Montenegro

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

The Montenegrin education system[1] is based on developing Montenegro as a society of knowledge with a focus on lifelong learning. It should facilitate an easier transition from the world of education to the world of work and better position people for the labor market. The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport is responsible for the design, implementation, and development of the education system; the founding, functioning, and licensing of educational institutions; and the organization of their work. The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport is in charge of overall education policy and is the responsible authority for education processes along with the following institutions:

- The Bureau for Education Services defines and ensures the quality of education work at institutions and performs advisory, research, and professional tasks in primary, secondary, and preuniversity education. It is also responsible for the preparation of curricula for general education subjects.

- The Examination Centre carries out an external assessment of knowledge, skills, and competencies after certain cycles of primary and secondary education. It also conducts assessments for the attainment of national vocational qualifications.

- The Centre for Vocational Education is in charge of the development of vocational education qualifications and curricula, advisory support, and research within the vocational education of young students and adults.

- The Bureau for Textbooks and Teaching Aids[2,3] is in charge of editing and printing textbooks and other teaching aids.

The Montenegrin education system includes preschool, primary education, general secondary education (gymnasium), vocational education, higher education, and adult education. The system[a] comprises 21 state and 35 private preschool institutions (5 of which are international); 162 public primary schools and 6 private international primary schools; 54 public secondary schools (gymnasiums, vocational, music, and combined schools) and 5 private international secondary schools; 3 resource centers (for students with special education needs); 118 licensed adult

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[a]   For more information on the Montenegrin education system, see www.skolskamreza.edu.me

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education providers; 1 public and 3 private universities; as well as 1 public and 4 private autonomous faculties.

Each Montenegrin citizen has the right to education regardless of nationality, race, gender, language, religion, social origin, or other personal characteristics. Foreigners residing temporarily or permanently in Montenegro are equally entitled to education as Montenegrin citizens. In Montenegro, foreigners can enroll in a study program under the same conditions as Montenegrin citizens in accordance with the Law on Higher Education and the Statute of the institution.

The education system in Montenegro comprises the following levels:

- Preschool (preprimary) education[4] is organized in public or private preschool institutions in nurseries and Kindergartens. Nurseries are for children up to age 3, while Kindergartens are for children ages 3 to 6. Preschool (preprimary) education is not compulsory and is not a precondition for admission to primary school. Children begin learning English from the age of 3. Preschool (preprimary) education in Montenegro is equally accessible to all children.

- Primary education[5] is compulsory and free of charge for all children ages 6 to 15. It lasts for nine years and is divided into three cycles. In Montenegro, primary and lower secondary education is organized as a single structure system. At the end of the third cycle of primary school, students participate in an external assessment of knowledge of mother tongue language and literature, mathematics, and one subject the student selects from the list of compulsory subjects taught in the third cycle for at least two years. The Examination Centre prepares the tests and administers the final examinations.

- General secondary education (grammar schools/gymnasium and mixed secondary schools)[6] is not compulsory and lasts for four years. Students who have completed primary education and who are younger than 17 can enroll in gymnasium. At the end of gymnasium, students have an external assessment of their knowledge called a Matura examination.[7]

- Vocational secondary education[8] is not compulsory and is implemented in a period of two, three, or four years in vocational secondary schools. Vocational education is provided by schools (theoretical part) and employers (practical part) in accordance with the education program. Students in a four-year vocational school take the Vocational examination. The Vocational examination is taken at the end of a three- or four-year vocational education program.

Matura and Vocational examinations can be external or internal. The Examination Centre conducts external examinations, which is a requirement for continued education at higher education institutions. The school conducts internal examinations. In Montenegro, secondary education (general or vocational) is free of charge.

The Master Craftsman Exam[9] is taken by candidates who complete three-year vocational schools and have three years of work experience in the profession or by candidates who complete four-year vocational schools and have two years of work experience in the profession.

- Upper secondary nontertiary education is a continuation of vocational secondary education. It lasts for two years and ends with passing the diploma examination.

- Higher tertiary education[10] can be obtained at the University of Montenegro, which is a public university, as well as at private universities and faculties. The three-cycle study system includes the first cycle (three or four years), graduate studies (specialist and master), and doctoral studies. Study programs can be academic and applied. First-cycle studies last three or four years except for first-cycle studies in medical science, which last five or six years. Graduate specialist studies last for one year after the completion of first-cycle studies, and graduate master programs last for two years after the completion of the first cycle. Students may continue their formal education with three years of doctoral studies that prepare them for independent scientific research. In the 2020–2021 academic year, students enrolled in the first year of master's studies at public universities were also exempt from paying tuition fees.

- Adult education[11] is part of the unique education system of Montenegro. Adults, by their own choice, train or learn to improve their knowledge, skills, and competencies, advancing their personal and professional development. Adult education training programs in Montenegro are implemented by adult education providers licensed[12] by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport. Adult education refers to various target groups (unemployed without qualifications, unemployed with qualifications that the labor market does not require, employed who want to broaden their knowledge in a specific area, and school leavers). Adult education is conducted through formal education, nonformal education, and self-directed learning. The main aim of adult education is to promote lifelong learning.

Exhibit 1 shows the scheme of the education system in Montenegro.

Exhibit 1: Scheme of the Education System in Montenegro[13]
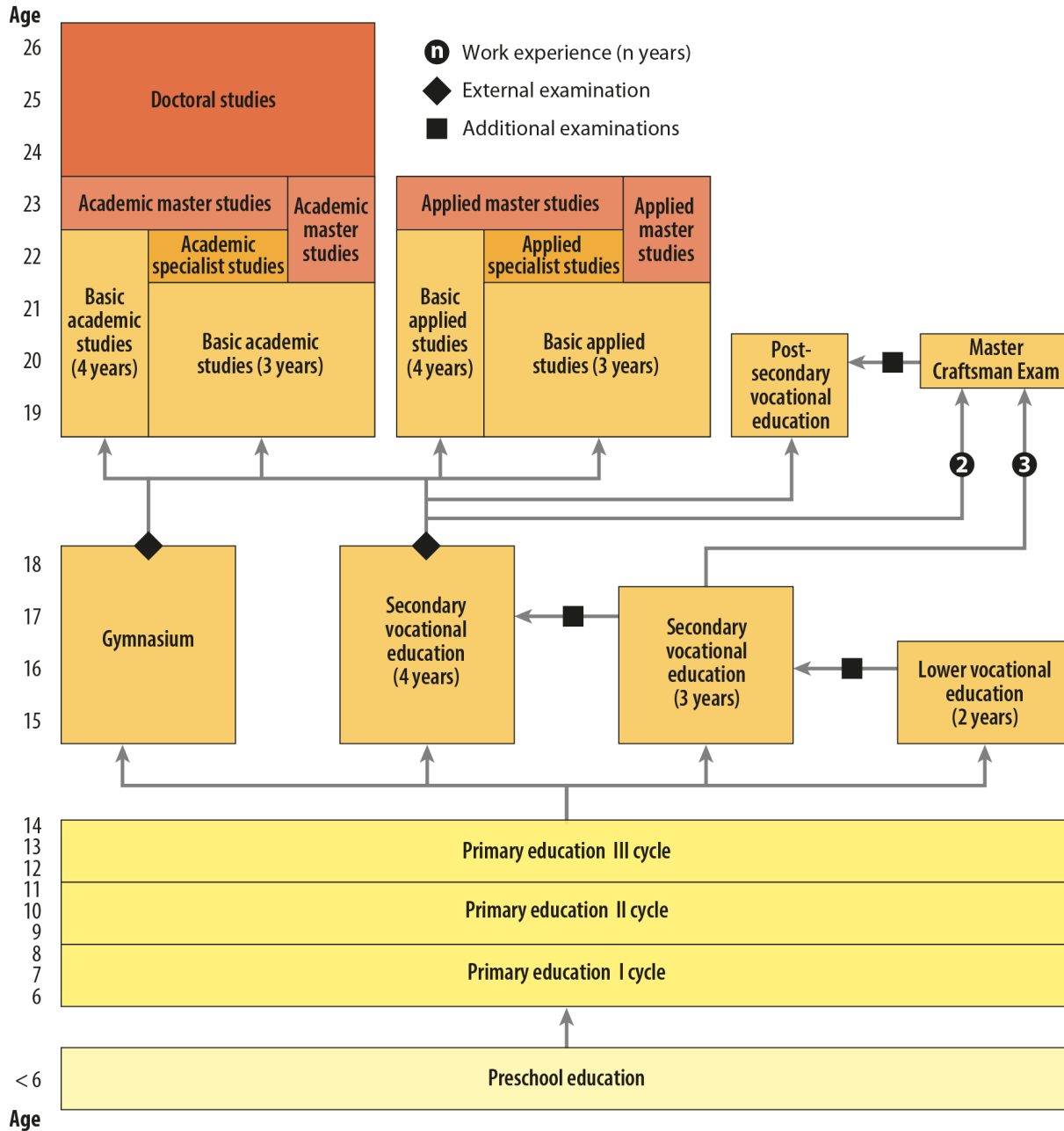
In Montenegro, an important goal is to improve the educational outcomes for all children. To ensure equality of opportunity and to eliminate discrimination of any kind against children, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport takes special measures to increase enrollment for children from the Roma community and children with disabilities. The system offers individual developmental education programs[14] for children with special education needs (IROP). Students

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with special needs attend traditional school classes. This approach involves engaging teaching assistants to provide technical assistance to children with special education needs.

The language of instruction is Montenegrin. Teaching also is performed in languages in official use: Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian, and Albanian. The Cyrillic and Latin alphabet are equal.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Montenegro participated in PIRLS for the first time in 2021.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The subject Montenegrin-Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian language and literature is a compulsory subject in primary schools and comprises the majority of classes. There are five Montenegrin-Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian language and literature classes per week in Grades 1 to 5, and there are four Montenegrin-Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian language and literature classes per week in Grades 6 to 9. This subject is important because it is also the language of instruction. Mastery of all other subjects is usually dependent on mastery of the mother tongue. Each of the two main areas in the subject—language and literature—has subareas. There are three subareas within language instruction: (1) reading nonartistic texts of various types (which includes media and information literacy), (2) creating texts based on the readings (oral and written expression), and (3) grammar and spelling. The subareas in literature instruction include: (1) reading and interpreting literary and artistic texts, (2) creating texts based on the readings (oral and written expression), and (3) adopting literary theoretical concepts (by age). Grammar and spelling in the mother tongue, along with a systematic literacy program in Cyrillic and Latin, are the key elements of language instruction.

The first three years of primary education are focused on learning basic reading and writing. The goal of the first grade teaching method is to prepare students for reading and writing. Students learn the Cyrillic alphabet in second grade and the Latin alphabet in third. Additionally, during reading and writing exercises, students are introduced to a variety of nonartistic texts that have been given a higher priority in the curriculum than literary texts (60 percent to 40 percent).

Montenegrin-Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian language and literature instruction promotes learning outcomes that are the explicit identification of the integrated knowledge, skills, and competencies. Students:

- form a positive attitude toward their mother tongue, respecting the differences of other languages; gradually and systematically learn the language as a system and use standard language;
- develop a positive attitude toward literature; develop literary sensibility and understanding of human nature, the character of man, and the world as a whole; read the literary works of

world literature and the literary works of national literature, which broaden their horizons and allow them to respect the differences of other cultures;

- critically read and listen to nonartistic and artistic texts; create texts orally and in writing based on what they have heard and read;
- gradually train for four communication activities: listening, reading, speaking, and writing;
- are trained to use technology and information assistance in collecting, organizing, and communicating information, and developing media and information literacy.

The curriculum emphasizes reading and writing but does not prescribe how much time teachers should devote to each component. Exhibit 2 presents the Montenegrin-Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian language and literature curriculum.

Exhibit 2: Montenegrin-Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian Language and Literature Curriculum[15]

Grade	Learning Outcomes
1	Write letters of the alphabet and connect them to phonemes; recognize different sounds; distinguish and compare sounds; recognize a letter as a sign for a certain phoneme; combine phonemes and letters into words; recognize letters and some words; recognize a sentence as a spoken-written unit; form a short text message independently; congratulate, ask, invite, apologize; understand the term "sentence" in all kinds of situations; read and write words and sentences; create a text orally with the help of the teacher's questions or pictorial material; explain the purpose and significance of pictorial commands, prohibitions, and warnings and create similar ones; become aware of short stories and create age-appropriate texts based on artistic ones; experience picture books as texts closely related to pictures; understand a stage play
2	Apply the basic principles of dialogic communication in conversation; use terms: sentence, word, sound, letter; loud and quiet reading of short and simple texts; distinguish between printed and written letters; use the Cyrillic alphabet; write a short essay independently on a given topic; link words in a meaningful and clear unit; shape and narrate a short story; apply basic spelling rules: a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence, a capital letter in writing proper nouns: names of persons, cities, and villages, name of their school; sentence signs: period, question mark, exclamation mark; communicate the experience of the literary text, highlight what the student liked in the work, and explain why the student liked it
3	Demonstrate knowledge about nouns, distinguish common nouns from proper nouns and singular from plural; distinguish adjectives as words that describe nouns; apply the basic principles of dialogic communication in conversation; distinguish between poetry and prose; demonstrate the technique of reading Latin texts; demonstrate the technique of writing in Latin (printed and written letters); use and distinguish between Latin and Cyrillic alphabet; demonstrate the technique of fluent and correct, loud and quiet reading of printed and written texts in both alphabets (Cyrillic and Latin); report about a task performed according to the chronological sequence of events; express observations, thoughts, and feelings after listening to or reading a literary and artistic text and connect the content of the text with one's own experience
4	Recognize the value of spoken language; name main and other events in a story, and narrate independently; predict new events and combine them into a new story; identify the compositional structure of the text (introduction, main part, and conclusion); differentiate a tale as a nonfictional story from a fairy tale as a fictional story; demonstrate knowledge of the relationships between nouns, verbs, and adjectives; recognize, name, and use affirmative and negative sentence forms; listen to or read a literary-artistic text with understanding and make a distinction between literary-artistic and nonartistic texts; notice and compare literary characters, analyze their actions, and identify with them; experience and value theater plays and cartoons; recite a memorized song expressively; tell the story of a fairy tale or short realistic story in one's own words

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

In accordance with the General Law on Education, teachers are obligated to have professional development in various fields through relevant programs. Professional development of teachers is a long-term process and enables teachers to develop their skills and abilities that are relevant for the success of both curricular and extracurricular activities of students. The *Rulebook on the Organization of Teacher Professional Development and the Method of Selecting Authors of Professional Development Programs*[16] specifies how teachers, professional associates, and other educators should organize their professional development, as well as the method of selecting authors of professional development programs. In the process of organizing professional development, the Bureau for Education Services and the Centre for Vocational Education prepare guidelines and propose priority areas of professional development. The authors of the programs are chosen through a public call. Programs that fulfill the required standards are submitted for accreditation to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport and then published in the Bureau for Education Services and the Centre for Vocational Education catalogs. The Bureau's catalog of professional development programs for the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 academic years offers 360 programs, whereas the Centre for Vocational Education's catalog offers 85 programs. In 2019, the National Council for Education approved changes to the Andragogic Training Program for Teachers. This program has taught 926 teachers, instructors, and other teaching staff who worked previously in adult education institutions. The rulebook on andragogic training[17] was adopted in accordance with the General Law on Education to regulate this field further.

The system of professional ranks has been established as a motivating factor to support teachers who are improving their knowledge and skills through professional development and practice applying their knowledge in the teaching process. It offers teachers the opportunity to progress to one of the following ranks: teacher mentor, teacher advisor, teacher senior advisor, or teacher-researcher. Teachers are issued a license[18] for working in educational institutions after passing the vocational examination. The license is valid for five years. Teachers, principals, or assistant principals who do not have a license or did not renew their license cannot work at an educational institution.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Knowledge assessment and evaluation make it possible to monitor students' individual development and enhance their motivation for further work and improvement. Short tests after each area covered can be used to monitor progress and test knowledge. Tests must be clear and based on the types of tasks and methods practiced in class, and assessments should be based on defined standards of knowledge. Students are encouraged to recognize the usefulness of newly acquired knowledge in everyday life. In addition to oral and written examinations, the following

methods also should be used: monitoring students' work, class activity, debates, students' reports, presentations, etc.

In addition to continuous assessments of students' achievements, done by the teacher in daily work and based on knowledge standards set in the educational program, external assessments of achievements are also conducted at the end of each cycle—in the third, sixth, and ninth year of primary school. Both national assessments and national examinations[19] may be useful methods for monitoring the achievement of curriculum outcomes and results. Test scores, together with international assessments, provide crucial data for revising curricula and improving education strategies.

Assessment is prescribed by the Law on Primary Education and the *Rulebook on the Manner of Assessment of Primary School Students.*[20] In the first cycle of primary school, student evaluations are descriptive at three levels: partly achieved, mostly achieved, and fully achieved; at the end of third grade, the performance of students is expressed by both descriptive and numerical marks. In the second- and third-cycle assessment, results are expressed using a system of numerical marks: (1) insufficient, (2) sufficient, (3) good, (4) very good, and (5) excellent. During the classification period, students must be assessed in each subject, except for the first graders in the first classification period. Schools are obligated to inform parents about their children's achievements and progress at the end of each classification period. The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport has created a web portal for parents that allows them to monitor the performance, absences, and conduct of their children.

Special Reading Initiatives

Across the curriculum, students are expected to become proficient in oracy, reading, and writing. The emphasis is on the learners' capacity to apply the skills and concepts they've learned to complete practical tasks that are appropriate for their developmental stage. Literacy development begins in the early years, and a greater emphasis should be on literacy in ages 0 to 3. Early reading success also is linked to a lower rate of early school departure. Parental involvement programs should have a specific focus on the importance of meaningful dialogue between parent and child.

Critical thinking about social and personal values, appearing in public, solving problems, accepting responsibility for decisions and actions, and making effective and moral decisions is related to the Bureau for Education Services initiative called My Values and Virtues.[21] Primary school students wrote essays on the topic, and the best essays were awarded. The initiative was launched in 2015 in cooperation with the Bureau for Education Services and UNICEF Montenegro. It was created based on the need to provide stronger support for schools to help students develop their social and emotional competencies. The initiative promotes not only better academic achievement and school quality, but also a higher quality of future life, employment opportunities, and constructive participation in social processes.

Montenegro started to use DAISY textbooks[22] systematically in its inclusive education system. DAISY textbooks are in the audiovisual format and are intended for all children, but are especially beneficial for students who have difficulty reading printed texts. Primary school children in Grades 4 to 9 currently have reading books in the DAISY format, with history textbooks available in this format as well. Children with visual impairments are familiarizing themselves with the world of literature by listening to books instead of reading them. Thanks to DAISY textbooks, classes become much more interesting. So far, nine DAISY textbooks have been recorded for students in Grades 4 to 9.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 period, Montenegro faced many challenges. Schools were forced to close, but the top priority was to protect every student's right to an education. During the COVID-19 lockdown, students, parents, and teachers were challenged by poor digital skills, network issues, accessibility issues, and lack of training, as well as resistance to change. The transition into online education started in March 2020, prompting educational institutions and families to communicate and work together. Parents were expected to be more involved in their children's education than ever before. Furthermore, all educators were encouraged to provide educational services for all students using online platforms, and schools usually used Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Real-time interaction with students also was encouraged. Apart from being required to learn to use Zoom or Microsoft Teams, teachers found that too much time was needed for class preparation, so they shared resources to reduce the workload and avoid any duplication of work. Some teachers preferred to record the classes so students could watch them on their computers in their own time. The 2019–2020 academic year was finished online but a few scenarios were prepared for the following academic year. The first one was the "normal" entry into schools at the beginning of the new school year. However, that did not happen and the new school year started on October 1, 2020, instead of on September 1, 2020. To reduce the number of students in the same building at the same time, the second scenario was a combined approach of groups of students having in-person classes along with online teaching for other groups. Masks were mandatory on the school premises. The third scenario was online education for a minimum of a term, depending on the epidemiological situation. In Montenegro, all of the mentioned scenarios occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Academic year 2021–2022 started with all schools open; students had regular classes, but the classes were shortened to be 30 minutes long.

In addition, data on COVID-19 transmission in Montenegro in preschools, primary schools, and secondary schools are available on the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport website.[23] The data indicate that schools are safe places that do not contribute to a rise in COVID- 19 infections if preventative measures are implemented. For this reason, UNICEF calls

for everyone to respect #DistanceHandsMask measures,[24] thereby stopping the spread of the coronavirus, and for schools to be the last to close and the first to open during lockdowns.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The learning process carried out in the classroom by direct interaction between teachers and students cannot be compared to the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was carried out at home with an online or offline remote learning system. There were a lot of disadvantages of learning at home but there were advantages, too. The benefits of learning at home include saving on transportation costs and additional free time. Studying at home has the biggest advantage of allowing students to do everything without leaving the comfort of their room. It is possible to read aloud and repeat the learning material in the room, to practice presentations and simulations in solitude. Besides books, students also can use the computer, the printer, and the mobile phone as learning tools. Learning at home also allows students more flexibility in the timing of meals.

On the other hand, there are many disadvantages of learning at home, such as boredom, a decrease in student interest and motivation, and increased internet and electricity costs. Students need to have several elements to study, such as appropriate space and materials for learning. Students may need silence to concentrate and study effectively, and their homes may not support this. In addition to difficulty concentrating, learning at home may provide more distractions because of easy access to the internet, video games, etc. Students found it difficult to adapt to remote online learning due to lack of focus at home, lack of access to digital devices or a good internet connection, lack of motivation, and having a difficult time remembering deadlines and assignments for online classes. Students' mental and emotional health has been affected negatively by the pandemic, resulting in more anxiety and stress. Disorganization, isolation, disconnection from peers, as well as the cancellation of graduation celebrations, made the feelings of stress and anxiety worse.

Policy and Practice Changes

On March 16, 2020, the Montenegrin government ordered Montenegrin schools to close physically. The World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a pandemic two days earlier. Worldwide, schools and educational institutions closed due to concerns about the spread and severity of COVID-19. During the COVID-19 discontinuation of education, remote online education was the most suitable education policy. The Ministry provided access to the Microsoft Teams platform to grant quality and accessibility of communication between students and teachers. The concept #LearnAtHome was implemented in both the Montenegrin and Albanian languages for the first and second semesters. Priority contents broadcast on TVCG 2 and MNE

SPORT were complemented by the teachers' portal,[b] the Ministry website, and social networks throughout the 2020–2021 academic year. Since the beginning of the pandemic, classes have been broadcast continuously. For students who attend classes in Albanian, classes were broadcast on TV Teuta and TV Boin. The videos are also available on the YouTube channel #UčiDoma,[c] sorted by level of education, subject, and class. The YouTube channel[25] had the most views from the Montenegrin region, followed by views from Germany, Slovenia, Russia, the United Kingdom, Macedonia, Hungary, Italy, Canada, Poland, and Turkey. During that period, more than 1,700 classes were recorded in 17 subjects. The 2019–2020 academic year ended online except for final examinations, which were taken in person. The 2020–2021 academic year began on October 1, 2020, with a so-called combined model in schools. Students in Grades 1 to 6 of the primary school attended classes in schools, taking into account the recommendations of the Institute of Public Health for health protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in Grades 7 to 9 had online classes. A new portal eDnevnikME was developed for parents, which contains information on their children's grades and behavior.

In December 2021, Montenegro launched a digital school based on the Learning Passport that is developed jointly by UNICEF, Microsoft, and the University of Cambridge. The Learning Passport platform currently is used in 17 countries around the world. The digital school is designed to bring together learning resources for children and adolescents, parents, guardians, teachers, and other professionals in the education system.

Based on the analysis performed, it can be concluded that the Montenegrin system has demonstrated responsibility and quality in response to challenges during the COVID-19 period and a willingness to continue with further improvement.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Due to the closure of schools in March 2020, it was not possible to conduct the PIRLS field test. Since the PIRLS field test was to be administered on paper, the materials were ready but were delayed because of school closures. The next school year began one month later than usual and started on October 1, 2020, which was too late to conduct the field test. The main data collection was conducted in March 2021 under difficult conditions. Because there was a large number of COVID-19 infections in the country, new measures for safe education were adopted every seven days. Based on the number of patients in the municipality, the National Crisis Staff decided whether students should go to school or have online classes. Therefore, plans for when schools should conduct PIRLS were adjusted weekly. Materials were distributed to different schools six times, thus covering all schools. This was the only possibility for PIRLS implementation. In some schools, the test date was changed two or three times, which resulted in some parents not allowing

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[b] For more information about the teachers' portal, see www.skolskiportal.edu.me

[c] For more information about UčiDoma, see https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC07wVCV2n_Zpg3WFb9_9vew and www.ucidoma.me

their children to participate. School coordinators reported that some parents reacted negatively and insisted that testing should be postponed. However, PIRLS was conducted in compliance with the epidemiological recommendations of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport. Each class of more than 17 students was divided into two groups, which meant much more work for the test administrator and more difficult organization. In some schools, there were a lot of students who were in isolation and for that reason, make-up sessions had to be organized.

In conclusion, it was very challenging to administer PIRLS 2021. There were not many problems, but some parents prohibited their children from taking the test. Upon completion of PIRLS testing, the school coordinators filled out a survey expressing their opinion regarding the implementation of PIRLS. One of the questions was "Are you satisfied with how the PIRLS was administered in your school?" In the survey of 90 participants, 87 percent answered "very satisfied" and 13 percent answered "satisfied."

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