

## Action Update- August 10

# Back to School: Protecting Children Through Education



*In Serbia, only 3.9% of children from Roma settlements are included in preschool programs; primary school attendance is compulsory, but not free. Additional costs often prevent poor families from sending their children to school, putting children at greater risk*

*for street involvement and other high risk situations. Barriers to education are especially challenging for Roma children living in informal settlements. The Protection Through Education program (a CWS program supported by Week of Compassion) supports Roma children like Ana\*, promoting access to and retention in school.*

*During 2020, the program was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with school closures and movement restrictions putting all activities on hold. In spite of significant challenges, our partners successfully provided psychosocial and education support for children; advocated for the rights of families; and worked to empower parents by helping them gain access to public services. Families also received packages containing hygiene supplies, food, and clothing.*

Ana was 5 years old when she became part of the Protection through Education program. Born abroad, she had difficulties adjusting to the new environment when her family had to return to Serbia, and the Serbian language was completely unknown to her. Bureaucratic issues also prevented the family's access to social welfare assistance. When their father left the family, Ana's elder brother took on the role of provider, but the family still lives in extreme poverty.

The Protection Through Education team helped address a number of challenges with Ana's enrollment. For instance, Ana did not have a birth certificate, so team members connected her mother with legal assistance and managed to get her papers from Germany. A medical nurse from the PTE team helped resolve issues accessing Ana's vaccination records.

When she first began the program, Ana was still using a pacifier and often cried, reluctant to leave her mother. She would keep to herself at workshops, but gradually, she began to take part in activities where it was not necessary to speak (like clay modeling and drawing). But Ana still did not speak. After several months, she began replying to questions non-verbally--with facial expressions, nodding or shaking her head.

Like other children in the program, Ana stayed at home during the COVID-19 lockdown. Program staff maintained remote contact with families as much as possible, providing educational and extracurricular materials via phone and messaging apps. When in-person activities resumed a few months later with mitigations in place, a small miracle happened-- Ana spoke clearly in Serbian for the first time, soon forming entire sentences!

This was also the time for Ana to enroll in first grade. The nurse provided her mother with intensive assistance in scheduling and taking her to medical appointments. Because of the ongoing pandemic, they had a choice between in person or online classes. Since lunch at school costs more than eating at home, Ana has to attend classes online. Since Ana would be able to go to school more regularly if the family had a steady income, the project team is working to find job placement for her elder brother. Working together with other organizations that assist vulnerable groups, our partners go above and beyond to address obstacles and make it easier for children like Ana to access the education they need to thrive.

Ana now regularly attends workshops with the Protection through Education program with great dedication and joy. Plans are in the works for her to come to school once a week to socialize and begin adapting to the school environment.

As families in the U.S. and Canada prepare to send children back to school, many Disciples congregations will celebrate with backpack blessings, share prayers and concerns for the year ahead, and otherwise offer care and support for the children and youth in our communities. During this season, we are also mindful of neighbors around the world for whom access to education is a constant challenge, and we are grateful for Week of Compassion partners who care for vulnerable children and create more hopeful paths for the future.

*\*Ana's name has been changed for privacy.*

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## Volunteer Opportunities

*Week of Compassion has some great opportunities for Disciples volunteer groups to help with the hands-on work of rebuilding in disaster-affected communities!*

*Visit our **[website](#)** to learn more about volunteer needs and locations, or submit this **[volunteer interest form](#)** to request registration information.*

*Please note, at this time, Week of Compassion requires that all volunteers who are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine do so before serving.*

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*For an interactive map of responses, **[visit our website](#)**.*

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***[Week of Compassion is the relief, refugee and development mission fund of the Christian Church \(Disciples of Christ\) in the United States and Canada.](#)***

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