Recognized as independent in 1991, Croatia has been an official candidate of the European Union (EU) since 2004 and is expected to accede in 2010. Its status as an EU candidate increases pressure on the government to improve social services, including education. Croatia is ahead of many of its neighbours in Southeast Europe in terms of educational access, quality and equity, however many obstacles remain before Croatia matches the educational standards of the EU.

Croatia’s EU accession is supported by its stable and growing economy. Its GNP (PPP) is $12,620 USD per capita, which is the highest in Southeast Europe, with an annual growth rate of 4.8%. Croatia is ranked 47th out of 177 countries on the Human Development Index. According to 2004 data, 2.7% of the workforce was employed in agriculture, 32.8% by industry and 64.5% in services, with the largest industries being shipbuilding, food processing and chemicals. Although Croatia’s economy is the strongest in the CEE/CIS region, ‘difficult problems still remain, including a stubbornly high unemployment rate, a growing trade deficit and uneven regional development’. Long-term unemployment stands at 12% and about 11% live below the national poverty line.

Education Reform
Croatia has launched a host of education reforms since its independence that have served to accelerate school improvement. The following are some of the most prominent:

- ‘In 2005, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted The Education Sector Development Plan 2005 – 2010 as a strategic document for the development of pre-school, primary, secondary, higher and adult education. The Plan is founded on the principles and goals of the Treaty of Lisbon’s Education and Training until 2010, the Copenhagen Declaration, as well as the Bologna Declaration. The Development Plan integrates the principles of lifelong learning at all levels of education by focusing on developing learning-to-learn attitudes and skills.’
- ‘The Ministry, with the financial support of the World Bank, in 2007 equipped 29 new kindergartens in those counties and towns which did not previously have organised programmes for pre-school children.’
- ‘From the school year 2005/2006 until September 2007, 294 programmes for early foreign language acquisition for pre-school children were approved, and over 45% of children of four to six years of age learned one foreign language as a part of their regular kindergarten programme’ was developed.
- The Croatian National Educational Standard for primary schools came into being as a result of joint efforts on the part of the wider scientific

Quick Facts about Education in Croatia

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<tr>
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<th>Croatia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>50.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth unemployment rate as percentage of unemployment rate</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of GDP spent on Education</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Pre-Primary School Enrolment, 2005 (Gender Parity Index (GPI)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
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<td>(Girls/Boys))</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Enrolment in Primary School, 2005 (GPI)</td>
<td>85 (1.02)</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Enrolment in Secondary School, 2005 (GPI)</td>
<td>39 (1.19)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross Enrolment in Tertiary Enrolment, 2005 (GPI)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Teacher Ratio, 2005</td>
<td>14000 (51)</td>
<td>80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of School Children (% girls)</td>
<td>690,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of refugees and internally displaced persons of concern</td>
<td>467 (11), 477(11), 493 (6)</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008; Innocenti Research Centre
Education in Croatia

Country Profile

and professional public, and over 500 experts participated in its preparation. It was introduced in 49 primary schools in 2005/2006.8

• ‘In accordance with the Primary Education Act and the Secondary Education Act, pupils who cannot attend school for health reasons, but are willing and able to master the programme, as well as the children with disabilities, are entitled to classes in their homes, or in their hospital of residence, as the case may be.’9

• ‘The Croatian Government announced in June 2006 the implementation of compulsory secondary school education in order to advance the rights and quality of life of the individual, as well as to ensure the advancement of society as a whole.’10

• ‘A modernisation of the vocational training system was launched by the Agency for Vocational Education and Training (AVET). From September 2005 to December 2006 AVET carried out the CARDS 2002 programme ‘Vocational Education and Training (VET). Modernisation and Institution Building Project’. Under the Project a number of activities were successfully completed – a labour market analysis was conducted, resulting in a reduction of educative vocational sectors, from 33 to 14; the White Paper was drafted, defining the basis for VET system modernization and the content of VET law was proposed.’11

• The Croatian government declared that all children will have access to free textbooks.

Access

Educational coverage in Croatia is not as extensive as in other areas of Southeast Europe. The country’s primary net enrolment ratio (NER) is 87%, which is far below the regional average of 92%. Fourteen thousand children remain out-of-school in Croatia. The secondary school NER however is above both the regional and sub-regional averages at 85%. The NER in pre-primary education is 46%, which is below the sub-regional average but above the CEE/CIS regional average, although this number is continuously rising with government efforts to expand access to early childhood care and education (ECCE). See Figure 1.

Equity

The Croatian education system has largely achieved gender parity, however it still does not provide equity of access to all sub-national populations. Inequities in access to educational services are most severe between ethnic groups. The exclusion of Roma children from the school system is the most
accentuated disparity (See Box 1). However, in addition, ethnic Serbs often do not receive the same level of access or quality as do Croatians. Much resentment remains from the civil war between the two groups.

Schools in Croatia lack efficiency. Although participation rates are high, the number of early school leavers is also high. Although specific numbers are not available, the government has identified the reduction of school dropouts as a major challenge and point for policy intervention, especially given that the EU sets its benchmark at less than 10% of early school leavers. The majority of dropouts occur in lower or upper secondary school, although only 91% of children complete primary school.

Education Financing
Croatia spends 4.9% of its total GDP on education. Its financing system remains highly centralized compared to other countries in the region; 75% of its education spending comes from the central government and only 22% from local governments (See Figure 3). The distribution of education spending shows that the largest portion of the education budget is spent on primary education, which consumes 43% of funds; 12% of its expenditure is spent on pre-primary education, 21% on secondary and 18% on higher education.

Educational Priorities
‘Accession to the European Union creates new challenges for the Croatian educational system, such as attaining greater levels of quality, flexibility, mobility and responsiveness to changes in Croatian society and the EU. The EU policy of labour force mobility may result in young people leaving the country, especially those with higher education

Learning Outcomes and Educational Quality
Croatia participated in the PISA 2006 Assessment. PISA findings showed that Croatian students outperform their peers in all other countries in southeastern Europe in reading, mathematics and science. In all three subjects, Croatia performed at the level of its neighbours in Central Europe. In reading, Croatia scored 7th out of the 17 countries that participated in the CEE/CIS region, in mathematics, it scored 11th, and in science it scored 6th. However when compared to all countries participating in the PISA assessment, it becomes clear that, although Croatia outperforms its neighbours in the sub-region, Croatia still has much progress to make before it can claim success globally. Out of 57 total participating countries, Croatia ranked 26th in science, 36th in mathematics and 30th in reading, placing it below the international average in all three subjects. See Figure 2.

The case of Croatia illustrates discrepancies that remain present throughout the region between the legal framework and reality. While the rights of national minorities are relatively well legislated, the situation of Serbs in particular remains dire. Serbs continue to be discriminated against in employment, in housing and by the police. The authorities’ behaviour toward minorities suggests either assimilation or departure as alternatives for members of the minority. Similarly, the legal framework remains largely cosmetic and minorities encounter broad discrimination, often a heritage of the war.”

Source: MoSES Croatia.
(brain drain). In order to avoid these risks, concerted action by the entire social and political community is necessary. The Croatian education system also faces challenges related to the information-based society, in which the use of information and communication technologies opens a wide range of possibilities for sustainable learning opportunities. There is a need for expanding the use of ICT, and advancing the concept of flexible and individualized education for all.

‘The priorities for action and policy development within the strategy, in the light of these challenges, are:

• Improving the quality and effectiveness of education;
• Encouraging continuing professional training of teachers and other education sector employees;
• Improving the management and efficiency of the education system especially with regard to early school leavers;
• Promoting education for social cohesion and economic growth and development.’

Box 1. Evaluation of School Violence Program in Croatia

A survey done in 2003 found that 20% of Croatian school children report being bullied regularly. UNICEF in cooperation with the government of Croatia developed an anti-violence campaign to ‘enhance the protective and enabling environment’ of schools. The program aimed to identify and give recognition to schools that are taking strides toward creating a safe school environment, establish a referral system defined by the community, to train teachers to confront violence and bullying, to train peer supporters and to involve the local community and parents. The program now has been implemented in 121 schools with over 60,000 children; over 4,500 teachers have been trained.

Results of the program have revealed a significant decrease of certain types of violence among pupils and increased recognition of some other types of violence. Bullying has now become more visible, and pupils more readily react to it now. The majority of pupils are aware of most elements of the protective environment. Also, pupils seem now to know more about the various forms of bullying than the year before, and they now better recognize when they are bullying others. Pupils have also received well the materials and activities of the project. However, pupils assessment of the school safety in general is close to neutral, revealing that students do not perceive their school as a protective environment against violence, although the feeling of safety has improved – significantly fewer pupils are now fearing that others will now be violent toward them.

Source: Evaluation of the Program ‘For Safe and Enabling Environment in Schools – Campaign for Prevention and Combating Violence in Schools’

2 UNDP Human Development Index Online.
3 CIA Factbook Online.
4 CIA Factbook Online.
5 CIA Factbook Online.