

Making the Best of a Challenging New School Year

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The first day of school ordinarily brings a range of feelings for both children and their parents - excitement and hope for the year ahead, and joy or nervousness at rejoining friends and teachers. Children are eager to recount their summer adventures, and parents are happy to see their little ones back in class. But this, alas, is no ordinary year.

The parents with whom I've spoken over the past few months all overwhelmed by the same concern: how to support and empower their little ones in these uncertain times, how to help them learn and grow during a pandemic. COVID-19 has put all our parenting skills to the test. Parents who normally encourage their children to put down their devices and go outside and play with friends now must help them observe social distancing, and navigate long days of online learning, while worrying about both their physical and mental health.

Over the past few months, how we teach and how we learn has been turned upside down, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but all over the world. Teachers have been forced to incorporate new technologies and methods to deliver lessons, while children have had to embrace new methods of learning. The shift to online teaching has not been easy. Teachers have invested herculean efforts to adapt to “the new normal”, to pass on knowledge to their pupils, to maintain connections with and among children and to keep them engaged, motivated, and safe. Working parents have been forced to find the time and energy to keep kids focused on school activities at home. This has been a particular challenge for families who lack internet access or cannot afford computers. Despite the many difficulties and the uneven quality of education systems, the country’s educators have been striving tirelessly and creatively to adapt to the new normal and help prepare our children for a successful future. As the school year resumes, they deserve and need our strong support.

After all, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently said, education must be at the forefront of pandemic recovery efforts. The question, of course, is how to find the best balance between measures designed to minimize the spread of the virus while allowing education to continue safely and effectively. There is no doubt that physically attending school is preferable for the overall emotional well-being of children, including social-emotional learning - the critical process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and the interpersonal skills necessary for success in school, work, and beyond. On the other hand, we all want to protect the health and safety of students, teachers, parents and grandparents.

Closing schools is an extreme option, and in terms of combating COVID-19, it should probably be one of the measures of last resort, used only after bars and restaurants have been shuttered, for example. According to the Centre for European Disease Control (CECDC), evidence indicates that closures of childcare and educational institutions are unlikely to be an effective control measure for community transmission of COVID-19 in the absence of other broader community measures.

I'm pleased to see that BiH authorities are doing their utmost to begin the school year safely and allow classes to resume - whether in-person or virtually or a mixture of both. However, education officials should not be alone in this fight. We should all do our part to support them. As the WHO guidelines state - wear a mask, wash hands and maintain social distancing -- all the time, whether at school or work, or shopping and socializing. By stemming the spread of the virus outside schools, we add a further layer of protection to the children inside them.

With these challenges also come opportunities, both for students and their parents. Children learn just as much, if not more, outside the classroom by watching how their parents, teachers and community leaders respond to a crisis. With the right encouragement from parents, they can learn to be role models in terms of wearing a mask and respecting social distancing. They can harness technology to develop new interests and skills and find new ways to stay in touch with their friends. They can learn the importance of speaking up to advocate for social change and the power of cooperation and inclusion to achieve larger goals. They can learn the value of a kind word and the benefit of helping others in trying times. They can see how the world is interconnected - how events in one region affect another and how all

people face similar challenges -- drawing lessons that extend beyond the pandemic to other issues, such as climate change or building peace.

Times of crisis often provide the opportunity to steer change and achieve goals that might have been impossible in more “normal” times. Indeed, the need to respond to the pandemic brings with it a once-in-a-generation opportunity to push forward desperately needed educational reforms to raise the quality and inclusivity of education in BiH. The data and the tools to do so are available -- the PISA test results released in 2019 provide the diagnosis and the basis on which to set goals and measure progress, and the OSCE Mission to BiH and other international organizations stand ready to help. What is needed now is pressure from parents and teachers for change and the commitment of ministry and school officials to work together constructively. Let us commit to do this together for the benefit of all children by pushing for a modern learning environment; a renewed focus on pupils, their needs and expectations; better and safer schools; a more inclusive environment in which no pupil is excluded or left behind.

On behalf of the OSCE Mission to BiH, I wish everyone, both parents and children, teachers and students, a good school year and safe and productive days ahead.