

## **WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM? RESPONSES FROM AMERICAN PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS**

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As a Peace Corps Response to Romania I was assigned to the Ministry of Education as a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) trainer and curriculum specialist. Consequently I could work for a year with 35 American Peace Corps Volunteers in the TEFL program. They were teaching English in the smaller villages. When I first arrived, I asked them to answer the following question:

**What changes/reforms would you like to see in the Romanian educational system? (The participants were given some suggestions: curriculum, school structure and organization, student-teacher relationship, Romanian classroom management or lack of, available materials, access to Internet, methodology of teachers in your building.)**

This is the edited summary of their responses:

1. Please try to update the books. We have books, but many are old and outdated.
2. The curriculum needs to move away from teaching every single grammar point and encourage production, especially verbal. I have eighth graders who are supposed to learn difficult English tenses because the curriculum demands it, yet they cannot answer simple questions such as, "How are you?"
3. Encourage creative thinking and problem-solving.
4. My high school students are learning the same grammar components that my middle school students are learning. Students need more time to learn and utilize each grammar topic before moving on to more difficult grammar. To do this, perhaps students should have English every day for a semester or year, not twice a week for 4 years.
5. Having students stay with the same groups of 30 kids for 4 years, regardless of subject ability level, means that some kids will be left behind and others

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will be bored. It also limits their social skills and comfort in meeting new people. Also, it would be better if teachers had their own rooms, like in the United States.

6. In my school, there are no school-wide discipline standards. Students don't have consequences for bad actions other than being humiliated if they are caught and if the teacher cares enough to do something about it.
7. Ending the A, B, C, etc class/section system and moving to a system where students move to classrooms staffed by a single teacher (or shared by several).
8. In an American school, when a student falls behind in a subject, they are placed in a low-speed class. For example, students at my high school who could not handle Algebra 1-2 would take Algebra 1a-1b. Likewise, students who excel in a subject are placed in advanced classes.
9. Currently, students are together with the same group of kids for years at a time. If a student falls behind in a subject, they will continue to move along in that subject with their colleagues. It doesn't matter if they are advanced in one subject and behind in another. If they fail math, but excel in English, they must take the whole year all over again instead of progressing to next year's English class and retaking math.
10. I believe there must be an incentive for teachers not to pass students who really don't deserve to be passed. At least a third to half of the kids in any given group seem unable to perform the work asked of them.
11. Teachers should be allowed to remove misbehaving students from their classroom.
12. No more *serviciu* students. The current system wastes students' time. The school bell should be automated and guests should be greeted by a staff member, not a child.
13. Directors and Inspectors should not be political positions.
14. Inspections should not occur in specially-chosen classes, but at random with normal classes and 100% surprise. The current system is one where inspections are special shows put on by the school for inspectors, including special students, special lesson plans, special resources, even food, drink, and rides for the inspector. The entire school is disrupted to maintain this charade.
15. One of the most serious issues in many schools is the lack of materials that match the level of the students. In my school, only a handful of 5th-8th graders are at the intermediate level. Everyone else is still at the beginning level. Yet, teachers are expected to use the required books for each grade. Each year, the material gets more difficult, and further out of the reach of most students. Encouraging teachers to make their own

- materials is futile because my school did not have a copy machine that worked for at least the two years. It was finally repaired this summer, but teachers have to buy their own paper and other supplies.
16. Teachers cover all grammar points every year, but never really have time to master any of it. I think the curriculum would be better if each year teachers focused on only a small part of the grammar, increasing in difficulty each year, and allowing the majority of the students to master one task at a time.
  17. The Romanian English school teacher is required to cover a set amount of material in a semester/year. My observation is that by rushing through in order to meet the requirements, the students do not have time to really understand English. The bright ones may figure it out, but the majority does not. Having more hours of English a week would help, or having less material to master would help.
  18. Some students are slow learners, but there is no one to help them. They need extra attention. The students with excess energy disturb the rest of the class, while the ones who can't absorb the material are ignored.
  19. Because of the rush to finish a certain amount of material, the students get little time to practice speaking English. The students are not in an environment that stresses conversation.
  20. Textbooks should have instructions and explanations in Romanian, rather than in English. It makes the students dependent upon the teacher and class time for developing their understanding, especially if the students do not have access to other resources such as the Internet or translation dictionaries at home.
  21. Many students are in need of follow-up learning. Students who struggle are often labeled as lacking effort or intelligence and sometimes are passed along to move them out of the way. These students just keep their heads and hands down during class and hope to survive without being noticed.
  22. Creativity needs to be introduced and encouraged from an early age. Many teachers are still asking their students to just memorize. By middle school and high school, it's nearly impossible to incite spontaneous speech since their language development has been centered on memorization and translation of texts.
  23. The curriculum says, „You're in 9th grade. This is what you should learn". But this comes with the huge assumption that the majority of the students have actually learned all the material that came before the 9th grade. All the students are expected to learn at the same rate and it isn't realistic. Schools need flexibility and the right to change what they teach depending on the needs of the students.

24. I teach in a high school and have students coming in with no knowledge of English, while others can at least do basic conversation. I believe if the curriculum was more flexible and students had books where they could see Romanian translations it would be helpful. Most of my students can't gain any knowledge from their books because they are years beyond their knowledge.
25. Updates or changes in curriculum should be done in a way that is accessible for schools lacking funds, without putting additional financial burdens on the students. For example in 11th and 12th grade in my school, students are supposed to purchase their own English books. However, most students don't, so you end up with a whole class where only 3-4 students have the book. I would love to have the Ministry think of ways to put out materials that could be adopted by schools regardless of their financial situations.
26. My observation from living in a small town in Moldavia is that a big TEFL challenge occurs when kids from village schools come into town schools. The students aren't placed based on their actual English or French foreign language level, they are placed in class based on age. So I had 5th graders from the village who hadn't really had English with 5th graders from town who had a bit of English. I had to keep up with the structured *planificare* (lesson planning) with high and unrealistic expectations. Because of this placement based on age rather than current language ability, some kids were always left behind and some were always bored, making it difficult to teach. We never really met the *planificare* expectations.
27. The kids would benefit from a slower pace in the curriculum, one that gave them time to apply what they learned through projects, dialogue, and other activities. It would be a relief to the Romanian teachers who are under pressure to teach a large amount of grammar and vocabulary, while simultaneously making sure that every child in the class is keeping up because no one is allowed to fail.
28. I am pleased with the new education law that started this past September. Teachers can now compete for a free position in a school by submitting a portfolio. School directors are now responsible for hiring the teachers.
29. I would introduce small business classes so that students can learn how to start their own business once they graduate.
30. I would promote partnerships with companies, so that once students graduate, they are hired by these companies.
31. Teachers should have their own rooms. Students should be the ones who move from one class to another.
32. A strong teacher mentor program would be helpful.

33. Teacher training programs should be more practical, with less theory. There should be more practicum for teachers-to-be while they are in university. I only had like 2 days total.
  34. Much time is lost in some classes with ineffective methods of discipline.
  35. Workshops on Cooperative Learning would be helpful. With the traditional system of calling on someone whose hand is raised, engaging one student at a time, many kids get nothing but a few seconds per week to actually use English.
  36. Regarding the *planificare*, it was unrealistically fast, and never allowed the students time to consolidate what they learned.
  37. There is no system in place to help students who are left behind. This stems, in part, from a cultural belief that some kids, and even entire classes, are stupid or lazy and nothing can be done about it.
  38. English teachers need to be taught creative, fun activities that get their students thinking, interacting and producing.
  39. Classroom management is generally done by yelling and with threats. Teacher training on this topic would be beneficial.
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