

A NEW EDUCATIONS STRATEGY – A NEW CHANCE OR?

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Abstract: *The debate on the Strategy of Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2030 (SROVRS 2030), provoked numerous opposing views. The unions raise the issue of finance as a key issue, but also many others. SROVRS was done in difficult times in Serbia. In addition to the pandemic, major problems are: transition, the path to the European Union, the position of education in society and numerous reforms in all segments of society, including education. An important issue is the possibility of predicting events until 2030. time of rapid development of information and communication technologies. The new strategy prescribes, and thus should implement, numerous and major changes. The changes refer to the entire education system of Serbia, which was more focused on the past than the future. They also include primary education as primary and a very important part of that system. This paper will discuss primary education in more detail in the light of the old, but also the new Education Strategy.*

Keywords: *Education strategy 2030, primary school, education, financing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

We have welcomed the new Strategy of Education and Upbringing until 2030. Admittedly, with a delay. Probably because of the coronavirus. It is noticeable that its name has been changed, to which the word “education” has been added. This is not bad, as long as it does not remain just a letter on paper. We have all become aware, even those who wrote this strategy, that our educational function of schools is quite weak. And not only school, family is in crisis and its educational function, which is very important, is not at a satisfactory level. It is often the cause of shifting responsi-

bilities from the family to the school and vice versa. The determinants of education in society are not going in the right direction. The unions are already skeptical and see the newspapers as “wandering in the dark”. Finances also play a big role in all this, because the level of GDP allocation of 6.5 for education, which is envisaged by the Strategy until 2020, has not been reached. All these are situations that are expected to be resolved by the new Education Strategy. And the solutions are not easy or simple. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development organized a public debate on the new strategy in the period from February 19 to March 10, 2021. It is even more important to take into account realistic and quality proposals. The new strategy envisages increasing the coverage of children with preschool education as well as preparatory preschool education. In addition, it is planned to increase the achievement of students in the final exam. And not only the achievements, but also the re-examination of the combined test, but also the purposefulness and quality of the final test. The strategic goals for primary and secondary education also envisage increased coverage, but reducing pupil dropout. Secondary education is considered to become compulsory when conditions are created. And this is considered one of the priorities in the strategy. Another key priority is the precise operationalization of the state graduation exam. The optimization of the network of secondary schools is also envisaged. When it comes to higher education, at this level of education, in addition to the basic functions of education and research, new functions such as technology transfer and innovation are also envisaged. And not only that. The line ministry states that the strategic goal is to modernize the entire system of higher education and higher education institutions. An increased rate of participation in education and training is envisaged for adults. The starting points for the development of the new strategy are: Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2020, ex-post and three reports on the results of the implementation of SROS 2020 and monitoring the action plan and 6-7 strategies relevant to the Education Strategy. Unlike the last, this strategy is envisaged for a period of 10 years. At its end, the Action Plan for the period from 2021 to the end of 2023 was published, which is adopted together with the strategy as its integral part. It determines the bearers and partners for the implementation of measures, deadlines and financial resources for their implementation.

2. STRATEGY FOR EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN REPUBLIC OF SERBIA 2020

This strategy ceased to be valid in 2020. It was adopted after about twenty reforms that took place before it. It outlines the four most important goals of long-term development of education: increasing the quality of the process and outcomes of education to the maximum achievable level, lifelong learning, achieving and maintaining the relevance of education, increasing the efficiency of the use of all educational resources, ie completing education within the prescribed period, with minimal extension and reduced school dropout. These goals have not been achieved or have been partially achieved. At the time of its adoption, it was called a wish list. Could more have been done. Probably, yes. It was made during one set of authorities, and analyzed by another. During its duration, several ministers of education were changed. Although it belongs to the past, the unresolved issues from it remain for the present but also for the future.

Table 1. Feasibility of the Education Strategy of Serbia until 2020

Strategic goal	Predicted	Achieved	Assessment of the authorities ¹
Coverage of children with primary school education	Not less than 98%	97%	Partially realized
Reducing dropout rates during schooling	5%	0,4	Achieved
Increasing the primary school completion rate	Not less than 95%	97%	Achieved
Existence of a team in MPNTR for monitoring and reporting on the situation in education in rural areas and in vulnerable categories of children (coverage, dropouts, school completion and quality of education)	Group for monitoring the situation in the countryside and in sensitive categories	In the Action Plan, the part related to primary education, there is no action that directly refers to this strategic goal, so the feasibility cannot be given with certainty because no group has been formed to monitor children in rural primary schools, and the feasibility is given on the basis of the Department for Human and Minority Rights.	Partially achieved - The assessment of performance is based on the existence of the Department for Human and Minority Rights in Education (formerly the Group for Minority Education, Social Inclusion and Protection against Violence and Discrimination) and the activities carried out by the group.

<p>Mechanisms for the protection of schools with a smaller number of students in the introduction of per capita funding.</p>	<p>Creating mechanisms</p>	<p>It has not been realized or at least not to the end, ie as planned</p>	<p>Partially realized - Assessment of realization is performed on the basis of adopted bylaws and the fact that the relevant Rulebook specifies exceptions for schools in border and mountain areas, when due to the small number of pupils, lack of road network (which can move passenger vehicles) and long distances between settlements possible, in a rational and economical way. However, the Rulebook does not specify specific funding measures for four-grade schools.</p>
<p>Optimization and financing of the primary school network.</p>	<p>To create a new network of primary schools.</p>	<p>It's not done.</p>	<p>Partially realized.</p>
<p>Growth of the quality of the education system expressed through PISA achievements</p>	<p>Higher quality-better achievements on PISA tests.</p>	<p>According to the results of that research, Serbia is below the average of the member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which implements it. Out of 79 ranked countries, it ranks 45th. The results are well below average.</p>	<p>Not realized - Although a significant number of activities were carried out, the achievements of students at PISA 2018 (source: MPNTR, PISA 2018 - Report for RS) are still significantly below the OECD average on the scale of mathematical literacy 448 points, on the scale of reading literacy 439, on the scale of scientific literacy 440 points), and additional achievements recorded a slight decline compared to 2012</p>

Revision of educational programs to ensure their modernity, functionality, life and social relevance.	Strengthens the educational function of the school.	Not realized. The educational function of the school has even weakened.	
Унапређење позиције директора: depolitizacija, nova zakonska regulativa, osnaživanje uloge kroz obuke i izgradnja sistema evaluacije rada direktora.	Improving the position of director: depolitization, new legislation, strengthening the role through training and building a system of evaluation of the work of directors.	It was not achieved except for the training of the director for the license. The quality and duration of the training is not adequate. The director is elected by the minister, not the staff.	Partially realized.
Strengthening school autonomy	Higher school autonomy	School autonomy is not measured by the adoption of legal acts, but by the actual situation.	Achieved - Article 99 of ZOSOV prescribes the autonomy of the institution and teachers as professionals, and there are a number of bylaws that regulate the evaluation of quality-self-evaluation and external evaluation.
Introduction of one-shift work	Schools will work in one shift (increase in number).	It has not been achieved, except in a negligible number of schools.	One-shift work was not introduced in all primary schools but in 17%, as a pilot project.
Evaluating the work of the school.	Include external evaluation of all primary schools.	All schools are covered by external evaluation, but the question is the relevance of the evaluation of, for example, teachers with one class visit.	Achieved.
The advantages of information and communication technologies and various forms of learning in the online environment are used	Use of IT in teaching and extracurricular activities.	This was especially evident during the pandemic, by switching to online classes, but the situation is not as it should be.	Partially realized.
Support for inclusive education.	All measures that provide for that support.	The state has not yet provided a sufficient number of pedagogical assistants.	Achieved.

Increasing relevance and efficiency	Greater flexibility of the program and autonomy of teachers in choosing the part of the teaching content.	Teachers can change the teaching contents by up to 10%, everything else must be done as prescribed. The programs are still not optimally flexible.	Achieved.
Increase public funding for education from 4.5% to 6% of gross domestic product	Increasing the allocation rate for primary education.	Not only has it not been achieved, but this allocation is less than 4.5%. For primary education, 3.1% of the gross domestic product.	Not realized.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Education Strategy in Serbia until 2020, shows that our education system is not in the place that this strategy foresaw. This means that the new strategy must be realistically achievable and, more importantly, that the strategic goals , realize.

3. EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2030 OF REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

The new strategy brings new predictions, but also old unresolved issues (problems). Already the public debate has provoked fierce and opposing views and controversies over new and old issues. They came from the ranks of educational unions that are (or should be) representatives of employees in education. Every good and applicable proposal should be implemented. A new strategy should not make old mistakes. It is well known that learning from the mistakes of others is expensive, and even more expensive from one's own mistakes. The old strategy was often called a wish list. Whether those wishes came true and to what extent they could come true, is the question that the creators of the new strategy should have asked themselves. Although the new strategy was most valid in 2019 by the former Minister of Education, it was done only in 2021. With the advent of the new strategy, the names of the people who created it were not known. And that doesn't matter. The educational public should know whether the authors are prominent experts or were chosen on some other basis. If knowledge is one of the most important resources of today, then the education strategy should be a light on the path to resources. If, as a country, we have well-educated professionals who will contribute to the development of Serbia, which is still in transition, the education strategy should take its rightful place. This also means its feasibility, because no matter how good a strategy is, if what it envisages is not realized, the goal has not been achieved.

Education needs to restore reputation and quality. Motivation of employees in education is not good. A poorly motivated teacher will not be a good motivator for a student. The motivation of educators is related to the conditions in which they work, but also to finances. Many school years began with strikes by educators. Today, at the time of the pandemic, the situation is not much better. They are in a position to change the way of working, teaching methods and assessment in a short time by switching to online teaching. It could and should have been better because an emergency situation such as the coronavirus pandemic is not the first and only one that has happened to this country and its education system. A pandemic must not be an excuse for a delay or a job not done properly. On the contrary, it can be a chance for something we went through to be better done. It is important that SROVS is of high quality and achievable by 2030, and thus that the entire educational system of Serbia is directed towards the future, and not the past, because every strategy is done for the future.

3.1. EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF THE SCHOOL IN THE NEW (SROVS) AND OLD STRATEGY (SROS)

The novelty in the new strategy is one more word in the title, and that is education. This is a positive shift compared to the old strategy, if that word has the role it has lost in practice nowadays. Although SROS stated by 2020 that the educational function of the school was neglected in the part of the strategy “current state of primary education”. The SWOT analysis also states under the list of weaknesses that the educational role of the school has been neglected. However, under the main challenges and commitments of SROS until 2020. the educational function of the school is not included, but the improvement of the effects of primary education, raising the quality of knowledge, reducing the dropout of children and educating teachers.

Education has an educational function. Primary school is an institution in which education is realized, and the very name of primary education and upbringing indicates the importance of upbringing. However, yes, it is in SROS until 2020. assigned a central place, and if no shift had been made, it would have meant nothing. On the other hand, upbringing is somehow covered by the old strategy, but the realization was bad.

The educational function of the primary school in Serbia as it is today, not only is not good, but it is still weak. That needs to stop. If the family, in addition to school, is the main factor in the upbringing of the child, it is clear that we need to turn to the demands of cooperation with the family in the new time. This time is accompanied

by aggravating circumstances, such as primarily the weakened educational function of the family caused by numerous factors. The school has a great role and obligation in this cooperation. This obligation is often hindered by factors over which it has no influence. This makes its obligation even more difficult. It also leads to the transfer of responsibilities and obligations from the family to the school and vice versa. The traditional orientation is abandoned where there is a clear division of responsibilities and roles of family and school. There is an increasing tendency towards partnership orientation. It becomes a key factor in the context of the development of cooperation in the field of interaction that exists among the actors of education. These actors are: family, schools, parents, teachers and the community. Their common focus should be the child as a pupil. Achieving the efficiency and functionality of such a partnership becomes an imperative to strive for reform, ie. in theory and practice. This aspiration is not only in Serbia but also in Europe. In this context, the primary school should work on its role of partnership with the family and find ways of that partnership in the “jungle of today”. The strategy should trace those paths.

3.2 FINANCING OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

The state should support and finance this important tracing in the strategy in order to give the school, as a contractor, a chance to do the job properly. And not just a chance but an obligation and a responsibility but not switching it from one to the other.

According to the World Bank¹, there is insufficient investment in education in Serbia, and that in the future it is necessary to increase funding for education, ie reduce investment in education should not happen, because education is of strategic importance for further economic and social development of RS. This is of special importance if we keep in mind that in 2017, Serbia allocated only 3.7% of GDP for education, which is below the 25 average for a group of countries with the same income (4.7%), but also in relation to average investment in the countries of the region (4.6%) Allocation for education should be applied to the entire education system; from pre-school to higher education and lifelong learning. According to the latest data, the allocation for primary education is 3.1% of the gross domestic product. That is much less than envisaged by the Education Strategy of Serbia until 2020. If it is known that finances are one of the preconditions for achieving the strategic goals set by the strategy, then it is necessary to anticipate the necessary finances, set them aside and use

1 Serbia: Human Capital and Jobs, World bank. The document is available at:www.worldbank.org/humancapital

them for what is envisaged. All this implies timely, objective and relevant data.

3.3. PRIMARY SCHOOL IN THE NEW (SROVS) AND OLD STRATEGY (SROS)

In addition to the educational function envisaged by the new strategy, which is also envisaged by the old strategy, important strategic goals are: reducing the dropout rate, raising the quality of knowledge and educating teachers. The old strategy outlined a reduction in the number of pupils dropping out of primary school. SROS by 2020 recognized as a key strategic feature of the education subsystem are the coverage of pupils with primary education; quality of education (conditions, teaching process, teachers, student achievement and quality of school as an institution); efficiency and relevance.

Statement of the competent bodies that dealt with the analysis of the implementation of SROS until 2020 data on the coverage of primary school students are given: School year 2018/2019 the number of students in primary schools was 52.7834 and at the beginning of 2019/2020 amounted to 517,826, which is 10,008 students less than in the previous school year. This decline can also be caused by migration and depopulation, but as for the 2019/2020 school year, it cannot be said with certainty that it has remained at the same level.

By 2020, all boys and girls of school age (minimum 98% of the generation), regardless of socio-economic, health, regional, national, linguistic, ethnic, religious and other characteristics, are covered by quality primary education from which dropout is not higher than 5% (ie completes primary school 93% of the generation), not only at the national level but also for categories of children from vulnerable groups (rural, Roma, poor children and children with disabilities). However, the relevant data on the last school year are not known, so the actual situation cannot be ascertained.

Until 2020, SROS stated that in 2012, the network of schools was not adapted to numerous social changes: demographic, economic and social. The new strategy states in 2021 that the optimization of the network of institutions is a process that has been going on for years, and while it has been done in some cities, it has not been completed at the national level. Thus, network optimization of institutions is an unfinished business.

The fact is that the efficiency of the system should ensure quality, relevance and coverage. This requires the rational use of resources that are engaged in the system in order to achieve these goals. Internal efficiency is also important here, ie the completion rate of different levels of education. Regardless of the predictions of the old

and the new strategy, the factual situation is that it must be improved and raised to a higher level in order to make Serbia competitive. The quality of knowledge and skills of primary school pupils is still a problem. And that problem should be solved in the right way because it is important for the economic development of Serbia. The analysis of quality, which was measured by the external evaluation of educational institutions, is from 2018. So, three years ago. In three years, especially during the pandemic and the transition to online teaching, many things have changed. External evaluation, according to data from 2018, evaluated 1154 primary schools and obtained an average grade of 2.8 on a scale from 1 to 4. Only 16.4% of schools received the highest grade (four). 3.9% of primary schools received the lowest grade.

In addition to external evaluation, the quality of schools is measured by the achievements of pupils who are tested at the national and international level. The data on the national testing of seventh grade pupils in 2018 in mathematics, history and physics is stated and it is stated that the results of this testing are not yet available. It is about the quality of education that is closely related to the quality of knowledge - one of the most important resources today, and there is no data. The question is why important data three years ago are not available when it comes to the most important education strategy?

The new strategy indicates a revision of curricula as a strategic goal that was not covered by SROS by 2020. The reforms introduced in primary education have brought many changes in teaching and learning. Since 2017, the curriculum of teaching and learning for the second cycle of primary education has been revised. Three new subjects have been introduced: Informatics and Computing, Engineering and Technology, and Physical and Health Education. All three subjects existed until then, with the fact that Informatics and computer science were studied as an elective subject, and then its status changed to a compulsory subject. This is a positive step, but as usual, it came with a delay. With the development of information and communication technologies, information literacy is considered basic. With the introduction of informatics in primary schools, it also meant the technical equipment of schools. The views of the competent ministry and the union on whether all schools had these conditions were different, if not contradictory. This is because of the data that should have been relevant and available to the public. Computer literacy means the literacy of both pupils and teachers. In the case of teachers, this is a competence prescribed by law. The real situation in practice with that competence was not good. With the transition to online teaching, the situation has somewhat improved with teacher education, but there is still a need for professional development in this area of teacher work.

The changes that followed from the school year 2018/19 in the field of planning and programming of the teaching process and learning are new curricula based on learning outcomes. With the new strategy, it is one of the directions of further development. The analysis of the realization of the old strategy shows that significant progress has been made in strengthening school autonomy through pedagogical autonomy in the implementation of teaching and learning programs, a flexible system of external evaluation and testing, teacher autonomy, stronger relations with the local community and strengthening the student parliament. All of the above is far from desirable, so these significant shifts still do not have optimistic views. Especially not in practice and from educators. The new strategy raises the question of the quality and expediency of the final testing. It was at that final exam that the educational public had numerous objections. The criticism of the professional public on the combined test at the final test, as well as the other two tests, remained a statement in the strategy and nothing more. Although primary school teachers and principals sent their opinions on the changes each year, pupils testing did not change, or at least not as it should. With the appearance of the third text, all actors in the test, from pupils and parents to teachers and principals, had negative opinions and attitudes. However, this test is being solved by pupils this year as well. The situation with the combined test, which is poorly conceived and which is an additional burden for pupils, and which was pointed out by the professional public, should have changed. And it's not. So statements such as "progress has been made", "partially realized", "preconditions have been created" and other formulations that a strategy that is important for the well-being of a country, should not appear. This is also the case with the language formulation when it comes to financing education, where it is stated: „ ... because currently there is only fragmented information on costs that is difficult to interpret and compare with the implemented reform activities“. A further explanation is that the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development is not included in the budget execution information system (ISIB). The question is whether it dared to happen or why it did not connect? Unresolved issues or bad solutions at the national level, at the level of the line ministry, have consequences in all lower segments of their activities. If we take into account that our educational system is very centralized, then the conclusion is easy. There is a difference between a new and an old strategy. The most significant difference should be that the new strategy realizes the planned, unlike the old one which did not or partially realized it.

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(Table Footnotes)

1 www.mpn.gov.rs/pocela-javna-rasprava-o-predlogu-strategije-razvoja-obrazovanja-i-vaspitanja-u-republici-srbiji-za-period-od-2021-do-2030-godine/ accessed:07.03.2021.