



Executive summary of the public audit report

COULD LITHUANIAN STUDENTS PERFORM BETTER?

28 November 2017, No. VA-2017-P-50-1-20



SUMMARY

The Importance of the Audit

In assessing the progress achieved in Lithuania, the European Commission (EC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) had criticised the country for failing to improve the quality of education, and the ineffective funding thereof. Said institutions had noted¹ that values of indicators tracking the number of students assigned per teacher in Lithuania are among the lowest in the EU, and has been noticeably declining since 2005. If Lithuania were to reach the EU average (of student number per teach), the number of teachers would have to be reduced by 8.5 percent (2015). With the number of teachers remaining constant, the load per teacher declines, and so does the salary.

Bloated infrastructure leads to most of the funds allocated to education being used for the maintenance of buildings. Given that our expenditure on salaries also exceeds the EU average, fewer funds remain for improving the quality of education. This is also indicated by the stagnant performance of Lithuanian students, as measured by the PISA study conducted by the OECD², as well as the assessment of the achievements of Lithuanian general education, and the results of final exams. Student performance in smaller village schools is worse than in city schools, which increases the gap even further. In the opinion of researchers interested in the future of education, poorly performing students are a potential public burden, because many of them will not be able to live and work on their own, necessitating social services³.

The OECD study (2015)⁴ has shown that in cases where student performance reaches the average of the OECD countries and remains at that level across the entire country, the growth of the GDP of that country covers the expenditure for education in 10 years. Therefore, an effective and outcome-driven education system is an economically beneficial investment.

In order to identify the factors responsible for the stagnant learning outcomes of Lithuanian students, which become an increasingly bigger burden on taxpayers every year, we have conducted a systematic audit on the effectiveness of general education.

The Goals and Scope of the Audit

The goal of the audit was to assess whether the quality of general education is being ensured. For these purposes we have chosen the changes in student performance, because that is the only indicator tracking the progress in learning outcomes across Lithuania.

The audited period – 2014–2016. In order to accurately specify the changes in the indicator values, we have also used data from previous years.

The key questions of the audit were as follows:

- is the network of schools developed, and education financed with the goal of improving student performance?;
- are school leaders and educators responsible for student performance?;
- is there a goal to ensure the improvement in student performance by educating students in accordance with their individual needs?

¹ Available on the Internet at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2015/cr15139.pdf>.

² Available on the Internet at: <http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=LTU&treshold=10&topic=PI>.

³ Available on the Internet at: <http://www.thefivethings.org/andreas-schleicher/>.

⁴ Available on the Internet at: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/universal-basic-skills-9789264234833-en.htm>.

Audited subjects:

- The Ministry of Education and Science;
- the network and funding were assessed in 66 schools within 16 municipalities;
- performance of school leaders and educators were assessed in 50 schools within 15 municipalities;
- assurance of education according to individual needs was assessed in 53 schools within 15 municipalities.

Audit procedures were carried out in 21 municipalities and 116 schools.

In order to ensure comparability, we have selected the following establishments owned by all of the audited municipalities: primary schools, progymnasiums (including extended gymnasiums), as well as schools providing pre-school, primary and general education up to eight grade.

The audit was carried out in accordance with the National Audit Office and the international standards of supreme audit institutions. The scope, limitations and methodology are described in more detail in the Annex no. 2, "Audit Scope and Methodology" (p. 63).

Main Results of the Audit

Since improving student performance is a national priority, the National Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030"⁵ includes the goal of reaching that at least 50 percent of Lithuanian fifteen-year-olds would achieve the third (of six) reading, mathematical and science literacy level specified in the PISA study by 2020. The breakthrough expected in 2015 did not happen – students remain below the 50 percent mark, while the science literacy indicator has actually gotten worse. In terms of science literacy, Lithuanian fifteen-year-olds have settled in the 36-38th position, in terms of mathematical literacy – 36th position, and 39th position in terms of reading ability⁶. Meanwhile, education benefited from 53 percent higher (377 to 577 million EUR) expenditure over the last 10 years (2006-2016).

Unfortunately, within the key national strategic document, the aim to improve student performance remains a merely nominal indicator. The general education reform is conducted without the aim to improve learning outcomes, the aim fails to be regarded as the main indicator by any national regulations regarding education policy, and the Ministry of Education and Science lacks power to ensure that municipalities implement the national aim to improve student performance.

Improving learning outcomes is not specified as the goal of reforming the school network; not all municipalities and schools specify the improvement of learning outcomes as the goal in their strategic documents, and neither school leaders, nor teachers are held responsible for such

In planning the reform of the school network, only 25 percent of the audited municipalities specified the improvement of learning outcomes as one of the goals or tasks. The rules on the development of the network of schools responsible for the implementation of formal educational programmes lack specific criteria to determine which schools must be reformed and how.

Indicators tracking the educational progress made in schools or municipalities, necessary for the consistent implementation of public goals, are lacking on the national level.

⁵ Available on the Internet at: <https://www.docdroid.net/OHqeBsc/lietuva2030.pdf#page=29>.

⁶ Available on the Internet at: <https://www.lietuva2030.lt/lt/naujienos/1591-paskelbti-penkiolikmeciu-pasiekimu-tyrimo-pisa-2015-rezultatai>.

Only 18 percent of the strategic documents of the leaders of audited schools have specified the improvement of learning outcomes and school performance indicators as a goal. Some municipalities had failed to ensure that school leaders would strive to improve outcomes and be held responsible for such, also failing to set the goal of improving indicators tracking the progress in learning outcomes and the quality of education for themselves.

The current procedure for assessing the performance of leaders (certification), and reports submitted to municipalities by said leaders had, in some cases, failed to ensure the responsibility and accountability of school leaders for related outcomes and progress, because only documents and procedures have been subject to assessment, neglecting practical activities and indicators tracking the progress of relevant schools.

Only 20 percent of the leaders of audited schools have held teachers accountable for student performance and progress.

Even though smaller schools are incapable of ensuring good learning outcomes, municipalities are in no rush to reform them, and the Ministry lacks the authority to affect municipal plans regarding the reform of the network

During 2014–2016, the number of students decreased by almost 14,000, the number of schools – by 49, while funding for education increased by 61.7 million EUR from the public budget, and 51.3 million EUR from municipal budgets.

The reform currently underway is ineffective, because expenditure for unformed (small) classes had increased by a factor of 2.5. Approximately 30 percent of the audited schools had conjoint classes. Small and conjoint classes fail to ensure good results.

Smaller extended gymnasiums with a single complex of 11–12 grades fail to ensure the provision of classes on all subjects which students desire, and certain classes – such as science and social education – which belong to the core of general education.

The performance of students at smaller schools, mostly located in villages, are lower not only on the EU, but also on the national level, as demonstrated by the outcomes of the Assessment of the Outcomes of General Education (AOGE), and the national exams (NE).

The Ministry is responsible for the development of national educational policy, and the organisation, coordination, and control of its implementation, but lacks the legal authority to affect the reform of the municipal general education school network.

Plans for funding education are being changed, and the goal of improving learning outcomes forgotten

The experiment of funding class vouchers was conducted in two of the audited municipalities, and cost the state 498,000 EUR more in 2016 than the education voucher would have cost on its own.

In 2016, the class voucher was more beneficial to smaller, regional schools, which are already funded additionally in accordance with the current education vouched methodology. The OECD recommends Lithuania to refrain from establishing a universal class voucher funding model, which could lead to further reduction of the average number of students per class.

The goal of having competent schools leaders is lacking

The level of competence of school leaders is inconsistent across the country. In 2014–2016, only 15.5 percent of school leaders were assigned their duties after assessing their competence levels and compliance with the qualifications for leaders of educational establishments, approved in 2011.

Professional development of school leaders was fragmented (77 percent of training session lasted only one day); leaders developed their competencies and skills at varying intensities (6 to 176 hours per year). No additional attention or aid was given to new leaders.

The salary of school leaders depends mostly on school size and may vary between 816.5 EUR to 1,540.7 EUR (among the lowest in the EU). For this reason, it may be difficult to attract the best leaders to work in schools, where they are most necessary due to poor and stagnant learning outcomes.

The teaching profession is unattractive; talented and young teachers don't go to work in schools

Low salaries and large workloads deter people from becoming teachers. The number of people studying education-related subjects is decreasing, and only 15 percent of people with Bachelor's degree gain employment. Their competitive score is lower than that of students joining more popular study programmes, which doesn't necessarily lead to the attraction of the best school graduates. In 2016, only four percent of school teachers were under the age of 30, and this proportion is decreasing every year, especially in rural areas.

The biggest influence on the salaries of teachers is their workload. In 2015, 11 percent of city, and 20 percent of village teachers had less than 18 contact hours (lessons) per week. 57 percent of teachers make 400-800 EUR per month.

The age of school teachers is increasing – 52 percent of teachers are older than 50. Once they retire, and new teachers become unavailable, there may be no one to replace them.

Not all students are ensured their individual educational needs, and social exclusion remains stable

Student performance increases when they are taught in accordance with their individual needs. The latter must be recognised, met by way of appropriate measures, and monitored in every student with the help of parents. It is especially important to recognise needs resulting from the social, economic, or cultural environment, because meeting them reduces social exclusion.

Reliance on tutoring services indicates that educational needs of some students are neither recognised, nor met. A survey conducted by the auditors has shown that 34 percent of parents with school-aged children rely on tutoring services. As many as 25 percent had hired tutors for their pre-school children. 28 percent of parents specified insufficient teaching of certain subjects at school as the reason for using tutoring services.

Only the individual needs of students with special educational needs are being recognised, and, in part, those of 11-12th grade students. The educational needs of most students (67 percent of students in the audited schools) are either not recognised, or recognised in a fragmented manner.

Only nine (out of the 53 audited) schools implemented some form of monitoring the individual progress of students. Only several of them have persons responsible for it. Learning outcomes in schools which consistently monitor progress and actively include parents are improving.

The integration of children with significant special educational needs into schools of general education is slow. In 2016–2017, only four out of 1,562 children taught in special educational establishments or classes were transferred to schools of general education in 11 municipalities.

Conclusion

1. The school network is developed, and education funded without reference to the goal of improving learning outcomes, because:

- 1.1. the Ministry of Education and Science lacks influence on the reform of the municipal network of schools of general education, because it is not authorised for such by legislation (subsection 1.4);
- 1.2. in reforming the school network, municipalities fail to specify any goals/tasks related to the improvement of learning outcomes, because legislation is lacking in specific criteria regarding the quality of education/the improvement of learning outcomes, which could function as the basis for the school network reform (Subsection 1.3);
- 1.3. as the student number decreases, classes are not being fully formed, resulting in conjoint classes, because the municipal reform of the school network is slow (Subsection 1.2);
- 1.4. the establishment of a universal class voucher would cost Lithuania more than the education voucher, and fail to speed up the network reform, because it is more beneficial to smaller schools (Subsection 1.4).
2. There is a lack of assurance that schools would be headed by continuously developing leaders who are responsible and accountable for school performance, the striving for progress, and the improvement of learning outcomes, because:
 - 2.1. there is a lack of agreement upon school and municipal indicators on the national level; legislation fails to specify the duty of setting and accounting for indicators tracking the learning outcomes of students, and the progress of schools. Leader certification and the reports submitted to municipalities by school leaders do not always ensure accountability for outcomes (Subsections 2.2 and 2.3);
 - 2.2. newly assigned leaders and not being provided with aid from mentors or introductory courses in accordance with national priorities, changes to the educational contents, etc. No institution is made responsible for coordinating the professional development of leaders (Subsection 2.4);
 - 2.3. no aid is provided to leaders after external school assessments. Only three out of 15 audited municipalities provided complex aid to schools after assessment (Subsection 2.5).
3. Teachers are not being motivated to strive for higher quality of education and better learning outcomes of students; schools fail to attract young educators, resulting in the failure to maintain generational balance, because:
 - 3.1. the current certification procedure fails to oblige teachers to check their work and results against their level of qualification, resulting in the failure to encourage them to improve, and ensure compliance between outcomes and salary. The annual assessment of educators is only implemented at the initiative of school leaders, resulting in differing results which arise due to the lack of a common approach to assessment (Subsection 2.7);
 - 3.2. consistent measures for attracting talented young teachers to work in schools are lacking on the national, municipal, and school levels, while career prospects, low salaries, and the lack of aid to new teachers fail to motivate them to choose the teaching profession (Subsection 2.8);
 - 3.3. there is a lack of predictive studies on the needs of educators, which could help determine not only the required type and number of educators, but also to formulate the order of educators in a justified manner (Subsection 2.8).
4. Not all children are being provided with education in accordance with their needs, because:
 - 4.1. The educational needs of most students are either not identified, or identified only partially, while needs arising due to an unfavourable social, economic, or cultural environment are often not recognised in the first place (Subsection 3.1);
 - 4.2. schools which implement assessments of the progress made by their students approach it in differing manners. Many schools only track the changes in grades, while available examples of good practices are either not recognised, or not shared (Subsection 3.5);

- 4.3. schools lack teaching assistants who assist teachers, rather than students (Subsection 3.4);
- 4.4. Since Page 10 of Article 29 of the Law on Education⁷ contradicts the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, schools are not being obligated to accept all students with special educational needs (Subsection 3.4);
- 4.5. additional funds allocated to students with special educational needs fail to encourage schools to accept students with special education needs. There have been no assessments of whether such funds are sufficient to ensure said needs, and it is unclear what these funds are used for (Subsection 3.4).

Recommendations

In order to improve learning outcomes, and the efficient use of funds allocated to education, we submit the following recommendations, which must be implemented consistently, without delay, and at the same time. Given that students are the most important players in education, recommendations regarding education in accordance with individual needs of students are presented first.

To the Ministry of Education and Science

1. Ensure education in accordance with the individual needs of students:
 - 1.1. relying on available examples of good practices, identify indicators for tracking the individual progress of students, which should be monitored by all schools, and oblige them to include parents into the process of monitoring said progress (Conclusion 4.2);
 - 1.2. provide schools with the aid necessary to better identify students with special educational needs (same goes for unfavourable environmental factors), and ensure the provision of aid necessary for such students (Conclusion 4.1);
 - 1.3. encourage inclusive education by amending the Law on Education regarding the assurance of the rights of students with special educational needs, the employment of assistants to teachers and students, the specification of educational funds, allocated to the needs of students with special educational needs, such that they would reach them, and the accounting for the use of such funds (Conclusions 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5);
 - 1.4. share examples of good practices regarding successful outcomes in educating children according to their needs, the employment of necessary experts of educational aid, etc. between municipalities and schools (Conclusion 4.2).
2. agree upon progress indicators for tracking the learning outcomes and the quality of education in schools and municipalities, and specify accountability for such. This would ensure the consistent implementation of national priorities in education, as well as evidence-based decision-making (Conclusion 2.1).
3. in order to achieve effective and consistent management of schools, develop and establish a system for the provision of aid and professional development opportunities to newly assigned school leaders, necessary to prepare them for their duties (Conclusions 2.2 and 2.3).
4. in order to encourage continuous development of educators, link salaries to outcomes and competencies, and develop a teachers' career and assessment system (Conclusion 3.1).

⁷ Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania, No. I-1489 of 25 June 1991 (amendment No. XI-1281 of 17 March 2011).

5. in order to ensure the training and attraction of required experts, periodically assess the need for educators in accordance with reliable data (Conclusion 3.3).
6. in order to achieve balance between the number of younger and older educators, and ensure continuous education, specify and implement measures necessary for attracting young and talented teachers to schools (Conclusion 3.2).
7. Given that the reform/optimisation of the municipal school network should be aimed at ensuring the improvement of student performance and learning outcomes, as well as cost-efficient and effective maintenance of infrastructure, legislation must be amended such as to provide the following:
 - 7.1. mandatory and clear goals/tasks for the reform of the municipal school network, aimed at the improvement of student performance and learning outcomes, as well as criteria for the school network reform, including the prohibition of conjoining grades five through eight (Conclusions 1.2 and 1.3);
 - 7.2. measures for the school network reform which should be taken by the Ministry in cases where municipalities fail to ensure the improvement of learning outcomes, and violate the legislation regarding the reform of the school network, and the funding of schools (Conclusion 1.1).
8. Since the OECD had recommended Lithuania to refrain from the establishment of a universal class voucher, the usefulness of the planned reform of the funding of education must be assessed in order to ensure that it provides the conditions necessary for the improvement of the outcomes of general education, rather than encourages the survival of smaller schools (Conclusion 1.4).

The terms and measures for implementing the recommendations are provided in the section, "The Plan for Implementing Recommendations" (p. 52).