Lack of teachers in schools of general education

Audit report no. 2-5/04/14 of March 5, 2004

Executive summary

Setting of audit task

The Constitution provides that everyone has the right to education and that the central and local government bodies must maintain the requisite number of educational institutions. To ensure the availability of education and the functioning of educational institutions, the schools must employ a sufficient number of teachers.

The SAO carried out an audit designed to map the existing teaching staff in the general education schools and to analyse the reasons why the schools lack teachers, the manifestations of this shortage and how to relieve the situation.

The following issues were scrutinised: collection of statistical information on teachers, the need for teachers nor and in the future, planning of government-commissioned teacher training with regard to the universities, requirements to teachers or the possibilities of assuming teacher's office, remuneration of teachers, and workload and working conditions of teachers.

Overview of teaching staff

Reliable statistics on the existing teaching staff is an important precondition for determining the need for teachers and planning the activities. In order to plan the future need for teachers, one must know the breakdown of teachers by:

- age group;
- qualification;
- location;
- subject;
- language of instruction.

The SAO audit showed that currently the Ministry of Education and Research does not have a reliable information on how many and which teachers are working at schools, how many positions are vacant and which will the need for teachers be in the future. For years, the Ministry has failed to comply with the Government's order to collect statistical data on teachers. As of the beginning of this year, the work on the introduction for the register of teachers has begun, in order to keep account of the teachers. Unfortunately, the currently envisaged register is too modest to enable making conclusions and decisions about future action, allowing only the presentation of data on an individual basis and not any statistical overviews (based on age, qualification etc). Neither does the register reflect how many and which teacher's offices are vacant.

In Estonia, like in most European countries, it is quite difficult to find a sufficient number of teachers. Estonian teaching staff is old – almost one third of the teachers will soon retire and there is very little new young staff coming up. Nearly three quarters of Estonian schools consider it hard to find teachers. The shortage is the greatest among English, mathematics and boys' manual training teachers. Class teachers are the only ones galore.

The Ministry of Education and Research has predicted that in the future the need for teachers will decrease, given the declining number of students resulting from the low birth rate. Although the survey showed the schools' acute need for teachers, the analysis of statistical data collected on academic years 1997/98 to 2000/01 by the Education and Employment Monitoring Centre indicated that the number of teachers has grown, despite the reduction in the number of students.

The SAO recommended the Minister of Education and Research to develop the register of teachers into a functional database, which would serve as a basis for adopting educational policy decisions and monitoring the need for teachers in schools of general education.

The Minister expressed his willingness to deal with the development of the quality of the register of

teachers.

Preparation of teachers in universities

Most of the posts available for teacher training are financed from the state budget. Each year the universities and the Ministry of Education and Research agree on the government-commissioned education, which allows the government to respond to the needs of the labour market.

Despite the Ministry's efforts, the government-commissioned education does not correspond to the expectations of the labour market and it does not take much account of the acute shortage of teachers of certain subjects (foreign languages, sciences, boys' manual training) and the surplus in the case of some others.

For the government-commissioned education to be adequate, it is essential to monitor how many young people receiving a teacher's diploma actually take up that profession. The Ministry of Education and Research does not collect such information systematically. The analysis by the SAO revealed that, on the average, 73 % of those completing the teacher training become teachers, whereby there are remarkable differences between specialties. The teacher's profession is popular among those completing the class teacher training (80 % of the graduates become teachers) and unpopular among those completing the English and German language teacher training (44 % and 38 %, respectively).

One way of reducing the shortage of teachers is to bring people, who have higher education in the appropriate fields, but no a teacher's diploma, into the education system. This process is considerably influenced, among other things, by the qualification requirements set to teachers. Our audit showed that the possibilities offered for complying with the requirements to the qualification of teachers are too inflexible as these include the requirement to complete courses at a university. On the other hand, previous work experience as a teacher and independent studying are not valued highly enough.

The SAO suggested that in order to bring government-commissioned education closer to real needs the Minister of Education and Research should prepare a prognosis of the need for teachers, broken down by years, subjects, levels of education, instruction languages and regions, and to examine the situation as to the persons completing teacher training going to work in schools, using, for example, the Tax Board's databases for this purpose. In addition, we recommended expanding the possibilities of taking refresher courses to reduce the shortage of qualified teachers.

The Minister of Education and Research agreed to the SAO proposals and produced a detailed action plan for implementing those proposals.

Balancing teacher supply and demand

The number of students is not the only factor influencing the demand for teachers. The government possesses a number of control mechanisms to influence this demand, e.g., the standard workload of teachers, the volume and differentiation of the curriculum, the limit values of class sizes and the distribution of the school network. It is important that these mechanisms are used in a manner beneficial for the study process, incl. the work of teachers. The audit indicated that only one third of teachers have a standard workload, which implies that the existing teachers are not employed in the most rational way. Countryside schools are in a difficult situation, noting that the lack of the possibility of offering full workload is the main obstacle to finding teachers.

In most cases, remuneration has been considered as a means of attracting and motivating teachers. We analysed the current salary system, which is based on standard workload and the hierarchy of grades. The analysis leads to the conclusion that remuneration is not flexible enough and does not motivate teachers. The main shortcoming pointed out was that people with very different inputs receive similar salaries. In schools applying a more flexible remuneration system, the teachers felt greater fairness and were thus more satisfied.

However, there are other motivators besides remuneration, which influence the teachers' will to do their work well. The teachers attached importance to personal development opportunities and a transparent work organisation. They also concluded that they should have more freedom of choice in making work-related decisions, suggesting advisory capacity instead of control.

The SAO recommended the Minister of Education and Research:

- to take account of the small schools' need to provide full workload to teachers in developing the new national curriculum, in order to avoid the shortage of teachers;
- to map better practices, which the schools and local government units have applied for avoiding the shortage of teachers, and to share this information with interested parties;

- to give the schools more discretion with regard to remunerating the teachers and to take more account of the teachers' complementary duties;

In general, the Minister of Education and Research agreed to these recommendations, but adopted a different view on the proposal to take account in the curriculum of the need to ensure full workload to teachers.

The Minister maintained that the national curriculum is based on the principle that all students must have equal opportunities to acquire education, regardless of where they live. Therefore, the workload of teachers cannot be the basis for developing the curriculum, but the curriculum must serve as a basis for planning the formal adult education and continuing training of teachers. School operators, being mostly local government bodies, are responsible for the quality of education. Operators should deal with the problem, for example, by co-ordinating the employment of subject teachers so that they would work for several schools.

The SAO agrees with the note of the Minister of Education and Research that the curriculum should be based on the principle that all students must have equal opportunities to acquire education, regardless of where they live. We don't think that the curriculum should be prepared only in the light of the teachers' workload. However, this issue should be kept in mind in developing the curriculum, given the fact that the more the curriculum is fragmented and the more subjects it contains, the harder it is for schools to provide standard workload to teachers. By ignoring the small schools' inability to find part-time teachers and putting the school operators in a difficult situation, we could cause a situation where many schools will lack a sufficient number of appropriate teachers and not all students have equal opportunities to acquire education.

Märt Kivine
Chief Auditor of the Performance Audit Department