

PRIMARY SCHOOLS PREPARATION FOR THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR – THE PARENTS PERSPECTIVE

During the COVID-19 epidemic the Slovenian educational system was put to a great test. After initial technical difficulties, some of the schools with a week's delay, primary schools implemented distance learning and successfully completed the school year. At the Association of Parents' Council Working Groups of Slovenia (Slovenian: ZASSS) we closely monitored the events and it was two times (after one week and after five weeks of distance learning) that we collected information on the course of distance learning from parents who were, under the circumstances, able to follow the work of the pupils most directly. The data is available at www.zasss.si, however, they proved useful in reflecting on all possible scenarios that might happen in the autumn.

The ZASSS research data have been recently complemented by the data from the Slovenian National Education Institute (<https://www.zrss.si/strokovne-resitve/digitalna-bralnica/podrobno?publikacija=297>) which were also made available. In addition, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport presented four basic models and two combined models as possible forms of teaching in primary schools in the upcoming school year (models A, B, C and D as well as BC1 and BC2)¹. Each model presents a basic framework as the general instructions sent to all primary schools on 6th July requested them to prepare for the implementation of all these models. Which model is to be implemented (either at the beginning or at any time during the school year) depends on the epidemiological situation. It also stated that the schools will receive more detailed instructions on implementation of each model after 20th August.

Based on the above stated, we held a discussion in some of the regional Councils of Parents as well as in the ZASSS Coordination Group. In this document we shall provide the reflections and certain questions that may help to decide on the details of different teaching models. With these reflections we would like to make a constructive contribution to prepare the complete primary school system, teachers and pupils (indirectly also the parents) in the best possible way for the unpredictable conditions that await us in the coming school year.

We have grouped the reflections and questions in the 8 sections listed below, and each section is explained in more detail on the following pages.

- 1. Lessons should take place at school to the greatest extent possible.**
- 2. The criteria for deciding on a teaching model should be defined and known in advance.**
- 3. Schools, teachers and pupils must be adequately equipped and trained to use ICT in distance learning.**
- 4. If it is necessary to (partially) apply distance learning, lessons should be appropriately organized.**

¹ Model A: all pupils are at school, no preventive measures are required; Model B: all pupils are at school, preventive measures are required; Model C: pupils up to the 3rd grade (if there is enough space up to the 4th or 5th grade) are at school, for all others distance learning is applied; Model D: distance learning applies for all pupils; Model BC1: distance learning applies for the pupils of individual classes; Model BC2: distance learning applies for the pupils of individual schools.

- 5. If the need comes to (partially) apply distance learning, lessons should be adapted accordingly.**
- 6. If the need comes to apply distance learning, it is necessary to ensure both its simultaneous evaluation and regular monitoring of pupils' progress in different areas.**
- 7. Irrespective of the teaching model, attention should be paid to vulnerable groups and to gifted pupils.**
- 8. In the case of distance learning and its effects on enrolment in secondary education and receiving scholarships, the negative effects should be anticipated and reduced as much as possible.**

Although we are now looking forward to a (well-deserved) holiday, we expect that part of the time until September 1 will also be devoted to thorough, more detailed preparation for the new school year. There is really not much time left, therefore, we suggest joining forces and cooperating of all those involved, who can contribute to high-quality solutions. In accordance with its mission and on the basis of the data we have collected and the discussions we held, ZASSS is ready to actively participate in these preparations to the best of our ability.

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President of ZASSS: dr. Anton Meden

1. Lessons should take place at school to the greatest extent possible

The lack of social contacts between the children resulted in psychological problems and problems with learning motivation, which occurred because there was no professional, live explanation of the new learning material. We were concerned about the proper nutrition of the pupils who receive fully subsidized meals at school, one of many aspects of the negative effects of a longer interruption of normal activities on the school grounds.

Taking into account health and epidemiological safety, the last few weeks of school in this school year also revealed the possibility of different ways of organizing lessons (in particular the separation of groups) aimed at achieving sufficient safety and less disrupted teaching process. In order to ensure that the socialization aspect of schooling for children is not neglected, we support the idea that **distance learning should be the last option** in primary education, and we welcome a similar approach by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and the National Education Institute Slovenia.

2. The criteria for deciding on a teaching model should be defined and known in advance

Schools and the public have been informed about possible models for implementing the educational process in the school year 2020/21. In the discussion on 1st July when the models were presented, it was suggested that all the parties involved are informed in advance about the criteria that will trigger transitions between different models. Our discussions also raised questions on this issue: are or will the precise criteria be defined, determining when a particular teaching model is applied, or will the criteria be established on the basis of publicly published data regarding the course of a possible epidemic?

Once the criteria are known, **all those involved can prepare for action in the following phase, both in the event of a tightening or a loosening of the restrictions**. This will facilitate the preparation and organization of different processes in education and, above all, a faster transition between models.

3. Schools, teachers and pupils must be adequately equipped and trained to use ICT in distance learning.

In recent months, distance learning has shown some weaknesses in the school system regarding the use of ICT tools, which we have also noted in our questionnaires. We are interested at what stage are the **considerations about the choice of ICT tools to support primary school teaching** (not necessarily merely in the context of distance learning). From the pupil's point of view, the use of many different methods and systems has proved to be very problematic, so it would be useful **to standardize ICT distance learning tools** as much as possible in order to reduce the burden on the pupils while also ensuring comparable treatment of pupils within schools and between schools.

On the other hand, experts should estimate **how much load a single system can cope with** (recently, no online learning support system would probably work properly if it were used by everyone). If the tools were standardized and licenses were needed, **national licenses** would probably need to be considered, which would be cheaper than individual school licenses.

Tools also include hardware and **Internet access** for each pupil. When it comes to compulsory education, **one cannot rely on parents to provide these in all cases**. According

to the figures presented by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, which are valid for the last few months, about 98% of pupils use the hardware that is privately owned by their parents and a web connection that is also paid for by the parents. However, it is very important **to provide all pupils with such material conditions** (although far from enough). We are interested in the considerations being made in this direction. Are there updated complete records about which pupils do not yet have these material conditions? Is it possible to provide these pupils with equipment through schools or perhaps by vouchers? These pupils must also be provided with **help in starting and using the donated equipment**. Are there any solutions on this field? How can Internet access be provided to all children?

We know that at the time of the epidemic, **teachers were already trained** in the use of various ICT tools for distance learning and that courses are also offered during holidays. Are the contents of these courses in line with the tool selection and is there an estimate of how many teachers will (can) participate? How could **all teachers be trained** (as soon as possible) to use the selected tools?

Besides the teachers, **all pupils should master the use of the selected ICT tools**. The differences between children in the field of ICT management are great. At present, the use of ICT is integrated into different subjects, there is no compulsory subject dedicated only to the use of a computer (and blind ten-finger typing) in the primary school curriculum. Could we consider the possibility that, at the beginning of the school year, all pupils are included in training to acquire the knowledge required for the use of ICT (for distance learning, but not exclusively) in a more concise form either as part of regular lessons or in designated courses? A more specific content definition should be included in the curriculum.

The competence of pupils, teachers and the ICT online learning support system can be maintained if digital content is regularly used to complement / enrich lessons. We are also proposing to consider some kind of **"stress tests" that would simulate the transition to distance learning**, should this ever be necessary in future. Consider it as a kind of a "fire drill" – changing to distance learning for a day or two and checking all elements: the equipment on both sides (school and pupils), the qualifications of teachers and pupils. If all schools were to do this at the same time, the infrastructure at the national level would also be thoroughly tested.

The "emergency" transition to distance learning has also triggered an extensive exchange of various e-materials between teachers on different portals (sio.si, razlagamo.si, učimse.com...). We would like to propose the idea to connect the existing portals and develop them into a kind of **national "library" of video lectures for all grades from 1st to 9th**, perhaps also for secondary schools. The lesson plans would follow the curriculum for the individual subjects, being designed and presented according to professional criteria for such subject teaching, equipped with tests and quizzes... Such library would be useful in the normal work as a supplement, suitable to help children who could not attend lessons due to illness, and of course also in case of a future need for distance learning.

One of the possible teaching models could be to divide the classes into two (a more detailed version of model C), with one half participating in the school lessons and the other half attending the lessons from home therefore, we are interested in whether schools are equipped for high quality (visual and acoustic) transmission of the lessons from the classroom to online registered users, so that the pupils who are not in school can follow the lessons from home.

4. If the need comes to (partially) apply distance learning, lessons should be appropriately organized.

As already stated, distance learning should be an extreme option, if school lessons are not safe enough for all pupils for health reasons. Guidelines for the implementation of distance learning are determined by the models C (partial) and D (complete) or the sub-models BC1 and BC2, but since the details of the teaching models are still to be determined, we understand that it is still possible to consider additional options.

We are particularly interested in **the possibilities of combined teaching modules**, applying the one week at school, one-week distance learning; or e.g. 2 days a week at school, 3 days applying distance learning, so that half of the pupils who are not at school could **follow the lessons via video conference** (or watching the video later, as not all pupils could follow the planned lessons at the exact time). In this case the need for twice as many teachers is eliminated, but there would be a problem with childcare providing for younger pupils.

A variant of this method would be to have half of the children gather in another place, for example in a branch school or in another suitable place (using the help of the local community). Perhaps such a method would be suitable for smaller places where the possibility of infection transmission is low. **The pupils who usually commute** could then **follow the lessons in a nearby branch school**, despite the probable cancellation of public transport, with an additional teacher or appropriate learning tools and technology.

According to unofficial information, a combined model of teaching (partly at school and partly applying distance learning) is being considered in Croatian schools as well. We suggest looking into different options abroad (or at other schools).

5. If the need comes to (partially) apply distance learning, lessons should be adapted accordingly.

Adapting teaching to an emergency situation is a matter for the professionals to tackle, but a more or less appropriate adaptation ultimately affects the knowledge of the pupils. This was also made clear by the parents who participated in our survey as they were able to follow the lessons during distance learning closely. A supplementary data was provided by a National Education Institute Slovenia survey involving the pupils in grades 4 to 9 of the primary school and the secondary school students, as well as the teachers and headmasters.

The last document sent to schools by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport dated 6th July 2020 does not include the above-mentioned topics, but all the previous documents were considering various guidelines for distance learning, which we understand may continue to apply in the future if the need occurs.

Notwithstanding, this document would reiterate some expectations and considerations on the adaptation of distance learning.

Live contact between the teacher and the students is irreplaceable and, in the case of distance learning, there should be **at least occasional video contact**. The mere provision of written instructions on where to find the material to be learnt and what tasks to perform proved to be inappropriate.

Distance learning was supplemented by the educational and entertainment programme titled Izodrom, broadcast on Slovenian television, which was on for one hour every working day for 10 weeks and earned a good response. **The support of public television for distance education might be further developed** – perhaps following the example of the Croatian

portal skolazazivot.hr (<https://skolazazivot.hr>), where distance education is carried out in cooperation with the national television TV programme HRT 3. The situation is similar in Italy (<http://www.raiscuola.rai.it/>).

Now that we can prepare for the possible reintroduction of distance learning, it might be useful to apply the existing experience of some pilot projects in Slovenia, e.g. the experience with distance learning within the project "INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGY ONE TO ONE", which is taking place in some schools in Slovenia, for example in Radenci.

In the case of distance learning, from the pupil's point of view, apart from limiting the channels for monitoring lessons, which was suggested in article 3, the **organization of the subject matter** is also important. From this point of view, we might consider preparing an **online entry point with a daily timetable** so that pupils are systematically guided through the necessary daily learning activities, which would **support or enable their independent learning**, as most of them have not yet developed adequate self-regulation skills for successful distance learning. We propose to adjust the timetable (for older pupils, grades 6 to 9, subject level) in the case of distance learning so that fewer subjects are taught in one day. For example, subjects comprising up to 3 hours per week could be taught modularly once a week or every two weeks (especially if the course is 1 hour per week). This would allow pupils and teachers to better focus on the subject matter. We are interested in whether concrete instructions are prepared for the teachers, how, how much and what subject matter should be covered or left out in the event of distance learning.

Perhaps it would be useful to engage pupils in learning groups for a particular subject? For example, groups of 3 to 5 pupils who can work together and prepare different school tasks. This would be positive for cooperation among pupils, which has proved to be a weakness of distance learning in the past, and it might relieve the teachers, as they would need less time to correct the exercises and have more time for feedback.

6. If the need comes to apply distance learning, it is necessary to ensure both its simultaneous evaluation and regular monitoring of pupils' progress in different areas.

In our questionnaires, one of the highlighted issues was the lack of feedback on the adequacy of the homework the pupils sent to teachers and on the progress of the pupils in general. Therefore, in the event of distance learning, **parents would like to have good and as up-to-date feedback as possible on their children's work and progress in distance learning**, including information to parents in cases where, for example, the child has not completed and submitted the task twice within the set deadline, or has not responded to the video conference, etc.

The burning issue in distance learning is **assessment**. Therefore, we are interested in how, in the case of repeated distance learning, the methods and standards of knowledge assessment, if any, will be adapted, as well as testing of knowledge on national level, should it be necessary to conduct distance learning over a longer period of time. Will they follow the example of the change in criteria in the last months of the 2019/2020 school year?

In addition to the concerns about learning results, parents are often interested in **other educational objectives**, such as **the motivation of pupils to acquire new knowledge, their emotional and social development**. We are interested in how or with which activities schools are planning to pursue the objectives of the education, as well as what solutions are proposed in the distance learning plans in order to motivate pupils to follow such lessons. In our survey we found a significant decrease in pupils' motivation for distance learning in the period from

the first to the fifth week, so we believe it is very important to pay special attention to how to keep pupils' motivation high.

We are also interested in **how to ensure continuous evaluation of the distance learning success**. For the previous distance learning, which literally had to start overnight, it is quite understandable that evaluations will only follow. For the future, it makes sense to prepare evaluation procedures in parallel with the methods of implementation and to carry them out in such a way that a feedback loop in quality regulation is possible. Will the monitoring of distance learning be handled systematically and in a standardized system, or will it be left to the planning and implementation of individual schools? If the latter is the case, in what way is the quality of teaching in the different schools monitored?

7. Irrespective of the teaching model, attention should be paid to vulnerable groups and to gifted pupils

In recent months, despite efforts being made at various levels, it has become apparent that many pupils from vulnerable groups have not received appropriate treatment during the period of distance learning and had reduced social contacts. We are therefore interested to know what considerations have been made to ensure, for example, that the support for children with special needs is not reduced in the event of an epidemic outbreak of an epidemic, that professional help is provided to children in need and that food is provided during distance learning for children who have fully subsidized school meals...

We are also interested in how work with talented pupils can be enabled and supported, as it was cancelled and inadequate in the school year 2019/20.

8. In the case of distance learning and its effects on enrolment in secondary education and receiving scholarships, the negative effects should be anticipated and reduced in advance as much as possible.

Many competitions have been cancelled this year. As a result, this year's achievements in the competitions that took place before the outbreak of the epidemic were excluded from the scholarship criteria (last year's achievements were taken into account, but some pupils who had applied for the competition only this year were unable to get the necessary points). How will this issue be dealt with in the event of repeated restrictions on school learning? Has it been considered to organize such competitions even under such conditions? What can the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and National Education Institute Slovenia do in view of the fact that many competitions are organized by external contractors? Experience could be gained from institutions that provide distance learning and have experience with this type of assessment.

This year, the National Knowledge Test was not carried out, and if something similar should happen in the future, we are interested in how the issue of secondary school enrolment was (is) solved in cases where the results of the National Knowledge Test are taken into account in the limitation of enrolment (in the case when several applicants have the same number of points from the test results of the last/third cycle of primary education)?