

Presentation by PDHR Don Hays on behalf of the High Representative at a roundtable meeting of principals, parents and pupils from three model schools in the Sarajevo area

***Schools in the Sarajevo area:
Jovan Ducic School in Kasindol,
Sixth Primary School in Stup,
and Vrhbosna Faletici School in Stari Grad***

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The High Representative, during his almost three years in Bosnia and Herzegovina has repeatedly stressed the preeminence of education for the country's recovery. A well managed school and university system that uses effective modern teaching methods to educate a new generation is not a luxury, it's a necessity as BiH competes with its neighbours to attract foreign investment and create a functioning market economy. It is also a necessity if BiH is to prepare itself for further integration with the rest of Europe.

Speaking to BiH university professors and deans at the end of last year, the High Representative reiterated the centrality of education to the whole process of economic, social and political regeneration. He also acknowledged that, because of an inevitable concentration on physical reconstruction and political reform in the immediate postwar years, the International Community had not focused as much as it might have done on education.

That is changing. All of the international organisations involved in education are now coordinating their efforts, and this will result in greater effectiveness.

In the last two years there has been substantial progress in raising teaching standards and improving the quality of BiH schools, and the International Community together with its BiH partners can now build on that progress, in a focused and systematic way.

Everyone recognises that education is the key to social and political harmony and economic development – yet some politicians are still determined to create barriers between schoolchildren instead of building bridges.

That must stop.

The people who will put a stop to this are parents, teachers and children. The interests of politicians might be served by sabotaging efforts to improve schools – but obstructing education reforms and delaying the introduction of modern curricula and teaching methods certainly doesn't serve the interests of schoolchildren and students.

You and your children are the people who need efficient schools. You have to get involved. And in this respect I know that the people in this room have done exactly that. You have taken the initiative. You have taken an active role in making things better in the schools where you are stakeholders. When that becomes the norm throughout BiH, the children and young people of this country will start to receive the kind of start in life to which they are entitled, the kind of start which their counterparts in neighbouring countries already enjoy.

OHR is currently preparing a countrywide campaign aimed at discovering and disseminating the many ways in which good teachers around the country are already raising standards and giving the children in their care a better chance in life, and the ways in which forward-looking schools, like the three schools represented here this afternoon, are encouraging the active participation of parents and the community in school activities. They are making the optimum use of scarce resources, and they are adopting modern and effective teaching methods. This is the real business of education reform in BiH. There is a great deal that schools can already accomplish, despite obstacles placed in their way by politicians who continue to cling to their own obsolete agenda.

High-quality textbooks are clearly an important element in raising academic standards. The textbooks used in former Yugoslavia were for the most part information dense and oriented towards rote learning. Yet, in the last ten years the debate over textbooks has not been about raising academic standards. A huge amount of effort and time

has had to be expended on eliminating nationalist propaganda and ethnic chauvinism from textbooks. This has been necessary work, and substantial progress has been made. But think about the progress that could have been made in raising the academic standards of textbooks if so much time had not had to be devoted to making them conform to minimum European standards of tolerance and decency.

This is not the only area where an arid preoccupation with ethnic division has wasted time and denied BiH citizens the benefits to which they are entitled. When BiH became the 44th member of the Council of Europe, it committed itself to adopting a new "law on schools" within two years. It also committed itself to signing the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of Higher Education qualifications. The failure of the Education Ministries till now to secure domestic and international recognition of BiH academic qualifications is an unforgivable disservice to schoolchildren and college students. The Entity Ministries of Education are committed to signing the Lisbon Convention before the end of 2002. They must do so.

In 1999, 29 European education ministers signed the Bologna Declaration, committing themselves to the creation of a common European higher education space within a period of ten years. The European Credit Transfer System is part of the Bologna process. It lets students attend courses at different universities around Europe, and it encourages universities to standardise teaching methods and introduce quality-assurance mechanisms. BiH student don't have the benefits of this agreement yet because the Education Ministries have failed to come up with a promised action plan detailing how they will meet the Bologna Declaration's basic requirements.

These two agreements affect university students directly, but indirectly they also affect toddlers and teenagers — the primary and secondary students of today are the university students of tomorrow.

In March this year, under OHR auspices, the Entity Education ministers signed an Interim Agreement on the rights and needs of returnee schoolchildren throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Agreement stipulates that all children in both Entities will be taught all general subjects on the basis of the curriculum wherever they are currently living or wherever they and their families return to live. Parents can choose which curriculum they prefer their children to follow in the "national group" of subjects – language and literature, history, geography, religious instruction, and (in primary school) the subject of nature and society. This means that parents can opt for the curriculum of the Entity or Canton where they return, or choose another curriculum. As a matter of priority, returnee teachers will be re-hired or engaged to teach the national group of subjects to minority returnees.

This is a practical and forward-looking agreement. Its main characteristic is that it puts the interests of children and parents ahead of the interests of politicians. The sooner every child in this country feels at home in any school in the country, the sooner Bosnia and Herzegovina will be able to take its place in the family of normal European states.

Even though education will remain an Entity/Canton responsibility in the medium term, all education legislation needs to reflect these standards. An inter-Entity implementation agreement will probably be an important component of this effort.

As more agreements are reached, they will have to be monitored. We are very happy that the OSCE is taking the lead in this respect. It has a countrywide staff network, and it has the capacity to initiate a monitoring programme which might do for education what the Property Law Implementation Plan has done for returns – measure the performance of schools against standards required in agreements signed by the Education Ministries.

The International Community has partners in the BiH education reform. I recognise partners around this table this afternoon. You represent tens of thousands of parents, teachers and pupils around the country who want modern and efficient teaching in well run and open-minded schools. We are committed to working with you.

Thank you