**How to stay in school: Preventing early school leaving from the education system in the Republic of Serbia**

**Belgrade, 28 November 2016** - A two-day conference to discuss *Prevention of early school leaving from the education system in the Republic of Serbia* started today in Belgrade.

The *Prevention of early school leaving from the education system in the Republic of Serbia* is a project implemented by the Centre for Education Policy in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and UNICEF, and with the financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and UNIQLO. It aims to contribute to the reduction of school dropout and early school leaving of children and young people through the effective prevention and intervention at the school level, as well as the development of national guidelines for systematic solutions for this problem.

Data obtained during the implementation of the project showed that in all 10 schools that participated in piloting this framework, significant results were achieved, and that the dropout rate decreased by 66.1%. The most effective measures implemented by schools proved to be individualised support measures for pupils at risk of dropping out. The school can act in a preventative manner and can influence those factors that are commonly thought to be outside of school purview - extreme poverty, family problems and serious behavioural problems.

Opening remarks were made by Anamarija Vicek, State Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, Michel Saint-Lot, UNICEF Representative in Serbia, and Ursula Läubli, Head of Swiss Development Cooperation in Serbia.

"The Education Development Strategy in Serbia until 2020, provides for dropout prevention from the education system of the Republic of Serbia, and its main goals are the development of accessibility and fairness in the education system, as well as reducing the dropout rate of children from the education system. The results of the *Prevention of early school leaving from the education system in the Republic of Serbia* project will continue to serve as guidelines for systemic activities. They will be embedded in new legislation, which will enable us to reach, and perhaps even surpass, our strategic goal - to provide every child with quality education. We will continue to place special emphasis on children who are at risk of dropping out - they must be provided with continuous support from preschool thorough to the time of employment,” said Anamarija Vicek, State Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

The capacities of 10 primary and secondary schools for the early identification of pupils at risk of dropping out, as well as for the planning and implementation of intervention measures have been enhanced through this project. New measures and activities were introduced and include: peer support, the increased participation of parents in school life, improvement of the implementation of remedial classes, as well as the strengthening of cooperation between schools and local communities.

Michel Saint-Lot, UNICEF Representative in Serbia, commented on the importance of cooperation between schools, parents and local communities. “Completing secondary education or a vocational equivalent is a pre-requisite for the inclusive and sustainable growth of societies and countries. However, there is no easy solution to dropout and early school leaving. Thanks to this project we know that school/staff collaboration and building partnerships with parents, peers and external institution networks in local communities is crucial. Together we must work to ensure that children at risk of dropping out of school get adequate support from experts - within and outside the education system. I would especially like to thank the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UNIQLO for securing financial support for this project,” said Michel Saint-Lot.

UNIQLO and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation have provided financial support for the piloting of this project in seven municipalities - in Surdulica, Vladicin Han, Vrbas, Bela Palanka, Kraljevo, Kragujevac, and Pancevo. Ten schools were selected through a selection process, and the selection criteria included the socio-economic development of municipalities, as well as the locations with the largest number of pupils at risk of dropping out.

 "The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has been supporting social inclusion in education for more than 10 years through its *Joint Program for Roma and Marginalized Groups Inclusion*. We have invested more than 12 million Euros. We have seen that these pilot programmes, which have been tested and analysed thanks to Swiss support, have improved the quality of schools. This motivates children to stay in school and improve their skills, which then has a positive impact on their futures. These pilot programmes are now ready to be replicated. Inclusive education promotes an inclusive society and inclusive growth for Serbia," said Ursula Läubli, Head of Swiss Development Cooperation in Serbia.

The conference, dedicated to the prevention of dropout of pupils from school, will allow for the exchange of national and international experiences and lessons learned.

***For additional information please contact***

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