

DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

POLICY ROAD MAP

Croatia



**Empowering School Principals
for Inclusive School Culture
HEAD**

This publication is one of the outputs of the *HEAD: Empowering School Principals for Inclusive School Culture* project that aims to address the professionalization and continuous professional development of school principals in primary and secondary schools, focusing on inclusive education.



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BACKGROUND

This policy document was created with the purpose of providing recommendations and possible activities for strengthening school leadership in the direction of creating an inclusive school culture in the Republic of Croatia. The analysis of scientific and professional literature shows that schools around the world are increasingly aware of the different demographic and other characteristics of their students (e.g., those coming from different socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, or linguistic environments, and students with disabilities, etc.) from whom different needs arise: needs for specific learning and teaching approaches, as well as specific approaches within other activities and services of the school (nutrition, care, safety, care, etc.). In the documents directing the development of educational policies, the need to respect the inclusive dimension of education is increasingly advocated, and the value of increasing participation in both social and educational processes is emphasized, thus reducing the risk of exclusion and discrimination (Donnelly, Turner-Cmucha and Óskarsdóttir, 2018; OECD, 2021).

Studies highlight the importance of the school principals' role in creating an inclusive school culture and, among other things, emphasize that leaders of schools and other educational institutions are recognized as key stakeholders on whom depends the success of adapting pedagogical and other school processes to students with different characteristics and needs. At the same time, their role in strengthening schools' capacities of considering the needs of all stakeholders arising from their diversities is particularly advocated. Schools should develop inclusive policies, implement inclusive practices and create inclusive school cultures. Analyses show that school leaders need stronger (material and educational) support in order to successfully apply inclusive and anti-discriminatory practices and strategies in their work, develop school values supporting inclusion and multiculturalism, as well as cooperation between different stakeholders, and encourage teachers and other employees to use the same practices (Brejc, Ažman and Grobbe, 2021; Turner-Cmucha and Óskarsdóttir, 2020; Wang and Degol, 2015).

Croatian school principals have various professional development programs at their disposal, mostly organized by the relevant agencies (Education and Teacher Training Agency and Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education), however, after consulting the catalog of the programs offered, it can be noticed that the content of most of the mentioned programs is focused on general issues of the administrative management and leadership of schools, while

topics such as inclusion, multiculturalism, fairness, and justice are less represented. The analysis of empirical data collected through a survey questionnaire within the HEAD project on the sample of school principals in Croatia confirmed the need for the professional development of school principals in the field of inclusive principals. The collected data relates to the demographic characteristics of school principals; the previous activities relating to the development of competencies for inclusive education and inclusive school leadership; the characteristics of professional development with the greatest effect on improving school leadership and the need for professional development programs in the field of inclusive education for school principals. The results showed that school principals express the greatest need for programs relating to developing cooperation with other stakeholders inside and outside the school, preparing school employees to consider the needs of different groups of students, supporting parents for active participation in school life, and ensuring inclusive learning. (Mlekuž and Veldin, 2022).

Postgraduate specialist study programs for principals of educational institutions are carried out at three Croatian universities (the University of Rijeka, the University of Zadar, and the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek). However, an insight into the curriculum of the aforementioned study programs shows that the content developing inclusive competencies is poorly represented. For example, in the study program carried out at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, part of the content relating to inclusive topics can be found in the descriptions of the courses of Modern Pedagogical Knowledge of Learning and Teaching and Modern Psychological Knowledge of Psychological Development, Learning and Teaching, and it is expressed in the learning outcome that reads: *recognize the needs of students with developmental disabilities, as well as of gifted students, and adapt teaching to their characteristics*. However, it should be emphasized that there is still room in the study program for the implementation of additional inclusive content into the existing courses, as well as the possibility of introducing new optional courses explicitly aiming at developing the competencies of school principals for inclusive school leadership. For the time being, only a very small number of school principals or candidates for the position of school leader enroll in such programs (e.g., the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka has so far initiated just one generation with 6 enrolled students), since these are programs of longer duration with relatively high tuition fees that the participants usually settle themselves. Only a few other providers of continuous professional development services for educational workers offer programs that are thematically related to inclusive education, and a greater commitment of institutions that are partners of this project should be emphasized (Forum for Freedom of Education, Open Academy *Step by Step*). On those grounds, one can conclude that there is an increased need to provide various

forms of professional development and support to school leaders aimed at developing competencies for creating an inclusive school culture.

In the legal regulation defining the method of appointing and hiring school principals in Croatia, it can be observed that the development of inclusive competencies is not a condition for employment or the continuous professional development of school principals. An overview of the content of the documents on occupation and qualification standards for principals of educational institutions¹, in which sets of principals' duties, i.e. sets of competencies necessary for their performance, are specifically defined, showed that the inclusive dimension is not explicitly stated in the document, and it should be emphasized that the documents have not yet taken root in the context of improving the employment policy and professionalizing of school principals. In addition to being able to contribute to a better understanding of the competence profile of the leaders of educational institutions and finding better management practices and structures, the documents should direct educational policymakers towards adopting better policy solutions for the selection of candidates for the principals occupation, their employment, initial training, continuous professional development, and evaluation of the quality of their work. It can therefore be concluded that there is a need to ensure their full application, whereby it is necessary to ensure that the occupation and qualification standards for school principals direct school leadership according to the principles of inclusion.

The two-day meeting organized within the project "HEAD: Empowering school leaders for inclusive school culture" gathered together 40 principals of primary and secondary schools and directors of student dormitories, as well as other experts in the field of education (university professors employed in institutions dealing with the initial training of educational staff; representatives of the education office in local and regional administration and self-government units; experts working in civil society organizations dealing with the improvement of the field of education, i.e. the development of the inclusive dimension of education). The organizers of the meeting introduced the participants to the methodology of participatory drafting of recommendations for empowering school principals in creating an inclusive school culture. An innovative method policy lab was used to empower various interested stakeholders to participate in public policies in order to come up with

1 Occupation standard - Leader of an educational institution (<https://hko.srce.hr/registar/standard-zanimanja/detalji/33>) was entered in the Register of the Croatian Qualification Framework on June 2, 2020 and is in force until December 31, 2025. The standard is proposed by the Ministry of Science and Education. Qualification standard - Leader of an educational institution (<https://hko.srce.hr/registar/standard-kvalifikacije/detalji/27>) was entered in the Register of the Croatian Qualification Framework on November 13, 2020 and is in force until June 15, 2025. The standard is proposed by the Education and Teacher Training Agency.

possible ways of overcoming the obstacles and/or possible solutions for the identified challenges in education through joint reflection and analysis. A framework was used to monitor the representation of the inclusive dimension in the documents that were subject to the analysis, with a special emphasis on the representation and monitoring of the main functions of inclusive school leadership: setting direction, organizational development, and professional development of school employees (EASNIE, 2018). The fundamental challenge presented to the participants was aimed at finding elements missing in the educational policies in order to support school principals in creating an inclusive school culture. The participants worked in small groups of mixed composition to ensure an outcome in which the perspectives of the representatives of different stakeholders were represented.

The occupation and the qualification standards for principals of educational institutions were analyzed first, whereby it was observed whether the individual competencies within the sets of competencies are aimed at developing an inclusive dimension of leadership. It was concluded that most competencies have space that can be supplemented with words that highlight the focus on developing the inclusive dimension more precisely. When formulating individual competencies, that dimension was not explicitly emphasized and the participants pointed it out as a key shortcoming, and several proposals for improvement were suggested (mainly for extending the existing formulations with words emphasizing the inclusive dimension). During the discussion, some important perspectives were highlighted. One referred to the need to initiate a public debate about the content of occupation and qualification standards documents, which, according to most participants, was absent during the process of creating the documents, that is, it was not conducted in a way that would ensure full participation in the creation of the content of the documents. Another one referred to the importance of structuring the public debate about the documents, whereby participants need to be offered a concrete framework for analyzing the documents that are relatively complex for analysis due to their defined structure and methodology according to which they are created. For example, if an analysis framework directing the reader to find the inclusive dimension of leadership is applied in advance, it is possible to ensure the better quality of the results analysis.

In the second step of the analysis, the way in which the system can support all school principals in the realization of the selected competencies that are key to creating an inclusive school culture was explored. In conclusion, it is important to highlight the need for the further development of school principals' competencies for the (proactive) creation of policies concerning their own profession, emphasizing several levels: the knowledge of the methodology of creating documents

of the occupation and the qualification standards, the development of the skill of active participation in public debate resulting in the formulation of concrete proposals for improvement, and the development of proactive action towards the stakeholders responsible for the implementation of the mentioned documents in practice.

The framework curriculum for improving school leaders' competencies for the development of inclusive school cultures, designed within the "HEAD: empowering school leaders for inclusive school culture" project, was implemented in Croatia and North Macedonia in the form of ten-day training sessions attended by a total of 81 school principals. This implementation showed that school principals who have taken a training course in the framework curriculum, compared to the control group of school principals who have not, evaluate their competencies for creating an inclusive school culture more highly just a few months after the training course implementation ended. In some aspects, it has been shown that, in addition to school principals, both students and teachers recognize the elements of inclusive school culture in their schools to a greater extent than before.

The guidelines for educational policies were formed based on collected data and are aimed at several levels: national, local, and regional administration and self-government, local community level, institutional level, and individual level. They were formulated as answers to questions about what should be done at each of the levels in order to remove the identified obstacles to the development of inclusive education and inclusive school leadership, with particular regard to strengthening the capacity of school principals and their associates in the processes of inclusive school leadership. The recommendations are further elaborated through concrete activities that can lead to their realization, along with the proposal of entities that will take responsibility for their realization. The recommendations are mostly defined in the context of developing and improving existing policies, while in several places, where the existing ones are not sufficient for their implementation, the creation of new policies is suggested. The recommendations are structured in such a way that communication and connections between different levels of authorities responsible for the creation and implementation of inclusive education policies can be observed and monitored.

OBJECTIVE OF THE GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The objective of the guidelines for educational policy for Croatia is to improve the competence development system of principals of educational institutions necessary for the creation of an inclusive school.

The vision of the policy development is to create conditions for quality education, with school leaders as leaders of progress toward building a holistic system of inclusive education – in which every child and student will have an equal opportunity to reach his/her potential. This implies that *quality education for all* is understood as a public good and a fundamental social value. In such a system, a network of competent school leaders develops appropriate programs and measures for their continuous professional development through participatory and collaborative processes they successfully implement those measures and appropriately evaluate the inclusive education practices using quality methods for the data collection about the effectiveness of the measures. These processes use both bottom-up and top-down approaches in active collaboration with all the relevant stakeholders. The collected data further serves for evidence-based quality assurance measures as well as for the improvement of the teaching/learning processes and the creation of an inclusive school culture.

The implications of such a vision are that society will have quality-educated citizens, who actively and competently participate in all societal developments and processes. Those citizens would significantly contribute to building an inclusive and learning society built on knowledge. School leaders would have an important and active role in developing inclusive leadership of the schools as the basic and essential cells of society, in the promotion of democratic values, and in the assurance that democratic practices are incorporated in school policy documents. Such school leaderships would be able to address the challenges to inclusiveness not only in schools but in the wider community as well.

IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES

Based on the findings and data collected through the studies and the consultation process, the following recommendations were developed with an implementation plan of the steps planned for the development of school leaders' competencies to create an inclusive culture in schools:

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

IMPROVE THE SYSTEM OF COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS NECESSARY FOR THE CREATION OF AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL.

Specific objective

1. DEFINE THE COMPETENCIES OF PRINCIPALS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS NECESSARY FOR THE CREATION OF AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL.

Recommendations

1.1. CONDUCT A PARTICIPATORY EXPERT DISCUSSION ABOUT THE NECESSARY COMPETENCIES OF PRINCIPALS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR THE CREATION OF AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL.

1.1.1.

Organize and implement various forms of professional dialog with educational workers contributing to the understanding of the principles of social inclusion.

Stakeholders involved

Educational experts in the field of social inclusion, school principals, experts from the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE), Education and Teacher Training Agency (ETTA), and The Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education (AVETAE).

Level of implementation

National, regional, local.

1.1.2.

Organize and conduct various forms of expert discussions with all the relevant stakeholders at different levels of the system with the aim of harmonizing and defining competencies for inclusive leadership of educational institutions.

Stakeholders involved

School principals, university professors of educational sciences, experts employed at MSE, ETTA, AVETAE, associations of school leaders, and representatives of civil society organizations dealing with this topic.

Level of implementation

National, regional, local.

1.1.3.

Organize and conduct various forms of expert discussions about the content and/or the need for a revision of the occupation and the qualification standards for school leaders in force with the aim of ensuring the development of competencies for inclusive leadership of educational institutions.

Stakeholders involved

School principals, university professors of educational sciences, experts employed at MSE, ETTA, AVETAE, associations of school principals, and representatives of civil society organizations dealing with this topic.

Level of implementation

National, regional, local.

Recommendations

1.2. ENSURE THE REVISION OF THE OCCUPATION AND THE QUALIFICATION STANDARDS FOR PRINCIPALS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN FORCE, CONSIDERING THE INCLUSION OF THE INCLUSIVE DIMENSION IN THE CONTENT OF THE DOCUMENT.

1.2.1.

Gather the opinions of all the relevant stakeholders through various forms of professional events about the possibility of revising the occupation and the qualification standards for school principals in force with the aim of ensuring the development of competencies for inclusive leadership of educational institutions (for example, thematic expert meetings, etc.).

Stakeholders involved

School principals, university professors of educational sciences, experts employed at MSE, ETTA, associations of school principals, and representatives of civil society organizations dealing with the topic of education.

Level of implementation

National, regional, local.

1.2.2.

Register the revised occupation and qualification standards for principals of educational institutions in the Register of the Croatian Qualification Framework, considering the inclusion of the inclusive dimension in the content of the document.

Stakeholders involved
MSE.

Level of implementation
National.

1.2.3.

Inform the professional public about the content and possibilities of the application of the revised documents of the occupation and the qualification standards for principals of educational institutions through public consultation and other forms of providing information.

Stakeholders involved
MSE, associations of school leaders, ETTA, AVETAE.

Level of implementation
National, regional and local.

1.2.4.

Form an expert working group for the revision of the occupation and the qualification standards in force.

Stakeholders involved
MSE, associations of school leaders, ETTA, AVETAE.

Level of implementation
National, regional and local.

Specific objective

2. ENSURE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPETENCIES OF PRINCIPALS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS NECESSARY FOR THE CREATION OF AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE.

Recommendations

2.1. ENSURE THE AVAILABILITY OF PROGRAMS FOR THE INITIAL TRAINING OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS, THROUGH WHICH COMPETENCIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ARE DEVELOPED.

2.1.1.

Create a national competency framework for the initial training of school principals, as well as their continuous professional development, which ensures the development of inclusive leadership competencies of principals of educational institutions within the framework of appropriate study programs.

Stakeholders involved

MSE, Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), universities, and higher education institutions accredited for the initial training of educational staff.

Level of implementation

National.

2.1.2.

During the accreditation and re-accreditation of postgraduate specialist study programs for principals of educational institutions, ensure the representation of competencies for inclusive school leadership provided for in the revised documents of the occupation and the qualification standards for school principals.

Stakeholders involved

ASHE

Level of implementation

National.

Recommendations

2.2. ENSURE THE AVAILABILITY OF PROGRAMS FOR THE CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS THROUGH WHICH COMPETENCIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ARE DEVELOPED.

2.2.1.

Define the quality criteria of various forms of continuous professional development programs for school principals and their providers, considering the development of school leaders' competencies for inclusive school leadership.

Stakeholders involved

ETTA, Higher education institutions accredited for the initial training of educational staff, and civil society organizations dealing with the professional development of school principals.

Level of implementation

National.

2.2.2.

Recognize the importance of and offer support to other registered educational institutions in the system when accrediting professional development programs for school principals aimed at developing competencies for inclusive education and inclusive school leadership.

Stakeholders involved

ETTA.

Level of implementation

National.

2.2.3.

Expand the offer of professional training programs for school leaders organized by ETTA and other institutions and non-governmental organizations aimed at developing competencies for inclusive education and inclusive school leadership.

Stakeholders involved

ETTA, local and regional self-government units, civil society organizations, and other institutions dealing with the professional development of school principals.

Level of implementation

National.

Specific objective

3. PROVIDE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT EXPECTS AND ENABLES THE APPLICATION OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' COMPETENCIES TO CREATE AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE.

Recommendations

3.1. ADVOCATE AND PROMOTE THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENTS AT THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS.

3.1.1.

Promote/publicly emphasize the importance of developing an inclusive environment in all areas of public activity of regional and local administration and self-government units and state institutions (organizing meetings, round tables, promotional activities, etc.).

Stakeholders involved

Government of the Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Health, MSE, local self-government units, Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, experts in the field of children's rights, and civil society organizations.

Level of implementation

National, local.

3.1.2.

Continuously conduct analysis of the needs of children at risk in schools and in the environment of local and regional self-government units, as well as at the national level.

Stakeholders involved

MSE, NCEEE, local self-government units, and schools.

Level of implementation

National, regional, local, school.

3.1.3.

Initiate the introduction of educational and other programs promoting social inclusion and respect for diversity among children and adults.

Stakeholders involved

MSE, AVETAE, local self-government units, civil society organizations, and schools.

Level of implementation

National, local, school.

3.1.4.

Introduce assigned funds encouraging the development of the inclusive dimension at the national and local level, as well as at the level of educational institutions, and monitor their spending.

Stakeholders involved

MSE, local self-government units, and schools.

Level of implementation

National, local, school.

3.1.5.

Initiate and encourage the mutual networking of school principals and encourage the strengthening of cooperation with different partners and stakeholders outside the school with the aim of strengthening and developing the inclusive dimension of the school.

Stakeholders involved

AVETAE, civil society organizations dealing with the professional development of school principals, associations of school leaders, and school leaders.

Level of implementation

Regional, local.

3.1.6.

Apply mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of the principles and criteria of inclusiveness of education and leadership at all operational levels of the educational system (e.g., through research, analysis, evaluation, self-evaluation, etc.)

Stakeholders involved

MSE, NCEE, ETTA, and local self-government units.

Level of implementation

National, regional, local.

Recommendations

3.2. ANALYZE AND SUPPORT THE REVISION OF EXISTING PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS, WITH A SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION.

3.2.1.

Introduce criteria for evaluating the application of the principle of social inclusion in schools and the participation of all stakeholders (including students, parents and educational staff) into the existing activities for evaluating the quality of educational practices, in addition to the existing standards and criteria for the self-evaluation and external evaluation of schools.

Stakeholders involved

ETTA, AVETAЕ, NCEEE.

Level of implementation

National.

3.2.2.

Create additional criteria and include additional mechanisms for verifying the application of the principle of inclusion in schools.

Stakeholders involved

MSE, ETTA, local and regional self-government units, NCEEE.

Level of implementation

National, local.

Recommendations

3.3. HARMONIZE THE BASIC DOCUMENTS (LAWS, REGULATIONS, ETC.) REGULATING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CROATIA WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, CONSIDERING ALL LEVELS AND SEGMENTS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

3.3.1.

Define binding principles and criteria of inclusive leadership for all operational levels of the educational system (for example, form an expert working group that will create a list of principles and criteria).

Stakeholders involved

MSE, ETTA.

Level of implementation

National.

3.3.2.

Implement the necessary changes to the basic documents (laws, regulations, etc.) regulating the education system in order to ensure the application of the principles of inclusive education and inclusive leadership.

Stakeholders involved
MSE.

Level of implementation
National.

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