

Chapter 7

Reforming Education in Poland



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Abstract This chapter presents a history of the successes and challenges of education reforms in Poland from 1999 to the present in the context of political and social changes.

The goals of 1999 school system reform were to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the education system, ensure equal opportunities and raise the number of graduates of secondary and tertiary programs. The reform encompassed modernisation of core curriculum and the introduction of external exams. The crucial aspect of the reform was the reduction of primary education from 8 to 6 grades and creation of a new 3-year general lower secondary school level, what extended comprehensive general education by 1 year and postponed tracking to general and vocational secondary schools. The reform efforts were continued with the further changes in the curriculum aimed at the development of cognitive and analytical abilities and problem-solving skills. The positive outcomes of the reforms were seen in the progress of Polish students in consecutive (2000–2018) cycles of the PISA study. However, despite strong student performance, the new lower secondary schools developed a poor public reputation. In the 2015 election campaign, the then opposition party appealed to a general nostalgia for the “good old times” and, among other populist proposals, promised to reverse the education reform by eliminating lower secondary schools. When the party won the election, they quickly reversed the earlier reforms, disregarding negative opinions of researchers and local authorities as well as the protests of parents and teachers. Teachers’ frustration because of the chaos caused by the reform, poor working conditions and low salaries culminated in the 2019 strike in which almost 80% of schools participated. The protest, although not successful, was a beginning of civic society informal activities like citizens debates on education (NOoE).

This chapter has been supported under the program “The School of Education of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation and the University of Warsaw” operated by the Foundation for Quality Education, funded by the Polish-American Freedom Foundation.

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7.1 Introduction

In this chapter we will present a history of the successes and challenges of education reforms in Poland from 1999 to the present in the context of political and social changes.

The 1999 school system reform was introduced 10 years after comprehensive political and economic changes in Poland began which instigated changes across Central and Eastern Europe and led to the collapse of the Soviet system. The objectives of the reform were to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the education system, ensure equal educational opportunity for all students, and raise educational attainment by increasing the number of graduates of upper secondary and tertiary education programs. To achieve these objectives, the Ministry of Education introduced a redesigned national core curriculum which set only general learning objectives for each level of schooling, while decisions on pedagogic methods, didactic tools, and the selection of textbooks were left to teachers and schools. Curriculum reform was accompanied by the introduction of external exams at the end of each cycle of schooling (primary, lower and upper secondary). The most critical and visible aspect of the reform was the reduction of primary education from 8 to 6 grades and creation of a new 3-year general lower secondary school level. This structural change facilitated the implementation of the curriculum reform because it extended comprehensive general education by 1 year. The opening of new lower secondary schools with new curriculum and greater school-level autonomy was seen by teachers as an opportunity to promote innovative approaches to teaching and learning and to experiment with new teaching methods. Enhancing teacher autonomy demonstrated trust in teachers' skills and competencies, which was crucial for their ability to cope with reform implementation, as well as the overall success of the reform. The positive outcomes of the reform were seen in the progress of Polish students in consecutive (2000–2018) cycles of the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) study. Particularly important was the reduction in the proportion of low performing students in PISA 2003 in comparison to PISA 2000. Those students benefited from the additional year of general education and better quality schools in rural areas.

However, despite strong student performance, the new lower secondary schools developed a poor public reputation. This was primarily attributed to the short timeline of the reform implementation, with less than 2 years between the presentation of the reform concept and the opening of new schools and introduction of new curriculum. Moreover, teachers in the new lower secondary schools encountered behavioral problems typical of young teenagers. Even though teachers subsequently developed methods to address these behavioral problems and work effectively with teenage students, these negative experiences remained in the collective memory.

Year by year the reform brought positive results what was confirmed by the results of Polish students in PISA study in 2006 and 2009. Poland became a 'top performing country' due to mean results beyond the OECD average and the reduction of the between school variance. However there were shortcomings. Students

had difficulties with nonstandard problem solving tasks, the competences of the students in different types of upper secondary schools vary significantly and the participation in the preschool programs was relatively low.

To address those challenges the Ministry of Education initiated in 2008 the curriculum reform aimed at the development of cognitive and analytical abilities, non-standard problem-solving skills, and raising the competences vocational school goers. At the same time school education was made mandatory for 6-year-olds and pre-school for 5-year-olds. While the change seemed justified as mean to ease access to pre-school programs, for many it was difficult to accept as it was generally believed schools were not ready to receive younger children. A grassroots social protest movement was organized very efficiently under the banner of “Save the Toddlers”.

In the 2015 election campaign, the then opposition party appealed to a general nostalgia for the “good old times” and capitalized on the negative opinions of the 1999 school reform and the change of the school starting age. They promised, among other populist proposals, to reverse the education reform by bringing back the old structure of the education system. This included eliminating lower secondary schools and raising the school starting age to seven. When the party won the election, they quickly pushed new regulations through Parliament and reversed the reforms, disregarding the protests of teachers, parents, local authorities and researchers. The new “Law on Education” demolished the school system by introducing change without proper infrastructure. Curricula, textbooks, and manuals were written in haste, and the new curriculum no longer integrated the learning of several subject fields at a time. History and Polish language syllabi were extended in order to more effectively shape the national identity of students.

That reform (of 2017) was not rooted in evidence-based research and policy, but was a reaction to collective public opinion that schools were not working properly. Teachers universally perceived this as a negative evaluation of their work and the many years they had dedicated to improving the quality of education. The subsequent disbanding of teacher teams at lower secondary schools discounted their valuable achievements and severed local social capital.

The lessons from the history of recent education reforms in Poland are:

- Curriculum reform should be facilitated by the creation of pro-reform, innovative learning environment which place trust in teachers’ skills and competences.
- Even successful reforms are not sustainable if they are not understood and supported by the larger society, particularly parents. Without public support, politicians (populists) are ready and able to appeal to popular nostalgia for “good old times”, ignore evidence, and reverse earlier reforms. Such changes are difficult, if not impossible, to reverse.

7.2 The 1999 Education Reform

7.2.1 *Social & Political Context of the 1999 Education Reform*

It would be impossible to describe any societal or political changes in Poland over the last 30 years without discussing the historic breakthrough of 1989. That year the so-called “Round Table” talks were convened with representatives of the “Solidarity” trade union, previously banned under the 1982 Marshal Law, and the ruling communist party. After many weeks of negotiations, civil liberties were restored, including the freedom of association in trade unions and the abolition of censorship. However, the single most important achievement was the agreement to hold free elections for the upper chamber of Parliament (the Senate) and free elections for 35% of seats in the lower house (the Sejm). The elections were held on June 4, 1989 and every possible seat was won by candidates of the Citizens’ Committee, with Lech Wałęsa, leader of the 1980 strikes, the first leader of Solidarity. With this election, Poland became the first country of the so-called Soviet bloc where representatives of the democratic opposition gained real influence and power. In September 1989, a non-communist government was formed, marking the symbolic and actual end of the communist regime in Poland and – over the next few months – in the entire Eastern Europe.

The new government began to vigorously introduce reforms – both political (democratization, rule of law, civic freedoms) and economic (competition, free market, limiting the role of the state). The reforms brought about positive results – halting the enormous inflation, reviving individual entrepreneurship, and engaging citizens in various social activities. However, rapid transformations also led to serious repercussions in the form of social divides. Many companies went bankrupt. Unemployment rose. One could observe both the swift financial success of the few, and a sharp decline in living standards for many social groups. Public sector employees, including teachers, also experienced painful wage cuts. The political scene was unstable, governments came and went in close succession, and consequently various reforms were undertaken only to be abandoned soon after. The systemic changes concerned education only to a very small degree.

Limiting the state monopoly supervision after 1989 also resulted in changes in the provision of social services, including education. New, usually private, institutions were founded to satisfy educational, health and other needs. Non-public schools and universities were opened. The private tertiary education sector proved particularly vibrant as an alternative to state universities, whose organization, financing and management methods no longer lived up to social expectations.

In the early nineties modifications of school curricula were introduced, especially in the field of history, which was purged of elements of communist ideology. At the same time, schools were encouraged to allow parents and students to weigh in on school life. The teaching methods, however, remained unchanged. The lecturing method was used in class, pupils were rarely encouraged to independently solve problems or take part in discussions. In the second half of the nineties the Ministry

of Education launched discussions on the reforms of school curricula and established quality assurance mechanisms in education, including the introduction of external examinations. The efforts were supported by increasingly strong contacts with developed western countries and cooperation with the World Bank, OECD and the European Union (EU), the latter of which dedicated special aid funds in preparation for Poland's anticipated membership. These connections enriched the discussion of the development of the Polish education system, especially by the comparison of living standards and the quality of public services in various countries. It is hard to overestimate the role of international comparative research on student achievement¹ developed since the 1960s by the International Association for the Evaluation of Student Achievement (IEA) and later by OECD (especially PISA). However, in the 1990s Poland did not yet participate in these types of international assessments, so it was therefore difficult to verify or contradict the widely held belief that the Polish education system was performing adequately.

7.3 Changes in the School System in the Wake of the Education Reform (1999)

The profound systemic changes initiated in Poland in 1989 barely affected the public education system. It was not until 10 years later that the system underwent a fundamental reform. The 1999 Education Reform was one of a number of public sector reforms based on the new ruling party's guiding principles of free market solutions and decentralization. In January 1998, 3 months after the formation of government, the Minister of Education publicly announced the plan for a comprehensive reform of the education system. The need for change was justified first and foremost by overall low educational attainment levels and significant inequalities in access to education which limited economic and social development. The Ministry of Education identified the following 3 major goals of the reform:

- Raise the educational attainment of society by increasing the number of graduates of upper secondary and tertiary education programs
- Ensure equal educational opportunities through the development of a well-staffed and well-equipped network of schools, particularly in rural regions; financial assistance for students and improved provisions for students with special needs
- Enhance the quality of education by modernizing the structure and content of the national curriculum in order to prepare students for lifelong learning and active participation in economic and social life

¹ Spring J (2009) *Globalization of education. An Introduction*, Routledge, New York and London

A key element of the reform was a change in the structure of the education system achieved through the introduction of a new school level – a 3 year lower secondary school. Lower secondary school provided general curriculum in addition to 6 years of primary school and served as an introduction to either academically- or vocationally-oriented upper secondary school. The education system reform was implemented swiftly to coincide with other simultaneous public sector reforms, including of the pension system, health care and public administration. In May 1998 a draft of the comprehensive education reform² was presented and in July the Sejm (Lower House of Parliament) amended the law. In January 1999 the law “Regulations for the School System Reform”³ was passed, and in February an executive order was issued with the new national curriculum along with guidelines for its implementation. Meanwhile, the first classes of the newly created lower secondary schools were scheduled to begin in September 1999. The scarcity of time between the announcement of the reform, the legislative process, and implementation did not allow for proper consultations. Despite the Minister of Education and ministerial officials’ assurances that they were open to critical remarks, a true debate with such limited time was impossible.

7.3.1 *Changes in the School Structure*

The introduction of a new school level was the reform’s most spectacular change. The 8-year elementary level was reduced from 8 to 6 years and a 3-year lower secondary school (*gimnazjum*) was formed. This extended mandatory general education by 1 year, with obligatory education starting at the age of seven and ending at the age of 16. For their subsequent years of education⁴, students had the choice of attending a 3-year upper secondary school (*liceum*), a 4-year technical school, or a 2–3-year vocational school. The principle which required some form of institutional education until the age of 18 remained unchanged⁵.

The newly established lower secondary schools were intended to contribute to the implementation of the substantial national curriculum reform and raise the quality of education particularly in rural areas. The new schools were to have larger catchment areas than the previously existing primary schools. They would be

²Ministry of National Education (1998) “Reforma Systemu Edukacji – projekt”. WSiP, Warszawa

³*Przepisy wprowadzające reformę ustroju szkolnego.*

⁴The Government that initiated the reform intended a different form of education at the secondary level, through the institution of profiled schools based on the comprehensive school model. But because they lost the elections after a merely 4-year term, they could not continue further changes in education. Their successors maintained the division on into three types of secondary schools, traditional in Poland.

⁵Due to a strict observation of this obligation, very few students drop out of the education system before the age of 18.

sufficiently large to make it economically viable to hire teachers-experts in particular subject fields (such as physics, chemistry, and biology) and finance the necessary equipment for workshops and labs. The introduction of computer classrooms in all lower secondary school was also a priority.

7.3.2 Curriculum Reform

Changes in the organization of schools were meant to enable a more efficient introduction of the most important element of the reform – the new curriculum. Before 1989 the education system was based on one syllabus and one textbook per subject. During the 1990s individual schools were allowed to run original teaching programs on an experimental basis. Yet very few teachers embraced the opportunity as they were not prepared and did not feel competent.

The 1999 education reform introduced radical changes to school syllabi. The syllabi were derived from the national curriculum which determined the general education goals (including transversal skills – Box 7.1.), guidelines concerning the learning content, and the general rules for the functioning of schools. The key principle underpinning the new national curriculum was an emphasis on the

Box 7.1 Transversal Skills in 1999 General Curriculum

In school a pupil is provided with the conditions to acquire knowledge, skills and habits, i.e. to develop competences as follows:

Learning

- Acquiring know-how
- Problem-solving
- Organizing the learning process and taking responsibility for one's education
- Using experience and combining various elements of knowledge

Thinking

- Understanding the relations between the past and the future, cause and effect, functional dependencies
- Holistic and contextual perception of complex phenomena

Enquiry

- Searching, organising and using information from various sources, including reasonable and competent use of information technology and media

Acting

- Organising the work of oneself and others

(continued)

Box 7.1 (continued)

- Preparing activities and assuming responsibility for their running and results
- Rational time management

Self-improvement

- Evaluation of one's attitude and conduct, and that of others, according to accepted standards and universal values
- Taking responsibility for oneself and others
- Flexible response to change, seeking new solutions, standing up in the face of adversity
- Maintaining physical and mental fitness

Communication

- Effective communication
 - Presentation of one's point of view, putting forth arguments and defending one's opinion
 - Readiness to listen and take other peoples' opinions into consideration.
- Conflict resolution
- Making use of new communications technologies

Cooperation

- Group work; negotiating and reaching agreement, making group decisions, applying democratic procedures
- Establishing and nurturing contacts, building interpersonal relations

responsibility of the school for the implementation of the educational mission and goals. The guidelines for specific subjects were formulated in three points:

- Education goals – competences and attitudes which should be developed
- The tasks of the school – how the learning and teaching process should be carried out
- Content – the content of school syllabi

The guidelines of the national curriculum established standard requirements to be achieved by students at each stage of their education. They were also the basis for the proliferation of school syllabi and textbooks. It became possible to create many syllabi for every subject and to introduce different manuals. The choice of the syllabus and textbook was given to the teacher. This was a fundamental change for teachers, in that moving away from one centrally-defined syllabus increased their autonomy, but also their responsibility for the successful implementation of the curriculum. In practice, balancing the teaching of knowledge and skills proved to be a

challenge for teachers. Teachers complained that the syllabi were overloaded with content knowledge and there was not sufficient time to practice skills⁶.

7.3.3 *Promotion and Training for the Reform*

The Ministry of Education made a considerable effort to disseminate information about the reform to all interested parties at the local level, especially teachers and parents. The Ministry continually emphasized the key role of teachers, not only in the short-term implementation of the reform, but also in the long-term process of the continuous development of the education system. The Minister of Education expressed this in his introduction to a publication presenting the future reform⁷:

The reform of the education system is never a fully completed task, but rather a framework for an inspiring process. We do not wish to destroy what is good. We wish to help those who are striving for improvement. Hence it must be clearly underlined, that it is the awareness of the achievements of individual teachers, headmasters, but also local authorities, (...) that gives us the mandate, but also the obligation to proceed with this swift and comprehensive reform.

To reach the teachers, the Ministry set up a cascade training program under the heading of “New School” (“*Nowa Szkoła*”). During the first stage of the program 2750 trainers were trained to provide professional development programs for teachers⁸. The trainers organized meetings with teachers’ councils⁹ to discuss changes in the curriculum. They covered topics which included increased autonomy and responsibility of schools for the creation of teaching syllabi, interdisciplinary (cross-subject) integration, the establishment of school assessment systems, and preparation for external examinations. The Ministry estimated that approximately 70% of teachers participated in the training program¹⁰. At the same time, information meetings were organized by regional teacher development centers. From April to June 1999, over 200,000 teachers participated in 6363 such conferences¹¹. The Ministry of Education in consultation with academic authorities defined the requirements for teachers professional development courses and made a special fund available in the form of grants to universities on a competitive basis. In the effect of three cycles of the grant program 15,000 teachers completed post-graduate courses and some 80,000 teachers participated in shorter in-service training courses¹².

⁶ Konarzewski K, *Reforma oświaty. Podstawa programowa i warunki kształcenia* (2004). ISP, Warszawa.

⁷ Ministry of National Education (1998) “*Reforma Systemu Edukacji – projekt*”. WSiP, Warszawa

⁸ Ministry of National Education (2001) “*Edukacja, Raport 1997–2001*”. Wydawnictwo CODN, Warszawa

⁹ Teachers’ council is a main decision-making body in a school. It decides on teaching programs, professional development, students marks and graduation etc.

¹⁰ *ibidem*

¹¹ At the time, schools employed about 0.5 million teachers. *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*

An important element of the Ministry's information campaign was the so-called "Reform Library" ("*Biblioteczka reformy*"). It included 40 booklets (A5 textbook format, a few dozen pages each) that presented the essential issues concerning the reform in a clear and simple manner. They covered teaching syllabi, the school network organization, financing, manuals, assessments and examinations, teachers' work, and supervision. The circulation of each booklet was 75,000 copies and they were sent free of charge to schools, libraries and teacher training centers. Despite the efforts, fears were not entirely dispelled nor were people fully reassured. Surveys among teachers showed that they were immensely concerned by the planned changes; they felt especially insecure due to the change in the terms of employment. Over 50% of the respondents in a national sample of teachers in 1999 believed that the reform should be put on hold¹³.

7.3.4 Textbooks

The school textbooks market de-monopolization policy was introduced at an early stage during the 1989 overall economy transformations. Hence, when the 1999 education reform was introduced, several professional, competing publishers already existed, although the state company (WSiP), the only provider of textbooks before 1989, still held a dominant position. The reform, and specifically the possibility of choosing a syllabus and textbooks by schools, created unique opportunities for publishing houses to develop and improve their market position.

In the brief period between the announcement and the implementation of the reform, the publishers made an enormous effort to equip teachers with new textbooks for the classes that initiated the reform, especially the first year of the lower secondary school, at the start of the 1999–2000 school year. Before being cleared for use in schools, all textbooks had to be evaluated by experts designated by the Ministry of Education. One-hundred seventy-nine titles were on the list of accepted new textbooks announced before the beginning of school year 1999–2000. The list did not include exercise books or teachers' manuals. It was estimated¹⁴, that in total over 500 titles issued by 150 publishers were available.

The majority of new textbooks proposed innovative solutions in terms of both method and form. This encouraged teachers to verify their own pedagogic and didactic methods and to seek new solutions. They received support, as the appearance of new textbooks on the market was accompanied by manuals with

¹³Putkiewicz E, Siellawa-Kolbowska K, Wilkomirska A, Zahorska M, (1999) *Nauczyciele wobec reformy edukacji*. ISP, Warszawa, p. 142.

¹⁴Gołębiewski Ł, (2000) "Raport o książce szkolnej", Biblioteka Analiz, Warszawa

methodology, lesson plans and teaching aids that could be copied, handed out to students, and used in class. However, publishers found it challenging to reach teachers with information on their offerings for school syllabi and textbooks. As a result, publishing houses organized and participated in various didactic conferences, supplementing the reform campaign of the Ministry of Education and contributing to the development of the teachers' know-how.

7.3.5 Assessment

The introduction of external, standardized examinations at the end of every stage of education was a change of great significance and with great consequences. Exams at the primary and lower secondary school level became mandatory, as opposed to the final secondary school exam (*Baccalaureate* or *Matura*). However, since the latter replaced the university entrance exam, all students who aspired to continue their education at a higher level nevertheless took the exam. The reformers intended the system of tests and examinations to¹⁵:

- Assess students' acquired skills and knowledge defined in the national curriculum;
- Allow for comparisons in the performance of schools and individual students;
- Indicate the consistency and quality of learning.

Tests and examinations were to be above all tools for reflection and self-assessment for schools. They were to assist the process of drawing conclusions concerning the performance and quality of schools. The intention was to use test results for external evaluation (supervision) only to a limited degree, and the conditions of a given school were to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, quite quickly, due to the ranking lists published in the press, the tests became the basis for a public (informal) evaluation of school performance, the comparison of schools, and even the assessment of particular teachers. Another reason for this was the results of the post-lower secondary exam (along with the scores on the school-leaving certificate) were crucial for recruitment to secondary schools. A good result meant admission to a renowned upper secondary school, which in turn increased the chances of a good result on the baccalaureate exam and the opportunity to enroll free of charge at one of the best state universities. In large cities, selective recruitment for lower secondary schools emerged, despite the existence of school catchment areas guaranteed by law. For instance, schools introduced classes with an extended foreign language program, and during the recruitment process students were tested for linguistic abilities, though the results of their post-primary exam were also considered. Gradually, preparing students for examinations became one of the most important tasks of every teacher. Consequently, students frequently practiced taking exams and "learning for tests".

¹⁵Ministry of National Education (2001) *Edukacja, Raport 1997–2001*. Wydawnictwo CODN, Warszawa

7.3.6 *Management, Financing, & Quality Assurance*

The education reform was implemented alongside the administrative reform, which introduced a three-tier structure of local administration with delegated responsibility for running schools at different levels. Primary and lower secondary schools were run at the municipal level, upper secondary at the county level, and higher vocational schools at the provincial level (*voivodeships*)¹⁶. The local authorities received funds for the financing of education from the state budget in the form of a subsidy. Its amount was calculated based on the number of students. However, the funds were not ear-marked in the local budget and thus could be dedicated to any goal. In practice, the subsidy usually only covered teachers' wages. The local authorities had to cover the remaining costs from their own resources.

One of the most important initial tasks of the new authorities was to configure a school network in their catchment area. The municipalities needed to establish lower secondary schools and make decisions concerning the further functioning of significantly smaller (6, instead of 8-year) primary schools. The county authorities took over upper secondary schools, including vocational schools, which catered to the needs of former industrial enterprises and not current economic needs. Because education financing was dependent on the number of students, the funds allocated to small rural schools were insufficient. Many of them were closed, and pupils had to be transported to larger establishments.

The reform of the education system, aligned with the public administration reform, also handled the issues of supervision. The task of controlling the legal and educational aspects of school activities was entrusted to Education Boards (*Kuratoria Oświaty*) placed within the structure of the provincial (*voivodeship*) government administration. School performance was periodically assessed via self-assessment (including opinion surveys among parents and students), expert on-site visits, and external examinations. Overall, three bodies had an impact on the functioning of schools: local authorities (material teaching conditions), Education Boards (supervising regulatory aspects, especially the adherence to the national curriculum), and school principals (coordination of the learning process). This setup occasionally caused tensions, especially in organizational matters with financial consequences (e.g., class sizes, extracurriculars, etc.).

The organizational changes also required the appointment of new principals and the exchange of principals among existing schools. Principals were selected through competitions, which gave them great confidence and higher status in local communities. New principals, especially those of lower secondary schools, tried to promote a school culture based on quality and cooperation. The increased autonomy of schools and teachers in making decisions concerning school syllabi rendered the task easier. According to the recommendations, schools were to be open to

¹⁶Universities gained autonomy already in the early 90-ties.

cooperation with local communities, especially with parents. Every school was to have a statute, mission statement, educational program, scoring rules, and other principles guiding school life. The objective of the recommendations was to create teams of teachers who would work together to fulfil common goals. In many schools the recommendations were deemed to be nothing more than cumbersome red tape. However, certain schools bloomed thanks to the implementation of the guidelines. (See Box 7.2).

Box 7.2 Case Study of Successful Reform Implementation

- Research work conducted in 20 selected lower secondary schools in 2006 by a group of sociologists from the Warsaw University enabled the identification of a school where the reformers' recommendations to create a friendly school culture based on partnership were fully achieved.
- The school principal was a very active and resourceful man. He had travelled a lot and was familiar with the school systems of many countries. When the decision was made to introduce lower secondary schools in the spring of 1999 he started to recruit teachers. For 3 months prior to the start of the school year, they discussed the basic strategy for the operation of the school. The school year opening was a big event, attended by teachers, parents, local officials, and entrepreneurs. After the event, finding sponsors willing to support the school was never a problem.
- The school had its own internal rules and regulations (agreed with the Parents' Council), which were observed to the letter. The students' rights were respected. The class leaders formed a consultative body that the principal met with once a week. Students were motivated to learn and develop their competences in a culture of high expectations. No serious cases of negative student behavior were noted. Absenteeism – a problem in most Polish schools – was almost non-existent, nor was grade repetition. Although the area, like other rural communes, was affected by high unemployment, low parental educational attainment, and low average income levels, student test results were significantly higher than the average in the region.

In Poland many schools attempt to develop practical and social skills by ensuring a well-organized system for involved, innovative and cooperating teachers. Yet in the majority of schools, teachers hold traditional lessons focusing mainly on transferring knowledge they perceive to be indispensable for achieving good results in exams. This, in turn, reflects directly on the public opinion of the teacher and the rating of the school.

Table 7.1 Teachers' perception of education reform (%) (2000)

Change introduced with the reform	Percentage of positive responses	
	Primary school teachers	Lower secondary school teachers
Creation of lower secondary schools	41	72
Possibility to choose textbooks and school syllabi	90	90
Introduction of internal assessment systems	80	86

7.3.7 Teachers

For many teachers the reform meant a change, but for some it resulted in job loss. This was due to the reduction of years in primary school from 8 to 6, the closing of small, rural schools, and higher requirements for lower secondary school teachers (university degree). Additionally, new principles of promotion were introduced. Higher levels could be achieved after required job tenure and through participation in professional development courses. A promotion to the next level meant a higher salary.

Surveys of teachers demonstrated their anxiety during both the planning and implementation of the reform. There was a particularly high sense of insecurity linked with a change in the terms of employment. In 1999 over 50% of respondents from a national sample of teachers indicated the reform should be stopped¹⁷. The attitude of teachers towards specific solutions within the framework of the reform was studied at the request of the Ministry of Education at the end of 2000¹⁸. The study also included students, parents, and representatives of local school authorities. From a broad set of issues, we selected a few below that seemed especially important (Table 7.1).

Teachers¹⁹ of both types of schools gave a very positive response to the possibility of choosing textbooks and teaching syllabi (90% positive responses). The new internal assessment system, in which the teachers as a team determined the rules, criteria and grading scale, was also very well received (80% and 86%). Teachers of primary schools assessed the introduction of lower secondary schools much worse (only 41% positive) than their colleagues who worked in the new lower secondary schools (72% positive). The survey also inquired about the school syllabi used by the teachers. The overwhelming majority (98% in primary schools and 95% in lower secondary) used syllabi developed by experts and approved by the Ministry

¹⁷Putkiewicz E, Siellawa-Kolbowska K, Wilkomirska A, Zahorska M, (1999) Nauczyciele wobec reformy edukacji. ISP, Warszawa, p. 142.

¹⁸Ministry of National Education (2001) "Edukacja, Raport 1997–2001". Wydawnictwo CODN, Warszawa

¹⁹The representative sample included 765 primary schools and their 7091 teachers; 241 lower secondary schools and 2604 teachers respectively.

Table 7.2 Teachers' opinions on the effects of the reform (%) (2003)

	Primary schools		Lower secondary schools	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
All changes for the better	2	0	3	1
More changes for the better than worse	29	35	44	32
More changes for the worse than better	44	40	27	39
All changes for the worse	10	10	10	12
No impact	6	7	6	4
No opinion	9	8	10	12

of Education. One in four teachers partially modified the syllabus to adopt it to their students' needs. Only the most creative teachers (2–3%) devised their own teaching syllabi.

Four years after the launch of the reform, Professor Konarzewski²⁰ interviewed a representative sample of 950 teachers from primary and lower secondary schools. Their opinions on the effects of the reform are summarised in the table below (Table 7.2).

Teachers of rural lower secondary schools were the only group that reported more positive than negative impacts of the reform. At the same time, teachers of rural primary schools were the most skeptical group. The difference in opinion could be due to the fact that lower secondary schools were new, better equipped, and often located in modernized buildings with qualified teachers who were willing to innovate. On the other hand, primary schools in villages were in declining physical condition, while the number of students, classes, and teachers dwindled. Small schools were in serious danger of being closed.

7.4 Reform Implementation and its Consequences

The reform implementation started with the admission of all graduates of the sixth grade of primary school to the first grade of the newly established lower secondary schools. Initially the curriculum reform concerned only students of 1 year. Since securing the necessary school infrastructure in such a short time was not possible, the local authorities were compelled to choose certain primary schools and transform them into lower secondary schools. Opening a lower secondary school meant that the pupils of the former primary school had to be moved to other establishments. As this was not always possible, schools were sometimes left unchanged, except the seventh grade was renamed as the first grade of the lower secondary.

²⁰ Konarzewski, K. *Reforma oświaty*, ISP 2004

There were a number of challenges during the early stages of reform implementation. Due to the speed of the reform, teachers found it difficult to familiarize themselves with the new syllabi and textbooks, and hence frequently chose materials at random. Not every syllabus was well adapted to student needs. Occasionally for instance, an element necessary for teaching physics was missing from the maths syllabus. There were also delays in printing and delivering some textbooks to schools. These logistical problems contributed to the negative perception of the reform in public opinion. However, the biggest problem about lower secondary schools in the public's opinion was of a behavioral nature. Conflicts emerged between students and teachers that had never occurred before in primary schools. This was the combined effect of gathering youngsters of a so-called "difficult age" in one type of school and having teachers who were not properly prepared. Nor were the psychological counselling centers – the very institutions meant to support schools in such cases.

In time, most of the implementation challenges were resolved. New buildings were constructed for the lower secondary schools and the issues with syllabi and textbooks were sorted out. Teachers gained the experience and ability to work with teenagers and to deal with problems typical for adolescence. Yet the perception of lower secondary schools as places where young people often became demoralized by violence, alcohol, drugs, and sex still remained.

Despite the difficulties, many principals and teachers, especially in newly formed schools, saw the reform as a chance to abandon obsolete school routines and introduce innovative teaching methods to engage young people, develop cooperation with local communities, and gradually expand the application of computer technologies. The introduction of new syllabi to schools was assisted by publishers of various kinds of educational books. They offered training courses to promote their textbooks, programs, methods, and didactic materials. Their efforts, supported by education authorities, brought about positive results, though not immediately.

Evaluating a reform's effect is always challenging. Poland was lucky to participate in the first PISA study to evaluate the reform of 1999. The study was carried out for the first time in 2000. At that time 15-year-old students (the age group targeted by PISA) were not affected by the reform. The second cycle of PISA in 2003 assessed the students who were in the last year of new lower secondary schools. This meant the group targeted by PISA 2000 could serve as a benchmark for the evaluation of the reform by comparison with the results in consecutive cycles of the study.

The improvement in PISA scores between 2000 and 2003 served as a very positive evaluation of the reform (See Chart 7.1). Poland improved its scores significantly in all domains. Moreover, the analysis²¹ of the distribution of students' results

²¹ Jakubowski, M., Patrinos, H., Porta, E., & Wiśniewski, J. (2016), *The effects of delaying tracking in secondary school: evidence from the 1999 education reform in Poland*. Education Economics 1–16. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2016.1149548>

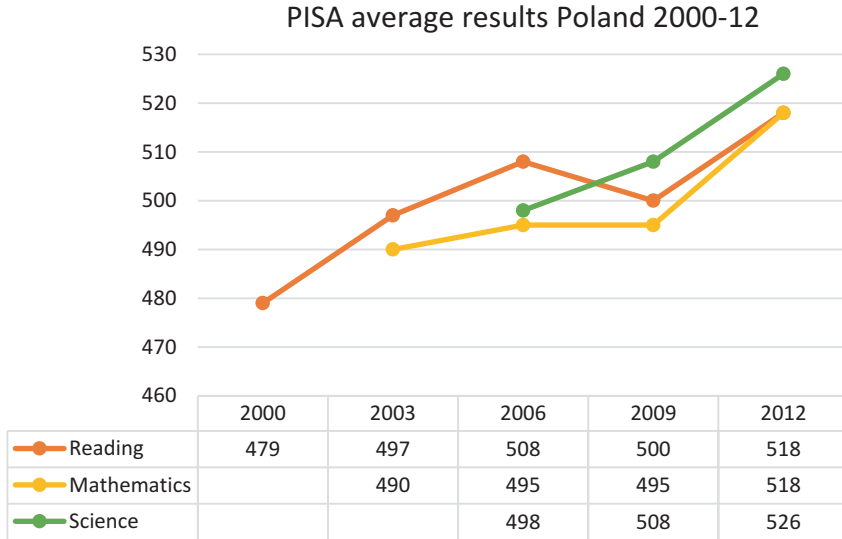


Chart 7.1 PISA average results – Poland (Each of the PISA study domains is a main domain in every third cycle of the study. Trends can be calculated for reading from 2000, math from 2003 and science from 2006. <http://pisadataexplorer.oecd.org/ide/idepisa/>)

revealed that the increase in average results between 2000 and 2003 was mostly due to the reduced number of low achievers. Moreover, the most significant improvements were made by students who would have previously ended up in basic vocational schools. After the reform, because tracking was postponed, they were given a chance to acquire more general skills in the newly created lower secondary schools.

The introduction of exams after every stage of education made it easier to make decisions concerning further education. Either everyone took the exams (end of lower secondary), or nearly everyone (baccalaureate), which automatically enabled students to apply to schools of a higher level. There was a selection process, but overall the paths to subsequent stages of learning were more accessible. The outcome was a real educational boom. The number of secondary school and university graduates grew rapidly. On the other hand, vocational schools, which had enjoyed the most popularity during the communist times and had been attended by almost 50% of primary school leavers for half a century, collapsed due to a lack of candidates.

However after a few years, even the successful implementation of the reform’s main aims gave rise to accusations against its authors. People complained about the poor preparation of students and a devaluation of diplomas. The critics disregarded the fact that this was due to a significantly greater influx of candidates to secondary schools and tertiary education institutions. The students were more diversified in their competences and abilities. Besides, some were less interested in broadening their knowledge and skills than in extending the status of a student (benefits

especially health insurance covered by the state) and postponing entering the labour market characterize by the high unemployment.

The role of lower secondary schools in providing equal opportunities, one of the main objectives of the reform, was also questioned. In big cities lower secondary schools differed in quality because of the emerging mechanisms of selective recruitment (despite the school catchment principle guaranteed by law). For instance, schools opened classes with an extended foreign language course, and during recruitment tested prospective students' abilities. This brought about serious consequences. Parents, especially middle-class parents, tried to enroll their children in schools with a better reputation. This should not have taken place, yet a blind eye was turned to exceptions, because school principals were keen on admitting good students. Great hopes were placed in rural lower secondary schools, which were to raise the education levels of children in the countryside, but there also was some degree of disappointment. In many towns the schools were well equipped, but only local pupils could fully enjoy the opportunities. The buses transporting children from remote villages were departing from the schools once regular lessons ended. In the effect those children were unable to participate in many of the extracurricular activities or benefit from the additional assistance of teachers in the learning process. A scrutiny of exam tests results still showed a strong link between students' achievements and the level of their parents' education and place of residence.²²

There were parliamentary elections in Poland in 2001 and education was among important topics addressed by various parties in the electoral campaign. Opposition parties criticised the reform of 1999 and suggested that some "corrections" were needed. In particular they proposed not to convert technical secondary into profiled general secondary schools and vocational continues training centers. Another proposed option was to postpone the introduction of external final secondary school exam. The opposition won the election and quickly introduce both proposed changes. The message from that move was threefold. Firstly it said that the reform was not perfect. Secondly, it was possible to change (at least partly) the reform. And thirdly, the modification of the curricula for upper secondary education was slowed down.

That was the first signal that the sustainability and continuity of education reforms could be affected by political changes.

²²Dolata R, (2008) Szkoła – segregacje – nierówności. Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa.

7.5 Reform Follow-Up

7.5.1 *Modernization of Teaching Curricula*

The 2003 and 2006 PISA studies showed that Polish students performed well in reading and comprehension and ranked among the best in international comparisons (see Chart 7.1). Yet they continued to struggle in a few areas, including with math problems which require moving away from simple schematic solutions, reasoning in natural sciences, and general problem solving. The national report on the 2006 PISA results indicated that: “The development of abilities of independent thinking, scientific reasoning, mathematical modelling and reasoning, formulating hypotheses, writing concise conclusions, perceiving alternative solutions to problems, is the Achilles heel of the Polish system of education.”²³

At the same time, PISA and other studies were used to analyse how far the selection of the general education (academic) and vocational path impacted the students’ achievements. In the first PISA study (2000) the differentiation in results was strongly linked to the type of school – the results of vocational school students were very weak, while students in general education upper secondary schools performed well above the international average. In the PISA 2003 study that only covered lower secondary school students, the differences, especially between schools, were much smaller. A significant improvement in average results was due to better achievement of the weakest students. In order to evaluate the effect of selection, in the 2006 PISA an additional test was conducted in the first forms of upper secondary school. The results were just as differentiated and strongly linked with the type of school, as was the case in PISA 2000.

These results led to the preparation of yet another change of school curricula in 2008. The reform introduced in 2008 aimed at the development of cognitive and analytical abilities, non-standard problem-solving skills, and raising the competences of vocational school goers (e.g., basic literacy). The new general education curriculum²⁴ created two 6-year cycles: the first for primary school and the second lower and upper secondary schools. The general education curriculum covered in the first forms of all types of upper secondary schools would be basically the same – the same set of subjects and the same expected learning outcomes. The differentiation of curricula into academic-oriented or professional programs would start from the second grade. This was to mitigate the negative effects of selection to different types of schools.

²³ Ministry of National Education (2007) Wyniki badania 2006 w Polsce. MEN, Warszawa

²⁴ The new curriculum was introduced in December 1998 by the ordinance of the Ministry of National Education

Table 7.3 Learning Cycle Objectives

Primary	<p><i>General education in primary schools constitutes a foundation – the school carefully introduces students to the world of knowledge, providing for their balanced intellectual, ethical, emotional, social, and physical development. The objective of general education in primary school is:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1) acquisition by students of a basic set of information on facts, rules, theories and practices mainly concerning topics and occurrences that are close to their experience;</i> <i>2) acquisition by students of abilities to use what they know when performing tasks and solving problems;</i> <i>3) forming those students' attitudes which are crucial for the efficient and responsible functioning in the contemporary world.</i>
Lower and upper secondary	<p><i>General education in lower and upper secondary schools, though provided in two different schools, forms, in terms of program, a coherent whole and constitutes the foundation for diverse professional qualifications, and their subsequent development or modification; it is a starting point for lifelong learning.</i></p> <p><i>The goals of general education in stages III and IV are:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1) students' acquisition of a determined set of information on facts, rules, theories and practices;</i> <i>2) students' acquisition of abilities to make use of gained information during the performance of tasks and problem solving;</i> <i>3) shaping attitudes conducive to efficient and responsible functioning in the contemporary world</i>

Every learning cycle received a set of general objectives (see Table 7.3) that determined the role of a given cycle in the context of lifelong learning – a gradual introduction into the world of increasingly complex phenomena and the development of skills to enable understanding and using one's knowledge for further learning and development. The goal of education was to develop competences defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (as defined in the European Parliament Recommendation²⁵).

The document specifies that the shaping of students' attitudes is to foster their further personal and social development. Thus the attitudes have been associated with values such as: honesty, credibility, responsibility, perseverance, self-esteem, respect for others, cognitive curiosity, creativity, entrepreneurship, politeness, and readiness to participate in culture, take initiative, and work in a group. The importance of civic involvement and respect for different traditions and the culture of one's nation were also emphasized. The schools were committed to prevent all forms of discrimination.

Each education cycle of the national curriculum was supplemented by the most important transversal competences (See Table 7.4).

²⁵ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2006/962/oj>

Table 7.4 Transversal Competences

Primary	Lower and upper secondary
1. Reading – defined as a simple activity, as well as the ability to understand, use and process texts to a degree that allows one to acquire knowledge, develop emotionally, intellectually and ethically and to participate in social life	1. Reading – the ability to understand, use and reflectively process texts, including cultural texts, leading to the achievement of one’s goals, personal development and active participation in social life
2. Mathematical reasoning – ability to apply basic mathematical tools in everyday life and to conduct elementary mathematical reasoning	2. Mathematical reasoning – ability to apply basic mathematical tools in everyday life and to formulate judgements based on mathematical reasoning
3. Scientific thinking – the ability to draw conclusions based on empirical observations of nature and society	3. Scientific thinking – the ability to apply scientific knowledge to identify and solve problems, and to formulate conclusions based on empirical observations of nature and society
4. Communication skills in the native language and in a foreign language, both orally and in writing	4. Communications skills in the native language and in foreign languages, both orally and in writing
5. ICT skills including the search and use of information	5. Fluent ICT skills 6. Ability to seek, select and perform a critical analysis of information
6. Ability to learn as a way of satisfying the natural curiosity about the world, and to discover one’s interests to prepare for further education	7. Ability to recognize one’s own educational and learning needs
7. Ability to work collaboratively in teams	8. Ability to work collaboratively in teams

The knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that a student gained and developed in school were described in detail in terms of educational outcomes. This enabled the formulation of qualification requirements as the basis for examination tools. According to the new rule, every student was obliged to actively participate in at least one collaborative project during his or her time in lower secondary school, and the results would be presented to the entire school. Participation in the project was noted in the school leaving certificate, but not graded.

The introduction of curriculum changes and the preparation of new examinations were accompanied by large scale information campaigns addressed to students, parents, and teachers, who were also offered various training opportunities. Schools organized tests and examinations with tasks in line with the standards of the new curriculum.

As the national curriculum prioritized competences, schools felt encouraged to look for innovative solutions and to devise their own teaching syllabi without a strict division into school subjects, but rather around transversal issues and competence building. (See Box 7.3).

Box 7.3 Radowo Małe – An Exceptional School

Radowo Małe is a small town in a poor region of Poland with huge social problems.

The school is equipped in an unconventional manner. Classrooms and corridors are filled with cupboards, sideboards, mirrors, chests and plenty of bric-à-brac and pottery made by the children. Many classrooms have been transformed into workshops and labs for courses in drama, kitchen, travel, chemistry, pottery, and stained-glass.

School Principal: “Every workshop and its activities are meant to develop specific competences. In the drama room we teach listening, speaking, creative problem resolution, group work. In the travel room we teach how to seek knowledge from various sources, present information in different ways, to communicate and be understood; in the kitchen workshop we teach group work and taking responsibility, as well as how to learn and how to plan work. In the art lab we teach planning, taking a project to a conclusion...”²⁶

The school is following the national curriculum, yet adopting an out-of-the-box approach by combining topics from several subject areas in one project and working on it in mixed-age groups. Classes are organized in such a way as to give students enough time for various activities. Conducting 2–3 lessons at a time ensures that both students and teachers can work freely. Every child spends at least 6 h a week in the workshop format.

Changes to the national curriculum and external examinations introduced in 2008 likely contributed to the improvement of Polish students’ performance on the 2012 PISA study (see Chart 7.1). This was noted in the national report on the study:

“The average score of Polish students in maths increased by as many as 23 points (...) A significant change also occurred in the field of comprehensive task resolution: Polish students solve problems which require reasoning, argumentation and strategy creation and application, better than (on average) students from OECD countries. In terms of scientific literacy, Polish students improved by 18 points.”²⁷

7.5.2 Lowering School Starting Age

After the effective implementation of the 1999 systemic reform and the modernisation of national curriculum, the Ministry of Education began to introduce some additional changes to the education system. These changes in particular aimed to

²⁶ Quotes from Manthey E (2017) Nie-zwykła publiczna szkoła – reportaż z Juniorowa, <https://www.juniorowo.pl/nie-zwykla-publiczna-szkola/> access 24.10.2018.

²⁷ Ministry of National Education (2013) PISA Wyniki Badania 2012 w Polsce. MEN, Warszawa

increase the participation of children in pre-school education. To this end, beginning in 2003, 6-year-old children were required to attend a nursery school or preparatory classes (so-called ‘zero’ classes) in primary schools. Next, in 2008, school education became mandatory for 6-year-olds and pre-school for 5-year-olds. These changes had two objectives. The first was to make an curriculum covering basic abilities such as reading, writing, and numeracy available to 6-year-olds. The second objective was to create more places in nursery schools for children aged 3–5 by moving older children into the formal school system.

While the change seemed justified, for many it was difficult to accept. First, it was generally believed that schools were not ready to receive younger children in terms of organization, programming, and equipment. In addition, children stayed in nursery school until the return of their parents from work, while in schools students were free to go home after just a few hours, what disorganized the lives of many families. After-school care was available, but it was not considered appropriate for small children. A grassroots social protest movement was organized very efficiently under the banner of “Save the Toddlers”.

Under mounting pressure from the media and public, and supported by parliamentary opposition, the government delayed the implementation of the reform several times. However, this did not satisfy the protesters, who grew even stronger. At the end of 2014, a request for a referendum was submitted to Parliament, signed by nearly one million citizens. In addition to the question about the school starting age, it also asked about mandatory education for 5-year-olds, restoring the pre-1999 reform education structure, and curriculum changes. Parliament rejected the request on the grounds that the topics were too narrow and too specific for a national referendum.

7.5.3 Changes After 2015 – Reversal of Reforms

The abrogation of the law on the lowering of the school starting age became one of the slogans of the opposition in the parliamentary electoral campaign of 2015. This was accompanied by the promise to restore the pre-1999 school structure, leading to the elimination of lower secondary schools.

The opposition party won the parliamentary elections and immediately began to carry out its electoral pledge. The law was modified in a matter of weeks, and the school starting age of 7 was restored. At the same time, the mandatory 1 year preparation for school for 5-year-olds was abolished. The protests of local authorities, who invested in preparing schools for the reception of 6-year-olds and pointed out the difficulties of “returning” the youngsters to nursery schools, were completely ignored.

Plans to re-establish the old school structure, and thus eliminate lower secondary schools, triggered opposition from the most concerned parties: students, parents, and teachers. Researchers also protested, citing the PISA results as evidence of the strengths of the current system and the absence of any analyses showing a new system would be more effective. Local authorities also noted the need for financial

investments in school infrastructure. The Ministry disregarded the protests, but to assuage concerns, announced the launch of a national consultation process. They declared plans for any future changes would be derived from the conclusions and recommendations of the consultations. In practice, the consultation was a sham, limited to badly moderated internet discussions. No summary or conclusions were ever presented. The parents' and teachers' organizations responded with justified criticism (See Box 7.4).

With no report from the consultations, the Minister of Education nevertheless announced the intention to reinstate a school structure with an 8-year primary school, a 4-year general secondary school, 5-year technical secondary school and a 3-year vocational school. This meant the elimination of lower secondary schools. It is by no coincidence that the announcement was made during a conference outside of the capital and on the first day of the summer holidays in 2016. Teachers felt disappointed but did not have the opportunity to express their protest in an organized manner.

Box 7.4 Consultations of the reform proposals in the opinion of NGO-s²⁸

“The government announced very broad consultations. We were pleased with the idea. We were anticipating a serious public debate” said Iga Kazimierczyk from the “*Przestrzeń dla edukacji*” (“Space for Education”) Foundation. In fact – she added –these were no consultations, but meetings of experts in a closed circle of 1800 people divided into groups, and an exchange of opinions on a restricted platform. “We do not know, and will not find out any time soon, what opinions and what proposals were voiced there.” she said. She pointed out that consultations happen, when a specific project is being consulted, and “in this case no one saw such a project”. Sławomir Broniarz, the President of the Polish Teachers' Union added: “There was a declaration about the closing down of lower secondary schools, and we are waiting for the consultation process in this area. I am mentioning this, because it seems to me that the debate, the discussion initiated by the Minister is only to help come up with an idea. This means that, so far, you have dismantled a certain structure. It is easier than to build. The whole teachers' community is now waiting for what you intend to propose.”

The “Law on Education” passed in December 2016 yet again demolished the school system by introducing change without a proper infrastructure, and with curricula, textbooks, and manuals written in haste. The curriculum changes involved dropping solutions that integrated the learning of several subject fields at a time. History and Polish language syllabi were extended in order to more effectively shape the national identity of students. Project-based learning ceased to be mandatory.

²⁸Gazeta Prawna (2006) Konsultacje MEN nie tak szerokie jak zapowiadano. <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/953445,organizacje-spoeczne-konsultacje-men-nie-tak-szerokie-jak-zapowiadano.html> (access 28.11.2019)

The changes introduced by the Ministry of Education were not based on evidence, but on the notion that schools were not working properly. Teachers universally perceived this as a negative evaluation of their work and the many years of their constant efforts to improve the quality of education. Breaking up teams of teachers at lower secondary schools and wasting their valuable achievements, resulting in a loss of local social and professional capital, was a serious problem. The outcomes of numerous training courses based on the old curriculum and addressing specific needs of the students at each of three levels of schooling were dissipated and plans for new professional development programs had to be modified, because their recipients and their training needs were no longer the same. Despite feelings of disappointment and discontent due to the changes, teachers have not abandoned long-term projects aimed at the development of key transversal competences, particularly in sciences and foreign languages. The impact of the steps taken by the new government will, however, only become clear in a few years.

The draft of this chapter was finished in the autumn of 2018. Within the following months some important developments take place in Poland which are briefly described below.

The autumn of 2018 was marked in Poland by big scale salary protests of young medicine doctors, policemen and teachers. At the beginning of 2019 the biggest teacher trade union (ZNP) Executive Board adopted a resolution regarding a collective dispute inviting the government to start negotiations on increase of the salaries by 30%. As there was no response to the invitation schools started strike referenda. The determination of teachers community turned out to be stronger than the pressure exerted by public authorities, as more than 80% of schools took part in the strike referendum. The government not only refused to respond to the union demands but at the same time the government party promised of substantially more spending on family benefits and to offer financial support for farmers.

The strike of the majority (70–80%, more than half million) of Polish teachers started on 8 April, just days before key school exams, i.e. end-of-primary school and middle school exams. The rise the salaries (among of the lowest in OECD member states) was not the only reason for the protest. Teachers were fed up with the chaos and overloaded curriculum the effects of the reform of 2017 (especially elimination of the lower secondary schools) introduced without any consultations with teachers.

What was slightly surprising, teachers' strike got a strong support from the society. Most of parents did not complain and instead they organized themselves to collaboratively take care for their children during normal school hours. Many employers offered the possibility to bring kids to the company or office premises and some companies even hired professionals to take care and offer learning activities for the children. Local governments sponsored open access to public institutions like museums, zoo etc. People collected money to compensated the salary loss of striking teachers.

There was an important phenomenon which accompanied teachers protest – Citizens Debate on Education ([Narada Obywatelska o Edukacji](https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/) – NOoE)²⁹. It was

²⁹<https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/>

initiated by the web-based informal groups of teachers and educators (*JaNauczyciel – Me-the-Teacher*; *Protest z wykrzyknikiem* – Protest with exclamation mark) and supported by non-governmental organization *Stocznia* (the Shipyard) experienced in advocacy for public policy programs. *Stocznia* proposed the world café format for debates and made available dedicated website with the simple manual how to organize the debate and the template for collecting basic information (location, number of participants) and summarized outcomes. The debates were organized already prior to the strike, during the strike and when it was suspended. All together more than 150 debates took place all over Poland with active participation of teachers, parents, students and local authorities. Collected summaries and conclusions are analyzed and are intended to inform policy debates during election campaign to the Parliament (this autumn).

The impact of those activities might be seen already within months.

7.6 Summary

The three recent reforms of the Polish education system – including the 1999 system reform, the reform that reduced the school starting age, and the recent reform that reversed the two previous ones – were all introduced in haste, in a top-down fashion, without sufficient support for teachers, and with mixed public opinions.

An in-depth analysis of decision-making in the field of education in post-communist countries was presented by Joan Nelson³⁰ in a World Bank report. She identified many similarities in the methods of operations of countries which recently adopted a democratic system. She claimed the new authorities focused their attention on economic and political changes, while the public services sector was not treated as a priority. What followed was that the ministries responsible for public services did not have enough political clout, especially in applying for public funds. Moreover, high ranking officials from the Ministry of Education were quite often recalled from their duties, not only after a change of government, but also under the same government³¹. Decisions made by one government were often undermined by the next one. In such circumstances the development of a long-term education policy becomes impossible. The only chance to carry out changes was to prevent the adversaries from modifying the decisions of the predecessors.

J. Nelson also points out the essential role of teachers in the education system, who are often disregarded by the authorities. If reforms are not approved by the teachers' community, either changes will not occur or will only be superficially implemented. Gaining teachers' approval requires a good communication strategy,

³⁰Nelson J, (2000) *Reforming Health and Education*. The World Bank, Washington DC;

³¹Śliwerski B, (2009) *Problemy współczesnej edukacji. Dekonstrukcja polityki oświatowej III RP*. Wyd. Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa.

thorough negotiations, and sufficient time. There are various reasons why teachers distrust change, especially ones that risk destabilizing the principles of their work with students, diminish their professional prestige, or reduce their salaries. Thus, education authorities find themselves in a trap. On the one hand, the introduction of positive changes requires rapid measures and seizing the moment, and on the other hand, successful reforms must be preceded by long-term action, broad consultations, and consensus with various interest groups and political parties.

The outcome of actions undertaken in the absence of agreement between the government and opposition is dramatic for the education system. The introduction of new radical reforms every few years often results in resistance or discouragement among teachers due to new working conditions, changes in school groups, and damaged cooperation between people. This presents a threat to all reforms aimed at the modernization of the curriculum as well as the methods and means of teaching and learning. It is much easier to refurbish buildings and replace textbooks than to modify solid didactic methods. The Polish teachers, who worked in the schools of so called “real socialism”, later had to reject the values they were previously supposed to believe in. They ultimately experienced a succession of reforms every few years with subsequent changes in curriculum and teaching methods. Hence, they became proficient in the art of mimicry. Some of them report on applying innovative methods expected by the authorities, but change very little, perhaps nothing at all, in their relation to students or teaching methods.

It should also be mentioned that the essence of the 1999 reform was the establishment and opening of new possibilities. Lower secondary schools were the symbol of the reform. They were to ensure better conditions for teachers and students. The introduction of change was to rely on the involvement of entire teams working in schools, with the support of local authorities. The Minister emphasized that he believed in the competences and capabilities of the teachers, which made changes for the better possible.

A completely different message came from the Ministry during the introduction of the newest reform. The Minister emphasized more than once that the current system was not working well, but she never specified the weaknesses or their origin. Teachers could very well see this as a low assessment of their work. The proposed remedy was the elimination of lower secondary schools and an unclear prospect of returning to the “good old days”. Destruction and focusing on the past do not encourage involvement in the process of change.

On December 3, 2019 the results of PISA 2018 were released. Polish students keep on improving the results (see Table 7.5 and Chart 7.2) which are significantly beyond the OECD average. Such scores place Poland among top performers in Europe.

Normally, that should be a reason for satisfaction, proud and celebrations. But not in Poland in 2019. Students who sit PISA test in March 2018 were the last group attending lower secondary schools which were being shut down as the result of the 2017 “reform”. It is a paradox that we have a sound evidence that those schools were good schools when they do not exist anymore.

Table 7.5 Trends in mean performance of Polish students in PISA

	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Average 3-year trend in mean performance:	+4.5 ^a	+5.1 ^a	+2.1
Short-term change in mean performance (2015–2018)	+6.2	+11.2 ^a	+9.6 ^a

^aIndicates statistically significant trends and changes, or mean-performance estimates that are significantly above or below PISA 2018 estimates

OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>

PISA average results Poland 2000-18

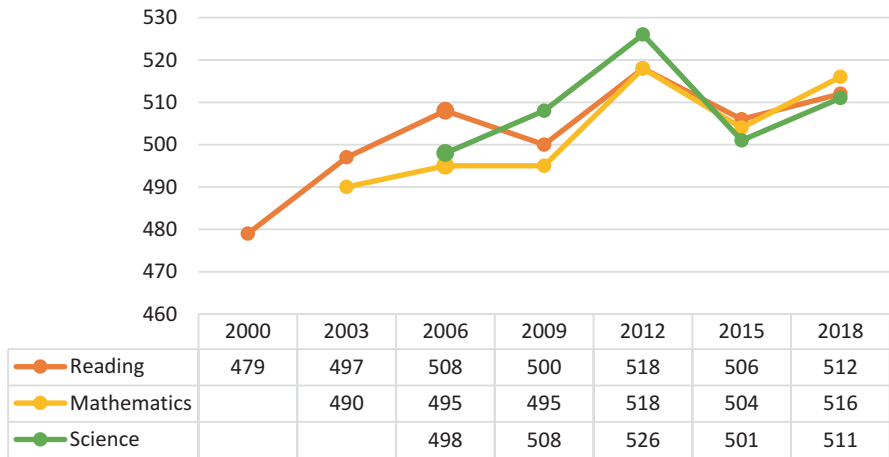


Chart 7.2 PISA average results – Poland 2000–2018 (OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>)

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