

Correspondence and Handling of Covid19 Pandemic in Schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020-2021

The handling of Covid19 pandemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina was and still is quite confusing and inconsistent. More so, the highly structured and divided political situation in country is making this, already serious, situation even more difficult. Reaching consensus on national level has been a challenge and general instructions regarding measures of protection and prevention against Corona virus have been greatly decentralized and uneven throughout the country. To better understand the whole national context and structure of education system, a brief introduction will be presented.

Fragmented Legislative Structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Namely, in 1995, the war against Bosnia and Herzegovina ended with a Dayton Peace Agreement, signed among warring parties in U.S. Military Base in Dayton, Ohio. This peace agreement, whose annex IV still serves as a Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, introduced extremely complex state structure, with highly fragmented institutional and territorial setting. In order to ensure that all former warring parties have equal share of influence in governance, the model of political system that was introduced heavily relies on existence of a single ethnicity dominated dominions.

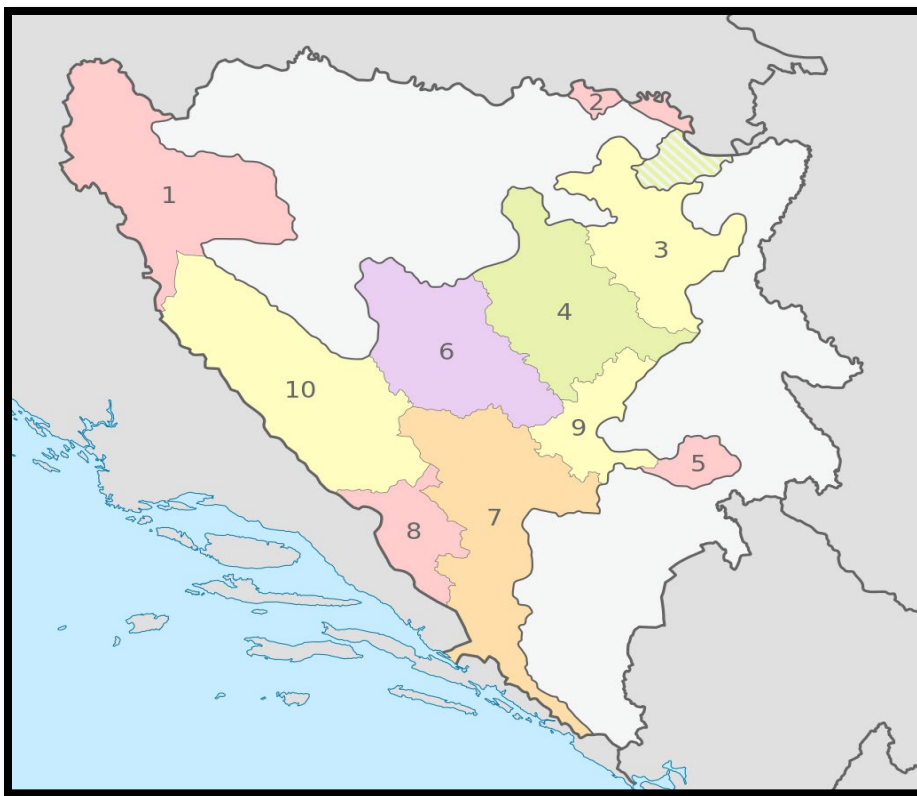
More precisely, the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina comprises of two administrative and territorial entities called Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republic of Srpska (RS). Entity FBiH is furthermore divided into ten Cantons. Each of these administrative/territorial units has its own higher education legislative, ministry of education and sole responsibility and jurisdiction in all education-related matters. In addition to two entities, there is a separate administrative unit - Brčko District. This complexity of system and division of responsibility adds up to the total of 14 administrative and legislative units that are in charge of the education.

At the same time, resulting from a deal that was struck in Dayton, Ohio among former warring parties, the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a ministry of education on the state level. Instead there is a single department, within the Ministry of Civil Affairs, responsible solely for coordination of education-related matters with other levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The lack of one central governing body results in inexistence of common and coordinated system curriculum, inequality and poor quality of learning. The Department for Education within the Ministry of Civil Affairs performs tasks related to the implementation of the basic principles of coordination, activities and exchange of data with national and international

institutions responsible for education. It is in charge of setting laws and regulations for all levels and types of education, as well as, participation in the preparation and coordination of activities throughout the country.

Logically, such fragmentation and decentralization of government bodies in charge of education system leads to great inefficiencies and low performances, as well as, education outcomes in the whole country. More so, it has proven to be highly ineffective in the period of pandemic and very confusing to all stakeholders equally: educational workers or parents and students/pupils... Even though agencies for civil protection (existing for greater territorial and legislative entities) have been suggesting and giving orders since the beginning of pandemic, smaller entities had freedoms to slightly adjust their implementation in educational settings. Depending on the epidemiological situation in different territories (cantons) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the instructions to schools and educational institutions were changing.

Figure 1. Administrative divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Wikipedia.org)



MAP LEGEND:

- Light gray – Entity of Republic of Srpska
- Striped Green – Brčko District
- No. 1 to 10 (in color) – Cantons within Entity of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

This is important to note, since the focus of this report are schools in Canton Sarajevo (capital and urban area) corresponding to instruction of the Government of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its Federal Administration for Civil Protection. Therefore, the most probably, presented situation was not exactly the same in all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in given period.

The Course of Teaching/Instruction in Schools from Beginning of Pandemic in 2020 until Now

The state of epidemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina was officially declared in the beginning of March 2020, after appearance of first cases and their steady spread across the country. On the assembly of Government of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on March 16th 2020 (Government of Canton Sarajevo, 2020) the Administration for Civil Protection, together with the Ministry of Health was given the authority and responsibility to determine and mandate new laws of operation and manner to all institutions and people with main purpose for civilian protection from the novel Coronavirus.

Their decisions and instructions were main guidance for all educational institutions at the very beginning of epidemic. Schools immediately shut down and there was no instruction whatsoever, for about two weeks and the whole society was on standby with regular lockdowns and curfew. Children got back to schools sometime in April, while ministries were deliberating future plans of operation, seeing that situation was not getting any better with time. According to the assembly on March 16th, the official decision stated that: 'all primary and secondary schools, as well as universities, are forbidden to operate, with exception of praxis at universities and graduate defenses' (demand/act number 13) from Government of Canton Sarajevo, 2020.

March – June 2020

After this decision, primary and secondary schools in canton Sarajevo continued operating fully online. All pupils were attending classes from home. The platform widely used for all ages was Google Teams. This form of teaching persisted until the school year (academic year) finished, the middle of June.

The classes of lower grades of primary school completely relied on Teams. In the meantime, students of higher grades of primary school and secondary school, occasionally utilized Zoom, mostly for foreign languages and some technical subjects. Classes on Teams were made possible by class-teachers or subject-teachers who prepared necessary materials (content) in advance and uploaded it to students together with tasks and home works.

Luckily, the end of the school year was near and this improvised teaching did not last for too long. In all seriousness, the online teaching was badly organized, materials were poorly used and

quality of content was reduced. Moreover, students were expected to individually learn and prepare everything, which was extremely demanding for younger ages. Students who were not in possession of computer were in almost all cases given a tablet or a laptop, either from school's efforts or by some international institutions and foundations.

September 2020 – June 2021

In the academic year of 2020/2021 there have been 3 forms of teaching present:

- Fully face-to-face,
- Fully online
- Combined

*The combined form of teaching involved both face-to-face and online instruction in the following principle:

Each school-class was divided in two halves, each half representing one group. So, one week one half of class goes to school, while others participate online and vice-versa.

To make things even more complicated, classes were shortened from 45 minutes to 35, with minimal or no breaks in between (to shorten the time spent at school).

Also, the school day in Bosnia and Herzegovina is usually divided in morning and afternoon shift. So if 'face-to-face' group attended school in the morning, the 'online' group would receive class materials and tasks in the afternoon. This meant longer working hours for teachers and almost double the preparation.

The halving of each class was done with the purpose of having less students physically present in classrooms during face-to-face teaching which greatly facilitated to the adherence of measures proposed by the Ministry of Health and the Administration for Civil Protection.

General Epidemic rules proposed to avoid infection and spreading in schools

The general instructions from the Institute of Public Health of Federation stated:

- Wearing masks for students (younger children should wear a mask outside the classroom, not during class),
- Wearing masks for teaching and other staff,
- Maintaining adequate physical distance, 2m,
- Maintaining hand hygiene,
- Putting visual instructions in places for hand washing / disinfection,
- Ensuring the presence of supervisory staff,

- Cleaning and disinfection of school buildings, classrooms and especially toilets at least twice a day, especially surfaces that many touch (fences, tables, sports equipment, handles on doors and windows, toys, learning aids, etc.),
- Ensuring adequate ventilation of the school premises,
- Organizing meals in schools is not recommended. Students should bring their own snack, and eat in class, instead of in the canteen or other common areas,
- Organizing the beginning and end of classes every day so that as few students as possible are present in the hallways and at the entrances / exits at the same time,
- Reducing the number of students in the group / class to as small as possible (10-15 students per class / group) and prevent unnecessary mixing between groups / classes,
- Abolishing the big break, and during the short break between classes, students should not leave the classrooms,
- Reducing classes to 30 minutes and limit the number of hours per day (up to 5),
- Cancellation of gatherings, sports games and other events that create crowds,
- As part of physical education, it is recommended to perform only individual exercises, and to organize them outside, when weather conditions allow so.

In the second semester (February 2021), when situation with number of cases and number of fatalities was higher than ever, the instruction of Government of Canton Sarajevo was following:

“Classes for classroom teaching (primary school), from the 1st to the 4th grade (for individual schools including 5th grade) will be realized according to the combined model. For 6th, 7th and 8th grade students, classes will be realized online, and for 9th grade students, classes will be realized in classrooms for all students, if schools are able to comply with epidemiological measures. If this is not the case then for 9th grade students, classes will be realized according to a combined model.

High school students from 08.02.2021, 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade of four-year schools will attend classes online. Students of final grades of high schools (for all types of high schools, with either 3 or 4 grades, will attend classes regularly in the classroom, face-to-face, but with the obligation to comply with all epidemiological measures. If that is not possible, than teaching will be realized according to the combined model (Government of Canton Sarajevo).”

However, in the most cases, schools were individually deciding on the forms of teaching according to the conditions each school had and their abilities to fully obey given directions. Most of the time, all schools in Canton Sarajevo were having the same decisions and principals of executing instruction.

All tests and examinations were also held in combined method. If there was opportunity, students who were attending classes in school were taking tests at school, while those who were

at home had them online. This approach depended on teacher's preference how to grade students.

Students with medical conditions had the right to fully participate online, with proof from the doctor or medical institution, as they were considered as a critical group or in greater risk of the virus.

September 2021 – present

As of the start of the new school year, this September, all students went back to the usual teaching at school with class length of 45 minutes and regular breaks. However, great attention is put on the measures of prevention of infection, with social distance, disinfection and wearing of masks (Osis.edu.ba, 2021).

Unfortunately, Ministry of Education of Canton Sarajevo has already announced that teaching at primary and secondary schools will again be switched to combined form in the near future. Some schools have deliberately switched to that way already, before time.

However, no official decision has been made yet.

Outcomes of Remote/Online Teaching

Perhaps it is too early to see the true outcomes of combined and online teaching. All children, either at primary or secondary school are in the unenviable position with many losses. Perhaps the most vulnerable group are first graders, just starting school and not being able to study on their own. Moreover, they are just starting their education with an unpleasant experience and quality-wise they are lacking a lot. For instance, learning alphabet is a milestone at the age of 5-6 years of age and it is even hard to imagine how it can possibly be taught to such young children online.

In general, the observations of teachers, parents, and even students are that the quality of teaching, content and final knowledge has dropped significantly, because the seriousness and commitment can hardly be reproduced online. Also, weak technological support and inexistence of schools' platforms for exchange and generally poor application of ICT in education has proved many disadvantages and losses in this situation.

Also, we have many studies worldwide already proving that lack of social interaction with peers and long hours of alone-time at home have great stakes on the mental health and overall wellbeing of children.

Having these issues and challenges in mind, the Ministry of Education of Canton Sarajevo has proposed Guidelines for parents and guardians for protection of mental health of children in the time of pandemic.

Some suggestions given in order to overcome hardships were (Ministry of Education in Canton Sarajevo, 2020):

- Encourage your children to talk and learn to listen to their concerns and emotions.
- Spend time playing with your children at home and outside.
- Re-establish daily routines for school obligations, play, meals and rest.
- Monitor and limit exposure to media content about the current crisis (this can initially cause fear, confusion and anxiety in children).
- Explain to the children that everyone is involved in recovery of the community.
- Take care of your children's physical health and daily activity.
- Be more patient when it comes to school activities.
- Connect through online communication with other parents and children.

Such and similar advices are often given by the principals of schools and head teachers as well. In Bosnia and Herzegovina where there is lack or complete inexistence of institutions for help and support in these and similar cases, it is in parents and teachers to try their best to maintain the wellbeing of children.

Teachers and School Faculty in the Time of Covid19

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the situation is extremely hard for teachers. Without any organized support or government institution taking care of teachers' needs and concerns, they are all left to solve problems on their own. In the best cases, principals and 'pedagogues' are willing to collaboratively seek relief and answers to the problems.

Unfortunately, teachers' work position and profession does not earn them any special allowances, dividends, or other considerations.

Moreover, there are not any in-school responses to PCR tests and vaccinations, nor are educational workers prioritized in any way. (PCR testing and vaccination are equally available to all citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina and are up to their own organization and cost.)

In cases of infection of teacher and illness, there does not exist any previously organized substitute. It solely depends on the communication, collaboration and agreement within the school setting. Such problems are usually solved between principal/pedagogue and other fellow teacher that can divide work and are of the same expertise (in case of subject teachers).

Additionally, in case of infection with mild symptoms, sick teachers may even work from home, preparing class contents and materials and uploading them online.

Responsibility and Individual Decision Making

Great responsibility and pressure lies in the arms of principals and head teachers because their internal consultations and decisions may be criticized. Though they do have constrained powers to make slight changes that would apply to the school they are appointed to, mostly they follow general suggestion by the ministries and replicate the operation of other schools in the area.

Such behavior is, perhaps, the safest. In a situation with so many risks and unknowns, head teachers and principals are obeying the rules given by institutions of higher order, while making greatest efforts and doing their best to improve their internal school atmosphere and cater to the needs of students and teachers the best way possible.

After all, no one has been in this situation before and only together we can create environment that fits everyone. But when this crises is over, all stakeholders must put pressure to the government, demanding greater conditions, support and guidance from the ruling institutions, because it seems like handling the pandemic from educational perspective was/is of least priority in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

* No special or extraordinary decisions were made regarding new strains of the Corona virus in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as 'Delta' variant.

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