



Building Bridges in Schools

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina's *Building Bridges* project aims to bring students, teachers and parents together to learn about the diverse traditions, peoples and religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to strengthen bonds among and between schools and communities.

Since the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina began to engage in education reform issues in 2002, the task of helping to create or rebuild links within and between divided communities has been at the core of its work.

In post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), there are many schools where children from different ethnic or social backgrounds are discouraged, rather than encouraged, to communicate with each other. To address this issue, as part of the *Building Bridges* project, the Mission facilitates interaction and dialogue between students in divided communities. The project also encourages local education authorities to introduce new subjects, themes and activities in schools that will foster respect for diversity and civic activism.

The *Building Bridges* project educates school communities about the diversity of the peoples, religions and traditions of BiH and presents this diversity as a source of wealth and pride, as opposed to a source of distrust or conflict. The project also aims to create closer links between schools and local communities by supporting and encouraging the work of school civic bodies, such as student and parent councils. Furthermore, the Mission strives to establish sustainable local mechanisms, by working with a variety of education stakeholders at all levels of authority, to ensure the long-term implementation of these initiatives.

Objectives

- Encourage the development of a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity in schools
- Promote peaceful resolution of conflicts between students, teachers and parents
- Reinforce school bodies (student, parent and teacher councils) to democratize the functioning of schools
- Encourage teaching about the BiH national minorities in schools by publishing and promoting a student workbook and teacher guide about national minorities
- Encourage teaching about all religions practiced in BiH and beyond

Tolerance, Respect and Co-operation

BiH's post-war society struggles with strong ethno-national divisions and these divisions are reflected in the country's education system. Each ethnic community has the right to teach its history, language and traditions to its children; however, this right should not overshadow the necessity to teach children how to learn about others, value diversity, and be open-minded and tolerant citizens in a democratic society.



Local *Building Bridges* initiatives provide education stakeholders from divided or neighbouring mono-ethnic communities with improved knowledge and skills related to issues of dialogue, tolerance, teamwork and diversity. The projects are mostly implemented via workshops or through joint work on a project or training of shared interest. The various events bring together students, parents and school staff from across ethnic divides and enable them to get to know each other personally thereby combating prejudice, isolation and intolerance.

Through the *Peer Mediation* project, implemented in the wider Srebrenica region, the Mission has provided and promoted strategies for improving the school climate by countering juvenile delinquency and conflict among youth. The project includes teaching students, teachers and parents non-violent conflict management strategies and providing insight on how to apply these methods in their schools and beyond.

School Civic Bodies

Student councils in BiH are nominally present in each primary and secondary school, as prescribed by law. However, student participants often lack the necessary knowledge which decreases the effectiveness of student councils and their ability to shape school policy. Moreover, student councils do not receive enough help from their schools when it comes to both moral support and the facilitation of meetings and activities. Parent councils face similar problems, with their efficiency additionally hampered by lack of motivation and information.

Student and parent councils are important grass-roots school bodies with an inherent capacity to carry out positive democratic change and reform in their communities. The Mission focuses on developing sustainable mechanisms for assisting student, parent and teacher council members to develop their capacities and improve their work. In order to increase the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of student councils, the Mission implemented the *Peer Education* project to train Peer Educators, who in turn have succeeded in transferring their knowledge to peers in their schools and neighbouring schools. The Mission is planning capacity building workshops for parent councils and activities to raise awareness about the importance of their work among local communities.

Most of the field-based projects promoting diversity and inter-school co-operation also involve school civic bodies, to capitalize on their strong potential to become lasting and sustainable agents of change in their schools and communities.

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina assists BiH in meeting its OSCE commitments and in progressing towards its stated goal of Euro-Atlantic integration by strengthening security and stability through completion of peace-building within the Dayton framework and developing inclusive political discourse and democratically accountable institutions that respect diversity, promote consensus and respect the rule of law. The Mission takes a comprehensive and integrated approach through its field presence, reflecting an emphasis on developing cohesive communities and on the timely identification of obstacles to progress.