

Speech by Principal Deputy High Representative Donald Hays To an OHR-sponsored Conference on Education in BiH

We are here today to begin a public debate regarding the future of education in BiH. It is no secret that the present state of education in this country is deplorable. Failure to address the quality and state of education offered to the youth of this country would be nothing less than catastrophic. While other countries are busily training their young people in information technology and other modern disciplines preparing them for today's business environment, students in Bosnia and Herzegovina can, in most cases, only dream about up-to-date tuition in high tech subjects. Schools in this country suffer from inadequate facilities, educational materials and substandard tuition and this only diminishes the BiH future skills base and competitiveness. I would like to remind you of what President John Kennedy once said, "Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefits for everyone and greater strength of our nation."

We are here today to consider the lessons regarding an integrated, multiethnic education that have been developed by students, teachers and administrators of the Brcko District. We also intend to discuss the broader question of the future of primary and secondary education in Bosnia Herzegovina. Every day we wait to address this issue the nation loses

something it will never regain – a dream, an invention or a future business.

We are late in tackling this issue, one that should have been viewed as a core issue for BiH post war recovery and an issue that will definitely influence the success or failure of all our efforts to create a free, democratic and stable BiH.

No one denies the importance of education. For an educated populous is certainly a better safeguard for a nation's liberty and well-being than any standing army can possibly be. Furthermore as you will hear from the students themselves, shaping the minds of our young people in fact shapes the destiny of the nation.

Yet for some reason this precious resource has been at the center of a confused debate – should school buildings be shared, text books harmonized, or curricula be altered. In fact these misdirected discussions have absorbed the energy and attention of educators, administrators and politicians to the detriment of the students and the nation's future.

In the meantime a large number of pupils have been condemned to occupy substandard facilities, with outdated text books and outdated teaching methods. This is inexcusable. Many of the people in this room have struggled against the trend, making positive headway in very difficult circumstance. I believe that your efforts, your courage to take a chance for the future of your children and the state is going to be rewarded and in fact provides a beacon of hope. It required all of you to have faith in the children and a willingness to go against the grain. But as one of America's early educators once said, "The secret of education lies in respecting the student." (Emerson). You have to take a chance on the young so that they can overcome the hurdles we have placed before them

and succeed where we have not.

I can only hope that the debate over education is shifting and the focus will now move from politics to pedagogy. Despite modest successes around the country, reform is still moving too slowly. Last year it became obligatory to teach both alphabets in Primary and Secondary schools in both Entities. Since September, Human Rights and Civic Education have replaced Civil Defense in the first and second – year Secondary School syllabus.

Furthermore, since September, 20 to 40 periods annually have been set aside to teach the literature of the three constituent peoples in the primary and secondary school curriculum. In February this year new language models – highlighting common linguistic heritage rather than diversity are set to be introduced at primary and secondary level throughout the country. Work is now underway to eliminate offensive nationalist propaganda from textbooks, and more comprehensive work will take place in the near future. Last December in fact, the two Ministers of Education signed a Textbook review agreement committing their Ministries to a new program aimed at making all textbooks inclusive rather than exclusive.

The Ministers have also taken part in regular meetings of the Conference of Entity Ministers of Education, co chaired by OHR and the Council Europe. These meetings were designed to promote the interests of school children throughout the country on the basis of promoting an integrated, cohesive society. Something the students from Brcko have benefited from and can personally attest to.

The war left a terrible legacy of fear and bitterness which infected every aspect of everyday life. Nowhere was that more

damaging than in the field of education. We simply must take action to clear up the debris left behind by that terrible conflict and focus on preparing the youth of this country for the challenge of this century. The curriculum must lead to universally recognized examinations and norms established throughout Europe if this country is to compete with its neighbors in the market place.

A number of years ago I too was faced with an educational system that talked separatism and divisiveness. That experience made it clear that such attitudes have no place in the classrooms of our children. We must constantly reflect on the fact that it is the children of today who will ultimately build the state and create that common space with Europe. From my short talks with the students of Brcko, I can tell you that they have already learned that lesson well.

Inadequate facilities and substandard teaching techniques are the twin problems that must be faced if we are to create a modern educational system in this country. They must be addressed and urgently. The consequences of delay are obvious and totally unacceptable. I would draw your attention to your neighbor to the north, Slovenia. Today Slovenia's per capita income is more than twice that of its neighbors in central Europe. This income is almost solely due to the intellectual talent of its citizens. So while other countries are improving their educational institutions in order to compete, BiH cannot sit idly by and fall further behind. Your citizens deserve better.

Remember it is a trained and educated workforce that will attract that foreign investment so sorely needed for the recover of this country's economy. That investment will only come and will only stay if sufficient attention is given to providing a first class education for the workforce of this country. Today that seems like a pipe dream, students today

can only dream of up-to-date high tech education. The substandard facilities, teaching methods and paucity of equipment are undermining the country's prospects for long term economic recovery. But worse than that they are undermining the viability of the state. The long lines in front of foreign embassies every morning tell the tale all too clearly. Your youth sees little future in this country and is choosing to vote with its feet. That talent drain must be stopped and it can only be stopped through a shift in priorities. One that makes it clear that this country is committed to building for the future not fighting the past.

The European Commission, the World Bank, UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the OSCE have all been actively engaged in this country attempting to assist your local authorities in building a new model for your educational system, implementing comprehensive reforms and trying wherever possible to modernize the educational system. But the international community can not solve this problem for you. This must be something you design, you commit yourselves to and ultimately you ally yourselves with as a national priority.

Tomorrow, as you know, there will be a conference here in the Holiday Inn organized by the European Commission's project to assist education reform in BiH. The theme of the conference is "The Shared Strategy for Modernization of Primary and General Secondary Education in BiH." I hope that many of you attending this conference will take the opportunity to participate in that one as well. Delivering a better education to the young people of this country should be everyone's priority. The role of the international community is clear; it is to offer material assistance, to share our common experience, and to facilitate solutions. In the final analysis, the education system you choose for your country can only be desired by the citizens of this country – BiH's educational system should not and really can not be modernized by foreigners. It is the job

of the educators, the parents and the students.

The OHR is in the process of inaugurating a “Learning Partnerships” public information campaign which we hope will spread the message that what happens in the classroom is a shared responsibility of parents, pupils and educators. As part of this campaign, information on successful classroom innovations already being practiced in this country will be gathered, tabulated and redistributed to schools throughout this country. In this way, all schools will be able to benefit from techniques currently being used in only one or two schools. The people who know about teaching both its potential and its challenges are the teachers. BiH teachers will provide the answers, not internationals or government bureaucrats.

Harmonizing curricula is the easy part – replacing the teaching style inherited from the pre-war educational system with its old-fashioned, top-heavy administration, its lack of creativity and interactivity will require political will and a certain amount of courage. You will have to trust teachers that are taking a chance and students that want to see change happen.

But this gamble is one you can ill afford to avoid. The needed reforms are obvious. Remember you are competing actively with your neighbors and some of them have already undertaken these reforms. The future of Bosnia Herzegovina depends on modernizing – urgently, but sensibly and collectively – its school system. Once you decide to make that your priority, the state’s future will be secure. The work of today’s conference will be a useful first step along that road to a quality educational system. I wish you all a bright future and solid success.