



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:
Croatian Education System's Response to COVID-19 and
Introduction of Online Classes
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Croatian Education System's Response to COVID-19 and Introduction of Online Classes

Summary

As the COVID-19 epidemic is spreading around the world, people are still required to continue with their work, some from their offices, others from the safety of their homes. For children and students this situation represents a turning point, since schools in Croatia are no longer secured, and classes are now organized through online platforms and television. That system is currently showing the results, however the hardest period of evaluating children and enrolling to universities for seniors is still to come.

Introduction

There are number of newspaper headlines in Croatia that underline how well the country or, in this time a more suitable word would be “nation”, is dealing with the health emergency after the world was struck by the epidemic of COVID-19 virus. Of course, there is always a significant amount of irresponsible citizens who still do not take the situation seriously, but overall, it would not be an overstatement to say that Croatian Government, Ministry of Health, medical staff and experts in the field of epidemiology are doing a good job when compared to other European countries. The economic crisis will, undoubtedly, disrupt the flows not only Croatia, but the rest of Europe and the world, and many papers have already written about it. There is another field or policy area that requires more attention during this time and that is education. Since March 16th, Croatia has implemented the online classes for children in primary schools and for those in secondary or high school. The online system has been doing pretty good so far, but there is a rising number of questions that will, eventually, call for an answer from the decision makers and people in charge of education portfolio. For instance, nobody is still aware of the fact how the grading procedure will be done via online platforms; there are no answers on the date and place of final exams for high school seniors; those who wish to undertake college applications still do not know how this process will be arranged since some colleges require entrance exams.

The Teacher's Strike in a Late 2019

Unlike other European countries, Croatia has already faced with serious challenge during the current academic year due to a strike in primary and secondary schools in late 2019. According to some data, around 95% of school staff in Croatia had participated in strike, including teachers and professors, but also administrative and technical staff. The strike began on October 10th and lasted for 36 days. During that time, the main concern was whether or not the whole academic year will have to be prolonged. The Government and the Ministry of Science and Education assured parents and students that there would not be any need for such kind of measures and that academic year will be continued as soon as the agreement with school syndicate is reached. Finally, the strike ended in early December when Prime Minister Andrej Plenković announced that salaries of school staff will be increased based on a coefficient of 6 percent. The deal included 3+1+2 criteria, meaning that the salaries have gone up for 3 percent starting in December 2019, and will be raised for additional 1 percent in June 2020, and for 2 percent in January 2021. At that time, nobody was counting that the virus epidemic will cause further problems in school system and that children and students will not be able to attend classes in a few months. Given the weight of current COVID-19 crisis, the Government reacted quickly and Croatian children are now attending school from the safety of their own homes with classes being broadcasted on national and private television channels from morning hours until afternoon.

The Ministry of Science and Education Response to Crisis

Even though Croatia was one of the first European countries that had implemented online classes since the inception of COVID-19 epidemic, there are still a number of concerns that have to be addressed in the forthcoming period. The strike in the late 2019 has shown how fragile an education system can be when conflicting positions cannot be reconciled and that consequences of disagreement between politics and certain professions, in this case teachers, often end up at the expense of the most vulnerable groups in society, that being children and young people. Therefore, the corona crisis required the mentioned actors to find a common ground on how to continue with school activities and curriculum in a time when social distance has become probably the most commonly used phrase and advice given by the authorities and experts. Since children are now required to attend classes by using television and internet, the Ministry of Science and Education had to make sure that every family in Croatia has equal access to those services in order for their children to continue with regular school activities. For

those families living in poorer financial conditions and who cannot afford technologies such as computers, tablets, or internet access in general, the Ministry agreed that schools should provide them with necessary equipment, and for those schools that cannot meet those requirements, the Ministry offered a financial injection in amount of 4 million kunas to buy it and serve it to the families. To keep track of their children progress, the parents should be connected via Viber, WhatsApp, or e-mails with teachers and inform them if the above mentioned mechanisms of teaching and learning are showing results.

How is This Situation Affecting Students and Teachers?

The scientific institutions have also taken a role in following of the whole progress of online classes. The Institute for Social Research have made a study of three schools based in Zagreb with a goal of helping them in a creation of curriculum programs and other activities to keep children occupied during these times, but also to gain some insights on how the children are accepting and evaluate online courses. The results have shown that children are showing high levels of stress due to social uncertainties in these times, with being closed in houses and not being able to be in contact with other people of their age as the most common denominator. Thus, the stress levels are not connected exclusively with online classes, rather they are more of a social and emotional matter. Furthermore, the results are pointing in a direction of a high school seniors who are represented as a most vulnerable group, which is actually highly expected because of the fact that they have to enroll to universities this summer, but they still do not know when the final exams will take place and in what circumstances. Additionally, the Ministry of Science and Education have conducted a survey itself among 4139 teachers and students from March 27th to April 2nd, showing that 34,2% of teachers are completely satisfied with the way the classes are organized, while 61,5% are mostly satisfied with it. Regarding technical equipment that is being used for school and teaching purposes, 87% of teachers are considering it to be adequate for online classes, but 13% of them were unsatisfied mostly during the first week. Finally, almost half of teachers request more video lessons and some additional software's for the upcoming period.

Some Questions Still Require an Answer

Blaženka Divjak, Minister of Science and Technology in Croatian Government, recently opened up about some remaining questions in the field of education. Her comments were mostly

in line with expectations and estimations of medical staff and epidemiology services, thus, she said that online classes will remain until the experts from above mentioned domains come up with the decision that students and teachers can go back to schools and continue with regular classes. Of course, nothing new has been said with that statement as it is now obvious that the rest of the school year will most probably have to be conducted via online courses. However, parents and teachers are interested in how the remain of the year will be organized, most of all how the grading system will be carried out, and how or when the children will enroll to high schools and universities. Divjak said that some part of grading scheme will most certainly take place by using the online services, since students are not in a position to come back to schools only for the purpose of passing the exams. The biggest challenge will be to organize final exams for seniors who aim to enlist to university studies. The exams are usually prescribed for mid-May to mid-June period and by the strict rules of procedure, they require seniors to take their exams personally at schools, but it does not seem so likely that it is going to happen, at least during summer time. One exam, that of Croatian language and literature, has already been postponed. It seems more likely that the whole process will take place somewhere during autumn, which is not very much out of order, because of the fact that the academic year at universities officially ends in September. Therefore, if the exams are taken in early September, there would still be enough time for seniors to take their place at universities they want.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 outbreak has struck education portfolio quite severe. Croatian children and students have already lost 36 days in late 2019 when the strike of teachers and professors kept them out of schools. Much needed to be compensated, but as regular classes are postponed in favor of online teaching, it appears that the end of a school year 2019/2020 will have to be organized via internet streams and broadcasting on television. Such solution does not seem to be wrong as long as the interest of children is set as number one priority.