

Bratislava, 15 April 2021

Mrs. Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth
Mrs. Dubravka Šuica, Commissioner for Democracy and Demography
Mrs. Věra Jourová, Commissioner for Values and Transparency

European Commission
Brussels

Copy To: Ladislav Miko, Head of Representation of European Commission in Slovakia

Dear Commissioners,

school closures due to COVID-19 pandemic has had detrimental effect on children and young people around the globe. As per UNICEF report¹ schools for more than 168 million children globally have been closed for almost a full year. In spite of the general consensus about profound negative impacts of school closures and the recommendation that **school closures are a measure of last resort, implemented as an additional, time-limited layer** – the perspective supported both by ECDC² and WHO³ - **significant differences exist across EU/EEA Member States and European governments are seen to take widely contrasting approaches to school closures.** France, Ireland, Switzerland, The Nordics and others, often Western European countries, keep education very high on the priority list and provide the examples of proper government focus on the future of young generation. Few others are clearly lagging behind, seems to have much lower ambitions or keep failing to seek for solutions to avoid school closures and to protect the right to education for children and young people.

Slovakia - representing the second group and being among lowest ranking EU countries as per UNICEF report - deprioritized school re-opening even after the first wave of pandemic in spring 2020 even though its epidemic situation was much better compared to many other EU/EEA countries. The schools were among the last to open and majority of students got to school only during the final week of the school year at the end of June 2020. A significant number of children did not have access to online remote learning during the first wave (estimated 128.000 or 18.5% of primary and secondary school students) or learning at all (est. 52.000 or 7.5% of students)⁴. Despite a little has been done to improve preparedness, the partial school closures were among the first measures taken early in fall period. The closures were applied from 12 October 2020 for secondary school students and from 26 October 2020 for lower secondary education (5th to 9th grade, age 10 to 15). In-person learning at universities and higher education institutions has been interrupted completely since 13 March 2020. **In a nutshell, over more than one calendar year (10+ school months) secondary schools were open just for 34 days, lower secondary education for 44 days while higher education institutions have been closed for the whole period. In comparison of 31 OECD countries Slovakia is the third worst in length of period with fully closed upper secondary schools⁵.**

¹ UNICEF: [COVID-19 and School Closures](#), March 2021

² ECDC: [SARS-CoV-2 - increased circulation of variants of concern and vaccine rollout in the EU/EEA, 14th update](#), February 2021

³ WHO: [Schooling in the time of COVID-19: Opening statement at high-level meeting on keeping schools open and protecting all children amid surging COVID-19 cases](#), December 2020

⁴ MoE Slovakia: [Hlavné zistenia z dotazníkového prieskumu v základných a stredných školách o priebehu dištančnej výučby v školskom roku 2019/2020](#), August 2020

⁵ OECD: The State of School Education – One Year into the COVID Pandemic, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/the-state-of-school-education_201dde84-en, March 2021

The school closures in October were applied without any time limits and have de facto become a permanent measure for more than six months now. The comprehensive binding plan for the re-opening of schools for all the students has not been prepared yet. Besides impact on mental and physical health, this long school closures have had additional negative effects with most prominent ones being:

- Serious discrimination not only for the children at risk of poverty and social exclusion but also for broad spectrum of children: without internet access or digital equipment, without an access to appropriate level of remote online learning, without a suitable environment for learning, multiple-child families, etc. The education system was inadequately prepared for remote learning and support for families, teachers and schools was minimal. Corrective actions were not taken and the data regarding access to and quality of remote education have not been gathered. As a result, the overall impact is not known and yet needs to be discovered.
- The lack of proper planning and communication intensified uncertainty especially for students in final grades due to school leaving and school admission exams.
- School programs aimed at development of practical skills were especially impaired as remote learning cannot provide a suitable alternative here - again without compensation or corrective actions.
- Together with school closures all in-person activities for talent and personal development of children and students, such as sport, arts, etc. were banned.

The initiative “Dajme deťom hlas” (~ Let children have a voice) was established in October 2020 with the aim to bring together parents, students, psychologists, teachers and others concerned about schools and education⁶. Its primary goals were to appeal to authorities to put education among the priorities during pandemic, to treat education and schools with respect and dignity and to draw attention to negative impacts of school closures on children.

Since October 2020 many education professionals and institutions have gradually expressed their concerns regarding the effects of prolonged school closures and long-term isolation on mental health, prevention of socially pathological phenomena such as domestic violence or child abuse and diagnostic and prevention of developmental disorders altogether with gaps in knowledge, skills and abilities. In December 2020 The Public Defender of Rights warned about discrimination seen in several areas related to education and proportionality of the measures in relation to schools. **As an outcome of the growing public pressure the school re-opening has been repeatedly proclaimed as a priority by various public and government officials, including the Prime Minister. However, the promises have not progressed beyond verbal declarations and remained without proper execution.** Exactly the opposite, the eased measures in other areas (even non-essential international leisure travel⁷) caused further worsening of epidemiological situation and led to a complete school closure at the beginning of January 2021.

Another appeal was addressed to Slovak President, Prime Minister and Minister of Education at beginning of February 2021. **More than 30 organizations⁸ representing education professionals, psychologists, students and employer/trade associations proclaimed the necessity to prioritize the education and called the officials for taking necessary steps to ensure safe reopening of schools.** The government in its reaction shifted the responsibility for partial school re-opening (just grades 1 to 4 of primary schools and selected final grades of secondary schools) to local governments and school managers. Such approach created tension and chaos among school stakeholders and resulted in unclear rules with contradictory statements. Majority of schools did not reopen and complete school closure followed again after just 3 weeks. **In a comparison with other Member States there are major questions to be answered about the judiciousness, advisability and**

⁶ <https://www.dajmedetomhlas.sk/o-nas/>

⁷ European Commission: [Commission sets out key actions for a united front to beat COVID-19](#), January 2021

⁸ [Otvorená výzva: Uprednostnime školy, prerušenie prezenčnej výučby a sociálna izolácia má vážne dopady na deti a mladých ľudí](#), February 2021

appropriateness of school closures in Slovakia (but also other measures taken) as despite having them the epidemiologic situation deteriorated significantly over time and country moved to the leading group in relative incidence, hospitalizations or deaths associated with COVID-19.

Eventually the youngest children (pre-primary and grades 1 to 4) have been allowed to return to school since 12 April 2021. The final grades of lower secondary schools (grades 8 and 9) are scheduled for return altogether with reopening of non-essential shops, churches, hotels, museums, etc. on 19 April 2021. The remaining grades of primary schools would potentially follow a week later depending on local epidemiological situation, with mandatory FFP2 masks and regular weekly testing. The plan for return of secondary school students has not been prepared yet. **Reopening of the schools with easing of other measures in parallel implies a major risk for return of older students who then might not be able to experience in-person learning anymore in the current school year.**

We are aware of the fact that COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented situation, most serious public health crisis in decades and an utmost challenge to governments across the globe. Likewise, we understand that in the EU/EEA both national education system and response to the COVID-19 pandemic are under the responsibility of the Member States. It needs to be accepted as well that there might be settings which require measures in schools, including complete closures - in particular if they are applied judiciously as an exceptional and time-limited approach aiming to quickly and significantly improve the epidemiologic situation.

However, **the significant differences in the effort and results of the Member States in the protection of the right for education and in balancing of the impact of pandemic on young generation require, in our opinion, the involvement of European Commission.** The education and schools in some Member States are treated the way which causes severe discrepancies across EU countries and seriously impairs the equality in opportunities as well as future success of young generation. **Harmonized approach seems to be the resolution which could improve access to education, help to avoid or limit serious adverse effects on children development and equality of opportunities for young generation across the Member States as also outlined in The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee.** We are convinced The European Commission can help those Member States which need to bridge their gaps and get them closer to EU leaders in education, in particular with:

- **getting a profound understanding that education and high-quality schools are among key values in the EU and stressing their importance for the future of young generation, our democracy and EU itself**
- raising the awareness about negative effects of school closures and the **importance to protect educational and personal development activities for children and young people even during exceptional periods** such as COVID-19 pandemic with the goal to minimize the impact on development of young generation and its mental and physical health

We believe those Member States would strongly benefit if EC could further support them with:

- the analysis of the approaches and measures taken by the Member States towards schools in years 2020-2021 to provide an opportunity for lessons learned to be taken with goal to avoid repetitive mistakes
- monitoring of the situation in Member States with regards to the education, measures taken in schools and preparation of guidelines which could be used by Member States as a reference
- facilitation of knowledge transfer and best practices sharing across Member States, especially from those which were capable to combine opened schools with the proper management of epidemiologic situation
- setting higher ambitions to minimize the disruptions in education and to work on continuous improvement of safety in school environment

- having respect to and dignity of the children, students, teachers and other participants in education process at top of the mind when suggesting and implementing the measures in school to avoid creation of disincentive environment
- expertise, knowledge and experience to prepare comprehensive mitigation strategy to minimize the gaps in knowledge and practical abilities which resulted from long-term interruption of educational process
- co-ordination of the scientific effort with aim to obtain relevant information and to improve the understanding about the role of schools in spreading of SARS-CoV-2 virus in broader community

As the Slovak example described above shows, not all the Member States are capable to handle pandemic situation having children and education among their priorities. **We believe that proactive involvement of the European Commission** in monitoring of situation, coordination of the effort and advisory **would inspire those Member States, which, similarly to Slovakia, kept their school closed for majority of time over last year.** It would encourage them **to prepare more progressive strategy and eventually to succeed in creation of efficient environment for education, not only for the rest of COVID-19 pandemic period.**

We are convinced the citizens of the respective Member States would benefit from such improvements and will highly appreciate such engagement.

Yours Sincerely



Andrea Hajdúchová

On behalf of the 24 organizations and their representatives listed below who have endorsed this letter as of 15 April 2020:

Initiative Dajme Deťom Hlas – established to promote importance and protection of the education and children’s development during pandemic period

Andrea Hajdúchová, hajduchova@ddh.sk, www.dajmedetomhlas.sk

Association of Primary Schools of Slovakia – represents community of primary schools in Slovakia

Alena Petáková, info@skolamac.sk, www.zsss.stranka.info

eduRoma – Roma Education Project - brings solutions in the education of Roma children

Vlado Rafael, vlado@eduroma.sk, www.eduroma.sk

School Network - provides expert advice to schools on the path of their further development and improvements in the quality of education

Ladislav Baranyai, laco@skolskynetwork.sk, www.skolskynetwork.sk

Forum of Proactive Schools – initiative to promote networking of schools with aim to share inspirations and innovative approaches in education

Viera Grohová, vierka.grohova@gmail.com, www.kvalitneskolstvo.sk

Standing Conference of Educational Associations / NGO Deti nepočkajú - connects citizens and organizations cooperating in the innovation of Slovak education

Martin Brestovanský, martin.brestovansky@truni.sk, www.kvalitneskolstvo.sk

Lutheran Academy, Martin (Evanjelická spojená škola, Martin) - provides pre-primary, primary and secondary education

Jozef Sopoliga, jozef.sopoliga@essmt.sk, www.essmt.sk

AmCham Slovakia - unites almost 300 companies with a vision of Slovakia as a globally competitive and transparent country

Gabriel Galgóci, president@amcham.sk, www.amcham.sk

Industry Innovation Cluster Slovakia - group of highly engaged corporates aiming to share innovative ideas

Martina Le Gall Maláková, malakova@elektrik.sk, www.industryinnovationcluster.sk

Club 500 - association of companies employing more than 500 employees in Slovakia

Tibor Gregor, gregor@klub500.sk, www.klub500.sk

The National Union of Employers - the most prominent employers' organization in Slovakia

Miroslav Kiraľvarga, ruz@ruzsr.sk, www.ruzsr.sk

The Slovak Children's Foundation - supports children and young people via grants and educational programs

Ondrej Gallo, ondrej.gallo@nds.sk, www.nds.sk

Open Society Fund - supports human rights, democracy and creates opportunities to strengthen civil society

Zuzana Čáčová, zuzana.cacova@osf.sk, www.osf.sk

League for Mental Health - association of experts dedicated to promote quality mental health care

Martin Knut, dusevnezdravie@dusevnezdravie.sk, www.dusevnezdravie.sk

National Coordinator of International Studies Health Behavior in School-Aged Children

Prof. Andrea Madarasová Gecková, andrea.geckova@upjs.sk, www.hbscslovakia.com

Institute for Active Citizenship - helps to build civic and life competences of children and young people through innovation in civic education all over Slovakia

Jana Feherpataky Kuzmová, janka@ipao.sk, www.ipao.sk

Alliance of High School Students - the largest organization representing high school students in Slovakia

Kristián Krivda, prezident@alianciastredoskolakov.sk, www.alianciastredoskolakov.sk

Youth Council of Slovakia - connects children and youth organizations in Slovakia, conducts research on opinions and share perspectives of young people

Juraj Lizák, lizak@mladez.sk, www.mladez.sk

Parents.sk (Rodičia.sk) – civic association striving to raise the voice of parents in the public discourse and policy-making process

Matej Stuška, info@ozrodcia.sk, www.ozrodcia.sk

Pontis Foundation – dedicated to development of the Slovak education system with the aim to provide children and young persons with the opportunity to develop their potential
Martina Kolesárová, martina.kolesarova@nadaciapontis.sk, www.nadaciapontis.sk

Center for Environmental Education Živica - brings inspiring ways into education, encourage environmental aspects and sustainability values
Ivana Poláčková, polackova@zivica.sk, www.zivica.sk

Freedu - the largest tutoring center in Slovakia
Jana Kišoňová, freedu@freedu.sk, www.freedu.sk

Association for Youth, Science and Technology - supports children and young people in science and technology
Gabriela Kukolová, kukolienka@amavet.sk, www.amavet.sk

Children's organization FÉNIX - helps children and young people meaningfully use of their out-of-school time
Marek Džalaj, fenix@do-fenix.sk, www.do-fenix.sk