CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ON-LINE EXPERIENCE-SHARING MEETING ON THE ORGANIZATION OF DIGITAL TEACHING AND LEARNING UNDER THE COVID-19 CIRCUMSTANCES

The on-line meeting on the subject of sharing experiences in responding to the COVID-19 challenges in organizing classrooms was organized by Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) on 21st July 2020, using the Zoom platform.

The meeting gathered the speaker from the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education (Ms Lidija Kralj, assistant Minister), Austrian e-network (Mr Andreas Riepl, national coordinator), OeAD (Ms Monika Mott, head of unit) and Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (Ms Danijela Šćepanović, special advisor for digitalization). The meeting was attended by representatives from Croatia, Albania, North Macedonia and Moldova.

The participants presented their experiences and practices in relation to:
- Organizing shools and classes in different forms, depending on the COVID-19 situation, alternating from face-to-face classrooms, fully digital classrooms, and blended classrooms (partly on-line, partly physical)
- Ensuring hygienic conditions at schools
- Ensuring quality of digital learning.

The main conclusions were as follows:
- The priority is to ensure the right learning conditions for the right categories of students and respecting all the hygienic recommendations.
- This means that there are priority categories of students that will attend face to face classes when it is possible: 1-4 graders of primary school, students with difficulties and at risk of being excluded, final graders of secondary schools (and in some cases final graders of primary schools in cases of admission tests or national exams at the end of primary schools).
- When organizing face-to-face classes for these categories of students, distancing rules must be obeyed and 1 – 2 m distance must be respected. This can be done by placing students in bigger rooms, or by separating them in different classrooms – where the question of additional staff comes up and needs to be taken into account.
- Another option is organizing classes in shifts – dividing classrooms into half and having half of the classroom coming to school 1 week or for 3 days, while the rest does home and practices at home for this week or 2 days.
- The use of LEARNING MANAGEMENT PLATFORMS that enable individualized and interactive classes is crucial!
- The use of MOODLE platform as a NATIONAL PLATFORM was mentioned by Croatia and Austria. Because of the limited capacities, together with the Moodle platform additional learning platforms were used, such as Microsoft teams
- The benefits of MOODLE:
  - it creates a safe environment for learning, communication and collaboration;
  - it offers quick access to the new and relevant information
  - provides support to users
  - enables sharing ideas, activities, assessments, methods, resources

- it is necessary to within the learning management platforms there are virtual classrooms that offer similarities to physical realities, enable communicaiton between members, information and material sharing, video and audio meetings, chat options, and are secured
- Another crucial element that was missing is COMMUNICATION: even though the digital platforms used enabled effective communication, in reality the communication has to be enhanced:
    - Between Ministry and expert agencies and head teachers and teachers – providing additional support in the use of technology, identifying problems, providing solutions, ensuring mentoring of teachers and teacher trainings even before the beginning of the next school year; avoiding over-burdening of teachers
    - Among head teachers and teachers so that Ministry and agencies recommendations are disseminated, and that there is a clear understanding of the situation on the field
    - Among teachers – so that the workload is evenly distributed to students, and that the material is exchanged and that the use of material and digital platforms is streamlined and not overwhelming for bots students and teachers;
    - Between teachers and students – so that students' attitudes and problems are taken into account, avoid over-burdening of students; and
    - Between teachers and parents – so that teachers have another perspective at what is going on with students and learning. So far the communication element was missing and it is absolutely necessary to be introduced and for head masters to organize and make sure it is done.
- The use of the additional licences for Moodle platform and Microsoft office for Croatia did not cause additional pricing.
- The availability of notebooks and tablets, as well as fast internet connection was crucial – both Croatia and Austria are purchasing additional devices for excluded students or certain categories of students; Croatia had a scheme with mobile providers enabling free fast internet connection to certain categories of students via sim card.
- A survey among teachers showed that the support they are missing from the authorities is on the topics of:
    - How to encourage and motivate students
    - Communication with students in virtual environment
    - Use of variosu digital tools with students
    - Social and emotional support to students
    - Assessment for learning and assessment as learning in distant environment
- Whereas in terms of subject matter the teachers feel pretty confident.
- Possible scenarios for next year include:
    1. Mainly face-to-face teaching – with the possibility of introducing distance learning for groups of students
    2. Combined teaching model – combination of face to face learning and distance teaching but with elements of e-learning in both approaches – teaching would partly be carried out in schools and partly at home through virtual environment; deciding on priority students who should continuously attend classes in school (groups at risks of being excluded, VET students,

lower primary schools students, final graders), and for others ensure occasional teaching in the schools

3. Mainly distance learning – using ICT with possibility of on-line assessment and grading.

- Deliver clear guidelines to schools prior to the beginning of the next school year – on healthy and hygienic conditions and on the organization of teaching and learning