

# Two Schools under One Roof: The Most Visible Example of Discrimination in Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina



## How they came to be?

The 1990s conflict in BiH resulted in vast displacement and consequently ethnic homogenization in many areas. In an attempt to reverse this process and encourage the return of refugees and displaced persons, the practice of ‘two schools under one roof’ was established as a temporary measure in three ethnically-divided cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zenica Doboje Canton, Central Bosnia Canton and Herzegovina Neretva Canton). This interim measure provided children of different ethnicities, who had previously studied in separate, often inadequate private premises (houses, bars or restaurants), an opportunity to at least receive education in a single school building. Unfortunately, the temporary has become permanent without any systemic solution in sight to transition to integrated schools.

## What they look like?

The characteristics of ‘two schools under one roof’ vary.

The visible manifestations of these schools are buildings, or networks of buildings, that in prewar years housed a single

primary or secondary school, but now house two. Children of the same age attending the same or similar programs in the same location are divided on the basis of ethnicity. Children are defacto segregated by means of physical or non-physical barriers, including the use of separate entrances and attending school in different shifts.

This segregation of children instills division and the notion of artificial differences. In postconflict BiH, this fosters mistrust, impedes reconciliation and is a long-term threat to stability and economic prosperity.

What’s more, the system of ‘two schools under one roof’ is also economically inefficient, negatively impacting on education quality.

## Why are they discriminatory?

The practice of ‘two schools under one roof’ is in breach of international conventions as well as domestic legislation. There are explicit legal provisions, whether in state-level or lower-level laws, which prohibit discrimination and segregation as a form of discrimination.

While students have the option to attend either one of the schools within the ‘two schools under one roof’ model, the practical reality is that they will attend the school that is dominated by their ethnic group. The school environment, along with curriculum, is welcoming to only one ethnic group.

While the need to protect one's cultural identity is understandable, abusing it is not, as confirmed in the BiH Report of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur, "the over-emphasising of cultural differences, including linguistic differences, is used to justify practices that enforce the segregation of students based on ethno-national affiliation." There is also a domestic court decision that has ruled the practice as discriminatory, but it is yet to be implemented.

## From progress to backsliding

A limited but important step over recent years in some locations has been the administrative and legal unification of 'two schools under one roof'. This means that previously segregated schools become one legal entity, with one name, one budget, one school board, one director and one deputy (of a different ethnicity), one teacher council, one parent council and one student council, and

joint administrative and support personnel.

Schools which have been administratively and legally unified still face challenges, but the approach is positive and, with complementary work in other areas of education, such as curriculum reform, could form the basis of a strategic approach to ending the practice of 'two schools under one roof'.

While administrative and legal unifications indicate a step forward, the overall situation is not getting better.

On the contrary, there have been attempts to establish more 'two schools under one roof', or to completely separate children via mono-ethnic schools.

The latter has been the practice in multi-ethnic areas with children being transported to schools in areas where they are the ethnic majority.

These measures are the polar opposite of the practices needed for the advancement,

reconciliation and prosperity of young people in BiH today.

The issue continues to be difficult to resolve. Cantonal authorities, which hold the primary competencies over education in FBiH, are not being held accountable for eliminating discrimination in education.

There is also a severe lack of political will, as well as concerns from parents about preserving national identity.

## A way forward

To shift from 'two schools under one roof' to inclusive quality schools is of paramount importance. This change would enable children to attend many classes together, while linguistic and cultural diversity would be nurtured, including through separate language and religion classes, and where children learn from student learning outcomes-based curricula, promoting tolerance and critical thinking whilst exposing students to multiple perspectives.

To advance decisively toward inclusive schools, the Mission recommends the following:

1. Political dialogue
2. Administrative and legal unification of schools
3. Increasing interaction among children
4. Curricular reform
5. Respect for court decisions
6. Donor responsibility.

'Two schools under one roof' is one of many policies and practices in the education sector that are discriminatory and damaging to BiH's youth. Even though 'two schools under one roof' represent only a small portion of BiH schools, this practice is a most visible and egregious education policy that deepens divisions. It is ultimately up to BiH authorities to determine exactly how to end this practice, but they must do so as a matter of urgency.

The Mission remains at hand to support shaping the way forward and the implementation of positive changes.

Follow OSCE Mission to BiH



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