



Greece: No School for Many Asylum-Seeking Kids

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[Greece's](#) Education Ministry should move quickly to implement positive new plans for the [education](#) of asylum-seeking [children](#) on the Aegean islands and make schools accessible to all of them, Human Rights Watch said today. When the school year began on September 11, 2017, hundreds of asylum-seeking children who are being prevented from leaving the islands due to a [European Union deal with Turkey](#) remained out of school.

Greece will extend a program that provides special Greek classes and integration support for non-native speaking pupils to asylum-seeking children on the islands. But this program excludes children in the so-called refugee hotspots and other reception facilities who cannot obtain the proof of address required to enroll in school. To reach children in these facilities, the Education Ministry recently announced it would open afternoon classes at public schools on the islands.

"Greece's Education Ministry has crucial work ahead as it attempts to improve the country's dismal record of denying access to school to children seeking asylum on the islands," said [Simon Rau](#), Mercator fellow at Human Rights Watch. "Children who have fled hellish conditions in search of safety in Europe need the support and hope a classroom provides and cannot wait until much of the school year has passed."

The new integration program and the afternoon classes will both exclude children over age 15, and a delay in providing vaccinations to asylum-seeking children poses problems because vaccinations are required for school enrollment. The ministry estimates that both programs will start in mid-October.

The Education Ministry should extend the programs to make formal education accessible to all asylum-seeking children of school-age as soon as possible, including for children over 15. It should speed up vaccinations so that the vaccination requirement is not a barrier to the right of all children to education. The ministry should end the arbitrary exclusion of children in refugee camps on the islands from public schools by opening the promised afternoon classes for them as soon as possible, and ensuring that they can obtain a proof of address to enroll.

In late August, Human Rights Watch interviewed 47 children ages 6 to 17 and/or their parents, who had arrived on the Greek islands of Lesbos, Samos, and Chios before the end of the last school year. None had gone to school there. "Aram," a father from Kobane, [Syria](#), who has been living with his four school-age children in the Kara Tepe camp on Lesbos for more than a year said: "Without education they lose their future, but they have not done anything wrong."

Under Greek law, all asylum-seeking children in the country [have the right to enroll in public schools](#). However, during the 2016-2017 school year, only 40 asylum-seeking children on the island of Lesbos could enroll in school, while about 530 asylum-seeking children of school age - ages 6 to 17 - were on the island as of August 29, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) officials on the island. According to UNHCR on Chios, the island had 261 asylum-seeking children of school age in late August/early September, but not a single asylum-seeking child had been able to enroll in school in the 2016-2017 school year. On Samos, seven asylum-seeking children had enrolled, but 374 children of school age were registered on the island with UNHCR as of August.

In the 2016-2017 school year, Greece opened [so-called afternoon preparatory \(DYEP\) classes](#) to integrate asylum-seeking children into public schools on the Greek mainland. Enrolled children could attend [lessons in Greek, English, mathematics, sports, arts, and computer science](#) between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m.

By March, [2,643 had enrolled](#), but the program did not cover the islands. [A report](#) by an expert committee on education for refugee children in Greece said the Ministry of Migration Policy had set the restriction. On September 13, the Education Ministry told Human Rights Watch that it expected afternoon classes for asylum-seeking children in camps on the islands to open by mid-October, about a month after the school year in Greece began. The Ministry of Migration Policy should support opening public schools on the islands to all asylum-seeking children.

The Greek government's "Zones of Educational Priorities" (ZEP) program allows public schools with nine or more registered pupils who are not Greek native speakers to set up an "integration" class. Children in [these classes](#) receive special lessons in Greek, English, science, and mathematics to prepare them for full integration into Greek schools. They join their Greek peers in other classes, such as sports, information technology, and music.

For the 2017-2018 school year, the Education Ministry has [secured funding](#) for 700 ZEP classes across the country. A UNHCR official told Human Rights Watch that the program would be the first opportunity for asylum-seeking children on Chios to go to school.

That the ZEP classes will not open before mid-October risks causing children to drop out despite the new program, as they have to start the school year without the support of special classes. Eight-year-old "Sanya," from Syria, told Human Rights Watch that she looked forward to going to school on Lesbos, but her father Kamal worried that she may struggle with the Greek language.

All asylum-seeking children on the Greek mainland, including those in refugee camps, are eligible to join a ZEP class. On the islands, however, the program will exclude children living in camps, because they cannot obtain the proof of address required for school enrollment. On Samos, only 52 of the 374 asylum-seeking children ages 6 to 17 registered with UNHCR in August lived outside camps. In late August/early September on Chios, 43 of the 261 children ages 6 to 17 did, as did about a quarter of the [1,419 children on Lesbos](#) as of July 31.


Greek law requires certain vaccinations for school enrollment, but these are not available for all asylum-seeking children before the beginning of the school year. According to a coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières, an international medical humanitarian organization that provides medical services to asylum-seekers in Greece, a lack of coordination between the Ministries of

Health, Education, and Migration Policy is causing vaccination delays. While vaccinations were expected to be finalized for all children eligible for ZEP classes on Samos and Chios by mid-September, this may take until mid-October on Lesbos, said UNHCR officials on the islands.

"Greece [promised](#) to make public schools accessible to asylum-seeking children last year, but completely left out children on the islands," Rau said. "The new plans are laudable progress, but asylum-seeking children on the islands cannot wait any longer for Greece to fulfil their basic right to education."

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