

## Making school an attractive option

### A Bulgarian school has eliminated drop-outs after involving Roma parents in their children's education

*Tyanka Kardzhilova is headmistress at an elementary school for 6-14 year olds in Galabovo. The flat landscape here is dominated by coal mines, and the St Paisii Hilenarski has 230 pupils, with a particularly high percentage of Roma pupils because it is close to a Roma neighbourhood.*



**There are no more drop-outs because Roma parents are helping to solve the problem**

“In my school here in South-East Bulgaria near the Turkish and Greek borders, 30 percent of the children are of Bulgarian origin, and the others are Roma. These Roma families live in poverty and their social status is low. The parents are generally not interested in their children's education.

“We've been working on a project to decrease drop-out rates for the last three years, and the results are good. We used to have dropout rates of 10-15 children a year, and now we don't have any. Our purpose is to empower Roma parents by getting them involved in school life. We encourage them to participate in school planning and management.

“Not all parents are keen to do so, but for those who do get involved it's a positive experience. They sit on school councils, we hold parent-teacher meetings and invite them to special events at the school. We had

them sit around a table with cups of coffee to discuss their views on how to solve truancy problems. We regularly invite the mayor of the Roma quarter, and he too helped us try to keep Roma children in school.

“We also organise extra-curricular activities, including classes on Roma culture and tradition in which all the children – Roma and non-Roma – are encouraged to take part. It's essential to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma children through teaching tolerance and training staff. If we don't integrated the Roma into Bulgarian society, if they remain uneducated and sometimes illiterate without professions or occupations, they will continue to represent a major problem for our country.

“We don't have any serious tensions between the Bulgarian and Roma parents. Our problem is that more recently young non-Roma families have been moving to big cities or abroad to find work and I am concerned that our school may turn into a segregated school. The enrolment of non-Roma children has been going down. I hope our hard work will yield results. It's vital for our society.”

## Raising awareness to the environment

### How do you lessen prejudice? One school does it by organising extra-curricular green activities for Roma and non-Roma children

*St Paisii Hildenarski school in Galabova runs a second project to teach children about environmental issues. Mariana Palazova is a teacher at the school.*

“The Roma and non-Roma children work together, which helps integrate Roma children into the mainstream. A lot of the activities take place at school in the afternoon, such as recycling and gathering waste, teaching healthy eating habits and about travelling to school on foot and by bikes, rather than being dropped off by car.

“This sort of project is very useful for our children because it keeps Bulgarian and Roma children together after classes, and thus offers an opportunity for them to overcome prejudices and change attitudes. Intercultural education is essential to modernising the Bulgarian educational system and answer the needs of children and parents. The parents too start to see Roma parents with different eyes. I've found many talents among my Roma pupils – we have singers, dancers, footballers, actors. I think many of our students will go on to secondary education.

"I learned about Roma culture classes at the Amalipe Centre. We have also been on trips to partner schools, and this has been very useful both for teachers and pupils. In Scotland, for instance, they saw mixed classes of Scottish and Indian children, and they also learned how some schools work with children with special needs and physical disabilities."

**Amalipe Centre**

*This project was managed by the Amalipe Centre for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance, a leading Roma organisation in Bulgaria, which regularly receives EU funding.*

**Healthy Europe, Happy Europe**

*A Comenius project, "Healthy Europe, Happy Europe" is part of the EU's Lifelong Learning programme, working with 10 schools from eight countries, including Britain, France, Portugal, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey and Bulgaria. It was launched in 2011-12. In Bulgaria it is managed by the Amalipe Centre.*