

Conclusions and recommendations

School system context

A highly selective and predominantly public school system with established examinations

Children in the Slovak Republic must complete 10 years of schooling and the majority attend public schools, but they may be enrolled in different school types according to their interests and academic ability. Regional and municipal authorities exert a direct influence over public schools as their organising bodies (“school founders”). Children may transfer to an academically selective school (a *gymnázium*) at the start of Year 6 (age 11), Year 9 (age 14) or Year 10 (age 15). National examinations at the end of upper secondary schooling (*Maturita*) certify student achievement with a view to higher education access. Since 2009, there is a full-cohort national summative assessment in Year 9 (*Testovanie 9*) in the Slovak language and literature, as well as, where applicable, in the major language of instruction (Hungarian or Ukrainian), and in mathematics. A new national summative assessment in Year 5 is expected to be introduced in 2014/15.

Academic success is strongly associated with future economic success, but a large proportion of children underperform

There are major economic incentives for individuals to pursue education. In international comparison, the reduced risk of unemployment for Slovak men and women with upper secondary education is particularly strong, and there are considerable benefits to attaining upper secondary education. Student performance in international assessments indicates some improvement in reading at the primary level, but some significant and growing challenges at the secondary level. In PISA 2012, 27.5% of 15-year-old students demonstrated low levels of mathematics proficiency compared to 23.1% on average in the OECD. In fact, a significant increase in the proportion of low performing students in mathematics has driven the deterioration in mathematics performance since PISA 2003. The Slovak State Schools Inspectorate (ŠŠI) has indicated quality concerns among teachers in their professional ability to develop students’ higher-order thinking skills and there is some evidence from international assessments to support this.

The Slovak school system is highly inequitable

There are considerable equity challenges in the Slovak school system: student performance differences across socio-economic groups are greater than on average in the OECD; school performance differences are greater than on average in the OECD and are explained to a greater extent by student and school socio-economic characteristics; educational differences between rural areas and cities are significant; educational outcomes of the Roma minority are particularly poor and a high concentration of these

children are in schools providing special education. Regional disparities are more pronounced in the Slovak Republic than in other OECD countries, with a particularly high concentration of poor households in the Eastern regions.

A major reform to curriculum content, greater pedagogical freedom and a teacher salary system

In a major reform, the School Act (2008) set the framework conditions for the content of education, but introduced greater pedagogical autonomy with schools responsible for staffing and curriculum. It also established more rights for children, including access to a free year of preschool immediately before primary education starts, free choice of schooling in a public, Church or private school, and a ban on the use of corporal punishment in schools. The national education programmes define the core content to be taught, specifying competencies and “cognitive competencies” in different content areas, and each school develops a school education programme – the ŠŠI has inspected these in many schools. The *Maturita* and the *Testovanie 9* have progressively adapted to better assess competencies listed in the national education programmes. The Act on Pedagogical Employees and Specialist Employees (2009) guarantees teachers the freedom to choose pedagogical methods and teaching approaches, and has created a salary system based on teachers’ qualifications, plus a bonus system based on performance or credits gained from attending professional development training.

Strengths and challenges

Evaluation and assessment enjoys broad political support, but lacks strategic oversight

Since 2001, there has been a commitment to implementing a series of reforms that follow the basic strategic points outlined in the long term education strategy “Millennium”. Such commitment reflects the support from all political parties for the important role of evaluation and assessment activities in schooling. In particular, since 2008 the Slovak Republic has introduced serious innovations in the intended curriculum, central assessment activities and the level of autonomy for teachers and schools in pedagogy and assessment activities. However, there are concerns with the implementation of the competency-based curriculum, from the specification and refinement of content and minimum performance standards, to the alignment of national examinations and the daily instructional activities against these. The OECD review team noted concerns with a lack of consensus or clarity in the national education programmes, and a lack of central tools and guidelines for schools to support the development of the school education programme and its effective implementation in regular teaching activities. The duplication of efforts to promote evaluation and assessment activities also poses a challenge. The OECD review team noted concerns with the existence of different standards and criteria for teacher appraisal that had been developed at different times by different bodies. Also, there is no clear national programme of innovation or dissemination for the promotion of school self-evaluation, but rather several different and apparently disjointed initiatives. This runs the risk of compromising efforts in terms of energy and money invested in the individual projects against their potential impact and, importantly, may damage the willingness of schools to participate in these efforts if they perceive conflicting messages and approaches being promoted by the different projects.

There are some efforts to build capacity for evaluation and assessment, but these need to be sustained and strengthened

At the time of the OECD review, the Ministry could draw on the specialised capacity of four major bodies, the National Institute for Certified Educational Measurement (NÚCEM), the Slovak State Schools Inspectorate (ŠŠI), the Methodology and Pedagogy Centre (MPC) and the Institute for Information and Prognoses of Education (ÚIPŠ) to support evaluation and assessment activities in the school system. Since early 2014, the ÚIPŠ has been merged with the Centre of Scientific and Technical Information of the Slovak Republic (CVTI SR). The existence of specialised national bodies signals the importance of robust and objective evaluation and assessment activities. Notably, by establishing the NÚCEM as an independent agency, the Slovak Republic significantly increased its capacity to ensure reliable student examinations and generate information for system monitoring. The ŠŠI has systems in place to improve its own service and capacity (including good international cooperation), but new responsibilities have compromised its capacity to deliver the regular cycle of complex school inspections. There is as yet inadequate analytical and research capacity centrally to fully exploit the results from evaluation and assessment. A clear strength in the traditional Slovak approach is the support to build capacity of beginning teachers. Typically, the MPC coordinates with schools to support these induction programmes and also offers professional development for school leaders and deputy leaders. However, several stakeholders identified the need to increase the MPC's capacity to provide professional development, both in terms of the quantity and quality offered.

A legal framework underpins evaluation and assessment activities, but the dominant purpose of these is compliance, not improvement

Educational laws over recent years have aimed to create a good balance of power, responsibility, ownership and accountability, and are designed to engage different stakeholders. While the implementation of evaluation and assessment activities varies throughout the system, the OECD review team gained the impression that the legal framework has succeeded in engaging several new responsibilities to both conduct assessment and evaluation and also use evaluation results. In the general context of strengthening aspects of a civil society, this reflects great success over a relatively short period of time. The ability to engage stakeholders in evaluation and assessment activities is also an important strength to further develop school quality in the Slovak Republic. However, existing evaluation and assessment activities do not sufficiently promote improvement. The OECD review team formed the impression that there is a greater need for feedback to students on how they can improve their learning. Although the national education programmes include standards, in many subjects these only specify a minimum performance requirement and do not allow the measuring of student progress along a continuum. And although there is regular formative feedback to teachers, this is completely disconnected from the formal, external appraisal within the certification procedure. The focus of external school evaluation conducted by the ŠŠI is increasingly on school compliance with legal standards, with less feedback to teachers and schools for improvement. Although schools are required to produce an annual school report, many do not yet use these for school development and improvement, but rather see it as

bureaucratic exercise. The existing information on the school system could be better exploited to inform policies for system improvement.

Evaluation and assessment activities appear to pay little attention to equity

There are no explicit equity goals for the school system in the Slovak Republic. While there are initiatives to ensure that student assessment is more equitable, e.g. adaptations to the national tests for blind and deaf students and the introduction of an external component to the *Maturita*, the monitoring system *per se* does not pay sufficient attention to the equity of outcomes and how differences in school quality impact the educational opportunities for different students. There are some important information gaps regarding measures of student and school socio-economic context, which are central to monitoring equity. Although the NÚCEM has started to report test results aggregated at the regional level, there is room for further reflection on how to set realistic goals for improvement and how best to monitor these. The particular structural feature of academic selection in the Slovak Republic's school system is not reflected in the reporting of national test results, which has consequences for both the interpretation of particular school results and the monitoring of equity across the school system. There also appears to be limited attention in reporting systems to the outcomes for different student groups.

The National Institute for Certified Educational Measurement (NÚCEM) has introduced innovations, but assessing competencies remains a challenge

Since its founding in 2008, the NÚCEM has played an important role in developing and reforming student assessment in the Slovak Republic. For example, it reformed the content of the *Maturita* qualification to bring it more into line with other European assessments and better address aspects of the revised curriculum. The NÚCEM is also developing and piloting *Maturita* examinations in new subjects, as well as developing a new national test for Year 5. The NÚCEM also works on innovative ways to deliver qualifications using technology. Further, the NÚCEM sends detailed reports with an analysis of test items or curriculum areas that students found difficult directly to school leaders in order to inform decisions about curriculum development and areas requiring greater coverage. However, the assessment of skills and competencies in schools lags behind the vision of the new curriculum, with schools and teachers lacking guidance on how to assess competencies. An assessment model predominantly focused on testing is better suited to traditional approaches to teaching and learning based on transmission of a fixed body of knowledge, rather than encouraging students to develop their own ideas and interpretations independently. The lack of any national assessment criteria beyond the minimum performance standards in the national education programmes means that it is difficult for teachers and students to have a shared sense of what is being assessed and what progression looks like.

There is improvement in supervision for external testing, but internal student assessment remains inconsistent across schools

From 2011, the NÚCEM introduced more rigorous administration procedures to improve the reliability of high stakes student testing and to address continuing concerns about the potential for malpractice. Most importantly, the following changes have been introduced to increase the objectivity of *Maturita* tests: within the internal examination the written component now carries more weight, so that a student would have to succeed in both the written and oral elements in order to pass the examination overall; the chair of the subject commission from a different school is part of the panel for the internal component; and inspectors from the ŠŠI observe the administration of the internal component in schools with identified or suspected malpractice (approximately 40 schools). Similar procedures have been introduced for the *Testovanie 9*, where a teacher from a different school must observe administration of the tests and the ŠŠI visits a random selection of 150 schools. However, there remain concerns with the reliability of on-going teacher assessment. While the OECD review revealed examples of schools implementing procedures to improve internal assessment, (e.g. with professional development, working with other schools and using subject commissions), an evaluation in 2012 by the NÚCEM found large variations between grading across schools. During the OECD review, parents expressed the perception that different schools graded more harshly or leniently. In the absence of clear criteria for teacher assessment, their judgements can be viewed as subjective and unreliable. This raises issues for student transfer, where the assessment information provided by one school may not match the standards of another school.

Good feedback to parents on student progress, but feedback to students would improve with more formative assessment

The OECD review team noted a culture of periodic feedback from teachers to parents on how their child is doing at school. Parents formally meet with class teachers twice a semester. This gives an opportunity to discuss their child's attendance, behaviour and performance and receive advice on how their child could improve. There are also examples of schools operating an "open door" policy, where parents can meet with teachers to discuss any concerns they may have about their child's schooling. While there is an established culture of regular summative assessment for students (e.g. they receive a grade or achievement level at a particular point or results on regular tests), the OECD review team formed the impression that the idea of formative assessment was not well understood by teachers, students and parents. While schools may use "input and output tests" at the start and end of a unit of work or topic to measure student progress, it did not seem clear that the results of these tests were being used in a formative way. Interviews with students indicated that feedback was mainly limited to *what* the student needed to improve rather than *how* they could achieve this improvement.

Teacher evaluation with observation of classroom practices is established, but there is an inadequate professional development offer

The principle that teachers should be appraised appeared widely accepted in the Slovak Republic. One of the strengths of the Slovak approach to internal teacher appraisal is its focus on the observation of classroom practice. While the frequency and approach to classroom observation may vary among school leaders, they typically observe the classroom practice of each of their teachers at least once a year. Compared to other OECD countries, a higher proportion of Slovak lower secondary school principals reported in 2013 that they often or very often observe instruction in the classroom. Teachers interviewed by the OECD review team reported that they found classroom observations and feedback on their work valuable to develop their own professionalism. The national teacher appreciation days and moral appraisal are important opportunities to recognise and celebrate excellent teaching. The improvement focus of internal appraisal is reflected by its close connection to professional development planning. However, there are concerns about the supply of professional development programmes. Most are developed centrally by the MPC and teachers can participate in these free of charge. While MPC courses are automatically accredited, other training providers need to apply and wait for accreditation. Schools do not have their own budget to choose the professional development provider and type of courses most suited for their needs. Although career advancement is predominantly based on the completion of professional development programmes, these may not necessarily be available in all the important areas of teaching expertise and it is school leaders who choose which teachers can participate in them.

External teacher appraisal complements school-based regular appraisal, but is disconnected from classroom teaching

The OECD Reviews on Evaluation and Assessment in Education recommend that teacher appraisal that has an impact on the teacher's career or salary advancement is made more objective with a national framework, standard procedures and an external component to validate the process. In this context, the existence of an external process to appraise teachers to reach the first and second certification levels is a positive aspect of the Slovak approach. The existence of a career structure for teachers together with an appraisal and certification process provides teachers with opportunities for promotion and for diversification. It allows teachers to benefit from meaningful career opportunities and may contribute to recognising and rewarding strong performance. At the same time, there are concerns about the fact that the certification process and career advancement system are disconnected from classroom practice and do not include observation of actual teaching. The career advancement system is built on the obligation for teachers to accumulate credits through proof of professional learning and development. This credit system rewards teachers with a pay rise for attending courses rather than for proving that they are changing their practice accordingly. Equally, the certification system is focused on the preparation and defence of a theoretical piece of work (a so-called thesis) rather than evidence of actual teaching performance. The appraisal for specialisation for specific positions is also disconnected from teachers' daily work as it is done by educational providers at the end of particular professional development programmes. This

considerably limits teachers' opportunities to receive feedback on their work from external sources and have their achievements validated.

Initiatives to develop teaching standards, as the existence of different sets of standards may send conflicting messages about good teaching

At the time of the OECD review, the Methodology and Pedagogy Centre (MPC), Bratislava University and international experts were developing professional standards for teachers as an update to the 2006 standards that had not been widely used. The intention was to professionally evaluate the standards and to complement them with tools that teachers could use for self-evaluation, and to pilot and refine these through 2013-14. The new professional standards were expected to specify for each of the three major career stages, three broad competency groupings: understanding students' knowledge, characteristics and conditions for development; processes leading to student learning and development; and teachers' own development as representatives of the teaching profession and as school employees. Importantly, the intention was for the new standards to underpin both internal and external teacher appraisal processes and also school self-evaluation and school inspections. Many different standards and criteria are in use for teacher appraisal: criteria to appraise beginning teachers at the end of the induction period; sample appraisal forms for regular school-based appraisal; criteria specified by different education providers for specialisation appraisal; and specific criteria for classroom observations conducted by school inspectors. As a result, the different appraisal processes are likely to be perceived as disconnected processes teachers have to undergo that do not align to form a coherent whole.

Complex school inspections include classroom visits and feedback to teachers, but there is a perception that these are receiving less focus

There is a well elaborated system of complex school inspections on a five year cycle, with an adequate quality framework for evaluating the various kinds of schools. In complex inspections, inspectors conduct classroom observations using a stable analytical observation and judgement instrument. These instruments and procedures are comparable with other European inspectorates. The OECD review team formed the impression that schools and other stakeholders seem to be satisfied with these complex inspections and their usefulness for the further development of the school, in addition to their accountability purpose. School inspections are a good opportunity to give direct feedback to teachers and to link inspection to guidance and to discussions on school development. However, this depends on the frequency and intensity of classroom visits, and on the availability of inspectors for feedback. Increased demands on the ŠŠI to conduct other types of inspections, but without additional resources, necessarily reduces the ŠŠI's capacity to conduct complex inspections on a five year cycle. Interviews with schools and other stakeholders identified examples of schools that had not had a complex inspection carried out in over seven years. In addition, other types of inspections had been experienced as bureaucratic exercises placing demands on school time, but not providing useful feedback for the school. Schools experience this as a shift "backwards" towards a more bureaucratic inspectorate.

The importance of school self-evaluation is recognised, but schools must build a culture of ongoing self-assessment and improvement

The OECD review revealed widespread support for self-evaluation, and education policy recognises how this can contribute to school improvement. There are regulations in place to help stimulate school self-evaluation: all schools must write an annual school report that includes school results, along with other relevant information; the School Board (with representatives from the parents, teachers and the founder) must comment on this report; and schools must develop a specific school education programme in line with the national education programmes, which is checked by the ŠŠI. These regulations aim to empower those connected to the school and allow the school to set its own profile, priorities and pedagogical focus. However, self-evaluation practices are just starting to be introduced and are not yet well connected to the overall framework of assessment and evaluation in the Slovak Republic. The ŠŠI's framework for assessing school quality is not generally accepted or understood, but could serve as a general framework for school self-evaluation. Typically, annual school reports seem to be restricted to financial, statistical and administrative issues and do not include detailed analysis of students' educational results and outcomes, nor link this to the school's educational planning. There is a need to strengthen school use of data in self-evaluation (e.g. results from *Testovanie 9*, *Maturita* and private tests). The dominance of general management, administrative and financial matters appears to overshadow the pedagogical leadership role for school leaders. The OECD review team gained the impression that in general, school boards do not yet capitalise on the legal framework to fully contribute to school evaluation and improvement, but rather only act where there are major concerns or on superficial issues. Notably, there is room for many school boards to strengthen their evaluative role in discussions of the annual school report.

Objective data are available for schools, but school performance data do not allow for school context and can be misleading

Results from national assessments are fed back to schools with information allowing them to compare their overall student performance with national benchmarks. Schools receive their school results digitally within three weeks of the *Testovanie 9*, and a few days later in print, including the school's ranking regionally and nationally. *Gymnázium* and secondary vocational schools have a similar possibility to compare their performance nationally using the *Maturita* results. Further, the OECD review revealed the wide use of student assessments developed by private companies that are available in different subjects and grades to complement the *Testovanie 9*. The NÚCEM publishes school average results on national assessments in tables ranking schools by their average performance. The publication of such "raw scores" of school performance without any adjustment for the school's context and socio-economic and educational intake can lead to users making unfair comparisons and judgements on school quality. Students' performance in these assessments is affected by factors that are beyond the control of the school, such as prior attainment and social background. An important contextual factor in comparing *Testovanie 9* results is the academic selection of students. In some primary schools many of the best students leave for Gymnasias in Year 6, with other students going to bilingual schools in Year 8, leaving only the relatively less academic students in that school to be tested in Year 9.

There is transparency in reporting key results of system evaluation, but limited research and analysis

In the Slovak Republic there is a clear commitment to reporting the major results from national assessments and school evaluations at the system level. The regular reporting schedule, for example, the release of the ŠŠI annual report every November, also adds credibility to the reporting of system level results. NÚCEM has a commitment to transparency and all results are systematically reported and made available to the public on its website. NÚCEM's reporting seeks to optimise the value of the results for teachers and schools, e.g. with a series of in-depth reports for each subject examined in the *Maturita*, including full information on how students responded to different tasks and an accompanying analysis. The ŠŠI annual report summarises the state of all quality indicators in different school types (preschool, basic school, *gymnázium* and other secondary school types), sheds light on identified priority areas within the school system, and can form a basis for the development or refinement of policy to address these priorities. There are also efforts to stimulate the use of national assessment and school evaluation results for evaluation at the regional level, for example: since 2009/2010 the ŠŠI has started to organise conferences on a regional basis to present the key findings in the annual report, and NÚCEM holds conferences and workshops in different regions to promote the use and relevance of results at the regional level. However, the lack of systematic research on the quality of the education system as a whole is a weakness in the current approach to system evaluation. The Slovak Republic is one of eight OECD systems that does not ensure the collection of longitudinal information, whether that is research programmes or monitoring the progression of students or student cohorts through the school system and beyond. Official bodies may have a mandate to conduct research, but their capacity to do so is limited due to other demands on their resources.

Increasingly reliable evidence on outcomes, but lack of basic information for system evaluation, in particular to monitor equity

Currently, the Slovak Republic can draw on three major sources for evidence on education system performance: international assessments; national assessments and examinations; and evidence from school inspections. While the major purpose of national assessments and examinations is to provide a summative measure of individual student performance, the annual results provide information on average performance for the system and allow the potential to compare how these results vary among regions and schools. The potential of these measures has increased due to the heightened confidence in the reliability of the results. The initial results were not reliable due to concerns with the administration of examinations and assessments by schools. Ad hoc and targeted inspections by the ŠŠI have largely addressed this, but there appears to be a need to continue to monitor assessment/examination administration in some schools. Coverage is also a concern with some important information gaps. Schools report aggregate data as part of the annual school compliance reporting procedure. Typically, a major added value of system evaluation, in contrast to other elements of the evaluation and assessment framework, is the attention to monitoring equity throughout the system, but currently, there is limited information available to adequately do this. For example, there is a lack of reliable data on student and school socio-economic background, including a concern on the definition of “learning disadvantage”.

More regular external supervision of schools at the local and regional levels is limited to compliancy

Evaluation activities at regional and local levels are limited to a monitoring and checking of school administrative and funding requirements. Within a regular cycle of complex school inspections, schools would only be subject to an external evaluation of their quality every five years. While regional authorities monitor schools more regularly, the fact that the focus is purely on financial and compliancy-related aspects fails to promote that evaluation activities should be concerned with the quality of educational processes and teaching and learning. The challenge is to respect the carefully designed structure and balance of authority and power, while building on the willingness of regional or local authorities and other stakeholders to engage in evaluative discussions and decisions about their school(s).

Policy recommendations

Develop a framework document to promote greater coherence in evaluation and assessment and a strategic plan for further development

The Ministry should oversee the development of a strategy or framework document that conceptualises a complete evaluation and assessment framework for schooling in the Slovak Republic. This will help generate synergies among different evaluation and assessment activities, avoid duplication of procedures, and prevent inconsistency of objectives. A first step is to clarify and/or set the major goals for schooling in the Slovak Republic. The overarching long-term goals set in the “Millennium” strategy were a clear strength in establishing initial activities. Equally, a set of long-term goals will help to integrate the different elements into a coherent evaluation and assessment framework. A second step is to map out all existing evaluation and assessment activities and scrutinise whether and how these fit together and to identify any duplication. It is crucial that the Ministry engages key stakeholder groups when developing the framework. This will help embed evaluation and assessment as an ongoing and essential part of professionalism within the school system, clarify different responsibilities and allow for better networking and connections among stakeholders.

The 2008 School Act introduced significant innovations to the Slovak school system. The OECD review team recommends that the Ministry collates evidence on the progress of implementation and the impact of these innovations on the quality of teaching and learning. This will provide helpful feedback on how to refine existing activities. Such evidence on implementation and impact will also help set priorities for future changes. The OECD review team notes the on-going review of national education programmes and also suggests developing assessment criteria against these for on-going student assessment. However, all further refinements or innovations should be carefully phased in, including adequate stakeholder engagement in developing the refinements and the use of piloting in selected schools.

Prioritise capacity building to ensure successful implementation and use of results

An essential part of any implementation strategy is to ensure an adequate provision of guidelines, tools and specific training. While evaluation and assessment can identify areas for improvement, they are only instrumental in achieving improvement if their results are used by stakeholders. Within available resources, the OECD review team recommends that the Ministry sets up a priority plan for capacity building to ensure the maximum benefit is gained from evaluation and assessment activities. The clear demand from schools for professional development and the limited capacity of the MPC requires a rethinking of the professional development offer. There is a need to ensure adequate professional development provision so that teachers and school leaders learn from the results of evaluation and assessment and make changes that lead to improvement in student learning and outcomes. For example, there is a need to supply high quality training to teachers on student assessment and school self-evaluation activities. At the national level, there is a need to build analytical and research capacity to fully exploit the results of evaluation and assessment, so that these feed into policies for school system improvement.

Clarify the purpose of different evaluation and assessment activities and ensure adequate focus on improvement

The framework document should unambiguously communicate that the major purpose of evaluation and assessment is to improve student learning and outcomes. This is best achieved through a balance of activities designed for accountability or development. In the context of greater freedom and responsibility at the local level, it is clear that there is a need for sufficient accountability mechanisms in the Slovak school system. The introduction of an external examination component in the high stakes student examinations (*Maturita*) is a strength. The accountability role of the ŠŠI could be strengthened with the publication of individual school inspection reports. Importantly, the Ministry needs to ensure sufficient emphasis on *student learning progress* and improvement in education. Here it is most impactful to promote a culture of formative assessment and assessment for learning in schools. This can be promoted with the development of student assessment criteria to support on-going internal assessment, initially in Slovak language and literature and mathematics in order to make the implementation more manageable for teachers. In the longer term, it could support a shift to criterion based national testing. At the same time, an important support will be national guidelines with concrete examples of student work against these assessment criteria. There is room for the Ministry to promote a focus on learning progress through school system evaluation with the development of more longitudinal measures or research programmes.

Raise the focus on equity within the evaluation and assessment framework

A major challenge for schooling in the Slovak Republic is the observed disparities in educational quality and outcomes within the system. Evaluation and assessment can contribute significantly to both monitoring and promoting equity, and a greater focus on equity is strongly recommended. The OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in

education have identified several systems that have set explicit goals to improve equity in the school system. This a clear signal of the importance of success in schooling for all children. These may involve specific improvement targets on objective outcome measures and may focus on different student groups, school communities or regions.

Give more support to teachers to implement curriculum and assessment, and develop models to assess skills and competencies

Changes as radical as those introduced in the School Act (2008) will inevitably take time to implement and will require a significant shift in culture within schools. For example, the change in focus of the *Testovanie 9* test to better reflect the revised curriculum has led to a greater emphasis on higher level reading comprehension skills and more contextualised tasks in mathematics. The revised Slovak curriculum aims to develop competencies that can help young people to cope with social, economic and technological change, and succeed in school and the world beyond. However, if these competencies are to be recognised, valued and developed, they need to be assessed using appropriate tools. While many countries and jurisdictions have moved towards a greater focus on wider skills in their curriculum, there are different opinions on how best to assess them. It is agreed, however, that there is a need to develop assessment tools and methods that are suited to recognising skills and competencies, and to capture evidence from a wider range of sources, e.g. self-evaluation reports, portfolios, structured teacher observation or periodic 360 degrees assessment drawing on feedback from parents, friends and other teachers or coaches. Here, the Methodology and Pedagogy centre (MPC) has an important role to play and should provide training and guidance for existing teachers, both nationally and through its regional offices, to develop teachers' pedagogical practice in diagnosing student learning needs. There is also the potential to make greater use of NGOs to facilitate networking, peer support and sharing of best practice in assessment.

Phase in student assessment criteria linked to the standards specified in national education programmes

The OECD review team recommends the Ministry of Education, the NÚCEM and the National Institute for Education and teacher representatives collaboratively develop assessment criteria that would show progression towards and be integrated with the standards in the national education programmes, and ultimately replace the 1 to 5 grade scale currently used. Assessment criteria should match the curriculum, be compatible with the existing national education programmes, and provide sufficient detail to be clear and unambiguous without being unwieldy for teachers to implement and use. Adopting this approach would provide a foundation to support: tracking of progression for individuals and cohorts; greater consistency and reliability within and across schools in grading; and formative assessment, as the criteria will provide clear learning goals for students. To make implementation more manageable for teachers, assessment criteria should initially be developed for Slovak language and literature and mathematics. The criteria should be fully trialled with pilot schools before they are implemented, and teachers and educational researchers should be involved in their development to ensure they are fit for purpose and appropriately set. The introduction of these assessment criteria should be supplemented by guidance and training to show best practice in how the

assessment criteria could be used, and annotated examples of student work at different levels to establish a shared standard and support teachers' professional judgements.

Integrate formative assessment into teaching and learning

Valid and reliable on-going assessment is vital for students to know how their learning is progressing and what they need to do to improve; and for teachers to know whether their students have understood what they have been taught, what level of attainment they have achieved and how planning can be improved. To meet both aspects, a balance of summative and formative assessment is needed. Research has identified formative assessment as an effective tool to improve student learning progress. To have an effective formative outcome, teachers need to consider what they are teaching and how they teach it, in order to find out what they want. This approach also needs to give students the opportunity to take more responsibility for their own learning and develop their skills in “learning to learn”. It is possible to use testing formatively if teachers discuss students' responses with them in a way that develops their knowledge and understanding of how to improve. However, teachers should be encouraged to use a wider range of assessment tools and methods and to involve learners in the assessment process. The effective implementation of formative assessment into Slovak schools will involve a substantial shift in the teaching culture as a whole that will require a strong, long-term commitment from the Slovak government.

Further strengthen internal appraisal for professional development

The emphasis on regular classroom observations by the school leadership team is a clear strength in the Slovak approach and should be maintained and strengthened. Various measures can be introduced to enhance school leaders' appraisal and evaluation competencies: disseminating resources and training for the direct evaluation of pedagogical practice; stimulating peer learning among school leadership in different schools; supporting regional leadership programmes run by the regional school authorities; building the capacity of employers and school inspectors to undertake effective performance reviews of school leaders; and further distributing leadership within schools among middle and senior leaders. In this context, the provision of training opportunities regarding appraisal and evaluation could be scaled up for a wider group of school staff, including middle leaders. There is also room to review the framework for funding and provision of professional development to ensure it responds to school needs. To diversify the offer of programmes, the decentralisation of its funding could be considered. This could be done, for example, by attributing earmarked funding training vouchers to schools so that they can freely choose the training and provider most suitable for their needs. In this context, it would be particularly important to also review the quality of the accreditation system for training providers.

Revise the career advancement system and raise the status of the teaching profession

The career advancement function that is currently being achieved through appraisal processes at the end of induction, credit evaluation, certification processes and appraisal for specialisation, could be brought together in a single process of teacher appraisal for

career progression. Teachers would apply to access career levels beyond “independent teacher” and teachers not applying for such promotion would be required to maintain their basic certification status as independent teacher. The associated appraisal system should be based on the national framework of teaching standards and have a strong component that is external to the school, e.g. an accredited external evaluator, who would typically be a teacher from another school with expertise in the same area as the teacher being appraised. Decisions must draw on several types of evidence, including classroom observation, as most key aspects of teaching are displayed when teachers interact with their students in the classroom. The OECD review team supports the use of a portfolio that is closely related to teachers’ daily work, including elements such as: lesson plans and teaching materials, samples of student work and comments on student assessment examples, teachers’ self-reported questionnaires and reflection sheets. It is important to attract high performing individuals to the profession and help them to stay motivated for continuous improvement throughout their career, e.g. with adequate working conditions, a professional environment, professional services from the authorities and teacher professional bodies and adequate salaries.

Consolidate a single set of teaching standards to guide appraisal processes

It is important to consolidate a single and authoritative set of teaching standards that build on the strengths of already existing appraisal forms and criteria developed by the MPC, the Ministry, the Inspectorate and teacher education providers, so that there is a clear understanding of what is considered accomplished teaching. They should provide a common basis for initial teacher education, appraisal of beginning teachers, regular teacher appraisal for performance management, teacher certification, professional development, and career advancement. This would provide coherence for the teaching profession and achieve better alignment between teaching standards, teacher education and teacher appraisal. Teaching standards need to be informed by research and express the sophistication and complexity of what effective teachers are expected to know and be able to do. For the teaching profession to feel ownership of the standards and for them to be relevant, it is essential that teachers are involved and encouraged to take responsibility for their development. In the Slovak context, there are different options for how the national agencies can support such involvement, for example through the organisation of stakeholder conferences, web-based consultation with teachers, and the collection of examples of teacher quality criteria that are currently used in some schools. A collegiate body of key social and academic actors could establish a process to monitor implementation of the standards beyond initial agreed versions.

Prioritise complex school inspections and reinforce their impact on the quality of teaching and learning

The OECD review team recommends a serious reflection on how to heighten the relevance of the external school evaluation system for school improvement. In particular, by keeping the system of complex inspections in place for the coming five to eight years, because it is clear that it will take a substantial period of time for schools to develop effective systems of self-evaluation. The system of complex inspections allows for a healthy external pressure on schools. The real value to school improvement that complex inspections offer is their feedback on a number of teaching and learning issues that could

be improved, rather than a list of issues of non-compliance to be addressed by schools. With such inspections, the ŠŠI can communicate that an “acceptable” or “sufficient” level of teaching and learning is not enough and that all Slovak schools should strive for improvement, not just those with serious deficiencies. Robust and informed objective feedback from inspectors on areas for improvement and possible actions can help schools move towards excellence. There is a need, therefore, to ensure that inspectors have the capacity to provide objective feedback at a general level on teaching. One way to improve the ŠŠI’s capacity here is to compile examples identified through school inspections of how teaching practice has been improved. To ensure implementation of complex inspections on a five-year cycle, the ŠŠI may need to limit their focus to part of the school (e.g. in selected school years or in selected school subjects). In this case, it would be important for inspectors to stimulate schools to complete the complex inspection in other parts of the school. For example, by promoting the inspection framework, by holding a conference during or shortly after the inspection, and by stimulating peer reviews among schools.

Drive forward the development of self-evaluation in schools, strengthen support and stimulate evaluative responsibilities for school boards

Experience in other countries indicates that the development of an effective self-evaluation system is a difficult task for schools. It is essential to communicate a strong, clear policy message on the importance of an effective self-evaluation system to school improvement. The Ministry should promote a more coherent approach to self-evaluation by: improving the visibility and status of the ŠŠI inspection framework; having the ŠŠI inspect a school’s self-evaluation system as part of the complex inspection; setting up a joint commission of key stakeholders to develop some sample self-evaluation tools for schools, e.g. parent and student surveys; and publishing and promoting good self-evaluation practices that the ŠŠI has identified in Slovak schools and using these to illustrate points in the inspection framework more concretely. The ŠŠI inspection framework should be regularly reviewed to ensure that it adequately reflects emerging research and evidence on school improvement and effectiveness. Similarly, a more elaborate list of suggested content for the annual school reports could be of help to schools, if it: speaks significantly to the teaching and learning process; is open enough for schools to elaborate and develop these aspects autonomously; and, critically, is connected to a clear concept and framework for self-evaluation. In other OECD countries, schools have benefitted from having a member of the school team with clear responsibility for self-evaluation activities. Equally, school boards can strengthen their evaluative role by publishing a written statement about the annual school report. This would outline the school board’s priorities for further development and future statements could reflect on how school leaders have addressed these.

Broaden the range of data used in school evaluation and pay adequate attention to the school’s context

The OECD review team notes the importance of providing adequate contextual information on schools in order to ensure better interpretation of school performance information, notably the publication of school average results in *Testovanie 9* and

Maturita. It is important to adequately support and prioritise work to improve the coverage and quality of information on school socio-economic context. This will be an important information source for the ŠŠI, but in the short term, inspectors can collect facts on schools' socio-economic context and investigate these during inspections. The OECD review team recommends that a wider range of information be taken into account when reporting on school performance to build a more fully rounded picture of the education provided by a school. The full report from a school's complex inspection provides a robust, comprehensive evaluation of the school at a given point in time and should be published. The publication of other basic information could include school enrolment, average class size, attendance and suspension information, demographic factors, teacher qualification information. Where relevant, information could be included for previous years to show trends, for example if the number of students suspended is increasing or decreasing over time. As school self-evaluation activities become more established, other complementary information could be published, e.g. the results of satisfaction questionnaires taken by students and parents.

Build analytical and research capacity and better mobilise evidence for policy making

The OECD review team underlines the need to continue to support efforts by national agencies to improve the credibility and timeliness of national statistics, and suggests greater attention is paid to the interpretation of statistical reporting, e.g. with clear definitions and information describing data limitations. This will help to promote the greater use of system results and to generate greater demand for the use of evidence in policy making and in public debates. Importantly, while several national bodies have an analytical mandate, limited resources are dedicated to this. Increasing analytical capacity in national bodies is expected to bring considerable benefits by: promoting a strong use of evidence throughout the system; better feeding existing results into other regional and school level evaluation efforts; and ensuring a more systematic use of evidence in policy making. A national research strategy would both open up existing information to the research community and ensure that additional qualitative research is commissioned in priority areas. A strategic approach is important to plan future research programmes on a manageable scale, while also continuing to validate existing data collection. The Ministry could introduce a summative reporting mechanism to provide a periodic assessment of the education system performance against the education system evaluation framework. Such a report would draw on all available evidence on education system performance, e.g. from school inspections, national assessments and examinations, specific evaluations in priority areas and different research programmes. This would allow the tracking of progress against key system goals.

Determine information needs and prioritise strengthening the national information system

Establishing a framework for education system evaluation will allow a systematic mapping out of available information. In each case, any technical caveats or quality concerns with the data, research results or statistics can be noted down. This will make the current concerns in terms of key information gaps and quality of information more transparent to policy makers. In turn, such mapping will be a solid basis to underpin decisions to prioritise the collection of further evidence for education system evaluation. The OECD review team identifies the improvement of measures on student and school

socio-economic context as a priority, given the recent developments in reporting system-level information at the school level. For example, policy makers, the CVTI SR, the ŠŠI and the NÚCEM can use the framework for education system evaluation to determine the information needs for monitoring equity in the Slovak school system. A clear mapping of the availability, coverage and quality of different measures on student socio-economic background can inform decisions on whether and how to improve existing measures and, if necessary, the most efficient way to collect more reliable measures. The OECD review team also strongly supports the development of an electronic data collection system for annual school compliancy reporting. This is expected to generate efficiencies at the central collection level, the regional validation level, as well as to reduce the bureaucratic burden in reporting for schools. A more timely and accurate collection of key information will significantly strengthen the information base for policy making at a system level, notably in the core area of funding allocation.

*Promote a greater evaluative role for
municipal and regional authorities*

The OECD review team noted some motivation for regional and municipal authorities to play a more substantive role in supporting school improvement. However, there is a need to clarify their possibility to do so within the current legal framework. The OECD review team sees room for an open discussion among key stakeholders to see how to promote a broader and more collaborative approach to the evaluation of educational quality. There may be ways to mobilise existing resources and experienced personnel at the regional and municipal levels to foster peer evaluation and collaboration among schools. This can be an important means of professional development for educators and managers within schools, and also help to promote local and regional goals. Such initiatives to promote networking amongst schools can help develop and spread good practice. Regional and municipal authorities can play a key role in providing opportunities to bring professionals together, for example for a day of collegial learning. All professionals are busy and it is difficult to organise such professional networks without some external stimulus. This could even be a mechanism to more concretely use the results from school inspections, by analysing results for schools at the municipal or regional levels and identifying common areas for improvement.



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