ABOUT THE FOUNDATION "STEP BY STEP" – MACEDONIA

The Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives "Step by Step" - Macedonia focuses its capacities toward the democratization of the process of education by promoting and nourishing the idea of constant training and support for teachers, pedagogues and pre-school and school principals while maintaining fruitful cooperation with the government institutions and teacher training faculties. The Foundation guides, coordinates, participates in and directly implements activities which promote innovation, progress and development of the work of preschool institutions and primary schools in the Republic of Macedonia.

The Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives "Step by Step" - Macedonia was established as a nongovernmental organization with the aim to continue the educational program "Step by Step" that has started with its implementation in 1994, as regional program of Open Society Institute – New York and George Town University from Washington D.C.

The Mission of the Foundation “Step by Step” - Macedonia

The mission of the Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives “Step by Step” - Macedonia is to prepare, develop and implement programs that enhance the education and culture in the modern society as a key factor for educational, cultural, economic and social development. The Foundation "Step by Step" - Macedonia is implementing programs in the kindergartens, primary schools and other educational and cultural institutions, supports innovative approaches and finds different ways to raise the possibilities to help the children achieve their full potential through education.

Strategic goals

- Encouraging the democratic processes in the education of children, youth and adults.
- Promoting and support of the educational initiatives based on modern approach to children.
- Advocating the idea of permanent training of the teaching staff and the teams in the kindergartens, primary schools and the students at the Faculty for teachers.
- Building partnership relationship with the ministries and the institutions that educate teachers, schools, kindergartens, with the local authorities as well as with the local and foreign institutions that share the same vision and objectives.
- Meeting the needs of every child, including the children with special needs, the children from minority groups, Roma children, children that lack the opportunity to be educated and the children who live in the rural areas.
- Increasing the public awareness of the needs of Roma children, poor children, children from the rural areas and children with special needs.
- Printing and publishing professional manuals, picture books for children and other reference books that promote our mission.
- Encouraging local communities in their support of the children development.
- Providing opportunities for the children to express themselves in a creative way.

The Foundation "Step by Step" - Macedonia is part of the International Step by Step Association (International Step by Step Association - ISSA) and through its actions fully supports and acts upon the ISSA principles for quality pedagogical practice:

1. Interactions
2. Family and Community
3. Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy
4. Assessment and Planning
5. Teaching Strategies
6. Learning Environment
7. Professional Development
FOUNDATION “STEP BY STEP” IN 2015

Professional development activities of Step by Step staff

Step by Step team is consisted of professionals with experience in the field of pedagogy, psychology and project management. Foundation “Step by Step” has a rich network of collaborators from all regions in the country comprised of teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, school/kindergarten directors, representatives from education institutions, university professors and other national and international experts.

During 2015, Foundation Step by Step staff participated in a number of professional development activities and events: Workshop on communication skills and processes ‘Moved By!’, organized by the International Step by Step Association and Fysio Educatief in Amsterdam, Training on inclusion of visually impaired children and youth in the United Kingdom funded by Erasmus+ and International conference “Quality and Equal Opportunities” in Slovenia. Team members also participated at the Regional Conference for Educators in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ECER 2015 Conference in Hungary, USAID Global Education Summit and Parents as Teachers Conference in the USA and the International Step by Step Association’s Annual Council Meeting in Bucharest, Romania. Foundation Step by Step was part of peer learning activities in Bulgaria and Luxembourg and hosted a peer learning activity for organizations from six countries in the region in Ohrid, Macedonia.

Organizational capacity building of Step by Step team

The Step by Step Foundation’s team continues the long-term process of capacity building, funded by the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and delivered by DETRA in cooperation with INTRAC, to build upon the process already started with in 2014. The overarching goal of these activities is to improve organizational, program and financial sustainability of the Step by Step Foundation.
Step by Step organizational e-bulletin

What started as an initiative for a project e-bulletin in 2013, soon grew to be an organizational bulletin covering news and information on all various projects and initiatives of the Foundation “Step by Step”. In 2015, the Foundation continued publishing its electronic bulletin on quarterly basis in order to inform and engage different stakeholders and partners: education officials, international donors, municipalities, educators, parents and the media. The bulletin is prepared in English, Macedonian and Albanian language. The four issues of the e-bulletin published in 2015, as well as other news published by the Foundation, can be found at the News and Events section of the official website.

During 2015, Foundation “Step by Step” continued with the implementation of various projects, based on the fundamental values represented ever since: stimulating children’s critical thinking, developing potential of all children and particularly of the children living on the margins of the society, enhancing teaching process and establishing collaborations to undertake initiatives aimed at fulfilling creative and intellectual potentials of the children, teachers and parents.

Foundation “Step by Step” had its role in the implementation of the following projects during 2015: Readers are Leaders Project and Teacher Professional and Career Development, funded by USAID, and Project for (Self) Empowerment of Roma Parents and Children, funded by the Open Society Foundation. More details on each of the projects are provided in the following sections of this report.

USAID READERS ARE LEADERS PROJECT

USAID Readers are Leaders Project aims to improve children’s reading and numeracy skills, strengthen teacher’s pedagogical skills, especially diagnostic and formative assessment skills, and increase overall community recognition of the value of reading and numeracy skills. All project activities, with due concern to geographical, ethnic, gender and social diversity, are aimed at addressing the needs of the children in the early grades within the formal education system, children from vulnerable and marginalized groups, including Roma children, children with special needs and residents in remote rural areas, and children residing in institutions, including: hospitals, orphanages, etc.

The initially planned lifespan of the project was May, 2013 throughout November, 2015. Upon request of the Ministry of Education and Science, USAID Macedonia extended the project cycle until November, 2017. Besides the extension of implementation period, the project team will also expand the project activities in all primary schools across Macedonia to provide support to schools for two additional academic years and thus increase the likelihood that activities and practices introduced by the project become deeply ingrained in everyday school practice.

Upon the interest of the Ministry of Education and Science for expansion of project activities in all primary schools around Macedonia, it was decided to involve additional 40 schools to the original 62 schools for the administration of EGRA and EGMA instruments in May 2015. In the selection process, the following criteria were taken into account: regional representation, language of instruction and location of the school (where priority was given to schools from municipalities that were not involved in project activities). Later on, in September, the remaining 233 primary schools were invited to join the project. Memoranda of Understanding were signed with the schools with the purpose and goal of facilitating efficient cooperation between the school and the Foundation Step by Step – Macedonia, for implementation of the Readers are Leaders Project funded by USAID. More detailed information on 2015 project activities by component are provided below.
Component 1: Reading and Numeracy Assessment

The main goals of this component are to set and implement the instruments for early-grade reading and math assessment, EGRA and EGMA, which will provide reliable results that can be used to support the teachers, schools and the relevant institutions.

Early Grade Reading and Mathematics study in May 2015: In the study conducted in May 2015, baseline performance data in literacy and math were collected in additional 61 schools on a sample of 1,000 Grade 2 and 1,000 Grade 3 students. Furthermore, reading and math performance of 1,000 Grade 2 students first tested with EGRA and EGMA in May 2014 were monitored in 2015 (in Grade 3), and will continue to be monitored for two more academic years. Prior to the May study, assessment instruments were modified in line with the lessons learned from study in May 2014 and the changes to the early grade math curriculum introduced in September 2014. Additionally, upon request and recommendations from the special education teachers in Maca Ovcharova primary school, which provides education for children with disabilities, EGRA and EGMA instruments were adjusted to accommodate the needs of these students. EGRA and EGMA instruments were administered in 103 schools from May 18 to June 5. A total of 159 trained assessors (school pedagogues, psychologists and teachers) administered the assessments. To assure the quality of the assessment process, total of 21 observers conducted 122 school visits during the study. Also members of the project team were mobile and provided assistance and technical support to the school assessors.

Early Grade Reading Findings: The reading results showed that students continue to have good results in naming letters correctly, but their reading comprehension skills are not well developed, regardless of the language of instruction. Students who were assessed longitudinally performed better than those assessed for the first time in 2015 in all EGRA tasks. Asking “why” questions not just as part of the reading instruction, but also in other areas should promote comprehension and the higher level of thinking of students. Instruction in mother tongue is critically important for the effectiveness of literacy, so funding should be provided for instructional materials and support in mother tongue. Increased involvement of parents, more exposure to books and other reading materials, popularization of libraries could benefit students in acquiring their reading skills. Any reading intervention should particularly target the students from satellite schools, students that have not attended pre-school and children of parents with primary or less than primary education. EGRA results should be used for opening policy dialogue with education institutions for modification to the early grade language curriculum.

Early Grade Mathematics Findings: The mathematics results showed that students are most challenged when it comes to subtraction in Grade 2 and word problems in Grade 3. Teachers should offer opportunities for students to use manipulatives to understand the concept of numbers and develop skills for using numbers in practical and problem-solving activities. The modification of EGMA tasks to comply with the newly introduced mathematics curriculum has made the longitudinal comparison of results difficult. More time should be given for the new mathematics curriculum to be rooted and practiced by the teachers.

Findings from questionnaires on school practices: Besides the assessments of student learning in the primary grades, it was of equal importance to find out more about the school and classroom practices as well as parental involvement, which are traditionally associated with student performance. Questionnaires distributed to school directors, teachers and parents as well as focus group discussions revealed that:

- Teachers need to provide instruction that will interest and engage students in learning
- Student results should be used for adjusting and planning for class activities, rather than just for assessment and grading
- Majority of teachers received a training in literacy and math but they still have expressed needs for additional training
- Other teachers and student support services are preferred as the main source of advice for teachers for resolving curriculum issues
- More than half of schools have not supplied any didactical materials in the past three years
- The books on the reading list and the textbooks in other subjects should be clearer and evoke more emotions in order to raise students’ interest for reading
- Investing in a small classroom library is a great option so that children can have ready access to books and magazines as part of their reading lessons and activities
- The use of ICT in instruction is impeded by worn ICT infrastructure and unstable internet connection. A lack of digital resources in the respective languages of instruction is another challenge for teachers
- New math curricula is often perceived as too ambitious, especially for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- Teacher-parent collaboration should be more intensive in order to support student learning in math by using the same teaching techniques in school and at home
- Parents should be encouraged to be engaged in early literacy activities with their children, such as: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, talking about things done, talking about things read, playing word games, writing letters or words, and reading aloud signs and labels
Preparations for the first study on national level in May 2016:
In the period from October to December, 10 two-day training workshops were delivered for 541 school pedagogues, psychologists and early grade teachers from 233 primary schools for administration of early-grade reading and math assessment instruments - EGRA and EGMA in Macedonian and Albanian language. Total of 355 tablet computers were donated to 255 primary schools during the training workshops, with two tablets provided to bilingual schools and schools with higher number of students in Grade 2 or 3.

Component 2: Professional Development

This component aims to improve teaching and student achievements in reading and numeracy by providing professional development activities to early grade teachers based on assessment data.

Language Skills Development Training of Trainers: three-day module focusing on the core literacy areas and using innovative and effective strategies for improving student literacy was developed and a ToT was delivered in March, 2015 for a group of master trainers selected from the project data base. The training focused on different techniques that aim to maximize students' language learning potential and allowed participants to consider a range of approaches to support literacy across different areas of learning.

Training for teachers for using innovative and effective strategies for improving students' literacy - "How to read, learn and have fun?": The Language Skills Development Training was revised and restructured in order to develop one-day condensed practical training, to accommodate the needs for language skills acquisition in specific schools communicated to the project by the school staff. In the period September – October, the training was conducted in 21 project schools. The participants at the training are members of the learning communities established in the schools, with two schools paired for each training session. The feedback of participants is that such trainings are welcomed because they provide hands-on teaching techniques with affordable resources and are a good opportunity for networking. Teachers outlined the importance of future parents' involvement in such professional development activities.

Training for teachers for using innovative and effective strategies for improving students' literacy - "How to read, learn and have fun?": This training aims to build upon teachers' previous knowledge on the topic giving them more in-depth theoretical knowledge on the principles for creating effective learning environment. The training demonstrates these principles by providing a make-over of one lower-grade classroom in each participating school. In the period October – December, a total of 22 trainings were delivered in Phase 1 and 2 schools. In order to support teacher - parent partnership and to ensure optimum support for children's learning, parents are also invited to these trainings. Furthermore, a big accent was put on addressing the biggest challenges for creating effective learning environment: sharing a classroom with upper-grade students, having fixed computers in the classrooms and the limited support that schools receive from the local government in terms of funds for teaching aids and other materials.

Preparation of module for training for teachers for using innovative and effective strategies for improving students' numeracy: At the end of 2015 the preparation of module for training for teachers for using innovative and effective strategies for improving students' numeracy started. It focuses on different techniques that aim to maximize students' math potential and explores how promoting the development of numeracy helps students to gain fundamental skills necessary to achieve success. The completion of the module and roll-out of in-school trainings will happen in 2016.

Component 3: Learning Communities

This component aims to promote the model of school-based professional learning communities of small groups of teachers that meet regularly to nurture a collaborative organizational structure and promote teachers' personal agency toward creating positive change. The essence of the professional learning communities is shared knowledge among colleagues and teachers' personal agency to promote positive change.
Providing mentoring support for the learning communities: At the beginning of March 2015, a selection of 24 mentors for the school learning communities was made from the project database of master trainer and mentors. Regular meetings with learning communities' mentors were held in order to assign them to schools where they will be providing the support, provide them information and tools needed to guide the work of the learning communities, and obtain feedback from work progress.

Establishment of learning communities and support visits in project schools: During 2015, learning communities were established in all 62 project schools. In each school, the assigned mentor was providing regular support during mentoring support visits:

- First support visits – learning communities were introduced to the concept of the school-based learning community as a platform through which teachers share practical knowledge and experiences and collaborate with one another to improve their teaching practice.
- Second support visits - mentors reviewed each teacher's development activities topics and helped redefine them so that they are adequate to their work in the next academic year.
- Third support visits - learning communities discussed opportunities to incorporate the new techniques into teachers' development activities.
- Fourth support visits – mentors provided guidelines on development portfolio of the members of the learning communities.

Mentoring support visits and networking events for learning communities will continue in 2016.

Component 4: Digital Learning Resources

This component creates and adapts materials for reading and math, in the form of audio-books, picture books, and educational games and encourages the use of ICT in reading and math instruction.

Publishing of a collection of picture books “Our First Library”: In order to contribute for enriching the selection of additional reading materials for the youngest audience in Macedonian and Albanian language, the project published a collection of picture books entitled “Our First Library”. A manual for parents and teachers and a poster were included in the collection, in order to provide guidelines and additional activities that foster discussion and critical thinking skills with children. In the period September – October, the collection of picture books was printed and distributed to all 337 primary schools in Macedonia. Each Grade 1-3 classroom and each school library received one package of picture books according to the language of instruction - Macedonian or Albanian. In addition to the schools, copies of the collection are distributed to other venues such as: public libraries in 33 towns across the country, Children’s Creative Center – Skopje, Children’s Clinic – Skopje, SOS Children’s village, other USAID education projects and project’s local partners.

Preparation of audio books: The production of digital audio books continued and by the end of 2015, total of 23 books were created. They were made available for the general public in the Step by Step digital library. Additionally, four audio books were developed for people with impaired hearing.

Digital authoring workshops: In order to provide teachers with technical knowledge and tips on how they can use ICT and open resource tools to create their own activities, the project organized a workshop for digital authoring. Following a training of trainers, the workshop was disseminated for a total of 260 lower-grade teachers from 42 Phase 1 and 2 project schools. During these workshops, participants were familiarized with user friendly and free of charge Internet tools that can be used to create digital books, cartoons, animations and bulletin boards.
Component 5: Family and Community Involvement

This component prepares and carries out initiatives and creative activities that will raise interest for reading and numeracy in students, engage their families and the wider community.

Workshops on creative techniques for teaching math for teachers and parents

Throughout 2015, workshops on creative techniques for teaching math for teachers and parents were organized in 62 project schools with 952 teachers and 729 parents. The aim of these workshops was to demonstrate creative activities and techniques for teaching math which will contribute for improved students’ math skills through fostering their critical and logical thinking, creativity, and practical use of mathematical operations in everyday life. This workshop also modeled mathematical didactical materials that can be easily crafted by educators, parents and students, and used in the classroom and/or at home. The workshops were held in Macedonian and/or Albanian language, in accordance to the language of the participants.

Reading and Math are Fun activities in the schools

Magic Literacy Van: During 2015, project’s mobile library - the Magic Literacy Van, visited 79 different location around Macedonia, engaging a total of 7,873 lower-grade students, 457 school staff and 217 family members. These locations included Phase 1, 2 and 3 project schools, additional schools that expressed interest for the activity, Roma centers and other public venues. Magic Literacy Van was also part of the Summer Book Festival organized by Skopje City Mall in the period June 20-30

Children’s Creative Center: After the re-opening of the renovated Children’s Creative Center in 2014, the center continued to work according to the official working time Monday – Saturday, welcoming children, parents and educators from the whole country for individual or group visits. The project used the venue to organize occasional reading sessions, to support group school visits and to organize an event to mark the International Literacy Day in September, 2015.

Cooperation with Children’s Clinic – Skopje: During 2015, the project continued with monthly reading sessions for the children residing at the oncology ward of the Children’s Clinic in Skopje and distributed picture books at the Clinic’s reading corner.
The Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives “Step by Step” – Macedonia is engaged in the implementation of the USAID Teacher Professional and Career Development (TPCD) Project, as a sub-grantee to the main implementing organization, Macedonian Civic Education Center (MCEC). The Project began its implementation in December 2012 and it is expected to end in June 2016. The Project’s goal is to contribute towards the design and establishment of a teacher professional and career development system in the Republic of Macedonia, by identifying necessary interventions that support existing national policies and practice, and aims to create a comprehensive, transparent, feasible and cost effective system that will improve student achievements and strengthen teacher’s credibility.

Project activities are being realized through the following three components:

1. Comprehensive Legal System Improved,
2. Enhanced Financial Schemes, and

Foundation “Step by Step” is involved in the implementation of the activities under Component 3. The overall goal of this component is to inventory clear standards of expected teacher competencies and professional development opportunities along with tools for evaluating progress in the teaching profession that will serve as a foundation for developing the legal system and schemes for funding of TPCD.

In 2015 the Step by Step Foundation continued to be implementing partner of the Macedonian Civic Education Center in establishing the system for teacher professional and career development. In December 2014 the piloting of the system for professional development began and lasted four months, until March 2015. In March 2015, the piloting of the process for teacher career advancement began, and somewhat later, in September 2015, the piloting of the process for career advancement of the student support services also began. These processes will end in 2016 when the final solutions will be presented.

An expert group prepared draft instruments for assessment of the professional development and the competencies and standards, as well as Guideline which explains the piloting process and gives directions for preparation of the portfolio. The experiences gained during the piloting of the career advancement for teachers were useful when implementing the piloting of the career advancement for student support services. Based on the portfolios gathered during the piloting and the assessment of the evidence by the pilot committee, changes in the instruments were suggested. The expert groups will continue to work intensively in 2016 on finalizing the solutions.

In the spring of 2015, the development of the competencies and standards for school librarians began. After several meetings of the task force in June, a focus group was held with librarian - school practitioners in order to gain feedback about the documents.

The Foundation also participated in the work group meetings for development of the new instrument for individual assessment of the teachers by State Educational Inspectorate.
PROJECT FOR (SELF) EMPOWERMENT OF ROMA PARENTS AND CHILDREN

The Project for (Self) Empowerment of Roma Parents and Children aimed at developing the understanding and capacities Roma families for supporting and stimulating their children’s early development and education in order to improve their prospects for successful education and life. The project focused on the most marginalized Roma families in Shuto Orizari, addressing the evident lack of opportunities for preschool inclusion of Romani children. In close collaboration with three partner Roma NGO’s, the Project contributed to improving the linguistic competence and confidence and schools readiness of 120 children and to enhancing the competence of Romani and non-Romani ECD professionals and paraprofessionals in Macedonia.

2015 saw the continuation of the essential components of the project:

- Daily educational activities promoting the linguistic confidence and competence of 120 Roma children, in accordance with the national preschool curriculum and developmental standards
- Regular home visits providing appropriate information and demonstrating good parenting practices in the home
- Monthly workshops for Roma parents, providing information and skills on better parenting practices, care and support and social and health-related issues
- Monthly parent–children bonding activities providing parents and children with stimulative ideas and skills for joint structured learning and creative expression

Already established activities enabled the project team to focus in 2015 on improving the quality of parent support and of the children’s educational program through:

- Further adaptation of teaching and learning materials, including Effective teaching and learning for minority-language children in preschool, Parenting with Confidence and Getting Ready for School
- Translation and adaptation of 6 bilingual picture books: Magical Armchair, Our Garden, In the Orchard, On the City Streets, The Sad Clown and Peter’s Day
- Setting homework for parents and children to do jointly at home on a weekly basis, as a prerequisite for continued support to the children’s formal education
- Organization of education and training activities for educators and parents on: responsible parenting, parent-child interaction, atmosphere in the family and its influence on the psycho-social development of the child, difficulties in regulating emotions and behavior, skills for dealing with children’s emotional problems and setting boundaries
- Informing and motivating parents to enroll their children and providing direct assistance in the process
- Organization of visits to the local school, ZOO, theatre and swimming pool
- Establishment of quality cooperation with the local school both in the process of enrolment and for promoting further parent involvement.

The Step by Step Foundation will continue to support access to quality preschool and primary education for Roma children and to promote better parenting practices. In the coming two years, with support from the Open Society Foundations and the European Union, the Foundation, together with two local NGOs, Dendo Vas and Nadez, will implement the Project READE – Roma Empowerment and Awareness for Democracy through Education, which will address inadequate educational awareness, participation and achievements, lack of knowledge and skills for improving employability and quality of domestic and community life among Roma.