

## **OSCE Mission to BiH: Key Successes in the Education Reform Process**

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

### **1) Reform of the legislative and institutional framework**

- A state-level Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education was adopted in 2003, providing the principles for a more cohesive education system which respects the rights of all – if the political will exists to implement it both in letter and spirit.
- Following efforts aimed at depoliticizing the education sector, a trend has recently been observed across BiH regarding proposing amendments to primary and secondary education laws concerning the election of school boards and the appointment of school directors: issues which are highly vulnerable to politicization. These amendments are in line with the recommendations offered in the Mission's 2007 public report on school boards.
- The Mission, together with other international agencies active in the field of education, advocated for the establishment of a mechanism to ensure and improve coordination among the numerous (14) Ministers of Education. These efforts bore fruit in January 2008 when a Conference of Ministers of Education in BiH was created by a mutual agreement of all Ministers. This state-level advisory body creates a platform for potentially better coordination and cooperation in the future.
- The Law on the establishment of an Agency for Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education in BiH was adopted in 2007 after many years of effort. The state-level Agency will be in charge of establishing standards of knowledge, assessing student achievements and developing common core curricula. While important, successful implementation will depend on real political will to make this a robust, rather than Potemkin, body. In 2008, the Mission will implement a public outreach initiative to inform parents, students, teachers and other interested parties about the importance and role of the Agency and seek their input and ideas.

### **2) Civil society and bridging divided communities**

- Building on over 1200 interviews with relevant stakeholders, the Mission initiated an effort aimed at improving good governance and civic participation in the country's school boards. A pilot project has been launched to support a grassroots group in developing training materials for school board members, with plans to expand the effort to other parts of the country.
- The Mission, both directly and through implementing partners, provided support to establish and strengthen student and parent councils in schools throughout BiH. Through this effort, a network of 30 trained student peer educators was established to serve as the foundation for ongoing capacity building. This network gave birth to an association of secondary school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina, gathering over 150 students. Additionally, the Mission directly supported working groups of student and parent council members to develop, print and distribute student and parent council manuals. Over 15,000 student council and 20,000 parent council manuals have been disseminated to BiH schools, together with associated training events.
- Various efforts targeting the notorious "two-schools-under-one-roof" and other extreme examples of segregation in BiH have remained in the spotlight. These are highly sensitive communities, and incremental efforts aim to promote and encourage interaction among otherwise divided students, parents and teachers. In 2007, a year in which Srebrenica remained a flashpoint, the Mission brought together over 40 students of different backgrounds

from the Srebrenica region to learn how to more effectively work in their school's student councils. Several students also implemented small grant opportunities designed to allow students to use their new skills, make immediate improvements to the community life of their schools and meet their peers in a way that broke down stereotypes of "the other." Similar efforts are underway in the polarized town of Stolac and in other divided communities.

### **3) Promoting tolerance, equal access and non-discrimination:**

- The Mission's 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 from school books, has led to the development of the Guidelines for Writing and Evaluation of History Textbooks. This further resulted in the development of 29 new history textbooks and training for over 100 history teachers in implementing these new resources. Although all authors tried to respect the Guidelines, the degree to which they succeeded is rather different and the textbooks should be further developed in order to be modern and multi-perspective. These improved textbooks are being used for the first time this year in a number of BiH's schools, and the Mission is evaluating the introduction of these textbooks and examining ways to expand their use.
- Over 40,000 leaflets highlighting the importance of school enrolment for all (especially Roma and girls) were distributed in disadvantaged parts of the country. The 2007/2008 school year has seen a rise in the enrolment of Roma children, though continued attention to this issue is crucial. Additionally, the Mission, together with UNESCO and other local and international partners, sponsored the first regional Education for All Forum in Sarajevo to discuss progress and challenges in educational access in the region.
- Progress has been noted in removing inappropriate and exclusionary symbols in schools through direct intervention and ongoing support for a local body overseeing this task. Nevertheless, numerous cases of non-compliance with the criteria remain, which indicate that the Mission must continue to have dialogue with local counterparts and urge local institutions to remove objectionable names and symbols and ensure that schools promote inclusion.
- A course titled *Culture of Religions* was developed together with the Goethe Institute and the NGO Sarajevo Open Centre, to teach students about BiH's four main religions through an inclusive, non-denominational approach aimed at promoting tolerance and understanding. The course has been incorporated into the regular school curriculum in three Cantons and piloted in some schools in the Republika Srpska and the District of Brčko. In 2008, a Culture of Religions textbook will be developed, and efforts to expand the course to more schools in BiH continue.

### **4) Raising awareness of education and education reform**

- The Mission organized a photo competition to give students the chance to express their concerns and hopes for the future of education in BiH through photography. There was great interest, as more than 700 pictures were sent in by students and schools from across the country. The winning 100 pictures were selected for a photo exhibition, which toured 34 towns across BiH, providing communities with the chance to see how the issue is framed by their fellow citizens.
- Motivated by the dismal, sub-standard quality of many of the country's schools, as well as by a sobering 2006 public opinion poll, the Mission developed a public information campaign on education financing entitled *Better Planning - Better Budgets - Better Schools*, aimed at re-framing the education reform debate in BiH towards good management and the effective allocation and use of resources. A million flyers were distributed along with phone solicitations, thus reaching practically every household in BiH. Reactions from interlocutors at all levels suggest that this campaign did reach people, and that all agree that improvements are needed. Public discussions and roundtables continued the debate in 2008, with recommendations from these events sent to the appropriate authorities for their action.