

REPORT



Edited by Dr Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz

ROMA EDUCATION ASSISTANTS IN POLAND

DIAGNOSIS OF NEEDS, CHALLENGES
AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SYSTEM

(...) this work is more than just a duty – it is a mission. I am often the person whom children trust the most. I see how much they need someone who understands them, does not judge them and is able to support them.

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FUNDACJA JAW DIKH!

Krakow, November 2025



The report of the Jaw Dikh Foundation was prepared in cooperation with the Central Council of Roma in Poland and the House on the Border Foundation.

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Table of contents

1	Summary of the report	4
2	Introduction	5
3	Research methodology	9
4	Quantitative research results (survey results)	10
4.1	Characteristics of respondents	10
4.2	Main challenges	11
4.3	Equal treatment and working conditions	11
4.4	Support and professional development	12
4.5	Forced migrants from Ukraine after 2022	12
4.6	Perception of the role of the AER and systemic needs	13
5	Results of quantitative research (in-depth interviews)	14
5.1	Sources of dissonance	14
5.2	Lack of prospects	16
5.3	Flexibility challenges	17
5.4	General conclusions	18
6	Summary	21
7	Recommendations	22
8	Bibliography	24



A report by the Jaw Dikh Foundation, prepared in cooperation with the Central Council of Roma in Poland and the House on the Border Foundation, provides a comprehensive diagnosis of the professional situation of Roma education assistants (AER)¹, a key group for the implementation of inclusive education and the integration of the Roma community.

The aim of the study was to identify the needs, challenges and expectations of AER, as well as to develop systemic recommendations for their further professionalisation.

The study also provided a unique opportunity to listen to the assistants themselves and giving them the opportunity to express their attitudes and opinions regarding the conditions in which they perform their work. The study was conducted using a mixed method, combining an online survey (12 respondents) and in-depth interviews (12 people from different regions of Poland). The survey questions and issues raised in the interviews covered, among other things, employment conditions, access to training, institutional support, the impact of full-scale war in Ukraine after 2022 on their work, and more personal opinions, views and assessments of the working conditions of Roma education assistants.

The results confirmed that AERs are a group with a high level of commitment and a sense of social mission, but they operate in conditions of unstable employment, low wages and a lack of systemic support. Although the profession is included in the Classification of Professions and Specialities (code 531203)², it still does not have pedagogical status or stable funding.

AERs are not only mediators, assistants and teachers. They also act as cultural intermediaries, mediators and community leaders, supporting Roma children, their families and schools in the educational process. After 2022, their role has been further expanded to include support for Roma pupils from Ukraine, which has demonstrated how essential their presence is in crisis and intercultural situations.

The report points to the urgent need to professionalise the AER profession, including:

- regulating the professional status and recognition of AERs as teaching staff,
- permanent funding of positions from the state budget,
- a system of training, certification and supervision,
- psychological support and mentoring,
- the creation of cooperation networks between schools, local governments and Roma organisations.

The findings of the study clearly indicate that Roma education assistants are an indispensable link in the education system based on inclusiveness, equality and respect for multicultural heritage. Their work translates into improved student attendance, increased trust between the school and the students' families, and effective integration of the Roma community. The professionalisation and stabilisation of this professional group is not only an expression of equal treatment, but also an investment in coherent, open education in Poland and the maintenance of harmonious relations between different social groups in Poland.

1. In the rest of this report, we will use the abbreviation AER – Roma Education Assistant.

2. Ministry of Family and Social Policy. (2018). Classification of occupations and specialisations for the labour market (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 227) – occupation "Roma Education Assistant" code 531203. Retrieved from https://klasyfikacje.stat.gov.pl/static/kzis/pdf/Klasyfikacja_zawodow_specjalnosci_1012025.pdf



Education is one of the key areas of social integration, and access to it is a measure of true equality of opportunity. In the case of the Roma community, which continues to experience educational and economic exclusion, the role of intermediaries is particularly important. These are people who are able to build trust between the school and the pupils' families, explain cultural differences, and support pupils in overcoming systemic and social barriers. In Poland, this role is performed by Roma education assistants (AER) – a professional group established at the beginning of the 21st century as part of the implementation of the government's Programme for the Roma Community in Poland (2001–2020).³

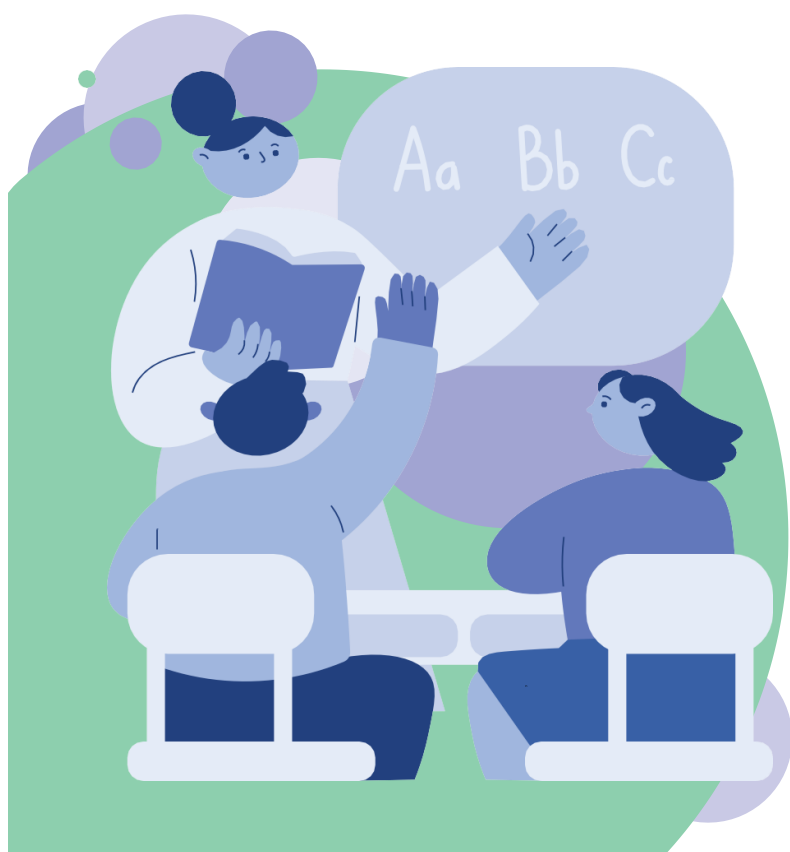
Over the two decades of this institution's existence, AERs have become one of the pillars of educational activities aimed at Roma pupils⁴. Their work includes not only teaching and educational support, but also mediation, cultural and social functions. In many cases, it is the assistants who are the first point of contact between the school and the family, acting as intercultural interpreters and advocates for the pupils' interests. Thanks to their commitment, hundreds of Roma children have started or continued their education in primary and secondary schools, and local Roma communities have gained a real voice in the dialogue with public institutions.⁵

Despite the enormous importance of this work, the professional status of AERs remains unregulated and unstable. The profession is not formally recognised in the education system, which results in a lack of uniform employment standards, uncertain funding, limited access to promotion and training, and low social prestige. Many assistants work on short-term contracts, with no guarantee of continuity of employment and no institutional support, even though their tasks are often more complex than those performed by other education workers.

3. Kończak, M., Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, J. (eds.) (2011). Cognitive functioning and language skills of Roma children attending special and mainstream primary schools – social contexts: Final report from the research project. Association of Roma in Poland.

4. Programme for the social and civic integration of Roma in Poland for 2021–2030: <https://www.gov.pl/web/mniejszosci-narodowe-i-etniczne/program-integracji-spoecznej-i-obywatelskiej-romow-w-polsce-na-lata-2021-2030>

5. Mirga-Wójtowicz, E. (2024). Intercultural assistants in Polish schools – the key to inclusion and equality in education. Report on a study with intercultural assistants. Solidarity for Diversity Coalition.



The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Roma children particularly hard, exacerbating existing barriers to education and exposing systemic weaknesses in support.⁶ The transition to remote learning has revealed fundamental inequalities⁷: a lack of computers and stable internet access in large households, limited space for learning, low levels of digital literacy among parents, and language difficulties among the youngest pupils⁸. In many Roma households, a single telephone was shared by the whole family, and learning with the camera on caused embarrassment due to the living conditions. During this time, Roma education assistants played a key role. Despite sanitary restrictions and a small number of positions, they became the only real bridge between the school and the family⁹. They provided paper materials, supported parents in using the e-register, helped with contacts with the school and monitored the situation of children at risk of dropping out of the system altogether. However, the lack of direct contact and the overload of responsibilities meant that many AERs were unable to fully perform their tasks, which translated into a drastic drop in attendance and an increase in truancy among Roma pupils. **The experience of the pandemic has clearly shown that AER support is an essential element of education policy – and its absence exacerbates existing inequalities and exposes children to long-term educational exclusion.**

The situation became even more complicated after 2022, when a significant number of Roma refugees from Ukraine arrived in Poland¹⁰. Assistants, especially those with experience of working in multicultural communities, became a key source of support for schools, pupils and families¹¹. Their role took on a new dimension – from local to transnational, including mediation in multilingual situations, responding to identity crises and counteracting new forms of discrimination. However, the lack of adequate systemic preparation and training in this area meant that AERs often had to act intuitively, under conditions of overload and emotional burnout.

6. Styrkacz, S. (2022). Pharo siklariben, or the difficult access to education for Roma children in Poland and Europe during the pandemic. *Educational Psychology*, 23, 39–48. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0015.9124>

7. Caban, A. M. (2024). Roma education assistant – profession and mission: conclusions and recommendations from the COVID-19 pandemic period. In: G. Piekarski (ed.), *Discourses (on) equality education* (pp. 303–314). Krakow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls

8. RPO. (2020). Coronavirus. The Ombudsman calls for help for the Roma from Maszkowice.

9. Caban, A. M. (2024). Roma education assistant – profession and mission: conclusions and recommendations from the COVID-19 pandemic period. In: G. Piekarski (ed.), *Discourses (on) equality education* (pp. 303–314). Krakow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls

10. Fiałkowska, K., Józwiak, I., Mirga-Wójtowicz, E., Styrkacz, S., Szewczyk, M. (2024). Romani dar and Romano marbien pafo Roma1. Between fear and agency – (un)equal citizenships two years into full-scale war in Ukraine. *CMR Spotlight*, 3(60).; Fiałkowska, K., Józwiak, I., Mirga-Wójtowicz, E., Styrkacz, S., Szewczyk, M. (2025). Three years on – Ukrainian Roma experiences of displacement, transnational lives and resilience ("CMR Spotlight", 3(69)). Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw; Markowska-Manista, U., Kołaczek, M., Talewicz, J. (eds.). (2024). We are nowhere. The situation of Roma children from Ukraine in the light of participatory research. Fundacja w Stronę Dialogu; Styrkacz, S. (2022). Pharo siklariben, or the difficult access to education for Roma children in Poland and Europe during the pandemic. *Psychologia Wychowawcza*, 22(2).; Styrkacz, S. (2025) "Invisible in the System" – On the Experiences of Romani Children from Ukraine. *CMR Spotlight*, 3(69)

11. Styrkacz, S. (2025). Psychological and social entanglement of Roma refugee students from Ukraine: educational and psychological challenges. *"Education"*, 1(172).; Mirga-Wójtowicz, E., Padshakh, K., Rusek, J., Emery, H., Voit, A., Szewczyk, M., Kwiatkowska, K. (2024). Experiences of Roma Refugees from Ukraine in Accessing Services and Assistance in Poland. IOM Poland.; Mirga-Wójtowicz, E., Talewicz, J., Kołaczek, M. (2022). Human rights, needs and discrimination: The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine in Poland: Report on research and intervention activities. Central Council of German Sinti and Roma. Mirga-Wójtowicz, E., Fiałkowska, K., Szewczyk, M. (2023). National and Local Mobilisation of Roma and Non-Roma Organisations and Activists in Poland Supporting Ukrainian Roma Forced Migrants in the Face of the War in Ukraine. Jaw Dikh Foundation; Markowska-Manista, U., Kołaczek, M., Talewicz, J. (eds.). (2024). We are nowhere. The situation of Roma children from Ukraine in the light of participatory research. Towards Dialogue Foundation.

The report **by the Jaw Dikh Foundation**, prepared in cooperation with **the Central Council of Roma in Poland** and **the House on the Border Foundation**, was created in response to these challenges. Its aim is not only to diagnose the professional situation of AERs in Poland, but above all to develop systemic recommendations that can contribute to strengthening their professional position, improving the quality of their work and providing more effective support to Roma students. The study combined quantitative and qualitative methods – an online survey and a series of in-depth interviews – allowing it to capture both a statistical picture of the phenomenon and the individual experiences of people working at the intersection of education, culture and social integration.

The results of the study reveal **a clear dissonance between the awareness of the social importance of this function and the systemic lack of recognition**. Roma education assistants are an extremely committed group, guided by a mission and ethos of social service, yet they remain in the shadow of educational structures. Their daily work includes working with students, supporting them in their education, but also crisis intervention, emotional support, mediation, explaining cultural and linguistic differences, and building long-term relationships with Romani families. Meanwhile, in the education system, **they often function as "teacher's assistants", without formal tools or adequate remuneration**.

From a social and political perspective, the report emphasises that **professionalising and institutionally strengthening the role of AER is one of the key conditions for effective education policy towards the Roma community** and, consequently, **for promoting social cohesion**. Assistants are not only school employees – they are also representatives and leaders of Roma communities, **and their work is a practical example of intercultural mediation, building bridges and trust between minorities and public institutions**.

The introduction of the AER profession into the education system and the creation of stable funding mechanisms, support networks and professional certification, and the development of training and mentoring programmes is not only a demand of the Roma community, but also a condition for the sustainability of the state's integration measures. It is also in the interest of the educational institutions themselves, which benefit in a real way from the presence of AERs at many levels.



This report fits into the broader context of European debates on equality in education, inclusive policies and combating antigypsyism, contributing to the discussion on the professionalisation of staff supporting students from minority groups.¹² It **also aims to inspire decision-makers, local governments, schools and non-governmental organisations** to work together to recognise AER as full and indispensable participants in the education system in Poland.

The experiences of other EU Member States show that educational mediators, teaching assistants and various forms of extracurricular support are among the most effective tools for increasing participation and improving the educational outcomes of Roma pupils¹³. In many European countries, these roles go by different names – Roma education assistants, community mediators, teaching assistants – but their scope of activities is similar: building bridges between school and family, supporting attendance, monitoring progress and facilitating communication. **Despite their proven effectiveness, in most countries these activities remain underdeveloped and based mainly on short-term projects**.

12. Roma Civil Monitor. (2017–2025). Roma Civil Monitoring: Strengthening the capacities of Roma and pro-Roma civil society in EU Member States. Retrieved 16 November 2025, from <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/>

13. Roma Civil Monitor. (2017–2025). Roma Civil Monitoring: Strengthening the capacities of Roma and pro-Roma civil society in EU Member States. Retrieved 16 November 2025, from <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/>



In Bulgaria, mediators are partially institutionalised and funded by the state, but work on unstable contracts; in the Czech Republic, their effectiveness is well documented, but only a few schools can afford to employ them without secure funding¹⁴.

In Hungary, the support function is mainly performed by "tanoda" centres¹⁵, which provide tutoring and mentoring, but depend on cyclical grants¹⁶.

In Romania and Slovakia, mediators and assistants help to overcome language and social barriers, but their employment depends on local or EU funding, which leads to unequal access to these services¹⁷.

In Spain, non-governmental organisations play a particularly strong role, but the profession mediator still lacks a permanent institutional basis¹⁸. Similar trends can be observed in Ireland and Sweden, where, despite different models, support is fragmented and project-based¹⁹. This overview points to common European challenges: lack of stable public funding, insufficient recognition and professionalisation of the role of mediator/assistant, inadequate language support and dependence on NGOs, which undermines the continuity of activities. These conclusions highlight the need for systemic and sustainable solutions in Poland as well.

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14. ERGO Network. (2025). Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, with additional benchmarking evidence from Ireland and Sweden: <https://ergonetWORK.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Education-report-2025-Digital-version.pdf>

15. Tanodas are Hungarian extracurricular educational support centres run mainly by non-governmental organisations. They offer children, especially those from poor and Roma families, daily learning support, tutoring, developmental activities, mentoring and a safe environment that supports their development. They were established in response to the insufficient capacity of schools to work with disadvantaged students. Most tanod operate on short-term grants (including EU grants), which makes their functioning unstable and dependent on funding cycles. See ERGO Network (2025), Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning

16. ERGO Network. (2025). Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, with additional benchmarking evidence from Ireland and Sweden

17. ERGO Network. (2025). Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, with additional benchmarking evidence from Ireland and Sweden

18. ERGO Network. (2025). Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, with additional benchmarking evidence from Ireland and Sweden

19. ERGO Network. (2025). Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, with additional benchmarking evidence from Ireland and Sweden



The study was conducted using a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods in order to obtain as complete a picture as possible of the experiences of Roma education assistants and assistants in Roma education in Poland. The primary research tool was an online survey addressed to both current and former AERs, as well as to persons working with the Roma community in schools, community centres, non-governmental organisations and local government units.

The questionnaire consisted of six extensive thematic sections concerning:

- 1** current professional challenges;
- 2** available forms of institutional and informal support;
- 3** professional status and employment conditions;
- 4** equal treatment and experiences of discrimination;
- 5** the impact of the war in Ukraine after 2022 on the scope and intensity of work on the most;
- 6** important demands for systemic change.

The qualitative part included in-depth individual interviews with selected respondents, which allowed for the interpretation of survey data in a broader social and emotional context. During the interviews, issues such as work overload, chronic lack of recognition from institutions, difficult relationships with some of the teaching staff, but also strong motivation, a sense of mission and deep commitment to working with the Roma community were revealed.

The interviews provided a perspective that quantitative data could not capture — they showed, among other things, how dramatically the everyday life of AER changed after 2022, when a sudden arrival of Roma refugees from Ukraine burdened the education and social welfare systems, making assistants a key link between schools and families.

A total of 24 respondents, women and men interviewees, participated in the study, representing diverse regions of the country, from large metropolitan areas, through smaller towns, to rural municipalities where Roma community centres operate or where there are single Roma Education Assistant (REA) positions. This geographical and community-level diversity made it possible to capture different working models, distinct challenges, and local support practices, thereby providing the broadest possible picture of how the institution of Roma Education Assistants functions in Poland.

4 Results of quantitative research (survey results)

4.1 Characteristics of respondents



The survey covered a total of 12

– Roma education assistants (REAs) from various regions of Poland. Women dominated among the respondents, women predominated (approx. 75%), which reflects the overall structure of this professional group, in which **women most often act as intermediaries between the school and the Roma community.**

In terms of professional experience, **most of the respondents (8 people) have been working as AERs for over three years.** One person has less experience (6–12 months), while three people are colleagues or former AERs who previously performed similar functions in educational institutions.

The vast majority of respondents (9 people) are employed under an employment contract, which indicates a relatively stable form of employment in the public sector. One person works on a contract basis, and two others were not employed at the time of the survey, although they continued to cooperate with educational institutions.

The respondents came from five provinces: Małopolska (Kraków, Limanowa), Lower Silesia (Wałbrzych, Kamienna Góra), Opole (Głubczyce, Kędzierzyn-Koźle), Mazovia (Warsaw), Łódź (Łódź) and Lublin (Chełm). Most of them work in both urban and rural environments, often supporting several schools at the same time.

All AER respondents (12 people) work with Roma pupils, with 4 people also supporting Roma pupils from Ukraine and 2 people supporting non-Roma Ukrainian children. These results confirm the growing importance of the role of educational assistants in working with groups of pupils from diverse ethnic and migrant backgrounds. The knowledge and experience of AERs is crucial because it is based on many years of practical work in Roma communities and goes far beyond the narrow understanding of educational support for children. It also includes knowledge of the realities of family life, mediation skills, the ability to build trust and familiarity with local support systems, which makes AERs an irreplaceable link between schools, institutions and the Roma community.

4 Results of quantitative research (survey results)

4.2 Main challenges

The data analysis revealed a number of difficulties faced by AERs in their daily work. The most frequently mentioned problems were:

- lack of stable contracts and low pay (12 people)
- low attendance of Roma pupils (6 people)
- lack of systematic training and institutional support (11 people)
- overload of responsibilities (10 people) and lack of understanding on the part of some teaching staff (9 people)
- the need to build and maintain trust between the school and Roma families (11 respondents)

Respondents pointed out that despite high commitment and a sense of mission, the work of AER is still not fully appreciated or adequately supported institutionally. These difficulties confirm the need for greater recognition and strengthening of this function in the education system.

4.3 Equal treatment and working conditions

The results of the study indicate that the phenomenon of unequal treatment affects a significant

Part AER. 25% of respondents admitted that they had directly experienced discrimination, and another 58% said that they encountered it "sometimes". Only 16.7% of respondents declared that they had not encountered such situations.

The most frequently mentioned form of unequal treatment was discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin (8 people), while cultural marginalisation concerned one respondent. More than half of the respondents considered that Roma education assistants are not treated equally with other education workers, especially in terms of professional recognition and status within the school team.

Two-thirds of respondents pointed to inequalities in remuneration and career advancement opportunities. Although half of the respondents confirmed the existence of formal equal treatment procedures in their schools, as many as five people admitted that they were unaware of such mechanisms, which indicates their limited availability and effectiveness.

4.4 Support and professional development

The level of support that AERs receive from teaching staff and management is rated as moderate. Half of the 12 respondents described it as average, 4 as high, and the remaining 2 as insufficient.

Training in equal treatment and work

Only two schools offer intercultural education, and only six implement it sporadically. Access to psychological support is equally limited – only three respondents have regular access to it, and the same number use it only occasionally.

When it comes to career development opportunities, five respondents rated them as poor and three as moderate. Only a quarter of respondents felt that they could fully realise their professional potential. More than half feel that their skills are only partially utilised, which is linked, among other things, to a lack of a clearly defined role and limited opportunities for promotion.



4.5 Forced migrants from Ukraine after 2022: new challenges for schools and Roma Education Assistants

The arrival of forced migrants fleeing the war in Ukraine after 2022 has significantly increased the scope of the AER's responsibilities and introduced new challenges to their daily work.

Four respondents noted a significant increase in the number of responsibilities, and another four signalled the emergence of new mediation tasks, especially in working with Roma families from Ukraine.

One in four respondents indicated an increased need for psychological support among pupils and their families. Despite this, only two respondents considered that they had received sufficient training and preparation to work in the new situation. **These data show that schools and educational institutions were not fully prepared for the integration of Roma refugee pupils** and need additional resources and tools in this area.



4.6 Perception of the role of the AER and systemic needs



Despite the difficulties, most respondents express their conviction that the work of the AER makes a real contribution to reducing educational inequalities among Roma children. The assistants emphasised that their role is crucial in building bridges between the school and the Roma community, as well as in creating an environment conducive to integration and mutual trust.

The respondents also formulated a number of systemic proposals, the most common of which were:

- the need for stable funding from the state budget
- the introduction of a clear career path and professional advancement
- the creation of a national system of training, certification and supervision
- formal inclusion of AER in school decision-making teams and educational policy-making processes
- increasing the recognition and prestige of the profession in the educational community
- regular training of for in the counteracting stereotypes and discrimination
- creation of a nationwide network support AER and representation of this group in national education policies

The data collected clearly shows that the AER is a highly motivated group with a strong sense of mission and commitment to improving the situation of Roma pupils, but operating in conditions of professional uncertainty and a lack of systemic support.

Therefore, the study points to an urgent need to institutionally strengthen the role of AERs – both by improving their employment conditions and remuneration, and by formally recognising this function as a permanent, professional element of the education system. Only then will the work of Roma assistants be able to fully realise its potential in terms of equality, integration and supporting the education of Roma children in Poland.

5

Qualitative research results (in-depth interviews)

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with Roma education assistants bring a very important individual and human dimension to the issues covered in this report. The main purpose of the interviews was to learn about the personal opinions of the assistants, their unique experiences, and gain a deeper insight into their attitudes towards their work. The interviews were also intended to provide an opportunity to articulate specific recommendations, proposals for change and suggestions for improving the work of assistants.



5.1

Sources of dissonance

At a general level, the interviews with AERs revealed a high level of motivation and commitment among this group, but also frustration related to the lack of institutional recognition. Undoubtedly, this group is characterised by considerable enthusiasm, an ethos that values education, and a belief that their work is a kind of mission. In the words of this assistant:

...this job is more than just a duty – it's a mission. I am often the person the children trust the most. I see how much they need someone who understands them, does not judge them and can support them.

As another interviewee says:

...the work of a Roma education assistant is not just a job, but a mission. It is about building bridges between cultures every day, learning to trust and fighting prejudice.

The assistants repeatedly prove with their attitude that these are not just empty words. Answering phone calls, intervening, and helping with lessons outside of working hours are all part of the norm. For those they talk to, it is completely natural that they devote their free time to helping and supporting students or parents, or trying to deal with official matters.

The interviewees emphasise the uniqueness of their role, which consists not only in mediating between students and parents, but perhaps above all in intercultural translation and being a key link in communication between the school, students and parents. The interviewees are well aware of this and it is a source of professional satisfaction for them. At the same time, the uniqueness of this role lies in the high uncertainty of the challenges faced by assistants, which requires them to be very flexible.



However, the source of most of the problems raised by the interviewees is the dissonance between their awareness of the importance of their work and its overall systemic positioning, recognition and appreciation. As this assistant points out:

I would like the assistants' voices to be truly heard. We are closest to Roma families; we see their everyday lives, their problems and successes. Without us, it would be difficult to talk about effective educational integration. We need trust, stability and respect – then we can work really effectively.

As the interviewees point out, **the source of the dissonance is not the atmosphere in the educational institution.** In most interviews, the atmosphere is described as good, although there are also problems. For assistants, it is very important that their duties are treated equally and that their overall scope of work is systematically integrated into the institution. **Assistants emphasised that they are often perceived as 'helpers' rather than professionals in the education system:**



I think that in my work there is a lack of systemic recognition. On the one hand, I know that my presence at the school is needed, but on the other hand, I often feel that my role is overlooked when decisions are made and activities are planned. At the systemic level, however, this recognition is minimal. There are no bonuses or awards, and often, even when important school matters are being discussed, we are sometimes not invited.

There is no doubt that assistants are an integral part of the teaching staff in school institutions. Most of the interviewees emphasise that they feel comfortable in them, have support and understanding from other members the teaching staff. However, this situation again causes dissonance due to uncertain working and employment conditions, which has a demotivating effect and degrading. As one of the interviewees points out:

Without systemic support, it is difficult to maintain motivation and ensure lasting results. I dream that the profession of AER will be treated with the same respect as that of a teacher or educator, because our role is equally important for the success of children and the entire community.



For highly motivated assistants who treat their work as a mission, however, the problem is not the lack of permanent employment. Treating AERs as lower-ranking teaching assistants also reduces their opportunities for self-development and realising their own potential. For the interviewees, this is particularly problematic. A wide range of training courses and additional courses available to teachers are not available to assistants, which may create the impression of systemic discrimination and exclusion from equal access to knowledge.

As one interviewee states:

The most important thing is stable employment and regular training. Assistants should be permanently integrated into the education system. There also needs to be greater cooperation between schools, local authorities and Roma organisations.

Interviewees sometimes refrained from criticising a given institution because they felt comfortable there in terms of interpersonal relations, but at the same time they were aware that for systemic and, consequently, financial reasons, they were in a worse position. For ambitious and motivated assistants, this situation is sometimes highly frustrating – not only do they not have permanent employment and are not treated equally, but there are no indications that this situation is likely to change. What is more, it is not entirely clear who they should turn to in order to change the situation.

It should be remembered that, as members of the Roma community themselves, assistants are ambassadors of the education system to Roma pupils and are responsible for maintaining their enthusiasm for learning and motivation to learn better and better. In a situation where the same system does not seem to reward the hard work of AERs, both pupils and AERs themselves may have doubts as to whether it is worth it. For ambitious members of the Roma community, this is a bitter lesson in systemic heartlessness and bureaucratic blindness. This is why it is so important to recognise and reward AER in schools. The interviewees gave examples of this, and there is no doubt that these gestures were of great importance. Below, one of the interviewees talks about how she received an award for her work:

Yes, a diploma. And he said it officially, former teachers, former administrators. It was so nice. The teachers also appreciated it, but teachers are like that, they might not come to you and say, "Oh, you're great." They know that without me, it would be difficult for them to reach this child and conduct the classes. If I don't call, if I don't call her, she wouldn't be able to call.

The interviews suggest that there is a systemic tension between informal recognition of the role of the AER in the school and formal marginalisation of this function in the context of school activities.

We have lower salaries, shorter contracts, often seasonal, and no access to the benefits that teachers are entitled to. In practice, we are treated as second-class employees.

There is no doubt that teachers and management are aware of the importance of this function, but in most cases, they do not seem to have the appropriate tools to meet the expectations of the AER. Unfortunately, in such situations, there are also cases of intentional marginalisation:

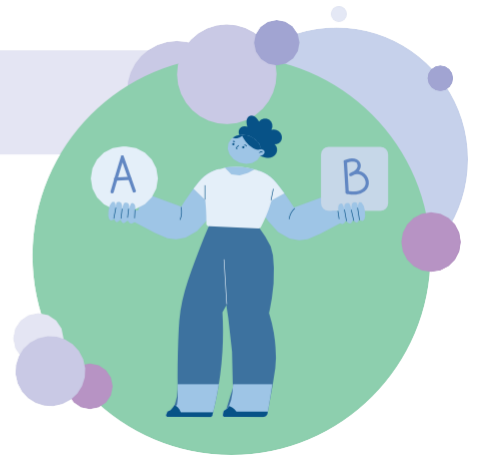
There have been cases where the management did not want to sign an employment contract, proposing civil law contracts instead, because "it is not known whether there will be funds".

Many participants spoke about indirect discrimination, marginalisation and a lack of space for development. There were also calls for the creation of a nationwide AER network and for them to be included in consultations on education policy.

An analysis of interviews, surveys and the institutional and legal framework in which AERs operate also leads to more general conclusions and resulting recommendations for the future.

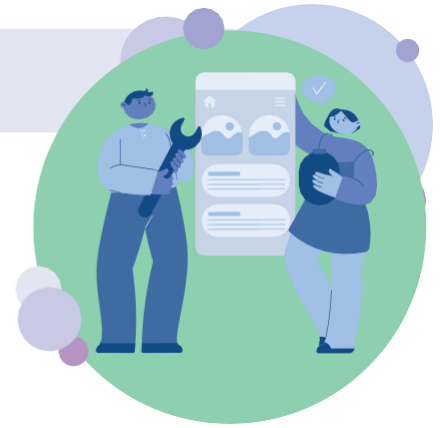
The emergence of new challenges and problems as a result of the war in Ukraine after 2022 has highlighted one of the fundamental problems related to the status of AER - lack of clearly defined framework of responsibilities, competences and tasks related to this profession. One of the issues raised by the interviewees is the constant readiness and ability to respond to new challenges and creative ways of dealing with ever-new problems. On the one hand, for assistants, dealing with such new challenges is a source of pride and satisfaction, indicating that their work is very multifaceted. On the other hand, however, requiring assistants to respond to ever-new challenges introduces a great deal of unpredictability and uncertainty into the profession, as it is impossible to know what local and general challenges the future will bring.

Added to this is the diversity of Roma communities in Poland, which sometimes face very locally specific problems – different problems dominate in large urban centres, others in smaller towns, and communities with different socio-economic status have different problems. The situation of the Roma minority in Poland therefore forces a certain ambiguity in the definition of the assistant's role. In-depth interviews with assistants reveal that one of the reasons for this feeling of instability is precisely the fact that they operate in a diverse and dynamically changing educational field. As one of our interviewees stated, an assistant cannot be a "jack of all trades" because this blurs their responsibilities, imposes unrealistic expectations and, at the same time, keeps them in a state of constant uncertainty.



Local, often informal relationships within a given educational institution may mitigate this unpredictability to some extent, but there is no doubt that the solution to the above-described dissonances lies in systemic solutions. One of the assistants shares the following experience:

It depends on the school. In one of the [...] schools I work with, I am treated as a member of the team – teachers ask me for my opinion, and we plan educational activities together. But there are also schools where my role is still misunderstood – where teachers do not know what I do and treat me as a "student assistant".



Analysis of the collected material – both quantitative and qualitative – confirms the high consistency of conclusions drawn from various sources. Data from surveys and interviews create a relatively uniform picture of the professional situation of Roma education assistants in Poland, while also showing their enormous commitment and the numerous systemic constraints they face.

The collected results point to recurring problems: lack of formal recognition and stability of the profession, low salaries, limited opportunities for professional development and insufficient institutional support. Despite these difficulties, assistants show extremely strong motivation to work, treating it as a mission and a tool for social change.

The first conclusion drawn from the analysis is the clear dissonance between social recognition for the work of AERs and their formal position in the education system. Both in the surveys and in the interviews, respondents emphasised that schools and teachers often perceive them as indispensable in working with Roma pupils – as intermediaries in contacts with parents, cultural interpreters, people who "connect worlds". Despite this, their role is not reflected in the institutional dimension of the system. Assistants remain outside the catalogue of teaching positions, are not included in decision-making processes and do not have clearly defined career paths. As a result, work that in practice has enormous educational and social value operates in the shadow of official educational structures, sometimes even on their margins.

The lack of formal recognition translates directly into unstable employment conditions. Most assistants work on short-term contracts, often renewed annually, and some on civil law contracts. Respondents' statements indicate that this situation is a source of uncertainty and reduced professional status. Although assistants are an integral part of the teaching team, they are not treated on an equal footing with teachers. The lack of allowances, lower salaries and limited access to training build a sense of "secondary status" in the school hierarchy. This, in turn, affects their motivation, but also the stability of their relationships with pupils and families, which require continuity and trust.

Another important issue is the limited access of AERs to professional development. The results of the survey and interviews indicate that assistants rarely participate in training courses and their opportunities to improve their qualifications are limited. They often lack access to courses and development programmes that are standard for teachers. In practice, this means that AERs learn mainly through experience, knowledge exchange among themselves, and trial and error. The lack of a certification and supervision system not only hinders the professionalisation of the profession, but also perpetuates its low status in the educational structure.

The analysis also shows that the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 and the arrival of Roma refugees from that country significantly affected the scope of the assistants' duties. Many schools saw the arrival of Roma children from Ukraine, often without documents, unable to speak Polish, requiring special emotional support and intercultural mediation. In this situation, AERs became key figures in the process of accepting new students and helping their families adapt. However, according to the respondents, they did not receive any additional training or support in relation to these new challenges. Their work, which was already demanding, became even more burdensome, often leading to mental overload and burnout.

It is also worth mentioning here the role of the intercultural assistant, which began to develop more dynamically in Poland after 2022 in response to the needs of schools accepting large numbers of refugee pupils, including Roma children from Ukraine. Although the scope of tasks of an intercultural assistant overlap with the duties of AERs in many areas – including linguistic, emotional and cultural support, mediation between the school and the family, as well as assistance in educational adaptation – their systemic situation is clearly different. Intercultural assistants benefit from more stable project solutions, training and programmes implemented by local governments or international organisations. In many cases, they operate within dedicated support pathways, receiving training in working in a multicultural environment, intercultural competences and the basics of migration pedagogy. Against this background, the position of AERs remains much weaker: despite many years of experience and in-depth knowledge of Roma communities, they are not covered by a comparable professional development system, they are not provided with training or clear working standards, and their professional status is less stable than that of intercultural assistants. This disparity shows how much Poland lacks a coherent, systemic policy to support these two roles – especially since it is the AERs who have been performing intercultural tasks for many years, before the institution of the intercultural assistant appeared.

Many respondents described their work as emotionally demanding and full of responsibility, but at the same time lacking adequate forms of support. Assistants often help students and families after hours, intervene in official matters, translate documents, and provide support in crisis situations. For many of them, this is a natural part of their professional mission, but the lack of supervision, mentoring, and psychological support causes overload and a feeling of isolation. Paradoxically, their greatest strength – empathy and commitment – can become a source of burnout if it is not accompanied by institutional protection and concern for employee well-being.

The analysis of the results confirms a number of earlier reports indicating that assistants play a key role in building trust between the school and the Roma community²⁰. Their work has not only an educational dimension, but also a social and cultural one. They are the ones who put the idea of inclusive education into practice, explaining cultural differences, counteracting stereotypes and supporting dialogue between teachers and parents. Many headteachers and teachers, despite formal restrictions, admit that without an assistant it would be difficult to maintain contact with Roma families, ensure pupil attendance and resolve day-to-day problems. From a public policy perspective, the presence of AERs in schools is therefore an investment of high social value, the effects of which are visible in improved relations, attendance and attitudes among pupils, and consequently in their achievements, opportunities on the labour market and possibilities for self-development.

At the same time, data from interviews indicate that the organisational culture of the school is of great importance for the quality of AER work. In institutions where the management involves assistants in planning activities, invites them to staff meetings and appreciates their work, there is a greater sense of agency and shared responsibility for the educational results of students. In schools where this approach is lacking, assistants feel marginalised and their role is reduced to technical support. These differences show that even in the absence of systemic changes, local practices and the openness of the management can improve the situation of AER to some extent – although these are still scattered measures and depend on the goodwill of individual schools.

20. Mirga-Wójtowicz, E., Talewicz, J., Kołaczek, M. (2022). Human rights, needs and discrimination: The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine in Poland: Report on research and intervention activities. Central Council of German Sinti and Roma; Kołaczek, M., Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, J. (eds.) (2011). Cognitive and linguistic functioning of Roma children attending special and mainstream primary schools – social contexts: Final report of the research project. Association of Roma in Poland; Markowska-Manista, U., Kołaczek, M., Talewicz, J. (eds.). (2024). We are nowhere. The situation of Roma children from Ukraine in the light of participatory research. Foundation for Dialogue; Caban, A.M. (2023). How to support Roma children and young people in Polish schools. Some practical information. Centre for Education Development; Caban, A., Kołaczek, M. (eds.) (2023). Assistant mission. The future of Roma education in Poland. Some theoretical and practical reflections. Foundation for Dialogue; Durjasz, A., Jarosz, S., Kołaczek, M., Piórkowska, P., Talewicz, J., Vaidalovych, O. (2023). "They are not refugees; they are travellers": Situation of Roma Refugees from Ukraine in Podkarpackie Voivodeship. Monitoring report 2022–2023. Foundation Toward Dialogue.

In summary, the collected data clearly indicate that the problems faced by Roma education assistants are structural rather than individual in nature. They stem from the lack of a clearly defined education policy for this professional group, insufficient funding and the absence of work standards. The professionalisation of the AER profession, its formal integration into the education system, and the creation of training and psychological support mechanisms are not only a necessity for the assistants themselves, but also a prerequisite for the effective integration of the Roma community and the implementation of state policy based on equality, inclusiveness and the recognition of Poland's cultural diversity as an important resource rather than a problem.

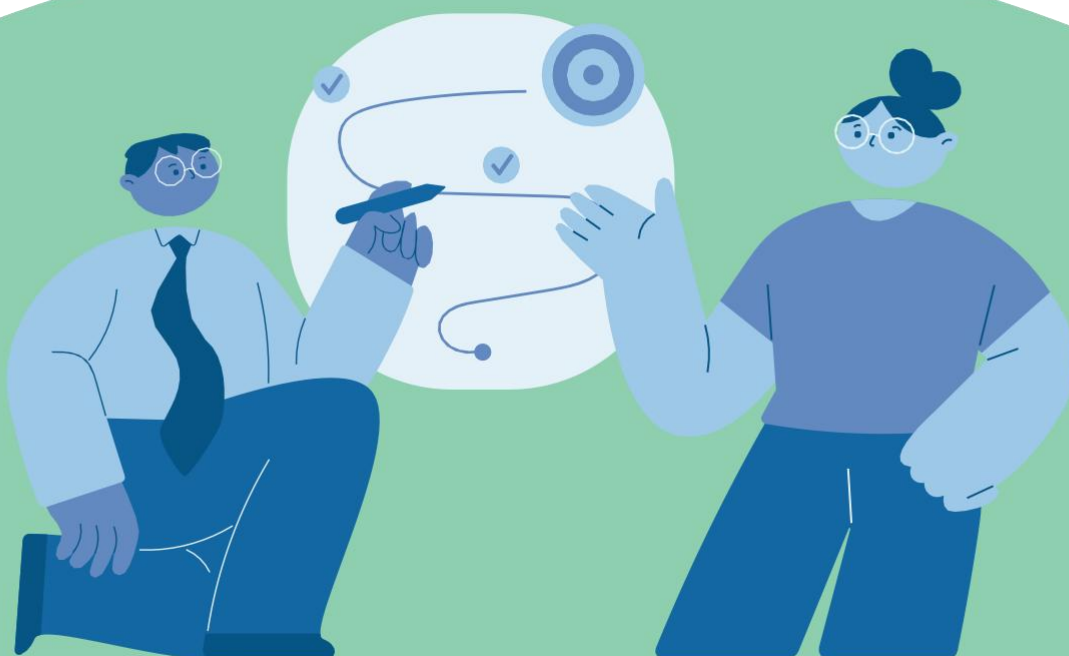
Roma education assistants are, in fact, not only school employees – they also act as cultural intermediaries, mediators and community leaders. Their work is of great importance for social cohesion and building trust between institutions and Roma communities. The lack of systemic support and recognition of their role is therefore not only an administrative problem but also a social loss, as it leads to a waste of potential and skills that are unique and difficult to replace.

The conclusions from the analysis clearly show that stabilisation, professionalisation and support for AER is not just a matter of employment – it is an investment in the future of inclusive education in Poland, where every social group, regardless of origin, has equal opportunities for development and participation in social life.

The results of the research and analysis of the institutional context indicate that although the profession of Roma education assistant (REA) has been formally included in labour market and educational practice regulations in recent years, its position in the education system remains ambiguous and incomplete. This is due to a number of factors, but the effect of this ambiguity is constant professional and personal uncertainty for assistants, which has the potential to be demotivating and negative not only for those concerned, but also for schools, pupils and families.

The profession is listed in the Classification of Professions and Specialities (code 531203) and can be employed in schools as a teaching assistant, but there is still a lack of separate pedagogical regulations that would provide AER with stability, a career path, a remuneration system and funding from the state budget.

The following recommendations focus on the next stage of professionalisation – i.e. strengthening, clarifying and standardising the rules governing the functioning of this professional group within the inclusive education system.





Roma education assistants (REAs) are a key link in the inclusive education system in Poland. Their work, combining teaching, educational, mediation and cultural functions, is of great importance for reducing educational inequalities and building trust between schools and the Roma community. The results of the Research confirms that AERs act not only as teaching assistants, but also as intercultural mediators, community leaders and ambassadors for equality in education. At the same time, analysis of the research material indicates that the professional situation of this group remains unstable and not fully regulated. The lack of a clear status in the education system, short-term forms of employment, low salaries and limited access to training and promotion cause a sense of marginalisation and undermine the prestige of the profession. Although the profession of AER has been included in the Classification of Professions and Specialities (code 531203), in practice there is still no legal framework guaranteeing job stability, clear working standards and state budget funding for these positions.

The collected data – both quantitative and qualitative – reveal strong motivation and a sense of mission among assistants, who treat their work as a form of social service. Their commitment, empathy and experience are extremely valuable assets, often used in conditions of excessive workload and lack of institutional support. The statements of the study participants show that AERs are essential for maintaining contact with Roma families, motivating students to learn and preventing early school leaving. This proves that their work has a real impact on educational and social outcomes.

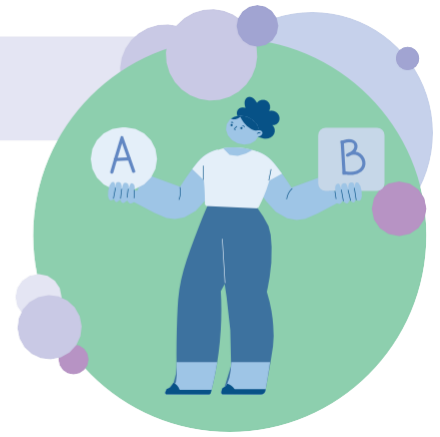
The results of the study also confirm that the war in Ukraine and the arrival of Roma refugees in 2022 significantly expanded the scope of assistants' responsibilities. Many of them acted as interpreters, mediators and carers, supporting Roma children from Ukraine in adapting to their new school environment. However, the lack of systemic preparation and appropriate training meant that these tasks were performed intuitively and without additional resources. This situation clearly showed that AERs are the first point of contact in crisis situations and that their role needs to be strengthened systemically.

In light of the data collected, it is clear that the problems faced by assistants are structural rather than individual in nature. Solving them requires decisions at the national level – incorporating the profession of AER into the education system as a teaching position, developing a national training and certification programme, and ensuring permanent funding for these positions. Only in this way can the continuity of their work be guaranteed and the full potential they bring to the education system be realised.

At the same time, it is crucial to create opportunities for cooperation between schools, local authorities and Roma organisations, as well as to support assistants through supervision, mentoring and psychological support. Such measures not only improve the quality of the work of AERs, but also counteract burnout and strengthen their position in the school environment.

The professionalisation of the Roma education assistant profession should be treated as an investment in a modern, inclusive education system. Strengthening the role of REAs will bring long-term benefits – it will improve communication between schools and Roma families, increase student attendance, strengthen a sense of belonging and trust, and contribute to building a more cohesive society.

In summary, the report indicates that further development and stabilisation of the AER profession requires comprehensive legislative, financial and organisational measures. It is their implementation that will determine whether the education of Roma children in Poland will truly become equal, accessible and effective – in line with the values set out in European standards for inclusive education and anti-discrimination.



● Lack of stable contracts and low salaries

Target audience: Ministry of National Education (MEN), Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Policy, Centre for Education Development (ORE), education authorities

It is recommended that an official job description for the position of Roma Education Assistant (AER) be developed and incorporated into education regulations (MEN regulation), covering the scope of duties, required qualifications and career advancement path. Ultimately, AERs should obtain the status of teaching staff, with the right to career advancement and access to the teacher training system- Permanent funding for AER positions

Target audience: Ministry of Affairs Internal Affairs and Administration, Ministry of Finance, local governments

A stable mechanism for financing AER positions from the state budget, linked to education subsidies, should be introduced. Permanent financing will ensure continuity of employment for assistants in schools and enable long-term planning of educational activities.

● Training, certification and supervision system

Target audience: Ministry of National Education (MEN), ORE, universities, non-governmental organisations

It is advisable to create a National Programme for the Improvement of Roma Education Assistants, including initial training, specialist courses, certification of competences and a system of supervision and mentoring. Cooperation with universities could enable the development of postgraduate studies for REAs, raising the prestige and professionalism of the profession.

● Involvement of REAs in school decision-making processes

Target audience: school principals, education authorities, governing bodies

AERs should be full members of the teaching staff, participate in teaching councils and educational teams. Their voice should also be heard in local teams for inclusive and intercultural education, especially when planning activities for Roma pupils.

● Psychological support and mentoring

Target audience: Ministry of National Education (MEN), local governments, schools, non-governmental organisations

Due to the high emotional strain of this work, every AER should have access to supervision, psychological support and mentoring. Such measures increase motivation, prevent burnout and improve the effectiveness of work with pupils and families.

● **Cooperation between schools, local governments and Roma organisations**

Target audience: local authorities, schools, Roma and community organisations

It is worth developing local educational partnerships between schools, local governments and Roma organisations. AERs should be involved in these activities as liaisons and co-authors of educational projects, intercultural workshops and initiatives supporting parents.

● **Information campaigns and counteracting stereotypes through training for teaching staff**

Target audience: Ministry of National Education (MEN), public media, non-governmental organisations

Educational campaigns promoting the role of the AER and counteracting stereotypes about Roma should be conducted. Disseminating good practices and positive examples of cooperation between schools and the AER will increase public trust and awareness. Training for teaching staff.



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