

## Executive summary

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*Most children are in public schools and all sit central examinations, but the school system is highly inequitable*

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Children must complete ten years of schooling and the majority attend public schools, but may be enrolled in different school types according to their interests and ability, with academic selection possible at ages 11, 14 and 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.

Compared internationally, students in the Slovak Republic show average performance at the primary level (basic schools) and below average performance at the secondary level (academic “*gymnázium*” and vocational schools). There are entrenched inequities in the Slovak school system. Compared to the OECD average, differences in student performance at age 15 are more strongly associated with their schools’ socio-economic intake. Regional disparities are more pronounced in the Slovak Republic than in any other OECD country, with a particularly high concentration of poor households in the Eastern regions. Educational differences between rural areas and cities are significant and educational outcomes for the Roma minority are particularly poor on average. There is strong incentive for students to complete upper secondary education: the reduced risk of unemployment for Slovak men and women with upper secondary education is particularly strong in international comparison.

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*A competency-based curriculum and greater pedagogical freedom have consequences for central evaluation and assessment capacity*

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A series of reforms have sought to give more pedagogical autonomy to schools, while at the same time strengthening the role of evaluation and assessment activities. Since 2008, 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 that should align to these. At the same time, the Slovak State Schools Inspectorate (ŠŠI) has conducted inspections on the school education programme. However, there are concerns that this and other new responsibilities have compromised its capacity to deliver the regular cycle of complex school inspections.

The National Institute for Certified Educational Measurement (NÚCEM) was established as an independent agency in 2009 to significantly increase capacity to ensure reliable student examinations and generate information for system monitoring. Since

then, the *Maturita* and the *Testovanie 9* have progressively adapted to better assess competencies listed in the national education programmes. However, there is inadequate analytical and research capacity centrally to fully exploit the results from evaluation and assessment.

Since 2009, teachers are free to choose pedagogical methods and teaching approaches and benefit from a salary and bonus system linked to teachers' qualifications and professional development activities. A clear strength in the traditional Slovak approach is the support to build capacity of beginning teachers. Typically, the Methodology and Pedagogy Centre (MPC) co-ordinates 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.

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*Strengthen strategic oversight of evaluation and assessment activities and stakeholder engagement*

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There is a need to clarify and/or set long-term goals for schooling in the Slovak Republic as this would help to integrate the different elements into a coherent evaluation and assessment framework. A central strategy or framework document mapping out existing evaluation and assessment activities and identifying duplication of procedures would help generate synergies among different activities and prevent inconsistency of objectives. Clear and commonly understood evaluation criteria can help strengthen coherence: a consolidated set of teaching standards will bring together different aspects of appraisal; and an authoritative role for the ŠŠI inspection framework would bring greater coherence between external and internal school evaluation. Engaging key stakeholder groups will also strengthen coherence by: helping embed evaluation and assessment as an ongoing and essential part of professionalism; clarifying different responsibilities; and allowing for better networking and connections among stakeholders. At the same time, it is important to collate evidence on the progress of implementation and the impact of assessment and evaluation innovations on the quality of teaching and learning, as it will: provide helpful feedback on how to refine existing activities; help set priorities for future changes; build credibility of these activities among stakeholders. 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.

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*Evaluation and assessment must have adequate focus on improvement*

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The framework document should unambiguously communicate that the major purpose of evaluation and assessment is to improve student learning and outcomes. The dominant purpose of evaluation and assessment activities appears to be compliance, not improvement. Students need better, formative feedback on *how* they can improve their learning – assessment criteria aligned to the standards in the national education programmes would help clarify individual learning goals and progress toward these. Formal, external appraisal within the certification procedure must pay attention to the quality of teaching, including classroom observation. The ŠŠI school inspections must go beyond a check of school compliance with legal standards and provide useful feedback to teachers and schools for improvement. School boards can strengthen their evaluative role and help promote the use of annual school reporting for school development and

improvement. Regional and local authorities can support peer evaluation and collaboration among schools. The NÚCEM and the ŠŠI can go further in reporting and promoting the use of results at the central, regional, local and school levels.

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*Prioritise capacity building in schools and centrally*

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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. A priority plan for capacity building would 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. There is a need to supply high-quality training to: (i) teachers on using a wider range of assessment tools and methods and involving learners in the assessment process; and (ii) school leaders in conducting classroom observation as part of both regular teacher appraisal and school self-evaluation activities. At the national level, there is a need to build analytical and research capacity so that the results of evaluation and assessment feed into policies for school system improvement.

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*Monitoring and reporting systems must pay adequate attention to equity*

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There are no explicit equity goals for the school system in the Slovak Republic. While there are initiatives to ensure that the design and administration of national student examinations is more equitable, central monitoring does not pay sufficient attention to equity. There are important information gaps regarding measures of student and school socio-economic context. At the same time the NÚCEM publishes school average results on national tests and ranks schools on these results, but there is a need for reporting to reflect the structural feature of academic selection and the school's socio-economic intake to allow better interpretation of school results. School inspectors would benefit from clear guidelines on how to take account of school context in forming a judgement on its quality. Reporting systems could pay more attention to the outcomes of different student groups.



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