

Serbia

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

The Republic of Serbia has laws to ensure that equitable education is available to everyone throughout the country. At the national level, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development (MoeSTD) oversees the administration of the public school system; develops educational concepts and a unified education policy; and creates laws, general regulations, and documents related to education. Within the Ministry, the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (IEQE) and the Institute for Education Improvement are responsible for conducting evaluation, research, and development in education. Preuniversity educational institutions are managed by school councils. The system of financing public educational institutions is established among the Republic, districts, and local government. The Serbian education system is organized as follows:

- Preschool education (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Level 0) is provided in nurseries (for children ages 6 months to 3 years) and Kindergartens (for children ages 3 to 7).
- Primary education is compulsory and consists of two cycles. The first cycle (ISCED Level 1) comprises Grades 1 to 4, with instruction of all subjects by classroom teachers. Some subjects, like foreign languages, may be taught by subject teachers. The second cycle (ISCED Level 2) comprises Grades 5 to 8, with all instruction by subject teachers. Children enroll in first grade when they are 6½ to 7½ years old (in exceptional cases, enrollment may be postponed for one year). At the end of primary school, students take a final examination and can enroll in secondary school if they pass. Some secondary schools require students to pass an entrance examination that demonstrates extraordinary skills. Students with special education needs can attend special primary schools or regular schools.
- Secondary education (ISCED Level 3 or 4) is not compulsory and lasts three or four years. There are different types of secondary education: general secondary education lasting four years (gymnasium), vocational secondary education lasting three or four years (vocational schools), or artistic secondary education lasting four years (art schools). Starting in academic year 2023–2024, after completing the fourth year of secondary school, students should take the

Matura examination, which is used to determine their eligibility for enrollment in higher education.

- Tertiary education (ISCED Level 5 or 6) comprises basic academic and vocational studies (three to four years), after which students may pursue master academic or vocational studies or specialist studies (one to two years).
- Master academic and master vocational studies, as well as specialist studies (ISCED Level 7) are available for students who continue their education.
- Doctoral studies (ISCED Level 8) last for three years. At state universities, education is free for a specified number of students.

Education in the Republic of Serbia is carried out in the Serbian language. For members of ethnic minorities, it may be carried out in their mother tongue. Instruction is provided in a minority language if there are at least 15 students who speak that language as the mother tongue at the time of enrollment in the first grade of primary education. Instruction in the languages of national minorities in primary schools has been organized in eight languages: Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak, and Croatian.

Standards for evaluating the quality of educational institutions are regulated externally and internally. Educational institutions conduct self-evaluations every year in certain areas, and external evaluations are carried out at least once every six years.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia—Journal of Education* adopted and published the current fourth grade curriculum.¹ The curriculum for teaching and learning Serbian language is based on results, i.e., on the learning process and achievements of students. For students in fourth grade, the curriculum consists of three areas: Literature, Language, and Language Literacy. Reading classes are held in all three areas.

By the end of fourth grade, reading-related outcomes for students include the following: read different types of texts with comprehension; briefly explain their impressions and opinions, respecting different points of view; paraphrase a text from different roles and perspectives; notice the basic tone of the literary text (e.g., happy, sad, funny); notice the conflict of people in a dramatic text; read the text with respect to the intonation of the sentence or verse; expressively recite a poem and read a prose text; interpret dramatic texts; connect the information expressed in a linear and nonlinear text and draw a conclusion from it; structure the text correctly; and participate in the elaboration of contents and working methods.

Key goals of teaching Literature are developing students' ability to read literary texts with understanding, encouraging a love for reading, developing a sense of a text's beauty and value, and cultivating taste and perseverance in reading and experiencing a literary work. It is necessary to nurture students' ability to describe their experience of reading literary works, to express opinions,

to understand the various characteristics and actions of characters, and to make judgments about those characteristics and actions. Reading takes time, perseverance, and dedication, characteristics needed for all further learning. Reading literature encourages empathy as students immerse themselves in the aesthetic world of the work and experience it emotionally. Reading literature strengthens students' national and cultural identity as they learn about their own literature and culture as well as the literature and culture of other nations.

A fundamental goal of Language Literacy instruction is enhancing students' means of expression, i.e., the development, enrichment, and improvement of their linguistic abilities. Language Literacy includes oral and written expression. Instruction in this area complements instruction in Language and Literature but is also taught through independent teaching units. Proper oral and written expression enables students to learn and master other school subjects successfully. Fourth grade students should be encouraged to narrate, speak, and describe concisely and thoroughly, both orally and in writing. Students' speaking exercises stimulate not only imagination and creativity, but also divergent thinking, so they should be used more often in Language Literacy instruction. Speaking exercises such as recitation, expressive reading, and stage presentation of a dramatic/dramatized text are appropriate for students in fourth grade.

The youngest students greatly benefit from reading and interpreting text aloud, with a gradual, systematic, and coherent introduction to the technique of reading silently. Each student's ability to read aloud should be evaluated in a well-intentioned and critical manner. In other words, after reading a text aloud, each student should get feedback from his or her peers and teacher about what was good about the reading and what should possibly be changed to make it even better. From there, students can learn to read silently with progression, systematization, and consistency. Indeed, reading silently contains a series of complex reflective actions that the student must master simultaneously.

Interpreting text is based on reading, experiencing, and understanding it. At the same time, understanding the message of a text is directly affected by how well it is read. For this reason, various forms of guided reading are necessary for students to acquire instructional knowledge and be successfully introduced to literary work.

Expressive reading is encouraged in a systematic way, with a steady increase in demands and the development of students' reading skills. The teacher selects an appropriate text to read aloud. Based on the reflective and emotional content of the text, the teacher adjusts volume, rhythm, tempo, intonation, pauses, sentence emphasis, and voice transformations while reading the text aloud, occasionally using audio recordings of exemplary interpretive readings. A variety of texts are used for expressive reading, including lyrical, epic, and dramatic texts in prose and verse in narrative, descriptive, dialogue, and monologue forms. Particular attention is devoted to the emotional dynamics of the text, its dramatic nature, and speaking from the point of view of the author and of the individual characters. Appropriate conditions for expressive reading and speaking should be set up in the classroom. Student readers and speakers should be given seats in

front of the classroom, and the rest of the class should be good listeners, interested and able to evaluate critically and objectively the quality of the reading and speaking. Students should be allowed to listen to their reading through audio recordings and reflect on their proficiency.

Expressive recitation of memorized prose and verse is important to develop students' oral culture. Interpreting a prose text is the starting point for the natural and expressive recitation of verse. For this reason, it is desirable to practice and occasionally compare the oral expression of prose and verse texts. The success of expressive recitation depends very much on the way the text is learned. If it is learned mechanically, as sometimes happens, expressive recitation can be automatic and flat. To avoid this, teachers use rehearsals to familiarize students with reflective and interpretative memorization of the text. During rehearsal, conditions should be created for the recitation to take place "eye to eye" so the speaker can observe the face of the listener and establish an emotional connection with the audience. Maximum attention is given to the natural attitude of the speaker, reliable transmission of information, and suggestive speech.

Reading silently is the most productive form of knowledge acquisition because it is always directed and exploratory. Reading exercises are integrated directly into other forms of work and provide students with more opportunities to acquire knowledge and understand a wide range of texts. Teachers use exercises for silent reading to build students' ability to read flexibly, as well as harmonize the speed of reading with the purpose of reading and comprehension of the characteristics of the text. Students are introduced to the text beforehand and then given appropriate tasks to complete as they read silently. Teachers then verify how each student completes the tasks to assess the student's comprehension and ability to learn independently. Further study of the text begins after students have successfully read it aloud and interpreted it silently. Literature is read, if necessary, several times.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Professional development of teachers is regulated by the *Rulebook on Continuous Professional Development and Promotion to the Titles of Teachers, Educators and Professional Associates*.² Teacher professional development is planned according to the needs of students, priority areas determined by the Minister of Education, and teachers' level of competency in different areas. Teachers must obtain 100 points of professional development per year (one hour of professional development is equivalent to one point), comprising at least 80 points from accredited vocational training programs.

The Institute for Improvement of Education approves professional development programs and publishes the *Catalog of Continuous Professional Development Programs for Teachers, Educators and Professional Associates*. In the current catalog³ the training related to reading education, "Complex method of initial reading and writing education," is organized by the Belgrade Teachers Association. The priority is to improve teachers' skills in planning and implementing results-

oriented teaching. General objectives are to strengthen and improve teachers' skills for an individualized approach in initial reading and writing education. The specific objective is to use a complex method in initial reading and writing education, since children learn letters and master reading and writing skills with an understanding of what is being read and written.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Monitoring student progress and assessment are carried out internally by teachers and externally through assessments administered by MoeSTD and IEQE.

Teachers monitor student achievement during the school year through summative assessment and formative assessment. Student knowledge and skills are evaluated on a five-point scale, and additional assessment is based on observations, student activities, oral examinations, written examinations, and other assignments (homework and projects). Students receive feedback throughout the school year and receive final grades at the end of the first semester (January/February) and at the end of the school year in June.

In cooperation with MoeSTD, IEQE prepares and conducts national examinations that are administered on the same date throughout Serbia. National examinations are conducted in Grades 1, 3, 5, and 7. At the end of eighth grade (ISCED Level 2), students take a final examination that comprises three tests: mathematics, mother tongue, and a test that combines material from five learning areas: biology, physics, chemistry, history, and geography.

The results of the final examination are the decisive criterion for enrollment in secondary school. Preparations are underway for the Matura examination, which will be conducted at the end of secondary school starting in 2024. IEQE prepares all the tests for national examinations.

In all national examinations, the language and literature test includes passages of text and tasks that assess comprehension. National statistics on reading literacy have been supplemented by the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment and will be supplemented by the results of PIRLS 2021.

Special Reading Initiatives

Serbian language teachers, school librarians, and other teachers have initiated a national interschool project called Readers to promote reading among students. I Read, So What is a program organized by municipal librarians (in cooperation with primary school librarians) that rewards the 10 most successful students from each school in each municipality (student performance on an anonymous test is assessed by teachers, Serbian language teachers, and primary school librarians). The program includes students from Grades 2 to 8. The books that children are obliged to read for the program are grouped by levels. The first level consists of books selected for the school competition, the second level consists of books selected for the municipal competition,

and the third level consists of books selected for the city competition. New children's books are included in each level when possible.

The Reader's Badge initiative is a literary workshop and competition intended for primary school students. It is organized and realized by the municipal library, primary schools, and various children's organizations. The workshop includes different literary works grouped by age appropriateness into eight separate programs, with one program corresponding to each class (the volume of reading increases with age). Each program includes classical, contemporary, domestic, and foreign literature (except for the program for students in first grade). Second grade students should read 5 out of the 8 titles offered in the program; students in Grades 3 to 5 should read 6 out of the 10 titles offered; and students in Grades 6 and 7 should read 7 out of the 10 titles offered. Reading diaries and students' test achievements also are evaluated to determine who receives a badge.

There are also numerous reading initiatives at the local level to nurture the culture of speech and promote reading habits in children.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The shutdown of Serbian schools began on March 16, 2020. It lasted until May, after which there were partial shutdowns, and students went to school in smaller groups only to take final examinations. In September and October 2020, parents could decide whether to send their children to school or keep them home. The second full shutdown began on November 1 and lasted until January 2021. For the remainder of the 2020–2021 academic year, a hybrid model of instruction was implemented throughout the country. Some students went to school, while others stayed home and participated in distance learning.

Based on the Serbian government's adoption of the Decision on the Declaration of COVID-19 Disease Caused by Infectious Virus SARS-CoV-2⁴ on March 15, the Decision of the Government of the Republic of Serbia on the Suspension of Teaching in Higher Education Institutions, Secondary and Primary Schools and the Regular Work of Preschool Education Institutions⁵ suspended teaching in higher educational institutions, secondary and primary schools, and preschool educational institutions for as long as COVID-19 persists. Related to this measure, MoESTD adopted a plan⁶ based on Serbian education law that states that learning can be done from home. In May 2020, IEQE prepared and published a framework for assessing distance learning in primary and secondary schools.⁷ During summer 2020, IEQE prepared and distributed goals and guidelines⁸ to schools to support instruction during COVID-19.

Additionally, MoESTD enabled the first-ever online assessment of knowledge in the country at the end of April 2020. Using the Moodle platform, the online assessment was an effort to prepare approximately 68,000 eighth grade students for their upcoming final examinations. Aside from

this effort, there have been no special provisions for any other particular groups of students, including students with special needs.

No specific efforts were directed to fourth grade reading instruction.

Policy and Practice Changes

Measures adopted and implemented during the pandemic had some positive effects, including access to broadband internet and increased computer usage in a large percentage of schools. Students and teachers learned and understood that internet and digital technologies can be powerful tools to support the learning process.

Suggested Readings

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- ² *Правилник о сталном стручном усавршавању и напредовању у звања наставника, васпитача и стручних сарадника* [Rulebook on continuous professional development and promotion to the titles of teachers, educators and professional associates]. (2017, 2018). Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 81/2017 and No. 48/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik-strucnom-usavravanju-napredovanju-zvanja-nastavnika-vaspitaca-strucnih.html>
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- ⁴ *Одлука о проглашењу болести COVID-19 изазване вирусом SARS-CoV-2 заразном болешћу* [Decision on the declaration of COVID-19 disease caused by infectious virus SARS-CoV-2]. (2020). Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia. Retrieved from <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/odluka/2020/23/1/reg>

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- ⁵ Одлука о обустави извођења наставе у високошколским установама, средњим и основним школама и редовног рада установа предшколског васпитања и [Decision of the government of the Republic of Serbia on the suspension of teaching in higher education institutions, secondary and primary schools and the regular work of preschool education institutions]. (2020). Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 30/2020. Retrieved from <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/odluka/2020/30/2/reg>
- ⁶ Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development. (2020). *Оперативни план за наставак рада школа у отежаним условима уз програм учења на даљину за ученике основних и средњих школа* [Operational plan for the continuation of the work of schools in challenging conditions with a distance learning program for primary and secondary school students]. Retrieved from <https://www.mpn.gov.rs/operativni-plan-za-nastavak-rada-skola-u-otezanim-uslovima-uz-program-ucenja-na-daljину-za-ucenike-osnovnih-i-srednjih-skola/>
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