



"I do not go to school in the camp, which is bad. There are none. It has nothing...It is dirty and every day there are problems," Hani, 9, from Syria living in Mavrovouni camp in Lesvos ©Save the Children/Pablo Blázquez*

BACK TO SCHOOL? REFUGEE CHILDREN IN GREECE DENIED RIGHT TO EDUCATION

September 2021

I. OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN GREECE

In Greece, compulsory education for all children begins at the age of 4 with enrolment in kindergarten. Children typically start primary school at 6 years old, for 6 years and, under the Greek constitution, obligatory schooling is concluded only after the child has finished a further three years of High School.¹ Attendance at school is obligatory regardless of the legal status of child. Continued formal school education in Senior High School (Lyceum) for another three years is common.²

At the end of 2020, there were approximately 44,000 refugee and migrant children in Greece, including unaccompanied children.³ 4,000 of these children live in overcrowded Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) on the Greek islands.⁴ The educational system for migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children in Greece has changed significantly since 2016.⁵

The current legislative framework for the education of refugee children in Greece is organized as follows:⁶

- * **Preschool education** (kindergarten) is provided in refugee accommodation sites for children and in Reception and Identification Centers (RICs), as well as in mainstream kindergartens for children who live in urban areas.
- * **Reception classes** within primary and secondary formal schools. These classes operate in the morning, in parallel with the school schedule and are targeted at children who do not have sufficient Greek language skills.
- * A special programme introduced in 2016 is called the **Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP)**, which operates within primary and secondary schools near refugee accommodation sites and RICs during the afternoon. Lasting one or maximum two years for each child, its main purpose is to facilitate school integration, taking into account special educational needs of the students.⁷
- * There are a small number **Intercultural Education Schools** for pupils with migrant and/or refugee backgrounds, which are specially designed to serve students from various cultural backgrounds.⁸
- * The Greek authorities also created the role of **Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs)** - permanent school teachers appointed for one year, who serve as mediators between the official school system and the refugee and asylum-seeking families across the country.⁹
- * Enrollment in a formal school must take place within three months of children registering with the authorities following their arrival in Greece. If parents or other carers of the child do not comply with this obligation “because the child does not wish to join the educational system”,¹⁰ administrative sanctions and restrictions on the material reception conditions are provisioned for the adult carers.

Problems in practice: low enrolment, even lower attendance

In theory, the government's legislative framework and additional programmes should ensure that all refugee children can access education in Greece. In practice, there is low enrolment and even lower attendance. Children and families face multiple barriers to accessing school, all of which have been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the school year 2018- 2019 only a third of refugee and migrant children are estimated to have enrolled in formal education. The rate of school attendance was only higher for children who were living in supported apartments, which had dedicated social workers, and for unaccompanied children in the camps who received specific support (although still only 67%).

For the school year of 2020-2021, there is a lack of disaggregated and comprehensive data, with official government estimates provided by the Ministry of Education ranging from 8,637 refugee and migrant children enrolled, to 14,423 enrolled out of an estimated 20,000 eligible children (itself a fraction of the 44,000 refugee and migrant children overall in the country).

Children in camps faced particular problems in the last year. According to the Deputy Ombudswoman for Children's Rights in Greece, the vast majority of refugee children residing in open accommodation sites (refugee camps) and Reception and Identification Centers in Greece did not regularly attend school during this school year:¹²

- In open accommodation sites, only **60 per cent** of children of school age are enrolled in either a formal school or [Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education](#) (DYEP), while **just 14 per cent** actually attend.¹³
- In RICs, only **9 per cent** children of school age were enrolled to schools, while **just 7 out of 2,090 children** (0.3%) were actually attending classes.
- The number of children actually attending school is believed to be even smaller, as there is a **high drop-out rate**.¹⁴

"I am 15 years old and I have 3 younger siblings, living together with my mum. In Iraq I went to school until the 4th grade and for the last four years that I am in Greece, I have been to school for 2-3 years.

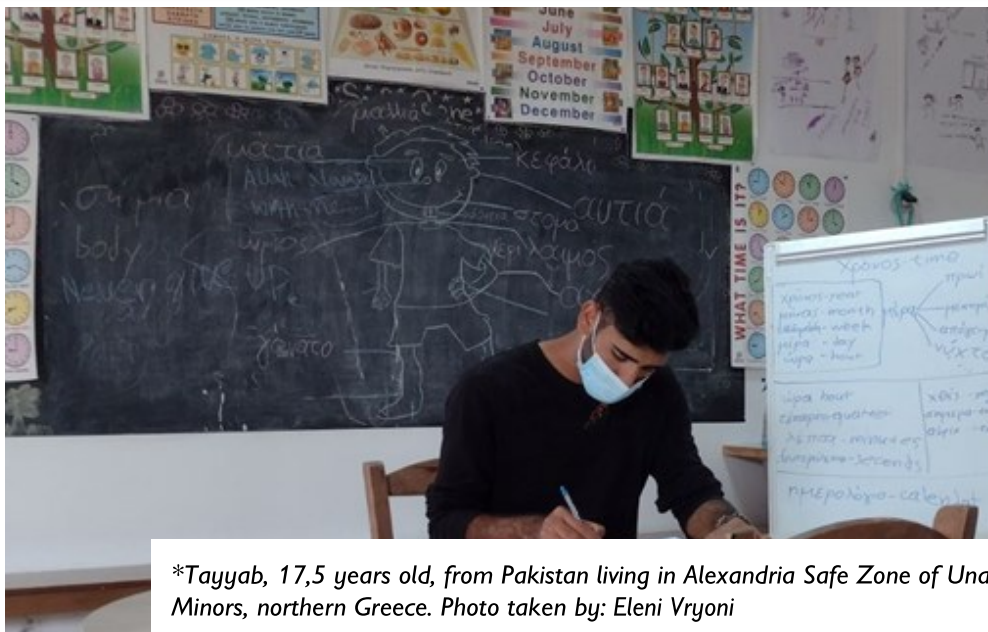
This year, I went to school when it opened in September, but after they closed it in October, we could do classes only online. I do not like online at all, what bothers me is that I cannot go to school, to see my friends.

Unfortunately, now that the school is closed, I do not talk to anyone, I have only one friend who is a refugee too and she lives next to us. I think school is very important for me to learn the language, as school gives us the opportunity to learn a lot of things. Now I do nothing, I rarely go out, I sit alone at home and of course I get bored. Therefore, I like to paint, I do it all the time so that I do not feel bored.

As you give me the opportunity to speak, let me inform you that there is no future in Greece for children. That's one reason why I would like to be able to travel to another country. The other is that I will be calmer, because mum and dad have problems here."

**Arya, 15 years old, from Iraq lives with her mother and 3 siblings near Thessaloniki, northern Greece*

II. BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN GREECE



**Tayyab, 17,5 years old, from Pakistan living in Alexandria Safe Zone of Unaccompanied Minors, northern Greece. Photo taken by: Eleni Vryoni*

In June 2021, the Greek Deputy Migration Minister and UNICEF signed a Memorandum of Understanding, called “Education for All Children” which aims “to provide a route for all 26,000 school-age refugee children in Greece into formal education in a three-year programme expected to cost €34 million”.¹⁵ Achieving this will require a concerted effort to overcome persistent barriers to education for refugee children. Refugee students, parents, school directors and teachers, and Refugee Education Coordinators have identified a number of factors which are contributing to the dire prospects for refugee and migrant children to access their right to education.¹⁶ The restrictions imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19 have had a major impact, but so have lack of resources and issues around scheduling, transportation and the views of host communities to inclusion of refugee and migrant children in schools.

1. Lack of staff and scheduling issues

Reception classes and DYEP are often critically understaffed and unable to operate for much of the school year. Schools in Greece start in September and usually, Reception classes and DYEP are staffed much later on, sometimes even half way through the school year. In January 2021 most of DYEP remained without staff and were not in operation.¹⁷ The families of refugee children left in limbo for so long conclude that further efforts to go to school is pointless. The DYEP programme has in itself been criticized for the fact that classes are held only after the official school hours in the afternoon and children are not provided with an equivalent certificate of conclusion of these classes, as those provided by mainstream schools. Despite the stated aim of the DYEP, it is resulting in the segregation rather than the integration of refugee and migrant children.¹⁸

In April 2021, the Greek Council for Refugees and seven other NGOs operating in the country organized an online Roundtable on Refugee Education in Greece which had more than 500 attendees, including refugee pupils, parents, teachers and politicians. A recording of the roundtable can be accessed at: <https://bit.ly/3jwP1hw> (in Greek).

2. Lack of transport to school

Refugee accommodation sites and RICs tend to be in remote areas, and transportation to school remains a major issue. Usually, due to their cost, transportation arrangements for the students are not made before Reception classes and DYEP start.¹⁹ As local authorities must procure transport services only after completing a competitive process, this leads to further, often lengthy delays.²⁰ An illustrative example is in Ritsona camp where, according to the NGO RSA only three out of thirteen needed buses had been arranged by early April 2021.²¹

Separately, pupils in the first two years of primary school and pupils of special schools need to be escorted when transported. As the Ministry of Education has been either unwilling or unable to hire and train an adequate number of additional escorts, in practice this requirement has translated into even less transport being available for children – and less children attending school. A coalition of NGOs in Greece forming the Education Task Force sent a letter sent to all Prefectures responsible for pupils' transportation, inquiring about the new school year's planning- most of them have not yet responded.²²

3. Community hostility to pupils and their families

Xenophobic, anti-refugee incidents are not rare in Greece. There has been community opposition to the establishment of Reception classes and DYEP, for example, in some cases even resulting in prosecutors investigating alleged hate crime and speech incidents against elected local authorities who opposed these programmes.²³ In other cases, parents requested the annulment of the establishment of Reception classes in their school areas by the State Council, the highest ranking regular administrative court in the country.²⁴

Equally, there are an inspiring number of initiatives to welcome refugee and migrant children and ensure they receive an education. For example, members of the Parents' Association of a school in Athens, reported that they run campaigns titled "All the children are our children". Teachers have been running free summer schools to facilitate language acquisition and other skills for refugee children.

4. COVID-19: restrictions in movement, no access to distance learning equipment and COVID-19 self-testing

Public health measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 saw restrictions on movement for almost 7 months in Greece in the school year 2020-2021. For refugee children this posed particular problems. Exiting refugee accommodation sites and RICs was permitted only on an exceptional basis, for some people – such as a family head or group representative, between specific hours²⁶ and only to serve basic needs (e.g. to go to the pharmacy).

Even when schools were open during the lockdowns, movement restriction policies were inconsistently interpreted by various camp managers all over the country, which together with the absence of clear instructions by the Ministry of Education or MoMA, resulted in children not being allowed to exit the camp to attend school.

When schools were closed or offered distance learning only, refugee and asylum-seeking children in refugee accommodation sites and RICs were effectively excluded from school entirely. Wi-fi or other internet access in the camps is inadequate. Refugee students also lacked equipment for remote learning such as tablets, laptops, or even smartphones. Regarding the latter, even where families have one or two smartphones these were not necessarily available to the children, recharged when necessary, or would have to be shared with siblings. According to the Ombudsman's findings, 27 out of 30 sites and RICs replied that this was listed as the main reason for the lack of or fragmentary distance learning for refugee children.²⁷

"This year was a special year saw unprecedented difficulties for the whole educational community. Of course, COVID -19 aggravated this situation, especially for the education of refugees. The pandemic was the main reason that the children were locked inside the refugee sites and from there on, distance education was something completely new. The situation presented great difficulties for us or we were not ready enough to deal with them.

I believe that all effort possible was put in this area - all possible actions were taken. Regarding internet connection and electronic equipment, it is difficult...above all, there's willingness to get back to normality and we are fighting towards this direction so as to be able to say that next year all the children will be in school."

Lemonia Boutskou, Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs²⁸

The Refugee Education Coordinators are of pivotal importance, as they not only they work as mediators between the refugee and asylum-seeking families and the school system as a whole. They facilitate the enrolment of children and the communication between school management (both locally and at Ministry level), teachers and refugee families.

During the pandemic, RECs proved to be all the more crucial, as they provided refugee children with some school exercises and learning material. When schools re-opened with the requirement that children self-test for COVID-19, in many cases RECs provided children with self-tests, even administering them so the children do not miss out on their schooling. Some RECs managed to resolve bureaucratic barriers in cases of children that had no PAYPAA or AMKA²⁹ in order to get tested, others found community-based solutions for the transportation of children.

III. GREECE'S INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS AND SUPPORT



**Rawan, 10 years old from Syria attending non-formal education classes in Northern Greece. Photo by Anna Pantelia*

Greece has clear international obligations to ensure all children on its territory can access education. Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines the rights of all children to education, including refugee and asylum-seeking children, as does the 1951 Refugee Convention.³⁰ EU directives also require all Member States to integrate refugee and migrant children into their national education systems. This access should “not be postponed for more than three months” from the date of their application for international protection, and governments should provide preparatory classes, including language classes.³¹ Specific rights to education are included in the European Social Charter and in June 2021 the EU adopted the European Child Guarantee, which recommends Member States guarantee “effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care” and to take into account the specific disadvantages of “children with a migrant background”, among other groups of children in need.³²

The Greek Refugee Council was amongst 33 NGOs working in Greece which published an open letter to Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs calling for the Commission together with the Greek government to overcome the obstacles that hinder the access of migrant children to education. In her response the Commissioner stated: “Education of migrant and refugee children is of crucial importance to the overall wellbeing of all children and of the Greek society as a whole and it is vital for successful integration into European society”. The EU has provided Greece with over 3.5 billion Euros for “managing migration” since 2015, including nearly 2.4 billion Euros from the Asylum, Migration and Integration funding mechanism.³³

It is clear, however, that the Greek government has manifestly failed to live up to these obligations, and despite the EU’s substantial and ongoing financial support, its laws and directives remain unimplemented.³⁴

“In Pakistan I went to school for 5 years. I started going when I was 10 years old and had to stop when I was 15. Quitting school was not a choice, I had to stop and suddenly leave the country as I faced serious problems. In my heart, I did not want to leave, I wanted to continue going to school. After travelling alone through many countries, for more than 40 days and nights, I reached Greece. I had no friends, no family, no one here. I did not know the language, I did not know my rights or how to access the Asylum Service. So, the first year in Greece was really difficult for me, as for many months I lived in a house of a person together with other adults, I had no papers, no access to services or school.

Today I live for more than 10 months in a Safe Zone, run by an NGO called Greek Council For Refugees (GCR). At last, I feel protected, I feel much safer and it's like a family house for me. Now, I go every day to the school near the refugee camp and I'm trying to do my best.

In the school I learn Greek, English, computers and other topics together with my Greek schoolmates. My teachers and my peers really make me feel comfortable and welcome. At the same time, I'm trying my best to be a good student, to learn the Greek language so that I can speak with my classmates.

When schools were closed because of COVID-19, learning was more difficult, as classes were held online. It was not easy to follow these classes, but I tried to do my best.

I want to continue going to school because I want to prepare myself for my future, I want to be able to communicate with Greek people, to learn not only the language but the culture as well. Also, I want to do a profession, I want to be a barber. I know this profession is going to make my future bright!”

**Tayyab, 17,5 years old, from Pakistan living as an Unaccompanied child in Alexandria Safe Zone, northern Greece*

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Refugee and migrant children in Greece face formidable challenges to access their right to an education, and have faced further barriers since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Greek Council for Refugees and Save the Children call for urgent action to ensure that no child in Greece is left without schooling. In particular,

The Greek Government should:

- ◇ Issue clear instructions to all service providers, including Regional Directorates, Directorates of Education, school management, outlining their obligation to enroll and facilitate school attendance of all children living in Greece, regardless of their legal status.
- ◇ Ensure the timely planning, staffing and establishment of Reception Classes and, only when their operational is impossible, establish Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP), all within mainstream schools
- ◇ Ensuring transportation services are available for all children residing in refugee accommodation facilities and RICs.
- ◇ Run awareness raising campaigns, in coordination with municipal authorities, on the right of all children to education, both for refugee and asylum-seeking families and hosting communities in order to enhance intercultural understanding and cooperation
- ◇ Conduct a nationwide training needs assessment, not only for asylum seeking and refugee children but also for youth turning 18, as well as adults in order to plan vocational education and inclusion into the work force in Greece
- ◇ Implement measures to ensure refugee children's education is not unduly affected by COVID-19 related restrictions, including:
 - Issuing clear instructions to all MoMA's facilities on movement restrictions and on how children in the facilities can access school.
 - In cooperation with the Ministry of Health, ensure self-testing for COVID-19 is available within the reception facilities for all students
 - Providing technical equipment, such as tablets or laptops, and access to Wi-Fi for all children within refugee accommodation sites, RICs and urban schemes



Photo by Anna Pantelia

The European Union and EU member states should:

- ◇ Monitor the effective implementation of the Reception Conditions Directive in national legislation and in practice, and in particular the provisions related to the prompt enrolment of refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking children in the Greek education system.
- ◇ Insist on the implementation of the Child Guarantee and its objective to guarantee effective and free access to early childhood education and care and education, one healthy meal each school day, school-based and sport, leisure and cultural activities to children in need, irrespective of their migration status.
- ◇ In line with this, urgently allocate EU funding resources towards ensuring that children in need are enrolled into and attend inclusive and good quality education
- ◇ Urge the Greek government to end the policy of containing refugees and asylum-seekers on the islands, and oppose unnecessary restrictions on freedom of movement, as these policies fundamentally undermine children's rights to access an education
- ◇ Relocate unaccompanied and other vulnerable children who have been unable to attend school, and provide tailored educational and other support to facilitate their integration upon arrival

ENDNOTES

1. See Art. 21 of law 4251/2014; Art. 33 of law 4521/2018 and art. 34 of law 4704/2020; also Constitution, Art. 16, where is stipulated in par. 3 that “The number of years of compulsory education shall be no less than nine.”
2. These last 3 years are offered either within the General Lyceum or within a Vocational Lyceum, the latter designed to facilitate the enhancement of job-related knowledge par. η, art. 6 of law 4186/2013
3. In this report “refugee children” includes children that are asylum seekers, children that have been granted subsidiary protection or refugee status, as well as children whose residence permit is issued (or is pending to be issued) on humanitarian grounds.
4. UNICEF Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe: Humanitarian Situation Report #38 (1 July to 31 December 2020), January 2021 <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/unicef-refugee-and-migrant-response-europe-humanitarian-situation-report-38-1-july-31>
5. Schools that specifically take into account the needs of children with migrant background were established during the 1980’s, followed by legislative modifications during the 1990’s due to an increase in the number of migrant families arriving from Albania and other countries neighbouring Greece.
6. Law 4415/2016, as amended by law 4547/2018
7. Article 73 of law 4547/2018
8. The number of these schools is relatively small: 13 primary schools, 8 junior high schools and 4 senior high schools all over the country. See Eurydice data at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/ell%C3%A1da/organisational-variations-and-alternative-structures-secondary-education_el
9. art. 77 of law 4547/2018
10. art. 77 par 2 of law 4547/2018
11. Asylum Information Database, Country Report: Greece, ECRE/ Greek Council for Refugees, update of 10 June 2021 <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-education/>
12. Ombudsman’s Report, Εκπαιδευτική ένταξη παιδιών που διαβιούν σε Δομές και ΚΥΤ του Υπουργείου Μετανάστευσης & Ασύλου, March 2021, available in Greek at <https://www.synigoros.gr/?i=childrens-rights.el.epanapatrismos.787548>. Data for the report was collected by 36 facilities run by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MoMa), covering both islands and the mainland. The report did not collect data on the educational integration of children residing in apartments in urban areas or other accommodation schemes such as hotels or other facilities run by INGOs.
13. The total number of children of school age residing in refugee camps was found to be 10,431, with only 1,483 of them were attending school
14. Ombudsperson’s report, p. 12
15. For more information, see Theirworld’s blueprint adopted by Greek government to give education and hope to child refugees. Theirworld, 3 June 2021 <https://theirworld.org/news/greece-plan-to-get-every-refugee-child-in-school>
16. See for example the documentary Agape is the most beautiful word in Greek, produced by “Foster Educators”, an initiative of school teachers supporting refugee students. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0t-NHWgEOs>
17. Ombudsperson’s report, p. 13
18. Simopoulos, G., Alexandridis, A. ‘Refugee Education in Greece: integration or segregation?’ (2019) 60 Forced Migration Review 27, available at: <https://www.fmreview.org/education-displacement/simopoulos-alexandridis>

ENDNOTES

19. Ombudsperson's report, p. 13
20. Until the end of school year 2018-19 IOM provided these services, but the issue has generally remained unresolved at a central level since.
21. RSA, "Excluded and segregated. The vanishing education of refugee children in Greece", accessible at: <https://rsaegean.org/en/excluded-and-segregated-the-vanishing-education-of-refugee-children-in-greece/>
22. As of 31 August 2021
23. For example, action was taken against the mayor of Chalkida who had refused to enroll children from Ritsona camp: Δικαστική έρευνα σε βάρος της δημάρχου Χαλκίδας https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaomata/284083_dikastiki-ereyna-se-baros-tis-dimarhoy-halkidas
24. State Council, decision no 469/2018 – the request was rejected by the court.
25. Between October 2020 and May 2021
26. For most of this period, it was 07.00am to 07.00 pm
27. Ombudsperson's report, p. 20
28. Interview with Greek Council for Refugees, 14 May 2021
29. PAYPAA and AMKA are social security numbers, giving access to the public health care system, including free self-tests and vaccines.
30. Convention on the Rights of the Child available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>; Article 22, Convention relating to the Status of Refugees <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>; more recently, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants of 2016, adopted by the UN General Assembly, includes a determination "to ensure that all children are receiving education within a few months of arrival" <https://www.unhcr.org/57e39d987>
31. Article 14, Schooling and Education of Minors, Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32013L0033>
32. Council recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, Council of the European Union, 4 June 2021 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9106-2021-INIT/en/pdf>
33. Fact Sheet: Managing Migration: EU Financial Support to Greece, European Commission, June 2021 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/202106_managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-greece_en.pdf
34. - The European Committee of Social Rights, for example, recently found that "there is a violation of Article 17§2 of the Charter in respect of migrant children on the islands". See Decision on the merits: International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) v. Greece, complaint No. 173/2018, paragraph 209. In 2020 alone, more than €816 million were allocated by the EU to support Greece's national education budget, including €7.5 million for refugee children's education.