arise — Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

# ARISE – Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

Policy Brief: Serbia

Equity is an integral part of the legislation in Serbia and it is one of the essential parts of the strategic and legislative framework in the education sector. Equity is defined as *"equal access to all education levels to all students and equal opportunity for successful completion of schooling for everyone from early childhood education and care to higher education"*.

**7%** of the poor in the Republic of Serbia (absolute poverty)

Poverty is one of the major sources of inequality. Groups that are associated with poverty in Serbia are usually those living in poor conditions with minimal income, unemployed or working on the black market and Roma.

Children and young adults are also affected by the poverty. **The absolute poverty rate** in Serbia, when presented **by age[1]**, is even higher:

Children up to 13	8,2 %
Children 14-18	8,5 %
Adults 19-24	8,2 %

23,2 % At-risk of-poverty rate in Serbia
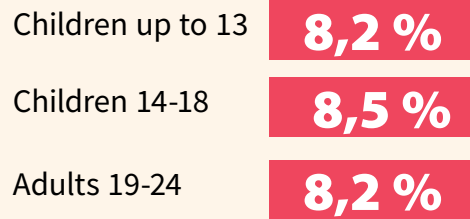
The risk-of-poverty rate[2] is significantly larger than the absolute poverty rate. Respectively, larger percentage of youth and young adults are at the risk of poverty.

This is how the **at-risk-of-poverty rate** in Serbia looks like when presented **by age[2]**:

Younger than 18	28,9 %
Adults 18-24	25,6 %
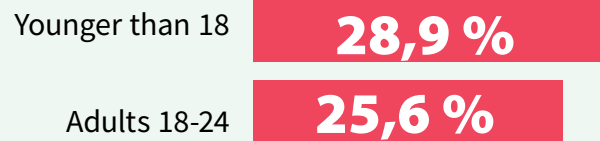
Besides poverty, employment status (age 15-24) and educational attainment have a significant influence on inequity!

15,7 % NEET rate

For age 15-29: **20,4 %**

Youth employment rate in Serbia **21,7 %**
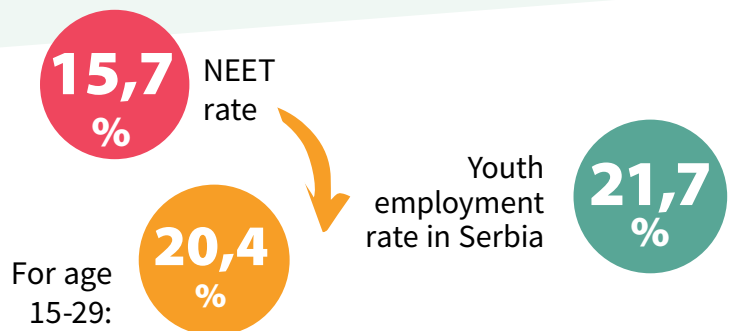
[1] Source: Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of Republic of Serbia
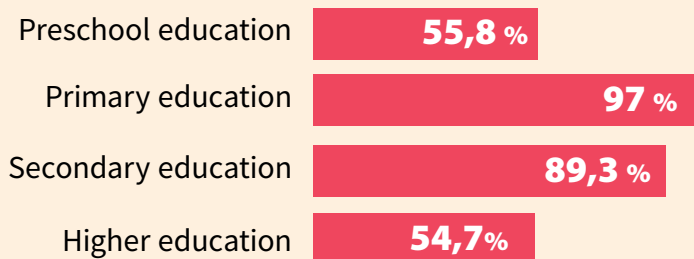[2] Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

When it comes to education system coverage[3], the low coverage of preschool education (children age from 6 months to 5,5 years) remains an issue and although some percentages might seem high (especially the primary school coverage rate), data on students from vulnerable groups, such as Roma students[4], indicate quite the opposite.
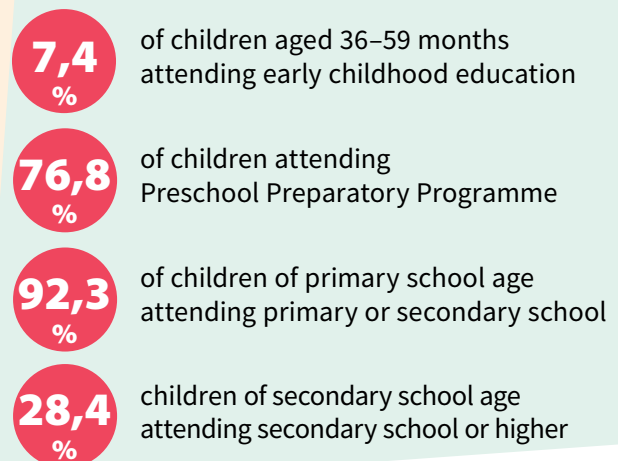
Public expenditure on education **as % of the GDP (2017)**

3,6 %

COVERAGE RATES (2018) per education level

Preschool education **55,8 %**

Primary education **97 %**

Secondary education **89,3 %**

Higher education **54,7 %**

DATA ON ROMA POPULATION (2019)

7,4 % of children aged 36–59 months attending early childhood education

76,8 % of children attending Preschool Preparatory Programme

92,3 % of children of primary school age attending primary or secondary school

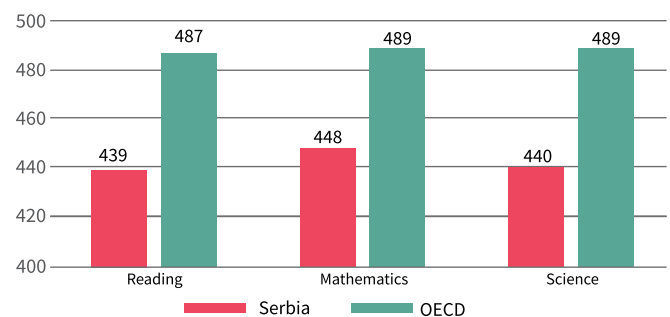**28,4 %** children of secondary school age attending secondary school or higher

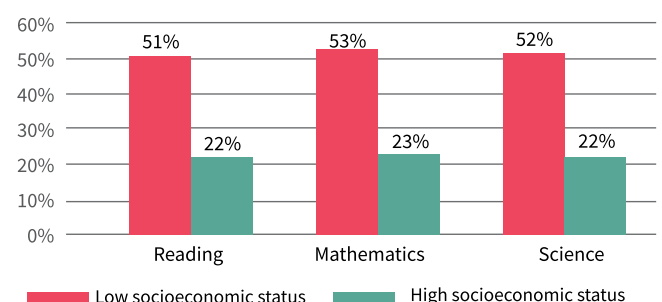Serbia has participated in **PISA assessment** since 2003.

Results for Serbia in all participating years, including 2018, are below the average achievement of participating OECD countries. Every third student in Serbia does not reach the basic level of literacy (38% on the scale of reading literacy, 40% math, and 38% science)[5].

According to the latest results, socio-economic status of students (SES) explains the 8% variation in reading scores and 9% variation in math and science scores, while the OECD average is 12% for reading, 14% for math and 13% for science[6]. It means the Serbian education system has higher equity comparing to the OECD average. On the other hand, Serbia has a higher between-school variance of achievements (40%) in comparison to the OECD average (29%).

PISA 2018 results

	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Serbia	439	448	440
OECD	487	489	489

Serbia   OECD

Percentage of students who do not reach the basic level of literacy (below second level) by SES

	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Low socioeconomic status	51%	53%	52%
High socioeconomic status	22%	23%	22%

Low socioeconomic status   High socioeconomic status

3   Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

4   Source: UNICEF

5   Source: OECD

6   Source: OECD

However, the percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds that are able to achieve high-performance levels in PISA despite disadvantages in Serbia is bigger than the OECD average (11,3%).

13,2 % of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve high-performance levels in PISA

MAIN OBSTACLES

- **Financing** is still insensitive to differences between and within schools and support measures at the local level often cannot be implemented due to the lack of financial resources.

- **Initial teacher education** does not equip future teachers with competencies for work with diverse groups of students including working with students from vulnerable groups.

- **Teachers** very frequently do not recognise low SES students as students from vulnerable groups who need additional educational support.

- Development of **evidence-based policies and measures** is rather weak - data collected during schools' external evaluation and self-evaluation are not entirely used for the school work improvement; Education Management Information System is not fully functional and needs to be connected to other sectors statistical data bases.

- Ample **coordination** between education and social system is yet to be established.

Good policy example

Rulebook on detailed instructions for determining the right to an Individual educational plan (IEP) and its implementation and evaluation

This Rulebook foresees that, along with IEP, schools could develop two other plans/tools for improvement of planning and implementation of additional support for students, as well as to enhance communication and coordination with other educational institutions and relevant local stakeholders.

Equity

These plans/tools are:

Transition plan - a plan to support inclusion of students in an educational institution, in the transition from one level of education to another, and from one educational institution to another. This plan implies the establishment of cooperation between different educational institutions intending to provide the best support to students during the transition period.
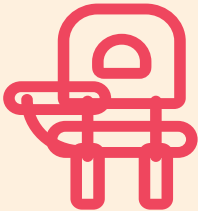
Dropout & Early school leaving prevention plan - a plan to support inclusion of students who are at risk of dropout and early school leaving. This plan should contain socio-economic, educational, and other relevant data about an at-risk student and individual measures and activities dedicated to prevention and intervention.

In this way, in addition to learning difficulties and disabilities, **the system recognises other factors that can affect students** such as socio-economic status.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Initial teacher education should be improved by revision of syllabus in the way to contain more topics related to inclusive education, more hours of practice in schools with an adequate mentoring system and more methodical, didactical, pedagogical and psychological subjects.

Development of **evidence-based policies and measures** should be improved by making Education Management Information System fully functional as soon as possible, which will support better targeting of measures on the national and local level while data collected during external evaluation and self-evaluation should be used more effectively as guidelines for schools' improvement. Also, policy makers should secure continuum in strategic planning.

Legislation should be further improved in the parts that regulate jurisdictions between education and social welfare systems. Also, there should be coherent planning between local and national level institutions in order to ensure financial and material support to students.

arise
Action for Reducing
Inequalities in Education