

Assessment and recommendations

Education system context

The economy is growing again and investment in education has been increasing, but remains low in international comparison

There are signs that the Czech economy has returned to growth following the impact of the economic crisis. Notably, unemployment has returned to pre-crisis lows and remains below the OECD average. However, as in other countries, the crisis hit the Czech youth hardest, with youth unemployment peaking at 19% in 2013 and remaining slightly above the OECD average. Compared to both median and average national wages, the minimum wage in the Czech Republic is the lowest in the OECD and for two-parent households on a minimum wage both parents would need to work to ensure that children do not grow up in poverty. Investment in education is comparatively low: cumulative expenditure per student (aged 6 to 15) is among the lowest in the OECD (USD 54 519 compared to USD 83 382 on average). However, contrary to in the OECD on average, since 2000 the Czech Republic has gradually increased public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure (from 8.0% to 8.9%; compared to a decrease from 11.8% to 11.6% on average). Over the same period, public expenditure has also increased as a percentage of GDP (from 3.2% to 3.7%).

A complex governance structure within the school system with several different school types

Compulsory education or “basic education”, starting at age 6 and ending at age 15, comprises two stages: Years 1 to 6 (primary education) and Years 6 to 9 (lower secondary education). Upper secondary education or “secondary education” starts typically at age 15 and can be followed in six different school types offering different qualifications: certificate of apprenticeship in vocational secondary schools; general certificate of secondary education in *gymnasias*, *lyceums*, technical secondary schools or *conservatoires*; and simply “secondary education” in practical schools.

In 2002-03 a public administration reform saw the creation of fourteen self-governing regions, including Prague the capital city. While the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (the ministry) establishes the legal framework for the school system, responsibilities for organising and providing education in the public sector at different stages are broadly split as follows: first and second stages of basic education (municipalities); secondary education (regions). However, there are some complexities, including the organisation of some specialised school provision by the ministry and by regions at the second stage of basic education (*gymnasias* programmes starting at age 11 or 13). There are over 6 000 self-governing municipalities in the Czech Republic, of which only 453 are urban municipalities. Among OECD countries, this represents one of the highest levels of administrative fragmentation and poses considerable capacity challenges. The vast majority of Czech

municipalities are “rural”, having less than 3 000 inhabitants. Not all Czech municipalities operate a pre-school or basic school. In 1990, legal conditions were set to promote a private sector and in 2012/13, 6.4% of Czech students were enrolled in privately managed schools, although mainly in secondary education. Private schools managed by registered churches and religious societies benefit from 100% of the public funding grant for teaching costs; other private schools benefit from between 50% to 80% of this grant.

Economic incentive to achieve higher education, but entrenched inequities in the school system

The Czech population is comparatively highly educated, with 92% of 25-64 year-olds having attained upper secondary education (compared to 75% on average in the OECD). Historically, levels of attainment in tertiary education have been low in international comparison, although there has been a rapid expansion in recent years and the proportion of young Czechs graduating from university programmes is now just above the OECD average. There is a clear economic incentive to attain higher education: employment rates for those with tertiary education are 43 percentage points higher than for those without upper secondary education. However, the Czech Republic has the lowest educational upward mobility rate of all OECD countries: only 17% of 25-34 year-olds have exceeded their parents’ educational attainment (compared to an OECD average of 32%).

There is clear evidence of entrenched inequities in the Czech school system. First, there are considerable economic and educational differences on average among the 14 Czech regions, which provides an important backdrop to the respective school networks. Half of the Czech national GDP is concentrated in the four regions with the largest populations: Prague (25%); the Central Bohemian region (11%), the South Moravian region (10%) and the Moravian-Silesian region (10%). Second, the early age of selection (from age 11) into “prestigious” school types (*gymnasias* and *lyceums*), coupled with the provision of reduced curricula in some provision (practical schools) and the existence of a strong special education sector sets conditions that favour a social selectivity in different school types. Evidence from PISA 2012 shows a very strong association between the school’s average socio-economic composition and the average performance of its students – more than double the score point difference found in the OECD on average. There is evidence of integration problems for children from the Roma community, with some research estimating significant proportions being educated in segregated schools.

Demographic changes have challenged the efficiency of the school system

One of the greatest efficiency challenges in recent years to the Czech school system has been the steep decline in the school-age population. While this hit all age groups in compulsory and upper secondary education, lower secondary and upper secondary education were hit the hardest: compared to in 1990, there was almost half the number of 10-14 year-olds in the Czech Republic in 2010; and the number of 15-19 year-olds is predicted to remain over 40% lower than the 1990 numbers until 2020. While birth rates improved between 2000 and 2010, which saw an increase in capacity in primary education (the first stage of basic education), they have started to decline and this is predicted to continue over the coming years and will exert renewed pressure on primary education.

Strengths and challenges

The ministry's five year strategic plan for education targets the major challenges

The ministry's Strategy for Education Policy of the Czech Republic until 2020 ("Strategy 2020") recognises the need for stability and more strategic oversight. The preparation of the Strategy 2020 was initiated in 2011 and four different Ministers of Education from different political parties contributed to its development. This ensured that, at least in part, the Strategy 2020 is perceived as a non-partisan framework for future education policy development. At the same time, the fact that over recent years the average time each minister has served is roughly one year underlines the importance of having an authoritative strategic plan to guide educational policy development. Such political instability has also impacted on the capacity for general management at the ministry and its subordinated organisations. Importantly, the Strategy 2020 puts new focus on addressing inequities in the Czech school system. An earlier OECD review had pointed out that equity or inclusiveness were not among the stated education goals or policy objectives. The proposed extension of the early childhood and care offer and introduction of a compulsory year of pre-primary education is expected to better mitigate socio-economic influences on early childhood learning development.

High level of autonomy at school level, but a need to strengthen regional and municipal strategic management

The fact that Czech schools enjoy a high degree of autonomy to make decisions in core areas can support a more efficient educational provision. Schools can tailor their educational programmes and other activities to the needs of their students and community. Depending on how the school management and staff approach this, such an exercise can help focus staff on the educational offer and what really matters at that school. The development of the School Educational Programme, if linked to the school development plan, can also be linked to core strategic priorities for the students, staff and community. There was also an initial check of the School Educational Programmes by the Czech School Inspectorate (ČŠI), providing a good balance of autonomy and accountability in this area. Similarly, schools are responsible for the professional development and performance of their staff and school inspections check the school's approach to this.

A striking finding that emerged during discussions with several stakeholders at national, regional, municipal and school levels was the overriding perception that the ČŠI bears sole responsibility for the oversight of the quality of educational provision. The requirement for schools to draw up a School Development Plan does not yet appear to be perceived as a useful tool for quality oversight and development by organising bodies and school staff. Analysis of a sample of regional development plans reveals that while they present core objectives, these often are vaguely defined and there appears to be minimal reporting on progress towards achieving these objectives (a lack of clear targets, little – if any – supporting data). At the municipal level, the over fragmentation in the system generally means weaker capacity at local levels and by default a continued strong role for the centre.

Evidence of consolidation in basic education, but challenges remain in certain regions and at the lower secondary level

For the main part, municipalities are responsible for organising pre-primary and primary education (first stage of education in basic schools) and the majority of lower secondary education provision (second stage of education in basic schools), while regions

are responsible for organising upper secondary education. While there are some caveats that complicate the distribution of responsibilities for basic education (i.e. the six- and eight-year *gymnasia* programmes and specialised educational provision), this broadly clear distribution of responsibilities in combination with the central per student funding system (the national normative) and the legal possibility to operate different kinds of schools and facilities under one legal entity appears to have supported an initial adjustment of the school network in basic education. These adjustments, at least at the macro level, appear reasonably well aligned with demographic changes. As the number of students dropped by 9.7% between 2005/06 and 2013/14, the number of schools dropped by 8.5% and the number of teachers decreased by 7.7%. Adjustments in the public sector have limited the impact on the student/teacher ratios in these networks. However, despite initial efforts, the proportion of smaller schools (those with 200 or less students) has increased from 54% to 61% since 2005/06. Demographic challenges persist, notably with a decline in the size of the population aged four years or younger between 2010 and 2014 in the Northwest, Northeast, Moravia-Silesia, Central Moravia and to a lesser extent in the Southwest. Data suggest that in regions with a comparatively low average size of basic schools, there is room to further reduce the number of municipalities with schools. As in other countries, this is an acutely sensitive topic on the political level.

Political will to further integrate students with special educational needs, but several barriers remain

National statistics clearly show a trend toward favouring integration of students with special educational needs in mainstream classes in basic education. Since 2010/11, while the number of students diagnosed as having special educational needs has remained pretty stable, the proportion attending mainstream classes in basic schools has steadily increased. An amendment to the Education Act (to be enforced as of 1 September 2016) guarantees the rights of students with special educational needs to support measures in mainstream education. In preparation, the ministry had initiated work to introduce a set of five broad legal categories of special educational needs, with a detailed catalogue of different educational needs that would fit into each broad category. The exercise of going through these finer classifications will be positive in familiarising educators with the diversity of educational needs. Indeed, developmental work had already brought together diverse partners that had previously not collaborated, including notably the pedagogical advisory centres.

However, the OECD review identified several potential barriers to achieving the policy objective of greater inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream education. There is an “attitudinal barrier”, in as much as, there is a well-established culture and institutional prejudice of segregated education provision. Also, analysis of aggregate data suggests there may be a tendency for regions to protect enrolment rates in the special education schools they manage, with increased proportion of students diagnosed with special educational needs at the upper secondary level – this in a context of a sharp decline in the 15-19 year-old population. One factor that would support this hypothesis is the fact that the staff at special education schools holds specific pedagogical qualifications, which presents a structural barrier to reallocating staff from special education schools to mainstream schools.

Transparent division of education finance into national and local components, but concerns with regional allocation to municipal schools

Responsibilities for financing of education are clearly divided between different levels of government. The direct costs are financed through grants from the state budget to regional budgets. The operational costs are financed from the school owner's own revenues, that is, from municipalities for basic schools and from regional authorities for secondary schools. This transparent division of education finance into direct and operational costs creates clarity of who is responsible for what function in the sector. In particular, it ensures that the main costs of the school, namely teacher salaries, will be adequately adjusted whenever the State decides to increase them, and it allows municipal and regional authorities to plan the operational component of school budgets in a relatively simple manner. However, there is a systemic conflict of interest in the fact that regions are responsible for the reallocation of funding for direct costs in basic education to municipal schools located on their territory. Regions may have the tendency to provide preferential treatment to supporting secondary and special education. Of special interest in this respect are the eight-year long and six-year long programmes in *gymnasia*, because the initial four years of the first, and the initial two years of the second, provide teaching to the age groups which typically would attend municipal schools offering basic education. Since secondary schools are generally more expensive than basic schools, the regional normative amounts for *gymnasia* are higher than those for basic schools for the 6 to 14 years age group. In this way *gymnasia* take funds away from municipal schools offering basic education, and this effect is stronger whenever long programmes in *gymnasia* are opened. It is important to note that the decision to open these long programmes rests with the region.

While there is a stable system to allocate public funding to schools, regional formulas are excessively complicated

The allocation of central funds for direct costs in education is designed through a system of per student normatives. There is common knowledge of this system and in general Czech education officials at all levels of governance accept the current system as fair and objective. The value of a publicly known and strictly adhered to allocation system in education is significant for the stable functioning of schools. The most important benefit is the stability and predictability of financing, which allows all schools to plan their development in the coming years. In particular, since 2012 there has been greater stability in the principles and technical details of the national normatives, namely the relative amount of the central grant for direct costs allocated to each age group has been held constant.

However, the allocation system is extremely complex at the regional level. For pre-schools and basic schools, the per student regional normative amount is the result of a specific formula applied to the number of students, using some supporting parameters (such as average salaries of teachers and non-teachers). The formulas include quite complicated mathematical functions of the number of students. For staff in education departments, the application of the formula is reduced to entering the additional parameters (salaries). In this mechanical process, there is no place to assess and respond to the differentiated needs of pre-schools and basic schools, or to take into account such crucial factors as the existence of a special class in mainstream basic schools. For secondary education, the complexity arises from the sheer number of educational profiles and corresponding normatives. There are regional normatives for every educational programme provided in the region's schools, ranging between 300 and 400 across the different

regions. Moreover, national regulation provides a strict and unambiguous methodology to calculate them from year to year, leaving regions very little room for manoeuvre in this respect. The main problem with such over complicated formulas is that they prevent discussion and dialogue and do not allow the analysis of specific school needs, to prioritise these needs, to discuss these priorities with all education stakeholders and in this way to formulate and implement a regional education strategy.

National allocation for direct costs does not support equity, but some funding for students with special educational needs

The national allocation system for direct costs is rigid, with an excessively simplified formula (only five different normatives) and it does not take into account regional differentiation of the Czech education system. With one per student normative for basic education (age group 6 to 14 years), for example, relatively more funds are transferred to urbanised regions and Prague than to more rural regions with smaller average class sizes. In this way, the national allocation system does not include the instruments to support the equity of education finance. An initial examination of the extent of regional variation on some basic indicators for basic education, suggests that this underlines the need for a more in-depth review and exposes the weakness of an over-simplified national allocation system. In this context, a strength is the fact that the Czech Republic recognises the need for specific regulation and additional funding for the teaching of students with special educational needs. This is currently provided through the allocation of additional teaching assistance on the basis of recognised and certified needs, and through the provision of specific funds for this assistance, above and beyond the funding for direct education costs. The need for this teaching assistance, in the form of allowed additional teacher positions, is negotiated between the school and the school founder, and then submitted for consideration by the regional education authorities, who take the final decision whether to fund these assistant teacher positions. The funds for additional teaching assistance are assumed to come from the regional reserve of education per student normative funds, legally set to be equal to at least 2.5% of the total sum of normative funds.

Teacher status is low, but there is recognition of the need to improve teacher pay

Czech teachers have a very low perception of their social status in society. With low teacher salaries, poor working conditions and low levels of teacher morale, it is no doubt difficult to attract high calibre candidates to the profession. While efforts have been made to improve the salaries of teachers in recent years, pay is still very low. The ratio of primary and secondary teachers' salaries to earnings for full-time, full-year workers with tertiary education is one of the lowest among OECD countries. Further, the slow rate of salary progression over the course of a teacher's career is found to be one of the least rewarding across OECD countries. A clear priority of the ministry in Strategy 2020 is to secure more resources for teacher salaries. The Czech Republic registered one of the largest increases in teacher salaries across Europe between 2009 and 2014 – with the annual gross salary increasing by 22% in real terms for teachers in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary general education. In addition, there has been a sharp increase in teacher pay by 3.5% in 2015 and the aim is to continue this trend. The OECD review team underlines how necessary these increases in teacher salaries have been as a core factor to ensure a minimum attractiveness for the profession.

There are weak links between teacher performance, pay and recognition, but teaching standards have been developed

While there is currently scope to promote teachers to a higher career level if teachers take on additional responsibilities or demonstrate high performance, in practice, salary is still largely determined by teachers' length of service. Whether or not teachers receive their "personal pay" often depends on factors outside of their performance. Such funding may be re-allocated at the school level at the end of the year to cushion and absorb losses in other areas, such as a drop in school enrolments. The personal pay component to reward outstanding teaching is very low in practice, averaging only 2.9% per annum. The proposed new career system (under consideration) may help to bring teacher performance, appraisal and salary closer together. However, a key consideration is whether the new structures will actually result in greater differentiation of teacher roles given some of this flexibility already exists and is not fully utilised. The barriers to actively promoting and advancing teachers need to be fully understood to ensure the new career system can have positive effects. At the time of the OECD review there was some uncertainty about securing additional funds for the new career structures. Many interviewees expressed the view that additional funding for implementation of the new career system will be critical to its success in enabling greater differentiation among teachers and promoting the best to the top teaching levels. A significant strength is the development of Professional Teaching Standards in 2012 that would underpin (and helped in designing) the new career structures. The standards outline the expectations of teacher qualities and professional capabilities over the course of their career, including the scope of a teacher's work and professional development to be undertaken at each career stage.

Schools and teachers are empowered with high levels of autonomy, but professional learning and collaboration can be improved

In international comparison, school principal reports from PISA 2012 confirm that Czech schools enjoy high levels of autonomy in hiring and dismissing teachers and setting starting salaries. Teachers also enjoy high levels of autonomy in the classroom. The Framework Education Programmes represent a significant shift to give schools and teachers more flexibility in interpreting broad education objectives into local curricula. Teachers also have high levels of autonomy to decide which pedagogical methods and educational materials to use. This provides the conditions for teachers to tailor teaching to students' needs. However, opportunities for professional learning and collaboration appear underdeveloped, with greater emphasis on training by external providers and less on teacher learning that occurs in the school in the daily work of teachers. While subject commissions are one form of collaboration, it is not clear how much they deeply explore issues of learning and teaching versus more routine and administrative subject-related matters. Mentoring in schools occurs at low rates. The autonomy that schools have to upskill their teachers has its merits, but requires monitoring in the event that information asymmetries may exist (i.e. there may be few indicators of course quality to schools and few avenues for providing feedback if teachers and schools are not satisfied). It was the OECD review team's impression that there were limited feedback loops between providers, schools, teachers and regional officials on the quality of training received.

The appointment and contract renewal of school principals have a sound legal basis, but decisions may lack transparency

School founders are responsible for the recruitment of their school principals, but need to follow central requirements that ensure a certain level of transparency, including publicly announcing the vacancy and appointing members of the selection panel to a required composition. The founder can choose two panel members and the regional office can choose one. The inclusion of one representative of the Czech School Inspectorate (ČŠI) and one expert in the field of public administration, organisation and management in education (e.g. a principal from another school) provides additional objectivity and brings in expertise and professionalism. This can be further bolstered if the panel chooses to invite additional external experts. The panel must also include one member of the school's pedagogical staff and one member of the school council which gives local stakeholders the opportunity to represent the interests of the school community. After interviews and possibly examinations, the selection panel votes on the candidates and makes a recommendation to the founder. However, school founders are free to ignore this, which bears the risk for "political" appointments by school founders. When it comes to the re-appointment of a school principal, in theory, both the ČŠI and the school council can intervene to prevent the contract renewal of a school principal in the case of concerns. In practice, however, this mechanism depends on sound school evaluations through the ČŠI and a competent and knowledgeable school council. Considering the review team's impressions that school evaluations are only beginning to focus on the quality of education and that school councils often seem to lack capacity, this mechanism may not be very effective.

Legislation provides some flexibility for school founders to influence school principals' remuneration, particularly through personal allowances and bonuses. In theory, this provides the possibility to provide incentives and to reward principals for high performance within budgetary limits. However, personal allowances and bonuses typically depend on processes that are determined by school founders themselves and that are not always clearly defined or openly communicated. Decisions about individual rewards are typically based on a limited set of criteria, such as budget discipline, instead of an appraisal of how effectively responsibilities are undertaken.

School principals can delegate responsibilities within their school, but legislation does not promote pedagogical leadership

Considering school principals' high level of responsibility as the head of their legal entity in most public schools, it is positive that they can rely on administrative and pedagogical support. Depending on the size of the school, principals can count on the support of one or more deputy principals and their roles and responsibilities are defined by the principal. Many schools also employ clerks and accountants to provide support for school budgeting and accounting. In addition, teachers provide support for curriculum development and teacher management, including in some schools pedagogical councils and co-ordinators to develop School Educational Programmes. However, legislation does not promote school principals' role as pedagogical leaders. There is a large amount of administrative and managerial tasks and central frameworks and legal regulations that schools need to comply with. Almost all Czech principals surveyed in TALIS 2013 (OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey 2013) reported frequently checking for errors in administrative procedures and reports. Coupled with teaching responsibilities, principals in small schools may find it difficult to undertake their responsibilities effectively.

Pedagogical leadership appears limited to occasional classroom visits, with little involvement in developing a collaborative school culture and teacher professional development. There also appears room to make better use of school development planning and in TALIS 2013 Czech principals reported low engagement and time for interaction with students, parents and the community. Importantly, the focus of school founders and the ČŠI is on legal compliance and budget discipline and not on their role as pedagogical leaders.

Policy recommendations

Build support for and ensure effective implementation of the Strategy 2020

The OECD review team's analysis of the international and national evidence on the quality, equity and efficiency of the Czech school system, confirms the pertinence of the three overarching objectives within the Strategy 2020. The major task for the MŠMT (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy – Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) is now to raise awareness of these objectives and to engage key stakeholders in concrete steps toward achieving them. A clear challenge in moving toward the Strategy 2020 objectives will be to secure adequate funding for full and continued implementation. The discontinuity of European funding, for example, had reportedly posed challenges at the central and regional levels in how to continue certain initiatives, regardless of how popular or effective they had proven to be. This underlines the need to better align national funding to ensure the sustainability of effective initiatives that have been supported by EU funding. A major step toward the objective to reduce inequities will be to secure funding to build adequate capacity in pre-school – notably in the regions where expansion of this age cohort is steady. Much international evidence on the importance of early intervention would support the extension of early childhood education and care services, in particular to less advantaged children. Also, to the extent that limited capacity in pre-school education was a barrier to children's participation, the provision of high quality services could see a greater participation of Czech women in the labour market (the low participation of highly educated women stands out internationally).

Develop models to strengthen strategic reporting and to focus this better on educational quality

Each region currently draws up and publishes its regional development plan. There is clearly room here for the Czech regions to take the lead in making this regular reporting requirement a useful – and also authoritative and comparable – strategic instrument to engage their broader community, including all other school organising bodies within the region. Regions should take the lead in developing models for reporting progress against the stated regional objectives, for example, reports could include a set of clear goals – in some cases, where feasible, including targets to be achieved – and subsequent reports would present a report of progress against each of these goals. Obvious areas that are current strategic challenges for many Czech regions include the need to consolidate the provision of both lower and upper secondary education. The Association of Czech Regions will also be able to draw on collective experience of how to communicate and report on the results of student final examinations (*maturita*) in their regions. A more proactive role and regular reporting of results by the Czech regions would build trust in the broader community.

The current distribution of responsibilities for oversight of school principals and school monitoring by the school organising body provide the conditions for stronger local accountability. Oversight at the local level can foster important relationships between school

principals and the local government, which would otherwise be impossible in a situation where direct responsibility lies at a higher level. However, there is room to significantly increase the oversight of educational quality at the local level by making more effective use of existing processes and documents that are underpinned by national legislation, notably: a prominent role for the school strategic development plan (SDP); the monitoring of the school principal's work and progress to achieving SDP goals; adequate follow-up at local level and also by the ČŠI. Importantly, regional, municipal and school leaders will need to proactively work toward shaping these instruments to better suit their needs. An important piece of glue to join these elements should be the new set of evaluation criteria being developed by the ČŠI. This should become an authoritative set of quality criteria to underpin regular school self-evaluation (although leaving room for local criteria to be added for specific development goals), feeding into school development planning. In turn, school councils and school organising bodies can use these instruments to discuss progress and challenge and recognise achievements of school management where necessary.

Develop guiding principles for school network planning with a focus on educational stages

With active collaboration and strong political will, there is a solid basis to plan a more efficient organisation of the regional education systems, including: good channels for policy discussion among the central, regional and municipal levels, as well as representative bodies for private and church schools and employers; objective demographic data and statistical forecasts with regional breakdowns; plus a strong administrative tool (the school registry) comprising a comprehensive listing of different educational fields and capacities. The MŠMT could lead a collaborative exercise to establish a set of authoritative guiding principles, rules and even target quotas for capacity at different key stages of schooling. The stages of educational provision facing urgent pressures to further consolidate – and importantly to improve quality – are lower secondary education and upper secondary education. These two major stages implicate the five main founders: the ministry, the regions, the municipalities, private providers and the church. The focus on educational stage as opposed to school type is important. For example, lower secondary education is offered by basic schools and is seen as part of a basic service to be provided as close as possible to where the children live, that is, even in small villages. This structural feature of the system makes it difficult to create school units of appropriate “size efficiency” and some areas with severe demographic pressures may face significant cost-efficiency and organisational problems in a system of per capita funding.

Actual and forecast capacity indicators for lower secondary education and upper secondary education would serve as the basic efficiency comparator for the current legal capacity in the school registry in each region (identified by summing up the capacity of each school offering lower secondary education and so forth). At the upper secondary level, a second indicator would be the current labour market needs (as measured by the proxy of employment and unemployment of recent graduates). The future labour market needs is a more challenging area and would require the active collaboration of employer representatives, chambers of commerce and industry. However, it is recommended that to the greatest extent possible the planning of upper secondary education fields would be linked to forecast labour market needs. Ideally, in the future Czech statistics could collect information from individual graduates on their employment and how well this matches their field of study.

Carefully evaluate the implementation of the new approach to classification of special educational needs

The development of an authoritative classification framework to support the provision of more individualised support measures to children with special educational needs is commendable. However, paying adequate attention to how this is implemented will be of key importance. First, it will be necessary to provide sufficient capacity building and familiarisation with the new categories for all professionals working in pedagogical advisory centres, who will be responsible for assigning support measures for Categories 2 to 5 (Categories 0 and 1 would be managed at the school level). Beyond the implications for the educational welfare of the individual child, there will also be costs assigned to offer support to children in these categories. There will need to be adequate opportunity for professionals across the fourteen centres to collaborate and exchange feedback on their experience with implementing the new categories, with a view to heightening the coherence of professional judgements across different regions. The implementation of the categories will also require adequate professional development at the school level – for school leadership to monitor this and for teachers to diagnose and work with children to address their specific learning needs. Second, the OECD review team underlines the need to conduct an independent evaluation of the funding implications. The official agreement with the Ministry of Finance is that this would be introduced on a no-additional-cost basis. The ČŠI could have a stronger role with a legal basis to challenge a diagnosis by the pedagogical advisory centres and to order an independent re-diagnosis where judged appropriate.

Transfer the grants for financing pre-schools and basic schools directly to municipal budgets (not via regions)

The current system of education finance, in which the regions have allocation responsibilities for pre-schools and basic schools, creates an additional layer of decision making between the state and the municipality, making the proper assessment of the equity and effectiveness of Czech education finance very difficult. It is recommended to introduce direct transfers for education of every level to those local authorities who are directly responsible for managing and financing that education level. For grants intended for both pre-schools and basic schools, this will mean a direct transfer from the national budget to the municipal budgets. The ministry needs these direct links, and the necessary policy dialogue they will promote, to better understand the problems of the Czech school system and to better plan its development.

The main difficulty confronting this approach is the extremely small size of the Czech municipalities and the fact that most of them have one school, if any at all. If it is considered that municipalities are too small to manage and finance basic schools, they should be entrusted only to municipalities with extended powers, as is already the case with a number of locally delivered public services in the Czech Republic. In this way not all municipalities will be the recipients of the grant. Transfers for example to municipalities with extended powers, completely bypassing the regions, will have to use more complex and flexible formulas. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that they can be designed to be far more simple and comprehensible than the current formulas for basic education used by the regions.

Make the national funding allocation system (the normatives) more flexible

The national allocation system, based on the pure numbers of students in five different age bands, is very rigid and does not reflect the complexity and the variation of the Czech

education system. It needs to be more flexible, by for example increasing the number of parameters, to reflect different factors which have impact on class sizes and on per student costs of providing education. Research and analysis will determine which factors should be used, along with two considerations: they must be objective, that is, they cannot be manipulated by local government decisions (e.g. average class or school size depend on institutional decisions, unlike factors such as population density, whether or not students belong to a national minority or attend a specific vocational profile); and they should have real impact on the class size and unit costs of providing education (e.g. econometric analysis can provide some initial suggestions for possible values of the parameters).

However, allocation formulas should always reflect education priorities and policies. At the national level, it will be necessary to engage all interested and relevant stakeholders, including primarily representatives of local governments, trade unions and school principals. Their experience and their expectations should be the mirror in which the ministry views the different allocation scenarios (meaning a proposed formula with a determined set of parameters) and analyses their consequences. For the stakeholders to meaningfully participate in these discussions, it is necessary that for each allocation scenario they are able to review the impact on each region, municipality and if needs be – on each school. In other words, each allocation scenario should come with nation-wide simulations. The most constructive use of national allocation formulas is to subject them to rigorous review, through simulations, and to ensure that their impact is consistent with national education policies.

Give regions more flexibility in the allocation formula

Presently, the regions are legally obliged to define and implement a very large number of normatives for secondary schools according to a very detailed methodology of different educational programmes. The OECD review team recommends that this legal obligation be either altogether removed or significantly weakened, because it leaves very little room for a flexible budgeting process at the regional level. The key recommendation is that the object of the budgeting process should be shifted from an educational programme to the school itself as an institution. At a minimum, this would mean serious reduction in the number of regional normatives (for example, using only one normative for *gymnasia*). Even more importantly, the budget of each school is an easily understood amount, comparable to historical costs of the school or to its staffing levels for all categories of school staff. Thus they can be analysed, discussed, and adjusted on the basis of common understanding of key education officials in the region.

A flexible budgeting process would involve establishing budgets of all secondary and special schools managed by the region, to try to satisfy their different needs within the context of limited available budget funds. In other words, it assumes: i) comparative review of the needs of all schools managed by the region; ii) comparison of characteristics of their students (including students with special educational needs, academically outstanding and academically non-motivated students, students engaged in sport and arts activities, immigrant students); iii) comparison of characteristics of their teachers (including new or experienced teachers, needs for in-service training, need for additional positions of pedagogues or psychologists); together with iv) their current and historical budget allocation; v) plans for future development; vi) historical and forecast demographic trends; as well as vii) changing requirements of the regional labour market. Such a review allows regional authorities to determine how their local school system should develop and what should be

the corresponding recurrent allocation for a number of consecutive budget years. The same review, it is worth adding, is necessary to adequately assess the investment needs of schools.

This may sound like a very complex exercise, but it really concerns important management decisions. To give a simple example, given the changing expectations of students, the region must plan which new education programmes to introduce in its schools, and which education programmes to phase out. At an even more fundamental level, which schools should be closed and which should be maintained. Clearly, these strategic long-term plans should influence decisions on recurrent allocations in no lesser way than the present number of students per full-time equivalent staff. Indeed, the current system only distinguishes two categories of school staff. A more flexible system would recognise the variety of staff employed in Czech schools and their different roles and salaries (e.g. teachers, school leadership, school administration, pedagogical support staff, technical staff, cleaning staff).

Increase efforts to attract and retain high calibre teachers

Improving the attractiveness of teaching is a key priority given the very low social status of teachers in the Czech Republic. While the ministry has taken steps to steadily increase teacher salaries over the past decade, these efforts should be strengthened. The ministry's plan to introduce a new career structure is a step in the right direction and is commended. To raise the public profile of teaching, the ministry should consider highly selective entry pathways at two stages: first, the quality of candidates accepted into initial teacher education, and second the standards that must be demonstrated to graduate from beginning teacher to qualified teacher. At the first stage, the ministry should explore approaches that can help better screen candidates into initial teacher education, such as encouraging providers to use more in-depth procedures that assess whether the individuals wanting to become teachers have the necessary motivation, skills, knowledge and personal qualities (specific assessments). Additionally, flexible programme structures can provide student teachers with school experience early in the course, with opportunities to transfer into other courses if their motivation towards teaching changes as a result. The ministry's plans to establish assessments at the end of the first year of teaching should help to raise teacher selectivity. However, assessments on their own will not be effective in changing teaching practice in a sustained way unless there is also a culture of continuous improvement and deep learning in the school. It is also important that the new assessment also avoids overly cumbersome processes that only lead to compliance and not improvement.

Promote a culture of using feedback, observation, student data and collaboration for professional learning

It is suggested the ministry increase opportunities that tap into the intrinsic motivation of teachers to improve student learning. The working environment of schools could be better organised so teachers have collaborative groups and safe forums to discuss and solve specific, concrete problems that occur in daily practice. This is the most powerful form of professional learning, but currently receives little attention in Czech schools. Research shows the most effective teacher learning involves collecting, evaluating and acting on feedback to modify their own teaching practices. Also, it is particularly important for professional learning to make a specific connection to an individual teacher's practice or to a problem within the school. The most effective learning activities help teachers to examine what they do in the classroom, what works and why. The ministry can encourage

schools and teachers to focus of this by setting clear strategic expectations that teachers continuously assess, review and improve their practices. This can be embedded as a core responsibility of school leaders to help education staff develops in this way. Also, school-level planning processes should be required to focus on this type of teacher learning and development in schools. The use of student assessment data should be central to identifying teacher development needs and goals within this process.

Further, it is recommended that teacher job descriptions in the new career structures incorporate the use of peer observation, demonstration and feedback. These practices can be embedded within specific programmes such as learning communities and mentoring in the school. While the new career system will expand mentoring, there should be more of a focus on establishing intensive learning communities in schools (which is currently missing). Teachers promoted to the highest career levels in the new career system in the Czech Republic could promote and lead professional learning communities. There should also be clear incentives and accountabilities for these professional learning activities as well. Teacher development and accountability do not need to be separate endeavours, but mutually reinforcing.

Promote greater objectivity in decisions on the appointment, appraisal and remuneration of school principals

School founders are the employer of principals and the power to select who leads their schools allows founders to match their human resource strategy with their educational strategy. However, considering the risk of political appointments, greater checks and balances should be in place. The judgement of the selection panel could receive greater weight, for example, by introducing a requirement that the school founder has to choose its final candidate from a shortlist of x number of top candidates presented by the selection panel. The ministry could introduce a clearer and more transparent set of national selection criteria, which could be based on the suggested professional school leadership standards. The recruitment process could benefit from the development of national guidelines for quality in recruitment procedures, training opportunities for regional and municipal authorities and a strengthened role for school councils, e.g. they could define a local competency profile that supplements national selection criteria.

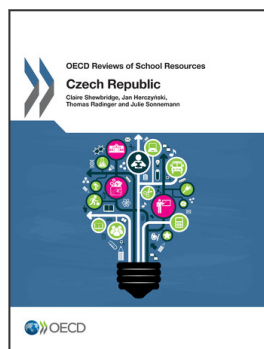
Furthermore, school founders should be encouraged and supported to develop appraisal processes that go beyond legal compliance and budgetary discipline as is currently the case. Appraisal could, then, become a tool to manage the school leadership profession and to communicate that school principals are responsible for the quality of teaching and learning in their school. Ideally, these would be based on a national framework meeting essential criteria of personnel evaluation, such as validity, reliability, accuracy, utility and fairness. Possible measures to promote and develop appraisal-related skills among evaluators include funding for evaluators' training and professional development, the piloting of newly developed appraisal systems before implementation, opportunities for on-site formal training sessions for evaluators and the development of online platforms for ongoing discussion. The implementation of a sound national appraisal framework would also help address concerns about the allocation of personal allowances and bonuses.

Create a vision for and support pedagogical leadership

Research has recently stressed the importance of pedagogical leadership for teaching and learning. However, the content of current legislation and school leadership training

courses continue to focus on the legal and administrative role. The implementation of professional standards for school leaders could clearly communicate the pedagogical role of school leaders and they could be used: by school leaders for self-evaluations; by teachers to understand the role of their manager; by training institutions for developing, evaluating and improving their programmes; by school founders for selection, recruitment, appraisal and development. Strengthening the pedagogical role of school principals requires a reflection on how school principals can be better relieved from administrative and managerial tasks, including a review of how school principals currently distribute their tasks and if they require further guidance on how best to do so. Considering their large workload, there is a strong case to reduce the teaching load of school principals, particularly in small basic schools.

The training and preparation of school leaders should also better promote capacity to be pedagogical leaders and to manage teachers effectively. First, it is recommended to develop a leadership continuum that reflects school leaders' needs at different stages of their career, including opportunities for aspiring and emerging school principals, mandatory training prior to appointment, an induction phase and opportunities for ongoing development. In particular, the ministry could introduce a requirement to undertake training before assuming a leadership role. Guidance on professional development needs from school founders and the school inspectorate could strengthen school principals' learning throughout their career. Second, training should focus more on competencies in areas that contribute to improving teaching and learning, such as strategies for supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality; goal setting, assessment and accountability; strategic financial and human resource management; and system leadership. Third, considering the role of distributed leadership in Czech schools, stakeholders should pay greater attention to the development of deputy principals, middle leaders and teacher leaders, such as heads of subject commissions (e.g. through the introduction of training requirements or a review of current development opportunities).



From:

OECD Reviews of School Resources: Czech Republic 2016

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264262379-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

Shewbridge, Claire, *et al.* (2016), "Assessment and recommendations", in *OECD Reviews of School Resources: Czech Republic 2016*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264262379-4-en>

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