

Executive summary

The primary and secondary education system in Kazakhstan has accomplished significant achievements. It has managed to reach almost universal access to primary and secondary education, and few differences are observed in enrolment by geographical location, socio-economic background and gender. Although the level of education attainment of the population is high, the performance of Kazakh 15-year-olds in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2012 suggests that there is considerable room to improve the quality of student learning outcomes. In mathematics, Kazakh students are on average two years behind their peers in OECD countries and about 45% of them are low performers, a proportion significantly above the OECD average (23%). The language of instruction in schools, school location and the socio-economic background of students and schools make a difference in student performance. National and international assessments also suggest marked differences in educational outcomes between urban and rural areas.

Kazakhstan has embarked on profound reforms to improve the quality of the education system and is increasingly looking to international standards and best practices. Reform initiatives include the expansion of the pre-primary education network, the development of new mechanisms of school financing (including a new per capita funding scheme), the creation of resource centres to support small-class schools, further investment in school infrastructure and a wider use of information technologies in schools. In this context of reforms, while there is an apparent desire to increase resources devoted to education and awareness that spending per student remains markedly lower than the OECD average and that of other neighbouring countries, there remains an official reluctance to expand public expenditure on education. This is linked to concerns about both the sector's efficiency and its absorptive capacity. This report analyses the effectiveness of the Kazakh school system and 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 Kazakh school system.

Increase overall public spending on education as the sector gains absorptive capacity, while addressing key inefficiencies

Kazakhstan underinvests in education in comparison with other countries with similar income. The lack of adequate resources is reflected at a range of levels such as low enrolment rates in pre-primary education; poorly remunerated teachers; overcrowded urban schools; and poorly equipped small-class schools. At the same time, there is considerable scope for a more efficient management of resources in areas such as the

school network and the teaching workforce. A gradual increase in public spending is needed to meet the ambitions set out in the sector's strategic documents. Additional resources should be prioritised where these can have the greatest impact: early educational years and support to low performing and disadvantaged schools.

Achieving considerable efficiency gains and ensuring that additional resources are well-spent, however, would require changes in governance structures. There is a need to strengthen the capacity to effectively manage and monitor the use of resources across all levels. In particular, insufficient local and school autonomy hinders effectiveness of resource use. Schools and *rayons* (local authorities) have little flexibility to invest more in human resources (by increasing staffing levels or by raising teacher salaries) if these are more acutely needed, or alternatively to invest in physical resources (school buildings, school equipment such as smart boards), if the present ones are insufficient or outdated. In addition, local and regional governments have very little spending discretion as norms determine how resources should be allocated and intergovernmental transfers have a very limited equalisation effect. A gradual increase of autonomy coupled with accountability and capacity building mechanisms could enable a more effective use of resources at the local and school level.

The distribution of resources to schools is currently decided on a discretionary and incremental basis by *rayons* in consideration of national norms but steps have been taken towards the development of a per-student school funding scheme. This is a positive move as a well-designed funding formula can, under certain conditions, be the most efficient, equitable, stable and transparent method of funding schools. Before national roll-out, the formula could be refined to take greater account of students' needs, capture better differences in class size across the country and increase its simplicity.

Review the organisation of the school network and lengthen the school day

A wide-ranging review of school network organisation could shed light on potential expansions or downsizings of school facilities in light of demographic trends. A vision for the provision of education in rural areas could be developed to improve the quality, equity and efficiency of the large number of small-class schools, which are a result of a policy to ensure universal access to compulsory schooling. Kazakhstan should sustain the efforts to remove three-shift schools and explore ways to minimise the impact of double-shift schools on younger students. There is also a need to adjust the norms for instructional hours to be more in line with OECD averages for official instructional time, particularly for students in grades 1-4. Having a relatively short school day, in terms of hours of instruction, may place children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who may be struggling, at risk of failure.

Support disadvantaged students and schools

More and more, the focus needs to shift towards providing education that promotes equity by recognising and meeting different educational needs. There is no systematic policy to support students who are falling behind. There is little provision of early support to prevent students falling behind, with personalised and intensive intervention. A greater focus on addressing underperformance is needed in Kazakhstan. Ensuring that schools provide their students with adequate and timely support is essential to enable struggling students not only to stay at school but to get the most out of their schooling years. Schools

should be encouraged to use early warning systems to identify students at risk and support them as early as possible. This is in contrast with the overemphasis placed on top-performing students. Also, schools in Kazakhstan appear to be making slow progress in accommodating children with disabilities.

Improve teacher quality and school leadership

There is scope to strengthen the quality of teachers and school leaders. Professional standards could be developed to clarify expectations of what systems of initial education and professional development should aim to achieve, serve as a framework for the selection of candidates in recruitment processes, offer the credible reference for making judgements about their competence, guide professional development, and provide the basis for career advancement. Initial teacher education and professional development opportunities could be reviewed to ensure that these provide a solid foundation for teachers and adequately respond to their needs. In the case of school leaders, improvements in their recruitment, professional development and appraisal are needed to tap into their potential role in leading school improvement.

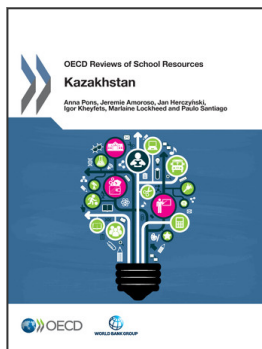
There is an imperative need to reconsider the number of staff and their remuneration. Current student-teacher ratios indicate that there might be some oversupply of teachers in the system. Increasing student-teacher ratios and class sizes could free up resources to further invest in teachers' professionalisation and remuneration. Also, the concept of teacher employment, whereby basic compensation is associated uniquely to the teacher's teaching load (*stavka* system), is a source of concern as it does not appropriately recognise the many tasks a teacher accomplishes beyond teaching and reduces his or her engagement in school activities. As a result, teacher employment needs to be re-conceptualised and the *stavka* system should be discontinued. The objective is to raise the professionalism of teachers, which can also be supported by better and more restricted selection into the profession and possibly fewer teachers with better salaries.

Use evaluation and information systems to foster improvement and accountability

Kazakhstan recognises the importance of teacher and school evaluation but there is scope to strike a better balance between the currently prevailing accountability function and the improvement one. Clearly, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on teacher and school evaluation for development purposes, where evaluation results lead to genuine professional discussions about effective teaching and teachers and schools receive advice for the improvement of pedagogical practices.

There is ample room to improve the external and independent monitoring systems of Kazakhstan's education system. The current monitoring approach is compliance-driven and entails no analysis of educational performance. As such, it is limited in the way it evaluates efficiency, equity, and value for money. An external independent monitoring system for school resource use should be a priority. External and independent bodies would strengthen the analysis of the ample data generated by existing monitoring systems. Enhancing the transparency and reporting framework is also likely to help reduce the opportunities for misallocation of resources and corruption that exist throughout the system, although a complementary policy to reduce loopholes in the system of norms is also needed.

The improvement of data collection systems and practices is also needed. In particular, procedures to ensure the quality of the data should be introduced at every step of the collection and processing of the data. Furthermore, Kazakhstan needs to improve the dissemination of information about activities at the school and local levels, including information on school and local education budgets. This could include school attestation reports. Similarly, school principals should disseminate their schools' activity reports and financial plans, in accessible language, by posting them on the web or on school bulletin boards, thus increasing transparency. Also, the existence of school Boards of Trustees, while still a nascent change, opens up avenues for improved transparency and reporting procedures at the school level.



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