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Insights from Moldova: Closing of a Residential Institution

CHANGING THE WAY WE CARE MOLDOVA

Changing the Way We Care is a global care reform initiative that promotes safe, nurturing family care for children reunifying from institutions or at risk of family separation.

Changing the Way We Care Moldova's key partners include Partnerships for Every Child, Keystone Moldova, and Copil, Comunitate, and Familie (CCF) Moldova.

After 60 years of serving as a residential institution for children with disabilities, the Hîncești Auxiliary Boarding school (Hîncești SIA) in Moldova closed its doors to children in May 2022.

The closing of Hîncești SIA and the reintegration of the remaining children in its care, serves as a harbinger for what is possible for other institutions for children with disabilities in Moldova and around the world. Its closure was not inevitable, but rather a result of collective efforts by government, community, and civil society organizations. The closure took years of laying the groundwork for reintegration, coordinating closely with the Government of Moldova, conducting assessments on all aspects of the institution, and the painstaking work conducted by social service workers of assessing every child and every family to inform the development of case plans.

This reflection works to capture the steps that made the closure possible and the insights into the key inflection points that influenced its closure.

Hîncești SIA opened its doors in 1960 in a city of about 19,000 people located 33 km from the capital Chișinău. It was established to support children with disabilities from across the country and provide educational services, accommodation, food, and health care. It operated under the auspices of Moldova's Ministry of Education and Research and was financed by the national government.

At the time of its opening, widespread placement of children in institutions was common in countries in the former Soviet Union. Parents were often persuaded or sometimes forced to relinquish their parental rights and send their children to institutions such as Hîncești, believing that the state was the only place their children could receive proper treatment and education. The legacy of institutionalization of children lasted well into the early 2000s, when Moldova began its reform process.

Hîncești SIA was the last institution under the control of the Ministry Education and Research to close.

INSIGHT 1: IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING A MULTI- SECTORAL TEAM

Building a multi-sectoral team that includes government officials, personnel from the institution, and civil society actors was key to the closing of Hîncești SIA.

Like pieces of a puzzle, all were needed to complete the process.

Building a multi-sectoral team

Moldova has made great strides in its care reform efforts over the past 20 years. One key to the success has been the strong partnerships that have been developed. Civil society organizations, including Changing the Way We Care partners, Partnerships for Every Child (P4EC), Keystone Moldova, and Copil, Comunitate Familie (CCF Moldova) along with social service professionals, educational institutions, and government officials, including the Ministry of Education and Research and Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, have been working together on care reform for almost two decades. During this time they have built a strong foundation of mutual trust based on transparency, partnership, and participation.

This foundation of partnership was what the closure of Hîncești SIA was built on.

From the beginning, P4EC and its partners, worked closely with the Ministry of Education and Research, the local public authorities and the staff at Hîncești SIA to gain support and buy-in for the closure of the institution. P4EC and civil society partners approached the deinstitutionalization of Hîncești SIA as a team effort.

Like all successful teams, each player had an important role to play:

The government authorities had the mandate over the school, their finances, and oversight on the social services provided.

The institution's staff had relationships with the children in their care and knew them and their families well.

P4EC and partners had experience in helping children and families reintegrate or if not possible, support the placement of children in alternative family-type environments.

"It was teamwork for years, exchange of experiences between us, a lot of advocacy, a lot of communication, a lot of training, capacity building, of the decision-makers, of the professionals in the system.

Daniela Mamaliga, Director, P4EC

MULTI-SECTORAL TEAM



Government has authority over the institutions including finances, and social services provided.

Staff in the institution have deep understanding of the children in their care and their families.



Civil society actors bring experience of reintegrating children into families and support alternative family care.

Holding the multi-sector team together was the mutual goal of ensuring the best outcomes for the children in the institution.

It was not an easy process, there was often resistance from all sectors, yet the team continued to work together. The result was a series of assessments that for the first time was conducted by the staff in the institutions with support from CTWWC partners. The assessments made it clear - Hîncești SIA should be closed to children and that there were places for all the children in the community.

INSIGHT 2: A CAPACITY BUILDING APPROACH TO ASSESSMENTS

Empowering staff at institutions to conduct child assessments builds their overall capacity to develop individual support plans for children and to consider all factors and areas of a child's well-being.

Capacity Building Approach

In May 2021, *Changing the Way We Care*, along with our key partners, launched a series of assessments aimed at improving the quality of services provided to children and establishing the possibility of reintegration of children into their biological family or other form of family care.

A series of four assessments were conducted focusing on children and their families as well as a deep dive into the human and financial resources of the institution. They also provided an opportunity to work closely with staff in the institutions, gain trust and buy-in for the deinstitutionalization process, while at the same time building their assessment capacity and tools.

Due to COVID restrictions preventing people other than key staff to enter institutions, for the first time it was not independent evaluators, but rather the staff at Hîncești carrying out the child assessments. To support the staff, P4EC provided training on everything from attachment theory and trauma, to how best to conduct the assessment. The local evaluation team was paired with a virtual mentor from P4EC to provide guidance at each step in the process. The evaluation tools applied were coordinated with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

At the beginning there were concerns about the objectivity of the staff conducting the assessments. The staff understood that the closure of Hîncești SIA would mean that they would lose their positions. Many of the staff had been working in the institution for years and were deeply invested in the children in their care.

"The personnel from the Hîncești institution, I can say that.... It is a team of people who cared about those children, we saw a good, beautiful attitude towards children.

Daniela Mamaliga, Director, P4EC

Assessments of Hîncești SIA Laying the Research Basis for Closure



Child Assessments:

Evaluate all children from a social, medical, psycho-emotional, and behavioral point of view based on established criteria and assessment templates.



Family Assessments:

Assess the ability of biological and extended families to provide the child with an environment of growth and development according to their individual needs. Map the social, medical, educational services available in the community, in order to determine the possibilities of reintegration of the children into the family and the community.



Human Resource Assessments:

Evaluate the functions, duties and responsibilities of the Hîncești personnel to provide recommendations for the professional retraining of staff and/or the transition to new roles focused on family and community care.



Financial Assessments:

Calculate the annual costs allocated from the state budget or other resources for the functioning of the institution including the costs of the types of services provided in the institution (including the annual cost per child) and a comparative analysis with the costs of similar services provided in the mainstream schools or in the community.

However, as they began conducting a detailed assessment of each child and family, many began to understand that it was in the best interest of the children to be placed in family environments.

INSIGHT 3 PULL FACTORS KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER - GATEKEEPING AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

A vast majority of the children were able to be reintegrated with the biological or extended families.

Promotion of inclusive education at national level and the rigorous mechanism for preventing and controlling placement in institutions, via gatekeeping, meant that children were no longer being sent to Hîncești.

Child Assessments

Child assessments were carried out by multidisciplinary teams, consisting of a social worker, a psychologist and a pediatrician under the guidance of the Changing the Way We Care Moldova team. All children in Hîncești SIA were evaluated from a social, medical, psycho-emotional, and behavioral point of view based on established criteria and assessment template.

The assessments found that the promotion of inclusive education at the national level and the rigorous mechanism for preventing and controlling placement in institutions, via gatekeeping, meant that children were no longer being sent to Hîncești SIA. In fact, there had not been a placement of a new child in over three years. It found that if families had the appropriate educational and financial resources, most would keep their children at home.

As a result, at the time of the child assessments only 18 children remained in the institution. All of whom were teenagers. Disability was cited in their records as the reason for placement in institution and a third of the children had been placed in residential care prior to coming to Hîncești SIA.

As with most residential institutions, the children residing in Hîncești SIA were not orphans. The majority of the children assessed had families and most of them maintained a relationship with their families. For these children, it was recommended that they be reintegrated into their biological or extended families. For the other children either foster care, small group homes, or guardianship was recommended.

"We made an assessment and one of the most important things that was found as cause of institutionalization, was poverty and mentality."

Daniela Mamaliga, Director, P4EC

Recommendations from the Assessments



13 children
reintegration with
biological or extended
family



3 children -
placement in foster
care



1 child -
placement in small
group home



1 child -
placement in
guardianship

**INSIGHT 4
PUSH
FACTORS:
POVERTY AND
LACK OF
ACCESS TO
EDUCATIONAL
SERVICES**

Poverty and stigmatization by the education sector were identified as the leading push factors that led families to bring their children to Hîncești SIA.

Family Assessments

The Family Assessments sought to understand the ability of biological and extended families to provide the child with an environment of growth and development according to their individual needs. The assessments also mapped the social, medical, and educational services available in the community, in order to determine the possibilities of reintegration of the children into the family and the community.

The evaluation team included a mentor with experience in the field of child protection and a social worker from P4EC, a specialist in child rights protection and a social worker from the communities where the assessed families live.

Families, an essential partner in the process, participated in the assessment of their own situation and in determining the necessary support for the child's reintegration. For parents who lived abroad, the assessment was conducted through Whatsapp or Zoom. Extended family, including grandparents and aunts/uncles, were included as appropriate.

For the vast majority of families assessed, problems related to the educational inclusion of their child was a significant driver to sending their child to Hîncești. Many families pointed to their unsuccessful experience in integrating children into community schools and feared that their children would not receive any specialized education support and would be stigmatized by classmates and teachers. Many families were convinced that their child would not cope at a community school.

"My child was not received by the teacher, she always said, that he is not for the 'normal school' and I need to get him faster from here."
Parent, Family Assessment

Family Assessments Findings - reasons for child placement as per the family perspective



lack of access to inclusive education



health related problems



behavior problems



lack of financial resources

INSIGHT 5 PIVOTAL ROLE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SERVICES

Inclusive education services have made it possible for many families to stay together.

However, the provision of inclusive education remains unequal across the country, especially for children with severe disabilities.

Inclusive Education in Moldova

Access to education lays at the heart of the story of the Hîncești boarding school. A parent's universal desire to educate their children is both a big reason it opened so many years ago and one of the main reasons it is now closing its doors.

Moldova's commitment to inclusive education dates back to 2011 with the government's adoption of the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education (2011 - 2020). It got a further boost in 2014 when it was included in the Education code and the set-up of an Inclusive Education Fund, which supports teachers and resource centers focused on inclusive education activities.

In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Research developed the Inclusive Education Development Program (2022-2027) which is expected to be approved in 2023 as part of the larger Education Strategy (2023 - 2030).

As inclusive education services expand, more families are finding alternatives to sending their child to an institution. However, for many children with disabilities, inclusive education remains out of reach.

Many obstacles remain, including issues related to infrastructure, transportation, and in-school support for children with different needs. Advocacy is needed at the national and local level to ensure that all children receive the support they need to thrive at school.

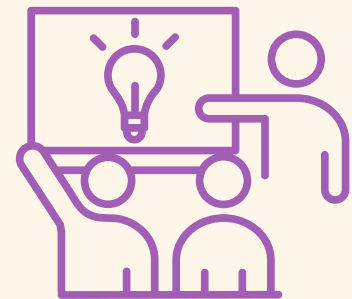
Snapshot: Inclusive Education in Moldova (2021/22 school year)

Inclusive education is an educational process that responds to children's diversity and individual developmental requirements and offers equal opportunities and opportunities to benefit from fundamental human rights to quality development and education in common learning environments.

*Article 3, Education Code
Government of Moldova*

9,500

Students with special needs were enrolled in primary and secondary schools in Moldova (2021/22 school year)



Findings from Family Assessment

"...the main reasons for the child's placement in the institution were related to the child's failure at school where the child did not have support due to the lack of specialists in inclusive education."

INSIGHT 6
THE ROLE OF
FINANCIAL
ASSESSMENTS

Beyond the child rights perspective, the financial assessment found that it was significantly more expensive to send a child to a residential institution than to send a child to a model inclusive education school.

Financial Assessment

The Financial Assessment laid bare the fact that the beyond the child rights implications of children living in institutions and outside of their families, keeping children at the Hîncești institution did not make financial sense.

By 2022, the Hîncești school, a sprawling compound of seven buildings, only had 18 children residing in it. At the time of the child assessments, there were 1.5 times as many staff employed as there were children residing there and the largest share of expenditures for Hîncești related to the personnel costs (80% of the entire budget).

As the number of children decreased, the average annual cost of maintaining a child in the institution increased. In 2020 alone, the cost of a child at the institution increased by about 11% compared to 2018 (\$9,710 USD/181,820 MDL per child vs. \$8,712/163,140 MDL per child).

The average annual cost for the provision of educational services in the institution exceeded 3 times the average annual cost in other general primary or secondary education institutions and 2 times the average cost of maintaining a student with special needs in the "Petru Ștefănuță" Theoretical High School in Ialoveni, a model of inclusion for children with severe disabilities.

For Changing the Way We Care and our partners, the financial assessment was an important advocacy tool to use with the government. Particularly compelling for the Ministry of Education was the data around the cost of per child.

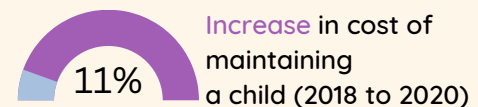
Hîncești SIA by the Numbers (2022)

1.5x more staff are employed than there are children (2020)

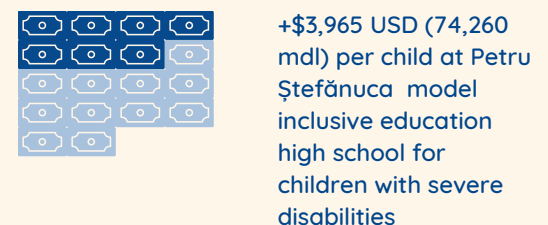
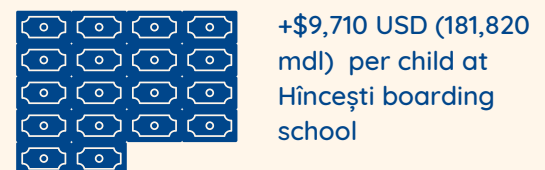
25 staff = 18 children



As expenses decrease the cost of caring for children increases (2020)



2 times more expensive to educate a child in the Hîncești SIA than at model inclusive education school



**INSIGHT 7
CLOSING VS.
TRANSFORMING**

Impact on Children

There is a need to work with local communities to not only close residential institutions but transform them into a resource for the community.

For the children reintegrated into the community, the results to date have been mostly positive. All the children are being closely monitored. The children that were able to be reintegrated into biological or extended families are doing well and are continuing their studies at vocational schools.

The children placed in foster care were also reported to be doing well and their situation is being monitored by specialists.

However, one child that was placed in a Family type Home Service, social workers found that while he is officially placed at the home, in reality he lives on his own. Social workers are looking for an alternative placement that may better suit the child's needs.

What is next for the Hîncești school?

The closing of the Hîncești SIA was an important step in a long journey to ensure that all children in Moldova live in safe, nurturing family environments.

What comes next for this sprawling complex has yet to be decided. There are discussions within the local authorities on how to transform the institution into a space that serves the community, but there are no concrete plans.

"The child lives with his parents and two sisters with whom he is in friendly relations. He feels loved in the family, the relationships between the child and the parents are very good.."

Report from Family Assessment

There are concerns that until the institution is transformed with a new community mandate, its doors could open once again as a residential institution for children. During the Ukraine refugee emergency, a number of former residential institutions were re-opened temporarily to house refugees entering the country.

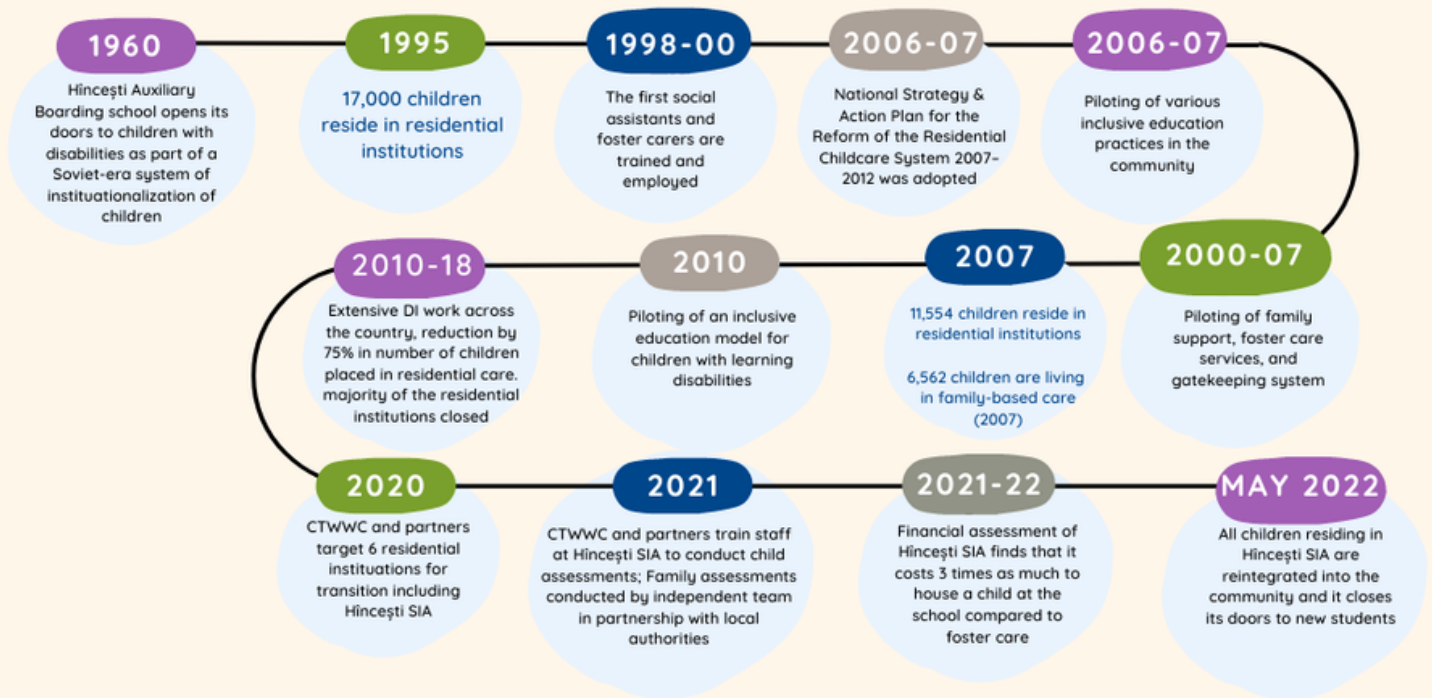
Changing the Way We Care and our partners are committed to working with local communities, civil society actors, and local authorities to not only close residential institutions but to help transform them into a community good, and finally close this chapter in Moldova's care history.

"The grandfather reported that he did not think at all about taking in his nephew and is glad that the child is near him. The child, likewise, is glad that he is in the bosom of the family. The situation of the child is stable.

Report from Family Assessment

CARE REFORM IN MOLDOVA

KEY MILESTONES



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Need to know more? Contact Changing the Way We Care at info@ctwwc.org or visit changingthewaywecare.org.

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