

Research project on joint initiatives on stress prevention

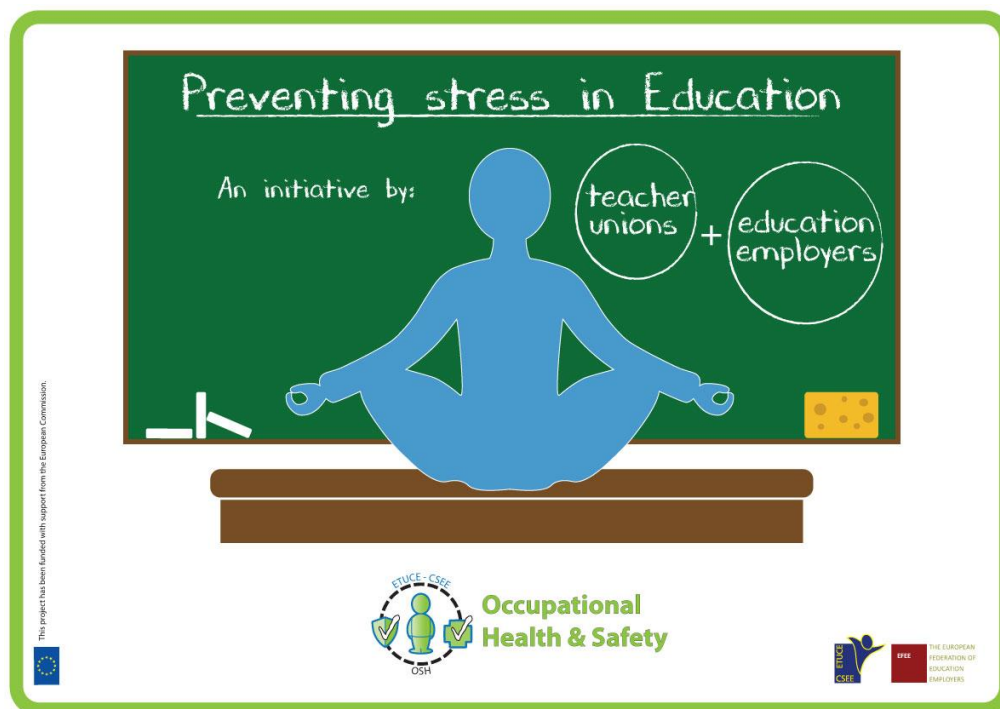
**Social Partners Promoting Decent Workplaces in the Education Sector for a Healthier Working Life**

This project is carried out with the financial support of the European Commission. Grant Agreement number: VS/2015/0030.

# PREVENTING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS AND WORK-RELATED STRESS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## ROMANIA Case Study Report

June 2015



The Project is scientifically supported by FFAW (Freiburg research centre for occupational sciences) and ISTAS (Instituto Sindical de Trabajo, Ambiente y Salud.)



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The ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee for Education) – EFEE (European Federation of Education Employers) project advisory group wishes to thank the local study delegation members and all the people interviewed in Romania for their time and hospitality.



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## **1. FIELDWORK NOTES**

Information used in this report is mainly based on semi-structured group interviews with a total of 25 key participants. On the one hand, social partners at national level i.e. **FSLI** (Federatia Sindicatelor Libere din Invatamant/Federation of Free Unions in Education) and **Alma Mater** representatives –two trade unions in the education sector in Romania- and the representative of the **Ministry of Education and Scientific Research** (MOE) as the employer; on the other hand, with experts on health and safety issues i.e. FSLI trainers and a university professor; and finally, with school leaders, trade unionists and teachers from the **Princess Margaret** and **Alexandru Ioan Cuza** schools. Princess Margaret is a public primary and lower secondary school (6 to 14 year old pupils), located in Bucharest. In the school year 2014-2015 there were 45 classes, 1178 students with a socio-economically mixed background (670 boys and 508 girls) and 67 teachers (60 women and 7 men), 17 being part-timers in this school. Alexandru Ioan Cuza is a public upper secondary high school (14 to 18 year old students), with a marked science profile, located in Bucharest. In the school year 2014-2015 there were 29 classes, 859 students with a socio-economically medium background (494 boys and 365 girls) and 54 teachers (46 women and 8 men), 9 being part-timers in this school.

The study delegation was formed of two representatives of EFEE and four from ETUCE, one representative from each EU level organisation and the other representatives from national level organisations (Romania, UK and Finland) and one member of the research team.

The researcher conducted **semi-structured group interviews** and at the end of the interviews, the other members of the study delegation could add more questions following the guidelines agreed at advisory group meetings. All interviews took place in a constructive manner and in an easy-going environment allowing the achievement of the case study goals i.e. a description of national background and to document and learn about good practices for the prevention of psychosocial risks and combating work-related stress in secondary schools.

All this information was analysed on the basis of audio recordings facilitated by the film team, study delegation notes and discussions. Secondary data was facilitated by interviewees and treated as relevant documentation.

For data protection reasons, the names of the staff interviewed are not disclosed in this report.

## **2. COUNTRY BACKGROUND**

### **Secondary school system**

Formal and **compulsory schooling** starts at the age of six. It includes *primary* (first 4 grades) and a **part of the secondary education** (last 4grades). Subjects include Maths, Romanian, History, Geography, Science, Art, Introduction to computers, Religion, Music, Physical Education and Civic Education. After the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are required to **pass** the Testarea Națională or the National Test to enrol in **upper secondary education** (*high school*). If they fail, students must go to a school of crafts and trades for two years before entering high school. It comprises four years of studies, two compulsory year levels (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade) and two non-



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compulsory levels (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade). Each high school can choose to offer one or more of the five academic profiles: Sciences, Humanities, Technical, Vocational and Economics, meaning additional subjects and up to 32 hours of classes per week. This profile affects the university degree choice. Students must take and pass the National Baccalaureate Exam or *Examenul National de Bacalaureat* for recognition.

In 2014, there were 5232 schools (primary, secondary and high schools), 98% fully financed by the state, with 3,107,852 students (May 2015). There is a resources gap between rural and urban areas.

### **Working conditions**

According to the MOE, 224,825 people work in primary and secondary education in Romania, being 171,335 titular teachers, i.e. they have passed national exams (data at May 2015). Women represent about 75% of its workforce (2012-2013). The average age of teachers in secondary education was 42 years, with 14% aged below 30 years and 27% below 50 years of age (TALIS, 2013).

**76% of school teachers are employed with a full-time permanent contract**, meaning at least **40 hours per week, being 18 hours of face-to-face classes** (effective teaching hours). Substitute teachers are recruited full-time, mainly with a 1 year temporary contract; this short period makes their integration at the school difficult. The majority of teachers work in one school, but depending on the subject they teach and the number of students in the school (smaller in rural areas) they must complete the 18 hours in one or two additional schools (composed workload). Schools in Romania function the whole day round and teaching is done in shifts. Week-end work is indeed common since all extra-curricular activities with students and teacher training cannot take place from Monday to Friday.

**Teachers' salaries are low**, e.g. in 2015, a teacher with 10 years of seniority and without a management position earns around 238 € per month (the Romanian minimum wage is 217€); moreover the maximum salary after 40 years of working is 500 € per month (similar to the Romanian average gross monthly wages: 564 €). It is the lowest salary by far for teachers in EU countries. This is a problem when recruiting teachers: graduates are looking for jobs in other sectors where salaries are much higher. If other members of the family do not cover daily needs, teachers must have a second job in order not to live in poverty. The status of teaching as a profession is declining.

### **Occupational Health and Safety**

Despite the transposition of Directive 89/39/CEE in October 2006 (Law No. 319 of 14 July 2006 on the health and safety of worker), which means that the duty of the employer is to ensure the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to work (technology, organisation of work, etc.), **only technical safety issues** are dealt with at school level under the OSH umbrella, leaving aside the broader approach to achieve an overall prevention policy that covers all occupational risks.

There are no specific regulatory provisions on psychosocial risks or work-related stress prevention, though there is a kind of recognition of stress as a professional hazard since salaries includes a percentage to cover this hazard bonus.

The law stipulates an obligation for creating a Health and Safety committee in organisations consisting of more than 49 workers. This committee is responsible for prevention activities at school level.

### Social dialogue

Social dialogue has **re-started with the new government**, after many years of being almost non-existent. The **previous government** applied cuts and austerity measures in the sector resulting among other issues in **wage cuts and freezing of wages** and a **ban on employing new personnel** followed by a period of conflict in labour relations which seems resolved now.

## 3. STRESSORS

There is an important agreement between social partners, the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research and trade unions, on priority issues about working conditions. Regarding what this project considers as stressors, **workload** for teachers was emphasised as the most important problem in the pre-university education system and low salaries. At school level the conclusion is the same. Definitely interviewees, regardless of being school leaders, teachers, coordinators or trade unionists, unanimously point at **workload** together with low salaries. Excessive workload could divert toward harmful exposures to psychosocial risks i.e. quantitative demands, work pace, role conflict, family-work conflict and hiding emotions.

### Sources

Highlighted sources of excessive workload were mainly:

- Excessive **red-tape** that overloads working hours

Teachers in Romanian schools have an excessive level of bureaucracy and of paperwork to complete since they have to document almost everything they do. Teachers are required to have a personal portfolio with a teaching plan, teaching materials, students' evaluation and reports on everything they do. At school level, each committee must have a special file with all kind of documentation on procedures, action plan and decisions: reports, minutes, etc. All in all, there can be up to 43 different committees in every single school, some of them overlapping in contents and others changed now and then by the MOE or local authorities. The MOE's purposes for all this information are to evaluate the education system and generate information to improve education policies and the evaluation of schools, with a view to grant additional funding and investments to individual schools. These purposes are not clear at school level where teachers and school leaders concluded that the information is compiled for the records only.

- **Vast curriculum** and many exams on which teachers have no say.

The syllabus content is set by the MOE. It is not possible to move away from it since students need to pass difficult exams on these compulsory subjects. Teachers consider the Romanian curriculum too vast, which does not allow them to delve deep into subjects nor to focus on quality in education. Subjects are covered briefly and often are not tuned with pupils' ages. The syllabus involves and requires a lot of homework, exams and marking.

- **Pupil/Teacher Ratio**

The recruitment ban in force between 2009 and 2014 led to a decreasing number of teachers and developed into class and school mergers which resulted in classes' sizes of 24 to 36 students; with the MOE allocating the number of students to each school. For teachers, this is extremely exhausting since the lesson must be adapted to different students' levels, all of whom need different teaching methods.

## 4. GOOD PRACTICES

Despite the fact that social partners, teachers, school leaders not trade unionists, do not formally consider red tape, curriculum, employment policy, salaries, workload, etc. under the umbrella of occupational health and safety, due to the security and technocratic approach to prevention explained here above, features highlighted are related to psychosocial risks and work-related stress and moreover, their prevention at source. Problems, ways and proposals to solve them could assure an improvement in the level of prevention afforded, integrating, without being completely conscious, the prevention of psychosocial risks and work-related stress on the one hand, in national social dialogue and on the other hand in schools' general management process.

### National level

In 2014, an agreement was signed between the Romanian Government and teacher trade unions concerning the education sector. Through this agreement, among other aspects, the Government has committed to increase teachers' salaries by 10% during 2015 and to **recruit 2500 teachers** as well as to develop a new Education Law. Employing new teachers is an effective way to reduce workload. Regarding the new law, among many other issues, measures to reduce workload are to be bargained. The interviews showed complete agreement on more proposals to achieve the reduction of teachers' workload. If these are to be part of the new education law, it could be considered a good practice together with employing more teachers, an already implemented measure. Three more ways to reduce workload were discussed:

- **Rebuilding national curricula, diminishing quantity of information and focusing it on practical issues**, moving from heavy theory towards knowledge application, and adapting it to pupils' ages;
- **Diminishing red-tape by means of reducing substantially the number of compulsory committees at schools and their paper work**; the goal is that teachers can devote their working hours to teaching and not to bureaucracy;
- **Reducing class size** (it is up to 35 when the maximum number by law is limited to 25-28), **by employing more teachers**.

The aim is to improve working conditions and the quality of education.

### School level

Formal Occupational Health and Safety (OSH) activities led by the Health and Safety committee are **only related to safety issues** following the principle of risk assessment and its



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main elements e.g. hazard identification, worker and workers' representatives' participation, introduction of adequate measures, documentation and periodical re-assessment as well as provision of information and training. Special attention is paid to first aid, fire-fighting and evacuation of staff (and students), taking all necessary measures i.e. arranging contacts with related external services (police, fire-fighters, etc.), designating workers to implement measures, informing, giving instructions and training to all staff and students. The most outstanding difference between both case study schools is that the Alexandru Ion Cuza High School has obtained a budget from the town council to outsource the prevention activities as a pilot experience.

Neither of the schools has a specific formal policy on work-related stress or psychosocial risks prevention. But actually psychosocial risks and work-related stress prevention is integrated and part of the schools general management.

School leaders, teachers, trade unionists and committees' coordinators at school level think that real solutions for excessive workload are out of their hands. They propose the recruitment of more teachers, reducing the size of the curriculum, reducing the number of committees and decreasing the reporting bureaucracy at national level. These proposals are along the same lines as those that national social partners' are bargaining for and seeking to implement.

In the meantime, however, at school level, school leaders together with staff have found ways to deal with workload and changing working conditions. The main measures taken in both schools are similar. Therefore, they are presented all together:

- **Participative working teams and distributed leadership**

Departmental or methodology committees that meet once a month are being used to share teaching materials and ideas, to develop participative work planning and to distribute tasks and share its results e.g. to prepare students for tests, how to teach certain issues, lesson planning, etc. In this way, time spent preparing lessons is reduced and teachers are given more confidence. Committee coordinators organise these meetings with other teachers and the school leader does not participate in them.

In fact, at both schools, there is a kind of board of coordinators who are in charge of different areas. All questions and comments dealing with these areas are first addressed and dealt with by them, only if they cannot solve them, does the school leader become involved. Teachers know whom they have to address first because this information is made available for everybody at the beginning of the course.

The school leader plays an important role in creating conditions for and promoting team building. For example on the one hand committees are found to be a means of establishing a team, on the other hand they involve everybody in searching for solutions when there is a problem; moreover they look for and organise activities based on team building to strengthen the team and provide feedback on this.

Contractual stability among the staff (long seniority and permanent contracts) is considered essential to remain engaged in the team, to know each other and to obtain profound professional experience to rely on.

- **Peer learning for new teachers**

New teachers are integrated in the team following a peer learning programme including mentoring and sharing materials to reduce the workload at the very beginning, with all the lessons to be prepared.



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- **Arranging the timetable**

Regarding class sizes, when preparing time tables, teachers who have more students in the class have priority and they are given first choice in terms of how their timetable is arranged, and if possible, provision is made to allow them rest time in between lessons.



## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In the Romanian secondary education sector, formal occupational health and safety activities are only related to safety issues. There is not a specific formal policy on work-related stress or psychosocial risks prevention. But actually psychosocial risks and work-related stress prevention is integrated and part of the incipient national social dialogue and schools' general management. However it would be worth developing a broader approach to achieve an overall prevention policy, covering technology, organisation of work (choice of working methods or work equipment, design of work places, procedures to distribute tasks, timetables, etc.), social relationships and all the factors related to a healthy work-environment, including prevention of all occupational risks, particularly the ones related to psychosocial risks.

Regarding what this project considers as stressors, workload was emphasised by national social partners and school leaders, teachers and their representatives at school level as the most important problem for teachers in the pre-university education system together with low salaries. Excessive workload could divert toward harmful exposures to psychosocial risks i.e. quantitative demands, work pace, role conflict, family-work conflict and hiding emotions.

Since its sources were excessive red-tape, vast curriculum and pupil-teacher ratio, the proposals to reduce these could be applied to all schools in the EU that have similar problems regarding workload and its sources. These proposals are:

- Restructuring curricula with a view to diminishing the quantity of information and adapting it to pupils' ages;
- Reducing the reporting bureaucracy ;
- Recruiting more and highly qualified teachers;
- Working in participative teams and distributing leadership;
- Peer learning for new teachers;
- Arranging timetables with a view to allow rest times.