

Assessment and recommendations

Education system context

The school system has accomplished significant achievements but quality and equity concerns remain

The school system in the Slovak Republic has accomplished significant achievements. Secondary-school attainment of the adult population (aged 25-64) is the highest within the OECD area. At the same time, upper secondary graduation rates for young people aged 25 or less are among the highest across OECD countries. By contrast, tertiary educational attainment is low by international comparison, although increasing enrolment rates imply the situation is gradually improving. Adults have literacy and numeracy skills around the OECD average but the performance of young adults is poorer by international comparison. Also, the Slovak Republic has a mixed set of student outcomes at the school level. Performance in international assessments indicates some improvement in reading at the primary level, but some significant and growing challenges at the secondary level. School location (urban or rural area) and the socio-economic background of students make a difference in student performance. There are also concerns about strong social selectivity in the school system, including misplacement of some students in special schools. In addition, the poor educational outcomes of the Roma minority remain a major policy challenge.

Significant education reforms were launched, in part to respond to efficiency challenges in the school system

The Slovak Republic has embarked on significant reforms to improve the quality of the education system and is increasingly looking to international standards and best practices. Reform initiatives include the development of new mechanisms of school financing (per capita funding scheme), the definition of student learning objectives in National Education Programmes, further school autonomy with the development of School Education Programmes, the introduction of standardised national assessments, the creation of a career system for teachers and the introduction of a dual system within vocational secondary education. In this context of reforms, there is an apparent desire to increase resources devoted to education (which result from the awareness that spending per student remains markedly lower than the OECD average) as well as the recognition that the sector's efficiency can be improved. This report analyses the use of resources in the Slovak school system, with a particular focus on the organisation of the school network, the funding of school education, the teaching workforce and school leadership. It identifies policy areas with potential efficiency gains or requiring further public investment. The following policy priorities were identified to improve the effectiveness of resource use in the Slovak school system.

Strengths and challenges

Local autonomy is well balanced with adequate accountability

The current distribution of decision-making power in the Slovak state education system involves the three poles of the national, the municipal/regional and the institutional. The schools have acquired relatively great autonomy: all of them now have an elected school board with relatively strong jurisdictions; they are protected from too strong a local control through the funding system (which limits the redistributing power of their founders); they take responsibility for human resource management; and they are also encouraged to adapt the national curriculum to their own specific educational context through school education programmes. At the same time the national Ministry maintains strong regulatory powers. The move towards extended local and institutional autonomy has been paralleled with the creation and strengthening of accountability frameworks. The emerging national system of standardised student achievement measurement and the State Schools Inspectorate are key elements of the latter. In addition, the Slovak Republic has an information system which allows the monitoring of many local and institutional level processes (such as student performance, funding and human resource management) and creates opportunities to assess the impact of national policies and development interventions.

There is consensus on the need to improve efficiency but governance arrangements make efficiency improvement challenging

The policy environment for efforts to improve school resource use seems to be favourable in the Slovak Republic. The quality and efficiency problems of the education system seem to be widely recognised and the need for action, including measures for network rationalisation seem to be shared among stakeholders. A range of efficiency concerns arise from current arrangements for the governance of schooling. The administrative capacities of most self-governments (especially small municipalities) are relatively weak; many of them require active support from the relevant state institutions to take and implement decisions. Furthermore, while effective education provision can only be organised through inter-municipal co-operation which allows the sharing of resources (for example, teaching capacities, special education services or extracurricular facilities), incentives for inter-municipal co-operation are weak. Efficiency challenges are also linked with the relative isolation of subsystems (pre-primary schools; basic schools; upper secondary schools; special needs schools) and the rather rigid boundaries between them. This makes it difficult for subsystems to share resources and also hinders the smooth shift of resources from one subsystem to another when needed and in function of demographic changes, emerging new needs, existing inefficiencies and changing policy priorities. This relative isolation of subsystems seems to be accompanied by the low intensity of communication between the administrative authorities responsible for these subsystems.

Spending on education is relatively low which leads to inadequate teacher salaries and pre-primary provision

Spending is considerably lower than the OECD average at all stages of school education in the Slovak Republic. The relatively low level of spending translates into inadequate spending on teacher and school leader salaries and on learning materials, including textbooks, and failure to meet the demand for pre-primary education places. Teacher salaries in 2012 were the lowest in the OECD in relation to the earnings of fellow

tertiary-educated workers. In the same year, the Slovak Republic was the only OECD country where teachers earned less than half of the remuneration of similarly educated workers. As a result, the teaching profession is not competitive in the labour market, causing difficulties in attracting talented young people to the teaching profession and in keeping those already on the job motivated. However, in recent years, there have been significant efforts on the part of the Slovak government to increase teacher salaries. Salaries were increased by 5% in 2013, 2014 and 2015, reflecting a commitment to bring teacher salaries to more adequate levels. Another consequence of low funding is the inability to meet the demand for pre-primary education places. Although the number of children enrolled at pre-primary schools has increased since 2008 – when pre-primary education became free of charge for one year before the start of compulsory schooling – demand for pre-primary education places exceeds supply. Pre-primary education enrolment remains significantly lower in the Slovak Republic than in other countries of the Central and Eastern European region. This is related to insufficient supply in many municipalities, which take primary responsibility for the provision of pre-primary education.

The funding formula has a range of positive features

The Slovak Republic has a sophisticated and well-embedded system of funding state, church and private schools via a formula, which is largely driven by the number of students, but includes modifying weights to adjust schools' budget revenues to differences in their size and structural costs (i.e. costs that schools cannot affect by their own decisions, such as student taught hours). The formula includes some components aimed at achieving a more equitable distribution of funding in relation to student needs. In addition, the funding system has shown itself to be adaptable. Over the years, the Ministry of Education has adjusted the formula in response to stakeholders' communications of their requirements. There is also extensive collection of data at school level to support the formula calculations.

There is flexibility in the funding system to respond to difficulties schools experience in financing all their costs from the amount allocated by the formula. Founders can redistribute funding between their schools – up to 5% of the salary normative and up to 20% of the operational costs normative. In addition, schools make requests to the founder and via them to the Ministry of Education for financial assistance. The formula provides efficiency incentives as funding depends on the number of students, but this is partially offset by the compensation factor which provides some protection for small schools and is thus sensitive to local needs. The formula funding system enables a high degree of financial autonomy for schools. In the hands of good school leaders, this autonomy gives them the means to make spending decisions that promote school improvement. Finally, the system appears to be highly equitable horizontally in the state sector as municipalities and self-governing regions add very little to basic and secondary school budgets from their own resources. The system is widely accepted and well managed; it needs minor modifications rather than a major overhaul.

Funding is transparent and the scope for misuse of funds is limited but there is a lack of audit capacity

The funding system is transparent. The funding formula is made publicly available. Schools produce quarterly financial reports, which are submitted to the founder. Founders are required to aggregate the economic reports from all their schools and submit these to

the regional state authority (“deconcentrated” state administration), which in turn prepares a summary report for submission to the Ministry of Education. Church and private founders are required to submit economic reports only of the use of public funds (data on private funds spent on educational services, however, are not monitored). Comprehensive audit regulations are in place. Although there are very limited resources at state central or regional level to audit school accounts and schools have infrequent audits from state employed auditors, there are mitigating factors. In particular, municipality auditors audit municipal schools. The small number of schools per founder and the presence of community members on School Boards make for local transparency of school spending. Also, schools have limited possibilities for the misuse of funds as over 80% goes on salaries and schools run on tight budgets for their other needs. Schools and municipalities also publish invoices of their purchases on their websites.

There has been some consolidation of the school network but there is a need to consolidate further

There has been some consolidation of the school network. As the number of students dropped 18.7% (20.4% in the state sector) between 2005 and 2013, the number of schools decreased by 5.4% (8.5% in the state sector) and the number of teachers by 7.8% (10.3% in the state sector). Overall, the decrease of the number of schools and teachers is slower than the decrease of the number of school-age students but it shows some capacity of the decentralised system to adapt to the demographic changes. On balance, the formula has promoted efficiency as it has encouraged some consolidation of state schools since its introduction in 2003. However, while state schools have been consolidated, the number of church and private schools (which typically have smaller classes), has been rising. Furthermore, the compensation component for founders with fewer than 250 students enables small schools to remain within the network. Consequently, over the last decade the average size of schools has decreased. Smaller schools tend to have higher per student costs as fixed costs are spread over fewer students. Small schools generally have small classes which education research has found do not generally boost student attainment except for the youngest and most socially-disadvantaged students.

Also, the high number of small municipalities providing lower secondary education makes the establishment of size-efficiency at this educational level particularly challenging. In light of the projected demographic decrease it is expected that the pressure to consolidate the school network will increase, as well as the pressure on small municipalities to establish co-operation for effective provision of lower secondary education. There are also specific efficiency challenges related to the provision of upper secondary education. Programme-level planning is missing in vocational secondary education and little tracking of graduates is undertaken. In addition, there is little synergy between vocational and general secondary programmes and regional co-operation between vocational providers is weak.

There is growing policy attention to equity in education but little capacity to provide inclusive education

There is a growing awareness of the critical situation faced by social groups particularly hit by social deprivation and poverty, especially regarding the need to make serious efforts to integrate the Roma minority in mainstream education. This results from the recognition that the Slovak education system is among those where the impact of the

socio-economic status of parents on student performance is among the highest. Also a strength in the system is the priority given to the provision of instruction in the language of national minorities, placing equity considerations above efficiency considerations.

However, the equity challenges in the Slovak education system are significant. The integration of the Roma community in mainstream education is limited. Similarly to other Central and Eastern European countries there is a tendency in the Slovak Republic to place a disproportionately high number of Roma children into special needs classes and schools. Although these placements are done on the basis of the decision of an expert panel the outcome of the process is a practice of exclusion that is often criticised by Roma and other civil rights activists. Overall, there is little capacity to provide inclusive education. The limited capacities of schools and teachers to provide integrated education, based on innovative pedagogies supporting teaching in heterogeneous classes, create constraints that push the system towards more structural differentiation (including both early tracking of students to basically different programmes and within-school tracking) and limited inclusion.

The integration of students with special needs in mainstream education remains a major challenge

In the Slovak Republic, a strength in terms of equity is that the funding system encourages individual mainstream schools to integrate students with special educational needs (SEN) through a per capita normative that is higher than for regular students. However, there has been a significant increase of students categorised as having special educational needs following the introduction of the funding premium. This raises concerns about the potential limited transparency of the processes to determine whether or not a student has special educational needs. There are a relatively high number of SEN students in the Slovak Republic as well as a relatively high proportion of those who are educated in a separate setting.

Socio-economic disadvantage and learning difficulties might still lead to attendance of special schools. The tendency to treat children with learning difficulties as children with mental disabilities, that is, “medicalising” the socio-economic disadvantages is often seen by local players as a solution to equity challenges but, on the longer term, these are further amplifying equity challenges. It is expected that the June 2015 amendment to the School Act which limits the attendance of special schools and special classes in mainstream schools to children with a diagnosed medical disability will progressively eliminate the practice of “medicalising” socio-economic disadvantage.

The fact that, while the administration of mainstream schools has been transferred to municipalities and regional self-governments, the system of special education schools has remained under direct state supervision has created a major challenge through disconnecting almost entirely the subsystem of special needs schools from the mainstream systems. This disconnection makes it particularly difficult to develop strategies for inclusive or integrated education which can be realised only through intensive daily interactions between the institutions and the practitioners of special needs schools and mainstream schools. The limited role of special schools’ professionals in improving the capacities of mainstream education to become more inclusive might be a major bottleneck for the promotion of effective inclusion in the Slovak Republic. At the same time, teachers in mainstream schools expressed difficulties coping with the presence of SEN children in their classes.

There is a high degree of school choice but there are also concerns about accreditation processes to enter the school network

The existence of private institutions with access to public funding, the per capita funding system based on the principle of public money following students and the free school choice system have created a quasi-market environment which places the users of services in a powerful position. This is supported by the disclosure of information about schools for parents and students with the intention of making school choice more informed and encouraging competition among institutions. This has encouraged the growth of private involvement in the education system, and increased the diversity of institutions from which innovative pedagogical strategies can be drawn.

However, recent new entry by church and private schools, encouraged by the funding system, has resulted in smaller schools and class sizes and hence a higher cost school system with no evident increase in student learning outcomes. Thus the stimulation of such an active schools market has come at the cost of reduced efficiency, though it has provided parents with a greater choice of different types of school. There are concerns about the transparency of school accreditation and registration decisions and whether these decisions are based on an assessment of need. Also, competition between state and non-state schools is unfair in a number of respects. In particular, private and church schools receive the state school student normative and can charge fees without any reduction in state funding (while state schools cannot).

EU funds create opportunities to improve the efficiency of the school system but implementation has proven challenging

The Slovak Republic is using EU structural funds to modernise its education system. This is a major historical opportunity to achieve not only reforms improving the quality and relevance of education but also to realise the necessary structural adjustments to make the education system more efficient and financially more sustainable. Priority areas are educational infrastructure, vocational education and training, the integration of the Roma community and pre-primary education. However, a major challenge has been the ability to absorb and consume the EU structural and development funds made available to the country. Another challenge is the alignment of EU-funded development interventions with the overall sectoral strategies and a better diffusion of the results of the most successful programmes. These challenges are aggravated by the weak operational and project management capacity, especially when the focus of managing projects should be shifted from achieving short-term output results to making a real longer-term impact.

Local autonomy in managing the teaching workforce is good but the distribution of teachers across schools raises concerns

In the Slovak Republic, there is considerable autonomy in the management of the teaching workforce at the local level. Schools have considerable responsibility for recruiting and dismissing teachers. This is a strength in a system where schools are individually judged on their ability to improve student learning. School leaders also have considerable room to develop the competencies of their teaching bodies in agreement with school development plans. Teacher appraisal processes internal to the school are well established, are led by school directors and have important consequences for the professional development of teachers. This strengthens the ability of school leaders to shape teacher professional competencies to properly respond to the needs of their

educational communities. Also, the autonomy from which schools benefit to allocate their budgets to teacher resources grants them with the ability to select the optimal number and mix of school staff for their schools, including opportunities to hire non-teaching staff to support the work of teachers. However, there are indications of some inequitable distribution of teachers across schools. For example, there are indications that, in schools attended by 15 year-olds, the likelihood of teacher shortages (as perceived by school directors) is considerably higher in both socio-economically disadvantaged schools and in schools located in a rural area. Also, there are indications that the proportion of less experienced teachers is higher in disadvantaged and non-urban schools.

A career structure for teachers exists but teacher certification fails to focus on the core work of teachers

In the Slovak Republic, teachers benefit from a clearly established career structure with four steps associated with a teacher certification process. The existence of a career structure for the most part accomplishes two important functions: the recognition of experience and advanced teaching skills with a formal position and additional compensation; and the potential to better match teachers' skills to the roles and responsibilities needed in schools. These convey the important message that the guiding principle for career advancement is merit and have the benefit of rewarding teachers who choose to remain in the classroom. Given the potential greater variety of roles in schools as the teacher goes up the career ladder, the career structure fosters greater career diversification. Such opportunities for diversification already exist in Slovak schools as with management responsibilities for teachers at schools, developers of professional development activities and mentors of beginning teachers. These are likely to have a positive motivational effect. Another positive feature of the teaching profession is the opportunity for horizontal differentiation. This is formalised in specialised career positions such as class teacher, educational advisor, ICT co-ordinator, Head of Subject Committee or Head of Methodology Association, which are proposed to teachers according to the needs of individual schools. In addition, beginning teachers benefit from a clearly established mentoring programme offering support and additional training as they enter the profession.

However, there are a range of implementation aspects to teacher certification that raise concerns. First, teacher certification is not a competency-based process, i.e. it does not directly assess whether a teacher has acquired the competencies needed to perform at the different stages of the career. Instead, as it is currently designed, teacher certification focusses on the acquisition of qualifications. Second, the certification process is too resource-intensive for individual teachers (preparing an academic paper) and does not concentrate on the core work of teachers (no observation of actual teaching). Third, teacher certification is disconnected from other teacher appraisal processes such as those internal to the school. Fourth, there are no provisions for re-certification, i.e. once certified at a given stage, the teacher remains indefinitely at that stage.

Teacher professional development is well linked to school priorities but participation rates are low

Professional development is well established among Slovak teachers, benefits from a wide supply of programmes offered by a variety of providers, entails the accreditation of individual programmes, involves co-ordination between schools and their founders and benefits from dedicated budgets at schools. Two features are of particular importance and

should be highlighted. First, teacher appraisal is used to identify the professional development needs of individual teachers. This is commendable as development is one of the main functions of teacher appraisal. Second, taking advantage of the fact that schools organise internal processes for teacher appraisal, school leaders define individual professional development plans in alignment with school development plans. While teachers decide on the professional development programmes they undertake, access to programmes free of charge is only granted if these are part of the school's plan for teacher professional development. However, in international comparison, the participation rates in professional development of Slovak teachers appear to be low. There are indications that this might result from the combination of a number of factors such as the little relevance of the supply of professional development programmes, the limited entitlement to free professional development, the predominance of the financial incentive to undertake professional development and an inefficient market for professional development.

There are some challenges to the preparation of teachers

Initial teacher education raises a range of concerns. First, there is some anecdotal evidence indicating that initial teacher education is not attracting the best candidates from school education. Second, a very large proportion of graduates from initial teacher education seems not to actually go into teaching upon graduation. Third, there are concerns about the required minimum qualifications for pre-primary education teachers. The Slovak Republic is the only OECD country where such minimum qualifications are set at the upper secondary level. This is in stark contrast to the requirement of a master's level higher education qualification for teachers at the other levels of school education. There is no reason why quality standards should be lower at pre-primary education given the lasting effects of this level of education on student learning opportunities. Fourth, a number of organisational aspects to the organisation of teacher education programmes are problematic: practical training could be strengthened through both the amount of time devoted to it and the quality of the interactions with schools; and teaching students with special needs and ICT skills for teaching have been identified by Slovak lower secondary teachers as their main needs for professional development, which might potentially indicate some under-emphasis in these areas in teacher education programmes.

There is some lack of transparency in teacher compensation defined at the school level

There are some potential benefits of linking teacher appraisal to the personal allowance teachers receive. It can allow school directors to do proper staff planning and reward, retain and motivate teachers. However, there are concerns about the transparency and subjectivity of the criteria used to determine the individual performance-related extra compensation teachers may receive at the school level. A major reason for the lack of transparency in defining teachers' personal allowance is the absence of a clear framework for appraising the performance of teachers. In addition, there seems to be very little scope for school directors to award performance-related extra payments because of the limited extra money available in their budgets. Therefore, in practice, the personal allowance is used predominantly as an instrument to reward additional tasks and responsibilities.

Mechanisms to heighten the objectivity of school leader selection are in place

There is a transparent procedure for the selection of school leaders. Both the school board and the State Schools Inspectorate (ŠŠI) play a central role in the selection process,

even if the ultimate decision remains the responsibility of the school founder. An inspector from the ŠŠI must be a member of the School Board's selection committee in basic and secondary schools. Slovak school boards have a broad composition with eleven members representing the three major stakeholder groups (founder, school staff and parents/students). This approach is likely to reduce opportunities for "political appointments" by school founders. In addition, school inspectors bring in professionalism and experience. They also heighten objectivity as they bring in a perspective both external to the school founder and to the immediate school community (as represented by the staff, parents and students). The current approach to school leader selection also facilitates a more coherent management of school leaders as the specific group taking the ultimate selection decision (school founder) is also in charge of the other relevant dimensions of human resource management (appraisal, development, career advancement). This should facilitate the alignment between the selection, appraisal and development of school leaders with the founder's educational objectives and financial resources.

School leaders play a key strategic and development role in the school but the position remains unattractive

The school leader is responsible for the overall quality of education services at the school. He or she develops a School Development Plan. The school leader is also responsible for preparing an Annual School Report and this includes a report on progress in implementing the School Development Plan. Compared to other countries, there is a high level of autonomy and responsibility for school leadership in Slovak schools. In the area of school resource management, Slovak school leaders report that a much greater degree of responsibility lies fully with the school, either for the school leader and/or shared with teachers. They benefit from good administrative and management support structures. The majority of school leaders have the support of at least one deputy leader. Typically, schools also employ administrative staff responsible for regular administrative arrangements, including a member of staff with responsibility for administering the school budget. Larger schools have both an "economist" and an "accountant". The economist assumes responsibility for the payroll, planning the school budget for staff salaries and the accountant assumes responsibility for operational costs, planning the school budget for goods and services. School leaders may also benefit from different advisory bodies to support their work (pedagogical board, methodological associations, subject committee). However, the position of "school leader" is perceived as unattractive and compensation is inadequate. The position of "school leader" is rather an extension of "teacher" and does not adequately enjoy a distinct professional status. There is currently not a distinct career structure for Slovak school leaders. A school leader is conceptualised as "a teacher who performs specialised activities" and receives additional salary allowances that correspond to these activities (an allowance for managerial activities).

Capacity for and approach to school leader appraisal varies among school founders

Procedures and criteria used for school leader appraisal vary considerably among different founders. For founders with only a few schools there would be more regular contact with the School Board and parents. Such feedback, in addition to the regular audit of finances, is deemed adequate information to feed into school leader appraisal. For founders with a larger number of schools, procedures may include meeting once or twice a year at each school and/or the use of a standard questionnaire to gather feedback from

school leaders. Different criteria range from a general perception of community satisfaction with the school or an assessment of school progress against goals in the School Development Plan, to a specific set of criteria established by the founder, such as the size of the school and evidence on school performance. Also, the capacity to conduct school leader appraisal varies enormously among different school founders. Some founders may have a specific department with responsibility for schools, but the number of employees will vary and may be only one.

Policy recommendations

Increase overall public spending on education, while addressing key efficiency concerns

The Slovak government should continue efforts to increase the amount spent on school education in real terms and as a percentage of GDP as can be afforded, given general economic conditions and government fiscal policy. Priorities for increased funding are the expansion of pre-primary education and the increase of teacher and school leader salaries. It is also desirable to enable schools to increase both the amount and proportion of school budgets spent on learning materials and equipment. A general increase in the total amount allocated to school budgets would enable schools to spend more on both staff and learning materials/equipment. Given the constraints on increasing the real value of education public expenditure, it is all the more vital to secure efficiencies within the existing education budget, as proposed below by rationalising the school network so as to reduce the number of small schools and small classes.

An expansion of pre-primary education, especially for socially-disadvantaged communities is required. This should involve a reform of the current financing of pre-primary provision, with the ultimate aim that all children aged 3-5 can attend if their parents so wish and no child is prevented from attending because their parents cannot afford the fees. Since pre-primary education is so important in preparing a child for basic education it should become fully funded by the Ministry of Education through appropriate normatives (instead of mostly funded by municipality budgets). Another top priority should be the improvement of teachers' compensation and working conditions. The objective is to improve the status of the teaching profession, attract better candidates to teaching, ensure teacher education graduates enter the profession, make teaching more appealing to males, and ensure teachers have adequate incentives to be effective in their daily practice. This need is well recognised by the Slovak government as shown in recent efforts to improve teachers' salaries. These efforts should be sustained in the years to come, result in the significant improvement of teacher salary conditions, and go alongside efforts to improve working conditions. The latter relate, in part, to efforts to better resource individual schools so they are able to provide better instructional materials to teachers, more relevant professional development for teachers, and better conditions for individual student support.

Further consolidate the school network through co-ordination of education provision

Given the present considerable inefficiencies in the provision of education services (e.g. small schools and classes) and the ongoing demographic changes, the rationalisation of the school network is a clear policy priority. Developing planning capacity, co-ordination mechanisms and inter-municipal collaboration is cornerstone to create a more efficient and equitable school network. School consolidation should be about making optimal

choices to ensure quality education for all children. It is therefore important that the focus is not on savings or a prioritisation of accessibility over quality. The key question in considering school consolidation must therefore be what is in the best interest of students.

In the consolidation of the school network, in particular in small municipalities, the Slovak Republic can consider a number of different strategies. One possibility is to close or consolidate small schools, or reduce services within schools (e.g. a basic school providing only Years 1-4) with due consideration to the costs, feasibility and acceptability of different alternatives such as transporting students and housing them in boarding schools. Another possibility is that nearby schools share resources. Shared resources may include teachers (who would conduct lessons and other activities in more than one school), sport facilities (open to students from all schools participating in the collaboration), computer labs and similar. A further possibility is the clustering of schools, which involves the conversion of several nearby small schools into satellites of one educational institution with a single leadership team and budget.

The management of the school network also requires co-ordination and planning at the regional level. This could be organised through regional planning platforms covering all levels of school education and involving all relevant stakeholders (e.g. municipalities, self-governing regions, regional representatives of the world of work, regional state authorities and also representatives of national authorities) and connected to regional development processes. These could initially be launched on a pilot basis in one or two self-governing regions. The regional planning processes should also encourage more horizontal co-operation between municipalities, especially in the case of those of smaller size. At present, inter-municipal co-operation is not facilitated due to weak regional co-ordination and the strong role of municipalities and school directors, making co-operation for jointly provided educational or connected services very rare. This co-operation could involve the co-management of basic schools across municipalities, improving transportation services and the common use of various facilities, joint purchasing, shared school maintenance, improving the access to professional services, etc.

Create stronger financial incentives for school and class consolidation

Given the international evidence that smaller classes are not value for money, except possibly for young children and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, efficiency would be improved by modifying the funding formula to put further pressure on founders to consolidate schools and classes. To encourage further school consolidation, the Ministry of Education could define an average minimum class size below which a school is not funded from the state budget if the school's average class size remains consistently below the threshold size for a given number of years – for example three years. As an alternative to introducing a minimum class size threshold, further measures could be taken to put financial pressure on founders with small schools and classes by modifying the existing compensation allocation. For example, the existing weighting for founders with fewer than 150 students could be reduced as the number of students decreases rather than remain constant, as at present in the formula.

In addition, the minimum number of students required before a school is approved for inclusion in the network should be raised, for instance to an average class size of 20 for Years 1-9 and 25 for Years 10-13. Maintaining a sufficiently high class size threshold before schools could be included in the network would go some way to address the problem that new entry from the private sector, stimulated by receiving the same per student formula

allocation as state schools, has resulted in reducing average school size and thus the efficiency of the school system. Finally, financial pressure on schools having to split classes to prevent a breach of maximum class size rules would be eased by making maximum class size rules more flexible so that schools have more freedom to decide on their own class and teaching group formations, given their educational objectives and budget constraints. Maximum sizes should be increased and schools allowed to raise them further after obtaining permission from a relevant authority or even abolished altogether.

Expand inclusive education for students with special needs while reviewing their identification

The expansion of effective inclusive education for students with special educational needs (SEN) requires a well-elaborated strategy with two key components. One is encouraging SEN service providers (in SEN schools) to develop a new function of supporting both students with special needs being educated inclusively in mainstream schools and teachers providing inclusive education in these schools. This might involve rethinking the role of special schools, leading special schools' teachers to spend part of their working time in mainstream schools not only directly supporting children but also providing consultancy to class teachers. Turning special schools into methodological centres providing support to mainstream schools is a highly complex process of institutional change, which requires serious adaptive capacities from SEN professionals and schools and it can be implemented only slowly and gradually through pilot development projects based on voluntary participation and through the spreading of successful practices.

The second key component of a strategy for inclusive education is enabling mainstream schools to provide effective inclusive education. This is also a slow and gradual process which, however, can be significantly accelerated by massive and effective capacity building. The practice of inclusive education requires major changes both in the professional competences and the attitudes of mainstream teachers. Only teachers capable of using a rich repertoire of innovative teaching methods and capable of creating learning environments that support personalised teaching and learning can achieve successful inclusive education. This requires a supportive institutional context characterised by an organisational culture which supports diversity and pedagogical innovations. Successful inclusive education can be realised only if massive capacity building in mainstream schools creates new capacities in these institutions and in their teachers to manage effectively classes where students with and without special needs are educated together. Institutions responsible for initial and continuous teacher education, including those providing specialised forms of training linked with specific development interventions should be strongly involved in this process.

At the same time, a rigorous review is needed of teachers', school leaders' and educational psychologists' practices in identifying students for special school attendance or integration to discover to what extent this increase has been driven by the attractions of additional funding and the intention to place socially-disadvantaged children, in particular Roma, in special schools. The Ministry of Education needs to be more proactive in ensuring that assessment for SEN categorisation and hence funding is carried out using consistent criteria and is not motivated by other considerations such as obtaining increased funding or little motivation to include certain students groups in mainstream education.

Give priority to equity objectives and expand the equity components of the funding formula

In light of the low equity performance of the Slovak school system it is essential that the equity dimension remains central in the development of educational policy. For example, all initiatives aimed at improving the efficiency of resource use should give specific attention to the Slovak Republic's strategy for the integration of the Roma community. One of the key components of this strategy is the establishment of relevant indicators and the regular monitoring based on these indicators. In general the principles of the early school leaving strategy of the European Union can be applied in this area, including the combination of measures of prevention, intervention and compensation and the use of macro- and micro-level data to support the evidence-based policy approach. The careful impact analysis of development interventions in this area is particularly important. Also, the government should use VET in general, and work-based learning and recognition of informal learning in particular, to integrate groups at risk, including the Roma, into the labour market. This should be accompanied by the expansion of second-chance education opportunities based on provision of formal certification and on-the-job learning. Also, students from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds should be supported by a maintenance grant to cover some of the expenses of attending school, such as transportation costs, equipment and foregone earnings. This would be contingent on regular school attendance and satisfactory progress.

It is also important that equity remains a key consideration of school network design and planning. There is a need for a continuous monitoring of the equity implications of all restructuring or rationalisation decisions. The specific needs of the socially-disadvantaged groups have to be considered and the implications of rationalisation measures especially for the integration of the Roma minority and the inclusion of students with special education needs have to be carefully analysed. It is proposed that this dimension receives the greatest attention when creating the new institutional frameworks for effective network design and planning with guarantees such as the participation of the representatives of the most vulnerable groups. Some service components, such as the employment of Roma teaching assistants should benefit from special protection when restructuring or rationalising measures are implemented. This should be accompanied with intensive capacity development programmes for mainstream teachers in order to improve their skills to use advanced pedagogical methods enhancing work in heterogeneous student groups and more personalised teaching.

At present, some funding for special educational needs and socially-disadvantaged students in mainstream schools is included in the non-normative budget. It would simplify the funding system and make the formula more comprehensive, including within it all the funds intended for improving vertical equity. Funding could be provided on the basis of indicators of social disadvantage or non-fluency in the language of instruction. Using the formula to allocate funding intended to support equity objectives rather than providing resources in kind, such as teaching assistants, gives schools autonomy in deciding how best to spend the money on supporting disadvantage. Different students in different school contexts benefit from different ways of using the additional funding.

Improve the processes determining public funding eligibility and adjust the public funding of non-state schools

In the decentralised context where the allocation of public funding to private providers and where the contribution of private partners (e.g. parents, employers) to pay for some components of public services is a normal practice, there is an increasing need to establish a high level of transparency. This can be supported by the establishment of quality standards and through various quality evaluation development procedures. The current rules for accrediting schools into the school network or excluding them should gradually be made more flexible so that the nature of these decisions (allocating public funding for services provided by various providers) becomes clearer. Decisions on allocating public funding to education services should increasingly depend on needs analysis and quality assessment. Only services of proven quality should get public funding and only new services whose need has been identified should be allowed to become part of the school network.

Also, the national government should reconsider its policy of providing non-state schools exactly the same amount of money that is spent on students in state schools given that non-state schools are allowed to charge tuition fees. Providing such substantial subsidies to generally wealthier households to opt out of the state school system raises equity issues and over the longer term quality issues by depriving state schools of the input of potentially more engaged parents and students. It also runs against the state's objective of consolidating the system into schools of an effective scale and in this light can be considered counter-productive. Alternatively, non-state schools could receive the same amount of public subsidy as long as they do not charge tuition fees. In such a system, non-state schools would see their public subsidy reduced in proportion to the level of the tuition fees they charge.

Given the freedom for parents to choose a school in the Slovak Republic, it is important that parents, schools and policy makers have fair and reasonably accurate information on the relative performance of schools. Using raw test and examination results to compare schools when making school choice decisions distorts the schools market since schools with advantaged student intakes are inaccurately perceived as more effective than schools with less advantaged intakes. The development and maintenance of a value-added system of assessing school performance and the appropriate dissemination of these measures is required in order to underpin the schools market with fairer and more objective measures of school performance.

Use EU funds to support strategies to improve the efficiency of the school system

The OECD review team recommends a systematic review of the possible uses of EU structural and investment funds, within the framework of the Partnership Agreement between the European Commission and the Slovak Republic for the programming period 2014-20, to support strategies to improve the efficiency of the school system. For example, these funds can be used effectively to create the necessary institutional and human conditions for inclusive education (e.g. to support the adjustment of SEN schools' functions with the development of new methodological service centres providing individual services to mainstream schools which are integrating students with special needs). The use of EU structural and investment funds for supporting the implementation of the strategy of the Slovak Republic for the integration of the Roma community should also remain a priority (e.g. through facilitating access to pre-primary education). In

addition, the EU funds can also be used to support local reorganisations of provision aiming at improving efficiency and at reconciling efficiency and quality goals. In those municipalities where the school population is expected to decrease EU funds can be used, for example, to create appropriate conditions for school transportation.

As school consolidation proceeds, adjust the use of human resources at schools

While there is a need to both ensure the continuous entry of new talent into the teaching profession and to constantly motivate in-service teachers, there is no need to increase the overall size of the teaching workforce. On the contrary, the needed school consolidation is likely to require a certain degree of teacher redundancy. This entails developing strategies for reallocating, redeploying and retiring teachers currently employed in schools which will be affected by school (or class) consolidation. In this context, it is important to note that there are a number of areas in which teachers made redundant by school consolidation could assume new responsibilities. These include engaging them to help mainstream special needs students in regular schools and classes; using them to implement strategies to individually support students who are falling behind; and involving them in advisory roles within or across schools. This could go alongside offering early retirement packages for some teachers who are close to retirement age. Also, the introduction of teaching assistants to support the learning of students with special needs and disadvantaged students is a development that can be expanded. Finally, in order to address the specific instances of shortage that might still occur in rural areas and disadvantaged schools, the introduction of some incentives such as special allowances or in-kind support is recommended. This should be complemented with the monitoring of the equitable distribution of teacher resources across schools.

Simplify the teacher certification process and maintain a focus on school-based teacher appraisal

The teacher certification process should remain as the component of teacher appraisal predominantly dedicated to accountability but needs to be simplified and brought closer to teaching practice. This process should be associated with the existing career structure, allowing for progression within the career path as well as providing access to different specialisations and positions. The appraisal for certification should be founded on the national framework for teaching standards, describing teacher competencies at the different stages of the career. Also, instruments used in teacher appraisal need to capture the quality of teachers' practices in the classroom, namely classroom observation and teacher portfolios providing evidence of teachers' work. Each permanent teacher should undergo periodically (e.g. every four years) a formal appraisal for certification, or re-certification. The purpose would be to confirm the teachers as fit for the profession. Also, the emphasis on school-based teacher appraisal which is predominantly for teacher development should be maintained and strengthened. The introduction of teaching standards will bring the necessary reference to guide teachers through their development and will better link school-based teacher appraisal to other aspects of teacher policy such as appraisal for certification, career advancement and professional development. This approach to teacher certification would associate good performance to career progression, also possibly linking performance to the speed of salary step progression within career stages. This ensures teachers have a monetary incentive to achieve good performance. As a result, the possible use of pay bonuses for good performance at the school level (through the teacher's personal allowance) might be redundant as a monetary incentive.

Improve the framework for professional development provision

Professional development needs to become a more regular practice among teachers in the Slovak Republic, with a greater diversity of relevant offerings, driven by teachers' aspirations for professional growth and adequately resourced. A number of options are recommended. First, professional development should be understood by teachers as the main instrument to acquire the new competencies necessary for professional growth and career advancement. It is therefore suggested that the direct link between professional development and a salary allowance is eliminated to avoid the phenomenon of "credit chasing". Second, suppliers of professional development programmes need to better connect to the professional development needs identified through school-level professional development plans. This suggests a range of possible actions: better interaction between professional development providers and individual schools; an assessment on the part of an organisation such as the State Schools Inspectorate of the professional development needs of teachers; or strategies to directly survey teachers about their professional development needs. Finally, given that there is a significant degree of dissatisfaction with the current provision for professional development, it would be helpful to review the framework for funding and provision. A possible approach is to open a market for professional development provision while providing individual schools with earmarked funds for professional development or give each teacher a personal allowance which could be spent over several years. In this situation, schools could freely choose the training and provider most suited to meet their professional development needs. This would also require the strengthening of the accreditation system, making sure accreditation processes are effective and take into account the observed quality and relevance of programmes. This approach would also benefit from an improved eligibility for paid professional development for individual teachers.

Improve the provision of initial teacher education

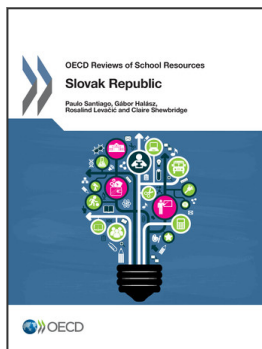
Overall, the Slovak Republic is not facing teacher shortages. This is an opportunity to be more selective about those who enter the profession and initial teacher education. If salaries are increased, as suggested above, and better candidates are attracted to initial teacher education, it is clear that entry into preparation programmes can be much more selective to ensure only high-quality graduates fill the available teaching posts. Potentially useful initiatives include: providing more information and counselling to prospective teacher trainees; procedures that try to assess whether the individuals wanting to become teachers have the necessary motivation, skills, knowledge and personal qualities; incentive schemes to recruit candidates with high-level competencies; and flexible programme structures that provide students with school experience early in the course. Also, a higher education qualification should become the minimum requirement for entering the teaching profession at pre-primary education level. There is no reason why qualification requirements for pre-primary education teachers should be lower than those for teachers at other school levels. Furthermore, the role of field experiences in schools as part of teacher education programmes could be reinforced. Finally, in light of efforts to integrate students with special needs in mainstream schools, initial teacher education programmes need to strengthen their preparation of teachers to respond to this increasing need in schools.

Make the school leader position more attractive and underline the importance of distributed leadership

The Slovak Republic is faced with the challenge of attracting new talent to prepare for and eventually take up school leader positions. There is a clear need to make the school leadership position more attractive and this requires re-thinking of the school leader career and finding ways to make leadership positions more financially attractive. Steps in making the profession more attractive may include: a distinct career structure for school leadership (linking career progression to specific leadership responsibilities as underpinned in school leader professional standards); an independent salary scale for school leadership; greater flexibility in teaching hour requirements; and appraisal results to inform career advancement. Also, given the diversity and complexity of conflicting demands on school leaders' time, there are pressing needs to effectively share management responsibilities. This requires policy to underline the importance of distributed leadership.

Support a more coherent approach to school leader appraisal and strengthen the input of the School Board

There is a need to establish a more coherent approach to school leader appraisal so practices across schools become more consistent. An important first step is to use a central reference such as the existing professional standards. This is likely to increase the objectivity of appraisal procedures. There is also a need to emphasise the developmental purpose of appraisal and to ensure that it does not introduce excessive demands on school leaders' time. The challenge is to develop appraisal processes, frameworks and conditions that do not require an excessive investment of time and effort, that serve as an effective tool for improving practices and that are perceived as useful and relevant by school leaders. An important step in this is developing capacity among school founders to undertake school leader appraisal. The inspection framework includes a set of quality indicators to evaluate "school management" which could serve as a basis for founders to undertake annual school leader appraisal. Also, a discussion of documents such as school annual reports and development plans could be part of school leader appraisal. Finally, in light of its involvement in school leader selection, and with the objective of reinforcing the alignment between the selection, appraisal and development of school leaders, there is room to strengthen the role of the school board in school leader appraisal. The school board could conduct an annual interview with the school leader, analyse student outcomes at the school and review school leadership processes.



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