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Minister of National Education
Al. J. Ch. Szucha 25, 00–918 Warsaw
[Courtesy copy for Voivodeship Education
Superintendents]

**Appeal for an active involvement of the Ministry of National Education,
Voivodeship Education Superintendents, and school authorities
in promoting the employment of teachers' aides
(cross-cultural assistants) and Roma teaching assistants**

Dear Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Voivodeship Education Superintendents,
Dear Representatives of school authorities,

We address this letter to you as the institutions responsible for the formal education system in Poland, including the education of Roma students and students with experience of migration. Its aim is to call for active involvement in promoting the employment of teachers' assistants (also known as cross-cultural assistants) and Roma teaching assistants in schools¹.

The cooperation of institutions at all levels: the Ministry of National Education, education superintendents, and school authorities, is necessary so that the students with experience of migration and Roma students are provided with appropriate education and support in integration with the school environment. One of the most effective – and, at the same time, not widely used – tools enabling the achievement of these goals is the employment of teachers' assistants in schools (in accordance with the provisions of the Education System Act and/or the Education Law Act²), commonly referred to as cross-cultural assistants, and also Roma teaching assistants.

This letter was created on the initiative of people and organizations co-creating the nationwide Coalition for strengthening the role of cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants, established in October 2019 by the Foundation for Social Diversity. The Coalition consists of eleven non-governmental organizations and institutions from all over Poland that are directly involved in the

¹Later in the letter, we use the collective term "assistants" to refer to both of these groups.

²In accordance with the Act of December 14, 2016 Education Law (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59, as amended) Paragraph 165 *Persons referred to in paragraph 7 [persons who are not Polish citizens, subject to compulsory education, who do not know the Polish language or know it at an insufficient level to benefit from education – ed.], have the right to assistance provided by a person who speaks the language of the country of origin, employed as a teacher's assistant by the school authority. This assistance is provided for no longer than 12 months (previously the provision was in force in the Act on the Education System). According to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of November 14, 2007, on the conditions and methods of performing tasks by kindergartens, schools, and public institutions, enabling the maintenance of the sense of national, ethnic, and linguistic identity of students belonging to national, ethnic, and social minorities using the regional language (Journal Of Laws No. 214, item 1579, as amended d.), art. 12 Sec. 2: In a kindergarten and a public school it is possible to employ a Roma teaching assistant as a teacher. The Roma teaching assistant helps children and youth of Roma origin in contacts with the kindergarten or school environment, and also interacts with their parents and with the kindergarten or school.*



education of children with experience of migration and Roma³ children; cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants, teachers, and school principals. Support for the appeal is also expressed by other non-governmental and social organizations, cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants, parents and legal guardians of children with migration experience, Roma children, and Polish children, school principals, teachers, pedagogical and psychological staff of schools and psychological and pedagogical counseling centers, university staff, as well as experts in the field of integration who support the education of children with experience of migration, and counter exclusion and discrimination. The diagnosis of the situation and the recommendations presented in this letter result from the expertise, research⁴, experiences of cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants, as well as many years of experience of non-governmental organizations that cooperate with schools where children with migration experience and/or Roma children learn. They are also complementary to the NIK report entitled "Education of children of parents returning to the country and children of foreigners"⁵, published on September 8, 2020.

It should be emphasized that the possibility of employing cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants in schools, which is provided by the regulations in force in Poland, brings many practical and potential benefits. Despite the difficulties, barriers, and challenges related to employing assistants to work in schools, school staff and non-governmental organizations greatly appreciate the possibility of employing assistants that is provided by the regulations. It is a unique solution on an international scale, which could constitute a good practice and a model for other countries – including those where the scale of migration is much larger than in Poland. We want these legal provisions to be applied in the most systemically advantageous way and for school to use the potential of employing assistants to the greatest possible extent – both in the context of obligations regarding the observance of human rights, and effective and efficient management of public funds. Access to education is a constitutional right and a human right resulting from international agreements. It is thanks to the assistants that children and young people with experience of migration as well as Roma children and youth can benefit from this right in practice. The role of public authorities, both central and local, is to provide the conditions for its implementation.

We would also like to emphasize that the employment of assistants is an element of economical and effective management of funds allocated to supporting the education of students with special needs: i.e., the educational subsidy for Roma children and children from abroad (the subsidy may cover, among others, the salaries of assistants). We therefore encourage the school governing

³Foundation for Social Diversity (FRS) from Warsaw, Foundation Towards Dialogue (previously known as Dialogue-Pheniben Foundation) from Krakow, Mikołaj Rej Foundation for the Support of Polish Culture and Language from Kraków, the Central Roma Council with its seat in Radom, the Travelling Women Foundation from Trójmiasto, the Polish Migration Forum Foundation (PFM) from Warsaw, the Association for the Earth from Lublin, the Association for Multicultural Society Integration Nomada from Wrocław, the Kaleidoscope of Cultures Foundation from Wrocław, Association 9twelfths from Białystok, Education Department of Ochota District in Warsaw, Association Port from Słupsk. More about the Coalition and the employment of assistants in schools in Poland can be found at www.asywszkole.pl.

⁴Including research by the Foundation for Social Diversity: Research on peer relations against the background of cultural, religious differences, etc. (2014 - 2015), Research on the system of teaching Polish as a second / foreign language (2012 - 2014), Research on the phenomenon of exclusion of foreign children in schools in Poland and actions taken to integrate them (2012 - 2014): <http://ffrs.org.pl/aktualne-dzialania/badani/>

⁵Link to the report: https://www.nik.gov.pl/plik/id_22685_vp_25384.pdf, a message summarizing the most important content of the report: <https://www.nik.gov.pl/aktualnosci/ksztalcenie-dzieci-cudzwiedzcow-i-powracajacych-do-kraju.html>



authorities to use the subsidy funds to employ assistants, as this is one of the most financially effective investments in education and integration into the school and the local community.

Recognizing the benefits of employing assistants in schools, as well as being aware of the existing needs and challenges, with **this letter we want to draw your attention to the need to strengthen the role of assistants at the systemic, institutional, and local level, as well as the need to recognize and appreciating their work – both when schools work in the standard, in-person mode, as well as during the coronavirus pandemic and the remote education related to it. We also want to encourage the State to take actions that will make it easier for schools in Poland to employ assistants** in numbers and on a scale adequate to the real needs – so that as many students as possible, as well as teachers, can benefit from their support.

Below we present:

- I. **Benefits** related to the employment of cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants in schools,
- II. **Challenges, difficulties, and needs** related to the employment of cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants in schools,
- III. **Conclusions and recommendations** for the Minister of National Education and Voivodship Education Superintendents as well as for the authorities governing schools.

In implementing the conclusions and recommendations described below, we encourage you to use the support of non-governmental and social organizations as well as persons who have knowledge, expertise, and experience in employing assistants in schools in Poland, e.g. organizations and persons co-creating the nationwide Coalition for strengthening the role of cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants. Feel free to contact us: koalicja.asy@ffrs.org.pl to jointly support school staff, students, and parents in using the potential of assistants in schools to the fullest.

Sincerely,

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I. Benefits related to employing cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants in schools.

Having worked for years in schools and with schools attended by children with experience of migration and Roma children, we are aware of the huge need to employ assistants and of the great benefits of their work. The staff of schools attended by children with experience of migration and Roma children have, for many years, emphasized that the presence of assistants is one of the most effective solutions supporting both the children themselves, the school staff, the entire school, and local communities:

1. **It enables students with migration and Roma experience to benefit from learning;** has a positive effect on their school attendance, integration, and educational results.

Assistants:

- help students with migration and Roma experience in learning, thanks to which children learn Polish faster and achieve better learning results,
- they provide emotional support, support in the process of cultural adaptation, help the students find themselves and build self-esteem in the new school environment – thanks to this, the children feel safer at school, are more open, and build positive relationships with their peers.

Their presence also reduces the risk of children dropping out of the education system, which is particularly important when the contact with children and their families is difficult (e.g. in the case of families living in centers for foreigners or during remote learning).

2. **It facilitates class management and reduces the burden on teachers** working in preparatory departments and in multicultural classes attended by Polish children as well as children with migration experience and / or Roma children – both during standard, in-person schoolwork, as well as in the particularly difficult times of the pandemic and remote education. Assistants make the teaching and educational work of teachers more effective and less burdensome; they also help to intervene in difficult situations or to prevent them.
3. **It facilitates contact with parents and / or legal guardians.** Assistants enable and / or facilitate effective communication between the school and parents or legal guardians of students with migration and Roma experience, reduce the parents' concerns about the child's situation at school, advise or mediate in counseling in the event of educational difficulties and learning problems, get to know the situation of the family, which may affect the child's functioning and educational results, advise and help to cope with some practical, everyday matters, which reduces the stress of the parents and thus increases the well-being of the whole family.
4. **It strengthens the integration of school and local communities** and improves the conditions for learning in multicultural classes (including learning conditions for the Polish children). Assistants help to understand cultural differences and solve the resulting misunderstandings or conflicts. Their presence at school helps to develop an attitude of respect for social diversity.
5. **It facilitates remote education.** Universal remote education related to the COVID-19 pandemic additionally shows how important the role played by assistants is for the well-being of children and their access to education, and how much school staff needs their support. During this extremely demanding period, assistants:
 - help to ensure safety in migrant and Roma communities, e.g. by translating important messages related to hygiene during the pandemic,



- support children and their parents and legal guardians in using Librus and remote education platforms used in remote learning,
- perform a basic educational and didactic function, as the tasks given by teachers to be completed individually are often incomprehensible and / or difficult to understand for children with migration experience and Roma children due to their insufficient knowledge of the Polish language – especially when their parents or legal guardians do not have appropriate knowledge, education, or knowledge of the Polish language to help their children,
- support the school in identifying the difficulties that children experience in the situation of remote education, including hardware deficiencies, lack of language and educational assistance from parents, etc.
- develop cooperation with non-governmental organizations, including help to collect and distribute the necessary computer equipment for remote learning for the students, create educational and social groups online, providing children with the opportunity to maintain and develop social contacts,
- provide psychological and emotional support for children with experience of migration and Roma children, which is extremely important during the pandemic, because the situation of many families in this period became very difficult due to, inter alia, the deterioration of the economic situation or the uncertainty regarding the possibility of continuing their legal stay in Poland.

In schools that employ assistants, it is largely thanks to them that the students with experience of migration and Roma students had a chance to benefit from remote education during the pandemic. This allowed to reduce the risk of the formation of educational differences between different groups of students, related to, inter alia, the economic, social, and cultural situation of the family.

The work of assistants has a beneficial effect on the work of the entire departments, including the Polish children. It enables more individualized communication with the children and improves the flow of information in the classroom during the lesson. As a result, it makes it possible to take care of the needs of children with migration experience and / or Roma children without detriment for the Polish children. Children using the support of assistants learn the language faster and build relationships with their class faster – as a result, their integration process is accelerated.

II. Challenges, difficulties and needs related to employing cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants in schools

Despite the numerous benefits related to the work of assistants as described above, there are also systemic challenges that require an urgent response as well as actions and cooperation of institutions responsible for the shape of formal education in Poland:

1. **Insufficient number of assistants currently working in schools in Poland.** The information provided by school management and staff, as well as the analyzes of non-governmental organizations, show that the number of employed assistants is dramatically insufficient in relation to the needs of the school environment. Assistants often divide their working time between several schools and classes. As a result, they are unable to support children to the necessary extent and dedicate enough time to them. It happens that in some communes there is only one assistant, which means that they cannot support children in the required scope and time. At the same time, the regulations in force do not impose any restrictions on the number of assistants who may be



employed at one institution. In the opinion of schools and non-governmental organizations, the provision on employing school assistants is a very good legislative solution, giving (in theory) the possibility of employing the optimal number of assistants and defining the scope of their tasks adequately to the needs of schools. However, this is not the case in practice, mainly due to the fact that the governing authorities do not provide the necessary funds. School management also lacks knowledge about good practices and the methods of recruiting assistants, as well as encouragement to undertake such action.

2. **The remuneration of assistants is disproportionately low** in relation to their role, the required competences (including intercultural, interpersonal, and often didactic), fluent knowledge of at least two languages (including the so-called rare languages), and the ability to work with children and youth.
3. **Assistants are often deprived of employment stability** – they often work on the basis of civil law contracts signed only for the period from September to June, excluding the summer holidays. Low remuneration combined with the instability of employment make it difficult to find competent people to perform these functions and to maintain the continuity of their involvement, which has a negative impact on the situation of children with experience of migration and Roma children, and on entire school and local communities.

In addition, during the pandemic, the work of assistants was often considered unjustified by schools and / or governing bodies, which was explained by the fact that during remote learning they do not work directly alongside the teacher. Meanwhile, during remote teaching, the assistants performed additional, difficult work, related both to teaching and general education, because they were often the ones who were responsible for the main burden of teaching children with experience of migration and Roma children. The role of assistants should be recognized and appreciated, and the function of cross-cultural assistant should be included in the classification of professions (the same applies to the function of Roma teaching assistant).

4. **The work of assistants is not adequately appreciated.** Assistants are positioned low in the school hierarchy. This state of affairs is influenced by both the formal aspects (including an unstable form of employment) and social and institutional factors: lack of knowledge about the role of assistants among school staff, the official name of the position in the regulations (in the case of people working with children from abroad the name is "Teacher's aid", suggesting dependence and inferiority), as well as stereotypes and prejudices regarding the origin and nationality of people performing these functions.
5. **No or limited in-service training opportunities.** Assistants do not work on the basis of the Teacher's Charter, and thus are not covered by the professional development system. There is a lack of training, workshops, courses, and postgraduate studies for assistants offered by public institutions. Trainings and courses organized by non-governmental organizations are very popular, but they are not conducted in a continuous and regular manner – mainly due to the lack of availability of funds and the point-based method of their distribution. They also do not allow for certification and do not translate into career advancement and / or salary increase. At the same time, assistants often do not have the opportunity to take advantage of paid training due to low remuneration.
6. **Assistants often do not have the work tools provided to carry out their tasks efficiently.** Assistants lack access to contact details enabling communication with parents (which is extremely important, especially during remote education).



7. **Certain tasks performed outside school are often not taken into account in calculating the worktime and the remuneration of the assistants:** trips to centers for foreigners (in the case of working with children who are in the procedure of applying for refugee status, living in centers for foreigners), translation support provided during visits to psychological and pedagogical counseling centers, consultations with parents (personal, by telephone, or online) often performed during the evenings. Assistant work (like the work of teachers) is work in the school environment and in the local community – it is not limited to the time spent in classes in the school building (with children and their parents / legal guardians).

III. Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the diagnosis and expertise presented above, we present recommendations on strengthening the role of cross-cultural and Roma teaching assistants, and thus on supporting the education and integration of children with migration experience, Roma children, and entire schools and local communities:

Recommendations for the Minister of National Education and Voivodeship Education Superintendents:

1. **Active promotion of the employment of assistants** among schools and governing bodies, as an effective tool supporting the education and integration of children with experience of migration (foreign) and Roma children. That can be done by informing the governing authorities and schools about the possibility of employing assistants and the related procedures (e.g. regular information campaigns, visible information, and materials within the existing tools of communication of the Ministry of National Education with schools and governing bodies, events popularizing this solution – also in cooperation with local non-governmental organizations, etc.).
2. **Collecting and disseminating good practices and standards of cooperation between schools and governing bodies and assistants**, enabling each party to cooperate effectively, satisfactorily, building a positive image of assistants in school communities, and strengthening their role (in cooperation and in agreement with non-governmental organizations and the assistants themselves).
3. **Introduction of financing mechanisms that ensure funds for stable and long-term employment of assistants**, adequate to the needs of schools. Introducing mechanisms securing the continuity and stability of employment of persons working as assistants, also during summer holidays and remote education.
4. **Designing** (in consultation with non-governmental organizations and the assistants themselves) a **path of professional development of assistants and providing an offer and opportunities for professional development**, including courses and postgraduate studies preparing persons to perform the functions of an assistant, and / or professional development. Assistants should have constant access to trainings and the possibility of regular participation in them (including training in digital competences that would prepare them for remote work), courses developing pedagogical and specialist competences (e.g. working with bilingual children, children with disabilities and with medical certificates, etc.), as well as to postgraduate studies (in the case of persons with higher education).



5. **Introducing the profession of cross-cultural assistant to the classification of professions and specialties**, which will enable, among others, implementation of the postulate described in point 4.
6. **Using the knowledge, expertise, and experience of assistants as well as non-governmental organizations and initiating cooperation with them** (including joint development of systemic solutions and consulting them).
7. **Monitoring the employment of assistants in schools** – collecting reliable data on the number of persons employed in these positions and their place of employment, public disclosure of these data and their systematic updating.

Recommendations for school governing bodies:

1. **Transferring funds to employ more assistants** – adequately to the real needs of schools, also during remote learning related to the pandemic.
2. **Providing decent and stable working and employment conditions for assistants and appreciating their work.**
3. **Using the flexibility in defining the tasks of assistants** provided by the applicable regulations – adapting the tasks of assistants to the current needs without stopping their work (e.g. during remote education, holiday breaks or summer holidays).
4. **Regulating the method of accounting for tasks performed outside of the school in the terms of employment**, especially if a given person works simultaneously in several schools and if the cooperation of assistants with other entities is required (e.g. with a center for foreigners, psychological and pedagogical counseling centers, cultural institutions, social welfare centers, etc.) In addition, provision of financing for travelling to these institutions, when they are outside the immediate vicinity of the school.
5. **Providing assistants with tools that will allow them to perform their work effectively** (e.g. access to contact details of children and parents, a place at school where they can easily meet children and parents).
6. **Using the knowledge, expertise, and experience of nongovernmental organizations and establishing cooperation with them** – we invite, among others, to the [website www.asywyszkole.pl](http://www.asywyszkole.pl) and to direct contact with the Coalition entities and local organizations.
7. **Collecting and sharing good practices** related to the employment of assistants in order to disseminate this solution.
8. **Building and strengthening a positive image of assistants and appreciating their role in schools, school communities, and local communities.**
9. **Monitoring the employment of assistants in schools** – collecting reliable data on the number of people employed in these positions and their place of employment, public disclosure of these data and their systematic updating.
10. **Treating expenditure on employing assistants as an investment in education and social integration**