

Rapid Education Diagnosis (RED) Republic of Moldova

Synthesis for policymakers





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Synthesis for policymakers

This Rapid Education Diagnosis (RED) presents a comprehensive, data-driven assessment of Moldova’s education system, with a strong focus on inequalities, financing, and governance. RED was carried out as part of the “Support to Education and Skills Reforms” (SER) regional programme funded by the European Union (EU - DG ENEST, formerly DG NEAR) for Eastern Partnership countries¹ and entrusted to the European Training Foundation (ETF). The programme, which includes two other components, on institutional capacity reinforcement, and on peer learning among Eastern Partnership countries and with EU member states aims to support national authorities and development partners—most notably the Moldovan Ministry of Education and Research (MER) and the European Commission—in advancing education reforms and strengthening institutional capacity.

Rather than offering a celebratory review of achievements, the RED approach and report place greater emphasis on challenges, bottlenecks, and risks, offering an analytical foundation for policy dialogue and investment. Accordingly, the political commitment and policy reform efforts of the Government of Moldova, and of the MER in particular, should be recognised and commended at the outset.

The principal findings and recommendations of the RED are summarised hereafter, with primary relevance for policymakers. For a more detailed analysis and full data sources, reference should be made to the main body of the report.

Background and Context

Moldova’s education system operates in a highly constrained environment shaped by demographic decline, economic fragility, and geopolitical uncertainty. The population has shrunk from 4.5 million in 1991 to 3 million in 2024, with resident school-age cohorts experiencing steep reductions—especially among the lyceum and preschool age groups. These trends are driven by low birth rates, high mortality, and sustained outmigration, particularly of young families. Simultaneously, Moldova has faced pressures from refugee inflows since 2022, notably absorbing over 50 000 displaced Ukrainian children, as a direct consequence of the war Russia-Ukraine.

Politically, the country is navigating a crucial transition. Following the 2024 referendum confirming a narrow majority in favour of EU accession, Moldova is expected to align with EU values and

¹ Eastern Partnership countries (EaP) include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine



standards. This offers reform momentum, yet also increases pressure to modernise public institutions—including the education system—amid lingering East-West political tensions.

Economically, Moldova remains among the poorest European countries, with a GDP per capita of \$6,651 and 14% of the population living in poverty. Despite recent upper-middle-income classification, economic vulnerability, particularly in rural areas, constrains opportunities for equitable human capital development. Additionally, Moldova is increasingly exposed to climate change-related risks, especially in its agriculturally dependent rural regions.

Policy and Reform Dynamics

Despite the various challenges analysed hereafter, Moldova has shown notable policy engagement in education. The “Education 2030” Development Strategy articulates nine sector objectives and sets clear priorities, including early education expansion, teacher training modernisation, model school networks, infrastructure upgrades, curriculum materials, inclusive education initiatives and tertiary system development. Together with the National Development Strategy “European Moldova 2030”, they provide a long-term vision aligned with European and global goals.

The EU accession process offers further reform impetus, although it also brings political tensions, especially around school network optimisation and decentralisation. Divergent political interpretations of reform objectives—highlighted by field testimonies—suggest that consensus on direction and pace remains elusive.


Findings

Inequality analysis

Education Access and Participation

Moldova has achieved broadly high enrolment levels across general education, with nearly universal participation in primary and lower secondary. Notably, upper secondary enrolment has increased by 8% since 2017/18. However, access is not uniform across education levels or geographies.

Early childhood education faces the most pronounced gaps. While 1 479 preschool institutions serve 129 592 children, the offering is insufficient to meet demand in urban areas, where enrolment pressures are acute and capacity strained. Urban occupancy rates approach or exceed



100%, while rural preschools are often underutilised, reflecting demographic decline and inefficient allocation of resources.

The system also suffers from significant inefficiencies: 8% of general education schools serve 50 or fewer pupils, and 17% serve between 50 and 100—primarily in rural areas. These small institutions face operational challenges and cost pressures, particularly under the new per-student funding formula, which may exacerbate inequality by penalising schools with low enrolment.

While 44% of upper secondary students are enrolled in vocational education and training (VET)—the highest share in the region—enrolment in these programmes has declined overall, even as post-secondary VET has grown slightly.


Despite a stated policy commitment to inclusion, access remains limited for children with disabilities, children from Roma communities, those from low-income households, and refugee children. Access barriers include insufficient assistive technologies, inadequate teacher training, language barriers (especially for Ukrainian refugees), and social stigma.

Quality of Education

Reform efforts to improve the quality of education are ongoing in Moldova, aiming to align the system with modern standards and better respond to the needs of learners and the labour market. Despite these efforts, a lot remains to be done, and the quality of education emerges as a pervasive, systemic issue—more critical and deep-rooted than access. This is particularly evident in teacher availability and training, pedagogical environments, and infrastructure.

A chronic shortage of qualified teachers—especially in STEM subjects, in upper secondary, and in rural areas—impairs learning outcomes. Nearly half the teaching workforce are over 50, and 22% are 60 or older. One in ten upper secondary teachers lacks the required qualifications, and many teach outside their fields due to recruitment gaps. Young teachers often leave the profession within three years, undermining continuity and effectiveness despite financial incentives.

Infrastructure and resources also remain inadequate. Schools—especially in rural areas—often lack proper sanitation, internet connectivity, and educational technologies. The digital divide is stark: 45% of rural schools report insufficient internet speeds, and over 30% lack adequate digital devices. These shortcomings hinder students' ability to engage meaningfully, particularly during remote learning periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or when modern, blended learning would be developed. Furthermore, although Moldova is engaging in green transition initiatives in



education, there is no systematic data to assess progress in areas like climate education or infrastructure adaptation.

Urban-rural divide and Vulnerability

Disparities in Moldova's education system are deeply rooted in a dual divide: rural vs. urban and vulnerable vs. non-vulnerable children. These axes of inequality intersect and reinforce one another.

In urban areas, access issues are driven by high demand and limited infrastructure, resulting in overcrowded schools and (limited) reliance on private education. In contrast, rural areas face problems of poor quality, under-resourced schools, and teacher shortages. Small school size combined with shortage of teachers often leads to multi-grade teaching, further compounding quality challenges.

Learning outcomes reflect these disparities. Students in urban schools consistently outperform their rural peers in both national and international assessments. PISA 2022 results show that students in large cities score significantly higher in mathematics than those from smaller towns or villages, with a 71-point difference between urban and small village students.

As mentioned above, among vulnerable groups, children with disabilities, Roma children, refugees, and children at risk face the greatest educational exclusion. National data on vulnerable children is fragmented and inconsistent, undermining effective monitoring and case management.

About 31% of students are considered at risk, with higher concentrations in rural areas. Many are affected by poverty (child poverty rates exceed 40% in rural zones), family separation due to parental migration, or exposure to violence or neglect. Bullying is widespread, and 44% of students report not feeling safe in school settings. Civil society organisations are concerned about recent anti-bullying legislation, considered as punitive and insufficiently restorative.

Efforts to support inclusive education, such as infrastructure improvements and psycho-pedagogical support services, are underway. Yet, data gaps, lack of coordination between ministries, and insufficient funding limit the impact of these measures. The 2024–2027 Programme of Inclusive Education sets an ambitious target for 80% of schools to be adapted for students with disabilities by 2027 but monitoring and evaluation mechanisms remain underdeveloped.



Financing analysis

Resource Mobilisation

State budget. Overall, government expenditure on education in Moldova accounted for 6.3% of its GDP in 2023—a considerable share, given that the EU average stood at 4.7%, which underscores strong political commitment to the sector. However, the proportion of total government expenditure allocated to education has been declining, from 18.4% in 2020 to 15.9% in 2023. Such reductions, although not problematic given the high proportion of GDP, should be offset by efficiency gains to ensure long-term sustainability.


Despite a public expenditure review conducted by the World Bank in 2022, no comprehensive, sector-wide financial or budget analysis has been conducted by either the MER or Ministry of Finance, leaving questions about cost-effectiveness, which require to integrate financial and school level data, unanswered.

The education expenses by education level and by economic item (salaries, capital investment, etc.) are said to be available but could not be extracted from the budget lines of the above-mentioned programmes. This data gap hinders any detailed breakdown of unit costs.

However, and despite progress in recent years, budget figures indicate a persisting chronic underspending in categories such as goods, services and subventions. It is mainly due to procurement bottlenecks, weak budget planning, insufficient financial management skills among school leaders or unfilled MER vacancies.

Development Partners financial assistance. Over recent years, a wide array of international donors (World Bank, EU, UNICEF, UNESCO, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Romanian and Austrian agencies, Swiss Development Cooperation, UNFPA, etc.) have financed projects spanning from education infrastructure, vocational training, inclusive education to gender equality. In 2023, three large projects totalled EUR 94 million, alongside 49 technical assistance initiatives (EUR 47.8 million), and budget execution reports included a further EUR 6 million for centrally managed education related projects.

The MER's Aid Management Platform launched in 2014, and upgraded in 2022, now offers a full view of donor commitments. It reveals that the World Bank and the European Union and its institutions are the principal external partners—accounting respectively for half of total commitments, predominantly via loans and 10%, through grants. Collectively, bilateral agencies represent nearly one third of all commitments (see Table 7 in the Annex). Unfortunately, compared



to the total official development assistance (ODA) disbursed to the country, the share of education was halved, from 18% to 9%. Overall, the ODA to education (including General Budget Support's contribution to education) represents 14.6% of the total government expenditure on education.

Non-state domestic resource mobilisation. Legally, schools may generate marginal additional income—through venue rentals, production linked training in VET institutions and voluntary donations—but these locally mobilised funds account for only about 0.2% of state- budgeted education resources. Private companies hardly contribute to the funding of the sector, including for VET level.

Resource Allocation

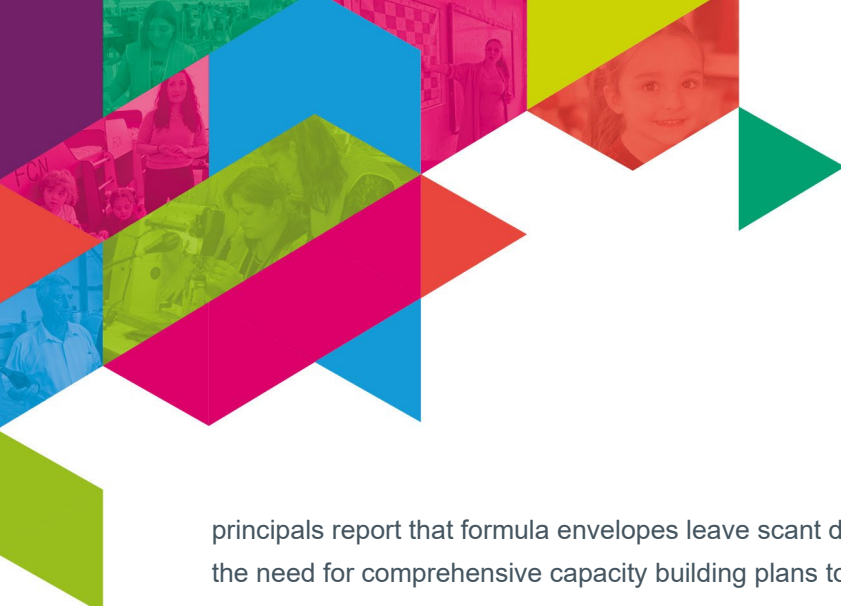
Resource allocation to schools. Shifting to the funding formula for allocating resources to schools appears to be a promising prerequisite but not a sufficient condition for improved quality of provision. Under the per student model, 95% (rising to 96% in 2025) of each school's core budget is formula driven; yet, true autonomy remains limited by lack of funds. The funding formula for schools is evolving to incentivize standards and address challenges, but economic limits still hinder schools' ability to improve quality. Similar funding changes are also being considered for early childhood education, with a pilot phase in 164 kindergartens from four rayons.

Financial Incentives for teachers and students. Moldova offers diverse support measures—lump sum bonuses, rural teaching allowances, commuting stipends for teachers, or scholarships for students, based on merit or vulnerability. Yet the absence of built in monitoring tools raises concerns about their eventual impact and value for money. This would be key to assess, especially in view of EU accession and the EU focus on ensuring equal opportunities for all.

Management of the Financing Chain & Institutional Capacity

Financial flows' challenges. Funds flow from the centre through multiple levels, including rayons and local public authorities, not without some bottlenecks, including due to funding delays and lack of oversight. To overcome these, two options are being considered: decentralise further, as preschool directors recommend for the management of their education level, even calling for self-governance models; or centralise more financial management, following the example of the RESTART reform that is implemented in the social protection sector. But no decision is made so far on the direction(s) to take.

The creation of chief accountant and economist posts in schools and the introduction of standard per-pupil and per-institution cost norms aim to enhance predictability and autonomy. However,



principals report that formula envelopes leave scant discretionary funds, and they also underscore the need for comprehensive capacity building plans to strengthen local financial management.

At central level, and despite the 2018 salary reform, pay scales in MER's implementing agencies are reported to still outstrip those in the ministry, posing retention and equity issues if asserted. A detailed, amount-based comparison is needed to gauge the effect on MER's institutional capacity.

Education Strategy 2030 Costing. The MER's Education Strategy 2030 outlines a detailed Medium-Term Budgetary Framework (MTBF) for 2025–2027, covering the main abovementioned policy priorities. While total estimated costs are anchored in a multi-donor financing plan, only about half of the required external contributions were confirmed at approval, leaving funding gaps—despite ongoing World Bank and GPE project consultations – that put strategy's implementation at risk.


Eventually, monitoring mechanisms for linking education policy choices and financial management implications are not ensured. For instance, monitoring tools for assessing the effectiveness of the school funding formula remain under resourced, and the education management information system (EMIS) does not integrate financial data.

Governance analysis

Responsibilities, subsidiarity and accountability. Despite a formal commitment to responsibilities' decentralisation, the Ministry of Education and Research continues to centralise an excessive range of functions—many of which could be delegated to local education bodies—while operating with insufficient staff capacity. This mismatch undermines both efficiency and local ownership, as newly created subordinate entities lack clear role definitions or collaborative frameworks, and anomalous units remain directly under MER control without clear justification.

The principle of subsidiarity is routinely proclaimed yet poorly enacted. Key decision-making powers remain concentrated in Chişinău, constraining the ability of rayons and communities to tailor solutions to local needs. Strengthening subsidiarity would require not only formal devolution of authority but also capacity building and accountability mechanisms at the meso level.

Moldova's hybrid mix of decentralisation and deconcentration places regional education departments in an awkward duality: tasked with enacting central policy yet answerable to politically elected rayon councils. This "mixed" model fuels erratic leadership appointments, funding delays and political interference in school operations. The pending RESTART re-centralisation reform



(targeted for 2026) aims to transfer authority over primary to lyceum levels back to MER, promising to streamline processes and insulate schools from local politics—though it risks reversing hard won gains in local autonomy unless carefully managed.

A coherent strategy to professionalise and empower local education leaders is notably absent, leaving meso level managers without essential skills in strategic planning, financial management or policy evaluation—capabilities enshrined in the Education Code but not systematically developed.

Strategic vision and role of donors and partners. The “Education 2030” strategy, underpinned by robust legal instruments, articulates nine sector objectives. Yet its ambition outstrips secured funding and coordination mechanisms, with annual action plans misaligned to strategic priorities and donor initiatives operating in parallel rather than in concert. A more unified approach—anchored in joint planning forums and shared monitoring through joint sector reviews—would leverage partner resources toward agreed reform milestones instead of fragmenting efforts. Development partners provide crucial financing and technical assistance, yet coordination remains limited to information sharing via the Local Education Group. Elevating the LEG into a formal platform for harmonised policy oversight would strengthen alignment between donor rules and national priorities, reducing overlap and ensuring coherent support for strategic reforms.

EU integration. Moldova’s transposition of EU acquis—particularly Chapters 25 and 26 on research, culture and education—faces hurdles in qualification recognition, youth law alignment and minority language access. A focused legislative and administrative roadmap is required to meet accession criteria while maintaining system stability.

The sociocultural setting and its influence on the education system. Moldovan society prizes discipline and academic rigour—even in early childhood—fostering an instruction-centred culture that can stifle creativity and learner centred pedagogies. Extracurricular programmes remain vital but lack harmonised governance, while digitalisation efforts face both infrastructure gaps and entrenched mindsets favouring closed, equipment restricted computer labs over open, student driven learning spaces.

Teacher management. Severe teacher shortages—exacerbated by migration, an ageing workforce and low recruitment—leave thousands of positions unfilled. Performance management is rudimentary: salary scales are uniform, rewards are tied to certification rather than demonstrated impact, and professional development is self-selected rather than needs driven. VET and general




education alike suffer from outdated pre-service training and misaligned in-service courses, while school leaders often lack managerial expertise. The National Institute for Education and Leadership (NIEL), recently established and operational since March 2024, is expected to improve the situation, namely through the development of new training programmes or the training of 1 000 experienced mentors to support teaching internships and early-career teachers. However, addressing systemic weaknesses demands a strategic overhaul of recruitment incentives, differentiated career pathways, data informed workforce planning and a professionalised leadership.

School network optimisation and model schools. Demographic decline and rural exodus have left many small schools underutilised, prompting the need for network rationalisation. In 2024, 35 “Model Schools” were launched to concentrate resources, infrastructure, and expertise, with the aim of uplifting rural and disadvantaged learners. While this initiative promises improved outcomes, it also risks widening inequalities if school closures outpace viable transport solutions or lack community support. To mitigate these risks, politically sensitive closures are largely deferred to “natural” attrition through future transfers to model schools. A transparent micro-planning process—integrating transport logistics, safety considerations, and community consultation—is essential to ensure optimisation strengthens rather than undermines access. Ultimately, success depends on clear funding rules, strong stakeholder engagement, accountability for inclusive enrolment, and parallel support pathways for non-model institutions.

Use of data along the policy cycle. Two governance challenges demand granular data: teacher deployment (by subject, workload and geography) and school network planning (leveraging demographic and geospatial data to optimise access and quality). Without disaggregated, interoperable datasets, policy choices rest on anecdote rather than evidence.

The Education Management Information System (EMIS), although it encompasses pre-school to VET modules, remains incomplete, -for instance on education related financial data- and plagued by interoperability issues—with Social Protection, Finance and Statistics databases—undermining its promise as a single source of evidence. Prioritising data quality, cross sector links and user capacity are vital to unlock EMIS as the backbone for evidence-based governance.

Monitoring green and sustainable development efforts. While energy efficiency and green growth projects (e.g. solar panels, building renovations) benefit dozens of schools, no consolidated monitoring framework tracks education sector progress on sustainability goals. Embedding environmental indicators within EMIS and aligning donor supported initiatives under a unified



green education strategy would ensure both accountability and learning from implementation challenges.

Digitalisation of and within the education system. Moldova’s readiness for digital education is rated “emerging”: infrastructure is outdated, especially in rural areas; teacher training lags behind the EU Digital Competence Framework; and only 27% of learning content is online. Strategic plans are fragmented, lacking impact metrics, while online safety regulations and inter-institutional coordination remain underdeveloped. A unified digital education roadmap—covering infrastructure, pedagogy, content and cybersecurity—must be paired with dedicated financing and governance mechanisms to move from pilot projects to system wide transformation.

Policy framework and implementation, and the “human factor”. While umbrella laws establish broad mandates, implementation guidelines remain under specified or unevenly applied at the local level, leaving policy success to hinge on individual initiative rather than system wide rigour. To ensure strategic vision is realised consistently, roles must be clearly defined, procedures standardised and oversight mechanisms reinforced.


Equally important is formalising the “human factor”—the creativity and dedication of individuals—within a state defined framework. With formal systems and coordination often incomplete, individual initiative fuels many successes. Nevertheless, inconsistent community engagement and a top-down mindset hinder the scaling of effective practices. Introducing incentive structures to reward and diffuse local innovations, alongside stronger institutional linkages, is crucial for embedding—and sustaining—governance improvements.

Recommendations

To advance Moldova’s strategic education objectives, a cohesive package of six key areas of recommendations has been developed. Each section addresses critical components of the system’s improvement, from infrastructure and equity to teacher development and data governance. This integrated approach seeks to guide implementation, monitoring, and sustainable reform delivery.

1. School system reforms and model schools

Holistic analysis of small schools. Small schools require a strategic review to align resources with efficiency and quality objectives. A geographic and financial analysis, including changes in



enrolment due to the new model school approach, should be completed within the first nine months of 2025 to inform evidence-based recommendations.

Reliable transportation and equity in access to model schools. The shift towards a network of model schools must be accompanied by mechanisms that ensure equitable access for students from remote areas. In the short term, a feasibility study should be conducted to assess transportation needs and consider incentives such as school feeding and boarding options to mitigate potential discrimination effects. By the medium term, pilot transportation schemes should be deployed in priority regions, and long-term efforts should focus on comprehensive evaluations, with the MER, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) and development partners leading a review process to integrate transport into a broader family support framework.

Improved learning environment at school. A dual emphasis on digital and green infrastructure will modernise the school environment. Immediate action should include incentivising internet providers to expand coverage in rural areas and conducting environmental audits. By 2026, digital devices should be distributed to disadvantaged students, and a Green Schools Initiative launched to retrofit schools. By 2027/28, at least half of all schools should adopt basic green practices.

2. Teachers' recruitment, support and development

Teacher incentives and recruitment. To address critical shortages and improve retention, Moldova should adopt a comprehensive compensation and incentive framework. Initial efforts should include detailed financial and qualitative studies, with medium-term goals of launching a restructured incentive system that includes housing support, career progression opportunities, and targeted strategies to reduce turnover in underserved areas.

Teacher training and involvement. Improving teacher capacity, including in digital and inclusive education, is vital. The Teachers' Assembly should evolve into a formal consultation platform. A national training programme must be rolled out with a focus on rural educators. From 2026, annual professional development sessions should target remote-area teachers, aiming for 80% participation and tiered support based on seniority.

Teacher financial support scheme. An evaluation of the recently launched and pre-existing support and incentive measures addressed to teachers should be conducted to assess the package's coherence, effectiveness and efficiency.



3. Support for vulnerable children and inclusive education

Vulnerable children concept and data. Clear definitions and data integration are essential for targeted support. It is advised to adopt in 2025, a standardised definition of vulnerability, to be incorporated into EMIS. Subsequently, additional funding should be directed toward disadvantaged groups.

Multi-stakeholder coordination for refugee children. Support for refugee children, particularly from Ukraine, requires a robust coordination mechanism. This includes formal national frameworks and cross-country collaboration, with shared digital tools and continuous monitoring to ensure children's educational needs are met.

Child safety at school and online. Protecting children requires a comprehensive safety framework. Early actions would include expanding specialised services and analysing the impact of parental migration. By mid-term, Moldova should involve civil society organisations (CSOs) in anti-bullying campaigns, integrate online safety into curricula, and ensure extra-curricular activities are accessible. Long-term efforts must deliver a centralised digital safety policy with teacher training and parental resources.

Inclusion and integration into education. Inclusive education must continue expanding, with special focus on children with disabilities and national minorities. In 2025, multilingual education guidelines should be developed and teacher needs assessed. By 2026, training, pilot implementation, and secure funding should lay the groundwork for broader roll-out.


4. Financial management and budget allocation

Strategic budget optimisation. To address persistent underspending, a financial audit should be conducted in 2025, including assessing the effectiveness of funding mechanisms and the fiscal realities of small schools before revising funding formulas.

Financial and policy transparency. A transparent reporting framework would need to be designed and tested in pilot regions. Standardised training for local officials will support proper financial oversight and public accountability.

5. Governance and reform implementation

Functional review prior to potential institutional re-arrangements. Any governance reform—whether inspired by the RESTART re-centralisation initiative or by pre-school stakeholders



advocating for self-governance—requires careful planning, as it aims to strengthen system-wide operations: ensuring uniform standards, stricter curriculum implementation, higher quality, reinforced accountability, and alignment with national strategic priorities. The first step is a functional review of the current system, covering MER as a priority, but also -funds allowing-implementing agencies, and sub-national education management levels. This review should assess the feasibility of these reforms in light of existing human resources and lay the foundation for further discussions on institutional re-arrangements (decentralisation or re-centralisation), mandates or functions’ adjustments, budget planning, and recruitment/capacity building. By 2026, consultations should be finalised and, in the event of a “RESTART decision”, asset and human resource transfer mechanisms should be developed to ensure a smooth transition of authority from local public authorities (LPAs) to the MER.

Inter-institutional collaboration and coordination. The Local Education Group (LEG) should evolve into a central mechanism for reform monitoring. From 2025, its operational mandate should be clarified and endorsed, with monthly meetings established. The Teachers’ Assembly should also be strengthened to support reform dialogue. Long-term, the LEG should become the primary coordination body.

6. Data management and use

Enhanced data management. The Education Management Information System (EMIS, also called SIME at national level) must be upgraded for consistency, accessibility, and integration. In the course of 2025, Moldova should publish vetted datasets and metadata, standardise templates, and begin integrating financial and exam performance data. Full integration and training are targeted for late 2025.

Evidence use in policy development. EMIS data use for informing policy should be reinforced. Analyses of private vs public outcomes, equity in resource allocation, impact of incentive formulas, and teacher deployment trends will guide smarter planning and resource use. Benefit Incidence Analyses and microplanning tools should become standard features in education governance.

Conclusion and next steps

While this Rapid Education Diagnosis (RED) may not reveal entirely new insights into the challenges facing the Moldovan education system—many of which practitioners already recognise empirically or intuitively—it provides a comprehensive, systematic, data-driven, and user-friendly



consolidation of existing knowledge. Broad dissemination of these findings should support consensus-building around the most pressing issues and priorities.

The recommendations aim to help the Ministry of Education and Research identify new levers for progress, engage with change agents, better prioritise actions within the Education Strategy 2030 framework, allocate resources more efficiently. They should also help donors, including the European Union, identify priorities for their financial or technical support. Each cluster addresses a specific reform area, offering actionable steps that can be implemented progressively to foster a more inclusive, effective, and efficient education system in Moldova.

Ultimately, the true value of this diagnosis lies with policymakers and partners, who—through the consultation and planning processes they choose to adopt—will determine how to engage with, refine, and follow up on the RED recommendations.