

Availability of Education in Serbia – Main Issues and Recommendations

Summary

The right to education is a basic human and civilizational right, established in the Constitution and other fundamental international documents ratified by the Republic of Serbia. This status, i.e., the right to education obliges legislative and executive authorities to ensure the availability of quality, free and regular education to every child at least to the level determined as compulsory (in the Republic of Serbia this is 8 years, plus half a year of compulsory preschool education). Education is key to social advancement and economic well-being, and at the same time it is a condition for the achievement of many other economic, social and cultural rights.

Main Issues in the Area of Education in Serbia are:

The right to primary (compulsory) education is still not available to the entire population of Serbia. There are no reliable and verifiable data on early school leaving, nor data on the working population without a completed primary school education (a compulsory eight-year education was introduced in Serbia/Yugoslavia 60 years ago). According to official sources, the early school leaving rate is 0.4%. At the same time, UNICEF claims that 15% of children from Roma communities are excluded from the education system.

Preschool institution capacities are insufficient. The number of children enrolled in preschool institutions in Serbia is 55.9% of the contingent. The number of ‘children through capacity’ was 5.6%, and ‘the number of children not admitted due to capacity utilisation’ was 3.1% (data from 2018). In addition to listing positive trends and achieved results, the *Annual Report (2018) on the Implementation of the Action Plan for Implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia until 2020*, points to two negative phenomena: (1) there are significant differences between municipalities in terms of the coverage of children with a pre-school upbringing and education. More developed (or: wealthier) municipalities more often have a higher enrolment rate than less wealthy and especially poor municipalities (in seven municipalities the percentage of children enrolled in preschool is below 30% of the contingent), and (2) children from Roma neighbourhoods (enclaves) are mostly excluded from preschools.

An inadmissibly large number of primary school facilities **fail to meet the minimum sanitary, hygienic and construction standards** set in the *Rulebook on Norms of the Space, Equipment and Teaching Aids for Primary Schools* (RS Official Gazette - Education Gazette, No. 4/90). The *Report on Risk Factors for the Health of Children in the School Environment for 2018* (Dr Milan Jovanović Batut Institute of Public Health Belgrade, 2019) states that in this same year, of the inspected facilities, 20% were assessed as not in satisfactory condition: the supply of drinking water in half of the facilities inspected in 2018 is unsafe; local water facilities used by schools are mostly aged, neglected and do not meet the prescribed technical and sanitary-hygienic requirements, there are no sanitary protection zones or they are not subject to proper maintenance, there is pollution near the source, when analyses are done there is a high percentage of defective water samples (microbiological, physico-chemical or both, depending on region) and no water purification and disinfection is performed; rural schools generally have the same issues: buildings are old, classrooms have inadequate floor coverings; cleanliness is difficult to maintain, school furniture is inadequate, lighting is inadequate and carpentry is dilapidated; liquid and solid wastes

are often disposed of unsatisfactorily; sanitary facilities are not provided in all facilities; classrooms are also not always rated as hygienic. It should be added to this Report the already notorious fact that close to a thousand primary school buildings do not have indoor toilet facilities, rather students use improvised, unhygienic and risky outhouses. A few months after the publication of the Public Health Institute's report, the corresponding Minister announced that "95% of the toilets in Serbian schools have been 'put in order'". (rs.n1info.com/vesti/a534395/Sarcevic-Toaleti-u-skolama-dovedeni-u-red) (14 October 2019). It is enough to compare these two sources for one to understand the type of manipulation and lack of interest there is in providing conditions within schools as defined by the Constitution. The attitude of the legislative and executive authorities towards education can be assessed by the fact that most of the improvements made to facilities and schooling conditions in Serbia over the last 20 years has been achieved thanks to funding from the international community (European Union, IPA funds, individual EU countries).

Working in two, and in some urban schools in three shifts, is a common way of organising classes in a large number of primary schools in urban areas, but also in the peripheral zones of towns/cities, with intensive housing construction. Data on the shift work of schools go almost completely unmonitored, which would be necessary since harmonising the working hours of primary schools with the working hours of (employed) parents is one of the conditions for the safe upbringing and protection of children. Also, there are no data on the number of children taking full-time classes or those who remain in after school care.

Educational facilities are **spatially inaccessible to a large number of young people** from remote rural communities and hilly and mountainous areas. A *Special Report prepared by the Ombudsman Inclusive Education - Additional Support Services for Children and Students in Education* (Belgrade, October, 2018) claims that "children living in remote areas are not provided with full support services that would ensure the full inclusion of children in curricular, extra-curricular and community and peer group activities. In most cases, the only form of support is financial compensation for transportation costs, which is often insufficient to provide for the adequate transportation of children to and from school in a way that will enable full inclusion in the community. (...) There are no services available to children that enable their full inclusion in the community with appropriately organised transportation that takes into account the schedules and other needs of these children." (pg. 8).

Secondary education is poorly available to children whose parent do not live in urban areas which have (chosen, desirable) secondary schools. Dorms available to secondary school students **can accommodate approximately 4.3% of those enrolled in secondary school** (2018). We will not get into the topic of the quality of living and learning conditions within these dorms. Small dorm capacities indicate that students focus on high schools located in the town/city their family lives i.e., they do not have the opportunity to choose a secondary school, and that children from rural areas have little chance of receiving dorm accommodation, as well as that the deficit of (quantitative and qualitative) secondary boarding schools 'bottleneck' decrease the coverage of young people who continue their education after completing primary/compulsory education.

In the 2018/2019 academic year, **only 6.9% (or 7.9%, depending on the source) of students lived in a dorm while completing their studies**. The scarce capacity of student dorms indicates great deprivation and inaccessibility to higher education for young people from an economically weaker social strata, as well as for young people who do not live in urban areas where

universities/faculties are located. According to the RZS's (Statistical Office of the RS) database, practically **nine out of ten students (86.9%) are financed from private funds during their studies** (dependent - 75.6%, or personal income in the form of property, savings or inheritance - 11.3%). Just **6.5% of students use some form of scholarship**. These data indicate that in Serbia today, the prospects of acquiring a higher education depend predominantly on level of income and the availability of property and the support of parents and relatives. These data confirm numerous forms of sociological research conducted on the significant reduction of vertical social mobility and social progress is limited by the borders of its social stratum (class) in Serbia, which began to emerge more predominantly in the early 1970s throughout ex-Yugoslavia. In other words, quality education is no longer the main channel to vertical social mobility.

Recommendations:

- improving the quality of compulsory education in small district schools in peripheral zones of towns/cities and rural communities may be achieved through the use of **mobile services** ('customer-oriented services') such as the provision of mobile classrooms/buses, mobile teaching teams, mobile libraries/library buses, transport minibuses for transporting students to and from school, etc.
- achieving **minimal sanitary-hygienic and construction standards** within primary school facilities. Determining deadlines and defining those responsible for implementing the norms established in the applicable *Rulebook on Norms of the Space, Equipment and Teaching Aids for Primary Schools*.
- supporting the **organisation and subsidised status of complementary content** that increases the availability of education for the later grades of primary school, secondary school and higher education, such as: dorms, organised and interconnected offer of licensed private accommodation, boarding schools/kitchens, secondary school and university campuses, and the like. The function of these is to expand the gravitational area from which the users of these services come and to increase the quality of the services on offer.
- specialised secondary and higher education and scientific-research centres may become one of the **trademarks of smaller towns**. Securing space in which to organise these activities may be achieved by converting military barracks and other infrequently used facilities into educational centres for both secondary and higher education. We refer to successful examples of these types of conversions in Novi Sad, Čačak, as well as in other countries/towns/cities located in ex-Yugoslavia (Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Croatia and Slovenia).
- to include **measures to increase (provide for) spatial availability** in educational institutions in educational strategies, action plans and programmes.
- to place particular focus on **areas with widespread deprivation** (Roma enclaves, poor villages and hamlets) where education has been pushed to the margins under circumstances of daily misery and the fight for survival.

Ksenija Petovar
Professor (retired) at the Faculty of Architecture and Geography at the
University of Belgrade
Member of the Board of Directors of the Center for Democracy Foundation