Overview of problems with general education

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Summary of problems, and issues suggested for decision to the Parliament

Apart from the usual audit reports, the auditing principles of the highest auditing organisations [1] allow the State Audit Office to advise the Parliament in the form of overviews and expert opinions based on its auditing experiences. The present special report focuses on the SAO audits concerning educational issues carried out during the last years. The Cultural Affairs Committee of the Parliament expressed the interest for an overview of this kind.

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The number of students in Estonian schools is diminishing. This compels the government to reduce the school network. At the same time, the state has to ensure that young people keep up with the requirements of labour market. The quality of education does not mean just the academic results; it encompasses several other aspects. The working group established by a decision on the European Ministers of educations of Europe has formulated the definition of the quality of education, on the basis of which information is currently collected all over Europe. The definition covers the following elements:

- academic results;
- participation in the educational process;
- supervision of school system;
- the educational system and its expenses.

So far, the State Audit Office has been focusing on the participation in the educational process and the educational system – the fields that are important from the point of view of social coherence.

The purpose of the special report is to give the Parliament an overview of the key problems of education, the current situation on the way to their solution, and to point to the issues requiring a parliamentary decision, without which it is impossible to improve the quality of education in the near future. The audits concerned are the following:

- In 2002, an audit entitled "Ensuring the Completion of Compulsory Education" was carried out, which focused on the record-keeping of compulsory school attendance and ways of improving school attendance.
- In 2003, an audit entitled "Bringing the Basic School Drop-Outs Back to the Educational System" was carried out, which analysed the opportunities for continuing of school attendance of young people with incomplete basic education who are past the school-going age.
- In 2004, an audit entitled "Lack of Teachers in Schools of General Education" was carried out, focusing on the teachers' labour market and training.

1. Educational system and its expenses

How large does a school have to be? What is the optimal number of schools? How far should a school be from a child's home?

The diminishing number of students has brought about the closing of many primary schools in the countryside, which has made the journey of the children to schools longer and raised the urgent issue of the availability of education. On the other hand, the small schools are unable to compete with larger schools on the labour market, for they have great difficulties in hiring good teachers. The main reason for this is that small schools are unable to offer full-time employment and about one half of their teachers are compelled to work part-time. This tells on the academic results. The results of the academic placement tests remain far lower than those of the bigger schools.

- The State Audit Office recommends to the Parliament and the Government, in their capacity of shaping the educational policy, to decide what kind of school network would be the best to ensure the availability of quality education to students from all the geographical regions of Estonia. This should be the basis for deciding on the principles of financing the schools.

How to employ enough good teachers?

Nearly one third of the teachers currently working will retire in the near future and the number of young teachers is scarce. At present, about three quarters of Estonian schools find it difficult to hire good teachers. The main shortcoming on the part of the state is that the real need is not reflected in the government-commissioned teacher training. This results in two things: the teacher training resources are not used in the proper manner and the continuous imbalance of demand and supply lowers the quality of education.

- The State Audit Office recommends the Parliament, in its capacity of shaping the educational policy, to demand that the Minister of Education should ensure the existence and quality of information on which the government-commissioned teacher training could be based, and that he should also ensure the correspondence of the principles of the commission with the expectations of labour market.

2. Participation in the educational process

Who should be responsible for the ability of students to complete compulsory education?

The Ministry of Education and Research has no precise information concerning the number of dropouts from basic schools and the reasons why children do not complete the compulsory years at school. The reasons for this are both the confused definition of compulsory education and the poor record-keeping concerning school-going children. A whole other problem is bringing back to schools young people with incomplete basic education who are past the compulsory school attendance age, because the system does not cover this risk group.

- The State Audit Office considers it important that the Parliament, in its capacity of shaping the educational policy, would evaluate, while assessing the report of the Minister of Education and Research, how affective the Ministry has been in investigating the reasons for not completing the compulsory education and extent of such cases.

How to prevent a child from dropping out of school?

The system of dealing with problem students is in place; but the issue here is how it works. The implementation of the opportunities created by the Ministry of Education and Research that the students could use in order to complete their compulsory education (e.g. individual curricula, student homes, the so-called Toots' classes) is the responsibility of the schools. This creates great differences between counties in the use of these opportunities and ignores the real needs.

- The State Audit Office recommends to the Parliament, which is the organ that shaped the educational policy, to demand that the Minister of Education should work towards an optimal structure of measures to facilitate the completion of compulsory education in all the geographical regions of Estonia.

How to help a young person who has dropped out of educational system before completing the basic education?

At present there are two possibilities for completing the basic education – the adult secondary schools and the vocational schools' preparatory courses (preparatory vocational training). The adult secondary schools supply basic education and the vocational schools give only vocational training. There are three unsolved problems:

- more candidates than the schools can accept;
- the organisation of preparatory vocational training is not flexible enough – because vocational schools have no right to give basic education they have to find schools to supplement their curricula with evening or extra mural general education courses;
- the coping problems of students – two thirds of adults with incomplete basic education have economic problems while attending school, the more so among those who attend the preparatory vocational schools.

The State Audit Office recommends to the Parliament, in its capacity of shaping the educational policy, to facilitate the education of persons with incomplete basic education by amending the Vocational Educational Institutions Act. The Act could allow vocational schools to offer basic education courses for

students older than 17 years of age. The State Audit Office also recommends to the Parliament to review the principles of granting social support and find ways of supporting the adults with incomplete basic education in the preparatory vocational schools.

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