

Education in Croatia

Context

Access to public education in Croatia continues to be a governmental priority. Despite the international economic recession, the government has continued to support reforms aimed at improving schools.

Impact of the economic crisis

While neighbouring countries were hit hard by the economic downturn, the Croatian government anticipated a slowing economy and implemented anti-recession measures that successfully softened the impact of the global financial crisis. The government monitored revenues, cut expenditures and rebalanced the national budget. As a result, international investors continue to view Croatia as a solid emerging market. National concern lingers, however, since export demands are down and tourism (which accounts for 20 per cent of GDP) is anticipated to be light.

Croatia has been an official candidate for accession to the European Union (EU) since 2004 and hopes to accede in 2011; however, due to toughening EU rules, the process may take longer. Croatia's EU accession is supported by its stable and growing economy. Its GNP (PPP) is US\$15,540 per capita, which is about average for Central and Eastern Europe.

Although Croatia's economy is the strongest in the CEECIS region, it struggles with a high unemployment rate, rising trade deficit and uneven regional development. Long-term unemployment stands at 12 per cent, and about 11 per cent of Croatians live below the national poverty line. Croatia nevertheless ranks relatively high on the Human Development Index, at 45 out of 182 countries, with an HDI of 0.871.



Source: MoSES Croatia.

As an EU candidate, there is increased pressure on the government to improve social services, including education. Croatia is ahead of many of its neighbours in Southeast Europe in terms of educational access, quality and equity; however, obstacles still remain before Croatia matches the educational standards of the EU.

Education reform

Since attaining its independence in 1991, Croatia has launched a host of education reforms that have served to accelerate school improvement, including:

- The Education Sector Development Plan 2005–2010, a strategic document for the development of preschool, primary, secondary, higher and adult education. According to the European Education Commission, "The Development Plan integrates the principles of lifelong learning at all levels of education by focusing on developing learning-to-learn attitudes and skills."
- The establishment of 29 new kindergartens in areas that did not previously have organized programmes for preschool children (with financial support from the World Bank).

Quick facts about education in Croatia

Total population	4.6 million
GDP spent on education	4.6%
Net pre-primary school enrolment, 2007 (Gender Parity Index, GPI)	52% (0.97)
Net enrolment in primary school, 2007 (GPI)	90% (0.99)
Net enrolment in secondary school, 2007 (GPI)	87% (1.02)
Gross enrolment in tertiary enrolment, 2007 (GPI)	46% (1.23)
Primary school student/teacher ratio, 2007	17:1
Out-of-school children (per cent girls), 2007	2.2million (5%)
Number of refugees and internally displaced persons (2010)	3,523*
PISA 2009 score: mathematics, reading, science(rank/65)	460 (40), 476(36), 486 (37)

Source: UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010; UN Refugee Agency, Croatia Profile*

- The emergence of a 2008–2013 strategy aimed at developing vocational education.
- The participation in Education and Training 2010, an EU reform focused on outlining future objectives in education.
- The creation and introduction of the Croatian National Educational Standard for primary schools.
- The goal of introducing foreign language at the primary and secondary level.
- The priority of ensuring equal access to all children, including EU nationals and children of migrant workers.
- The establishment of a national strategy during 2009–2012 for the prevention of behavioural disorder among children and adolescents.
- The adoption of an action plan as part of the National Programme for Roma to reduce the cycle of poverty and exclusion.
- The development of a national qualification framework and the adoption of the 2012 Plan of Activities for the rights and interests of children.

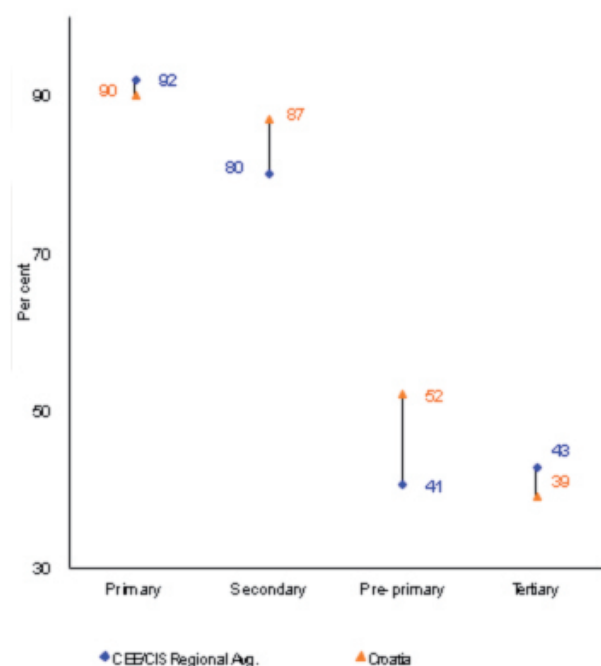
Access

Croatia continues to be a regional leader on access to education. Pre-primary and secondary education enrolment ratios are above the CEECIS regional averages (see Figure 1).

Early childhood education

The government's commitment to expand access to early childhood education has increased enrolment. The net enrolment rate (NER) in pre-primary education is 52 per cent, which is a 6 per cent increase from 2005. It does, however, remain below current EU participation rates, which were 88.5 per cent in 2007, and even further from the proposed rate of participation for 2020 in the EU of 90 per cent.

Figure 1. Net education enrolment rates in Croatia and the CEECIS region



Basic education

The country's primary NER is 90 per cent, which is just below the regional average of 92 per cent. Primary school is eight years and divided into two parts; classes 1 to 4, and 5 to 8. Only 0.3 per cent students repeat a grade, but 2,200 children remain out of school.

The NER for secondary school is 87 per cent, which is above both the regional and subregional averages. The government's decision to make secondary school compulsory has helped boost enrolment at this level. Gross enrolment in tertiary education is 46 per cent. To enter tertiary education, a student must pass an entrance examination. The state secondary school exit examinations are currently replacing the traditional entrance examinations to most higher education institutions.

Children with disabilities

Two options are available for learners with special-needs in Croatia: regular institutions and special education institutions. In regular institutions (kindergartens, primary and secondary schools) students are either in inclusive settings, or mainstream classes with special education groupings. Some supports are built into the system to aid students, such as a new inclusive Croatian curriculum, the focus of which is to support all learners in the classroom.

Special education institutions are designed specifically for children with disabilities. In these schools, the regular curriculum is adjusted and modified to accommodate a student's particular disability. While there is minimal student achievement data available from these institutions, there are concerns over the limited funding to cover high quality teachers and material costs.

Challenges facing youth and adolescents

Secondary schools are under increasing pressure to address the current realities confronting Croatian youth. Unemployment among young adults (under 24 years) continues to be exceedingly high. Crime and increased poverty are also concerns.

With secondary school now compulsory, there is greater discussion about the quality of schooling, courses and timetables at this level. Teachers are expected to provide increasing numbers of students with the skills and preparation to be marketable upon graduation. A new qualification framework is being considered to address this (see Box 1).

The Croatian government is also attempting to engage young Croatians. The government adopted the Youth Council Act in 2007. The Youth Council aims to encourage the development of decision-making skills and participation in public life by young people. Community-based family centres are also emerging to provide youth and adolescents with a place to go to discuss health issues and concerns.

Box 1. The Croatian Qualifications Framework 2008–2012

The Croatian Qualifications Framework 2008–2012 is “the instrument for the establishment of gained qualifications in the Republic of Croatia. It encompasses the creation of occupational standards (qualifications) and school curriculum and represents the harmonization of education with the labourmarket needs and analysis of curricula. It is an important precondition for the administration of lifelong learning which is the backbone of a knowledge-based society.”

Source: Republic of Croatia National Programme for the Alliance of Civilizations 2008–2012

Equity

The Croatian education system has largely achieved gender parity; however it still does not provide equity of access to all subnational populations. Inequities in access to educational services are most severe between ethnic groups and towards Roma children.

Ethnic Serbs often do not receive the same quality of instruction as Croatians. Resentment lingers from the civil war between the two groups. Discrepancies between legal policies and social reality have surfaced in Croatia. The rights of national minorities are relatively well legislated, but the daily realities for Serbs remains dire. They continue to face discrimination in employment, housing and by the police. Recent communication between the presidents of Croatia and Serbia reveal a possible improvement in relations and perhaps the hope of improved conditions for Serbs in Croatia in the future.

Roma education

The official census recognizes 9,463 Roma in Croatia, but unofficial estimates suggest 30,000 to 40,000 as a more accurate number. The majority of Roma children do not attend preschool programmes and most enter primary school with minimal fluency in Croatian, the language of instruction. Attendance and retention rates for Roma remain low. Between ages 7 and 15, only 70 per cent of Roma are enrolled in school, while almost all non-Roma children are enrolled. Similar disparities exist in drop-out rates between Roma and non-Roma children.

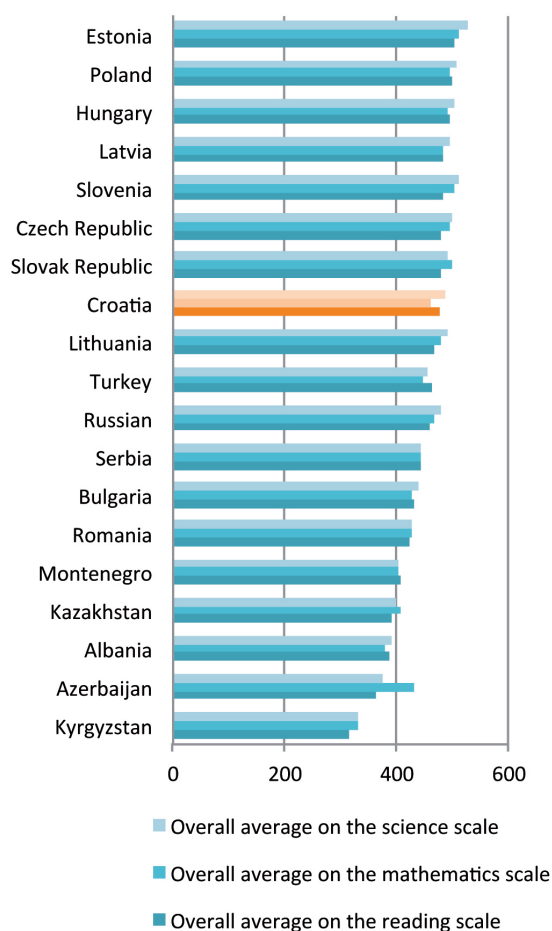
While ‘Roma-only’ classes have disappeared in Croatia, low expectations and negative stereotypes are still common. Racism and discrimination continue to be major concerns. Greater efforts to embrace Romani language, culture or traditions in schools could improve attendance and retention rates of these students. The basic financial costs associated with school also limit educational advancement for Roma children.

Learning outcomes and educational quality

Croatia participated in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Findings reveal that Croatian students outperform their peers in all other countries in South-Eastern Europe in reading, mathematics and science (see Figure 2). In all three subjects, Croatia performed at the level of its neighbours in Central Europe, and it scored ahead of Romania and Bulgaria, which are already part of the EU. Overall, Croatia scored 8th out of the 19 participating countries in the region. However, Croatia still requires much improvement before it can claim success globally. Out of 65 total participating countries, Croatia ranked 37th in science, 40th in mathematics and 36th in reading.

The Croatian government is committed to improving school efficiency. Although participation rates are high, the number of early school leavers is also high. The government has identified the reduction of school dropouts as a major challenge and priority, especially given that the EU sets its benchmark rate for early school leavers at less than 10 per cent. The majority of drop-outs occur in lower or upper secondary school, although only 91 per cent of children complete primary school, according to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008*.

Figure 2. Countries’ performance in reading, mathematics and science on PISA 2009



Education financing

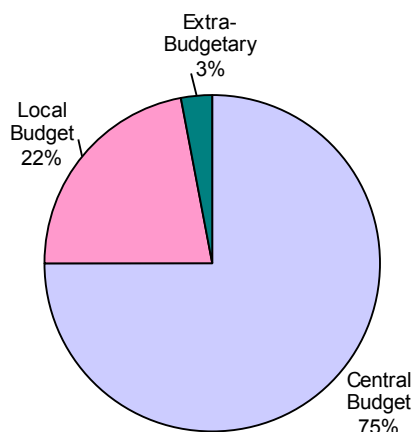
Croatia spends 4.6 per cent of its total GNP on education. Its financing system remains highly centralized compared to other countries in the region; 75 per cent of its education spending comes from the central government, and only 22 per cent from local governments (see Figure 3). The distribution of education spending shows that the largest portion of the education budget is spent on secondary education, which consumes 51 per cent of funds; 18 per cent of the education budget is spent on primary and tertiary education, 10 per cent is spent on pre-primary, and 4 per cent is unknown.

Educational priorities

As Croatia aims to become an official member state of the EU, the government is setting ambitious priorities and policy developments based upon a 2009 EU review. For education, these include:

- Reforming tuition fees and restructuring universities
- Improving participation in preschool education and adult participation in lifelong learning
- Improving inclusive education for minorities and disabled children

Figure 3. Sources of funds for public education, selected countries, latest available year



Source: UNICEF. *Education for Some More Than Others*. 2007.

- Encouraging professional training of teachers and other education sector employees
- Promoting education for social cohesion and economic growth and development
- Regulating the status and finances of the quality assurance agency



Source: MoSES Croatia.