



## Case Study: How One Community was Able to Get Every Child in School

Usually the school population peaks in September and gradually declines over the course of the year as some children move away and others, especially those living in poverty, attend sporadically. In Castelu, the opposite happened. On September 14, 2009 there were 32 first graders, and 120 children enrolled in pre-school. In June 2010, 46 children successfully completed the first grade and 180 were attending pre-school programs.<sup>1</sup>

Approximately 20 percent of the population of Castelu, a “comuna” of 5000 people in Constanta County, live in poverty. The poorest neighborhoods are located on Strada Garoafelor, Salciilor and Ferma. Approximately 350 people live in this area in 60 dwellings. Most of the inhabitants have no access to public utilities. The streets are little more than rutted pathways. Untreated water is obtained from a nearby pond for all cooking and personal hygiene needs.

Most adults living on these streets consider themselves to be Turks, but both the local Turks and the local ethnic Romanians consider them Gypsies. The majority of these adults speak a blended Turkish dialect. Thus, many children cannot speak or understand Romanian when they go to school. Because these families are destitute, they either do not attend school at all or they enter late. If they do enroll, their lack of preparation leads to early school abandonment, often after only four or five grades.

The Castelu School principal, Antoneta Prodan, was aware that children who receive quality early education do much better in school than their peers who first enter the education system at age eight or nine. She was also aware that many of the poorest children in her community were not attending kindergarten, entering school late, attending sporadically and dropping out

before they reached fifth grade. Meanwhile, the kindergarten principal, Mariana Musat, often encouraged the poor families to send their children to pre-school – but with little results.

Castelu hadn’t the resources – human, financial or conceptual – to tackle this multi-faceted problem single-handedly. After Ms. Prodan saw the *Scoala te face mare* public service announcements on TV, she called Ovidiu Rom to ask for assistance. Executive director Maria Gheorghiu visited the community in late August 2009 to ascertain how Ovidiu Rom could help.

### Ovidiu Rom’s 4 Steps to Getting Every Child in School

#### 1. Community Action

After site visits in which Ms. Gheorghiu talked with various stakeholders including parents, she helped establish a public-private partnership between the school, the kindergarten, comuna administration, elected comuna council, a local NGO - Fundatia Porti Deschise - and the General School Inspectorate of Constanta. At the first meeting a “Local Action Group” was formed consisting of the principals of the school and kindergarten, mayor, chief of police, social worker, local councilman, community representative, and representatives from the area’s two main religions, the Orthodox priest and the Muslim imam. After several meetings, this group agreed to take responsibility for closing the gap in the educational attainment of the Turkish/Roma children and most of the other children in the comuna.

In September, Ovidiu Rom organized a recruitment drive to enroll all children aged 6 or over in first grade.

<sup>1</sup> “Preschool” and “kindergarten” are used interchangeably for educational programs for children aged 3-6.

Members of the Local Action Group went door-to-door encouraging parents to send their young children to kindergarten and their six year olds to first grade. Elisabeta Kubassek of Open Doors walked through the community with a megaphone announcing “*Education is free. We can help you obtain the necessary clothes and shoes and supplies.*”

Children began to show up at school the very next day, but formal registration was a protracted process, which in some cases took most of the school year. Ultimately, two solutions were identified:

### **Immediate Action**

Unschooling children between age 6 and 9 were identified and registered. This resulted in the need for an additional first grade class for 19 students. (There already were two first grade classes.) Limited space forced the three first-grade classes to take turns holding class in a former gas station located across the street from the school for a few weeks. It wasn’t an ideal solution, but the children thought it was fun.

In September, the local council gave clothes and shoes to the 19 new first graders as well as 14 other poor children who were already attending school. Ovidiu Rom covered the salary of the new teacher in October. In November, the School Inspectorate allocated her salary. In January 2010, the local authorities inaugurated three rooms in a new building (which had been started the previous year but not finished due to lack of funds) as the “Kaleidoscope” Resource Center. Sponsored by Carrefour<sup>2</sup> and managed by Ovidiu Rom, Kaleidoscope opened its doors on January 29. It gave the poor children a place to do their homework and get tutorial help. The After School Program was staffed by the new teacher and paid for by Ovidiu Rom.

### **Strategic Solution**

In January, now that the space problem had been solved, the Local Action Group moved its attention to the many children age 3-5 in the area. The principal called on a local council member, Sebaidin Salim who had been trained as a school mediator in 2007, but never hired. Working together, Ovidiu Rom and the school mediator identified 80 additional children aged 3-10 and enrolled them in the pre-school program. The school mediator’s salary was paid by Ovidiu Rom with funds from Carrefour, with the understanding that his salary would become a line item in the local budget as of September 2010. Educational supplies were provided by Ovidiu Rom for the 80 new kindergarten recruits.

## **2. Educational Measures**

### **Teacher Training**

To prepare the teachers for a large influx of children with no prior school experience and language limitations, Ovidiu Rom began a series of four teacher training workshops. The training focuses on practical classroom application of current learning theories. The workshops also prepare teachers to utilize Ovidiu Rom’s syllabi and education package, the core of which is a 48 page full color workbook *The Treasure of the Eight Mirrored City*, structured as a narrative story with exercises, diary entries, and games.

### **Sotron: once a week kindergarten**

Ovidiu Rom helped the school staff set up a program called “Sotron” to introduce the young children and their parents, who had themselves never attended pre-school to both the benefits and day-to-day requirements of formal early education. Sotron includes: a guided family tour of the kindergarten, once-a-week classes for both children and parents, and on-the-spot registration for the next term’s kindergarten class.

### **After School Program**

This daily two hour session for 30 first graders (the 19 children and 11 others who were selected by their teachers as needing extra help) makes it possible for high-risk children to complete their homework in an attractive learning environment, to get extra help as needed, and a snack provided.

### **Summer Workshops**

These two week programs serve to familiarize both children and parents with the school environment. Ovidiu Rom provides the educational material and a new local NGO provides snacks. Basic numeracy, literacy, and thinking skills are introduced and reinforced.

---

<sup>2</sup> Carrefour “Adopted” Castelu School. See more details under Adopt a School, p.3

### 3. Family Engagement and Support

Probably the single most important factor in getting every child in Castelu in school was the welcoming attitude of the school and kindergarten principals. They actively helped poor families overcome difficulties like missing registration documents and lack of appropriate clothing.

#### Attendance Incentives

Ovidiu Rom “incentivizes” impoverished parents to send their children to school on a daily basis by offering 50 lei worth of food coupons for their child’s 100% attendance each month. In every community where Ovidiu Rom has implemented this strategy, attendance of at-risk children has increased dramatically. Ovidiu Rom initiated the program for 30 families in Castelu who qualified because the family was living below Ovidiu Rom’s poverty threshold defined by income, housing, and parents’ level of education. Before officially being accepted into the program, home visits were conducted by an Ovidiu Rom representative, accompanied by the school mediator. A meeting was then held with the families to thoroughly explain the **50 lei food coupon program**, in which:

- ✓ Children must have 100% school attendance (unless they have a documented ailment), satisfactory academic performance, and acceptable behavior.
- ✓ Parents of first graders must attend the monthly parent-teacher meeting in order to receive the coupons. If a parent misses the monthly meeting, they have to wait until the next month’s meeting to get the coupons. To underscore the importance of learning, as well as just showing up, the family receives an additional 50 lei coupon if the child’s grades are exceptionally good.

#### Supplies, Uniforms and Snacks

The local council provided clothing and shoes for each child in the target group. After-school program snacks were funded by Ovidiu Rom and Carrefour.

#### Health Issues

Early childhood is the best time to detect medical, dental, visual, and speech impairments so they can be prevented from handicapping an individual for life. An essential component of Ovidiu Rom’s methodology is to make sure specialized medical care is available for children recruited to school. Lower-income children are

more likely to have health problems, and as a result, are more likely to miss school for relatively minor problems. When the school nurse examined the children in Castelu, many were found to have head lice. This is always a problem where there is a lack of access to running water. It adversely affects school attendance and acceptance from peers, teachers, and other children’s parents. The School mediator obtained treatment from Open Doors, and the Medgidia Health Department, but it was a very temporary solution. The lack of strategic action from the county health department and the local doctor was discouraging, and the problem remained unresolved until Carrefour offered to co-finance with the local council the cost of drilling a well and creating a water pump on the street.

### 4. Public Awareness

#### Parent Education

Ovidiu Rom and Open Doors went door to door distributing flyers to parents and personally inviting them to a meeting at the school. It was necessary to hold his meeting several times, but ultimately 30 parents attended sessions led by the principal and the comuna social worker in which procedures and processes were explained. They also discussed the children’s basic legal right to education as well as the parents’ obligations to respect the law. In November, Antena 3 dedicated an hour long documentary to the problem of unschooled children and illiterate adults and featured Castelu’s community action.

#### Adopt-a-School

At the 2009 Halloween Charity Ball, the “Adopt a School” program was launched to encourage companies to invest their CSR budgets in educational measures that help develop future generations. Carrefour, the first company to Adopt a School, selected Castelu because of the company’s presence in Constanta. Their €10,000 contribution equipped the new resource center and covered teacher training costs, after-school, and summer programs. A plaque was mounted in the school entrance to commemorate the donation. The food coupons were covered by Ovidiu Rom with proceeds from the Halloween Ball.

## First year results

- ✓ First grade enrollment increased from 64% to close to 100%.
- ✓ 14 of the 19 children recruited for first grade advanced to 2nd grade.
- ✓ Perfect attendance of 28 of the 30 children who were offered food coupons.
- ✓ **80 children** aged 3-5 were registered or brought back to preschool.
- ✓ Poor parents' perception of "school age" changed from age 7 or 8 to age 3 or 4!
- ✓ 4 Step Methodology was refined in order to be able to scale up nationally.

This program resulted in getting **63 children** at high risk for early school abandonment, into pre-school and first grade, and increased attendance of another **45 children**. It cost approximately **€228 per child** to initiate. By contrast, a 2010 World Bank report concluded that Romania's under-educated citizens cost the country almost a billion euro per year in lost productivity and tax revenues.

## Objectives for 2010-2011 School Year

Since success in school is directly correlated with early education, Ovidiu Rom and the Local Action Group are concentrating on kindergarten enrollment for the 2010-2011 school year for all children in the community between the ages of 3 and 6.

Direct expenditures until 31 August 2010:		
<b>Ovidiu Rom:</b>	€13,000	Food coupons, staff transportation, training, educational materials
Local council:	€1,500	Clothes and shoes
Carrefour:	€10,000	Equipping Resource Center, snacks, teacher & school mediator salaries & summer school expenses
Total	€24,500	<i>Note: Ovidiu Rom, Local Council, and Open Doors also contributed staff time and organizational resources that have not been included in the calculation.</i>