Functions and Performance of Special Schools

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Summary

The State Audit Office audited the referral of children to special schools, education work conducted in such schools and the later progress made by children having emerged from such schools.

In Estonia, there are three special schools for students with behavioural problems; approximately 150 children aged 10-18 study in such schools. Girls study in Kaagvere School, boys of Russian nation in Tapa Special School and boys of Estonian nation in Puiatu. The annual budget of special schools totals to 21.5 million kroons; a place for one student is 5 times more expensive than in common school.

Referral to a special school is time-consuming and cumbersome. The period between making the decision and of a child arriving to a special school is from four weeks to six months, therefore, numerous children with behavioural problems are left without any supervision for a long time. The process is slowed down by the fact that a judge's approval is required, being largely a formal decision.

In most cases, children of 6th to 7th class need to be referred to a special school and therefore, the waiting lists of special schools are long for children of this age group. At the same time, the number of student places in special school exceeds the number of students. The schools' opportunities to change the structure of treatment groups are limited.

Children with very different background are referred to special schools. Special school as an option for reformation is sentenced for misdemeanours largely differing in severity: both the youngsters having committed serious crimes and those skipping classes systematically must learn together. For that very reason, specials schools foster harassment and crime, as children of largely different age come together to such places. Children are sent to special schools for different delinquency as the number of alternative study forms and educational measures is rather limited. Also, the practice of juvenile committees in choosing sanctions is rather different.

Education and studies at special schools fail to consider the needs of a child. Special schools lack psychologists, the positions for social workers are missing altogether. The material situation of schools is often very bad. Education work is mostly focusing on controlling, but not developing the children. This is one of the main reasons why so many children having left a special school can't get adjusted in the society.

Systematic follow-up caretaking is lacking. While it is obvious that the risk of misbehaviour is considerable in problematic children, having returned to normal environment, there is no special follow-up caretaking applicable to a child leaving special school. In most cases the quality of follow-up caretaking is dependent upon the good will and skills of a local social worker as there are no explicit instructions available in this sphere.

Due to all the factors mentioned above, the performance of special school system is rather poor. 65% of the former students of special schools have been punished for delinquency, 80% are not working and 60% not studying.

Main proposals to the Minister of Research and Education

Special schools with different orientation should be established, categorising the children on the basis of their age and severity of behavioural problems. The process for referral to a special school needs to be accelerated by reducing the bureaucracy and assuring preferential hearing of applications for referral to special schools in cooperation with the Minister of Justice. Assuring that the length for the implementation of educational measures would depend on the desired results. The structure of special schools should be adjusted to implement contemporary, result-oriented teaching and education work and provision of appropriate living conditions. A position for a social worker should be created at special schools to contribute to the re-socialisation of special school students.

Responses given by the Minister of Research and Education

The Minister of Research and Education did not give any considerable objections to the proposals made by the State Audit Office. Full version of the answers given by the Ministry of Education and Research is

attached to the report.

As many of the issues raised in course of audit involve problems of different institutions, not being in sole competence of the Ministry of Education and Research, it is intended to form a working commission of the representatives of various ministries and institutions for the elaboration of special schools development plan. The aforementioned working commission is going to devise a final report, providing, among other things, decisions concerning the implementation of the proposals given in this audit report.

The State Audit Office considers the establishment of the aforementioned working commission useful and we're observing carefully the further turn of the process. We would also like to point attention to the fact that the Minister of Education and Research should set specific deadlines for both the work of the commission and the implementation of decisions taken.

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