

**SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND ATTENDANCE OF MOLDOVAN CHILDREN:
ANALYSIS AND PERSPECTIVES¹**

**Tatiana COLESNICOVA², PhD.,
assoc. prof., NIER**

The main purpose of this article is to analyze school enrollment and attendance of Moldovan children in recent period, revealed the problems and estimated the perspectives. The following researches methods were used in the presented work: induction and deduction, synthesis, logical, monographic, comparative, economic analysis of the statistical data. The analysis revealed that the main reason for not attending the school is the pupil engaged in the labor market and poverty. Other reasons are: the pupil works with the parents in the household, the pupil works daily with parents, the pupil works daily independent of parents, etc.

Perspectives in the development of the educational process in the country: the digitalization of educational institutions and professional development of teaching staff in the field of digital technologies, strengthening the material and technical base of educational institutions of all levels, development of program documents, etc. Also, the development of an "Education Strategy 2030" in which the main objectives will be, above all, equal access, quality, relevance of learning, digitalization of education, as well as the development of gender issues, ensuring the resilience of the education system to the conditions caused by the pandemic and in general to the various critical situations that may occur. The strategic goal in the field of education in the country is to ensure its accessibility, the use of modern technologies in the educational process.

Key words: *education, school enrollment, school attendance, out-of-school indicator, children poverty.*

Scopul principal al acestui articol este de a analiza înmatricularea și frecvența școlară a copiilor din Republica Moldova în ultima perioadă, de a evidenția problemele și de a estima perspectivele. În lucrarea prezentată au fost utilizate următoarele metode de cercetare: inducția și deducția, sinteza, analiza logică, monografică, comparativă, economică a datelor statistice. Analiza a relevat faptul că principalele motive din cauza cărora elevii au abandonat școala sunt că elevul este angajat pe piața muncii și sărăcia în țară. Alte motive sunt: elevul lucrează cu părinții în gospodărie, elevul lucrează zilnic cu părinții, elevul lucrează zilnic independent de părinți etc.

Perspective în dezvoltarea procesului educațional în țară: digitalizarea instituțiilor de învățământ și dezvoltarea profesională a cadrelor didactice în domeniul tehnologiilor digitale, consolidarea bazei materiale și tehnice a instituțiilor de învățământ de toate nivelurile, elaborarea documentelor programatice etc. De asemenea, elaborarea unei "Strategii educaționale 2030" în care principalele obiective vor fi, în primul rând, accesul egal, calitatea, relevanța învățării, digitalizarea educației, precum și dezvoltarea problematicii de gen, asigurarea rezilienței sistemului educațional la condițiile cauzate de pandemie și, în general, la diversele situații critice care pot apărea. Obiectivul strategic în domeniul educației din țară este asigurarea accesibilității acesteia, utilizarea tehnologiilor moderne în procesul educațional.

Cuvinte cheie: *educație, înmatricularea în școală, frecvența școlară, indicatorul "out-of-school" – abandonului școlar, sărăcia copiilor.*

JEL: I20, I21, I24, I30

Introduction.

„Education is a national priority in the Republic of Moldova. It is the main factor in the transmission and creation of new cultural and human values, in the development of human capital, in the formation of national identity and self-determination, in the realization of the desire for European integration and plays a primary role in creating the conditions for sustainable human development and building a knowledge-based society. The quality of education determines to a large extent the quality of life and creates opportunities for each citizen to make the most of his or her talents.” [11].

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² © Tatiana COLESNICOVA, ctania@gmail.com

Every child in the country has the right on education. According to Constitution of the Republic of Moldova (published in the Official Monitor of Republic of Moldova no. 1, 18.08.1994.) - education is compulsory from the age of 7; public education is free (art.35) [9]. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the development of education in the country.

According to the Constitution, the goals of education in Moldova are:

- To meet the educational needs of the individual and society;
- development of human potential to ensure the quality of life, sustainable economic development and welfare of the people;
- development of national culture;
- promotion of intercultural dialogue, tolerance, non-discrimination and social inclusion;
- promotion of lifelong learning;
- promoting the reconciliation of men's and women's professional activities with family life.

The second most important document is the Education Code. Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (Parliament code No. 152 from 17.07.2014. Publication in the Official Monitor of RM no. 319-324, 24.10.2014.) - Compulsory education age (art.13 and 152), - Free public education (art. 9) [10].

The quality of education remains one of the strategic goals of the Republic of Moldova and a priority of many state programs.

According to definition of National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (NBS RM), the compulsory education in the country is comprised of 10 years of school that consists of one year of pre-school, four years of primary school (Grades 1-4) and five years of gymnasium (Grades 5-9). Children may attend pre-school at ages 3-6, and they normally start primary school at age 7, so that they can be expected to have completed their compulsory schooling by age 16 (Children who start school at age 6 may complete their basic education at age 15). Children are legally prohibited from entering employment until they reach age 16 or until they have completed their basic education. After completing their compulsory education, children can enroll in a lyceum (three years of general education geared towards preparing students for higher education), a general secondary school (two years), a vocational secondary school (three years), or a secondary professional school or college (two-to-five years).

The quality of education is ultimately determined by the results of schooling and the skills that children will use in later life and in the labor market. Despite the educational reforms undertaken in the Republic of Moldova since its independence, there has been a steady decline in the success rate in general secondary education exams. More than half of the pupils are only partially competent in reading, mathematics, or natural science, and noticeably lag in comparison with pupils from neighboring countries.

Adolescence is considered the most difficult age for parents. As a child grows up, his character changes, old hobbies recede into the background, and new ones take their place. This is the time when teenagers encounter their first love and their first serious experiences, when some of them join the ranks of youth subcultures, and when others simply find themselves in bad company. In this regard, in adolescence, many children decide to drop out of school, which has a negative impact on their later life.

The main purpose of this article is to analyze school attendance and school enrollment of Moldovan children in recent period, revealed the problems and estimated the perspectives.

The following researches methods were used in the presented work: induction and deduction, synthesis, logical, monographic, comparative, economic analysis of the statistical data.

Basic content. According to the last official data from NBS RM [1, 2] (relative indicators were calculated based on population with usual residence), in 2020, a number of 1485 units of *early education institutions* (increasing on 350 units from 2000) were operating in the country including 808 units with the status of nursery-kindergarten, 568 - kindergartens, 90 - schools-kindergartens, 17 - community centers and 2 - nurseries. About three quarters of these institutions were located in rural area (Table 1). All institutions operated on a 5-day working regime.

Table 1. Early education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, 2000-2020

| | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2015 | 2020 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Early education institutions, un. | 1135 | 1295 | 1381 | 1461 | 1485 |
| Children, pers. | 93665 | 113135 | 130041 | 149936 | 134158 |
| Places, un. | 143653 | 159130 | 163436 | 173623 | 177445 |

Source: Created based on data from NBS RM

In the 2020/21 academic year, 41.1% of the total number of children were included in primary

education, 47.8% in secondary education and 11.1% in high school.

The number of children enrolled in early education institutions accounted for 134.2 thousand people in 2020 (increasing on 40493 persons from 2000) registering a decrease of 15.5 thousand or 10.4% compared to the previous year. The reduction of the number of children in early education institutions took place both in rural areas (by 9.0 thou people or 11.6% compared to 2019) and in urban areas (by 6.5 thou people or 9.0%). In 2020, just over half of the children in early education institutions were enrolled in rural institutions - 51.1% and were male - 51.8%. Most children were enrolled in preschool education - 92.2%, with different values by region, registering the highest rate in Chisinau - 93.7% and the lowest rate in the South of the country - 89.6%.

The age distribution of children in early education institutions shows a preponderance of children aged 5 years - 24.9%, 4 years - 23.9%, 6 years - 23.8% and 3 years - 18.4%. The share of children up to 3 years old, enrolled in preschool education, being 7.8%, and those aged 7 and over - 1.2%. In 2020, an average of 76 children returned to 100 places in early education institutions in the country, an educator had on average 12 children. By areas of residence, there is a higher value of the average number of children per 100 places in urban areas - 91 children compared to rural areas - 65 children (decreasing compared to 2019 - 101 and 73 children per 100 places, respectively). By districts, the availability of places is also different, most children per 100 places being registered in Balti municipality - 111 children, Chisinau municipality - 94 children and Ialoveni - 93 children, and the least requested were the institutions from Leova district, where the value of this indicator was 42 children per 100 places.

In 2020, the number of children with sensory, physical and behavioral disabilities enrolled in special purpose early education institutions was 742 people (including children in special purpose groups in general purpose institutions). Most of these children are part of the age group 3 years and over and are included in preschool education (96.6%). Depending on the type of needs, higher weights fall on children with speech (38.4%), vision (26.5%) and intellect (13.9%). At the same time, 175 children with disabilities and 1259 children with special educational needs are integrated in general education early education institutions.

In recent years, the network of *primary and general secondary education* institutions has undergone a series of changes (Table 2). Thus, in the 2020/21 academic year, the network consisted from 1241 institutions (decreasing on 332 units from 2000/01), including 106 primary schools, 787 gymnasiums, 338 high schools and 10 schools for children with intellectual or physical developmental disabilities. Most of the general primary and secondary education institutions belong to the public sector (98.1%) and 74.5% of the total institutions operated in rural areas. As a result of the optimization process, the number of primary and general secondary education institutions decreased by 7.86% compared to 1347 units in the 2014/15 academic year.

Table 2. Primary and general secondary education in the Republic of Moldova, 2000-2020

| | 2000/01 | 2005/06 | 2010/11 | 2015/16 | 2020/21 |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Primary and general secondary education institutions | 1573 | 1558 | 1489 | 1323 | 1241 |
| Pupils | 631263 | 519027 | 396488 | 334509 | 334375 |

Source: Created based on data from NBS RM

At the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year, 334.4 thou children were enrolled in primary and general secondary education, 1.2 thousand more than in 2019/20 and less than in 2017/18 (in comparison with 333.1 thousand people in 2019/20, 334.5 thousand people in 2015/16, 335.6 thousand people in 2017/18). In terms of distribution by gender and area of residence, in the 2020/21 academic year 50.8% of children were boys, and 52.9% were studying in urban areas. The rate of children enrolled in the first grade, who attended preschool education programs, was 97.8%.

The share of children with special educational needs and disabilities integrated in general education institutions has increased. At the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year, 9.8 thousand children with special educational needs and disabilities were enrolled in primary and secondary general education institutions in the country, most of whom studied in general education institutions (94.5 %), and 5.5% - in schools for children with disabilities in intellectual or physical development. Compared to the 2016/17 academic year, the number of children with special educational needs decreased in general education institutions (by 10.9%) and the number of students with disabilities increased (by 3.7%). At the same time,

the share of children with special educational needs and disabilities who attend general education institutions, has increased over the last five years by 2.3 p.p. The proportion of boys with special educational needs and disabilities, included in general education, remains higher compared to girls in the 2020/21 school year: 65.9% and 34.1%, respectively. The number of children in educational institutions for children with disabilities in intellectual or physical development decreased by 37.1% compared to the academic year 2016/17. In the 2020/21 school year, two thirds of the children in these schools were children with intellectual deficiencies (66.5%).

In 2020, in the country were activated extracurricular institutions: 118 music and art schools for children, in which 21.3 thousand children studied; 49 creative centers for children, in which various circles operated, in which 33.0 thou children participated; 9 technical creation centers in which 5.0 thou children participated; 2 centers of young naturalists and 3 centers of young tourists in which 1.3 thou children and 2.0 thou children, respectively, participated. Within the music schools, the most requested instruments studied were the piano (for 4.7 thou children) and the string instruments (for 2.9 thou children), and within the art schools the most attractive were the fine arts and the choreographic class (for 5.9 thou and 2.5 thou children, respectively).

Regarding the school attendance (according to NBS RM), in 2018/2019 academic year, in Moldova, 10% of primary school age children and 15% of lower secondary school age children were out of school and only 60% of adolescents of 16-18 years old are enrolled in non-compulsory upper secondary education.

According to data from the Report *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor – Moldova, 2019* [5] (data for the 2013/2014 academic year) the main reason for not attending the school is the pupil engaged in the labor market – 18.3% from all the pupils participated in the survey (the number of boys is almost twice as many as the number of girls: 19.9% - boys and 16.2% - girls). Other reasons are: poverty – 5.1% (4.9% - boys and 5.3% - girls), the pupil works with the parents in the household – 2.3% (2.6% - boys and 1.9% - girls), the pupil works daily with parents – 3.26% (the number of boys is four times more than the number of girls: 4.6% - boys, 1.5% - girls), the pupil works daily independent of parents – 5.1% (the number of boys is more than the number of girls: 8.65% - boys, 0.37% - girls), etc.

According to last data from *End of Childhood Report 2021* [7], the End of Childhood Index Ranking for the Republic of Moldova is 86 from 186 countries (in 2017 this Index was 76, in 2020 - 84). The indicator Out-of-school rate (Out-of-school children of primary and secondary school age) for the Republic of Moldova is 17.1% (in 2017 it was 17.9%, in 2020 – 16.5%), followed by all CIS counties: Kazakhstan - 0.7%, Russian Federation – 0.7%, Belarus – 1.2%, Georgia – 1.6%, Azerbaijan – 3.5%, Uzbekistan – 4.0%, Kyrgyzstan – 5.5%, Ukraine – 5.7%, Turkmenistan – 6.8%, Armenia – 9.8%, Tajikistan – 10.3% (Table 3).

Table 3. The End of Childhood Index Ranking between CIS countries, 2021

| Countries | End of Childhood Index Ranking | Score | Out-of-school rate (Out-of-school children of primary and secondary school age) |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|--|
| Republic of Moldova | 86 | 869 | 17.1% |
| Armenia | 61 | 917 | 9.8% |
| Azerbaijan | 93 | 854 | 3.5% |
| Belarus | 35 | 959 | 1.2% |
| Georgia | 74 | 897 | 1.6% |
| Kazakhstan | 49 | 933 | 0.7% |
| Kyrgyzstan | 92 | 856 | 5.5% |
| Russia | 37 | 954 | 0.7% |
| Tajikistan | 105 | 830 | 10.3% |
| Ukraine | 52 | 930 | 5.7% |
| Uzbekistan | 62 | 916 | 4.0% |
| Turkmenistan | 71 | 905 | 6.8% |

Source: Created based on data from *End of Childhood Report 2021* [4, 5]

According to latest results from *Global Childhood Report 2021. The Toughest Places to be Child*, published by Save the Children Federation: “The *End of Childhood Index* compares the latest data for 186 countries – the highest number ever – and assesses where the most and fewest children are missing out on childhood. Singapore and Slovenia top the ranking this year with scores of 990 out of 1,000. Eight Western European countries rank in the top 10, attaining very high scores for children’s health, education and

protection status. Niger ranks last among the countries surveyed, scoring 392. The 10 bottom-ranked countries – all from sub-Saharan Africa – are a reverse image of the top, performing poorly on most indicators. Children in these countries are the least likely to fully experience childhood, a time that should be dedicated to emotional, social and physical development, as well as play. In these and many other countries around the world, children are robbed of significant portions of their childhoods. The United States badly trails nearly all other advanced countries in helping children reach their full potential. The U.S. score of 948 puts it at least 25 points behind most Western European countries. Countries with similar scores include Bahrain, China, Montenegro, Qatar, Russia and Slovakia.” [5].

According to data from *Violence Against Children and Youth in the Republic of Moldova: Findings from a National Survey, 2019* [12] the common reasons for not attending the school (*School attendance among 13-17-year-olds and reasons for not attending school, among 13-17-year-olds who are not currently attending school*) among females were that they had graduated or were done with school (74.1%). Among the 7.3% of males who were not attending school, common reasons for not attending were that they had graduated or were done with school (58.7%). Another reason among those who are not currently attending: Participant has to work - 9.6% females and 35.1% males.

According to the last official data from NBS RM (Table 4), in 2020, *the number of graduates of basic schools (gymnasiums)* was 30837 children, the number of graduates of upper secondary schools was 16843 children, the number of graduates of colleges was 6279 children, the number of graduates of higher education institutions – 14650 children.

Table 4. The number of graduates of all types of institutions, 2014-2020

| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total | | | | | | | |
| Basic schools (gymnasiums) | 33743 | 32115 | 30849 | 29883 | 30572 | 30087 | 30837 |
| Upper secondary schools | 26212 | 23434 | 15853 | 18130 | 18280 | 16855 | 16843 |
| Colleges | 6484 | 6252 | 6789 | 6367 | 7025 | 6586 | 6279 |
| Higher education institutions | 24274 | 23630 | 21886 | 19943 | 18142 | 16266 | 14650 |
| Per 10000 inhabitants | | | | | | | |
| Basic schools (gymnasiums) | 119 | 114 | 111 | 109 | 114 | 114 | 119 |
| Upper secondary schools | 92 | 83 | 57 | 66 | 68 | 64 | 65 |
| Colleges | 23 | 22 | 24 | 23 | 26 | 25 | 24 |
| Higher education institutions | 85 | 84 | 79 | 73 | 68 | 62 | 56 |

Source: Created based on data from NBS RM

In 2000, the number of enrolled children in early education institutions was 93665 persons and after 9 years (in 2019) only 30087 children were registered as graduates of basic schools (gymnasiums) – the differences between these two indicators is 63578 persons. It can be assumed that many of these pupils left the country with their families and have not filed a petition to expel their child from school, others abandoned their studies in favor of working for money, many abandoned their studies because their families were poor, others because of bad health, etc.

Conclusions.

Recent years, the Republic of Moldova has invested in the reconstruction and development of kindergartens to ensure children's right to pre-school education. The support of foreign donors, public-private partnerships, local authorities and parents helped to 150 kindergartens and community centers have been rebuilt in most localities. The percentage of preschool enrollment in Moldova is relatively high compared to other countries in the region. Today, 84% of children ages 3 to 6 attend kindergartens, twice as many as in 2000. Kindergartens are equipped with new furniture and with well-trained teachers, educational toys, and learning materials, children have had optimal conditions for development.

The main reason for not attending the school is the pupil engaged in the labor market and poverty. Other reasons are: the pupil works with the parents in the household, the pupil works daily with parents, the pupil works daily independent of parents, etc.

One of the main reason to leave the school or the education system before completing compulsory

education is high level of poverty in the country and especially children poverty. Poverty rates, although decreasing, remain high, particularly affecting children and households with children, especially in rural areas. In addition to monetary inequalities, the most vulnerable groups of children, including children with disabilities, roma children and those without parental care, are additionally exposed to social inequalities in the fields of education, health, access to quality services [17].

According to last official data from NBS RM about *children poverty*¹ [1, 2, 14], children represented 21.8% of poor population and 24.3% of extremely poor population of the country. In 2019 the poverty rate for total population represented 25.2% (in 2018 was 23,0%), the poverty incidence for children represented 24.0% (in 2018 was 24.4%), and 11.3% of children were subjected to extreme poverty (in 2018 was 10,1%). Rural area faced a higher poverty risk, where the poverty rate for children was 5 times higher if compared to children from urban area. The poverty rate was higher for children aged 16-17 years (26.8%).

Perspectives in the development of the educational process in the country: among the main priorities of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova are the digitalization of educational institutions and professional development of teaching staff in the field of digital technologies, strengthening the material and technical base of educational institutions of all levels, development of program documents, etc. Also, the development of an "Education Strategy 2030" in which the main objectives will be, above all, equal access, quality, relevance of learning, digitalization of education, as well as the development of gender issues, ensuring the resilience of the education system to the conditions caused by the pandemic and in general to the various critical situations that may occur. The strategic goal in the field of education in the country is to ensure its accessibility, the use of modern technologies in the educational process. The development of infrastructure of educational institutions remains a priority, which in the current circumstances can not be postponed. In this regard, the Ministry of Education of the country has set a task to digitize the educational process in vocational education at the national level. It is organizing training courses for teachers, master trainers in the implementation of information technologies in education, supporting the development of digital learning materials and the necessary software, etc.

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¹ Poverty indicators for 2015-2018 were calculated according to the revised methodology, approved in 2018 and supplemented in 2020, https://statistica.gov.md/public/files/Metadate/alte/Metodologie_saracie.pdf

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