



Weekly Briefing

Croatia Social briefing:
Reform in Croatia's educational system- 'School for Life'
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Reform in Croatia's educational system – 'School for Life'

Tens and tens schools in Croatia are starting this school year by participating in a pilot designed and led by the Ministry of Science and Education. The main idea of the pilot 'School for Life' is to change a way how information is taught in schools by introducing new teaching skills and by equipping schools with tablets and smart boards. Motivation to conduct this pilot is to create a basis for a comprehensive long-term education reform that has been discussed in Croatia for decades.

Historical background

Attempts at education reforms have been taken on board with nearly every Croatian government since the country's independence in the early 1990s. Some changes were introduced, but far from what even mild critics would accept as a decent school system for the 21st century. Croatia's educational system both at the primary, secondary and tertiary level deserves to be seriously shaken and reformed. Modern education requires different approach and different content, different atmosphere and different relationships between teachers and students. Education is constantly evolving in the world. Many would like to see positive changes being implemented also in Croatia. Yet, any change seems to be wrought with difficulties, obstacles and criticism.

This brief article looks at the latest initiative 'School for Life' in the elementary school system. Surveys and interviews throughout the society show the necessity of a school reform. How this will be achieved, however, remains to be seen.

The Croatian school system dates back to the 10th century and was, before Maria Theresa reformed it, linked to church institutions and the priesthood. The systematic education began in the 18th century, with the 'Edict on the General School Order in 1774'. Over time, Croatia's educational system developed to

the today's system of preschool and eight years of elementary school. The elementary education can be completed with one to four years of secondary school, in gymnasiums, vocational schools or art schools. Elementary education is compulsory in Croatia. The entry to higher education is based on the results of the final comprehensive examination. This state-wide post-secondary examination is implemented since 2010.

Main shortcomings of the Croatian school system

“When we start going to school, our talents are huge, but when we finish, they are small,” explained Croatian scientist, Professor Ivan Đikić.¹ Main shortcomings of the Croatian approach to teaching and learning are different, but most assessments revolve around the following:

- Learning by heart. What this means is that students are asked and required to successfully reproduce material presented to them by teachers or written in textbooks. They are required to memorize ‘by heart’ descriptions, formulae, definitions, dates and figures frequently without be provided with the understandable context in which new information can be found or applied.

- There is no motivation for critical questioning and logic inference. This follows from the preceding description. If the first step is to explain students that their mark will depend how successfully they reproduce information given to them by teachers or provided in textbooks, then they would have little inclination to critically view the information they hear from teachers or read in textbooks. The belief that students are not expected to critically assess, review, or analyze the new information, is reinforced by the fact that very rarely students report on motivated and enthusiastic teachers who encourage students to critically assess new information and link it to the existing knowledge.

- This last point leads to the third insight into the Croatian education system – there is little practical experience that students have in relation to the

¹ INDEX.HR, 15.09.2018. Ivan Đikić: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/djikić-objasnio-kako-u-godinu-dana-spasiti-obrazovanje-i-demografiju/2023965.aspx>

theoretical knowledge they are provided with. In other words, students learn new things, for example, in biology and chemistry, but not every learning step is based on direct practical application of the newly learned information. What seems to be even more problematic is that there is little effort to connect information provided in different subjects that can be linked to one phenomenon or event.

- In addition, there is little digital and financial literacy which is essential in today's modern education.

Education reform becomes even more challenging taking into account that fact that Croatia is facing demographic decline. There are less students to be enrolled into schools in the future. What this means is that new curricula should not only bring Croatia closer to internalizing the best available knowledge and methods into Croatian education system, but that the education system has to take into account also Croatian reality.

How to agree on a list of criteria on the basis of which decisions regarding future investments in education will take place? How to sustain education in communities that are left with very few students? How to stop a trend that young people, once they graduate, seek employment outside of the country? Croatia's taxpayers substantially subsidize education of students who leave to find a job elsewhere. This is not a unique Croatian problem, but needs to be addressed.

Elements of the reform

The Ministry of Science and Education plans to introduce reforms related to vocational education, functional literacy, comprehensive personal and professional development, such as solving problems and critical thinking of students. Likewise raising the school's digital maturity, children should learn to use digital and interactive content. In summary, “a different approach to

learning”², according to Blaženka Divljak, Croatian Minister of Science and Education, should be designed.

One new element is that computer science class is available in all primary and secondary schools and is an obligatory subject in grades 5 and 6 of elementary schools in Croatia. Each student in schools that participate in the pilot is given a tablet. This has resulted in their school bags being lighter around 30 percent than before because children carry less books now. Furthermore, teachers attended trainings to implement new methods. These comprehensive trainings took place under the coordination of 200 experts from Croatia and abroad. Teachers will be given further support and assistance by mentors.

The Minister is confident that the training program equipped teachers adequately. With method manuals, equipment and textbooks, they seem to be ready to teach under the new curricular system. 153 days of virtual teachers program seems according to the Ministry enough to enable a creative, dynamic and ‘new teaching’ with more digital and technological gadgets and help. However, there are those who claim that the reform was implemented too early and that teachers had no complete and systematic training. Then again, the idea of an experimental phase is that the content should be developed in cooperation with the teachers. The Minister emphasizes the importance that teachers are responsible co-create the reform, give feedback to readjust and modify the reform if necessary.

The future

The reform began on the 3rd of September 2018 and is a one-year experiment. 74 schools applied for the experiment, 8500 students and 2000 teachers in the 1st, 5th and 6th grade. From the state budget (HRK 13.5 million), EU funds and the support from the European Commission, the Ministry of Science and Education secured over HRK 200 million (nearly EUR 27 million)

² hrti.hrt.hr, Ima li što novo?

<https://hrti.hrt.hr/videostore/moviedetails?referenceId=356954662&refer=videostore%7Cmovies&customCatalogueReferenceId=imalistanovotmladidjim&heading=IMA%20LI%20%20C5%A0TO%20NOVO?%20>=>

for the pilot reform. The aim is to equip the 'School of Life' and ensure equal opportunities for all students in the experimental phase of the reform.

The European Commission states that 65 percent of students who are now in the secondary school will work or learn in professions and jobs that do not exist today. Furthermore, 90 percent of the jobs in the future will request at least a basic level of digital literacy. According to Đikić, basis for building advanced societies is science and, in particular, technology.

Conclusion

If the pilot, this one-year experiment, succeeds and is positively assessed by students, parents and teachers, it will be implemented in schools throughout Croatia. In any case, what is clear now is that there is huge motivation. 74 schools are participating in the experimental phase and there are 6.500 voluntary teachers who are not yet participating in experimental schools, but who took part in the trainings organized by the Ministry. If Croatia wants a long-lasting outcome it should adjust the educational system regularly, under consideration of the development and demands of the changing modern world.

“Not everything is ideal and we are all learning for life in this instructive phase,” said the Minister.³ Croatia needs reformed education and there is a lot of hope that the pilot will succeed. This may become a first important step in the long-term education reform in Croatia.

³ hrti.hrt.hr, Ima li što novo?

<https://hrti.hrt.hr/videostore/moviedetails?referenceId=356954662&refer=videostore%7Cmovies&customCatalogueReferenceId=imalistanovotmladidjim&heading=IMA%20LI%20%C5%A0TO%20NOVO?%20>=>