

The OSCE Mission to BiH and Education Reform: Towards Post-War Statebuilding, Respect for Diversity and Civic Citizenship

Education as a post-Conflict Security Issue

The Mission established a Department dedicated to supporting the education reform process in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2002. The country's post-war, fractured and divisive education policies were clearly detrimental to the Mission's goal of helping BiH evolve into a democratic, stable and secure state upholding all human and constitutional rights.

The primary objective of the Mission's work in education is to promote political and legislative changes so that BiH develops a holistic education system accessible, acceptable and effective for all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic background, gender or socio-economic status, thus supporting the long-term stability and security of the country. Mission members work in Sarajevo and in the Mission's 14 field offices, providing the only school-level, community view of the status of reform implementation, and of the current state of education in the country.

It is not an exaggeration to note that the country will only be as successful, stable and united as its schools. If the voters of tomorrow are educated according to the norms of nationalist division and exclusionary ethnic principles, BiH will remain at constant risk of further fragmentation or dissolution. If future citizens receive an education that promotes tolerance, an appreciation of complex European identities and civic participation in social and public life, post-Dayton BiH will have a much greater chance at democratic consolidation.

Education reform is not traditionally a post-conflict, transition support activity. However, there is growing awareness in the region and in other divided post-war societies that education plays a critical role in shaping the worldview of youth and their families, in forming attitudes to human rights and diversity and in promoting (or hindering) the development of tolerant, civic-minded future leaders and citizens. The current fractured system, in which students learn according to three biased, ethnically-colored curricula, and are therefore either assimilated or segregated, is having the effect of creating three separate sets of citizens, each ignorant and distrustful of the "other".

Key Successes

The Mission has led or supported a number of activities and efforts that have each helped to chip away at the division and segregation that pervades the status quo:

- Adoption of the state-level Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in 2003, which lays down the principles for a more cohesive education system that respects the rights of all – if the political will exists to implement it in letter and spirit;
- Establishment, together with other international agencies active in the field of education, of a Conference of Ministers of Education as a state-level advisory body;
- Progress in removing inappropriate and exclusionary symbols in schools through direct intervention and ongoing support for a local body overseeing this task;
- Implementation of projects in divided communities such as Srebrenica, Mostar, Stolac and other regions so that students/parents can meet their fellow citizens, learn about the country's diversity and learn skills to enhance their future leadership potential;
- Development of a course titled Culture of Religions, together with the Goethe Institute and the NGO Sarajevo Open Centre, which teaches students about religion through an inclusive, non-denominational approach aimed at tolerance and understanding;

- Support for the establishment of student and parent councils in schools throughout BiH, a network of trained student peer educators, and civic body training manuals;
- Multi-year support, in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the Georg Eckert Institute for Textbook Research, to a core group of trainers of history and geography textbook authors, combined with an initiative to remove hate speech, has led to the development of modern multi-perspective textbooks.

Continuing Challenges and Priorities

The pace and intensity of education reform in many ways reflects the pace of state-strengthening and reform efforts in BiH generally. Full implementation and interpretation of legislation and related competencies, has also depended on the extent to which the broader political environment has been focussed on state consolidation versus fragmentation.

A number of crucial challenges remain, and necessitate a long-term commitment to the country in general and education reform in particular. The current system in which children are subjected to ethnically biased curricula must be replaced with a more holistic system in which state-level learning objectives and standards, together with a system of elective courses, ensure that children spend more time learning together than learning apart. The issue of religion in public education is becoming a more heated political debate, and, if not addressed through a state-wide framework of respect for students' rights and diversity, this could further polarize communities and schools. While a state-level Education Agency will be established in 2008, its role in terms of setting and enforcing state-level standards - as opposed to playing a purely advisory role - remains undefined; continued pressure must be placed on officials engaged in this effort to ensure that the Agency is substantive and meaningful, and can ensure state-wide standards of education for all children.

Finally, it is important that education reform is viewed in terms of the impact of education on the protection of human rights, access and the development of the country's future citizens and leaders. Education can not be viewed as a simple issue of public administration reform, and the weaknesses of the current system cannot be solved through simple technical assistance with expert support. The lingering wartime politics of separation which underlie the current divisions must be acknowledged, and school- and student-level solutions aimed at bridging divided communities, promoting a culture of tolerance and a respect for diversity, must be further developed and supported.

OSCE Efforts in 2008 - Highlights

Key Mission efforts in 2008 include the following:

- Development of a student workbook on BiH's 17 national minorities, to assist teachers in teaching about the diversity of the country;
- Assessment of newly developed, modern history textbooks introduced in schools in the last school year;
- Series of school-level discussions on the potential role of the BiH Education Agency ;
- Promotion of the Breko District model of integrated education;
- Development of a series of events in divided communities throughout BiH aimed at providing opportunity for constructive school and community interaction;
- Expansion and consolidation of the course "Culture of Religions," including the development of a textbook, to reflect the OSCE's Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools and to promote a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity;
- Moral, political and programmatic support to reform-minded politicians under pressure to maintain the status quo, and quality-minded parents and students who are voiceless in the current polarized political climate.