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HOW TO MITIGATE THE PROBLEM OF UNDERACHIEVERS IN EDUCATION: AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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HOW TO MITIGATE THE PROBLEM
OF UNDERACHIEVERS IN EDUCATION:
AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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INTRODUCTION - WHAT IS THE PROBLEM

One of the basic tasks of education is to provide a basic level of literacy. The great problem is that for a certain proportion of children and pupils, public education is failing in this task. These are the so-called underachievers. There are a number of ways to measure the rate of underachievers in the pupil population. One of the most widely used is to look at the results of the international PISA testing and the proportion of children who fail to reach the minimum proficiency level. Failing to meet this basic proficiency level lowers a pupil's future chances both on a personal and professional level.

The results of PISA 2018 show that there is no reason for complacency. The proportion of underachieving 15-year-olds in the EU remains high and poses a significant social issue and a barrier to the EU's future economic competitiveness. Reducing underachievement remains a top priority for the EU in its pursuit of social fairness.

Specifically, PISA 2018 found that about one in five 15-year-olds in the EU are underachievers in reading (21.7%), mathematics (22.4%), or science (21.6%). Although the EU average conceals significant disparities between Member States, the overall underachievement rate has increased in science and reading and remained stable in mathematics over the past decade. Nevertheless, some countries have been able to improve their performance over time, indicating that reducing underachievement is feasible.[1]

Additionally, socio-economic factors strongly influence pupils' academic performance and expectations in most EU countries. Furthermore, countries with a high proportion of underachievers tend to exhibit significant performance gaps between students from advantaged and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

The key question in this situation is how to reform education to help these underachievers improve their outcomes in different countries with differently functioning education systems.

1. HOW TO REFORM SCHOOLS WITHOUT REFORMING THE WHOLE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The education system is a very conservative system. It is very difficult to find any room for consensus. Even if it can be done, it is even harder to convince all the stakeholders that this change needs to be implemented. And the absolutely most difficult thing is to transform the changes adopted legislatively into real practice.

In principle, there are two approaches to reforming education system. The first one focuses on parametric changes in the functioning of the system and comes with various modifications of documents and retraining of actors in education. The second sees the way not in a process of tweaking but in a paradigmatic reform that abandons the old system and introduces a new one. The popularity of these two approaches to education reform alternates regularly in the public debate. Both, however, have failed in the long run and have not produced the expected results.

In addition to these two approaches, there is a third alternative to education reform. This does not rely on improving the existing system or replacing the old one with a new one, but emphasizes allowing parallel solutions to emerge in education. It aims to create space for active and smart people who have the vision and desire to make a real difference in education. This is a tried and tested approach to education reform, which has a number of successful models with positive results abroad.

In particular, we propose the introduction of the so-called school portfolio management model. This means abandoning the 20th century model of school management, which is characterised by the micro-management of schools through legislation and regulation. And a move towards 21st century management, which is characterised by a high degree of autonomy for schools and, at the same time, their accountability for the achievement of basic learning outcomes.

In practice, this new model of school management is most often implemented through two policies:

1.1. Entry of higher quality schools into the system

The creation of the same schools, of which there are thousands in the system, would not bring about change. What is needed is the creation of an environment in which schools built on different principles can emerge. Entry-level reforms are therefore usually associated with the creation of a new type of autonomous schools that are not subject to existing regulations, bureaucracy and trade unions. Thus they have a high degree of freedom in hiring and remunerating teachers, in developing the content and form of education, in setting school design and the course of instruction, and in the use of finances and resources in the school.

Autonomous schools are thus a space where traditionally held practices and ideas about how education works can be freely tested and abandoned. But at the same time, autonomous schools are held accountable for achieving pre-agreed outcomes - most often in the form of the proportion of pupils who reach basic literacy levels.

This new type of school can be set up by a variety of non-profit, civic or religious associations, as well as by profit-seeking entrepreneurs. It is thus a breeding ground for all active, enterprising and innovative people who have an idea for the design of a successful school, but the current system does not allow them to realise it due to the existence of various obstacles. From the pupils' point of view, these schools are as free as traditional public ones and are publicly funded. And if there is more demand for such a school than the supply of empty desks, the school has to admit pupils on the basis of a lottery draw.

In different countries, these autonomous schools have different names: for example, Friskolor in Sweden, Free Schools in England, Independent Public Schools in Australia, Partnership Schools in New Zealand, or Charter Schools in the USA. In these countries, freedom in managing schools has allowed the emergence of many high-quality and innovative schools or even networks of schools.

The phenomenon of autonomous schools is most widespread in the USA, where 45 states have charter schools in legislation and there are more than 7 000 schools in total, attended by 3.6 million children and taught by 206 000 teachers. During the pandemic, charter schools experienced some of the fastest growth in history, while public schools, on the other hand, saw their enrolment numbers decline[2].

How are charter schools faring? Research generally finds a similar or slightly positive impact of charter schools on average student achievement[3]. From this summary, some critics of charter schools conclude that they are dysfunctional. However, this is a very unfortunate interpretation.

First, the impact on test scores is not the only, and for many, not even the main reason why they establish charter schools and why parents send their children there. These are mainly middle-class families whose children attend traditional public schools and perform satisfactorily in achieving proficient literacy. These families do not expect innovative schools to improve their children's academic performance, but pursue a variety of other goals. For example, the appropriate behaviour of teachers and staff towards students, the atmosphere and culture of the school, and the emphasis on moral principles and ethical education. Or special pedagogical methods that may not directly increase the tested academic skills, but develop soft skills. Research shows that even in studies that find only a modest positive or no effect of charter schools on student academic achievement relative to public schools, a significant positive effect on student and parent satisfaction with schools has been identified[4].

Parents who put their children in charter schools with the goal of having them achieve at least a basic level of literacy because their local public schools are utterly failing to do so are primarily from poor socioeconomic backgrounds in inner cities. And it is with charter schools in these areas that there is a strong consensus among researchers that they significantly improve the outcomes of children from backgrounds of generational poverty.[5] In addition, they also increase high school graduation rates, the likelihood of college admission[6], and are safer than public schools.[7]

Charter schools are thus proving to be an effective tool for educating poor children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Which is precisely the problem that needs to be addressed in EU countries.

1.2. Exit of poor quality schools from the system

One of the advantages of a market economy is that it doesn't need a bad cop persona. The bad cop is the impersonal profit and loss mechanism. It ensures that bad ideas or poorly implemented good ideas get the red light. Sooner or later, the people who came up with them lose money, status, and the ability to pursue them. Complaints will not help, because there is no one to address them to.

There is no such thing in the public sector. Here, a person has to come along who has the courage to decide that the dysfunctional ideas will stop and some people will lose their jobs, money and status. These are unpopular measures, but in a world outside the Garden of Eden, they must be done. Otherwise, service becomes a burden. And this is true of contemporary education as well.

There are many of schools educating even more children from poor socio-economic backgrounds day in and day out, resulting in very low levels of knowledge and skills. These children do not learn basic literacy skills, regularly fail and some of them do not even finish primary school. Working with them

is certainly not easy, but we cannot assume that this is not a failure of the schools. To assume otherwise is to assume that these children are doomed to failure from birth. Yet we know from the international experience described in the previous section that this need not be the case.

But we also know that these failing schools will not be helped by cosmetic changes in the form of retraining teachers, rewriting state education documents, raising salaries, or providing better textbooks and new teaching assistants. Only a comprehensive and significant change in the functioning of school processes will help these schools. Foreign experience shows that this can be achieved through a number of approaches. What they all have in common is that the original management of the public school, or even the founder himself, will lose the school and will be replaced by people from outside.[8]

In practice, this means that some part of the public sector - the state, a regional government, a new school district - decides to take over the worst public schools. Or the founder itself gives them up because of their failure to deliver education. The criterion for determining the worst schools is most often the long--term failure of a large portion of the school's students to reach basic literacy levels. These schools will then come under new autonomous school founders, or be managed by new education operators (known abroad as EMOs - Education Management Organizations), who will run the schools and manage all aspects of their operation.

This may lead to the ‚disappearance' of poor quality schools even in areas where there is only one school. By school we mean the sum of human capital and intangible know-how. Physically, the school building and its pupils will remain in one place, only the entire management, operator or license will change. In this way, important competitive advantages are also brought into areas where ‚parallel' competition (two schools side by side) is not otherwise possible. However, ‚serial' competition can work well here.

1.3.   Managing a portfolio of schools

The combination of reform approaches ensuring ‚entry of quality' and ‚exit of poor quality' schools is school portfolio management. The phrase „portfolio management model" was brought to education in 1993 by University of Washington professor Paul Hill. According to him: „It is time to retire this "command-and-control" system and replace it with a new model: portfolio management. In this new system, school boards would manage a diverse array of schools, some run by the school district and others by independent organizations, each designed to meet the different needs of students. Like investors with diversified portfolios of stocks and bonds, school boards would closely manage their community's portfolio of educational service offerings, divesting less productive schools and adding more promising ones.."[9] approach ensures that school quality levels improve in two ways:

First, it gives schools autonomy and freedom from the overregulated education environment while creating pressure to achieve agreed-upon outcomes. Every school that enters a school district's portfolio commits to achieving predetermined quality benchmarks. These benchmarks most often include some rate of improvement in student achievement over time and the proportion of students who achieve basic literacy levels in core skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition, different schools with specific pedagogies may agree on individual criteria that take into account their unique school goals and objectives (e.g., assessment of pupils' independence, their individual achievements, satisfaction with the school climate as assessed by parents or pupils, etc.).

The need for schools to deliver these agreed outcomes means that all staff, including management, face constant pressure to deliver high levels of performance. This pressure is compounded when their pupils underachieve. This motivates them to do something about these results immediately and to put in more effort and time to find solutions to problems. Thus, in a managed portfolio system, there is no possibility that school leaders and teachers have an automatic right to taxpayers' money without standing out in the competition and delivering the agreed outcomes. Conversely, in a public traditional school, regular, repeated student failure poses virtually no acute problem for school staff and leadership. It is only a problem for parents and their children.

Second, by managing a portfolio of schools where low-quality schools are taken over or eliminated, while making room for new high-quality schools to enter more easily, the average level of school quality across the entire school system (school district) automatically improves. This is simply by having low quality schools leave the system and high quality ones replicate in the system.

2. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE WITH SCHOOL PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

According to the Center on Reinventing Public Education, 35 school districts, which together educate hundreds of thousands of students in the U.S., have applied the Managed School Portfolio model in some capacity by 2022.[10] These are most often school districts that have long been known for poor-quality education, where dysfunctional public schools operate, and where there is a high concentration of children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. In this section, we take a closer look at three examples of successful applications of the school portfolio management model.

2.1. Hurricane in New Orleans

When Hurricane Katrina leveled schools in New Orleans in 2005, a unique opportunity arose to build a new school system on greenfield land. Until then, the quality of education in this city was among the worst in the US. High levels of corruption, extremely low student achievement and poverty. So the State of Louisiana took over the reins of building a new school system. It created a new school district in the city called the ‚Recovery School District', which gradually took over virtually all 83 public schools and made them autonomous schools through a performance contract (charter).

That did not mean, however, that the district did not have to close low-performing charter schools as well. From the hurricane through 2018, 22 charter schools closed in New Orleans due to underperformance. Those schools were closed or taken over by vetted operators and school managers.

After nearly two decades of education reform, studies, testing, school results, and other indicators speak the same language: the quality of education in New Orleans has improved dramatically, and it is a show-case for school improvement across the U.S. The proportion of students who achieve basic literacy, who graduate, who go on to college, and those who finish have all increased significantly. Most importantly, these positive results cannot be explained by the change in student structure after the hurricane. The high proportion of poor black children has not changed significantly. Academics agree that this educational miracle is simply due to the fact that dysfunctional public schools have been replaced by innovative charter schools.[11]

2.2.   Congress in Washington D.C.

A similar story, albeit without the natural disaster, took place in Washington D.C. The only disaster that took place in that city was the one in the classrooms. So in 1996, the U.S. Congress created a new school district in the city, the „Public Charter School Board," which began taking over the city's worst public schools. By 2021, it had taken over 135 of the city's 250 schools and put them under the management of private charter schools, or school operators, to fix them up and get them back on their feet. On average, Washington closed or took over 5 schools a year, and in total, the new school district closed one-third of the schools in its 20 years of operation.[12]

Washington, D.C. is such a nice demonstration of how two school districts of roughly the same size can exist in the same territory and be governed by completely different models. A traditional school district that centrally manages and regulates the operation of public schools. And a new district with charter schools that have a high degree of autonomy. This new school district provides „only" control of agreed-upon outcomes, closing and taking over low-quality schools and authorizing and expanding high-quality ones.

Again, the results of the new model are encouraging. Despite receiving significantly less money (about $ 6-7 thousand per pupil per year), charter schools are bringing in more music. In terms of the amount of knowledge gained, students who attend charter schools in Washington have received nearly half an extra year of education per school year compared to traditional public schools. And that gap grew even wider over time, to the benefit of students who attended charter schools for more years.[13] Consequently, politicians in the traditional school district began sounding the alarm and responding to the new competition. This created pressure for education reforms, teacher layoffs, and the closure of lagging schools in the „public" school district. Those that remain have gradually begun to catch up to the performance of charter schools, but they still lag behind in educating poor minority students, for example.[14]

2.3.   Coincidence in Denver

The third city is Denver with 700 thousand inhabitants. The school system here was not interfered with a hurricane or Congress, but by the accidental election of the right people to run the Denver Public Schools. The latter has instituted several reforms since 2008 that have resulted in the systematic closure of low-quality schools and their takeover and replacement by charter and innovative schools. It is the first and, so far, the last school district in the entire U.S. to voluntarily relinquish the exclusive right to control the schools in its district. Without interference from above - either in the form of disaster or the state.

In more than a decade of reform, Denver has closed or taken over 38 failing public schools, about one-fifth of all public schools. And at the same time, it has opened more than 100 new charter and innovative schools, which together account for about half of all schools in the school district. A major reason the reforms were able to keep going even in the face of difficult political battles was the fact that dysfunctional closed schools were replaced by high-quality schools fairly quickly. This helped take the aces out of the sleeves of the opponents of change. This is how the reform managed to survive four school district elections.

The most recent study, from 2022, looked at student and school performance in Denver compared to other school districts in Colorado. Before reform, Denver was among the 10 worst districts out of 180 districts. But between 2008 and 2019, it managed to outperform 100 districts and rank in the top 60 percent. According to the authors, this is one of the biggest improvements that school reform research shows - both in terms of the size of the effect, the scale of the schools involved, and long-term sustainability.[15]

3. FIVE CASE STUDIES OF DIFFERENT PROBLEMS IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION

Different countries have different problems with the education of underachievers and pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In this section we will look at the specific educational situation and challenges faced by the following countries: Lithuania, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.

3.1   The Problem of Underachievers in Lithuania

Lithuania presents an interesting case when it comes to the country's results in educational achievement. Lithuania's population is amongst the most educated in the EU: in Lithuania, 57% of 25-34 year-olds had a tertiary qualification in 2021 compared to 47% on average across OECD countries.[16] Furthermore, in Lithuania the share of young people (18-24 years old) who left the education system early is one of the lowest in the EU. In 2020 it accounted for 5.6% and was significantly lower than the goal of the EU Council in 2030 - less than 9% (National Agency for Education, 2021).

However, despite significant achievement in educational attainment, Lithuania demonstrates rather disappointing results in educational achievement. According to the 2018 PISA study, the achievements of Lithuanian students in all studied areas (reading abilities, mathematical and science literacy) are significantly lower than the average of OECD countries, and Lithuania ranks 21-27 out of 79 countries (National Agency for Education, 2021). Significant lagging in various skills is evident amongst the adults as well. According to the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Lithuanian adults in Lithuania show average proficiency in literacy and below-average proficiency in problem solving in technology-rich environments compared with adults in participating OECD countries .[17]

The paradox of the Lithuanian population having an above average educational attainment yet below average educational achievement illustrates that education in Lithuania is widespread and accessible but the quality is dissatisfactory (National Agency for Education, 2021). However, the data suggests that the issue is not of overall poor quality of education but rather of dramatically disparate quality of schools thus segregating Lithuanian pupils into well performing and those left behind. The data on educational disparities illustrates that the segregation of educational achievement in Lithuania manifests most significantly by: a) geographical areas; b) economic, social and cultural status; c) ethnic background.

Geographical Areas

Academic underachievement in Lithuania overall correlates with geographical location meaning that on average worst performing schools are from the rural areas - small towns and villages. Meanwhile, the best performing schools are located in the biggest municipalities.[18] Today, there are 971 schools operating in Lithuania, of which 331 schools are located in rural areas. According to the report produced by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, village children would need more than 2 school years to catch up with the Vilnius average (The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2019). This illustrates a broader pattern evident in Lithuania of student achievement declining as the level of urbanization decreases (The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2019).

This pattern is not unique to Lithuania as it also is evident in other OECD countries, however in Lithuania this tendency is considerably more prominent. The PISA study from 2018 revealed that the disparity in educational achievement among students in different geographical areas (metropolitan, urban, and rural) is twice as high as the average of other OECD countries and is significant at all levels of education[19]. Furthermore, the shares of people with tertiary education vary significantly in different regions of the country. In Lithuania, the share of adults aged 25-64 with tertiary education ranges from 38% in the regions of Central and Western Lithuania and up to 59% in the Vilnius (capital) region[20]. The difference between the best and worst performing municipalities as it pertains to the secondary school graduation exam results is 1.8 times.[21]

The data reporting that on average worse academic performances are concentrated in rural areas in comparison to urban areas matches the insights provided by the national school ranking journal "Reitingai". The 2022 list of all ranked secondary schools shows that the top 10 best performing schools are located in the capital city of Vilnius and 2 other biggest cities in the country - Kaunas and Klaipėda.[22] Meaning that Lithuania demonstrates significant and robust patterns of schools generating relatively consistent results: well-performing schools are mostly concentrated in urban areas while poor performing schools - in rural areas.

Economic, social and cultural status

Further analysis of data suggests that disparities in educational achievement have less to do not with the location itself and more with the differences in economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) of pupils in urban and rural areas. The National Agency for Education reports that higher reading ability results are achieved in schools with higher ESCS students, however more students with higher ESCS study in urban schools.[23] The European Commission reports that rural pupils would actually outperform pupils in urban areas if they and their schools had the same socio-economic profile.[24]

Lithuanian National Education Agency comes to a similar conclusion stating in their 2020 report that "it would seem that not the area itself, but its ESCS context is the reason for poorer achievements, namely it is much less favorable in the countryside."[25]

The importance of ESCS context rather than the location itself has also been stressed by the results of the PISA 2018 study, stating that: the reading results of students from Vilnius schools are on average 77 points higher than those from rural schools, and the difference between the reading results of students from the most and least favorable ESCS environment was 90 points (National Agency for Education, 2021). Furthermore, 40% pupils in the bottom quartile of the socio-economic index do not have the necessary reading skills (36.4% in the EU), compared to 11.2% of pupils in the upper quartile (EU - 9.5%) (National Agency for Education, 2022). Thus illustrating the significant link between one's ESCS environment and the academic output.

Ethnic minorities

Finally, significant educational achievement disparities are visible amongst the ethnic minorities in Lithuania. Lithuania has a significant population of pupils from ethnic minority groups, some of whom attend Russian or Polish speaking schools. In 2021 the number of pupils attending schools where the language of instruction was not Lithuanian made up to 47,150 pupils (National Agency for Education, 2021). Lithuania's Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in their 2019 analysis of Education in the Country and the Regions concludes that "the higher the grade, the bigger the achievement gap between students studying in Polish and Lithuanian and Russian, especially in the field of reading" (The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2019). This has also been evident from the study TIMSS 2019 International Results in Mathematics and Science which illustrated that 8th grade pupils taught in polish-speaking schools on average are 50 points behind (472 points) the overall country result average (522 points) (TIMSS, 2019). However, it is also important to emphasise that in Lithuania Polish-speaking schools usually have a higher share of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (24%) in comparison to Lithuanian-speaking (14,1%), multilingual (6,3%) or Russian speaking (0%) schools (The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2019).

Governmental Tools

The Lithuanian government has implemented a range of measures aimed at improving educational outcomes for all students, with a particular focus on addressing the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Improving School Quality

Allocation of the Quality Basket

The "Quality Basket" is a funding program for schools in Lithuania that provides additional funds to improve their activities and enhance student learning outcomes. Funding is provided based on various criteria such as school size, number of students, location, and others. The funding allows schools to invest in various areas such as updating teaching and learning materials, hiring additional teachers, organizing student activities, purchasing learning aids, and more. The project was launched in 2019 as the measure to reduce educational achievement gaps between schools in Lithuania.[26]

The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport has allocated funds from the quality basket to 150 schools identified as weak, and 30 schools identified as strong, based on the lists approved by the Minister on November 13, 2018. The aim of the quality basket is to improve the educational achievements of students, and it is intended to assist municipalities in creating conditions for improving the quality of education in both strong and weak schools (ibid).

"I Choose to Teach" is a program by the governmental institution Center for School Improvement (lt. Mokyklų tobulinimo centras) and it has been running for 15 years now. From the start of the program, 191 teachers have been brought in and assigned to different schools across various locations, ensuring that enthusiastic young professionals are working not just in the schools of major cities or urban areas but also in smaller towns and villages. Their mission is to ensure that "every child, regardless of their social, cultural and economic situation, will feel respected and valued at school, so that they can reveal their potential" (I Choose to Teach, 2023).

In order to make a difference, the program attracts motivated, service-oriented participants, provides them with training and support and places them to work for 2 years in less privileged schools. Only public schools can apply for the program and these schools cannot have a student selection process. The priority is given to the schools in the rural areas, smaller towns and village schools. The schools that apply to the program receive:

- For the head and deputy head of the school - an inclusive leadership competence development program (40 academic hours).

- Continuous training program for "Change" team members (40 academic hours).

- Training for the entire school community.

- Motivated teachers who have passed a difficult selection process.

- Consulting and professional assistance in planning and implementing a change project.

- Detailed study of school progress and consultation with the researchers.

Supporting Students at Risk

Recognising pupils with big potential

The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport has moved away from the „one size fits all" approach in Lithuanian education as a part of „The Millennium Schools" educational reform. This reform aims to bridge the educational achievement gap between town and village schools, as well as pupils from affluent and disadvantaged families. In the renewed guidelines for education the Ministry introduces the concept of "high learning potential children" - pupils who have additional educational needs and therefore struggle to successfully navigate the educational system and present results that reflect their abilities. The Ministry notes that 30-40% of high learning potential children are from rural areas.[27] Furthermore, the Ministry has created the recommendations which identify and present the profiles of six types of students who experience challenges to fulfill their academic potential (Create Lithuania, 2022a). Recommendations provide the school teachers and staff with knowledge and tools to recognize and support each type of student (Create Lithuania, 2022b).

Alternative School Models

As of march 2023 Lithuania has 971 schools, 57 of them are private. 17 new private schools have been established since 2015 and a few more are expected to open their doors in September.[28] Private schools are seen as a suitable option for those children who are not fitting into the public schooling system. However, not all private schools are the same. Some of the private schools are profiling themselves as the alternative: either promising a different education philosophy, a more individualized approach to teaching or a focus on a more robust preparation of pupils for entering prestigious universities. Furthermore, they vary in their costs, from 5 to 1500 euros per month (ibid). Some of them select their students by academic performance, others do not. Finally, they vary in the results they produce.

The list of ranked Lithuanian secondary schools has been published every year for the last 9 years by the research journal "Reitingai". The criteria has changed over the years but as of December 2022, it comprises of 26 indicators such as national exam results, share of graduates entering tertiary education, share of students who graduate, share of students who pass national exams with a maximum grade of 100%, percentage of students who failed the national exams, etc. The values of indicators are summed up to comprise an overall school's performance score allowing for comparing different schools. However, there are two distinct lists of schools: one includes those that admit students based on their performance in entrance exams, while the other comprises schools that do not discriminate against students based on their academic abilities. Therefore comparing private and public schools is not straightforward as they disperse amongst the two lists. Regardless, it is still possible to compare the points the schools receive.

In 2022 a total of 369 secondary schools were ranked nationally. Only 12 of them are allowed to select students according to their academic performance. Out of the 12 ranked schools, private schools take up the positions of 5, 6 and 8, the rest positions are taken up by public schools. When examining the top ten of the so-called „non-selective" schools, there are three private schools in the list, taking up positions 1, 6 and 7. The rest of the 16 non-selective private secondary schools took up the positions: 11, 14, 24, 28, 44, 47, 48, 76, 103, 140, 148, 176, 181, 297, 303, 318.[29]

Despite the ranking, Lithuania lacks direct data comparing private and public schools however Gintaras Sarafinas, head editor of journal "Rankings" comments that "there are no cookie-cutter answers, of course, but it is clear that state schools are increasingly standardizing everything, while private schools individualize, apply more modern teaching methods, and emphasize academic levels. State schools prioritize academic achievement, while private schools prioritize children's well-being and emotions".[30] Furthermore, over the years there seems to be an upward trend for private schools. According to the journal's editors, "both the secondary analysis of international studies and the national gymnasium ranking, which is based on national exam results, indicate a trend that municipalities and state schools are starting to fall behind in the competitive struggle with private schools".[31]

3.2   The Problem of Underachievers in Czech Republic

Primary school pupils who achieve lower academic results than their peers are geographically concentrated in two regions of the Czech Republic – Ústí nad Labem and Karlovy Vary regions. The other areas are parts of the Moravian-Silesian and Liberec regions, areas of the former Sudetenland or the peripheries of individual

regions. Some of these areas overlap, for example the Jeseník district is part of the former Sudetenland and at the same time on the periphery of the Olomouc Region.
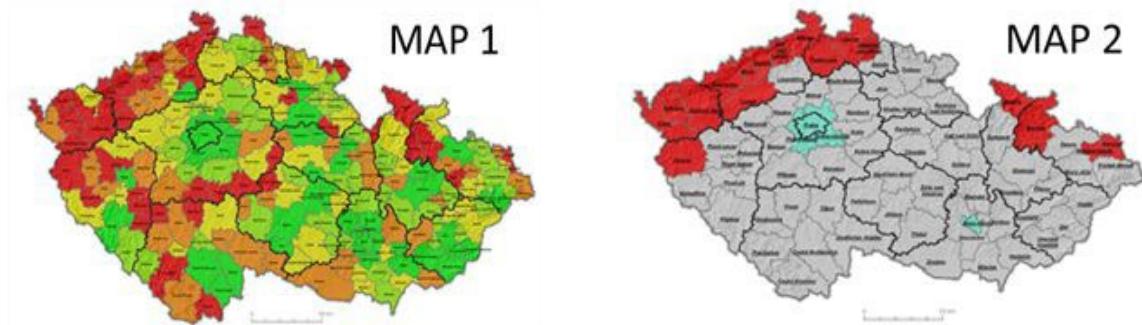
Source: Lebeda, Lysek, Marek et al. 2022

The worst performing districts are shown in red in Map 1 above. Although it is clear that the lowest-performing pupils are also found in otherwise rich districts such as the Central Bohemian Region, their concentration is most evident in the two districts mentioned above.

The socio-economic status of the pupils' family/parents also plays a key role in their performance, which is not unusual in the world. In the Czech Republic, however, this relationship is extraordinary strong. If the family has a higher economic status, the child usually achieves better academic results and vice versa.

A 2022 study by the Czech School Inspectorate looked at the causes of these problems at the level of individual districts, with the aim of finding the factors that link these areas. Subsequently, each district was divided into three groups:

a)   Districts with similar sociodemographics (Grey - Most districts)

b)   Metropolitan areas (Blue - Prague, Prague - West, Prague - East, Brno)

c)   Structurally affected districts (Red – Ústí nad Labem and Karlovy Vary regions, parts of Moravian Silesian and Liberec regions, Sudetenland and peripheries)

Map 2 more or less replicates the areas where pupils achieved the worst academic results compared to their peers. The factors that the study looked at and their results can be found in the table below. In fact, they closely replicate the spatial distribution shown in the maps above and the results of the most recent testing of 5th and 9th grade students, where students in both categories performed the worst in these structurally disadvantaged districts. (Novosák, Suchomel, Dvořák et al., 2022)

Table 1: Average values of standardised variables for groups of districts

Factor	Districts with similar sociodemographics	Metropolitan areas	Structurally affected districts
Percentage of divorced	-0,43	0,02	**1,41**
Percentage of entrepreneurs	**0,06**	2,54	0,79
Share of unemployed	-0,29	-1,18	**1,22**
Percentage of university graduates	-0,06	3,24	**-0,56**
Share of foreclosures	-0,44	-0,5	**1,56**
Percentage of economic entities per capita	-0,13	2,96	**-0,26**
Social capital index	0,32	0,98	**-1,3**
Urbanisation rate	**-0,31**	2,07	0,52
Percentage of children born to mothers with no more than primary education	-0,4	-1,12	**1,57**

Source: (Lebeda, Lysek, Marek et al. 2022)

In the table above, individual Czech districts are grouped into three main groups using cluster analysis. The districts are grouped so that they are as similar as possible within a given group and as different as possible from the others. The table then shows the average values of the standardized variables (z-score) used to link the particular districts together.

As their name suggests, structurally affected districts are the worst performers in about 80% of the factors compared to the other two groups. This further supports the thesis that socio-economic status and where a child is born has a direct impact on their academic performance.

Main government tools for helping underachievers

In the Czech reality, support for the weakest schools/pupils mainly takes the form of subsidy programmes in which schools can participate. These programmes are mainly aimed at integrating children with social, economic or cultural disadvantages. Every year, for example, subsidies are announced for the greater integration of Roma children, greater cooperation between their families and schools, or their preparation for further studies at university. The Roma minority is the main focus of the subsidy calls because their population makes up the majority in more than half of the Czech Republic's excluded localities. (Swart, Andrys, Pražáková, & Folwarczný, 2020)

In an effort to promote equal opportunities for all pupils, the past decade has seen a push for greater inclusiveness in Czech education. The law defines pupils with special educational needs, which can be in the form of disabilities, health disadvantages or social disadvantages. This should, in the longer term, help to close the gaps in access to education between individual children and thus help children in worse starting points.

Related to this is the development of the phenomenon of teaching assistants who are available in the classroom to the main teacher to help with the studies of pupils with special educational needs in particular. In the 2021/2022 school year, a total of 22 460 such assistants (15 405 FTE) were employed in schools, which would mean that there is such an assistant in every second Czech classroom.

Of course, their distribution is not homogeneous, so there are schools where there is an assistant in every classroom and, conversely, schools where there is none. (Polanská, 2022)

The new Strategy for Education Policy of the Czech Republic 2030+ already specifies how the state will try to help the two most affected regions - Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem. In particular, this will include support in the area of further training for teachers, the involvement of teaching assistants or school psychologists, and cooperation with field-based non-profit organisations. The state will also provide financial support, for example, for recent graduates of pedagogical faculties to enter schools in these two regions, or to provide free lunches for low-income families. Unfortunately, there is no mention of facilitating access to the education market for private schools in the new strategy.

How are private schools doing in the Czech Republic?

Competition to state education is growing slowly but surely in the Czech Republic. Private kindergartens and primary schools are no longer the preserve of the richest regions of the Czech Republic, but are gradually appearing here and there in the poorer peripheries. In all Czech regions, however, the demand for private education still far exceeds the supply of schools where children can be placed. The growth of the private sector in the area is mainly hampered by the rigid legal framework of the education system, which makes it impossible to respond quickly and flexibly enough to parental demand.

Although in recent years there has been a great development of private education in the area of kindergartens and primary schools. In 2021, the share of private facilities in the total number of primary schools was about 6.5% and they educated about 3% of the total number of pupils (about 22,000 pupils), which is about double the number in 2015.

It is still the case that the private school system in the Czech Republic is trying to provide an alternative to the public one, mainly in the area of the organisation of teaching. Thus, especially in the past decade, there has been a development of schools that present themselves in an alternative way of teaching, such as Montessori, Waldorf and other types of schools. In terms of funding, private schools in the Czech Republic differ essentially only in their founder, but they receive virtually the same subsidies per pupil as public schools. In contrast to public schools, however, as elsewhere in the world, they offer benefits that have long outstripped the demand for their services. These benefits include a different organisation of teaching or smaller classrooms where the child receives more attention.

Most private schools are concentrated in large cities or in wealthier regions such as Prague or the Central Bohemian Region. If we focus, for example, on the Ústí nad Karlovy Vary Region, we find that there are only 7 private primary schools in total. At present, the Czech Republic is not known to have any schools specifically targeting education in structurally disadvantaged regions. A problematic factor for the establishment of schools is mainly the sanitary and administrative requirements of the state, which do not allow the market to respond flexibly to the increased demand for private education.

Due to the complexity of the process of establishing a new school, for example, non-profit organisations have to substitute the role of schools in the field of leisure activities. In many towns and cities, or excluded parts of towns and cities, they organise leisure activities for children with low socio-economic status, or even set up 'low-threshold clubs' where children can attend after school.

3.3   Centralized Education and Its Consequences in Hungary

Hungary is a country where the issue of education has been at the forefront of political and societal discourse recently, as teachers (and their students) have been protesting and going on strike for over a year at the time of writing, mostly due to unfavorable working conditions, offensively low salaries, and a centralized and ineffective education system. After 2010, there was a shifting paradigm in Hungarian education policy, starting with taking schools from municipalities and centralizing control and funding on a governmental level, in the form of the KLIK agency. This created immense administrative burden and slowed decision-making, among other problems. At the same time, a new employment scheme was introduced for educators, which has been criticized ever since. This is beyond the scope of the current paper but is an important detail that help in understanding the current situation.

Most recently, there was upheaval related to a new proposal from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (where education policy belongs to as the former Ministry of Education was dismantled during the 2010 regime change) that would change teachers' evaluation protocol to a new system which was deemed "tyrannical" and akin to police surveillance by educator interest groups. In a country where education is both heavily restricted and critically underfunded, such as Hungary, the problem of underachievers would undoubtedly rise. Education policy is considered to be a weak point of Hungarian governance not just in the past 13 years, but even before. There was little improvement in education performance throughout the 2000s, and since after the 2010 regime change, performance entered a downward spiral, and all data confirms this.

One of the most recognized indicators of education performance is the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) score, which measures, among other things, 15-year-old students' skills in reading, mathematics, and science. In the case of Hungary, we see a constant decrease in all three categories since the 2010 regime change after having improved constantly between 2000 and 2009.[32] Moreover, there is a clear decrease not only in the competence, but also the subjective well-being of pupils.[33] While the reasons behind this decline are complex, the way education funding changed definitely has something to do with it. Looking at the data of the Hungarian Central Statistics Office, it's visible that education spending increased in the first half of the 2000s (5% of the GDP in 2001, peaked at 5,7% in 2003) but decreased constantly and dramatically after 2009, and was as low as 3,5% of the GDP in 2021,[34] which is baffling considering that at the same time education was centralized on the government level which would normally mean increased government spending in this sector. It is no coincidence that Hungary's PISA scores worsened or that the number of underachievers grew. The following pages examine the situation of education in Hungary, specifically, the problem of underachievers and the possibilities of private education.

Underachievers

The problem of underachievers is a serious one in Hungary. Going back to the PISA results, we can see that the ratio of underachievers is significantly higher than the OECD average.[35] Hungary also has above-average school segregation and gender disparity in student performance.[36]

The issue is that Hungarian public education puts those affected in a very perplexing situation.

Given the fact that speech therapists and remedial teachers are now a scarce profession in Hungarian public

education, the system is unable to provide meaningful help to students with any kind of learning difficulty, who thus acquire an irrecoverable disadvantage compared to others, which makes their integration difficulties more and more permanent in addition to their learning difficulties at school. There is an almost total lack of institutions that can offer affordable help to children and families with an increasing number of learning difficulties. Hungarian teacher training has essentially omitted to prepare teachers and educators in general to recognize and integrate children with learning and educational problems.

The current government has lowered the compulsory schooling age from 18 to 16 years, so it is precisely the most disadvantaged pupils who fall out of the already weak protective wings of the education system before their time, and tens of thousands of pupils have no chance of finding a job in the labor market and preparing for lifelong learning. This draconian step backwards, unprecedented in European educational practice, deprives children from the most disadvantaged families of the chance to break out and catch up.

Centralized education (based on the so-called National Curriculum) ignores individual needs, interests and abilities. The increasingly centralized and outdated content regulation essentially makes it impossible for schools and educators to choose their own paths, to provide education tailored to the actual needs of specific groups of children. The government, by forcing vocational training, early career choice and an outdated and increasingly ideology-induced curricula, leaves no time or space for modernizing the content of schools and adapting them to the needs of the 21st century.

Similarly to other CEE countries, the issue of underachievers and school segregation is closely tied to minorities, specifically the Roma population. On paper, there is a Roma strategy, which includes efforts to end segregation in schools, and a range of measures to encourage parents to ensure that their children attend school, but the government has no remedy for the fundamental problems:

A shortage of specialists, a change of approach, individualized teaching and meaningful catch-up. Nor do the institutional, financial, and professional conditions for integration exist. The government's education policy leaves families in need of help on their own, and the state school network is left without the means to deal with such cases. As a growing element of segregation, there is a widening range of financially better-off church schools, mainly in the area of grammar schools accessible to the elite, and an emerging network of private schools, often in the form of international schools, affordable almost only to the wealthiest. It is a common observation that over the years, especially since 2010 when church schools became significantly wealthier than state schools thanks to the forming of the Christian-in-name government of Viktor Orbán, there is a trend that slowly but steadily, in any region that has a state owned and a church school, especially in the Eastern parts of Hungary, non-Roma kids end up in church schools where there's better equipment, infrastructure and sufficient staffing, while Roma children are left in state schools that receive insufficient funding.

Private schooling in Hungary

In Hungary, the status of private schools is special thanks to government practice over the past 13 years: private schools are now the „way out" for all those who can afford it. This is why the over-enrolment rate is extremely high, and why many parents make financial sacrifices beyond their means in order to send their children to private schools.

One reason is that private schools are child-centered, another is that they are more welcoming, and thirdly, they focus on output expectations and try to help children develop their talents and skills according to their individual needs. These schools are no longer accessible to the middle class, and the government is doing its utmost to make their situation more difficult and to limit their number. The number of children in these schools is insignificant, 2-3%, even though there is a demand for them (even with almost unaffordable fees, the small number of private schools have to cope with over-enrolment many times over). The escape route for the middle classes is the much better funded church schools - now over 10% of the age groups concerned attend such schools, depending on type of school[37] - which are much better funded than state schools. A particular feature of the Hungarian school system is that this extra funding and therefore the special status of church schools is provided by the state budget at the expense of state-run schools. There is therefore a central political will to ensure that the so-called middle class finds a privileged place for itself in the schools maintained by the churches, a slightly better school.

Although this is beneficial for private schools -- considering that the demand far outweighs the supply due to the near-impossible criteria of founding new "alternative schools" that deviate from the National Curriculum -- the real solution would be the modernization of public education from a European, liberal perspective. As long as the government near forbids any education practices that could truly make a difference in integrating underachievers with specialized education, not to mention providing the sufficient funding or creating optimal market environments that would make it possible for schools to at least partially fend for themselves, or municipalities to maintain schools as part of settlement infrastructure, hope for improvement is quite dim.

3.4   The Problem of underachievers in Slovakia

Slovakia is a country where there has long been a problem with underachievement rate in reading, mathematics and science. According to the PISA testing, up to 30% of pupils achieve poor results (below level 2) in reading literacy, 25 % in mathematics, and almost 30 % in science. This is all well above the EU average.[38]

Thanks to the national Testing 5 and 9 in Slovak language and mathematics, we can now identify the schools with the worst results in Slovakia. Specifically, we looked at the 50 schools that achieved the worst results in Slovak language in Testing 5 in the 2019/2020 school year (for the 2020/2021 school year, Testing 5 was not held due to the pandemic, and for the next school year 2021/2022, the results are not yet processed on Skoly.Ineko.sk).

In the evaluation we focused on the three regions with the worst results: the Košice, Prešov and Banská Bystrica regions. These are the regions with a high proportion of pupils (between 12 and 18%) who performed very poorly in the test (below 20%), i.e. pupils who do not even reach the basic level of literacy.[39]

The average results of Testing 5 for the whole of Slovakia were 64.8% in Slovak language and 63.4% in mathematics. Pupils in the identified 50 schools performed significantly worse. On average, they scored 23.8% in Slovak language and 20.2% in mathematics. When interpreting the results, it should be noted that pupils could choose the correct answer from four options. Thus, even a pupil who does not know the correct answers and chooses randomly should achieve a result of 25%. Thus, we can assume that pupils in the identified schools did not know the correct answers even for the part of the answers that they marked correctly.

The 50 worst-performing schools educate 20 thousand children under the guidance of 1 500 teachers. These children typically spend between 9 and 11 years of their lives in schools, representing more than 10 thousand hours of teaching. In total, their education costs approximately EUR 16.5 million a year. The result of all this investment of children's time, adult effort and state funding is that the vast majority of these pupils leave school without having acquired even a basic level of literacy. They cannot read, write or do arithmetic.

Characteristics of identified schools

Based on the available data, it is possible to describe in more detail how the 50 identified schools function and what are their potential weaknesses and strengths. Let's start with the areas that are unlikely to represent the main weaknesses of the identified schools.

Thanks to the available data from the Slovak Information Centre (CVTI), we know that they do not lag behind in the proportion of teachers regularly using digital technologies in their teaching. In the 50 worst schools, 97% of teachers use digital technologies, compared to the average for the whole of Slovakia of 96%. While these statistics say nothing about the effectiveness and quality of the use of digital technologies, they do say something about the availability of these technologies in schools. Digital technologies have become part of the classroom even in the schools with the worst pupil results.

The number of pupils per teacher is slightly higher in the identified schools than in the remaining schools. On average, there are approximately 12.4 pupils per teacher in Slovak primary schools and 13.2 pupils per teacher in the identified schools.

The average salary of teachers employed in the identified schools was EUR 1 478 in 2021, while the average salary of a teacher in the Slovak Republic was EUR 1 522 in that year. They therefore have only a slightly lower average wage. The qualification quotient of teachers in the identified schools is slightly higher (1.16) than the average qualification quotient in the Slovak Republic (1.1). Thus, there is no problem of unqualified or significantly lower paid teachers in the worst performing schools.

Table 2. : Characteristics of average and identified schools

	Digital technologies	Number of pupils per teacher	Average teacher salary	Qualification coefficient
Average school in Slovakia	96 %	12,4	1 522 €	1,1
Identified schools	97 %	13,2	1 478 €	1,16

Source: CVTI, MŠVVŠ SR, INEKO

30 of the 50 identified schools have not been inspected (since 2010) by the State School Inspectorate (SSI). Apparently, such extremely poor results of these schools do not represent a serious problem worthy of immediate solution in the eyes of the current regulator and authorizer of primary schools (the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic). The remaining 20 identified schools inspected by the SIC did not achieve any significant negative rating. For the year 2021, according to INEKO's calculations, primary schools in Slovakia achieved the following results on average on the basis of the SSI inspection:

Table 3. : School evaluations by the State School Inspectorate

	School management	Educational and training conditions	Educational process
SR average	79 %	84 %	70 %
Average in identified schools	69 %	69 %	65 %

Source: INEKO

The results of the inspections carried out were calculated on the INEKO portal on a scale of 0% to 100%, with a higher value representing a better result.

In terms of the reform described above, the most important specific characteristic of the identified schools is their size. In Slovakia, the average number of pupils per school is 158, and about half of the schools are small schools with up to 150 pupils. In contrast, the schools we have identified are relatively large with an average pupil population of 413. This also implies the size of the average school budget in Slovakia, which is 142 thousand euros, while the average budget of the identified school is 328 thousand euros, more than double. This high number of pupils and budget creates room for sufficient economies of scale and the successful application of organisational and management practices used by many relatively large autonomous schools abroad.

Table 4. : Size of schools in Slovakia

	Number of pupils in the school	School budget
SR average	158	141 986 €
Average in identified schools	413	328 367 €

Source: CVTI, MŠVVŠ SR, INEKO

The high representation of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (SDB) is also an important factor when analysing the characteristics of the identified schools. These pupils perform significantly worse than pupils from non-disadvantaged backgrounds in Slovakia. The average success rate of pupils without a disadvantage in the 2019/2020 Testing 5 in the Slovak language was 66.4%, while the average success rate of pupils with a disadvantage was 24.4%. In the 50 schools identified, the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is approximately half (52%).

However, it should be stressed here that the mere fact that a pupil is from a SDB background cannot be an excuse for a completely failing education system. To assume otherwise would be to resign oneself to the possibility of teaching these 10 000 children at least basic literacy skills. Yet it is these children from SBD for whose future the availability of a quality school is crucial, as we cannot expect a stimulating environment in their home environment. Today's system views the failure of these children as their failure (they have not mastered the demands placed on them by school'). But this is an approach that is only possible in the public sector - where when the service doesn't work, you blame the customer.

Moreover, the identified schools are attended by about half of the non-SDB children and the data do not indicate that they perform significantly better than their non-SDB classmates. Thus, the identified schools are unable to teach basic literacy skills to even thousands of non-SDB children.

Based on the characteristics of the identified schools described above, it can be argued that these schools are somehow not significantly lagging behind in terms of educational inputs (use of digital learning, salaries, qualifications and number of teachers). On the contrary, the identified schools are well placed to apply innovative school management and organisation practices that require a sufficient school size and overall budget. However, these innovative practices known from abroad are difficult to put into practice by „push reforms" and simple re-writing and retraining. They require new school leadership by active people with vision who can bring about systemic change in schools. And the reform outlined above of establishing autonomous schools with accountability for results and taking over low-quality schools that have been failing for a long time makes just that possible.

Current policies to help SDB children

Measures to support the pre-primary education of SDB children primarily target children living in households receiving material assistance and children living at home, whose income is below the minimum subsistence level. Support instruments include fee waivers for kindergarten fees, subsidies for meals and, for pre-school children, subsidies for school equipment.

Measures to support the primary and lower secondary education of SDB children includes expenditure on the zero year - preK year - (5 million euro), a contribution to improving the quality of conditions for the education and training of SDB pupils (6.2 million euro) and development projects for SDB pupils (45 thousand euro).

These measures are inadequate and do not address the large problems and educational gaps of SDB pupils. These measures typically focus on the input side of education. This means better access to kindergarten, additional grades, free lunches and supplies. However, this does not address the complex educational problems faced by SBD pupils. This requires reform that can bring about a significantly different learning environment that takes into account the relatively low cultural capital of these children.

3.5 Towars a Better and More Competetive Educational System in Poland

The educational system in Poland in the context of the PISA research results

The last PISA research with fully known results was conducted in 2018. Overall, the results of Polish pupils where statistically satisfying in comparison to many other countries.

In the reading comprehension category, only 12% of all pupils in Poland were placed on two worst levels (5 and 6). The percentage of students achieving the lowest results in 2018 in Poland was very similar to that in 2015. Currently, every seventh 15-year-old in the country has not mastered reading comprehension to a degree sufficient to freely use written sources. It is worth noting that, in 2000, almost every fourth student in Poland fell into this category (at that time, the percentage was 23%).

Subsequent editions of the study showed that the percentage of youngsters with the lowest skill levels was steadily decreasing. Since 2009, it has been less than 15%. An increase in the percentage of students achieving the highest results was also noticeable: in 2000, it was only 6%, whereas in subsequent editions of the survey, this percentage ranged from 8% to 12%; moreover, in none of the survey cycles did it fall below this level.[40]

In terms of the mathematics category, 16% of pupils were placed in two weakest categories (in comparison to the 10% OECD average). However, in the European Union only Denmark and Estonia have better results. 15% of pupils were placed in two strongest categories in comparison to 23% OECD average. However, in the European Union, only the Netherlands – with the result of 18.4% – ranked better than Poland.

In terms of the natural sciences, pupils with the lowest results are: 13.8% of students in Poland and 22% in the OECD. The highest results were achieved by a total of 9.3% in Poland, whereas 6.8% of students reached level 5 and 6, respectively. One of the objectives of European cooperation in the field of education is to take action to reduce the percentage of students with the lowest achievement to less than 15% by 2020. Only four countries have achieved this goal – including Poland. In terms of the percentage of students with very high results, Poland also achieved a high position. It was ranked 6th, and apart from Estonia and Finland, it was also ahead of the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

It has to be emphasized that the last PISA results, from 2018, did not examine the impact of the mid-2017 educational reform in Poland and the liquidation of four-year lower secondary schools (gimnazjum). The former system with four-year lower secondary schools meant that students functioned in groups with different levels of knowledge and skills for one year longer than after the reform. Six years of the primary school, then four years of the lower secondary school, followed by three years of the secondary school before the reform was substituted by eight years of the primary school and four years of the secondary school.

It is interesting to see how this change may affect the next PISA results. It is expected that the number of underachievers as well as number of the best pupils may grow. Lower secondary schools were designed to help underachievers, but they seem to have created obstacles for development of most talented individuals. The announcement of the results of the 2022 study will take place at the end of 2023.

However, good results in the PISA testing should not be the only indicator used for measuring the Polish educational system, which faces a number of different issues and challenges. Polish graduates still often have problems with innovation, creativity, and teamwork.

Systemic problems of the Polish schools

There are numerous systemic problems in Polish schools. Among them one should mention:

1) Low level of digitalization;

2) Obsolete core curricula, which do not pay enough attention to building teamwork skills and prioritizing memorization of a huge amount of knowledge instead of teaching to look for information and use it in practice;

3) Low salaries of teachers that do not attract a sufficient number of valuable staff. A beginner teacher at the beginning of 2023 earned only the minimum wage;

4) Teachers' salaries depend on the teacher's charter and not on the assessment of the head of the school. The headmaster has very limited tools to reward financially a 'good' teacher for their work and engagement. The remuneration system functions independently of teaching methods and results;

5) The power of trade unions to block the deregulation and liquidation of the teacher's charter, which provides teachers with a small hourly range to receive the wage and binds the headmasters;

6) Overwhelming bureaucracy: teachers are obliged to spend time on various unnecessary bureaucratic duties;

7) The role of catholic priests and religion lessons in schools. These lessons are often conducted in the spirit of contradiction to the principles of science. The scale of financing the Church by the state through religion lessons in public schools is very significant.

Schools in Poland should definitely be subsidized both from the state budget and thanks to deregulation and giving the possibility of obtaining other sources of financing also by public schools.

Centralization and ideological revolution by Law and Justice

Over the last years, the debate concerning education in Poland subject of strong political controversy. On the one hand, numerous bad system solutions that have been operating for a decade are damaging the education system. On the other hand, the school became the subject of an ideological offensive by the Law and Justice government. Especially, since Minister of Education Przemysław Czarnek took over the office, the government has been trying to change the core curriculum in schools to one that is close to an extremely conservative vision of the state and society.

Another goal is also to centralize and effort to maximize government control over schools. The scope of the planned changes was so controversial that it was partly vetoed twice by President Andrzej Duda (interestingly, Law and Justice is his mother party).

So far, the Ministry of Education has already introduced or is currently pushing for, for example:

- the introduction of a new subject: "history and society", with the core curriculum telling visions of history dominated by the narrative of the ruling party (introduced),

- changes in the canon of reading (introduced),

- increasing the role of probation officers, a supervisory body appointed directly by the ministry over headmasters , who – until now – have also been dependent on local authorities (partly – introduced),

- limiting the possibility of teaching children at home (planned, vetoed),

- limiting the possibility of activities of non-governmental organizations in schools and organizing additional activities (partly introduced).

The paradox of this approach is, in turn, accelerating the process of escaping to private schools.

In September 2022 (school year 2022/2023), there were 254,604 children and youth in non-public schools (primary schools and general secondary schools), which accounted for 6.2% of all students at these schools – of which there were over 4 million (4,099,060).

In turn, in September 2013 (school year 2013/2014), 133,225 children and youth attended non-public schools (primary schools, junior high schools, and high schools), which accounted for 3.5% of all students – of which there were over 3.8 million (3,823,776).

In the 2022/2023 school year, almost twice as many students (an increase of 91%) attended private schools when compared to the 2013/2014 school year.

Private schools accounted for 13.4% of all schools in September 2022, and in September 2013 – 9.3%. Between the school year 2013/2014 and 2022/2023, the number of students in non-public general secondary schools more than tripled (an increase from 23,243 to 72,265).

The development of private education itself should be considered a positive development that contributed to this recent trend. However, it is important to closely examine the reasons for this state of affairs. Wealthy parents are transferring their children to private schools because of the growing deterioration of public schools in an attempt to protect their children from the ideological offensive of the Law and Justice government.

Moreover, even though private schools are not free from the influence of curricula created by the Ministry of Education, the pressure and burdens tied to recent changes on the central level imposed on private school teachers and headmasters seem lesser to parents. Private schools in Poland often become the schools for the rich that receive the best educational offer.

The consequence of this situation will translate into gradually increasing social differences, oligarchy of society, or blocking the possibility of proper development for many talented students from poorer families who will not be able to secure a place in a private school.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW TO WELCOME EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN 21. CENTURY

In education systems, it has long been the case that if you want to „reform everything", you end up „reforming nothing". That is why the entry of education into the 21st century will have to be gradual and will first have to operate „in parallel" alongside the existing public education system. We, therefore, propose to create an institution called the School District of Autonomous Schools (SDAS). This will implement the school portfolio management model outlined above. That is SDAS will be responsible for:

- Authorizing the entry of new autonomous schools that are willing to embrace freedom in exchange for assuming responsibility for student outcomes.

- Setting a minimum level of pupil achievement.

- Identifying and take over long-standing dysfunctional schools that cannot educate pupils to even basic literacy levels.

- Managing the whole process of setting up and agreeing performance contracts with autonomous schools, reviewing and evaluating their performance over time, and extending or, conversely, cancelling contracts after the agreed period of time.

- Providing support and assistance in replicating the model of successful schools and in taking over failing schools.

The establishment and functioning of the SDAS can be set up according to several models. It can have a nationwide scope and political independence, or it can have a regional scope at the level of the regional government and gain political legitimacy through elections to local governments. It is also common abroad for the leadership of a new school district to be filled by direct appointment by the Ministry of Education on the proposal of experts and civic society members.

Based on the experience abroad, the results in the first authorized schools and the improvement in student achievement in the first schools taken over will be key to the legitimacy and expansion of the SDAS's scope. In the case of positive results, it can be expected that further expansion of schools operating under the SDAS will not only happen through „take-overs and closures" but also through voluntary transition. It will therefore be necessary to set the conditions for such an abandonment of ‚traditional public education' and a transition under the SDASs, where schools will gain autonomy in exchange for a higher degree of accountability.

Based on examples of good practice from abroad, it may be sufficient for two-thirds of the stakeholders (parents of pupils, staff and school management) to sign a petition for the transition of a public school under the SDAS to help it become the new operator of education.

It is important, however, that this democratic transition of public school management under the SDAS not be framed as an admission of failure by the municipal or city founder of public school. It needs to be framed as a natural extension of the benefits of specialization into school governance and management. Just as a municipality or city does not program its own operating system on the computers used in the office, or manufacture its own chairs and desks, so it is natural that some founders will outsource the provision of school management and governance to specialist organizations.

Another advantage of having schools under the SDAS is that it will create a new benchmark of quality for other school founders and their customers. Residents in other municipalities and towns will be able to compare the functioning and performance of their schools with similar schools that have taken over or come under the SDAS. This will give them a better idea and information about the opportunities for quality education, while potentially creating momentum to transition their school to an alternative provider.

Gradually, various other specialized school districts may emerge due to the growing demand. For example, a Montessori School District, a Democratic School District, or a „No Excuses" School District. The opportunity to create these districts will be given to well-respected individuals and practitioners in the professional community who have been able to create a successful school district and there is interest in replicating it in other schools.

These new districts will also be required to achieve the basic levels of student literacy required of all schools, but beyond that, they will be able to set their own performance contracts (charters) that will be specific to different school models and school districts. This will create de facto different networks of schools that will begin to compete and provide operator services to failing public schools or schools where the principal and local parents have decided to abandon existing operators. This is a development that a number of school districts in the US have gone through where they have implemented a managed school portfolio system.

This expansion and networking has in some cases led to the emergence of large education companies. For example, just four well-known school networks, KIPP, Success Academy, IDEA Public Schools, and Achievement First, now collectively educate more than 230 thousand students in 500 schools. These four educational giants could thus provide education to large share of children in selected counties. In doing so, each of these large networks started as one small school with a few pupils and teachers.

CONCLUSION

The reform proposed in this document does not promise to improve the results of all schools in selected countries by leaps and bounds. It is not a miracle recipe for the whole of education. It is an escape route for children who are neglected by today's education system. And it is a free zone for all active and smart people who have a vision of what education in the 21st century should look like and the will to make it happen.

This is a gradual evolutionary way to trigger an avalanche of benefits with positive feedback through which schools in selected countries can be gradually reformed. Starting with the worst ones.

It is a reform that does not have a predetermined way of what good education should look like. No one knows how the content and form of education, the qualification and professional structure of teachers and their remuneration, the marking of pupils and their time spent in lessons, or the time allocations for subjects in successful schools will change. The only things the SDAS will be interested in are three things: results, results and results.

Will children in poor areas, where the vast majority of them come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, learn to read, write, and do arithmetic well? Yes? Good to know! The school can go on and expand to other schools.

Are these pupils performing poorly and have not even acquired basic literacy? Good to know! The management of a school that doesn't work ends. This means that the SDAS takes it under its wing and transfers the school to the management of another autonomous school or school operator. And they will be given the space to reform the school's processes and improve pupil outcomes.

This is not a bombastic reform that can be announced at a grand press conference. Nothing is being rewritten and no one is promising to change the whole of education. But if a similar reform had been introduced 10 years ago, the worst school in selected countries would certainly look different today. They would have been put in the hands of new people with a new vision and, most importantly, with the determination and opportunity to make a difference. Perhaps half would have failed. But today we would have many schools that are doing what they are supposed to do - educating children effectively. And most importantly, we would have the know-how to help those other half of failed schools. Today, after a decade of trying to change education across the board, we have what? How have the worst schools in the selected country changed over the last decade?

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