

Improving Early Childhood Education in Central and Eastern Europe Step by Step

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In 1994, the Open Society Institute (OSI) began a two-year pilot project in preschools located in 15 countries in Central and Eastern Europe to introduce child-centered teaching and strategies to strengthen family and community engagement. The program, called Step by Step (SbS), focused on supporting professional development of educators and providing resources to develop teaching practices that would promote open and critical thinking in a new generation of children. By October 2006, the program had expanded to more than 30 countries, including 28 in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

SbS provided teacher training to preschool and primary school educators and gave special attention to initiatives for Roma and other minority children, children with disabilities, parenting, and the development of children's literature, among other activities. In addition, the program helped to establish national, professional early childhood organizations in each country, as well as a regional networking organization, the International Step by Step Association.

OSI asked RAND to assess the capacity, reach, and sustainability of SbS across this region. To do this, RAND and OSI collaborated to develop a detailed survey and asked SbS directors from each participating country to respond. In addition, RAND reviewed findings from 23 qualitative, national case studies, conducted previously by teams of national and international researchers, involved in the SbS Case Study Project. The SbS Case Study Project was conducted between 2003 and 2007 to explore and document the dynamics of SbS's early education reform from the perspective of children, parents, caregivers, teachers, administrators, NGOs, and governments.¹ The RAND evaluation addressed the following questions:

Abstract

The Step by Step Program was designed to introduce child-centered teaching strategies and parent and community involvement in early childhood education systems in countries of the former Soviet bloc, where rapid social, economic, and political transformations were taking place. This study assessed the program's capacity, reach, and sustainability. RAND found that the program had achieved a wide reach and was positioned well for sustainability; however, the capacity to carry out the program varied substantially among participating countries. The researchers recommend several actions to strengthen the program in the future.

- What is the human and organizational capacity of the SbS organizations?
- How widespread is the program's reach in each country?
- How sustainable is the SbS program?

Capacity Varies Across SbS Organizations

SbS organizations need both human and organizational capacity to carry out their mission. The study measured human capacity by assessing each organization's staffing, teacher training, and professional preparation. Training capacity is particularly important because one of SbS's core activities is to train primary and preschool teachers in SbS methodologies. The study assessed organizational capacity by examining office space and equipment, staff quality, mission and strategy, and board of director roles.

Most SbS directors reported being satisfied with the size and capabilities of their staffs and having sufficient office equipment and materials. Most had actively involved boards of directors and felt confident in their mission and strategic directions.

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¹ The studies will be available in October 2008 at <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/childhood> and at <http://www.issa.nl>.

However, the countries varied widely in their capacity to train teachers and in the areas to which they dedicated their training resources. In more than half of the countries, the demand for training exceeded capacity, and many lacked funds to train more trainers. Thus, they found it difficult to maintain a robust system of teacher mentoring and professional development, again limited largely by financial resources.

SbS Is Widespread and Institutionalized

The researchers evaluated the program's reach by estimating the numbers of children, parents, educators, and others who participated in its activities since its inception and by its success in institutionalizing SbS methodologies within their countries.

Survey responses revealed the following estimated levels of participation from September 1994 through December 2006:

- 68,000 trained teachers implemented SbS methodologies
- 600 teachers per country on average received training on pedagogical standards
- More than 1.5 million children (a conservative estimate) were exposed to SbS methodologies
- 759 individuals received training to become parent facilitators
- About 3,500 parents participated in parent education initiatives in 2006.

Given the limitations of the data, the actual numbers are certain to be higher.

While these numbers are substantial, SbS programs extend their reach through partnerships with geographically dispersed training centers (23 countries utilize a network of centers), teacher retraining institutions (10 countries), and pre-service training institutions (11 countries). Over 1,200 faculty at institutions that train and retrain teachers have received training through SbS, which means potentially tens of thousands of student teachers have been introduced to child-centered approaches as a result of the program. In addition, most SbS organizations have been successful in attaining Ministry of Education endorsement in their countries and have been involved in developing policy, curriculum, and standards at the national level.

The Outlook for Sustainability Is Positive

The researchers examined sustainability by looking at a variety of indicators. SbS organizations have a number of factors operating in favor of their sustainability. First, they enjoy a positive public image, locally, nationally, and internationally. In a majority of countries, the demand for their

services exceeds their capacity. Second, a majority of SbS organizations are involved in education policy at the national level. Third, most of the organizations can operate freely and without restriction within the law. And finally, the SbS infrastructure is strong, and most SbS organizations have sufficient organizational capacity, as well as established relationships with other NGOs or public institutions.

The overall financial outlook for SbS programs is also positive. The programs on average appeared to be financially viable. Although many SbS organizations reported that their capacity was limited by current financial resources, many SbS programs were attracting multiple grants from diverse sources that they could rely on over time. In addition, some countries were increasingly generating grant income through participation in large-scale national or multi-country initiatives. SbS organizations were also putting financial management systems in place to support future financial growth.

The vast majority of SbS organizations were not restricted by laws in their countries affecting their ability to attract and collect grant income or to receive funds for services. In addition to grant income of almost \$6.5 million per year, SbS organizations together also achieved earned income in excess of \$1.5 million in 2006 from publication sales, training fees, and consulting, and most organizations covered the cost of providing those services or products with the income generated from them.

Strengthening SbS for the Future

The study recommends several steps to improve SbS and solidify its future:

- First, OSI and the International Step by Step Association should continue efforts to build SbS organizations' capacity through strategic planning and fundraising.
- Second, SbS should consider investing further to promote teacher quality and professional development, especially at the national system level, and then solidify methods for maintaining the network of SbS-trained individuals.
- Third, although the overall financial outlook is positive, SbS organizations should pay more attention to some aspects of their financial sustainability—in particular, to procuring more grants from local sources, generating earned income, attracting in-kind support, and developing strategies for fundraising.

Together, these actions could fortify SbS and solidify its future as an instrument of reform and innovation within the worldwide education community. ■

This research brief describes work done for RAND Education and documented in *The Step by Step Early Childhood Education Program: Assessment of Reach and Sustainability*, by Cathleen Stasz, Cathy Krop, Afshin Rastegar, and Mirka Vuollo, TR-593-OSI (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR593/), 2008, 180 pp. This research brief was written by Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.



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