



Changes in the education system in Poland

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The Polish education system has faced significant changes since 2016, including a change in school entry age and in the organisation of schools. Compulsory general education will be shorter, and tracking to general or vocational education secondary schools will take place earlier. These changes could have an impact on the inequality of outcomes, costs and the situation of teachers.

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Description

The Polish education system is facing significant changes that began in the school year 2016/2017, when the mandatory school age was raised from 6 to 7 years, reversing the reforms introduced in 2009. This was the first step towards deeper changes in the organisation of schools in Poland. From September 2017, primary school education will be extended from 6 to 8 years. There will be an external examination after primary school.

Learning in general secondary schools (*licea ogólnokształcące*) will last 4 instead of 3 years. Upper secondary technical schools will have a 5-year curriculum, instead of 4 years. Changes will also be applied to basic vocational education schools, which will be replaced by vocational education schools (*szkoły branżowe*) at level 1. After completing this school, it will be possible to continue vocational education in level 2 schools. Graduates from technical schools and level 2 schools will have the possibility of taking an external vocational exam, as well as the matura exam, and could then continue education at the higher (university) level.

The pupils who are in the 6th grade in school year 2016/2017 will start education in the 7th grade of primary school. Lower secondary schools (*gimnazja*) will be gradually phased out, with the last classes completing this education in school year 2018/2019.

The transition in the case of secondary schools will be completed by 2024/2025. The first full cycle of general education will be completed by the end of school year 2022/2023.

During the consultation on the draft laws, almost 80 opinions were submitted by social partners, representatives of local governments, non-governmental organisations, schools and individuals (excluding ministers and other central government administration bodies). Comments that were made focused on the following aspects of the reform:

- the lack of in-depth diagnosis explaining the proposed changes to the school structure;
- the timing of the proposed changes;
- the situation of teachers in the course of the changes, including protection of jobs, and preparation of teachers and the school system for the changes;
- the cost of the proposed changes;
- the late presentation of proposed changes to the core curricula, partial development of the curricula (only for some grades), the content of the proposed curricula, as well as late presentation of the framework teaching programme.

There is significant uncertainty regarding the outcomes of the reform, in particular those related to the phasing out of the lower secondary schools. These schools were established in 1999 and extended the unified general education to 9 calendar years (6 years of primary school and 3 years of lower-secondary school). They are seen as the major reason for improvement of PISA results in Poland, observed steadily in surveys between 2000 and 2012.

The results of the 2015 PISA survey confirm the leading position of Polish students in the assessment of their achievements (Sitek et al., 2016). In all of the assessment domains, there is a clear trend towards reducing the share of low achievers. A reform that would result in earlier streaming of students, without properly addressing the quality of general subject-teaching in vocational education schools, is likely to increase the share of lowest performing students.

Outlook & commentary

There are many uncertainties relating to the costs and timing of the proposed changes in the upcoming years. It is evident that the consequences of the changes will be borne by local administrations at the lowest (*gmina*) level, the teachers, and the parents and students themselves.

The proposed timing for the introduction of the changes means that various adjustments must

take place soon – those related to the school structure, the development of the curricula, the teaching materials and the textbooks, as well as the preparation of teachers.

Another uncertainty lies in the impact of the changes on the inequality of outcomes. In particular, educational researchers identify reduction in the duration of the universal general education as a significant risk of increased inequality in educational outcomes (Letter to Minister of Education, 2016).

The cost of the changes also remains unknown. Differences in the estimates made by the government and the stakeholders are significant. For example, the Polish Teachers' Union (*Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego - ZNP*) estimates that almost 9,000 teachers will lose their jobs. The outcomes of the changes need to be closely monitored, particularly their burden on local (*gmina*) authorities, which will face the direct consequences of the changes in the school structure.

The ZNP and parents' organisations, as well as opposition parties, among others, oppose the changes. In April, these institutions proposed the holding of a national referendum on the changes in the educational system structure. 910,000 people signed a call for a referendum (the required minimum is 500,000 people). There is also a proposal to postpone the introduction of the changes by one year.

Further reading

Letter to Minister of Education (2016). Letter of 87 educational researchers to the Minister of Education, dated: October 7th, 2016: <http://ibs.org.pl/news/apel-naukowcow-zajmujacych-sie-badaniami-edukacyjnymi-do-minister-edukacji-narodowej/>

Ministry of Education website on the education system change: <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl>

"Parents against the reform of education" (Rodzice przeciwko reformie edukacji) movement's fan-page: <https://pl-pl.facebook.com/Rodzice-przeciwko-reformie-edukacji-883885225080636/>

Polish Teachers' Union website: <http://www.znp.edu.pl>

Sitek, M. (ed.), Bordzoł, P., Biedrzycki, K., Bulkowski, K., Chrzanowski, M., Federowicz, M., Sułowska, A. (2016). Program Międzynarodowej Oceny Umiejętności Uczniów. Wyniki Badania 2015 w Polsce [Programme of International Student Assessment. Results of the 2015 Survey in Poland]. Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych.

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