Every Child Learns
UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030

ECE; curriculum reform; system strengthening – Expanding access to quality early childhood education for the most excluded children in Serbia

The problem: According to national data from 2018, access to early childhood education (ECE) stood at 63.9% in Serbia, with quality of the existing provision being an ongoing challenge. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) show that national averages mask deep inequities. Access to ECE is much lower for children from low-income families (9%), rural areas (27%), Roma children living in informal settlements (6%), and children with disabilities (UNICEF, MICS 2014).

The solution: In Serbia, increasing access to and improving the quality of ECE remains a key priority of the Ministry of Education. UNICEF’s assistance on the revision of the pre-school curriculum opened the door to broader system-level reforms, including a commitment by the Government to create an additional 17,000 pre-school spaces by 2022 with support from the World Bank, as well as corresponding training for a variety of ECE professionals.
Building a strong ECE system in Serbia

There are five areas in which progress is needed to strengthen ECE systems and deliver quality at scale: policy, regulation and planning; financing; ECE workforce development; data and quality assurance; and partnerships. UNICEF Serbia is working with the Government simultaneously in all five areas. For example, over the years, UNICEF has provided extensive advice to the Ministry of Education that has contributed to the development of the legal and policy framework, the development of a new preschool curriculum, and the design of pilots to increase access and improve the quality and inclusiveness of ECE. UNICEF has also strengthened the networks of ECE professionals and preschools and cultivated a broad-based partnership of national institutions, academics, and professionals committed to expanding quality ECE. These efforts laid the groundwork that enabled comprehensive ECE reforms to take root in all five areas mentioned above.

UNICEF is supporting ECE implementation by providing technical advice on an innovative teacher training programme for preschool teachers, directors, pedagogy specialists, and psychologists that combines blended learning opportunities, peer-to-peer learning as well as follow up mentoring and communities of practice. This approach is meant to ensure that quality goes hand in hand with increased access.

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<th>Roma in informal settlements</th>
<th>Low income families</th>
<th>Rural areas</th>
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<td>Access to ECE (%)</td>
<td>6%</td>
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Only 9% of children from low-income families, 27% of children from rural areas and 6% of Roma children living in informal settlements have access to ECE (UNICEF MICS 2014).
Cost effectiveness:
An investment of USD $3.9 million will improve quality of early learning opportunities for 197,000 children in Serbia attending public pre-schools. While 65 per cent of teachers will directly be trained on a new child-centred curriculum, all pre-school teachers will be included in peer-to-peer learning opportunities within their public pre-school institutions, increasing their competencies and raising their teaching standards to deliver high-quality education to pre-school-aged children in the country.

Preliminary results, lessons learnt and next steps
The Ministry of Education, in partnership with UNICEF, the University of Belgrade and the World Bank, has successfully developed a blended training package for pre-school teachers, directors, pedagogy specialists, and psychologists. By 2022, it will be rolled out among 12,000 ECE professionals, which comprise 65 per cent of the ECE workforce in Serbia. In September and October 2019, 1,890 professionals from 11 pre-schools received training and have started to implement the new curriculum with extensive mentorship support.

Lessons learnt:
- Bolstering institutional capacities within the Ministry, two state institutes and local governments, as well as intersectoral cooperation, are key to the future development of Serbia’s ECE system at the national and local levels.
- Further engagement with non-traditional partners is required, including with the ministries in charge of local government and finance who are relevant for the expansion of ECE services at local level.
- Regulation of all service providers, including those in the private sector, is needed to balance expansion with quality.
- Innovative financing models should be paired with equity to ensure that all children have access to quality ECE.
- To ensure the ECE reforms are implemented fully, pre-school teachers and principals need sustained support in using innovative pedagogy and follow up mentorship, coaching and communities of practice.

Next steps:
- Support the government and partners to ensure that reforms are implemented across the whole ECE subsector and for all pre-schools, in line with the new Education Strategy 2030, which is under development.
- Advocate for and provide technical assistance to pre-schools in implementing the new pre-school curriculum framework.
- Support efforts to develop sustainable and equitable ECE financing, including through public-private partnerships that support equitable, quality ECE.
- Measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the training for pre-school teachers and use the data to inform future pre-service and in-service training for pre-school teachers.

Curriculum reform in Serbia has been a successful entry point for more comprehensive reforms that will improve access, quality and equity of early childhood education to ensure that “Every Child Learns”.

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