



Opinion of the Slovak Chamber of Teachers on the issue of the use of resources in regional education for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The Slovak Chamber of Teachers (SKU) would like to thank the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development for the opportunity to comment on the issue of the use of resources in regional education in the Slovak Republic. Let us express our opinion in particular on the issue of the use and potential of human resources.

As teachers we are somewhere in the middle of an imaginary structure of relationships in the school system. On the one hand, we communicate with students and their parents, on the other hand, with the directors and supervisors, and, although to a much lesser extent, with the makers of school policy. From this position we, directly and in great detail, perceive the current direction of policy in the field of education, in its material facilities and direct effect on the development of education, as well as the well-being of individuals and society.

Education is all about people: students, parents, teachers, governmental and non-governmental organisations - specific relations that arise between them. Ideally, these relationships should be harmonious and transparent, at all levels there should be confidence that together we are able to prepare new generations that will stand up in competitive global labour market conditions.

Unfortunately, as is apparent from the Summary Report on the Use of Human, Financial and Material Resources in Regional Education, our education is facing a lot of problems for which appropriate solutions cannot be found. In the following text we will focus mainly on the issue of human resources and their reserves, which is, with regard to our position, closest to us.

1 School policy makers

School policy makers are members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic in the first place; the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic along with the organisations they control.

1.1 Unfortunately, the Slovak Republic does not have a clear concept of long-term policy in the field of regional education. We lack a rational and meaningful concept that would convince all relevant components in the school environment and so would be adopted by a broad social and political consensus.



1.2 School policy makers have not created a platform for continuous and sustainable debate to name and address problems in education with the participation of all its components.

1.2.1 Negotiations of school policy makers with school organisations take place bilaterally, not multilaterally, which does not allow all interested parties to gain an insight into the views and needs of other organisations.

1. 2. 2 Preparation of system changes is mostly without any public debate.

1. 2. 2. 1 The council for systemic changes in education, which was established on the recommendation of the OECD, did not meet the expectations of the public. Selection of the members was not transparent and never justified. Neither teachers nor headmasters directly involved in school practise in regional education were represented. What is more, the Ministry of Education refuses, despite the principle of free access to information, to publish the records of negotiations.

1. 3 School policy makers, in our opinion, do not address the problems in education with sufficient attention - education itself is not a priority for them. This is manifest particularly in the low share of Gross Domestic Product allocated to finance for education. The Slovak Republic is way behind in the characteristics relating to the amount of funding per pupil and teacher, not only among OECD countries, but also, for example, among the countries of V4.

1. 3. 1 For the greatest reserve of resources for education we see the possibility of a gradual and systematic increase of the share of GDP for education in the formation of the state budget, so we would reach the OECD average as soon as possible.

1. 3. 2 The Ministry of Education and other educational policy makers should therefore state all the problems in education clearly and openly. The policy makers themselves should principally create space for a consensus on the reallocation of public resources according to priorities.

2. Head teachers

Principals of schools and school facilities are a particularly important component in terms of human resources management.

2.1 Principals should have, in our view, greater space for the development of educational policy and systemic changes in education.

2. 2 According to an SKU survey, teachers would welcome directors having greater opportunities to evaluate and reward teachers based on their quality, access, personal professional development



(informal), mainly based on performance and results of the educational process. Understandably, it would mean increasing the available components in the salary limit.

3 Teachers - teaching and professional staff

Teaching and professional staff in education represent perhaps the greatest potential on which an effective school system can be built. Unfortunately, teachers themselves have long felt that this potential is not sufficiently supported and developed. They are often disappointed, apathetic and frustrated because they are unappreciated and nobody listens to them. We believe that investment in teachers and the systematic development of their intellectual, educational and human potential would have a positive effect on the actual quality of the school environment and performance of pupils.

3. 1 The greatest long-term dissatisfaction among teachers is the problem of their financial valuation being held back. Teacher salaries are less than half the average salary in other professions requiring higher education. Salaries of teachers in Slovakia are only about a third of the average salary of teachers in the OECD countries, while the cost of living in Slovakia amounts to 70% of the average cost of living in OECD countries. Just one example; the starting salary of beginner teachers in the neighbouring Czech Republic is 800 Euros. For Slovak teachers it is 561 Euros. A teacher in Slovakia reaches the 800 Euros level after about 20 years of experience and continuing education.

3. 1. 2 Teachers are dissatisfied with the current career system. According to an SKU survey in June 2014, a majority of teachers (57%) perceived the system and the law 317/2009 rather negative, 13% even quite negative. Teachers undergo various training courses mainly in order to obtain credit and at least a bit of salary increase. The greatest dissatisfaction teachers have is with the provision under which the credits and credit surcharge have a limited validity of seven years. Teachers think that the knowledge and skills they acquire in training have a significantly longer-term nature. An absolute majority of respondents had a problem with the choice of training. Sometimes, teachers do not consider the offer useful. In contrast, for training they are interested in (e.g., working with an interactive whiteboard), they have to wait one or even two years. The system does not take account the formal and continuous learning and creative activities in the preparation of textbooks, teaching aids and the extra-curricular work with students.

3. 1. 3 Low salaries in proportion to the intensity of work mean that the teaching profession is increasingly less attractive. This is manifest mainly in the development indicators of age and gender composition of the teaching staff. Again, we believe that solving the salary problem could help eliminate negative tendencies in this field.



3. 1. 4 Regional differences in the cost of living (up to 30%) mean that the salary issue is to the most extent felt by teachers in large towns. Teachers have to have an extra source of income, some of them have two or three "side" jobs. All these activities drain from them the time and strength they could spend working on their professional development, lesson planning or rest.

3. 1. 5 Long-term media publicity of the teachers' salary issue on the one hand and the continuous feeling of being ignored by the makers of school policies on the other intensify the scepticism among teachers. They are forced to point out this problem; they organize protests or even strikes. We believe that it is undignified for our status and the significance of our work to the society.

3. 2. Working conditions and the work environment are perceived by the teachers to be another serious problem. The greatest source of difficulty is the lack of high quality textbooks. Teachers often have to make their own teaching materials or even whole textbooks themselves. Another source of problems is insufficient equipment in specialised classrooms and laboratories. Many pieces of equipment are 30 or even more years old and schools lack money to buy new ones.

3. 2. 1 The problem of equipping schools with didactic aids is not being solved systemically but selectively through projects. However, these are very demanding for schools in terms of administration and bureaucratic procedures. One of the consequences is a difference in the quality of equipment of schools.

3. 2. 1. 1 Those working on these projects are members of the academic staff. It could be considered favourably if the money from the projects was an additional source of finance. However, together with sponsoring, project money is often the primary source of finance for improving the quality of environment, equipment and teaching aids of schools.

3. 2. 1. 2 Considered to be of above-average wealth, the Bratislava region is often excluded from calls for project proposals. The wealth of this region, however, cannot be seen school financing as there are the same rules for the schools in the Bratislava region as for schools in other regions of Slovakia. Neither normative funding procedures nor salary tables take into consideration regional differences, e.g. the differences in prices of goods and services.

3. 2. 2 Teachers appreciate the great progress made in the area of school ICT equipment. We believe that the same degree of attention should also be paid to equipping schools with microscopes, test tubes, maps, textbooks, expert literature and visual aids etc.

3. 3 Teachers show great dissatisfaction with frequent, concept-less and inadequately-prepared reforms in the curriculum. The purpose and aims of these reforms are mostly insufficiently explained and verified while the teachers are those encumbered with carrying them out. Teachers are often expected



to acquire new teaching techniques and methods while nobody bothers to show them practically how to achieve them and what the desired effect should be. They lack a platform for sharing their experiences which they share on teachers' web forums.

3. 4 Apart from insufficient material equipment and facilities, teachers suffer from insufficiencies in the area of personal support. Schools lack school psychologists, speech therapists, social educators, special educators and assistants.

3. 5 For a long time teachers have felt that they have been burdened with a lot of bureaucracy connected with the educational process. A lot of documents are kept in duplicate and without making use of the possibilities of digitalisation.

4. Students

Students should be the centre of attention. Unfortunately, something in our education system is not right. According to international testing our students are getting worse. According to 2012 PISA, testing they are becoming further and further below the average of the OECD. High school graduates cannot succeed in the labour market; many solve their situation by putting it off by starting university studies. According to surveys, students do not look forward to going to school, they don't feel happy at school. In our experience, they consider the school environment and teaching aids to be obsolete. Although they respect teachers for their knowledge and humane approach they consider them to be unsuccessful people and "losers" because they have become "only" teachers. The system does not generate a healthy level of competitiveness among students; it does not motivate them to a permanent interest in education and acquiring knowledge and skills. Generally it can be seen that among students that there is increasing indifference towards academic results as well as important social topics and problems.

Naturally, despite all its defects, our school system creates good conditions for active, ambitious and socially-involved students. They reach results comparable with or even better than in other OECD member states and achieve prominent places in international competitions. Our shared effort should be to increase the number of such students. At the same time, successful students should be rewarded by creating conditions for them to better themselves even more. Everybody has the potential to improve, the weakest as much as the strongest. Therefore, improving educational conditions should affect all students to the same degree.

4. 1 We think that the key role in eliminating all the negative phenomena mentioned above should be played by makers of school policies. Primarily, it is necessary to reassess whether the expenses on one student correspond with the possibilities of our economy. At the same time it is necessary to realise



that the word “expense” does not quite reflect reality, as in the case of education it is more of an investment.

4. 1. 1 It is necessary to invest primarily in the technical condition of buildings, teaching and didactic aids and teachers.

4. 1. 2 Secondly, makers of school policies should stabilise the legislative environment and curriculum. Here we are getting back to the compact school conceptual framework of 1. 1

4. 2 The school environment should be pleasant for the students and stable. It is necessary to eliminate bad feelings at all levels. It must be a shared effort of all human resources in the system. We teachers realise our responsibility in this process. Our main duty is to commit fully to our profession, view our work with a critical eye and seek possibilities to make the educational process interesting and engaging while making it an effective way of passing on values and knowledge.

4. 3 Naturally, there is also a lot of space for improvement for the students. High absenteeism and a high amount of missed classes at all types of schools remain a grave problem. Each missed class should be perceived as money down the drain. Understandably, students (and their parents) make use of the benevolent system of releasing students from school and excusing absence. However, school policies makers do not deal with the problem of missed classes (and not only those which are unexcused) systematically.

Loose discipline of the students in classes is a similar problem. At present we lack an elaborate and effective system of eliminating undesirable and sometimes even aggressive behaviour of students. Our current system of educational measures and lowered grades in behaviour do not affect the students (nor the parents) in a serious manner and does not lead to redress.

5. Parents

Numerically, parents are the largest group involved in education. Nevertheless, they remain on the periphery of the discussions during school policy making, the creation of educational programmes and discussions about the needs of individual schools.

School and family should complement and substitute for each other in the process of upbringing and education. Parents should take more responsibility for upbringing as it influences the behaviour of students in classes. Not only teachers of students from socially-disadvantaged environment but also teachers of students from the most socially-advantageous environment have to deal with discipline problems.



5. 1. Teachers would welcome stricter sanctions for parents whose children have problems with school attendance. These sanctions could be either financial or in the form of forced measures such as the obligation to attend a socio-psychological training.

Conclusion

The Slovak Chamber of Teachers sees the greatest room for improvement in utilising and managing human resources. We perceive the current system as unsustainable exploitation of human resources. We believe that Slovak school system should focus more on investments in human resources and their development. In our opinion, the effects of such development in the medium term would be the improved performance and results of our students; in the long term it would be lower unemployment rates of young people, enhanced competitiveness of our economy and growth of our GDP.

In our opinion there is a lot of room for improvement and great potential in all components partaking on the upbringing and education. Our shared effort should focus on creating such conditions which would enable the potential to be developed and grow. The adjustments and changes to the system should be based on continuous discussion, with the aim to find the widest possible social and political consensus necessary for its stability.

In Bratislava, in 2.7. 2014