

Executive summary

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. However, 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. There are also major equity challenges. School location (urban or rural area) and the socio-economic background of students considerably impact the performance of students. 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.

The Slovak Republic has embarked on significant reforms to improve the quality and equity of the school system. These include the development of per capita funding, the definition of student learning objectives, 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 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.

Increase overall public spending on education, while addressing key inefficiencies

The Slovak Republic has a sophisticated, transparent and well-embedded system of funding state, church and private schools by a formula, which is largely driven by the number of students, but includes modifying weights to adjust for schools' structural costs and students' characteristics. The 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. The system is widely accepted and managed well; it needs minor modifications rather than a major overhaul. However, in spite of the efforts in recent years, the level of public spending is low by international standards, which contributes to inadequate teacher salaries, pre-primary provision and learning materials.

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 (especially for socially-disadvantaged groups) and the increase of teacher and school leader salaries. This should involve a reform of the current financing of pre-primary provision, transferring the main funding responsibility from municipalities to the state, with the ultimate aim that all children aged 3-5 can attend if their parents so wish. 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. EU structural and investment funds can be used to realise the necessary structural adjustments to make the education system more efficient and financially more sustainable (e.g. support local reorganisations of provision, develop capacity for inclusive education).

Further consolidate the school network

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. This is widely recognised among stakeholders. Developing planning capacity, co-ordination mechanisms and inter-municipal collaboration is cornerstone to the creation of a more efficient and equitable school network. This could be organised through regional planning platforms covering all levels of school education and involving all relevant stakeholders. Municipal 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. The consolidation itself may involve a range of different strategies. One possibility is to close or consolidate small schools, or reduce services within schools 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 for nearby schools to share resources. Shared resources may include teachers, sport facilities, 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.

This should go alongside stronger financial incentives for 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. 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 remains constant, as at present in the formula. Also, 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 has resulted in reducing average school size and thus the efficiency of the school system.

Develop capacity for inclusive education in order to improve equity outcomes

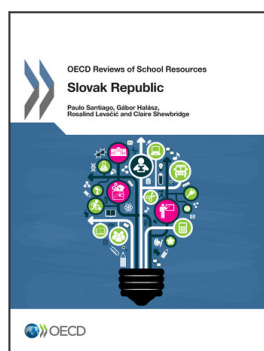
There is a growing awareness of the equity challenges in the Slovak education system. The impact of students' socio-economic background on performance is among the highest; the integration of Roma students in mainstream education is limited; and there is a relatively high number of special needs students and also a relatively high proportion of those who are educated in a separate setting. 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.

It is therefore essential that the equity dimension remains central in the development of educational policy. A priority should be the integration of the Roma community in the school system. An option is that the government uses VET (Vocational Education and Training) in general, and work-based learning and recognition of informal learning in particular, to integrate 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. The expansion of effective inclusive education for students with special educational needs requires a well elaborated strategy with two key components. One is encouraging special 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. The second key component of a strategy for inclusive education is enabling mainstream schools to provide effective inclusive education. 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. Finally, 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 to include within it all the funds intended for improving vertical equity.

Improve the use of human resources in the school system

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, developing 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. However, there are indications of some inequitable distribution of teachers across schools. In addition, there are some challenges to the preparation of teachers, low participation rates in teacher professional development, teacher certification processes weakly linked to the core work of teachers while school leader development is hindered by the limited capacity for school leader appraisal.

While there is a need both to 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 much-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, 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. Other areas of priority are bringing teacher certification closer to teaching practices; improving the framework for the provision of professional development; making initial teacher education more selective and better linked to school practices; and developing capacity for school leader appraisal.



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