

Community Impact Case Study FY20

Teach For Bulgaria



I. Case Overview

Since 2010, Teach For Bulgaria has grown its influence over policy and teacher training at the national level, and built the capacity of alumni for systemic impact. A nation of 7m inhabitants, Bulgaria serves about 1.2m children across its schools.

Launch Year 2010

Participants 104

Alumni 308 alumni

80% of alumni continue to work and lead in education, often in partnership with Teach For Bulgaria

II. Community Story



Bulgaria faces challenges and opportunities in the fight for educational equity. A highly centralized system, Bulgaria transitioned from communist rule to parliamentary democracy in 1989. In the last thirty years, the student population and education system have changed profoundly. Students were high scorers as compared to peers around the world in the 1980s, but their scores fell by the mid-2000s. Now, nearly half of all children cannot interpret a text they read. Nearly 20% of young people in Bulgaria are neither employed nor in school. 40% of companies in the country report labor shortage to be a big problem. Over half of teachers are aged over 50.

There is also unequal access to education. Socioeconomic status largely determines your educational outcomes. The Roma population in Bulgaria is about 11% of the national total, and Roma students experience worse educational outcomes than their peers. Immigrant children endure similar disenfranchisement. Bulgarian is often not the mother tongue of these student groups, so students too often lack the support they need to succeed.

Other social, economic, and political factors make systemic change hard. The country has the lowest GDP per capita income and the lowest human development index in the EU, and widening inequality. Widespread corruption is a challenge - it was rated the most corrupt country in the EU in 2018. The population is shrinking, now at 7m, down from 9m in the late 1980s. Economic sectors include services, industry (especially machine building and mining), information technology, and agriculture. Challenges facing young people are high.

Against this backdrop, many educational actors, NGOs, teachers and students across the country are coming together to work to improve the system so all children in Bulgaria can thrive.



III. Growth of Collective Leadership

Over the last decade, Teach For Bulgaria's success in developing fellows and alumni has enabled the organization to build influential partnerships with key stakeholders across the system. The team has built credibility through the program, added leadership capacity and made a compelling case for alternate pathways to teaching.

Teach For Bulgaria has strengthened collective efforts across the national education ecosystem through deep partnerships. Working with the support of their alumni, the organization coordinated and collaborated on a prominent education discussion series with the OECD and the World Bank on cutting edge education topics featuring global experts. They also played a central role in a multilateral effort to demonstrate the value-add of bringing new talent to the teaching profession in the project New Way for New Talents in Teaching (NEWTT), an effort backed by the European Union, and undertaken in collaboration with network partners in Estonia and Romania. The project involved piloting and testing alternative pathways to teacher certification in five European countries in disadvantaged areas, and the results revealed that teachers in the pilot perform on par or better than traditionally trained teachers, with motivation being a key differentiator between the groups.

Teach For Bulgaria has also strengthened leadership across the ecosystem, by shaping teacher professional development across the country. The organization regularly shares knowledge to spread best practices and serves as a convener for the education community and key stakeholders. Recently, thirteen of TFB’s training programs were included in the national professional development training register for teachers and principals on forward-thinking topics such as collective leadership in education and student-centered learning. The organization regularly generates well-received white papers on topics ranging from recruiting excellent teachers to 21st century knowledge and skills. They host regular conferences to share and spread learning and best practices, and build relationships and connections across the sector. TFB’s long standing relationship with the well-respected America for Bulgaria Foundation has helped to fuel and strengthen its work over time.

Recently, the Ministry of Education has called upon TFB to showcase effective implementation of education policy. TFB is working with a small group of alumni to share insights with the government’s backing on how to develop students’ skills for the 21st century. This effort is done on the ground with teachers and principals, and often in partnership with local technical experts in multiple regions. They expect to scale this project nationally next year.

TFB alumni and fellows have also deepened impact through a focus on supporting Roma students and immigrant populations through community-level partnerships. After seeing classroom-level resources for linguistically diverse students were sparse, fellows and the team leapt to action. They partnered with a local NGO, EducArt, to develop educational resources for additional language training for primary school students whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian. The team views bilingualism as a strength, and the effort received backing from European Bank and hundreds of local donors.



The organization is continuing to build the capacity of staff, fellows, alumni, and students to act as leaders for systemic change. There are many staff and alumni in leadership positions at schools and government and creating new enterprises to improve education and student support. Across the country, the team is seeing more community-rooted alumni initiatives that address local challenges such as Together at School/Together Outside of School (which tackles absenteeism), Leadership School for Parents and Students (which builds parents as advocates for child’s schooling), School Miracles (a poverty alleviation organization) and Vratsa Software (preparing young people for tech sector jobs). In partnership with TFB, alumni launched the Transformed Student Inquiry Process, a rigorous student-led leadership and learning process that culminates in exciting conferences. There, stakeholders learn from students and each about the drivers of holistic student development.

As Radostina Boycheva, who leads regional partnerships at TFB, puts it, “Systems are made of people showing up.”

IV. Teach For Bulgaria's Approach

Teach For Bulgaria is driving change across the country in various ways:

A strong program that builds on student assets

The team has viewed diversity as a strength in its program, particularly when it comes to students. Through several student leadership efforts, the team is showing what is possible when we build on students strengths and assets.

Providing mentoring, training, connections, and funding for alumni and their efforts

The team has provided its alumni with high-quality career development, through a pathways approach, to build capacity of its alumni for systemic change. They also provide connections and sometimes even locate financial support to help alumni kickstart and build their efforts.

Partnering across the ecosystem

TFB has developed deep, long-standing partnerships across the ecosystem including in local, national, and regional governments and other institutions, as well as local education leaders.

Showing up, finding common ground, and persisting to get results

When asked about the drivers for public influence, the team reflected on the value of being open and responsive when opportunities arise. They also emphasized not demanding credit and “sharing the glory” with your partners, and being aware that relationships take time. The team’s partnership with the country’s teachers unions have been slow, but they are beginning to make progress and traction after ten years of showing up and finding and valuing shared goals. It’s important to embrace the challenges of working with public sector partners, and to be persistent and generous in the pursuit of results for children.

V. Looking Ahead

The team is continuing its focus on building and scaling a strong program and collaborating with other stakeholders to drive change and improve the sector. The team is hard at work on many initiatives. For example, after listening to partners, the team is working on a new program called Model Schools. They are building a school training team to build capacity and increase student learning across the country.

Authored by Sarah King, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Doctoral Candidate

Special thanks to the Teach For Bulgaria team for their collaboration and support