

Education in Poland at the Service of the Ruling Party



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Law and Justice won an absolute majority in the Polish Parliament more than one year ago. Immediately after the new government was formed, things in Poland started to change at a great pace and in a very bad direction from the liberal point of view. Jarostaw Kaczyński, the leader of the ruling party, together with his puppets (President Andrzej Duda, Prime Minister Beata Szydło, the cabinet, and party speakers in both parliamentary chambers), embarked on a war against a number of achievements of the last 27 years of democratic Poland. One of the fronts is education, even though Poland is considered to be a European success story due to the results of school reform between the early 1990s and 2015.

What is more, the biggest beneficiaries of the reforms were disadvantaged children from smaller towns and villages, whose parents the socially oriented Law and Justice party wants to represent. However, the desperate need of the party to introduce their changes in every field of public life pushed the government to undo reforms and take Polish students back to the 20th century. At the same time, ideology was effectively smuggled into curricula. Schools will thus reflect a conservative, nationalist, and Catholic point of view, the only one that Jarostaw Kaczyński approves.

The current government does not care about quality of teaching or the competitiveness of Polish graduates on the European and global job markets. It wants to influence young people's worldview and shape the party's future electorate from the early stages of education. This dramatically illiberal agenda must be stopped and reversed. The role of the opposition is therefore to con-

vince society that changes in schools are based on manipulation and a political program, not on intentions to improve the status quo.

EDUCATION REFORMS IN POLAND

Following the modernizing reforms launched at the end of the 1990s, Poland was the biggest education success story among Central European countries. In the early 1990s, more than 60 percent of adults living in rural areas in Poland had only a primary school education. Today, 39 percent of 30-year-olds have higher education diplomas. No other European country climbed the international education rankings as consistently as Poland (e.g., OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment). Polish students improved their results in all competence fields tested: mathematics, science, and reading and interpreting. Moreover, the results are significantly better for both the best and the worst pupils. Results of Polish students were below the OECD average in 2003 and in subsequent surveys in 2006 and 2009, while in 2012, Poland achieved results significantly above the average level. The latest 2015 OECD education ranking places Poland as 5th in Europe and 11th in the world¹.

The education reforms started in the early 1990s with removing the ideological content of the Soviet-influenced curriculum. The score improvements are a consequence of the Polish education system reform introduced in 1999. The most important change was an extension of comprehensive education by one year. Poland's elementary school tier was reduced from seven to six years, but with a new three-year "gymnasium" (middle school) tier

¹ http://www.oecd.org/poland/Law_and_Justice-2015-poland.htm

tacked on. That gave all pupils an extra year before deciding on their paths to higher education or vocational training. The evidence suggests the change immediately benefited students.

The remaining elements of the 1999 reform are responsible for gradual improvement. These included:

- structural change accompanied by the reform of the curriculum and qualifications. A new core curriculum was still being fine-tuned until 2015, as were new university entrance exams. What is important is the fact that there was a political consensus on how to reform Polish education system to make it more competitive in Europe and the world;
- introducing external national exams. The first exams were launched in 2002 and now monitor students' performance at the end of every stage of education. The exams are standardized and individual results are available to all students and teachers. The results at school level are also made available to the public;
- extending school and teacher autonomy to allow teachers to decide which textbooks and teaching methods to use²;
- establishing a system of teacher development with four professional levels. The system created incentives to improve teaching, although it was criticized as being too bureaucratic;
- further decentralization of the governance and financing system. Currently, local governments are partly responsible



THE EVIDENCE FROM PISA SHOWS THAT POLISH STUDENTS HAVE OUTPERFORMED STUDENTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, SLOVAKIA, AND HUNGARY

for financing education, although most of the funds are transferred from the central budget.

Maciej Jakubowski, an education expert from the University of Warsaw, wrote in his 2015 report: "Over the last 15 years we have observed a sequence of school system reforms in Poland with one main goal: to create new opportunities for students to learn and achieve more. Gradually, Poland extended comprehensive education for all students and also improved the curriculum by emphasizing core skills and problem solving. Furthermore, Poland increased its investment in preschool education and foreign language teaching. Although the reforms were much broader than that, the key to understanding the consistency of the Polish reforms over time is to see that the main aim of extending comprehensive education has remained the same over the years. This goal is very different from what has been happening in the neighboring countries, where few students are

² The introduction of a single government textbook for first graders in 2014 (by Donald Tusk's Civic Platform government) should be seen as a step back toward the limitations of the old system.

given the opportunity to continue their general education and enroll in higher education”³.

The evidence from PISA shows that Polish students have outperformed students in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. That can be related to the distinct path of Polish reforms, as, for example, those three neighboring countries still have a very early selection of students⁴.

The core curriculum was revised substantially in the 2008 reform. Currently, the curriculum outlines learning outcomes that should be achieved at the end of each stage of education. It does not specify the teaching content and allows for variations in the distribution of materials over time. The new syllabus limits the need for knowledge acquisition and focuses more on problem solving, analytical skills, and soft skills such as teamwork. It blurs the boundaries between subjects and emphasizes fundamental skills, also in vocational education⁵.

The new school evaluation scheme has been gradually introduced since 2009 and replaced the old overly bureaucratic system of inspections. It is based on visits by assessors but is supported by self-evaluation tools. It is also data-driven as the assessors, teachers, and school principals can benefit from numerous research tools that provide quantitative and qualitative information about students, teachers, and parents.

Poland has also increased its support for pre-school education and expanded the general curriculum in vocational schools.

According to the OECD Directorate for Education working papers (produced in an attempt to explain Poland’s success), on average, the educational reforms in 1999 were “associated with significant improvements”⁶. As it is emphasized, “Reformers had two main arguments for the changes. First, dividing education into stages would allow teaching methods and curricula to better meet the specific needs of pupils of various ages. Second, a structural reform would have to be linked with a curricular reform, otherwise those teachers who resisted the reform may continue to teach their pupils in the same ways as they had for many years. So teachers were encouraged to change what they taught and how they taught it”⁷.

INTRODUCING THE COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY EDUCATION REFORM

After coming to power in 2015, the Law and Justice party began its counter-revolution in education by closing gymnasiums. As of September 1, 2017, students will attend eight years of primary school and four years of high school. This will replace a system of a six-year primary school, a three-year middle school, and a three-year high school. The structural change influences the teaching programs of all school levels and allows them to put new content into all syllabi for all grades.

The use of the phrase “counter-revolution” is appropriate because it is hardly a reform. Lacking ideas for a proper education reform, the Law and Justice government decided to bring about a radical

³ http://ibs.org.pl/app/uploads/2015/02/IBS_Policy_Paper_01_2015.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See: Marciniak Z. (2014) *Reviewing Polish education reform in the late 1990s – possible lessons to be learned*, World Bank Report.

⁶ <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/5kmbjgkm1m9x-en.pdf?expires=1483104415&id=id&aacname=guest&checksum=B5BD7A5F4779BCF578999CCC51253CD4>

⁷ <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/5kmbjgkm1m9x-en.pdf?expires=1483104415&id=id&aacname=guest> and *ibid*.

change by listening to opinion polls⁸ – and although in theory this seems like a good practice, in practice it is not. According to polls, gymnasiums happened to be perceived by public opinion as places full of aggression and not adjusted to the needs of pupils. However, this perception is a consequence of the tabloidization of the issue by the Polish press rather than a reflection of real problems.

The findings of the Institute for Educational Research in 2015, based on national and international surveys, present a different image⁹. The scale of harassment in Polish schools (in comparison to almost 40 countries or regions) is described as average. Furthermore, it is not true that the situation is worsening. Data from 1997, 2003, and 2007 indicate that the situation is stable or that the scale of aggression and violence in schools is slightly receding¹⁰. Moreover, the overall state of affairs in gymnasiums is not all that bad. A 2011 survey called “School without Violence” concluded that 49 percent of pupils were physically assaulted in grade schools, 36 percent in gymnasiums, and 18 percent in high schools. Since Law and Justice does not have a specific program to eliminate violence from Polish schools, its only proposal is to eliminate gymnasiums and sweep the issue under the carpet.

Nevertheless, the current Minister of Education, Anna Zalewska (famed for contesting the Poles’ responsibility for anti-Semitic actions during

⁸ E.g., <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/gimnazja-do-likwidacji-ilu-polakow-chce-likwidacji-gimnazjow-sondaz,artykuly,375811,1.html>;

⁹ Estimates indicate that 10 percent of Polish pupils are affected by harassment. According to an HSBC survey from 2009-2010, 14 percent of 11-year-olds, 11 percent of 13-year-olds, and 7 percent of 15-year-olds are victims of harassment (harassed at least two to three times per month in the last couple of months prior to the survey).

¹⁰ <http://www.ibe.edu.pl/pl/kontakt/381-przemoc-w-polskiej-szkole-jak-naprawde-wyglada>



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and after WWII), is not interested in those figures. What is even more horrifying, she is also not interested in the data derived from PISA tests. Minister Zalewska is concerned solely with obtaining Jarostaw Kaczyński’s approval. And his endorsement can be easily won by destroying everything that was achieved in Poland over the last 27 years.

Contrary to politicians from the ruling party, experts clearly state that the introduction of gymnasiums promoted the advancement of young Poles. Local governments, the Polish Teachers’ Union, parents, university chancellors, and even experts cited by the Ministry of Education (!) are widely critical of the phasing out of gymnasiums.

Clearly, the PISA tests are not of great value to Law and Justice politicians because they do not take into consideration knowledge about history, Polish literature, or religion¹¹.

¹¹ Minister Anna Zalewska claims that PISA results do



However, it is surprising that a party which claims to be a promoter of equal opportunity and social causes pays no attention to tests that prove gymnasiums helped children from underprivileged families, neglected rural environments, and those with a lower socio-economic status.

The analysis conducted by Michał Sitek of the Educational Research Institute found that, between 2000-2012, the diversification of results decreased, mainly thanks to the worst students achieving better results. The differences between students with the lowest and highest socio-economic status shrunk, as did the influence of social origins on the choice of upper secondary schools¹².

Moreover, Drucker and Horn's 2016 report showed that creating equal opportunities through the introduction of gymnasiums produced long-term effects¹³. Middle-school graduates in Poland had higher chances of finding a job and earning higher salaries. The effects were most visible among students who achieved the lowest education results¹⁴. According to a Eurostat report¹⁵, compared to other European countries, Polish middle school teachers are well-educated, eager to teach, and younger than the average: 51 percent are younger than 40.

not prove educational success of Polish students and states that, although they constitute good revision, they cannot solve any problems. <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20728955,zalewska-o-badaniu-pisa-pokazuje-ze-polscy-uczniowie-swietnie.html>

¹² <http://www.edukacja.ibe.edu.pl/images/numery/2016/2-7-sitek-zmiany-w-nerownosciach-edukacyjnych.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.econ.core.hu/file/download/bwp/bwp1602.pdf>

¹⁴ http://www.iesw.lublin.pl/rocznik/articles/RIESW_1732-1395_14-4-260.pdf

¹⁵ http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/151EN.pdf

DRAWBACKS OF THE NEW EDUCATION REFORM

There are several aspects contributing to the problematic nature of the reform by the Law and Justice government. Among these:

- *Fast implementation.* Law and Justice wanted to adopt this serious and complicated project in three sessions of the Sejm (lower house of Parliament). The speed of implementation is the cause of deep distress, even inside the government. The Ministry did not offer any viable and documented arguments supporting change in the educational system. Ninety-nine representatives of Polish academia from different universities issued a letter to the Minister of Education in which they criticized the rush, the lack of factual consultations, and expressed their worries about "squandering the most important educational concepts formulated after 1989"¹⁶. The authors pinpoint three main issues: 1) the closing of gymnasiums was never justified to the public; 2) there were no long-term consultations on the new core curriculum with experts; 3) the Minister's idea to write the core curriculum piece by piece is highly controversial – for example, rewriting the existing curricula only for grades 4 and 7, and not for all the affected grades¹⁷;

- *The new educational model starts functioning in 2017.* This means that the current sixth-graders will go to the seventh grade instead of gymnasium. This requires a new core curriculum for grades 1, 4, and 7, including new textbooks, all of which will have to be written at an unimaginable speed;

¹⁶ <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20790099,polonisci-przeciw-zmianom-w-edukacji-apeluja-do-anny-zalewskiej.html>. Own translation.

¹⁷ <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20790099,polonisci-przeciw-zmianom-w-edukacji-apeluja-do-anny-zalewskiej.html>

- *High costs.* Minister Zalewska informed the public that the sum of PLN 900 million (EUR 209 million) are the funds "directly dedicated to the reform". Enormous amounts of money have already been spent on gymnasiums. According to the Association of Polish Cities, the construction and management of middle schools has cost around PLN 130 billion (EUR 30.2 billion) of public money, 8 billion of which were capital expenses¹⁸. Today no one knows what would happen to all the infrastructure. The government remains silent in this regard. Local and regional authorities will probably have to find suitable solutions and pay for them on their own;

- *Chaos and uncertainty.* Instead of going to the first year of gymnasium, children who are currently in the sixth grade are supposed to go to seventh grade next year. It remains uncertain where they are supposed to continue their education. If they stay in the same school, many smaller schools will have to switch to a two-shift system. Some local governments are considering separating their elementary schools into two buildings. If the educational revolution enters into force this year then teaching of the seventh graders will be an act of complete and utter improvisation. There are no core curricula, no textbooks, no teaching programs. There will be no more than a couple of months to prepare – including a reorganization of the schools in the communes and, among others, retrofitting of buildings. There are still no guidelines, regulations, or detailed data regarding this reform. Law and Justice ignores these concerns;

- *Teacher redundancy.* Despite Minister Zalewska's declaration that only a small percentage of teachers will be let go, lo-

cal governments are announcing that the numbers could reach a couple thousand. The Polish Teachers' Union asserts that the closing of middle schools will cause an avalanche of redundancies – 45,000 teachers and 7,500 school principals could be sacked¹⁹.

To put it bluntly, Law and Justice had prepared a roller-coaster ride for Polish pupils. There is no detailed plan, no positive expertise, no time to adjust or convince the subjects of the reform of its validity. Once again, the government believes that turning everything upside down *is* reform. But it is not. It is only an extremely pricey, extravagant, and dangerous PR measure that will have negative consequences for society.

NEW CURRICULUM

A new school structure means new chances to change the curriculum and fill it up with content that would please Jarosław Kaczyński and his acolytes, such as conservative communities and the Catholic hierarchy.

The Polish Academy of Sciences criticized the new curriculum prepared by the Ministry of National Education. The Environmental and Evolutionary Biology Committee of the Academy of Sciences expressed distress over the fact that pupils no longer have to know much about evolution. The Polish Language Council, on the other hand, considers the project proposal incoherent, full of mistakes, and written by an incompetent team of authors. Council members are worried that, because of the new program, "ac-

¹⁸ <http://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wiadomosci/artykul/likwidacja-gimnazjow-ile-bedzie-kosztowac,98,0,2186082.html>

¹⁹ Today there's 11 pupils per teacher in Polish primary schools, compared to 14 on average in the EU, and 11 pupils per teacher in upper secondary schools, compared to 12 on average in the EU. In both categories, Luxembourg comes first with 9 and 7 pupils, respectively, and the UK comes last with 22 and 19 pupils, respectively. http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/fff/Teachers_and_pupils_in_the_EU.jpg

quiring knowledge will become passive and memory based²⁰, whereas critical assessment will be out of reach for many students.

The history program, which dictates that children be taught world history only as of fifth grade, is also controversial. Learning about events and people “who helped shape Polish cultural identity in a significant way” will start in the fourth grade. Interestingly enough, but not surprising, is that Lech Wałęsa, a personal “enemy” of Jarosław Kaczyński, was scratched from the lessons about the Solidarity movement.

Moreover, a new subject will be introduced: Patriotic Education. Its objective will be to “shape patriotic and civic behavior, a sense of identity and national, cultural and individual awareness”. It will be used by the government as a chance to introduce to schools more nationalism and conservatism, since this is how Law and Justice understands patriotism. In this case, it will be introduced directly. The Minister will not have to hide this kind of content in the syllabi of Polish literature or history lessons. Those who believe in modern and positive patriotism, a more European one, are as a rule regarded as nothing more than traitors in the eyes of the government and will not find their place in school curricula.

The new program is also accused of being piecemeal. The subject “Nature” will be removed from elementary school curricula completely, regardless of the fact that the latest research on the processes of learning and child development gives no mention



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²⁰ http://www.rjp.pan.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1723:uwagi-do-projektu-podstawy-programowej-men-jezyk-polski-szkola-podstawowa-klasy-iv-viii&catid=45&Itemid=55. Own translation.

of the benefits of splitting nature lessons²¹. Fewer scientific experiments will be performed. On top of that, the mathematics program will be pared down.

Furthermore, the Minister fails to understand that the foundation of a modern and competitive economy starts in elementary school and its success rests on a good level of education about nature, mathematics, and computer science²². Expanding the compulsory reading list of Polish literature from the Romantic period²³ and a more extensive knowledge of history and religion play no part in building an economy based on innovation which can compete with the most developed countries of Europe and the world. Expansion for the sake of expansion is pointless. Children do not need more education based on memorizing and recalling. The humanities should teach how to discuss, draw conclusions, and solve problems²⁴. Law and Justice pursues the goal of shaping young Poles to develop the party's mindset: to make them conservative patriots. The Minister, who looks up to Jarostaw Kaczyński, does not care about education as a tool enabling the development of students (and, by extension, Poland as such) but as a chance to educate

a new generation of voters. Self-obsessed Poles who do not understand the basics of teamwork, who do not care about the world, are Euroskeptics. They are the last hope for the survival of Law and Justice.

We may already see signals of such an intention – recently, the Ministry of National Education organized a conference on “Freedom and Dignified Behavior”. The problem is that its participants represented one world view, the one accepted by Law and Justice²⁵.

The Ministry created a system of tight control over the progress of its own program. They fired all the superintendents of schools, installed new ones, and assigned them special functions. Superintendents, who answer directly to the Minister, will now have to assess the usefulness of teacher formation to the achievement of government education policy²⁶. In other words, they will have the tools to block teachers who want to do something modern, creative, or not in line with the educational stance of the party. Thus, there will be less experimentation, flexibility, and creativity.

EDUCATING 6-YEAR-OLDS

Apart from the debate on gymnasiums, there is one more crucial counter-reform that the Law and Justice government car-

²¹ *Edukacja Biologiczna i Środowiskowa*, 2015/4, pp. 48–61.

²² Nature – only in the fourth grade. Geography and biology – starting in the fifth grade, chemistry and physics – starting in the seventh grade. Knowledge about society and education for safety – in the eighth grade.. Source: <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/men-przedstawia-podstawy-programowe-trafia-do-pre-konsultacji,696093.html>

²³ There used to be no pre-determined reading list for grades 1–3. Now there are 10 books planned for early school years.

²⁴ Another cause for distress and protests is the Ministry's announcement that the core curriculum for history and knowledge about society will be prepared by historians chosen by the Institute of National Remembrance. The current President of the Institute, Jarostaw Szarek, questions the role played by Poles in the Jedwabne killings and assigns “full responsibility” to the German occupiers.

²⁵ The conference was under the patronage of Professor Krystyna Chataś (from the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin), the author of such publications as *Education Towards Religious Values*, *Education Towards Values in Light of the Teachings of John Paul II*, and *Education Towards National and Patriotic Values*. These books will be the foundation of the moral revolution in schools.

²⁶ Additionally, the core curriculum is very rigorous. Concrete goals must be pursued by each grade. Framework teaching plans have been modified as well and define how many lessons of a given subject each grade should have. Until now, the lesson plans were laid down by the principals. The core curriculum indicated what needs to be covered in grades 4–6 and teachers could autonomously decide when it would be taught.



EARLIER SCHOOLING IS THE BEST HOPE FOR CREATING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

ried out in its first year in office. Namely, the abolition of the reduction of the compulsory schooling age from seven to six.

The gradual reduction of the compulsory schooling age from seven to six years old began in Poland in 2009. During the first five years, parents were given a choice to decide whether their children should go to school at age six or seven. On September 1, 2016, for the first time, it became compulsory for 6-year-olds (i.e., children born after 2009) to start first grade. A year earlier, it was mandatory for half of all 6-year-olds to go to first grade alongside 7-year-olds.

Reducing the compulsory schooling age was especially important in rural and underprivileged areas, with low social capital. Earlier schooling is the best hope for creating equal opportunity. The ombudsman for children claims that “Social structure and growing material gaps affect the chances of children and teenagers at an equal education. The situation in rural areas deserves particular attention because a range of factors which negatively impact the educational chances of the youngest children comes into play”²⁷. The reform also promoted preschool education in rural areas.

²⁷ Marek Michalak in a letter to Anna Zalewska. Excerpt translated by Natalia Czekalska. http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/wyst_2016_09_27_men.pdf

New preschools were created outside the city²⁸. Preschool activities stimulate children’s development and prepare them for school, teach them peer relations, and in the case of children with low cultural capital, stimulate their intellectual development.

The 2009 reform reduced the compulsory schooling age and was deemed controversial by a large group of parents who resisted it. The Ombudsman for Parents Association and Foundation collected almost 1 million signatures for a petition demanding a referendum regarding the withdrawal of the reform. However, the reform opponents failed to present factual arguments. Their “reports” were a collection of emotional letters from parents of children who suffered from going to school earlier or, as the organizers put it, because of “their stolen childhood”. This was reminiscent of 1919 when Poland introduced compulsory schooling. It was contested by over half of the parents but the resistance was overcome in the name of children’s well-being.

The previous Civic Platform government made a fatal mistake by ignoring the protesters. Law and Justice, then in opposition, did not and promised a withdrawal of the reform. Yet again, common sense lost to the electoral calculations of Jarosław Kaczyński²⁹.

²⁸ There remains a significant disproportion between access to preschools in cities and rural areas in Poland. According to data published by the Central Statistical Office, in the 2014-2015 school year, 79.4 percent of children between 3-5 years old went to preschool centers. That compared to 92.9 percent of children living in cities and only 60.8 percent of children living in rural areas.

²⁹ However, in this particular case, the calculations were in line with Law and Justice’s conservative worldview, according to which children should stay home with their mothers for as long as possible and be raised according to tradition. Pre-school is thus viewed by Law and Justice as an interference with family life and as a way of pushing women (oh, the horror!) to work.





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For campaign reasons, he allied with the opponents of lowering the age at which children start school education. Ensuring equal opportunity for development of children from smaller towns and villages did not play any role when some extra votes were at stake.

Once more, the only reform Law and Justice had to offer was to annul previous reforms. And so, in 2016, the government abolished compulsory education for 6-year-olds and returned to making it obligatory for 7-year-olds.

When that happened, for the first time ever, the Polish Academy of Sciences took a stance in the discussion. In a letter to Prime Minister Beata Szydło, the Social Education Task Force assigned under the Pedagogical Committee of the Academy of Sciences called the backing away from compulsory schooling a "drastic offence towards Polish children".

ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORMING EDUCATION IN POLAND

Polish schools do not need a revolution. What they need is a systematic change built on previous successes that would level out mistakes. Polish students should not be treated by Minister Zalewska as lab rats. Today they are a part of the worst kind of experiment, one that is happening fast, in an uncontrolled environment, and the results of which are to be ideologically charged. That is not what the education system should look like – it needs to be stable and predictable so that children, parents, teachers, and local governments can make the best of it.

There is a lot to be done in this respect. The PISA test results are important, but they cannot be the only reference point for measuring the quality of Polish education. School should prepare students for life, not only for solving tests. Polish schools need to focus on teaching group interaction, risk-taking, and thinking differently. But to accomplish those aims, the government would have to set different priorities, change the curriculum to focus on new learning methods and soft skills, give more flexibility to teachers, and invest in permanent training of the older ones. We should expand and modernize the nature and computer science curricula. The teaching of those subjects needs to be more individually tailored to meet the needs of the pupils. Economics and democracy should be part of the curriculum³⁰.

Polish employers rarely complain about graduates' lack of core or subject-specific skills, but they often report a lack of communication or interpersonal skills, problems

³⁰ "Entrepreneurship" and "knowledge about society" are already part of the curriculum but there are very few lessons in these subjects and they are often treated as non-essential.



FOR 60 PERCENT OF YOUNG POLES, INTERNET IS THE MAIN SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE WHEN PREPARING FOR SCHOOL. NEVERTHELESS, ONLY 21 PERCENT DOUBLE-CHECK INFORMATION FOUND ONLINE

with self-organization, or a lack of specific vocational skills. Although some attempts have been made to include soft skills training in the 2008 curriculum, Polish schools struggle with their implementation.

Children must also be able to develop digital skills in school. Coding and programming basics should be taught as early as elementary school. The digital competencies of Poles remain low.

Moreover, youth trusts information found online (66 percent finds online information very trustworthy or trustworthy) and for 60 percent of young Poles, internet is the main source of knowledge when preparing for school. Nevertheless, only 21 percent double-check information found online.

That is why media literacy³¹ should become one of the priorities in digital education in Poland. It would develop critical thinking skills to evaluate media messages.

Furthermore, Polish children need support in learning foreign languages. The first foreign language should be introduced in the first grade of elementary school. At the same time, Polish schools lack a practical approach to teaching languages – passing the A-levels language test with merit does not guarantee that the graduate will be able to communicate abroad. Therefore, it is necessary to find additional financing for online educational tools, practical languages lessons, and, if possible, for international exchanges.

Modern schools should be aware of the realities of the labor market and react to its needs. Vocational schooling shall be reintroduced and linked to the local labor market so it will not stand in the way of higher education.

Today vocational school graduates have the door to universities closed. They feel like second-class students with second-class degrees. The two learning paths must be intertwined so that vocational students could develop their education in a coherent and continuous way. Graduates from vocational high schools can be successful in navigating through highly competitive job markets as they possess relevant sets of skills that are in high demand in the modern economy.

Schools should be able to educate in the dual system, i.e., in cooperation with companies³². That way, it would be easier to

³¹ Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media.

³² This system is practiced in several countries – notably, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and South Korea. As part of the dual education course, students are trained in a company for three to five days a week. The com-



THE REFORM'S MAIN GOAL IS TO SHAPE POLES WHO WILL EMBODY THE LAW AND JUSTICE POLITICAL PROGRAM

react to fast-changing market needs and adjust professional training to the requirements of the local labor market.

Finally, the success of schools rests chiefly in the hands of teachers. Well rewarded and free in their choice of teaching style and subject matter, they will be more flexible toward pupil needs and capabilities. The so-called Teacher's Charter should be modified³³. As it is currently written, instead of promoting the best teachers, the charter protects the weakest teachers. Now, the charter fixes weekly quotas of teaching hours (meaning no flexibility in the long term), makes it very hard to fire teachers, and centralizes salaries (calculated in Warsaw for all teachers), making them unrelated to teacher's efficiency or engagement. The document is seen by some econo-

pany is responsible for ensuring that students get the standard quantity and quality of training set down in the training descriptions for each trade. Students are therefore employees of the company from the beginning and receive tasks according to their developing abilities.

³³ Teacher's Charter is a law regulating the rights and obligations of teachers in Poland. It supersedes the Labor Code.

mists and many local authorities as a privilege, a relic that serves teachers and not students or society³⁴.

School principals have to be free in managing the school as well as rewarding teachers and other staff. Principals have to be able to fire teachers who do not live up to the requirements. Furthermore, principals have to be able to vary wages according to subject, whereas promotions have to be transparent and reward the best teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, Law and Justice's activities in the field of education remind many of the dark times of Poland's previous regime. So-called reforms are rattled through. The most important changes are either semantic (new names for schools) or ideological. The reform's main goal is to shape Poles who will embody the Law and Justice political program. "Young patriots" are meant to be the new voter base of Jarostaw Kaczyński's party – a new generation of Polish patriots who will know all the details of the everlasting conflicts between Poland and its neighbors, but will not be able to contribute to the acceleration of scientific advancement. Law and Justice weaponized schools in its war against liberal democracy, the development of civil society, and European integration.

In his critique of the slogan "More patriotism in school", former Director of the Central Examination Commission Professor Krzysztof Konarzewski stated that he remembers school during the People's Republic of Poland, which promoted patriotism and ideological internationalism at the same time. "Two points of view: the national and the Soviet-communistic were reconciled through the view that the proletariat of all countries must unite. There

³⁴ E.g., Leszek Balcerowicz. <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/890024-Karta-szkodzi-uczniom.html#ap-1>

was talk of a great Poland and great Poles, and at the same time, of the Soviet Union, which stands at the head of the proletariat of the world. The propaganda of the Polish People's Republic preached that we were the 10th world economy, that we were free of sin. Ideological zeal coupled with lies enslaves the mind. And enslaving the minds of young people is a sin, a crime against the nation. If Kaczyński wishes to repeat that strategy, let me remind that for years, the Polish People's Republic was approaching its own fall and eventually fell³⁵.

This sort of treatment toward young Poles should cause outrage. And, thankfully, it does. Education is the foundation of a modern country and a measure of its success as well as the guarantor of a better future for its citizens. Several of Law and Justice's bad reforms dealing with other areas can be undone in the future. But education reforms? Not so easily. Changes with such serious effects cannot just be revoked. Public opinion is beginning to understand this. Emotions and feelings are being replaced with knowledge and data.

Support for Law and Justice's proposals is decreasing³⁶. In November 2016, 42 percent were against the reform, whereas 39 percent were in favor³⁷. The Teachers' Union with opposition parties are trying

³⁵ <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/reforma-edukacji-szkola-w-sluzbie-patriotyzmu-wedlug-Law-and-Justice,filmm,396168.html>

³⁶ The closing of gymnasiums is mainly backed by the "people's electorate". Although the children who benefited most from the introduction of gymnasiums are the ones from less-cultured families. 57 percent of the people who back the closing completed primary education (compared to 39 percent who completed higher education) and 58 percent of people live in the countryside (compared to 34 percent who live in the biggest cities). Source: <https://oko.press/likwidacje-gimnazjow-popiera-glownie-ci-ktorzy-nich-chodzili/>

³⁷ <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10032501/Sondaz-Polacy-sa-zwolennikami-czy-przeciwnikami-reformy-edukacji.html>

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to collect at least 500,000 signatures for an anti-reform referendum. More protests are taking place or are in the pipelines. The biggest one so far took place in Warsaw in November 2016 and gathered 50,000 people.

People who live in cities are assembling. The big-city, better-educated, and dynamic electorate is backing a model in which teenagers enter gymnasiums as they perceive the transition to another level of education not as a risk, but as a chance³⁸.

Law and Justice brought chaos to Polish schools. While parents try to find good schools for their children, principals are busy with preparing new working schedules, the new regionalization policy, and moving libraries from school to school, the government is free to change the program in peace.

On the one hand, the relation of parents and pupils to schools is based on coercion – from a certain age for a determined number of years, schooling is compulsory. But on the other hand, this coercion is justified by the second pillar of that relation – trust that schools teach what is necessary to achieve success in private and professional life. Law and Justice-backed schools do not gain trust by replacing knowledge with faith and manipulation. As Chancellor Jan Zamoyski once said, “Such will be the Commonwealths as the upbringing of its youth”³⁹. Let us remember that as a warning and as advice.

That is why today all of Poland’s liberals should oppose the pseudo-reforms of education. For Law and Justice, schools

(much like the media and cultural institutions) are above all a political battleground used to maintain power and ideologically dominate the conservative right. We cannot allow Poland to rejoin the group of countries in which the role of the school is to maintain the cult of the country and teach about the leading role of the party and its religion. If we stop protesting, it could turn out that in a couple of years, A-level dissertations will discredit the judges of the Constitutional Tribunal or be devoted to the Smolensk “assassination”. Let us not let that happen. ●



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MIŁOSZ
HODUN

³⁸ <https://oko.press/likwidacje-gimnazjow-popierajaglownie-ci-ktorzy-nich-chodzili/>

³⁹ Foundation Act of the Academy of Zamość (1600). Own translation.

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