

The School Support Team

Short guide of the principles for the school support team



Inklucentrum

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The support team influences the cultural setting of the school

In your hands, you are holding a short guide for school support teams at school on their way to inclusive education. The principals were born in the work of two professionals at regular schools while dealing with difficulties in children at risk. They looked for new ways how to support children in more complex and inclusive ways.

In the beginning, the most important was the support for the suffering children whose therapeutic work occurred in the school environment. Gradually, new ways of therapy have been found. The relationship between the class and the teacher was improving, and eventually, a more complex approach was established: it was found on the basis of a school support team that influences the setting of the school culture, helps and supports teachers in their natural interactions with students and brings therapeutic elements into teaching.

After publishing the first bulletin “On the Way to Inclusive Education” the second part comes out on the principles and direction of this unusual multi-disciplinary grouping of professionals coming directly from within the school environment. There isn't just science or research behind these lines, but most importantly real-life experience with hundreds of students, who suffered minor or life-altering events. There are many sittings with parents, multi-disciplinary consultations with professionals from other fields, phone calls, emails, official letters and assessments, terrain, and field trips – so the support for a child in his hardships would be more comprehensive. Not only the child but also the parents and teachers are equally important.

On the following pages you can find inspiring suggestions, principles and the vision of what it is that is important and useful for our schools to create an environment suitable for the development of the school support teams and therefore, could more effectively move towards inclusive education.

Viktor Križo and Zuzana Krnáčová

Who forms the School support team?

- 1 ● **school special pedagogue and school psychologist** with a desirable variation of social and therapeutic educator, speech therapist – at least part-time, and a career counsellor (see § 84a) of Act no. 138/2019),
- 2 ● **teachers and teaching assistants** are usually not members of this team, but they are a part of the “sub-teams” according to the problem,
- 3 ● **the team together with the school principal** also supports the students and teachers by helping to set the school processes. The term “professional” team is inaccurate because both teachers and parents are experts in their fields.

“I can't even imagine working alone at school. I experienced it and it was a very difficult time. Since we are a team, we help each other, we consult problems together and we can substitute for each other.”
— primary school special pedagogue

“They seem to me like rescue rangers. They come to the “crime scene”, they treat, improve conditions, understand all parties, and help resolve the conflict, problem, difficulties.”
— primary school teacher

“Entering a classroom full of basically adult students with my colleague – social pedagogue – gives me enough confidence, that we are a team, and while she manages activities, I am able to reflect on the process and students' needs. We complement each other in what we do while we can learn from each other new skills that may not even be a part of my profession.”
— high school psychologist

Assistant in a support team?

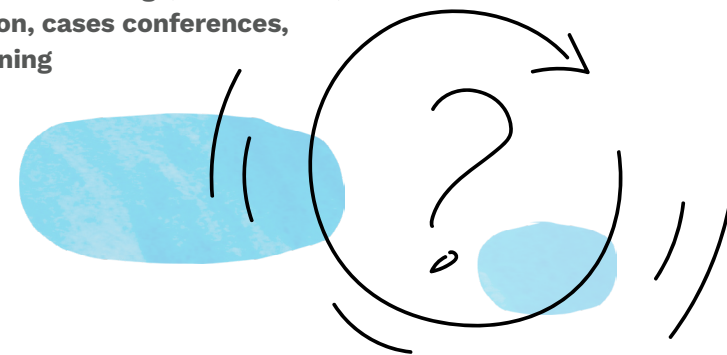
- the teaching assistant is usually not a member of the support team, his main responsibility is to the classroom and teachers, **helping with the implementation of support for all children.** Although in different situations, he can be a part of the team, if necessary,
- the assistant becomes a part of the “sub-team”, if he supports a child or a classroom that is in a situation being resolved by the professional staff at school,
- the work of the assistant is usually **coordinated by the school's special pedagogues,**
- **the support team professionally supports and guides assistants** at school and helps with a specific support for children at risk.

„In this whole cycle of work, at night I fall asleep with a feeling, that I am not alone at school anymore. In addition to great teachers, I also have a support team, that never forgets anything important – from students' fights, sensitive support to a family that is falling apart to joint teambuilding.”
— the Principal of a Primary school

„Even before I first stepped into the school building with my son, when we moved to town, we got a welcoming email from the school psychologist. We had a short introductory meeting with my son as well, where the psychologist introduced herself, the class and the teacher. The whole first month, we were in active contact with her and she regularly asked us how my son is doing, she was coming to see him in the classroom and asked if he didn't need anything. It was wonderful, I have never experienced anything like that.”
— the parent of a fifth-grader

What are the tasks of a support team?

- **searching and identifying the sources of risk** in students, classrooms, teachers (e.g. freshman starting school, switching to upper grade school, support to ninth graders, the career development of students, integration, new student in class),
- **implementing 360° feedback, sociometry of classes, the climate of the teaching staff,**
- **counselling, support, and education of teachers and parents.** The support of the school management through the fulfilment of its vision and school direction.
- **preventive and screening programs** (e.g. arthropiletics, morning circles, school trips, etc.),
- **conflict mediation** (using non-violent communication), regular individual reflection with students,
- **targeted intervention:** re-education of learning disabilities, group and individual therapy (art therapy, music therapy, play therapy...),
- **mentoring and assistant supervision,** support for class teachers,
- **active cooperation with The Centre for Counselling and Prevention (CPaP) /The Special Centrum for Children with disabilities (SCPAP)** – networking with other subjects (social workers, the police, doctors, LVS, DC, RC i.e.),
- **regular team meetings, intervisions, supervision, cases conferences, team training**

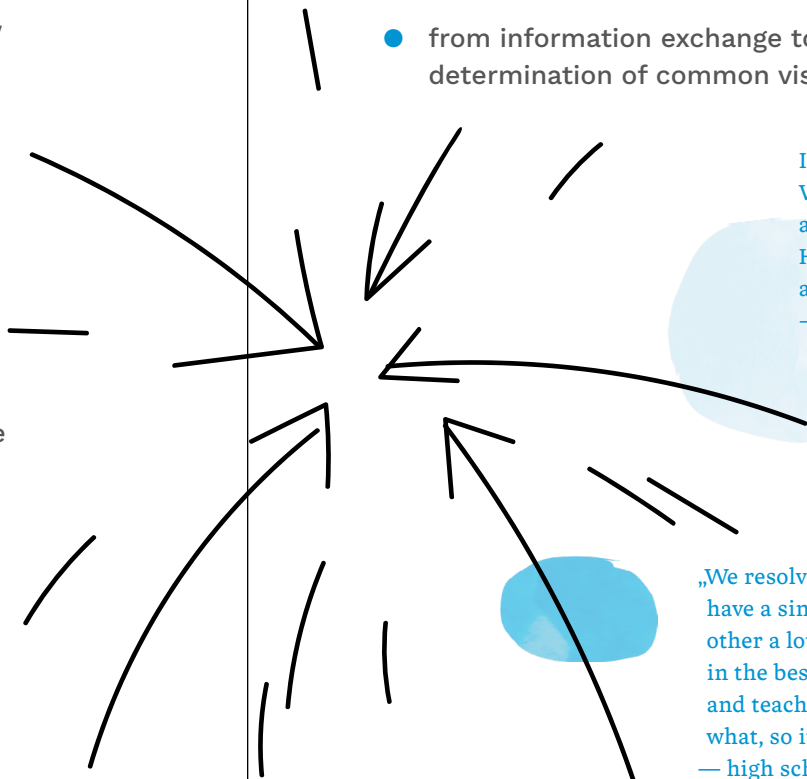


What are the basic rules and principles of the support team?

- **Task division** – includes tasks resulting from the profession, natural talents and the potential of each personality within the team, but also from the relationship with the given child, family, class, or an employee.
- **Sharing** – it is important to recognize which information is necessary to share with the team. Sometimes, because of the GDPR law, there are certain personal data that cannot be shared, though it might be in the best interest of the child. Ideally, it is best to talk about sharing information with the parents and children, or even better to talk about the possibility of enshrine it into school law of rules. The school law already allows and supports the sharing of information.
- **The sequence of steps (subsidiarity)** – if the class teacher can solve the problem, leave it up to him. He is the first-contact person. Parents, students and teachers should also know about this succession. The team has a supportive function toward the students and teachers.
- **Cooperation** – the children need to feel, that “their people” stand behind them, offer them joint and united support and safety. The members of the team cooperate together, so that, their skills and abilities complement each other.
- **Friendly relationships, openness** – the roles of each member of the team should represent diversity, not hierarchy, power struggle, competition, or service duplicity. If there is mutual trust and openness, there might be a good chance of being able to communicate and overcome all kinds of failures and shortcomings.

What are the basic principles of joint cooperation in the support team?

- from individual activities of professionals to regular joint meetings and realization of common activities and strategies,
- from the sum of all tasks of each individual profession to multidisciplinary networking,
- from conflict avoidance to their reflection, solution, interventions, and supervisions,
- from distancing to open cooperation and support of the teaching staff and management,
- from information exchange to a systemic determination of common visions and goals.



In our team, we don't have a “boss”.
We are simply a self-directed team with a coordinator – our special pedagogue.
Her role is to prepare meetings, inform and summarize. We all decide equally.”
— primary school psychologist

„We resolve each case individually. We don't have a single procedure, but we consult each other a lot, we are looking for ways that are in the best interest of the child, parents, class, and teachers. We divide tasks - who provides what, so it works out the best.”
— high school therapeutic educator

The cooperation of the support team with other parts of the school system

- An important part of team work is the **work in “sub-teams”**, which deal with specific situations and problems at school.
- In these “sub-teams”, the school staff connected to the case (class teacher, other teachers, teaching assistant, etc.) but also the parent, student, or others – cooperate with the support team.
- In solving problems and supporting children, **we always invite both parents to talk, if possible**. This further benefits the comprehension of given support, activation of the father, and the child's experience of seeing his parents cooperating.
- The support team **works closely together with the school management**, mainly in understanding the consequences of each of the steps taken and the guidelines. Cooperation is also important during the team budget-planning, e.g. team training, and the supervision of the team members.

“When Tom first came to the first class in September, he had regular outbursts of anger and exhaustion. He was disturbing the whole class and learning wasn't possible, nothing helped. Our team met repeatedly and thoroughly consulted together with the teachers and parents. We were able to identify great exhaustion in the child, we implemented a relaxation hour into his schedule after the third lesson with me as an assistant and once a week with the school psychologist.

We cancelled the fifth lesson for him, and he didn't attend the school club for the first three months. Later we added the fifth lesson after an hour of relaxing. The whole time we were able to communicate with the parents and share all the information. In the second class, he started to attend the school club, and eventually, during the fourth year, things became so good, that Tom didn't need any changes to his schedule or special help from assistants.”

— primary school - teaching assistant

Is it inclusive to work with an individual, small group, or the whole class?

- **The support team works on all levels** – from the whole group to an individual. Not a child but a person is the centre of attention, so that the whole system, the teachers, and the family are always being supported.
- Working with the class/educational group is a natural environment, in which the education of student occurs. Typical inclusive work and education are addressed in the group. The team supports the teachers and parents and monitors the atmosphere, development of processes, and group dynamics.
- Working with smaller groups (2-6 children) is usually focused on children at risk, who need additional support or help. The purpose of this work is to make children feel safer in their classroom, not only within the smaller group.
- Working with an individual child is inclusive to the extent that it meets his needs and at the same time leads to a gradual return to the group. It is used when the child has serious limitations, disadvantages, trauma, etc.

“Together with the school psychologist, we are leading a support group for girls from the fourth and fifth class. These girls need extra support because they are having problems establishing friendships. At the same time, we are trying to teach the girls to use their skills within the classroom as well, because that is the main point.”

— therapeutic educator – primary school

What legal rights and responsibilities does the support team have?

- Although the school special pedagogue is a **pedagogical employee**, just like the school psychologist, social and therapeutic educator, or speech therapist, **they do not have a fixed term**, as they do not perform supervision or other pedagogical activities that would make them directly responsible for students. **They have a supporting, systemic and procedural role.**
- Under the Labour Code, they have the same conditions as other teachers - the number of days of leave, working hours, breaks, material conditions, and protection of rights through employee representatives.
- In this profession, there is no requirement for any special parental consent when it comes to performing their duties, they work on the basis of Act no. A138/2019, the procedural, contextual, and professional standards in accordance with the 5 levels of support and other regulations.

“At our school, the support team is considered to be a fully valued and respected part of our teaching staff. The team members are present at our meetings, discussing student evaluation and the direction and vision of the school. Like teachers, their work schedule is similar – flexible, partially at home but also in the school, as needed and by a mutual agreement.

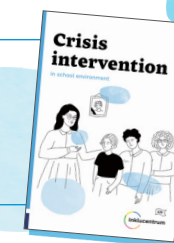
Not only do they have personal assessments for work difficulty, as teachers do, but can also receive compensatory leave when they help supervise on class trips, or during school enrolment, or their work sometimes requires extra teacher-parent conferences or meetings. All of these situations were determined in the school guideline about the support team, their activities are defined on the webpage, in the school law of rules, and in the school educational program.”

— Primary school principal

How to proceed in difficult cases?

- the team often faces challenges with difficult child trauma cases (death of a relative, abuse, tragic accidents, CAN syndrome), bullying in class, drugs, etc., which requires the whole team to work, sometimes even from night to morning,
- in serious cases, it is important to proceed in close cooperation with CPPaP and the school management and **do not allow quick resolutions of the situation**,
- the coordinator of the team or the given case, in cooperation with the counselling facility, proposes the procedure, informs the team, calls for a meeting or at least additionally informs the team,
- meetings with parents, the class teacher are called for by the coordinator of the team (specifies the time, room, attendees, and the topic),
- the school management/principal is informed and invited according to the agreement,
- **it is important to watch the psychohygiene and the support of the class teacher** (lower the substitution, or free him for some time from the schedule),
- it is important to lead reflective circles with the class of a given student, about - who feels what, what they need, and what they perceive,
- perhaps, the most important part of the success of the given case is the reflection in the support team – **intervention or supervision**.

More information on the topic of difficult cases can be found in **our bulletin**: inklucentrum.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Bulletin-Krizova-intervencia.pdf



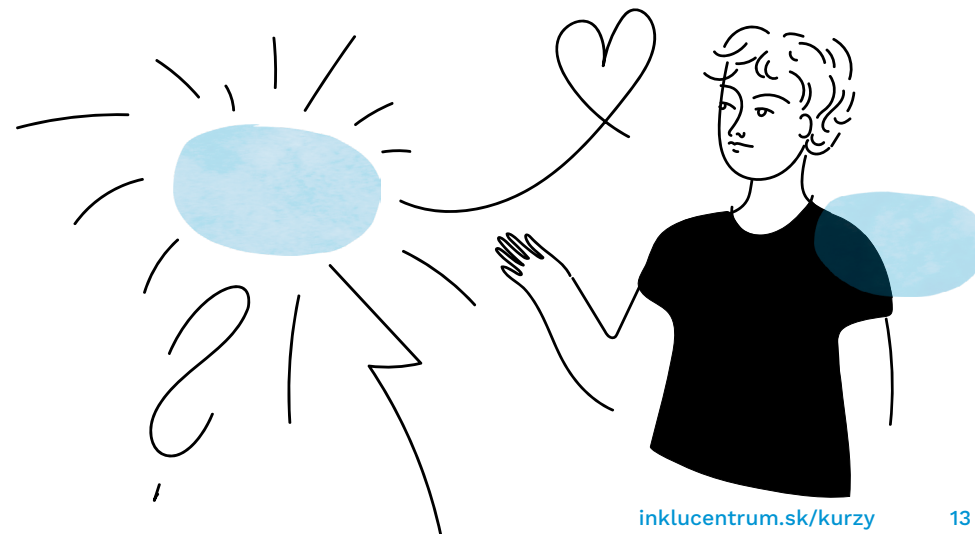
Case report

- A group of outwardly inconspicuous boys – seventh graders, quiet polite and average learners steal various food products from a store within a period of 4 months. After 4 months the owner of the store noticed it on the camera and tried to contact the nearest school whether they know these kids.
- On the same day, one of the students already admits it to his school psychologist in confidence. At that time, the school already knows it, directly from the store camera recordings. Coordination of the case is overtaken by the team, and together with the class teacher they determine the approach and tasks – the special pedagogue communicates with the owner and asks him for a couple of days until they can settle things at school.
- As the school management has been already informed of this situation, the psychologist with the child's consent invites the class teacher and the special pedagogue to try to resolve the problem.
- The school principal leaves the whole situation in the hands of the team and from then, only receives information about the case.
- After encouragement and voluntary confession of the whole group, a psychologist starts to work with them in close cooperation with the class teacher to support their own responsibility – first the boys together with the psychologist go to the store to meet the owner, reflect on the problem and compensate the financial loss for everything they took.
- They are sensitively led to inform their parents themselves, not the school. There is a list to the parents that helps them through it and later there is a parent-child meeting followed by a group reflection,

- The student remembered this whole event even after years as an incredibly difficult but valuable lesson. The trust between each of them as well as between them and their teacher improved and they never needed to steal again. They knew how to point to their mistakes and they learned to communicate better with their parents. Serious issues even emerged with one of the boys between him and his parents that led to individual therapy.
- After the case was finished, the team has performed its own supervision of their weak and strong sides while dealing with this situation and came up with a better-prepared plan for their future problem-solving procedures.

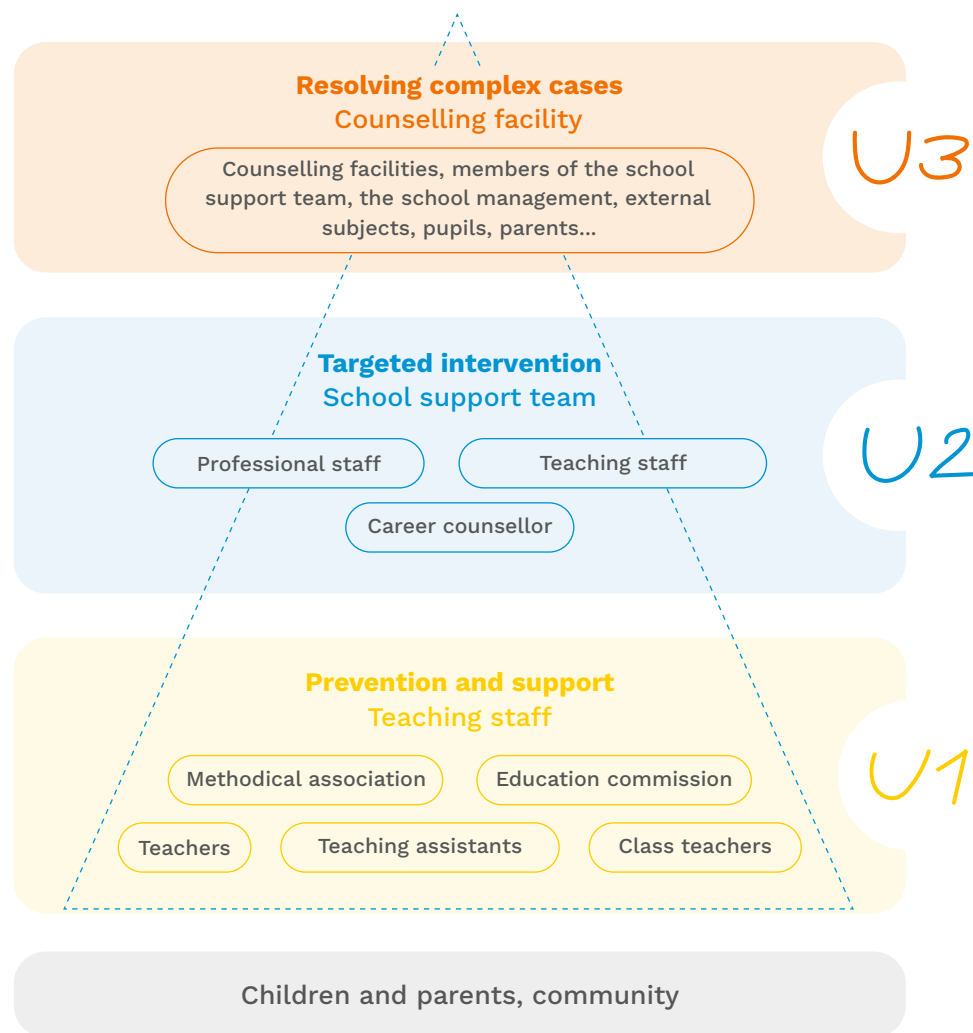
“Hi, mom! I have done something wrong, you will be angry at me, and I am as well. I don't even know why, I am an idiot, but I stole something, and I have a guilty conscience. Now, I am dealing with it and talking about it with my psychologist. She helped me a lot. We were even there to give back the money for what I stole (4 bars), I didn't even eat them, but gave them to someone because I couldn't even look at myself. I am really ashamed of myself and stressed about how you are going to react and what is next when you find out. I am sorry.”

— a letter from the seventh-grader to his mom



The concept of the school support team

We developed the support team, its composition, and characteristics according to several foreign models and we also used the system of the reformed document Learning Slovakia (2017). Given scheme is closely linked and supplemented with 5 levels of support of the Education Act.



A scheme of 3-level support for dealing with educational problems at school

The Scheme represents the illustrative levels (U1 – U3) of problem-solving and support when working with pupils, family, and class in a subsidiary, systematic way and as close to the student as possible.

The individual levels represent:

U1 Level 1 – regular support and work of teachers with the support of an assistant in class and during breaks, problem-solving by class teachers, and communication with parents. **The centre of this level is the class teacher, the assistant, and the parent as the most important relationships around the child.** The career counsellor mostly helps to support the transition to higher-level education and to harmonize the student's IVP and the direction of his further career development. At the first level, most of the problems are solved at school, although at this level the school psychologist, for example, is supposed to be active in prevention as well, with support programs, climate measurement, activities, class trips, other events – in close cooperation with the class teacher, members of the support team in prevention work and identification of students' risks and resources.

U2 Level 2 – targeted intervention and help for children at risk. Children, regularly at risk of failure or emotional problems, require long-term and professional care. Depending on the type of the problem at this level, a psychologist, special pedagogue, therapeutic educator, and/or speech therapist (therapy, counselling, guidance, re-education, support, and guidance of teachers, etc.) intervene individually. At this level, it is possible to offer specific support to some students or smaller groups. Individual professionals and teaching staff members work

closely with each other and **try to gradually return, with the individual child, back to level 1 in the classroom.**

U3 Level 3 – this level is about complex care for seriously endangered children and their families. The team works closely with the teachers, the school management, social pedagogue, counselling facilities, and other subjects to help children or families. The cases can involve crisis intervention after the death of a relative, cases of abuse, serious negligence, child endangerment, traumatic divorce, behavioural disorders, more serious health disadvantage, etc. It is necessary for the team in cooperation with the counselling facility to jointly plan the steps, hold meetings with minutes, draft agreements, propose effective steps, and their subsequent and joint inspection. These kinds of deeper and more complex solutions can require working with the child and the family on more levels – one expert deals with the environment and the child's family, the other works on therapy with the child, the class teacher can work (if necessary) with the whole class to support the child. Some cases also require inter-departmental cooperation (judiciary, social services, police, doctors, etc.). As the school is the closest establishment to the pupil and his family, it is essential that other entities, involved in the case, actively cooperate and coordinate their steps with the family and the school.



We cover Inclusive education

Inklucentrum – The Centre for Inclusive Education is an advocacy, educational, consulting expert organization on a national level, working in the field of support to inclusive education. It is dedicated to supporting quality and humanistic education in the school environment for the benefit of development of potential for all children, families and the school staff. It provides support, consulting and education in accredited programs and workshops, especially for pedagogical and professional employees.

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