

Education in Serbia

Context

The introduction of new education policies and initiatives over the past decade has yielded notable improvements in the national schooling system in Serbia. Greater efforts to reduce inequities between populations will further Serbia's aim of meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Impact of economic crisis

While neighbouring nations were severely affected by the global economic crisis, the impact on Serbia's financial sector was less severe, although external investments declined and end-of-year inflation was around 10 per cent. Of greatest concern is the nation's reliance on international capital inflow due to increasing debt. Given the current international economic downturn, it is less likely that funding will be available, which could pose problems in the near future for Serbia.

After real growth of 5.5 per cent in 2007 and 6.9 per cent in 2008, Serbia's GDP (PPP) per capita declined by 3 per cent in 2009 to US\$10,400. The nation's GDP is also on the low side for the Central and Eastern Europe subregion, at \$9,830 (PPP). Income inequality is relatively low in Serbia but slowly increasing, with a current Gini coefficient of 0.26, which is below many neighbouring states. On the Human Development Index, Serbia ranks 67 out of 182, with a score of 0.826.

Living standards in Serbia remain low for many families. As of 2008, 7.9 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line. The 18.8 per cent unemployment rate in Serbia is among the highest in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEECIS). Women are five times more likely than men to be without work. Youth unemployment remains a particular



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concern; 43.7 per cent of young people (40.7 per cent of men and 48.3 per cent of women) are without work. Over 80 per cent of Serbians who are unemployed have been out of work for over one year. Food prices are rising, directly affecting the living standards of the Serbian people.

Education reforms

Key education reform initiatives include:

- In 2004, the Law on the Foundation of the Education System was amended. The new Ministry of Education (MoE) distinguished the law from previous amendments, saying it would "provide a systematic, rational, and gradual approach towards the changes in the education system, capturing

Quick Facts about education in Serbia

Total population	7.3 million
GDP spent on education	3.8%
Gross enrolment in pre-primary school, 2008	98%
Net enrolment in primary school, 2008	95%
Net enrolment in secondary school, 2008	88%
Gross enrolment in tertiary enrolment, 2007(GPI)	48%
Student/teacher ratio, 2005	13:1
Out-of-school children (% girls)	12,000 (47%)
Number of refugees and internally displaced persons of concern	250,000
PISA scores: mathematics, reading, science (global rank)	435, (12), 401 (13), 436 (11)

Source: UNICEF Serbia, 2010.

the overall process, from the beginning to the completion of education, and not only parts of the process, which characterizes the existing law.”

- In 2006, the National Education Council was appointed by the Serbian Parliament as the highest body for education development and quality assurance.
- Commencing in 2006/2007, the Preparatory Preschool Programme became compulsory for the year prior to primary school.
- In 2008, UNICEF signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with four strategic goals addressing children with special needs: to transform residential institutions, to establish new standards for accountability and protection of child rights, to decentralize support services for families and children, and to establish a foster care system for boys and girls with disabilities.
- The MoE allocated 1.4 million euros to *A Child's Place is Within the Family*, a UNICEF initiative to support deinstitutionalization.
- In August 2009, Serbia adopted the Law on Foundations of the Education System, which provides a basis for inclusive education. The new provisions came into practice in the 2010/2011 school year. The aim is to provide equitable opportunities for all children, specifically those who are marginalized, economically disadvantaged, ethnic or linguistic minorities, disabled, internally displaced or living in itinerant communities.
- In November 2009, a new Law on Preschool Education was introduced. The law prioritized kindergarten enrolment for children from marginalized groups, which emphasizes the compensatory role of preschools for children who do not have adequate opportunities at home.
- Thirty percent of teachers are trained in child-centred education, where the focus is on active teaching/learning methods. The aim is to train all teachers so that child-centred instruction becomes the principal method of delivery.

A “School without Violence” (SwV) initiative has been implemented across the nation. The programme has increased awareness, shifted attitudes towards violence, and yielded safer school environments. The programme includes the development of plans for crisis situations, a parent’s manual and the promotion of fair play in sports and entertainment.

Access

Early childhood education

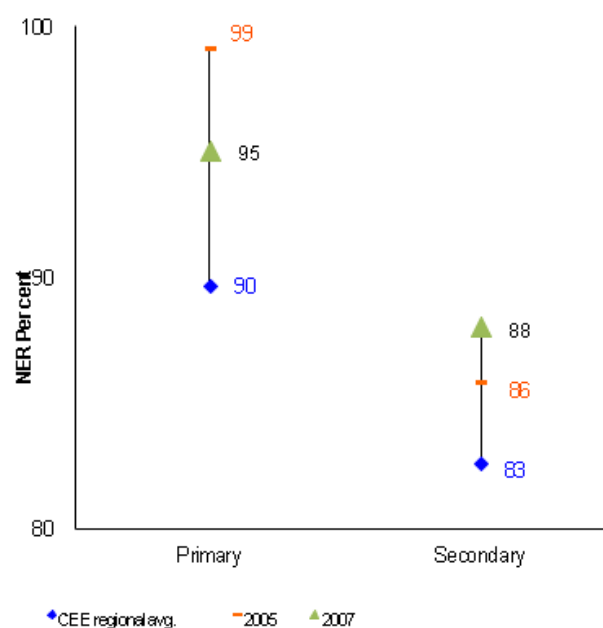
According to UNICEF Serbia, the gross enrolment rate (GER) for preschool education (for children from 3 to 5 years) is 98 per cent, though large discrepancies emerge when disaggregating the data by geographical area. For example, access is 100 per cent in Vojvodina, but drops as low as 33 per cent in some municipalities in eastern Serbia, according to the Serbian Ministry of Education. Similarly, ethnicity and geography sharply skews educational access: only 4 per cent of Roma children and 7 per cent of rural children are enrolled in preschool. Teacher

training to support Roma learners in early childhood centres is limited, as it is primarily provided through community-based and NGO programmes.

Basic education

Primary and secondary school enrolment are on par with other nations in the region, with net enrolment rates of 95 per cent and 88 per cent, respectively. However, according to *Global Monitoring Report 2010*, access has not improved significantly in the last decade for marginalized groups (see Figure 1). Access to tertiary education is 48 per cent.

Figure 1. Net enrolment rates in Serbia and CEE, 2005 and 2007



Educational challenges facing youth and adolescents

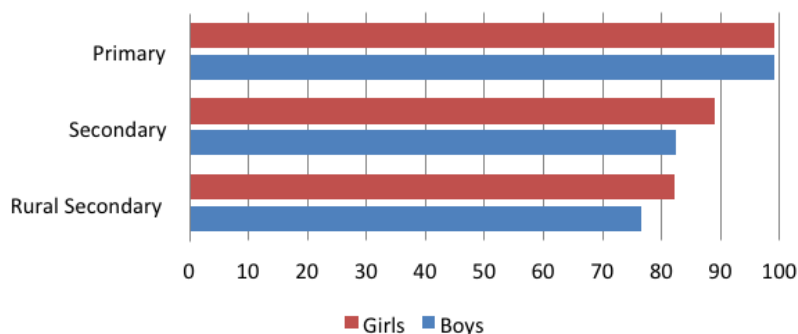
Many young people in Serbia are unsure about the value of completing education. Severe unemployment among this generation increases risky activity, low self-esteem and high interest in migration. The increasing violence and high rate of drug use (one out of every five youth in Serbia reports having a friend who uses drugs) are responses to these realities.

Equity

Greater efforts to address equity issues in Serbia are needed. Two primary equity issues demand immediate attention: the gap between rural/urban attendance, and the wide disparities between the retention and achievement of Roma children and children with disabilities.

In Serbia, a large gap remains between rural and urban enrolment (see Figure 2). Urban access is significantly greater than rural, with enrolment decreasing to 81.2 per cent in rural municipalities,

Figure 2. Enrolment trends in primary, secondary and rural secondary 2007



while some urban schools hold multiple shifts of classes each day to accommodate the large numbers of students. In remote areas, multi-age classes are often created to accommodate small class size, and some students commute substantial distances to attend school. A lack of qualified teachers in remote areas is also a concern and often hinders educational quality. In some areas, achievement levels of rural students lags by a whole year compared to their in-town peers.

While Serbia has essentially eliminated gender disparities in primary education – 99 per cent of boys and 99.1 per cent of girls attend primary school – a gender gap favouring girls remains in secondary school. Nationally, 88.9 per cent of girls attend secondary school, compared to 82.4 per cent of boys. This reverse gender gap is larger in rural areas, where only 76.5 per cent of boys attend secondary school, compared to 82.2 per cent of girls. This gap could be explained by boys having greater access to the labour force. Interestingly, in remote villages, the drop-out rates after primary school are higher for girls than boys. This is likely due to parents’ unease over young girls travelling long distances to and from school each day.

Children with disabilities

The Law on the Basis of the Education System, adopted in August 2009, reinforces a political commitment to provide inclusive national education. While adequate resources and regulations recognize the importance of inclusion, much more effort is required to change practices, behaviours and attitudes in Serbia. Currently, only 1 per cent of children special-needs have access to pre-primary education. At other educational levels, many children are hidden due to stigmas associated with their disabilities. Children with disabilities are also more likely than non-disabled peers to drop out of school. Special schools accommodate 15 per cent of students. Students with disabilities who are not at special schools are mainstreamed into regular schools where they receive minimal accommodations. There is no possibility for a student to transfer from a special facility to a mainstream school. Physical access and facilities for children with physical impediments are scarce as well.

Roma education

The most significant equity gap in education continues to be the divide between Roma and non-Roma children. For every four non-Roma children who go to primary school in Serbia, only three Roma children attend. By adolescence, only 10 per cent of Roma children attend school, compared with 86 per cent of the non-Roma population. Additionally, according to UNESCO, approximately 80 per cent of Roma children are placed in special schools for children with ‘mild mental problems’, which is extremely disproportionate considering that only 2 per cent of the population is Roma. Anti-discrimination laws are now in place, but change is slow.

In 2008, Serbia took over the presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015. Under the Serbian presidency, the following priorities were established: the right to education, fostering inclusion, monitoring Decade goals and developing the European framework for Roma inclusion.

Learning outcomes and quality

Serbia’s low performance on international assessments reopened the dialogue on school quality. Aside from the international measurements, little data is available on internal school processes in Serbia, yet with such low learning outcomes, it is apparent that school efficiency remains poor.

On the Trends in Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS) 2003, Serbia performed above the international average in mathematics, and it scored 8th out of the 12 participating countries in the region. In science, Serbia scored below the international average and third to last in the region (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Distribution of overall science achievement on 2003 TIMSS, grade 8

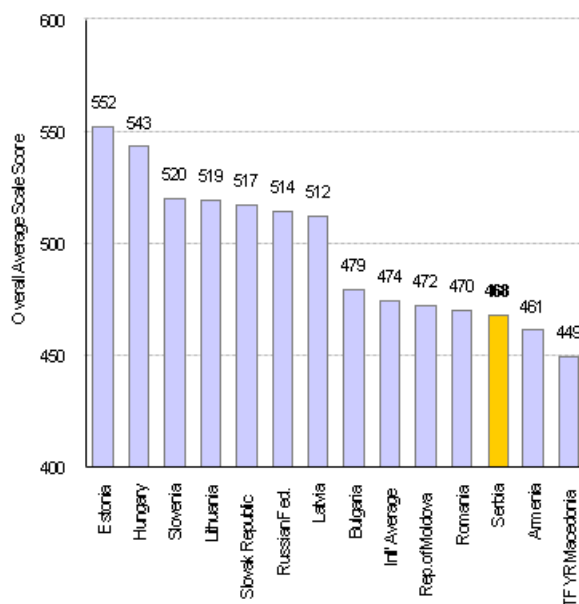
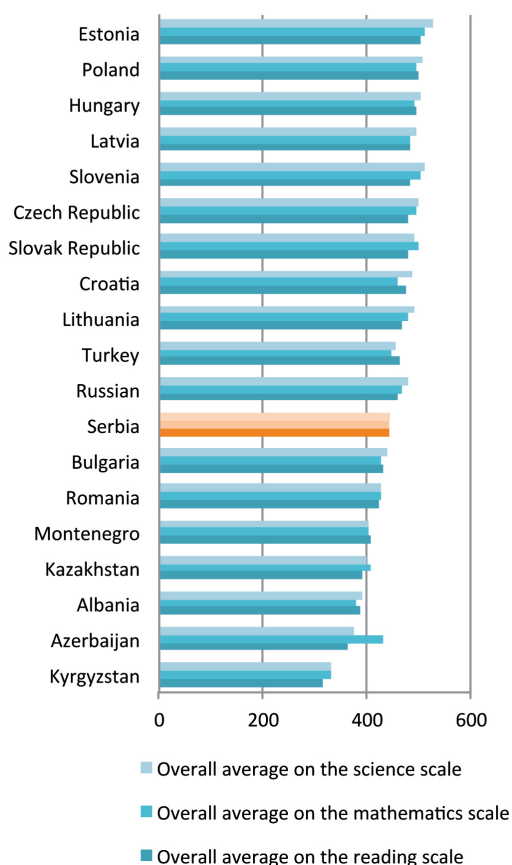


Figure 4. Countries' performance in reading, mathematics and science on PISA 2009



Serbia scored 12th overall out of 19 participating countries in the region in reading, mathematics and science on PISA 2009 (see Figure 4). Its performance did not change notably since PISA 2006.

Other issues, some of which are being addressed by the MoE, include teacher preparation, internal assessments and drop-out rates. Although Active Learning is endorsed by about 60 per cent of teachers in the system, outdated Yugoslav rote learning continues to persist in many schools. An official assessment carried out in 2005 revealed higher motivation in teachers and students. It also showed improved social and critical thinking skills in children. While it is too early to detect significant changes in achievement, improved education outcomes are predicted. Serbia still lacks an efficient system within the MoE to support and monitor the implementation of new programmes. In addition, it would benefit from implementing an internal information system. This is a significant obstacle for monitoring, planning and improving the current system. A lack of libraries in Serbian schools also hinders learning and exposure to knowledge. Another indicator of low educational quality is the high drop-out rates – around 20 per cent nationally – with the highest percentage in secondary school.

The school system has not adequately taken into account the psychosocial needs of children emerging from conflict. Children and youth over the age of eight lived through almost a decade of brutal war, and many experienced horrific violence. Many of those children, now on the verge of adulthood, are in need of counselling and psychosocial support. In addition, the education system can play a vital role in helping to prevent future violence.

Finally, students require improved safety and school conditions in order to reach their highest potential. The MoE's efforts to prevent and reduce violence in schools have yielded positive gains, but unsafe drinking water and unsanitary restrooms continue to be an issue in many schools.

Education financing

In 2008, the Government of Serbia spent 4.5 per cent of its GDP on education, an increase from 2005 when only 3.5 per cent was allotted. The budget was reduced in 2009 to 3.8 per cent. The MoE is under constant pressure to optimize expenditures without jeopardizing service delivery. Ninety per cent of the education budget continues to go toward paying teachers' salaries, although the amount remains inadequate and below regional standards. The remaining 10 per cent of the budget is allocated to equipment purchases and emergency school repairs. Municipal budgets fund professional development, school maintenance and supplies, so teachers in municipalities have limited training to update their skills.

Educational priorities in Serbia

While there remain many challenges in Serbia, the government is currently focused on the following priorities:

- Increase school readiness by focusing on pre-primary education and the Preparatory Pre-school Programme
- Increase educational access and quality of education for Roma and other socially-excluded children at all levels
- Implement legislation to further develop inclusion programmes and plans for individual assistance to children in need of special support (such as Roma, children with disabilities, and children from socially deprived groups)
- Optimize school networks and introduce a per capita funding formula to enable the best possible use of funds and ensure equity in education
- Improve secondary school enrolment and retention rates
- Pay particular attention to teaching-learning methodology and the expansion of active learning child-centred education and school community cooperation, reduction of school violence and the improvement of school sanitation
- Analyse the reasons for secondary school drop-outs and develop measures to improve school retention and continuation of education
- Ensure second-chance education of adequate quality for children who dropped out or have never enrolled in school