in which the resources are allocated. (There were no delays in the distribution of school supplies and food coupons and most communities provided clothes and shoes on schedule.)

D. CHALLENGE: ROLES OF LOCAL COORDINATOR, SOCIAL WORKER & SCHOOL MEDIATOR

LOCAL COORDINATOR

In most cases, the local coordinators (usually school principals or city hall staff) have exhibited tremendous dedication and personal effort to make this program successful. They spend 15-20 extra hours per month with no extra pay or financial incentives.

In addition to leading a team comprised of people employed by different institutions that have had very little previous interaction, local coordinators are responsible for managing the database, verifying monthly attendance reports, and organizing food coupon distribution. In some cases they must cover more than one location. Their role includes:

- 1 Understanding and communicating the procedures that must be followed precisely,
- 2 Adjusting to a fast, flexible, and demanding work pace, characteristic of a pilot project, but not so common in the public system, and
- 3 Coordinating a team of people employed by different public institutions, who traditionally are not used to working together closely.

SOCIAL WORKER

The social worker's role is to (1) evaluate the families' poverty level, in order to make sure they match the project's selection criteria, (2) counsel families regarding school registration procedures, IDs and related matters, and (3) distribute monthly food coupons – which should not be associated with the *grădiniță*, but with the Social Work Department. However, in most villages trained social workers are scarce (usually replaced by people with some experience in the field, but no formal studies), and the few qualified social workers are overwhelmed by their workload. It usually takes insistence by the Local Action Group and the mayor's commitment to get full social worker participation. From 2012, a better solution would be to hire school social workers from the per student budget. (See Appendix D).

SCHOOL MEDIATOR

Good school mediators are worth their weight in gold—but a variety of problems can prevent or erode their effectiveness, when, for example:

- A trained school mediator participates, but is not officially hired or paid;
- One school mediator is responsible for both the school and *grădiniță* in multiple villages;
- No one in the community has the 8 grades required by law;
- Because the mediator is paid by the county resource center, the *grădiniță* director does not have the authority to impose their involvement in FCG.

D. LESSONS: STICKING TO THE MODEL, DEFINING ROLES, AND PROVIDING SUPPORT

“Lack of fidelity— not sticking rigorously to the discipline and measures of a program— significantly erodes the impact.” Graham Allen, UK MP

Every team member’s role must be clearly understood and agreed to from the outset.

- **The teachers** must agree to monitor attendance daily and to only excuse absences based on proper documentation.
- **The school mediator** must understand that his/her role is to be in close touch with the teachers and to regularly visit the families of children who miss class in order to find out the reasons and persuade parents of the importance of daily attendance.
- **The social worker** must visit the families to determine their poverty level and must distribute the monthly food coupons (so parents don’t associate the decision of who qualifies with the teachers).
- **The school director** must understand the project philosophy and be willing to actively lobby to obtain more teachers, school mediators, or additional space as needed.
- **The mayor** must actively support the project to give it credence and authority in the community.
- **The local coordinator** must make sure that all team members are proceeding according to *Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță* methodology and standards.

In turn, Ovidiu Rom is committed to providing continual consultation and support and timely delivery of its financial contributions, which in the second year will include modest performance bonuses for effective local coordinators.



Foto: Davin Ellicson

II. NEXT STEPS

A. COMMUNITY SELECTION

In May 2011, Ovidiu Rom and the Ministry of Education launched a new invitation to mayors to select additional communities for the 2011-2012 school year.

Criteria for participation are:

- 1 High level of extreme poverty:** In most rural areas, the majority of people are just scraping by, but *this* program is only for children living under the poverty line in substandard conditions, whose parents have low levels of education.
- 2 Strong commitment and skill level of local team:** Communities must exhibit both commitment to the goal of getting every child in *grădiniță* AND demonstrate that they have the human capital to do so. (By matching corporate sponsors and communities, OvR can sometimes help defray costs with targeted CSR* funds.)
- 3 Coherence of local early education strategy:** renovated kindergartens and previous efforts at getting poor children into early education programs are signs that the local authorities sincerely want to address the under-education of the poorest children. OvR looks for communities whose strategy goes deeper than simply wanting to raise the number of children in the kindergarten. An appreciation of the complexity of the issues and a willingness to tackle the obstacles, in whatever form they take, is important for success.
- 4 Large number of disadvantaged children in concentrated areas,** rather than dispersed throughout the community, get priority consideration. Because the “ghettoized” poor are both geographically and economically marginalized, there are virtually no educated role models among them. Also, the power of peer pressure works wonders when a few of the more respected members of the enclave “get with the program”.

The selected sites will be announced in August 2011. (See Appendix A for 2011-2012 calendar.)

All 19 communities that participated in 2010-2011 school year (13 new and 6 ongoing) considered the program to be a success. Eighteen communities reapplied for the coming year. Săcele, Brașov did not reapply. The principal wanted to continue, at least “in principle”, but was not willing to take on a larger role and the coordinator will be out on maternity leave for the coming school year.

We will continue the programs in at least 14 communities and have not made a final decision on four communities due to one or more of the following:

- Unsatisfactory end-of-year attendance audit or faulty attendance records
- Coordinator going on leave without an assigned replacement
- Pronounced teacher dissatisfaction with lack of remuneration
- Early education for impoverished children not at the heart of local strategy.

This year the selection process will proceed in four stages:

Stage 1: Primary evaluation of applications and request for clarifications (June)

Stage 2: Preliminary visits of preselected sites, by OvR team (June-July)

Stage 3: Community visits by OvR director Maria Gheorghiu (July)

Stage 4: Communities send final list of recruited children, and the signed decision of the Local Council to support the project and cover the costs of necessary apparel for the children.

*Corporate Social Responsibility

B. ONGOING LOCAL COSTS

This program is designed to utilize current human resources in the community, i.e., the part-time involvement of a social worker, a school mediator, the kindergarten teachers, and a designated program coordinator (most often this is the school director or social worker). The budget also includes the costs of a two-week summer program.

The budget does not include such advantageous elements as IT equipment, performance bonuses and an assortment of quality classroom materials. (All too often *grădiniță* classroom teaching aids are limited to a menagerie of small donated stuffed animals and Disney cartoon posters.)

Nor does this budget include the essential costs of training, consultation, and oversight currently provided by Ovidiu Rom. It is imperative that teachers be given adequate support for the special challenges of educating severely disadvantaged children; that the implementation be carefully monitored; and the data collected, reviewed and archived. These costs are currently borne by donations from Romania's business sector and from individual American citizens through The Alex Fund¹². Scaling up to the national level should involve other poverty and Roma related funding channels (EU funds, Roma Education Funds, World Bank, etc.).

Estimates of the number of children living under the poverty line vary dramatically. Approximately 200,000 children are born per year, so there should be about 600,000 children aged 3, 4, & 5. If 10% are living in poverty, then 60,000 children a year would be eligible for this program.

Compare €225 per child per year with the cost of keeping a man in prison for a *month* (estimated in 2010 to be €571¹³). And note that for 60,000 children the direct annual costs would be a mere 13.5 million Euros per year.

Budget per child	EUR
1. Personnel	
Teachers	School
Local coordinator	School
School mediator	Local budget
Social worker	Local budget
3. Direct program costs	
Food coupons (12€ x10 months)	120
School supplies	15
Clothes and shoes for children	35
Summer program	35
Parent meetings	10
Other	10
Cost per child:	€225

¹² The Alex Fund is a (501)(c)(3) U.S. non-profit organization based in New York.

¹³ <http://www.ziare.com/articole/costuri+intretinere+detinuti>, accessed in July 2011

C. THE URGENT NEED FOR ACTION *AND CONTINUITY*

- Impoverished early experience has severe and long-lasting detrimental effects on later brain capabilities¹⁴.
- Preschool education reduces school abandonment, unemployment and crime rates¹⁵.
- Early childhood education programs pay a return of 4-10 times the investment¹⁶.
- Early education is the *only intervention* that has consistently been shown to make a major difference in school retention rates of disadvantaged children.

“Every dollar that we spend in early childhood education, we get \$10 back in reduced dropout rates, improved reading scores.” Barack Obama

*“Effective early intervention results in lower demands on public services and greater output and tax receipts. The billions we will save in court and policing costs are enormous... Little or no value can be demonstrated for money spent on late intervention programmes.”*¹⁷
Graham Allen, UK MP

Forward-thinking European and American leaders are beginning to heed the abundant research that confirms that early learning opportunities are the smartest, most cost-effective investments to ensure future economic stability and growth. (See Appendix A.) Educated parents appreciate the importance of early education for their own children. But public opinion and policy makers all too often conclude that when it comes to the rural poor and the Roma, early education is an impossible dream.

Popular opinion places the blame for Roma children’s weak academic results and soaring school abandonment rates on parents who “don’t value education”. Conversely, many activists place blame for the high Roma drop out rate on social barriers (e.g., culturally biased academic content and discriminatory attitudes). We disagree with both schools of thought.

It is true that very poor people tend to postpone enrolling their children in school and skip preschool entirely, but the reasons are complex¹⁸. Many poor parents: 1) Do not realize the importance of early education; 2) Are unable to support the hidden costs; and 3) Feel unwelcome and ill at ease in the school environment. But even the most traditional parents are proud to send their children to school when the children meet with acceptance and success. And children who do well in school rarely drop out; when they do, the reason is usually financial, not cultural.

It is also true that many teachers make negative observations about Roma students, stressing their lack of focus, poor classroom behavior, and language difficulties. But these ‘traits’ are a result of early deprivation, not culture or genetics. And they can only be addressed through *quality early education*. No amount of cultural sensitivity can overcome the fact that the brains of children who spend their first formative years in extreme poverty never fully recover. For most socially and economically disadvantaged children, first grade is too late to prevent their dropping out of school – because at the age of 6 or 7, they are already too far behind their mainstream peers to ever catch up.

¹⁴ “The Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Combine to Shape Brain Architecture”, Centre for the Developing Child, Harvard University http://developingchild.harvard.edu/library/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp5/

¹⁵ “Preschool Education and Its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications”, W. Steven Barnett, Rutgers University, Sept 2008; and David Boulton, New York Times, December 24, 2010;

¹⁶ James Heckman, www.heckmanequation.org

¹⁷ Early Intervention: an independent report to Her Majesty’s Government, January 2011

¹⁸ A 2011 report by *Agentia Impreuna* found that “the number of Roma parents who believe school is not important for their children is extremely low compared to the general public’s belief that this is the root cause of Roma’s lack of schooling”. They also found no statistically significant link between school abandonment and early marriage.

Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță has emphatically shown that poor parents DO send their children to *grădiniță* when they get modest incentives to do so – and that there is a relatively simple and inexpensive method for gaining the immediate participation of impoverished children, regardless of their ethnicity:

- The commitment of local authorities to actively recruit the poorest children and provide necessary apparel; and
- Food coupons tied to attendance, which both alleviate some of the families' extreme financial pressure and motivate poor parents to make the effort to get their children to school every day, despite the personal hardships involved.

Increasing Romania's school attainment level

The European Commission defines the dropout rate as the percentage of 18-24 year olds who have not completed the requisite number of years in school. Romania's official drop-out rate is 16.6%, meaning 16 % of Romanians age 18-24 have finished no more than eight grades. With 4.22 million children (0-18), we can predict that three quarters of a million Romanian citizens will drop out of school before 9th grade over the next two decades – if the issue is not addressed in a national strategic way.

The EC has set a 2020 target for reducing the school dropout rate to under 10% throughout Europe. That is nine years from now. Children who are 3 today will only be 12 in 2020. Thus, the results of early education programs cannot be reflected in the education attainment of 18-24 year olds until 2026. **But they are absolutely vital to Romania's economic health in 2040.**

In addressing school abandonment, **Romania must not fixate on children who are already in school to the exclusion of preschool age children.** Early participation in the education system for children living in poverty is unquestionably the most effective way to lower Romania's dropout rate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Early education programs must be implemented on the macro level. Romania cannot afford to conciliate special interest groups by funding a myriad of scattered short-term projects. Presently, projects designed to stem school abandonment are virtually never evaluated empirically or the results of different methodologies compared scientifically. Knowing what does not work and learning from mistakes is as important as sharing so-called, but never objectively tested, "best practices".

Success will require improving the relationship between central authorities and local services. Returning power to local communities and agencies is a positive step – but many local people want and need guidance. Local authorities need to work across agencies to tackle shared problems and pool resources from different finance streams to make it easier to tackle multi-agency issues where early social intervention combined with early education could have a profound impact. Local communities must be encouraged to act free of central government control or interference, and to raise money from the private sector.

The authors of this report believe that all Romanian municipalities that want to get every child in *grădiniță* should have the government support to do so. Making preschool mandatory will not solve the problem any more than making 10 grades mandatory has eliminated school dropouts. But communities that have the will should be provided with the means.

Real improvement requires a major long-term commitment. The authors also believe that the primary reason there is so little economic progress among marginalized populations around the world, not just Roma in Europe, is that efforts to address the poverty-related problems generally proceed in a fragmented and unscientific manner. NGOs follow the money while international aid agencies and governments make short-term financial investments and demand quick, measurable outcomes accompanied by stamped receipts that perfectly match projected budgets of yesteryear. Continued underwriting of even the most successful projects is rare for more than a few years. There never seems to be enough time and money to seriously evaluate results, conscientiously refine programs, follow up with candid longitudinal reviews, and THEN to persuade governments to scale up the most effective and efficient models. Laudable programs die before they become part of the root system of a community—and the wheel of development continues to reinvent itself at enormous cost and minimal impact. This serves no one well—not the “beneficiaries” (who tend to get blamed for being so intractable), not the individual donors or taxpayers, and certainly not the future wellbeing of society.

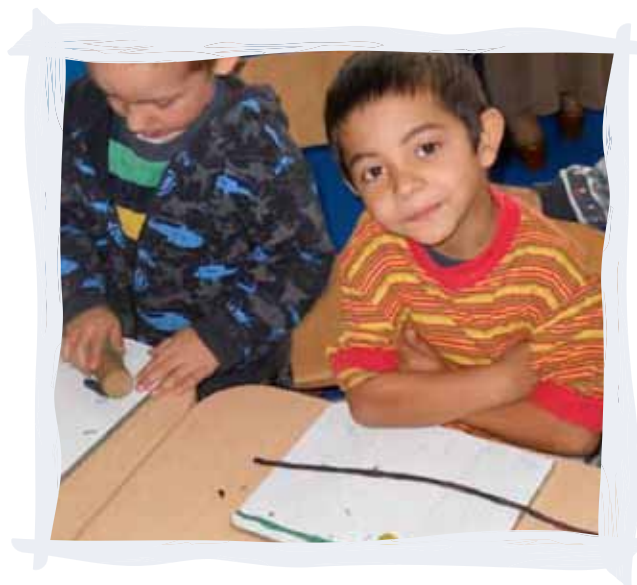
If Romania is serious about reducing school abandonment and thereby raising school attainment, literacy and employment – early education for ALL must be a cornerstone of our national education strategy – and these programs must continue at full throttle for at least a generation. This will require all political parties to work together on the early education agenda – and the continued adherence to the strategy by whichever party is in power in central and local government. The stakes are too high for parties to wield educational policy as a political weapon.

Radically raising Romania’s educational attainment level is not an impossible dream – any more than racially integrating a fiercely divided America was an impossible dream a half century ago.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Martin Luther King, August 1963

“Children are the inheritors of poverty’s curse, and not its creators. Let us act now so these children will not pass poverty on to the next generation like a family birthmark.” Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks on Project Head Start, May 1965



III. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: EVIDENCE OF THE LASTING EFFECTS OF EARLY EDUCATION: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX B: 2011-2012 SCHEDULE

FIECARE COPIL ÎN GRĂDINIȚĂ – JULY 2011 – JUNE 2012 TIMELINE

ACTIVITY	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June
Summer preparation programs												
Local coordinators meeting & training												
Meeting with school inspectors, mayors and principals at the Ministry of Education												
Final selection of 2011-2012 communities												
Training for local teams												
Preschool recruitment and registration drives												
Local Action Group meetings												
Monitoring attendance												
Teacher trainings												

July-August 2011

- **Summer preparation programs** for 2700 children in 75 schools and kindergartens (480 children from FCG)

August 2011

- **Launch project in new communities and continue in 16.**
- **Best practice conference** in Deva for summer programs teachers.
- **Meeting of mayors, school inspectors, principals and local coordinators** attended by Ministry representatives, partner stakeholders from the Ministries of Health and Labour, will reinforce the importance of early education and encourage local authorities to customize solutions for local realities.

September 2011

- **Regional and local teacher training workshops** for attendance monitoring and parent counseling.
- **Partner with Ministry of Health and/or health service NGOs** to:
 - Facilitate closer collaboration with family doctors in the program communities
 - Organize vaccination and check-up campaigns for 3-6 year olds
Address lice and other public health problems that impact school attendance.
- **Identify and collaborate with other organizations** to address the need for parent education, health and hygiene issues, multiculturalism, parent emigration, safety education, and so forth.

Suggested Rollout of a National Early Education Plan targeting poor children:

Year 1 (2012)	FCG for all impoverished 5-6 year olds in eligible communities that apply.
Year 2 (2013)	FCG for all impoverished 4-5 year olds in eligible communities that apply.
Year 3 (2014)	FCG for all impoverished 3-5 year olds in eligible communities that apply.
Year 4 (2015)	FCG available for all impoverished 3-5 year olds in Romania.

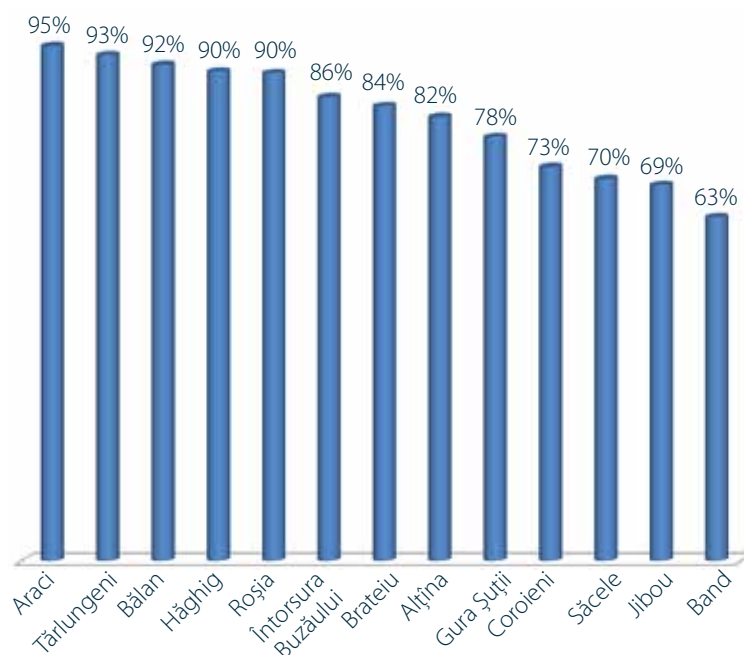
APPENDIX C: TARGET GROUP & LOCATIONS

Communities selected for 2010-2011 school year:

Braşov: Săcele, Târlungeni; **Covasna:** Araci, Hăghig, Întorsura Buzăului; **Mureş:** Band; **Constanţa:** Castelu; **Maramureş:** Coroieni; **Sălaj:** Jibou; **Sibiu:** Roşia, Alţîna, Brateiu; **Harghita:** Bălan; **Bacău:** Bacău, Buhuşi; **Dâmboviţa:** Gura Şuţii, Potlogi, Vizureşti; **Bucharest** Sector 5.

Most of the families that qualified have been in poverty for many generations. On average, the children's parents finished 4-5 grades although in some communities almost all parents are illiterate (i.e. in Band, only 5% of parents had finished 1st or 2nd grade). In only two communities, Rosia and Sacele, the majority of parents had finished 8 grades. The families have an average of 4-5 children and it is not uncommon for 10-12 people to cohabit in a two-room dwelling. Most houses are in appalling condition: improvised roofs, broken or non-existent windows, heated by wood or open electric grills and no running water, cook stoves, refrigeration or sanitation facilities. Children must walk on unpaved, often muddy pathways (in two cases a distance of 1-2 km) to *grădiniţă*.

Children in FCG with daily attendance per community, in May 2011



APPENDIX D: LEGAL AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Romania's new National Education Law, ratified on February 9, 2011, addresses early education as follows:

- Article 23** incorporates pre-preschool education (age 0-3) in the education law for the first time;
- Article 28(2)** assigns public authorities with responsibility for the step-by-step increase in the availability of preschool in their communities;
- Article 23(b)** introduces a mandatory preparatory year ("Clasa Pregatitoare") for 6 year olds;
- Article 58** recognizes the importance of recreational, after-school, free time, and remedial activities, and
- Article 12(1)** mentions that the State supports preschool children with special needs.

Fiecare Copil în Grădiniţă supports the philosophy and goals of the new law by its:

- "Şotron Zero" module which provides educational programs for 2-3 year olds and their moms;
- Active recruitment of impoverished children for preschool;
- Piloting of 'clasa pregatitoare' in our program sites in 2011 in partnership with the School Inspectorates;
- Summer 'school preparation' programs, and
- Monthly food coupons for children's perfect attendance in *grădiniţă*.

A new provision of the Education Law is that starting January 2012, schools will benefit from per student financing. This will give local communities more independence in hiring social workers, a medical nurse, or a school mediator from their own budgets.

The European Union has asserted that it considers preschool education a top priority in order to reduce the number of school dropouts and people living in poverty and social exclusion. On February 17th, 2011, the European Commission launched an action plan for universal access to quality preschool education.